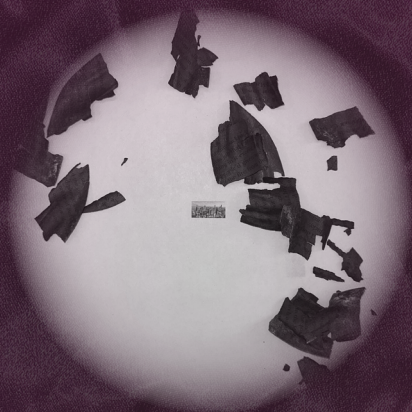


*Secret History of
Roadside Attractions*



David John Baer McNicholas



Doors are what
you get when you get
the fingers off a
much needed

one ordered

Then -

It gives
the whole
into the book

There is
symbols for
symbols for a
town.



The shadow of
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The Bucket

A chalky-grey, juicy finger. A stained, scratched fingernail, black veins and inky blood dripping from the other end. A prize, one to bring home to mother. He put it in the bucket. Boy sang while he worked. "As long as we got each other, we na nan na spinning rye nin our hands..." Windowless concrete buildings, empty eyeless monuments, watched over the bay. Smoke dragons curled out of factory stacks. One massive chimney steamed and glowed like a spell cauldron.

His bucket was full, so he skated back across the slippery grey and black low tide. He climbed the grassy hill, bare toes gripping soil. A branch snapped behind him, and he turned just in time to see Orkoo leap, screeching over his head. This was their customary greeting, and it walked by his side back to the house.

Mother was painting a haunting portrait, hollow, frightened eyes like snails, and a sinister black scar for a mouth. Her hands were covered in greasy black paint. She looked him up and down, appraising his overfull, dripping bucket. Mother kissed him on the forehead and with a toothy smile said, "I'd like some arms next time."

He laughed, "Do you think arms grow down there?"

She said, "Of course they do. Where do you think the fingers come from?"

Boy shuddered. He brought the bucket into the kitchen, where she carefully cleaned the mud off and prepared them with a seasoning of ground berries and seeds. Boy turned on the old TV, and it filled the house with voices. The man on the tube was ecstatic about new Subaru. It was "Deal Days" at Monte Cars. Monte, himself, said so.

"Those things..." mother growled.

Secret History of Roadside Attractions

"What about them?"

"Nothing." She laid thick slices of roots around the edges of the roasting tray and covered them with purple leaves. Orkoo screeched from beneath the table. She said, "No, Orkoo. These aren't for you." The commercial ended, faded to black. The program opened to bumper music and our hero Mike Seaver, looking worried. Boy bit his own lip. Mike, Boner, and Eddie get invited to a party with older people. The partiers keep asking Mike to go to the bathroom with them. He gets uncomfortable and runs home.

"Oh, it's the scary one," he said.

"They'll be fine. They're always fine, because they aren't real."

"I like the ending." Mike comes home. His father, Jason, has been waiting up. Mike is late. He drops onto the family couch and pinches the bridge of his nose like he has a headache. After he explains the night to his father, he feels better. The show ends with Mike talking directly to Boy. Mike says, "You don't have to do something you don't want to, just to keep your friends happy." Boy said, "I wish I had a father like Jason."

"Well, you don't" She stoked the coals until the oven glowed orange and slid the tray inside. "I pulled you out of the bay. You were the only whole person to ever come out of that muck."

He looked at his fingers. "On TV they have fathers."

"Have you ever seen anything else on TV in real life? That's what TV is; it's fantasy. These shows only play because the machines run on a loop. The people on TV have been dead for a long time." The small house creaked as something heavy settled on the roof. They both tensed up. "What, with dormingers about, that you should be worried about a father that never existed."

"They came early tonight." He reached for Orkoo. The animal put its head in his lap.

The tallow lamps and old rag wicks smelled stale. An hour after sundown, the oven timer dinged. "Fingers are ready," mother said. "Don't forget to pull the nails off." She slid the steaming tray from the oven, holding it with a greasy hand towel. Fingers stuck to the tray, oozing and popping like bony sausages. Split skins exposed knuckle bones.

Mother served boy on his Mickey Mouse plate. Before they ate, their ritual was to pick each one up, peel off the loose nail held only by a string of cooked nailbed and give a chef's kiss with the last finger. They smiled and giggled while they did this. Each scratched and stained fingernail placed in a

The Bucket

small pile to the side of their plate, to be used for various projects around the house. You could do a lot with a fingernail.

"Ooooh, these are a good find," she said. "Next time you'll find arms though. I'm sure of it."

"Will the arms have fingers too?" He looked at her, excited.

"I'm certain they will. Those arms were out there today. You just didn't dig deep enough. Do you remember where you found them?"

"Oh yes, I do."

"Tomorrow, when you find fingers, squirm your arm past them into the muck. You should feel the bony hand. Don't pull on that, because it'll come off, and a hand is really not as good as an arm at all. When you feel the hand, follow it, down the wrist to the forearm. Grab hold there and pull hard. If we're lucky, you'll dislocate the shoulder and we'll have a bicep too, but a forearm is nice." Behind his eyes, the boy was reaching into muddy shadows. "Don't let your fingers get cold, dear."

"But, if there are arms, might there be a whole person down there too? What if I pull up a whole person?"

"Don't be silly; you aren't strong enough." Mother smiled and sucked meat between her sharp teeth, leaving a series of knuckle bones, held together by milky sinew. "They don't need those arms, and they will grow back in a day."

Orkoo scratched at boy's leg. "Ow, Orkoo. Bad." He kicked around under the table, and it scurried away on thick padded hind feet.

After dinner, mother scraped the plates. Nails went into a jar, bones into a locked drawer to keep Orkoo from eating them. It watched, nose twitching. "Shoo. Go outside and find your dinner." She pushed it out the door. It turned quickly and snapped at her fingers with its long chisel teeth. But she was quicker, tucked them into a fist and punched it in one of its long floppy ears. Orkoo screeched and ran outside.

Boy ran over. "What's the matter with Orkoo?"

"Nothing. He's just excited."

"Yeah, he loves the night."

Boy and mother sat in front of the old, humming television. The moving scenes and words entranced them. Soon she was asleep, and he was left to his half-dreams. Arms and hands beneath muck press his body. Appendages sway underwater at high tide, collecting fish and snails to feed their muddy mouths. The bodies of the bay sway like seagrass, like anemone. Fragile arms of the mud, they shouldn't live long on land. Perhaps they are calling him back.

Secret History of Roadside Attractions

Mother was snoring and the broadcast day ended. A colorful, clean rag flapped in slow motion atop a pole. It was a sunny day. A lonely thing, yellow light, silent wind backed by a Moog symphony. He saluted and watched until the beep and the war of the ants came on. He turned off the box and sat in the darkness with a snoring mother.

Waving grey arms fill the cup of the bay. A frenzy of splitting knuckles and knobby elbows grab blindly. The prickly wetness of their inky blood runs through boy's body. The bucket glows, reflected in a green pool atop the cauldron shaped chimney. Tendrils of silty, sparkling hair drop chunks of disturbed mud, which descend in trails to the drowned bottom. A sunrise is coming, haloed in bracken green. A deathless thing rots to life.

Boy emptied the bone drawer with his small, grey hands. Even standing next to the oven, he couldn't thaw the frozen arc of his dreams. He washed and dried the bones, set them on the rack. He ground the day before yesterday's bones in the mill and sang under his breath as he cranked the handle. "Baby you and me, we gotta be / na nan na nan na, sharing the laughter and love."

He chopped wood and stacked it near the oven. The girls had laid six eggs. He grabbed those up and put them in the kitchen. Mother's painting watched him from its easel. He stopped and watched it back. Maybe the eyes weren't so scary, just intense. He stared very hard into them until he thought he saw a reflection. The mouth had been frightening last night, but now it looked sad. It's black lips turned down at the corners.

His chores kept him until early afternoon. Mother was back at work on the painting; her apron covered in greasy pigments. Boy had a lunch of bone bread and eggs. He grabbed the bucket and ran out the door at low tide.

At the shore, he wondered at the ancient, empty boat, decayed into the sawgrass and blue mud. A bristle worm crawled through the beached hull. He threw a sharp rock at the slick monster. It curled onto one side, head twitching, grabbing at some invisible enemy. Rose-quartz eyes watched him from a thicket. "Orkoo," he called, but the animal did not budge. "Orkoo?" It backed silently into the bush until just the tips of its ears were visible.

The boy backed out of the rotting boat. He had dallied. It was mid-afternoon when he made it to the place, he'd been the day before. But there were no fingers there. He dug in hole after hole, feeling around blind in the murk. More than a few bristle worms snicked at his bare arms, but no fingers. He decided to try some other spots on the way back to the house. Mother

The Bucket

would be very disappointed if he came home without dinner, but it was too late to go further out.

The sun turned coppery, and his shadow walked far ahead of him. Bubbles swirled in a shallow tidepool in the near distance. His breath quickened; he ran to the pool and dropped to his knees. He dug like a wild animal. Brackish water and muck splashed blue and black splatters over his back. A chalky-grey finger bobbed to the surface, floating in front of him.

He was shaking. Boy took two deep breaths, holding the second one, lay belly first in the mud and plunged his head and shoulders into the pool. He felt the hand, missing a finger. He slipped his arm past it to a veiny, cold, and thick forearm. The arm had a faintly jogging pulse, like the bay waves at high tide. It came to life, bony and tired and limp. It tried to worm away, deeper, escape. Boy's fingernails dug into the sheaf of wet muscle. He pulled hard and the shoulder dislocated, pop. It was sickening and exciting. His lungs were burning as he dragged it to the surface, where he lay on his back, gasping and holding a trembling arm.

The sun touched the tops of the trees on a faraway ridge. Dormingers would be out very soon. He struggled to his feet and tucked the frail and twitching arm into the bucket.

He skated barefoot through the mud. The bucket was much heavier than usual. The surface gave way in every direction. He leaned too far forward and fell face first into the muck. The unbalanced bucket turned over, and the arm flopped out, landing on top of him, twitching against his bare back, fingers flicking helplessly at the mud.

He struggled up and cleared his eyes. A veil lifted across the bay.

Boy slipped again climbing the hill, and again in the soft grass of the yard. The weak arm escaped and limped back toward the bay. He lifted the sturdy bucket high in one hand and brought it down, splorshk. The arm looked very sad now, a collection of chalky grey skin, blue and black muscles, torn white sinew, and pale bones. Black blood sparkled on green grass in the orange rays of sunset. A tree behind him creaked. Heavy footfalls slowly thumped closer.

He froze, his gaze fixed on a lonely dandelion, dried to a sphere of feathery wisps. It bobbed on its stem. A fishy gust of breath blew over his head, and it exploded into a thousand future flowers.

Orkoo jumped out of the bushes. Its carmine eyes glowed and it reared up on solid hind legs, split upper lip pulled back, snarling and screeching, with four-inch incisors scissoring against each other. Half-chewed bear scat dripped from its muzzle. Over boy's head leapt the long fawn streak.

Secret History of Roadside Attractions

Boy left the arm in pieces and ran, screaming and swinging his arms wildly around his head. He slammed into the door, which didn't budge, and fell onto his backside. Beyond the darkened house, the tree line was a black ribbon, where eyes glowed and creatures cackled and called. Orkoo screeched behind him.

There was a man standing in the yard. Orkoo bayed at his heels as he walked toward Boy and stooped to one shaky knee. His solitary arm, chalky grey fingers, black streaked nails, shook as he reached for the splattered mess on the ground. He stopped short of touching it.

His black lips. His cavernous eyes.

The man turned to Orkoo and reached for the animal slowly. The fierce beast chittered and bowed. He stroked its ears, and it calmed and cooed. Black blood leaked from the bucket laying on its side, into the grass, where it watered some young dandelions.

Secret History of Roadside Attractions

(Short stories)

The weird and spectacular, built as monuments to wonder.

A child harvests muddy fruit from an estuary...

A mouse in an experiment...

A truck that travels out of alignment with the universal clock...

A person who wishes for lightning...

More...

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