

thirteen phantasms

JAMES P. BLAYLOCK

James Blaylock has been a writer and writing teacher since 1976, when his short story “Red Planet” was published in *UnEarth*. Since then he has written seventeen novels and has published several collections of short stories, as well as scores of articles and essays. His novels and stories have been translated around the world. Blaylock is twice winner of the World Fantasy Award, and he received the Phillip K. Dick Memorial Award for his novel *Homunculus*. His story “Unidentified Objects” was included in *Prize Stories 1990, the O. Henry Awards*. According to the *Library Journal*, “Blaylock’s evocative prose and studied pacing make him one of the most distinctive contributors to American magical realism.”

“Thirteen Phantasms” was the first story from an online publication to win the World Fantasy Award.

There was a small window in the attic, six panes facing the street, the wood frame unpainted and without moldings. Leafy wisteria vines grew over the glass outside, filtering the sunlight and tinting it green. The attic was dim despite the window, and the vines outside shook in the autumn wind, rustling against the clapboards of the old house and casting leafy shadows on the age-darkened beams and rafters. Landers set his portable telephone next to the crawl-space hatch and shined a flashlight across the underside of the shingles, illuminating dusty cobwebs and the skeleton frame of the roof. The air smelled of dust and wood, and the attic was lonesome with silence and moving shadows, a place sheltered from time and change.

A car rolled past out on the street, and Landers heard a train whistle in the distance.

Somewhere across town, church bells tolled the hour, and there was the faint sound of freeway noise off to the east like the drone of a perpetual-motion engine. It was easy to imagine that the wisteria vines had tangled themselves around the window frame for some secretive purpose of their own, obscuring the glass with leaves, muffling the sounds of the world.

He reached down and switched the portable phone off, regretting that he'd brought it with him at all. It struck him suddenly as something incongruous, an artifact from an alien planet. For a passing moment he considered dropping it through the open hatch just to watch it slam to the floor of the kitchen hallway below.

Years ago old Mr. Cummings had set pine planks across the two-by-six ceiling \ joists to make a boardwalk beneath the roof beam, apparently with the idea of using the attic for storage, although it must have been a struggle to haul things up through the

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shoulder-width attic hatch. At the end of this boardwalk, against the north wall, lay four dust-covered cardboard cartons—full of “junk magazines,” or so Mrs. Cummings herself had told Landers this morning. The cartons were tied with twine, pulled tight and knotted, all the cartons the same. The word Astounding was written on the side with a felt marker in neat, draftsmanlike letters. Landers wryly wondered what sort of things Mr. Cummings might have considered astounding, and after a moment he decided that the man had been fortunate to find enough of it in one lifetime to fill four good-sized boxes.

Landers himself had come up empty in that regard, at least lately. For years he'd had a picture in his mind of himself whistling a cheerful out-of-key tune, walking along a country road, his hands in his pockets and with no particular destination, sunlight streaming through the trees and the limitless afternoon stretching toward the horizon. Somehow that picture had lost its focus in the past year or so, and, as with an old friend separated by time and distance, he had nearly given up on seeing it again.

It had occurred to him this morning that he hadn't brewed real coffee for nearly a year now. The coffee pot sat under the counter instead of on top of it, and was something he hauled out for guests. There was a frozen brick of ground coffee in the freezer, but he never bothered with it anymore. Janet had been opposed to freezing coffee at all. Freezing it, she said, killed the aromatic oils. It was better to buy it a half pound at a time, so that it was always fresh. Lately, though, most of the magic had gone out of the morning coffee; it didn't matter how fresh it was.

The Cummingses had owned the house since it was built in 1924, and Mrs. Cummings, ninety years old now, had held on for twenty years after her husband's death, letting the place run down, and then had rented it to Landers and moved into the Palmyra Apartments beyond the Plaza. Occasionally he still got mail intended for her, and it was easier simply to take it to her than to give it back to the post office. This morning she had told him about the boxes in the

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attic: “Just leave them there,” she’d said. Then she had shown him her husband’s old slide rule, slipping it out of its leather case and working the slide. She wasn’t sure why she kept it, but she had kept a couple of old smoking pipes, too, and a ring-shaped cut-crystal decanter with some whiskey still in it. Mrs. Cummings didn’t have any use for the pipes or the decanter any more than she had a use for the slide rule, but Landers, who had himself kept almost nothing to remind himself of the past, understood that there was something about these souvenirs, sitting alongside a couple of old photographs on a small table, that recalled better days, easier living.

The arched window of the house on Rexroth Street in Glendale looked out onto a sloping front lawn with an overgrown carob tree at the curb, shading a dusty Land Rover with what looked like prospecting tools strapped to the rear bumper. There was a Hudson Wasp in the driveway, parked behind an Austin Healey. Across the street a man in shirtsleeves rubbed paste polish onto the fender of a Studebaker, and a woman in a sundress dug in a flower bed with a trowel, setting out pansies. A little boy rode a sort of sled on wheels up and down the sidewalk, and the sound of the solid rubber wheels bumping over cracks sounded oddly loud in the still afternoon.

Russell Latzarel turned away from the window and took a cold bottle of beer from Roycroft Squires. In a few minutes the Newtonian Society would come to order, more or less, for the second time that day. Not that it made a lot of difference. For Latzarel’s money they could recess until midnight if they wanted to, and the world would spin along through space for better or worse. He and Squires were both bachelors, and so unlike married men they had until hell froze over to come to order.

“India Pale Ale,” Latzarel said approvingly, looking at the label on the squat green bottle. He gulped down an inch of beer. “Elixir of the gods, eh?” He set the bottle on a coaster. Then he filled his pipe with Balkan Sobranie tobacco and tamped it down, settling into an armchair in front of the chessboard, where there was a game

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laid out, half played. "Who's listed as guest of honor at West Coast Con? Edward tells me they're going to get Clifford Simak and van Vogt both."

"That's not what it says here in the newsletter," Squires told him, scrutinizing a printed pamphlet. "According to this it's TBA."

"To be announced," Latzarel said, then lit his pipe and puffed hard on it for a moment, his lips making little popping sounds. "Same son-of-a-bitch as they advertised last time." He laughed out loud and then bent over to scan the titles of the chess books in the bookcase. He wasn't sure whether Squires read the damned things or whether he kept them there to gain some sort of psychological advantage, which he generally didn't need.

It was warm for November, and the casement windows along the west wall were wide open, the muslin curtains blowing inward on the breeze. Dust motes moved in the sunshine. The Newtonian Society had been meeting here every Saturday night since the war ended, and in that couple of years it had seldom broken up before two or three in the morning. Sometimes when there was a full house, all twelve of them would talk straight through until dawn and then go out after eggs and bacon, the thirty-nine cent breakfast special down at Velma's Copper Pot on Western, although it wasn't often that the married men could get away with that kind of nonsense. Tonight they had scheduled a critical discussion of E.E. Smith's *Children of the Lens*, but it turned out that none of them liked the story much except Hastings, whose opinion was unreliable anyway, and so the meeting had lost all its substance after the first hour, and members had drifted away, into the kitchen and the library and out to the printing shed in the backyard, leaving Latzarel and Squires alone in the living room. Later on tonight, if the weather held up, they would be driving out to the observatory in Griffith Park.

There was a shuffling on the front walk, and Latzarel looked out in time to see the postman shut the mailbox and turn away, heading up the sidewalk. Squires went out through the front door and emptied the box, then came back in sorting letters. He took a