

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a room. In the center, a single, upholstered chair with a quilted pattern is illuminated by a beam of light from the right. The room is mostly in shadow, with a dark wooden door or window frame visible on the right side. The floor is dark and reflective, showing some light patterns.

The Places that Haunt Me

Autobiographical Horror

by Stephanie (Sterp) Evelyn

A Lighthouse in the Dark

(Chapter One Exclusive for Newsletter Subscribers)

I'd start at the beginning, but cocaine fueled nights in that rotting garage linger heavier than a migraine in the scorching heat. Believe me, my headaches still linger too. And I did say "that rotting garage," because it's still rotting away. Rundown boarded up houses that are no longer homes to the people that frequent them used for nodding off or getting strung out are always decaying, even after its inhabitants are long dead. They say that ghosts haunt people, but I know that places haunt just as much, and sometimes much worse. It doesn't matter how far you go either. It doesn't matter if you're in a deep sleep. Nowhere is safe. These places rot within the gutters of the mind. I guess "he" was right. I will always be haunted by the past, but how long can I survive it?

I went far too, from the west coast to the east. Of course, everything is different and that's the point exactly. My favorite difference is driving in this small town where the Susquehanna River watches over you. No matter where you are going, the surrounding woods, cornfields, and streams guide you. Roads, not streets, are desolate with sounds of chirping birds being heard, bald eagles soar overhead and deer dart down trenches while white tailed rabbits sit as still as statues thinking they aren't being seen.

Tall Victorian houses wave you by and when you turn down bridges where brooks watch you from below, you might pass trailer homes with rusty car parts adorning the yard.

Getting or giving directions sounds something like, "Turn left at the red barn with the broken sign, drive about a half mile, then turn right at the cornfield. At the end of the cornfield is a parked red pickup truck, turn right. You'll know you've arrived when the deer cross, and those chirping birds greet you."

Sometimes, abandoned boarded up structures that were once homes to families forgotten stare at you behind suspicious eyes. A rusted grocery cart missing one wheel is parked at an angle that tells of something tragic that happened there. I can't help but stop and get out. I walk over and touch what used to be the front door but is now boarded up, vines taking over. I look through broken glass where windows once caught the sunlight. Squinting through dust and grime, I see a painting hanging on the wall, crooked and torn in the upper right corner. It's a lighthouse. I remember that lighthouse. It lived back in California, in the house with the rotting garage; a garage where I spent many waking nights until the sun rose and the only thing greeting me outside those early mornings was bright and sunny guilt.

We called him Cheddar Boy. No one knew his actual name. His grandparents rotted away inside that house, lying dead for months as people came and went to smoke crack. Death and crack need each other like ham on rye. Cheddar's mom lived there too. She had scabs all over her body from never taking showers. We always hung out in the garage, but I had been inside their house once. I only needed to step inside one time to know that it was the most terrifying place I had ever seen. I had to use the restroom, but everyone knew you drove to the gas station on McKee and White to do that. I had to go bad and thought, how terrible could it be anyways? Cheddar offered me his hand to help walk me through the inside of his house. I stepped over piles of blankets that flies buzzed over. I tried to nonchalantly cover my nose from some awful smell. It was a mix of shit and piss and rotting food. I remember him telling me to watch for cockroaches. I couldn't see the floor and I could hardly see the walls from the piles of stuff against them. That's when I saw it, the lighthouse painting. Waves crashed against it and a small light shined out to the sky. That's when I found out that Cheddar Boy was an artist. His fingers were not only good at hitting torch lighters to smoke meth, but they were also good at laying

brush to canvas. His paintings were so beautiful you would have never guessed they hung inside such a dump. Those paintings deserved to be seen by sober eyes, but they never would. They just grew old and died away in that dark house with his grandparents.

We passed somber rooms. The kitchen was no different, blackened with dirt and grime and something that resembled dishes were stacked in the sink and across the counters. I was afraid to take another step, to breathe in there, and to keep my eyes open. Before we got to the bathroom, we passed a room with the door removed. Cheddar had no choice but to say something about what we saw. I think it was the curious, terrified, and heartbroken look in my eyes that gave it away. Two beds side by side were sunken in with two elderly people. Their mouths hung open and I wasn't sure if they were alive. He told me those were his grandparents and that was all he said about it. He waited for me outside the bathroom, and I pretended to go pee. That was the longest I had ever held it but there was no way I could sit on that toilet filled with piss, shit, maybe it was vomit, and dead cockroaches.

I breathed against the broken window of the abandoned house. Something tickled my arm. It was a cockroach. That's when I left, knowing the woods, cornfields, and rivers would guide me to a better place.



Stephanie Evelyn, aka Sterp, was born in California. She is the author of [The Sophia Rey Series](#), *Book 1: The Cult Called Freedom House* and *Book 2: The Coven of Retribution*. Her short story *The Lost Tea Cup* was published in [The Literary Hatchet #26](#). In 2022, her short story *Me and Florentine* was published in the horror

anthology [Shattered & Splintered](#). Today, she lives in central Pennsylvania where she writes, paints, and obsesses over the macabre.

- **Website:** <https://www.iamsterp.com/>
- **Email:** writersterp@gmail.com
- [Follow Sterp on Instagram](#)
- [Follow Sterp on Twitter](#)