



All Things Cease to Appear: A novel

By Elizabeth Brundage

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A dark, riveting, beautifully written book—by “a brilliant novelist,” according to Richard Bausch—that combines noir and the gothic in a story about two families entwined in their own unhappiness, with, at its heart, a gruesome and unsolved murder

Late one winter afternoon in upstate New York, George Clare comes home to find his wife killed and their three-year-old daughter alone—for how many hours?—in her room across the hall. He had recently, begrudgingly, taken a position at a nearby private college (far too expensive for local kids to attend) teaching art history, and moved his family into a tight-knit, impoverished town that has lately been discovered by wealthy outsiders in search of a rural idyll.

George is of course the immediate suspect—the question of his guilt echoing in a story shot through with secrets both personal and professional. While his parents rescue him from suspicion, a persistent cop is stymied at every turn in proving Clare a heartless murderer. And three teenage brothers (orphaned by tragic circumstances) find themselves entangled in this mystery, not least because the Clares had moved into their childhood home, a once-thriving dairy farm. The pall of death is ongoing, and relentless; behind one crime there are others, and more than twenty years will pass before a hard kind of justice is finally served.

A rich and complex portrait of a psychopath and a marriage, this is also an astute study of the various taints that can scar very different families, and even an entire community. Elizabeth Brundage is an essential talent who has given us a true modern classic.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Mesmerizing . . . Extraordinarily gripping and suspenseful . . . A beautifully written novel that works on many levels. It is thoughtful and lyrical, a penetrating study of a psychopath and a deeply disturbing portrait of a doomed marriage, but also a meditation on the deceptiveness of all appearances and on ‘the big fairy tale of America.’” —Kate Horsley, *Crimeculture*

“A marriage, a sociopath, a family destroyed by the economy, the things we do for love—all finely drawn. . . . All of the [cast] are sympathetic and suspicious in equal measure, a result of Brundage’s ability to peel away the onion-skin layers of emotion that define any relationship. As the clues accumulate and the killer is revealed, the truth becomes both horrifying and inevitable. In the end, justice is done and redemption found, though not at one might expect, which makes the book all the more satisfying.” —Vanessa Friedman, *The New York Times Book Review*

“A beautifully written treat. . . . as much a disturbing portrait of family and town life as it is a provocative mystery.” —Estelle Tang, *Elle*

“Unsettling, spellbinding . . . *All Things Cease to Appear* is a lot of things. It is part mystery, part ghost story. It is infused with the Swedenborgian ideals of marriage and the spiritual world. It is also very much about family, about what can hold a family together and what can tear it asunder. How the disparate pieces of the novel come together into a satisfying whole is its strength . . . Brundage’s novel is indeed ambitious. It is also just plain riveting.” —Steven Whitton, *The Anniston Star*

“Lyrically written, frequently shocking and immensely moving . . . It was, perhaps, for such extraordinary books that the term ‘literary thriller’ was coined . . . Reading this book is at once wrenching and exhilarating, thanks to Ms. Brundage’s prose, which can make you gasp in astonishment or break your heart with a single line.” —Tom Nolan, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Exquisitely gut-churning . . . Brundage’s elegant exploration of motive—in all its directions—sets this book apart . . . Paranormal activity hangs in the atmosphere [and] Brundage takes us compellingly inside the perverse machinations of a violently narcissistic mind [that] recalls Patricia Highsmith’s talented Mr. Ripley . . . Brundage’s language is the real draw, with her vivid portraits of spouses on opposite sides of a brutal abyss.” —Sarah Begley, *Time*

“[A] dark, chilling drama.” —Tina Jordan, *Entertainment Weekly*

“Transcendent . . . Tragedy leaves an indelible mark on both people and places in Brundage’s piercing new novel. Party mystery, part ghost story, and entirely brilliant.” —Liza Oldham, *Library Journal*

“Insightful, evocative.” —*People*, “Book of the Week”

“Slightly Gothic, socially perceptive, and briskly written. . . . Set in a seemingly haunted farmhouse is a rapidly gentrifying Hudson Valley town, the complex literary thriller ranges across generations of traumatized, interwoven families.” —Boris Kachka, *New York*

“Superb. . . think a more literary, and feminist, *Gone Girl*. As the seemingly perfect marriage at its core

reminds us, the most lethal deceptions are the stories we tell ourselves.” —Megan O’Grady, *Vogue*

“Brundage’s searing, intricate novel epitomizes the best of the literary thriller, marrying gripping drama with impeccably crafted prose, characterizations, and imagery. . . . Moving fluidly between viewpoints and time periods, Brundage’s complex narrative requires and rewards close attention. Succeeding as murder mystery, ghost tale, family drama, and love story, her novel is both tragic and transcendent.” —*Publishers Weekly* [boxed review]

“*All Things Cease to Appear* is a riveting ghost story, psychological thriller, and literary page turner. It’s also the story of four women: Ella, Catherine, Justine, and Willis. With masterful skill and brilliant empathy, Brundage brings each of them to vivid and remarkable life. At its heart, this is a story about women’s grit and courage, will and intelligence. It’s a powerful and beautiful novel.” —Kate Christensen

“At once high art and a spellbinding thriller, this is a book of many wonders, including a character as creepily sinister as any created by Patricia Highsmith.” —Beverly Lowry

“Brundage’s brilliant new novel is as terrifyingly unsettling—and as beautiful—as cracking ice over a raging river. Part murder mystery, part ghost story, it’s also a profound look at how past guilt informs the present, how what we yearn for is not always what we get, and how it’s not only houses that can be haunted, but people as well. One of the most ambitious, original and gorgeously written novels that I’ve ever read—and been unable to forget.” —Caroline Leavitt

“A dynamic portrait of a young woman coming into her own [and] of a marriage in free fall. . . . It rises to [great] literary heights and promises a soaring mix of mysticism.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“A classic murder mystery [combined] with a gripping psychological thriller, exploring the complexities of grief, relationships—romantic, familial and friendly—and small-town life.” —Haley Herfurth, *BookPage*

“I bloody loved this. I could have taken weeks over it, lingering on the harmony and beauty of her language and the creeping delicacy of what was going on - but the plot and the people pull you in. It’s an iceberg in disguise. Beneath the daisies and farmhouses, the drinks parties and local dramas something grand, tense and terrifying is shifting, between men and women, between townies and newcomers, between adults and children. And then a crack shoots through - unexpected light, the clarity of hatred, inevitability...” —Louisa Young

About the Author

ELIZABETH BRUNDAGE graduated from Hampshire College, attended NYU film school, was a screenwriting fellow at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, and received an MFA as well as a James Michener Award from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She has taught at a variety of colleges and universities, most recently at Skidmore College, where she was visiting writer-in-residence. She lives near Albany in upstate New York.

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February 23, 1979

Again, it was snowing. Half past five in the afternoon. Almost dark. She had just laid out their plates when the dogs started barking.

Her husband set down his fork and knife, none too pleased to have his supper interrupted. What's that now?

June Pratt pulled aside the curtain and saw their neighbor. He was standing there in the snow, holding the child, her feet bare, neither of them in coats. From the looks of it, the little girl was in her pajamas. It's George Clare, she said.

What's he selling?

I wonder. I don't see a car. They must've come on foot.

Awful cold out. You better see what he wants.

She let them in with the cold. He stood before her, holding the child out like an offering.

It's my wife. She's—

Momma hurt, the child cried.

June didn't have children of her own, but she had raised dogs her whole life and saw the same dark knowing in the child's eyes that confirmed what all animals understood, that the world was full of evil and beyond comprehension.

You'd better call the police, she told her husband. Something's happened to his wife.

Joe pulled off his napkin and went to the phone.

Let's go find you some socks, she said, and took the child from her father and carried her down the hall to the bedroom where she set her on the bed. Earlier that afternoon, she had laid her freshly laundered socks over the radiator, and she took a pair now and pushed the warm wool over the child's feet, thinking that if the child were hers she'd love her better.

They were the Clares. They had bought the Hale place that summer, and now winter had come and there were just the two houses on the road and she hadn't seen them much. Sometimes in the morning she would. Either when he raced past in his little car to the college. Or when the wife took the child out of doors. Sometimes, at night, when June walked the dogs, you could see inside their house. She could see them having supper, the little girl between them at the table, the woman getting up and sitting down and getting up again.

With the snow, it took over a half-hour for the sheriff to arrive. June was vaguely aware, as women often are of men who desire them, that Travis Lawton, who had been her classmate in high school, found her attractive. That was of no consequence now, but you don't easily forget the people you grew up with, and she made a point of listening carefully to him, and acknowledged his kindness to George, even though there was the possibility, in her own mind at least, that the bad thing that had happened to his wife might have been his own doing.

he was thinking of Emerson, the terrible aristocracy that is in Nature. Because there were things in this world you couldn't control. And because even now he was thinking of her. Even now, with his wife lying dead in that house.

He could hear Joe Pratt on the phone.

George waited on the green couch, shaking a little. Their house smelled like dogs and he could hear them

barking out back in their pens. He wondered how they could stand it. He stared at the wide boards, a funk of mildew coming up from the cellar. He could feel it in the back of his throat. He coughed.

They're on their way, Pratt said from the kitchen.

George nodded.

Down the hall, June Pratt was talking to his daughter with the sweet tone people use on children and he was grateful for it, so much so that his eyes teared a little. She was known for taking in strays. He'd see her walking the road with the motley pack at her side, a middle-aged woman in a red kerchief, frowning at the ground.

After a while, he couldn't say how long, a car pulled up.

Here they are now, Pratt said.

It was Travis Lawton who came in. George, he said, but didn't shake his hand.

Hello, Travis.

Chosen was a small town and they were acquaintances of a sort. He knew Lawton had gone to RPI and had come back out here to be sheriff, and it always struck George that for an educated man he was pretty shallow. But then George wasn't the best judge of character and, as he was continually reminded by a coterie of concerned individuals, his opinion didn't amount to much. George and his wife were newcomers. The locals took at least a hundred years to accept the fact that somebody else was living in a house that had, for generations, belonged to a single family whose sob stories were now part of the local mythology. He didn't know these people and they certainly didn't know him, but in those few minutes, as he stood there in the Pratts' living room in his wrinkled khakis and crooked tie, with a distant, watery look in his eyes that could easily be construed as madness, all their suspicions were confirmed.

Let's go take a look, Lawton said.

They left Franny with the Pratts and went up the road, him and Lawton and Lawton's undersheriff, Wiley Burke. It was dark now. They walked with grave purpose, a brutal chill under their feet.

The house sat there grinning.

They stood a minute looking up at it and then went in through the screened porch, a clutter of snowshoes and tennis rackets and wayward leaves, to the kitchen door. He showed Lawton the broken glass. They climbed the stairs in their dirty boots. The door to their bedroom was shut; he couldn't remember shutting it. He guessed that he had.

I can't go in there, he told the sheriff.

All right. Lawton touched his shoulder in a fatherly way. You stay right here.

Lawton and his partner pushed through the door. Faintly, he heard sirens. Their shrill cries made him weak.

He waited in the hall, trying not to move. Then Lawton came out, bracing himself against the doorjamb. He looked at George warily. That your ax?

George nodded. From the barn.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Errol Sawyer:

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