

The Baying Hound

by Joshua L. Hood

I'd know the sound anywhere. There are a million dogs belonging to a million masters in this world, but I know that this one is hers. The old wolfhound – a regal, hoary beast whose age never tempered its lust for loyalty and violence – was the only one of its sort in a hundred miles. Her ostentation would allow for nothing less. It bays outside the window now, though I cannot see it through the dim reflection of the room that the lantern casts back at me. Only the rain and the flickering corpse behind me are plain in that view. And me, of course, looking more the coward than ever I have been, which is saying much.

If the baying were constant, or nearer, then I would be less afraid. If it were even inside the room, echoing around my feet, then at least the tangibility of danger would divert my mind from so many gruesome possibilities, and perhaps I could die of that tangible fright before its teeth did the deed. It remains distant, though, almost as if the cur doesn't intend the baying as a threat, but simply as a dirge – sung to no one in particular – for the lost soul atrophying on this table. I know better.

But for now I haven't the luxury of dwelling on the intentions of the beast. I have work to do, and a short time to do it. The funeral is tomorrow. I've sewn her jaw shut, glued her eyes closed, dressed her face as opulently as she would have liked in life. I have now to, somehow, conceal the seeping wound over her heart, then dress her in the shroud that she will molder in for eternity. A shame. Even in death, the soft curves of her form arouse an instinct older and more primal than the loyalty of that damned hound.

I'd wished for so long to see her thus. Not necessarily dead, I mean, but nude, at hand, suppliant to my whims. And now she has come to me. In death, as she would not in life, she graces my table, listens to me speak, gives me undivided attention. I've wished so long for her...

That baying! It denies a wandering heart the fantasy of what could have been. It reminds me of potential now lost – my hidden desires to go forever unfulfilled. But how hidden were they, really? What man in twenty years hadn't wished the same as I – to have, to hold, to look into her eyes, feel her warm breath? Living eyes! Not those damned shriveled beads of blue glass I'd just closed away from the world forever. Living breath! Not that putrefying stench I'd sewn into stagnant lungs. How long before those curves, that porcelain skin, become like those eyes? Rotten. Shriveled. Corrupt...

Ah! This time I hear you, hound! This time my heart dirges with you. The past is lost, the future is grim, the present is...haunted...but ours.

And eternal, because I know I cannot leave this morgue while that beast waits.

Thunder has begun, and with it – lightning. It will be illuminating the window now and then as it strikes. I could look out and, in brief moments perhaps, glimpse the hound, the snarling beast. Do I hear its teeth gnashing?

I will not look. I cannot. It is painfully evident that it can see me and its lost mistress if it wishes – and perhaps it does – but I don't want to see it. I couldn't handle the sight. For how would it look now? How *could* it even look? How could it even be here, or anywhere on this material plane? It isn't possible