

The **THING...** on the Doorstep

By Rom Watson

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:

A stunning original adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's short story, Rom Watson's play is tightly written, thought provoking, and as creepy as hell. The Thing in THE THING ON THE DOORSTEP is beyond description - it's too menacing, too elusive, too disturbing. Through masterful storytelling and clever use of theatrical convention (the asides and seamless jumps in time are particularly inspired), the play delivers a narrative that sucks us in, latches on, and takes over our bodies and minds. H.P. Lovecraft's tale of the downfall of a friendship and the unraveling of the psyche is both mystery and horror. With dry humor, references to Shakespeare, and the power of dark magic from the Necronomicon, reading this play is like a master course in playwriting at Miskatonic University. Beware: THE THING is still out there - you may never pay back those student loans.

*In admiration. **Five Stars.** (Spacing and font size is playwright's own.)*

Love this (excerpted) dialogue between Daniel and Asenath:

DANIEL UPTON

But how can consciousness and the body be separated?

ASENATH WAITE

The body is merely the cage our consciousness inhabits.

DANIEL UPTON

And when the cage dies, when “black chaos comes again,” our consciousness moves on?

ASENATH WAITE

Yes, exactly.

DANIEL UPTON

To . . . I won't say heaven, but . . . a higher plane of consciousness?

ASENATH WAITE

Sometimes.

DANIEL UPTON

How can you test your theories without dying?

ASENATH WAITE

One doesn't have to die to leave the body.

The Thing on the Doorstep

A one-act play

Stage adaptation of the H.P. Lovecraft story by Rom Watson

Cast

THE THING, male or female, short

DANIEL UPTON, male, 30's to 40's, 8 years older than Edward

DR. PICKMAN, male or female, 30's to 60's

DETECTIVE DRAKE, male, 30's to 50's

EDWARD DERBY, male, 20's to late 30's, 8 years younger than Daniel, taller than The Thing

ASENATH WAITE, female, 20's to late 30's

If necessary, the Thing, Dr. Pickman and Asenath Waite may be played by the same actress.

The location: Arkham Sanitarium in Arkham, Massachusetts.

The time: 1955.

An upstage door faces the audience. It is the entrance to the Upton home, and is not used for other entrances or exits. It is surrounded by black curtains that run the length of the upstage area. The stage is bare except for two chairs, a low stool, and a cot. DANIEL UPTON is asleep on the cot, stage left. The lights rise as the door opens, revealing THE THING, a humped figure, short in stature, bundled up in loose, ill-fitting clothing. Its face is covered by a piece of dark fabric or a black silk scarf, kept in place by a hat or cap. It wears an overcoat that is much too long for it. The gender of this figure is indiscernible. It approaches Daniel, who stirs but does not awaken. Blackout. The Thing exits. The lights rise and Daniel awakens from his nightmare.

DANIEL UPTON

Aahhh!

(He sits up, catches his breath and calms down.)

Always the same dream.

(He looks around.)

Edward. You must have hated this room as much as I do.

(Calling out.)

Dr. Pickman?

There is no answer. He takes a folded piece of yellow legal paper from his pocket, unfolds it and begins to read. DR. PICKMAN enters, followed by DETECTIVE DRAKE. Drake carries a notebook and a pen. Daniel folds the paper and returns it to his pocket.

DR. PICKMAN

You're up. Good.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes. And very glad to be awake.

DR. PICKMAN

Bad dreams again?

DANIEL UPTON

“The dream’s here still: even when I wake, it is without me, as within me; not imagined, felt.”

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You can’t be that crazy, if you’re quoting Shakespeare.

DR. PICKMAN

This is Detective Drake. He needs to question you. Do you feel up to that? Daniel?

DANIEL UPTON

What? Sorry; yes.

DR. PICKMAN

Alright. Let me know if you get too agitated. I can give you something to relax you.
(To Drake.)
I’ll be down the hall if he gets . . .if you need anything.

DR. PICKMAN exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How are they treating you?

DANIEL UPTON

I have no complaints about the staff. Dr. Pickman is being very kind.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How are you feeling?

Drake sits.

DANIEL UPTON

I have terrible nightmares and when I wake up I’m in hell. Other than that, just fine.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What I meant was, are you ready to talk about what happened?

DANIEL UPTON

It’s the most horrible thing - why would I want to talk about it?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You know; get it off your chest. Make you feel better.

DANIEL UPTON

That would not make me feel better.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Yeah, I know what you mean. Women feel better after they talk about whatever is troubling them. Men don't.

DANIEL UPTON

So why ask?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I have to. I need to know what happened; why you put six bullets through the head of your best friend.

DANIEL UPTON

I did not murder Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Care to explain that?

Daniel turns away from Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE (CONT'D)

You'd just like to forget about it, huh?

DANIEL UPTON

I'm never going to forget it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then you might as well talk about it.

DANIEL UPTON

You're very logical, aren't you.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

It's one of the reasons I'm good at my job.

DANIEL UPTON

What I have to say isn't going to sound logical. Or believable.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why don't you tell me what you know.

(He opens his notebook.)

When did you and Edward Derby first meet?

DANIEL UPTON

When I was sixteen. He was eight.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Your best friend was eight years younger?

DANIEL UPTON

We had a lot in common.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Such as?

DANIEL UPTON

We shared an interest in the occult.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)

Hmmm.

DANIEL UPTON

Horror films, comic books . . .we had great discussions. He was very smart.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How smart.

DANIEL UPTON

He went to college at fifteen and graduated in three years.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Okay, I'm impressed. Which college?

DANIEL UPTON

Miskatonic University. His parents insisted he live at home, so he had no other choice.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I graduated from Miskatonic. He could have done a lot worse.

DANIEL UPTON

I didn't mean to imply -

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Forget it. Why did his parents make him live at home? His age?

DANIEL UPTON

They were always overprotective. When Edward was a child he had severe asthma; had to stay in bed for days at a time. He outgrew the asthma, but his parents never stopped coddling him.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Are they still living?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What did he do for a living?

DANIEL UPTON

He never needed to earn money.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Must be nice. What did he study at college?

DANIEL UPTON

English and French literature, to please his parents. For himself he studied the occult. Particularly ancient magic lore. The Necronomicon has a large section devoted to that topic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Neck - row - ...?

DANIEL UPTON

Necronomicon. Miskatonic's library has one of the few copies in existence.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)

Did you study that as well?

DANIEL UPTON

Edward and I shared a fascination for the occult, but I studied architecture at Harvard.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Oooh, fancy.

DANIEL UPTON

When I graduated I worked for an architect in Boston. I was learning all I could from him, and hoped he would make me a partner. But then I met my wife. We married and, I decided I'd rather raise a family here.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How often did you see Edward, once you married?

DANIEL UPTON

He came to dinner almost every night. For about two years.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Wasn't that an imposition?

DANIEL UPTON

No. We considered him part of the family. We named our son Edward, after him.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What happened after two years?

DANIEL UPTON

He met Asenath. (He rises.) She later became his wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What kind of name is Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

Biblical.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Aahh. And how did he meet her?

DANIEL UPTON

He occasionally gave a lecture at Miskatonic, on mediaeval metaphysics, and after one of these lectures a student approached him. Asenath Waite.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Any relation to Ephraim Waite?

DANIEL UPTON

His daughter.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Oooh. Poor kid.

DANIEL UPTON

You knew Ephraim?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Not personally, but we got a lot of complaints about him down at the station. "Weirdo Waite." People were scared of him.

DANIEL UPTON

He was scary. I remember seeing him at the town library when I was a child. He was always engrossed in ancient books I wasn't allowed to read.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

And that wife of his, who never spoke and always wore a veil? Creepy.

Drake rises.

DANIEL UPTON

It gets creepier. He died insane. Locked in an attic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When?

DANIEL UPTON

A few weeks after his daughter entered college. They say she inherited his gift for magic. And for raising thunderstorms.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Raising thunderstorms?

DANIEL UPTON

Besides being a student of magic, there were rumors that Ephraim could create a storm on a cloudless day.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Do you believe Asenath could do that as well?

DANIEL UPTON

I have no proof of her controlling the weather, but I do believe she could control people.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How?

DANIEL UPTON

Hypnosis. She could gaze at someone and cause them to feel as though they had exchanged personalities with her. They felt they were in Asenath's body staring at their own body from across the room.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Did this happen to you?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then how do you know this?

DANIEL UPTON

It happened to my wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

And you believe her?

DANIEL UPTON

Absolutely. If you knew her, you'd believe her too.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I wish my wife were like that. Did you like Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

I'm not sure anyone "liked" Asenath; except Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why is that?

DANIEL UPTON

Most people found her bizarre. She seemed to inspire fear and awe, but not affection. Even animals disliked her.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What did she see in Edward?

DANIEL UPTON

Besides their shared interest in magic and the occult? Edward had a strong mind, but a weak will. Which is just the way she liked it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When did you first meet Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

Edward brought her over to the house. My wife had gone out, and I wasn't expecting anyone, but I could tell from the series of knocks that it was Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Series of knocks?

DANIEL UPTON

It was our signal.

There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . .knock, knock. Daniel rises and crosses to the door. Drake crosses downstage to the low stool and sits facing upstage. Daniel opens the door and EDWARD DERBY enters, followed by ASENATH WAITE.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel, I want you to meet Asenath Waite.

DANIEL UPTON

Hello.

ASENATH WAITE

Edward's told me all about you, so we can dispense with pleasantries.

EDWARD DERBY

That's her way; she's rather forward.

DANIEL UPTON

It makes a nice change.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm glad you think so.

ASENATH WAITE

Some people find me off-putting, so I hope for Edward's sake you'll look past my prickly exterior.

DANIEL UPTON

Of course.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel's the best.

ASENATH WAITE
How fortunate for you.

DANIEL UPTON
Can I get you something? A drink?

ASENATH WAITE
No, thank you.

EDWARD DERBY
I'm fine.

Asenath gazes at Edward.

DANIEL UPTON
I'm glad Edward has found someone who looks at him the way you do.

ASENATH WAITE
Was I staring?

DANIEL UPTON
Yes, but in a good way.

ASENATH WAITE
Edward is quite the catch.

EDWARD DERBY
I'm the one who's lucky.

DANIEL UPTON
Edward told me you met at one of his lectures.

ASENATH WAITE
Yes. I was impressed by his knowledge of ancient magic. (She sits.) And when I spoke with him after the lecture, I was even more impressed.

Daniel sits. Edward stands next to
Asenath's chair.

EDWARD DERBY
(Embarrassed but pleased.)
Asenath is a student of magic and metaphysics.

DANIEL UPTON
All of it? Or a particular portion?

ASENATH WAITE

Consciousness. The way it localizes, and the way it travels.

DANIEL UPTON

Travels?

EDWARD DERBY

Her theories on astral projection are very interesting.

ASENATH WAITE

It's not projection.

DANIEL UPTON

Then what is it?

ASENATH WAITE

Consciousness is independent of the physical body.

DANIEL UPTON

"Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners."

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel sometimes quotes Shakespeare.

ASENATH WAITE

I recognized the quote.

DANIEL UPTON

But how can consciousness and the body be separated?

ASENATH WAITE

The body is merely the cage our consciousness inhabits.

DANIEL UPTON

And when the cage dies, when "black chaos comes again," our consciousness moves on?

ASENATH WAITE

Yes, exactly.

DANIEL UPTON

To . . . I won't say heaven, but . . . a higher plane of consciousness?

ASENATH WAITE

Sometimes.

DANIEL UPTON

How can you test your theories without dying?

ASENATH WAITE

One doesn't have to die to leave the body.

DANIEL UPTON

How does one accomplish that?

ASENATH WAITE

Practice. And of course a lot of study.

EDWARD DERBY

Sometimes I think she loves libraries more than she loves me.

ASENATH WAITE

Libraries, no. It's the knowledge inside them I crave.

DANIEL UPTON

Most people identify with their bodies so strongly, they can't conceive of their consciousness as being a separate entity.

ASENATH WAITE

Most people are ignorant.

EDWARD DERBY

Or they've never lost a loved one. When you lose a parent, you feel their presence, and it becomes very clear that their body was only a vessel. Isn't that what you meant, Asenath?

Asenath rises.

ASENATH WAITE

I wish I had been born a man. Life is very unfair to women.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes, it certainly can be.

ASENATH WAITE

When a man displays power, or a forceful opinion, he's hailed as strong, or a leader of men. If a woman displays any power at all she's declared a witch.

DANIEL UPTON

Fortunately that's changing.

ASENATH WAITE

Not fast enough.

EDWARD DERBY

Well, I'm glad you were born a woman.

Asenath tries to smile. The lights change
and Edward and Asenath exit.

DANIEL UPTON

They were married a month later. I was his best man.

Drake crosses to Daniel.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You didn't try to talk him out of it?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why not?

DANIEL UPTON

There's an old saying that's actually true: "infatuation thrives on opposition."

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I see your point; it's better to let a man find out the truth about a woman for himself.

DANIEL UPTON

Are you referring to your own marriage?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Ignoring his question.)

Do you think she married him for his money?

DANIEL UPTON

Oh no. She had her own money. Plus, she inherited the old Crowninshield place
from her father. They fixed it up and moved in.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

She didn't move in with Edward?

DANIEL UPTON

She wanted to be near the college, and its library, and her circle of friends.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So he moved in with her.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward had a strong mind—

DETECTIVE DRAKE

But a weak will.

DANIEL UPTON

After they married I didn't see him as much. And when I did, he was secretive about his occult studies, which we used to discuss for hours.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When someone marries, their friends tend to fade into the background.

DANIEL UPTON

I missed Edward, but not Asenath.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)

Uh-huh.

DANIEL UPTON

After about a year, Edward began to be a very different person.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Sadder?

DANIEL UPTON

More thoughtful. More adult.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Marriage can do that to a man.

DANIEL UPTON

That was my explanation. At first. But his facial expressions changed, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. Plus, he was seen around town driving a car.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So?

DANIEL UPTON

He never learned how to drive.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Oh come on.

DANIEL UPTON

I told you his parents were overprotective. They were afraid he'd have an asthma attack behind the wheel. But he was seen driving, and people would say he was starting to look like his wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

That happens to married couples.

DANIEL UPTON

After they've been married fifty or sixty years. Not one. I remember I stopped by to visit them, but just as I got there I saw Edward get in the car speed away.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So he did learn to drive.

DANIEL UPTON

That's one theory. I rang the bell to speak to Asenath, but their servant told me she was out as well.

Asenath enters.

DANIEL UPTON

As I was leaving, I glanced at the window and I saw Asenath in their den.

(Daniel and Asenath enact the following encounter while Daniel speaks.)

But her face . . . I'd never seen it like that before. It was sad, and defeated; hopeless. Then she saw me and turned away, but in that moment our eyes met, I could swear that it was Edward's eyes looking at me.

Asenath exits as Daniel crosses back to Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Is that when the trouble started?

DANIEL UPTON

It wasn't until they'd been married about three years that Edward began to complain.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

A whole three years.

DANIEL UPTON

That's also when Edward began to talk about . . .his fears.

There is a knock at the door: knock,
knock, knock, pause . . .knock, knock.
Daniel crosses and opens the door as
Detective Drake crosses downstage to the
low stool and sits facing upstage.
EDWARD enters.

EDWARD DERBY

She's going too far, Dan. I'm losing my identity.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I know that feeling.

Daniel gives Drake a look and he shuts up.

DANIEL UPTON

(To Edward.)

What are you talking about?

EDWARD DERBY

I want us to move back into my house, but Asenath won't hear of it.

DANIEL UPTON

Why do you want to move back into your house?

EDWARD DERBY

Her house is creepy.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, so is yours.

EDWARD DERBY

But the spirit of her father permeates that house.

DANIEL UPTON

I'm not surprised; he lived there for decades.

EDWARD DERBY

Not only that, but it's getting harder for me to come visit you. Or anyone. She has a power of some kind . . .

DANIEL UPTON

Mesmerism?

EDWARD DERBY

Telepathic. She can stop my actions with words, or a glance. I can't explain it. Her study of the occult has made her strong. It's a very potent sort of magic. More will than magic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)

Did you believe it?

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)

No, but I knew he believed it.

(To Edward.)

You managed to make it here today.

EDWARD DERBY

She's away in her own body. At Chesuncook.

DANIEL UPTON

(Not sure he heard him correctly.)

What's that?

EDWARD DERBY

An old forest in Maine. I refused to go; it's too creepy even for me.

DANIEL UPTON

That's saying a lot.

EDWARD DERBY

They have these secret gatherings out in the woods. They perform rituals, and have out-of-body experiences that take them to other worlds, and different dimensions.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)

Is this when he started to lose his mind?

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)

No. Edward always had that type of imagination. Over-active, people used it call it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)

I call it freaky.

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)

I just thought he'd been reading too much science fiction.

Daniel turns back to Edward.

EDWARD DERBY

I have to move out of that house.

DANIEL UPTON

Do you think Ephraim is haunting it?

EDWARD DERBY

I think Ephraim is haunting Asenath.

The lights change and EDWARD exits.

DANIEL UPTON

A week later I got a call from Arkham Sanitarium. Edward had been admitted and wanted to see me.

DR. PICKMAN enters.

DR. PICKMAN

Edward Derby stumbled out of the woods near Chesuncook, raving about . . .

(Checking notes.)

. . .Shoggoths, black magic, and Kamog the Hooded One. The police were kind enough to drive him here, and I've been observing him.

DANIEL UPTON

What's your diagnosis?

DR. PICKMAN

I haven't made one yet. He saw something in that forest that terrified him, but I don't know if it was imagined, or real.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would you think it might be real?

DR. PICKMAN

Because I grew up near Chesuncook forest. Come with me; I'll take you to Edward.

The lights change as they cross to another part of the stage and Edward enters.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, thank god you're here.

DR. PICKMAN

Call me if you need any help.

Dr. Pickman exits.

DANIEL UPTON

Are you alright?

EDWARD DERBY

I was at the pit of the shoggoths! Down six thousand steps. I would never let her take me there, and then suddenly I found myself there, in front of an altar with hundreds of howling things shouting "Kamog!"

DANIEL UPTON

Kamog?

EDWARD DERBY

It was Ephraim's name in the coven. Asenath took my body to that unholy pit, where the black realm begins. I saw the shoggoth; it changed shape. I'll kill her if she ever sends me there again.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, when you feel well enough to leave the sanitarium, you'll come stay with us. I will help you get a divorce.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel, you don't understand. She's been getting a hold of me, taking me over. One day, she's not going to let go. Right now she can't hold on for long periods of time, but she's making herself stronger. She takes my body to obscure places for those occult rites. She leaves me in her body and locks me up in our den. When she loses control of me, I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere. I wish to God I'd learned how to drive.

Edward begins to pace.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would Asenath –

EDWARD DERBY

The most bizarre thing, is now that I've inhabited her body, I've come to realize she's not one hundred percent human.

DANIEL UPTON

What?

EDWARD DERBY

A few weeks ago . . . I tried to kill myself. I was too embarrassed to tell you because I didn't want you know how weak I am.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, . . .

EDWARD DERBY

She had taken my body and gone off to some black magic ritual, and I was so depressed I filled the bathtub with water and lay down in it to drown myself. I waited for death, but it never came. I lay underwater for half an hour, staring up at the surface.

DANIEL UPTON

That's impossible. You must have been hallucinating.

EDWARD DERBY

Rather than dying, her body seemed to thrive. Her DNA must be part amphibian.

DANIEL UPTON

You're saying your wife is a salamander?

EDWARD DERBY

No. But some salamanders have both lungs and gills.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes, they do. They're called sirens. But--

EDWARD DERBY

Which leads me to believe she has some amphibian DNA. Besides, her family comes from Innsmouth. You always hear rumors about people from Innsmouth.

DANIEL UPTON

Not that they're salamanders. Edward, if you ever want to get out of this place, don't share this with anyone.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm not sure I want to get out. This might be the safest place for me.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, why would Asenath want to do this to you?

EDWARD DERBY

Because she wants to be in a man's body. Permanently.

DANIEL UPTON

Why?

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, did you ever meet her father?

DANIEL UPTON

No, but I saw him a number a times. Years ago, at the main library in town, before you ever met Asenath. He had a long, ugly grey beard.

EDWARD DERBY

That's him. He glared at me once when I was a kid and I never forgot it. Now she glares at me that way. Dan, he found some sort of formula or spell in the Necronomicon. He took over her body, and now he means to take over mine. He's going to go from body to body, on and on, so he'll never die.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, I think you need to rest now.

EDWARD DERBY

Well I think you need to hear this. Don't patronize me. I don't need a rest.

DANIEL UPTON

Okay.

EDWARD DERBY

Asenath told me her father went insane and she had to lock him away in the attic, where he died shortly thereafter. But Dan, I think Ephraim took over Asenath's body and locked her away in the attic, in his body, which was old and about to die. Why else would her handwriting suddenly cha--

(Edward's face changes and his posture shifts. He is suddenly calm. He slowly turns his head to Daniel and glares at him with a sinister air. His voice is now firmer and more decisive.)

I hope you'll excuse my ravings, Upton. I've been through a lot of stress lately. Please forget any crazy things I may have said about my wife. I shall rest now.

Edward lies down and closes his eyes. The lights fade on him and he exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Interesting. Multiple personalities?

DANIEL UPTON

That was my first thought. But it turned out to be something worse.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Go on.

DANIEL UPTON

Mid-September, after Edward was released, I heard rumors that people were hearing sobbing in the old Crowninshield house, sometimes female, sometime male. One evening in mid-October, I heard the familiar three-and-two knock at the front door.

There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . .knock, knock. Daniel rises and opens the door. Edward enters, looking furtively back over his shoulder.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward! Come in. It's good to see you. You seem like your old self again.

EDWARD DERBY

I hate to admit it, but my time in the sanitarium actually did me some good.

DANIEL UPTON

I'm relieved to hear it.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, Asenath is gone. We had a long talk last night, and I made her promise to stop controlling me. I have certain occult defenses I never told you about, and she, had to give in. She got very angry. Packed up and left for New York. Walked right out.

DANIEL UPTON

I think it's for the best.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm hoping she'll go west, and get a divorce. Anyway, I made her promise to keep away and leave me alone.

DANIEL UPTON

Maybe now you'll have some peace of mind.

EDWARD DERBY

I paid off those awful servants of hers this morning, and they're gone as well. I'm going to move back into the old Derby house. She's never going to take possession of my body again.

DANIEL UPTON

Uh . . .good.

EDWARD DERBY

That time you visited me in the sanitarium, when I was explaining it to you; she got me, she took over. Did you see the change?

DANIEL UPTON

I saw it.

EDWARD DERBY

I was telling you about her powers, and then in a flash I was back at the house, locked up in our den, in her body.

Edward becomes agitated. Perhaps he begins to pace, or crosses away.

EDWARD DERBY (CONT'D)

I had to save myself -- I had to, Dan! She'd have got me forever if she'd carried out that sacrifice she was planning for the Hallowmass. Old Ephraim would be in my body forever. Some people know things about the universe that no one should know.

Daniel crosses to the Detective.

DANIEL UPTON

I got him to calm down, and then we discussed arrangements for his moving back into the Derby family mansion. It needed some repairs.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When did he move?

DANIEL UPTON

He didn't. The repairs were completed by December but he never left Crowninshield. I paid him a visit there at Christmas, and . . .he broke down.

Daniel crosses back to Edward.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, it's happening again!

DANIEL UPTON

What is?

EDWARD DERBY

Asenath . . . Ephraim . . . it's trying to take control of me again. I feel it tugging at me, clawing at my brain, trying to get in. It's like a flame that won't go out - nothing can stop it, not distance, not magic, not death.

DANIEL UPTON

Is there anything I can do to help?

EDWARD DERBY

There is. Daniel, I need you to be my guardian.

DANIEL UPTON

Okay.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm having seizures every night, and if anything happens to me, I need to know you'll act in my best interests.

DANIEL UPTON

Of course. I'll have my lawyer draw up a Power of Attorney form.

Daniel crosses to Drake as Edward crosses to the cot and lies down.

DANIEL UPTON

I spoke to his doctor.

Dr. Pickman enters.

DR. PICKMAN

(To Daniel, not seeing Drake.)

His seizures are getting worse. I've called in two specialists.

DANIEL UPTON

What can I do?

DR. PICKMAN

I think he needs constant supervision.

DANIEL UPTON

Is he a danger to others?

DR. PICKMAN

No. But I can't guarantee he won't be a danger to himself.

Dr. Pickman exits.

DANIEL UPTON

I put him back into the sanitarium.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Did you visit him?

DANIEL UPTON

Twice a week. And every visit he would shriek and rage . . .

EDWARD DERBY

(From the cot.)

I had to do it - I had to - it'll get me! Dan, save me, save me!

DANIEL UPTON

One morning in late January, Dr. Pickman called to say that Edward's sanity had returned. I was so relieved, I went to see him immediately.

Daniel rushes to Edward.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward! They said you were back to normal.

Edward rises, extends his hand with a polite smile.

EDWARD DERBY

How nice to see you, Upton.

Daniel instinctively backs away.

DANIEL UPTON

(To Drake.)

He had changed again. It wasn't Edward.

Edward exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Who was he?

DANIEL UPTON

I don't know. But whoever he was, he wasn't "insane" any more. The seizures had stopped, the shrieking had stopped, there was nothing I could do. He was scheduled for release the next day.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then what happened?

DANIEL UPTON

That night I got a phone call. I couldn't hear who was on the line, but I was worried about Edward, so I thought it might be him. I said, "Hello? . . .Hello? . . .Edward, is that you?" The only response was a liquid sound, a sort of . . .gurgle. I said, "I can't hear you. Hang up and try again."

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Phone records show that the call came from Crowninshield.

DANIEL UPTON

Later I realized that it was Edward on the phone, trying to speak to me.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I inspected Crowninshield the next day.

DANIEL UPTON

What did you find?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The cellar was a mess. Dirt, tracked everywhere. A closet had been rifled through. There was an odd substance on the phone; and also on a yellow legal pad and some pens. What was really weird was the stench. It was horrible.

DANIEL UPTON

What do you think happened?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The medical examiner is still trying to explain what we found on your doorstep. He's got a lot of theories, but I suspect the truth is a lot more incredible.

DANIEL UPTON

And terrible.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Daniel, I need to hear what you think happened.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would you believe me? Why would anyone believe me?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The evidence.

DANIEL UPTON

What evidence?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Things like fingerprints on a candlestick. And time of death. And dental records.

DANIEL UPTON

Dental records?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The medical examiner was able to positively identify the remains.

DANIEL UPTON

(Brief pause.)

I . . . I now believe everything Edward told me. There are horrors beyond life's edge, things we don't even suspect. If we pry too much, we draw them to us. Those horrors engulfed Edward, and they're reaching out for me.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Is that why you shot him?

DANIEL UPTON

That thing I shot wasn't Edward any more. Has his body been cremated?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

They're keeping the body for another autopsy; by a different doctor who's driving up from New York.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward must be cremated.

(He crosses to Drake and implores him.)

Promise me he will be cremated!

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I-- I promise.

DANIEL UPTON

(Very relieved.)

Thank you.

(Perhaps he extends his hand and the Detective shakes it. Daniel crosses to the cot.)

I will not be driven out of my body. I will not change souls with anyone. That hell would be worse than this one.

He lies on the cot facing away from Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What happened that night? After the phone call?

Brief pause, then Daniel turns to face him. He decides to tell him. He rises, takes the folded piece of yellow legal paper from his pocket, and hands it to Drake. The lights fade on Drake. There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . . knock, knock. Daniel crosses to the door and opens it, revealing The Thing. Daniel slowly backs away, covering his nose and mouth. The Thing extends a gloved hand, which holds a letter impaled on a pencil or pen, hastily written on a piece of yellow legal paper and folded in thirds. Daniel takes the letter. He closes the door and crosses downstage, unfolding the letter. He reads it aloud. [If possible, it might be preferable to have the actor playing Edward pre-record the letter and play this recording while Daniel reads the letter silently. Or have Edward read the letter on stage in a pin-spot of light.]

DANIEL UPTON

(Reading.)

“Dan, go to the sanitarium and kill it. It isn’t Edward Derby anymore. It’s Asenath and she’s been dead for three months. I lied when I said she packed up and left for New York. I killed her. We were alone and I was in my right body. I saw my opportunity, and I didn’t see any other choice. I grabbed a candlestick and smashed her head in. I buried her in the basement, in the dank ground under some old boxes. I was fine for a while, but then I felt the tugging at my brain. She was trying to make me change bodies with her. A soul like hers --or Ephraim’s, lingers after death as long as the body lasts. And her amphibian DNA allowed her body to last longer in that moist soil. One day it happened --I found myself in the dark, in Asenath’s corpse down in the cellar. And I knew she must be in my body at the sanitarium. Permanently. Sane and ready for release, a menace to the world. I was desperate and managed to claw my way out. This body is too far gone for speech, but I can still write. Hope you can read my scrawl. I’ll manage somehow to get this letter to you. Kill that thing in the sanitarium. Make sure it’s cremated. Unless it’s burned to ash, it will live on, going from body to body. Dan, you’ve been a great friend. I’m sorry to drag you into this. I’ll be at peace soon; this body won’t hold together much longer. Kill that thing. And stay away from black magic. It’s the devil’s business. Yours, Ed.”

Daniel hurries upstage to the door and opens it, covering his nose and mouth to shield himself from the stench. The overcoat and other clothes are still there, but the body inside them has collapsed and is disintegrating. Slime oozes from one of the sleeves. Daniel watches in horror. The lights fade to black. End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

*In January of 2016, I joined Offending Shadows Theatre Company. At their first meeting, one of the artistic directors mentioned she loved H.P. Lovecraft. Never having read his work, I decided to read all the Lovecraft short stories, to search for something to adapt for the stage. I chose *The Thing on the Doorstep*. Not only because I liked it better than most of his other work, but more importantly because I felt it could be adapted easily and produced cheaply.*

Lovecraft wrote the story as an inner monologue. Transferring the narrative from inside a character's head onto the stage of a theatre required a number of changes. I added a detective to the story, and a doctor, and gave dialogue to the character of Asenath, who in the story never spoke. I also confined the play to a single location, so it would require no set changes. I tried to capture the atmosphere Lovecraft created with his words, and included phrases from his story when appropriate.

*As I was writing it, I found out Offending Shadows was looking for a one-act play to pair with an hour-long one-man show entitled *Roughly Hamlet*. I added a few quotes from Shakespeare as a tie-in to the one-man show, finished my adaptation, and submitted it. It was chosen, and the two were produced under the umbrella title *Adapted*, which played in Los Angeles for six performances in October of 2016. Subsequently, there was a student production at Northland Pioneer College in northeastern AZ on May 7, 2019.*

--Rom Watson, July 2020

AUTHOR'S BIO: Rom Watson is the author of the full-length plays LYING BENEATH THE SURFACE, IMAGE AND LIKENESS, THE NORMA CONQUESTS, PICKLE JUICE and PINOCCHIO IN THE BRONX. 12 of Rom's 27 short plays have been produced, including THREE SYLLABLES OF SHAME, MEAD AND STU GO TO SEAWORLD, CELEBRITY DEATH WATCH and MR. CUDDLES. Rom's full-length plays have had readings at The Road Theatre, Moving Arts, The MET Theatre, Alliance Repertory Company, Unknown Theatre, Celebration Theatre, Fierce Backbone and Neo Ensemble Theatre. Rom is a member of The Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights and The Dramatists Guild of America.