Christmas, Colorado, 1996

On Christmas Day, 1996, JonBenét Ramsey was reported missing by her family. JonBenét was six years old; she was also a successful child beauty queen. Patricia Ramsey, JonBenét’s mother, claimed to have discovered a ransom note left on the stairs of their home that apparently alerted the family to the fact that her daughter was missing. Though the note specifically indicated that JonBenét had been abducted, her father, John Ramsey, began the search for his daughter with two of his friends starting in the basement. Specifically, they looked in the area of the basement that was used as a wine cellar. They very quickly discovered the body of JonBenét, a factor considered highly suspicious by the police and at odds with the information in the ransom note that indicated she had been removed from the house. At once, the basement became a crime scene.

The basement is a staple of horror narratives, and Bernice M. Murphy draws on Gaston Bachelard’s seminal architectural work The Poetics of Space when she describes the “suburban basement” as “frequently a place in which unspeakable horrors lurk in the modern horror film.” She argues:

As Gaston Bachelard noted of the symbolic significance of cellars, the space is “first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths.” Similarly, basements in the Suburban Gothic are invariably associated with murder, the concealment of terrible crimes and illicit burial.2

When JonBenét was discovered in the basement of the Ramsey home she became part of an overarching Suburban Gothic

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narrative. The fact that her murder remains unsolved in spite of mass media coverage and extensive expert forensic analysis means that she has passed into the realm of myth and folklore; she is a truly haunting figure. The basement “conceals” the terrible crime of her murder temporarily until she is discovered, but on a more profound level, the basement conceals the crime forever. The evidence discovered there is illegible; the basement will not reveal the secret of JonBenét’s “illicit burial.”

Aside from the strangeness of the basement search, two other major discrepancies have never been accounted for in the case, and each of them has the quality of a myth or a nightmare. The first, and most widely reported, is the case of the missing footprints. The murder took place in the depths of a Colorado winter, when snow lay deep on the ground; yet there were no traces of footprints. This initially gave rise to intense speculation that the crime must have been committed inside the house, and the case became a true-crime locked-room mystery. Later, investigative reporter Julie Hayden looked more closely at footage of the snowbound house and reported:

We looked at the videotape once the footprints in the snow started becoming an issue and one of the things that I observed was, there did not seem to be snow going up to all of the doors. So, in my opinion, this thing about footprints in the snow has always been much ado about nothing because it seemed clear to me that people could have gotten in the house, whether they did or not, without traipsing through the snow.3

This analysis punctures the hermetically sealed mystery by allowing for multiple narratives. Hayden shatters the story into fragments by arguing that “people could have gotten in the house, whether they did or not, without traipsing through the

snow.” Here Hayden replaces the suspicious reading with an excavatory one, indicating multiple unhierarchized strata. As the crime could have occurred within or without the Ramsey house, there is no single legible narrative. This crime scene is not sealed, is not alien, but rather is part of a wider, cultural site of violence.

A second piece of evidence that caused widespread confusion, and at one juncture seemed to point to JonBenét’s murder within the home, was a dish of pineapple found in the kitchen of which she had eaten a portion:

For many years, the general public had heard that pineapple had been found in JBR’s small intestine. […] A bowl of pineapple was found in the breakfast area off from the kitchen […]. It seems implausible that a stranger or acquaintance intruder would have had the motivation or ability to get JBR to eat pineapple on her way to being assaulted. […] It is more plausible to imagine a “friendly” intruder, e.g., in the guise of a “secret visit” from Santa, having the motivation and means to do this, albeit a “diversion” that would have elevated the risk of being caught by the parents or Burke while in the kitchen or dining area.4

The dish of pineapple is abandoned on the work surface, an artifact at the scene. This clue is deeply unsettling; tinned tropical fruit is transformed from a Christmas treat into gustatory evidence within JonBenét’s body. The disjunction between the apparent homeliness of the Ramseys’ Christmas Day and the violence of JonBenét’s death is uncanny. Whether or not this speculative scene has any truth in it (the intruder offering JonBenét a last meal; a murderous Santa), there is a rupture within the home. The regularity and banality of meal times is compromised and becomes sinister. No member of the Ramsey fam-

ily claims to have any knowledge of the pineapple, and this fact signals a break in the smooth running of the household. At best the six-year-old JonBenét was left fending for herself, or looking to an intruder to meet her dietary needs; at worst the family was lying to cover up her murder.

D.A. Miller argues in his book *The Novel and the Police* that the happy family is simply a facet of the disciplinary institution, exerting control over the time, activities, and basic needs of the individual.5 The Ramsey home can be seen as an instantiation of this disciplinary unit, with the family basement as the ultimate site of corporal discipline — a site that John Ramsey, JonBenét’s father, is instinctively drawn towards. Aside from the obvious psychoanalytic reading of the basement as the unconscious, there is also a socioeconomic reading of the basement as an indicator of wealth. A basement generally belongs to a large building that has several unnecessary rooms; in the Ramseys’ case this included the added luxury of a wine cellar. In conjunction with the central crime of murder, the Ramsey basement can be read palimpsestically as a space for the capitalist accumulation of wealth and the colonization of land — both staples of the American Gothic narrative.

The most acute subgenre of the American Gothic narrative is perhaps that of Suburban Gothic, a term coined by Bernice Murphy, as mentioned above. This subgenre takes place in domestic locations, where the uniformity of the suburbs is an uncanny indicator of the inhuman. In this subgenre, larger colonial and genocidal forces are explicated through violent crimes against the individual. Arthur Kroker, a scholar of Suburban Gothic, suggests that the very sameness of the suburbs is “sinister”:

Most of all, it is the lawns which are sinister. Fuji green and expansive, they are a visual relief to the freeway and its accompanying tunnel vision. Even ahead of the golden arches, they are welcoming as the approach of a new urban sign-

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value. The frenzy sites of a decaying Christian culture where reclining lawn chairs, people in the sun, barbecues and summer-time swimming pools can give off the pleasant odors of an imploding Calvinist culture, playing psychologically at the edge of the parasite and the predator.6

Kroker is describing the context of late capitalism, of the postwar United States, and of urban sprawl cutting into the countryside. The banal multiplicity of the suburbs, built on material obsession and replete with replicas of nature, is horrifying and repellant to Kroker, who frames the suburbs within a religious paradigm. His “frenzy sites of a decaying Christian culture,” with its implicit hysterical decadence, could be applied as easily to the opening of the first millennium as to the US in the early twentieth century.7 The numinous nature of the hypergreen lawns of suburban North America are a façade for a culture in “frenzy” and “implosion.” Commenting on Kroker’s work, Kim Ian Michasiw also reads contamination, disease, and disgust in the “unnaturally vigorous turf” and asks whether “something might ooze from us and fuse us with the lawn.”8 These references to the “unnatural” greenness of the “turf” and the notion of “fusing with the lawn” are indicators of palimpsestic saturation. There is no escape from the contaminative traces of suburban horror, no escape from the crime scene.

7 In his 1998 work Tales from Ovid, which translates Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Ted Hughes makes an explicit comparison between the Augustan empire — it was flooded with “ecstatic cults” and at “sea in hysteria and despair” — and the end of the twentieth century. He says of Ovid’s tales that they “establish a rough register of what it feels like to live in the psychological gulf that opens up at the end of an era. Among everything else that we see in them, we certainly recognise this.” Ted Hughes, Tales from Ovid: Twenty-Four Passages from the “Metamorphoses” (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 6.
The lawns glow unnaturally luminol green.
Figure 2. Queer Light. Still from *The Luminol Reels*. 