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Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!

BY LIBBYTUCKER

Of all the animals with ghostly resonance, cats are among the most powerful. Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Black Cat" recounts the horrifying death and reappearance of Pluto, a black and white cat. In Celtic folklore, the Cat Sith—large and black, with a white spot on its chest—haunts the Scottish highlands. Settlers in early America feared black cats, associating them with witchcraft, and believed that only silver bullets could kill them. No wonder the possibility of a feline ghost still makes some people nervous, even though cats are wonderful creatures. I have two cats and love them dearly.

A couple of years ago, my students and I had a strange encounter with a cat during a field trip to an allegedly haunted place on our campus. During my years of teaching folklore, I have led quite a few field trips of this kind. Even though the legends associated with such places tell of sudden deaths and hair-raising hauntings, the places themselves have tended to be disappointingly quiet. All of my field trips have taken place in the afternoon, some in bright sunlight. What self-respecting ghost would appear under such depressingly cheerful conditions? For years I expected nothing exciting to happen, and for years nothing did.

In the fall of 2015, I was teaching our English Honors seminar, a small class of highly motivated, successful students. After years of dedication to their academic work, those highly capable students expected to get excellent results, and they usually did. Maybe that was the reason why something unusual happened on the day we went down to the sub-basement of Old Rafuse Hall, an office building that once functioned as a dormitory.

Before we reached the sub-basement, we made a quick stop at the building's storage room, which was filled with random things used by students in past years. Old music stands, drum sets, boxes of costumes, piles of sports paraphernalia, and other objects attested to active student lives. Now all those objects lay limp and useless. In one corner of the room, we found an old-fashioned rocking chair. "Maybe the chair will rock by itself," a student said hopefully. It didn't, even when



they took turns sitting in the chair. As usual, nothing much was happening in the haunted spaces of this former residence hall.

Trudging down the stairs, some of the students complained that it was getting harder to breathe. "The air smells like burnt broccoli!" one said. Certainly the air seemed thicker, less pleasant to inhale. Nonetheless, we kept going. As we entered the sub-basement, we saw a door labeled "DANGER"—not exactly reassuring.

The first room we visited was the old laundry room. When the building was still a dorm, students washed clothes there late at night; some of them claimed to have seen demonic faces in the washing machines' glass doors. Since then the machines had gone somewhere else, taking their demon faces with them. We listened for a moment, trying to hear any unusual sounds that might be there, but heard nothing at all.

At last we reached the door of the incinerator room, which a past student or maintenance staff member had covered with the message: "Rumor has it that a ghost's haunt this room" [sic]. Unimpressed with this graffiti writer's grammar, my Honors students found the message to be nonetheless a little daunting. Surely nothing scary inhabited the room? "Stand back," I joked. "A few of you can come in with me, but the rest of you should wait."

Only three students followed me into the room, which contained a pile of trash and had dark, cryptic markings on its walls. "Here," I said, "is the incinerator—"

"MEOWWWW! HISSSSS!" A frenzy of

angry cat noises erupted around us. Claws scabbled at the wall as a cat got ready to fight—but no cat was visible. For about 30 seconds, we heard more scabbling, hissing, meowing—and finally silence.

"Professor Tucker, did you put a cat here to surprise us?" the student standing nearest to me asked. "Of course not!" I answered. We looked all over the room, checking behind the door and inside the incinerator: no cat. Then we went up to the floor above, searching for a lost feline. By now the students who had heard the cat looked pale and shocked; the others looked a bit worried, too. All of us were glad to get back outside into the fresh air.

Clueless about the source of the cat sounds, I told the students an academic legend I had learned a while ago. A biology professor who loved nothing better than dissection had happened upon a cat in her garden. "Hmm, a stray cat!" she gloated. "How lucky that I have some chloroform! Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" The next day she entered her biology lab with a big grin on her face. "I have a *special surprise* for you!" she trilled. "A cat wandered into my garden! Just for you!" Pale with shock, the students had no choice but to dissect the cat. Afterwards, they never felt the same about their professor.

Could this have been the cat that my students and I heard in the sub-basement of Rafuse Hall? Surely not! But to this day, I can give no good reason for the sounds of an angry cat that erupted around us in the incinerator room. All I know is that on a dark night—or even a sunny afternoon—in an unfamiliar place, you might want to think twice before calling, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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