

In the Woods

by Mathew Paust

I have a resident earworm that's forever trying to madden me with one simple tune or another. Not a whole song. Just a prominent phrase or two, like a chorus, repeated mercilessly. My earworm's repertoire includes three or four of these snippets—so familiar in scale and cadence they pretty much run together, and I often have trouble remembering which one is on tap at any given moment. I recall vaguely when it started, back in my theater days, but that's a story for another time. I've learned to live with this musical monotony the way people with tinnitus say they escape the constant rasping of locusts in their ears testing their sanity: they hear it only when they remember it's there. My earworm's ditties remind me of their presence at predictably vulnerable times, when I've dropped my attention from something I'm trying to understand, when “fuguing,” as my ex used to call those spells of drifting silently with fragmented notions, or when a worry or pressing uncertainty takes hold and won't let go. Faced now with this unexpected, indeterminate peril, I became aware a new tune had entered my earworm's repertoire: *Come come come come, come to the church by the wiiiiildwood, oh come to the church in the vaaaaaale...*

The thrumming melody cued up as I studied the brownstone building challenging me from behind the cedars. It was a single-story, peaked roof, rectangular, plain design. The only windows I could see were two tall, narrow panes of rippled glass on either side of the front door, each topped with an arch of radiating lines creating an ecclesiastical effect. Ordinarily the irony of *Little Brown Church* springing up from a building on a hill hiding a moonshine still would have tickled my fancy, but at the moment, so fraught with menacing unknowns, even Thalia, goddess of comedy, turned away...*come come come come...*

