Folklife Today
October 2020: Haunting Songs for Halloween 2020

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m John Fenn, and I’m here with my colleague Stephen Winick.

Steve Winick: Happy Halloween!

John Fenn: Always! Always in October, that’s his greeting!

Steve Winick: Yeah, it’s kind of my thing.

John Fenn: We’re both folklorists at the American Folklife Center here at the Library of Congress. I’m the head of Research and Programs, and Steve is the Center’s writer and editor, as well as the creator of the blog Folklife Today. And in case you didn’t catch it, this will be our third Halloween episode!

Steve Winick: Right! In honor of Halloween, just like our very first episode, we’re sharing haunting songs from our archive here at the American Folklife Center.

John Fenn: So, to put this in context, especially for new listeners, Halloween is a special time here at the Center, isn't it?

Steve Winick: That’s right. We actually launched the blog Folklife Today at Halloween back in 2013, so this Halloween season marks the seventh anniversary of our blog, which you can find at blogs.loc.gov/folklife. And seven is a magic number! Since we started the blog, we’ve covered a pretty wide range of subjects and collections in over 750 individual blog posts. But we always do something special for Halloween.
John Fenn: Right, and that’s a tradition we’ve extended to this podcast. We launched the Folklife Today podcast two years ago for Halloween, so this is our podcast anniversary too, and our third Halloween episode as we mentioned. And we are joined this time to talk about haunting songs by Jennifer Cutting, a folklife specialist and ethnomusicologist on our staff. Hi Jennifer!

Jennifer Cutting: Hey everybody! So, on this episode, in recognition of the enduring themes of Halloween, we're featuring songs and tunes that involve our relationship with (dum-dum-duuuuum!) death and the supernatural. Why don’t we begin with the great Jean Ritchie singing “The Unquiet Grave,” which is both a tender love song and also a frank conversation with a ghost. “The Unquiet Grave” is a widespread popular ballad, given the number 78 in Francis James Child’s book The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, and it’s also number 51 in the Roud Folk Song Index, for all you Roud and Child nerds. It was sung all over Britain and Ireland, but was less common here in the United States, making Jean Ritchie’s version an unusual treat.

Jean Ritchie, of course, was a singer and collector from Kentucky who became a major force in the folklore world. Our recording of Jean singing this song was recorded by Herman Norwood in the Library of Congress recording lab. Of course, due to the pandemic we’re remotely recording this in our homes, but that lab was located right where we normally record this podcast in the Library of Congress’s beautiful Jefferson building. The recording was supervised by Duncan Emrich, then head of the Library’s Folklore Section, a precursor of the American Folklife Center. Since then,
Jean’s own collections and others featuring her music have been added to the American Folklife Center’s archive.

Steve Winick: That’s right. Now as for this song, my own dear folklore mentor, Kenneth S. Goldstein, also recorded Jean Ritchie singing this song for one of her Folkways LPs. And he wrote liner notes for that album, and here’s what Kenny said about this song:

Jean Ritchie’s Kentucky version, learned from her Uncle Jason, is notable for its exhibition of several universal popular beliefs, including a talking ghost, the idea that excessive grief on the part of mourners disturbs the peace of the dead, the troth plight that binds lovers even after death (with the death-kiss perhaps indicating a return of the troth), and the belief that the kiss of a dead person may result in death. Jean Ritchie’s version, truly exquisite as to both its poetry and music, is a valuable addition to our recorded ballad lore.

So with that introduction from one of my own deceased loved ones, let’s hear Jean Ritchie sing “The Unquiet Grave.”

Jean Ritchie:

“The wind doth blow today, my love
With a few small drops of rain.”
I never had but one true love
And she in the cold grave has lain.

I will do as much for my true love
As any young man may.
I'll sit and mourn all on her grave
For a twelve month and a day.

The twelve months and a day being up
The dead began to speak:
“Oh who is this sits on my grave
And will not let me sleep?”

“It is I my love sit on your grave
And will not let you sleep.
I crave one kiss from your cold sweet lips
And that is all I seek.”

“You crave one kiss from my clay cold lips.
My breath smells earthly strong.”
“If you had one kiss from my cold clay lips
Your time would not be long.”

“Down in yonder’s garden green
Love, where we used to walk,
The fairest flover that ever bloomed
Is withered to a stalk.”

“The stalk is withered dry, my love.
So must our hearts decay.
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away.”
John Fenn: Once again, that was “The Unquiet Grave,” sometimes also called “The Lover’s Ghost,” as sung in 1951 by Jean Ritchie. And Jennifer, you also brought along an interesting perspective on this song.

Jennifer Cutting: Yes, I will mention an interpretation from Shirley Collins, who is part of our Alan Lomax Collection, and who said about this song. She said:

This is one of the classic pieces of English folk song literature. From one point of view it is a feminine fantasy or a wish, perhaps for the death of a lover, perhaps for a way of arranging a night visit by the lover, perhaps for a way of showing how strong her love is, perhaps of a feeling of guilt. Certainly, it is a ghost story designed to delight the imagination of young women.

Steve Winick: And hearing Shirley Collins’s interpretation I can’t help noticing that she talks about wishing for the death of a lover, and wondering what might have been going on in her life at that time. Of course, she was herself a young woman when she wrote that. Shirley Collins is a couple of years older now, but still active in folk circles in Britain. And speaking of our mentors and Great Britain, and the Lomax collection, Jennifer had a song she brought along too.

Jennifer Cutting: Yes, just as Steve was one of Kenny Goldstein’s last students, I was one of the last students of the great A.L. Lloyd, which was a great honor. Albert Lancaster Lloyd, who was generally known as Bert, was a really important figure on the British folk scene. He started writing about folksong in the 1940s and became one of Britain’s leading experts. He mentored a lot of the folk revival musicians and groups, including folk-rock bands like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention—and he also mentored
ethnomusicology students at the University of London like myself! He collated and edited a lot of songs that became the folk revival’s standard versions, and sometimes—naughty Bert!—he even fudged the data on where his various songs came from, which Steve and other scholars have written about.

Steve Winick: That’s right! He even went to some of our Library of Congress collections at the American Folklife Center, like the George Korson collection, and then adapted American songs into supposedly British versions of those songs! But that’s a story for another day!

Jennifer Cutting: One of the songs he sang for Lomax in 1951 is called “Polly Vaughn,” also known sometimes as “Molly Bawn” or “The Shooting of his Dear.” It’s a widespread folksong about a young man who shoots his true love by accident. He’s out hunting, and she has on a white dress, and he mistakes her for a swan. And later her ghost makes an appearance! Let’s hear it:

A.L. Lloyd:

Come all you young fellows that carry a gun,  
I'll have you come home by the light of the sun.  
For young Jimmy was a fowling, and a-fowling alone,  
When he shot his own true love in mistake for a swan.

As young Polly went out in a shower of rain,  
She hid under the bushes her beauty to gain  
With her apron thrown over her, and he took her for a swan,  
And he aimed and he fired and shot Polly his own.
Now the girls of this country, they’re all glad we know,  
To see Polly Vaughan a-lying so low.  
You could gather them into a mountain, you could plant them in a row,  
And her beauty’d shine among them like a fountain of snow.  

Well, the trial wore on and young Polly did appear  
Crying, “Uncle, dearest uncle, let Jimmy go clear,  
For my apron was thrown over me and he took me for a swan  
And he made my poor heart bleed all on the green ground.

John Fenn: Wow, so the ghost comes to testify at the trial and tells everyone it was a hunting accident.  
Jennifer Cutting: Yes. She was a very forgiving ghost!  
John Fenn: In our very first episode two years ago, we featured “Pretty Polly,” in which Willie kills Polly on purpose, and her ghost tracks him down and kills him for revenge. This is kind of the opposite—Jimmy shoots Polly by mistake and her ghost defends him.  
Jennifer Cutting: That’s a great point. It’s really the opposite of a murder ballad.  
Steve Winick: it’s an involuntary manslaughter ballad with a forgiving ghost instead of a vengeful ghost!  
Jennifer Cutting: Right! And Bert sang a pretty short version of the song. There are others where Jimmy’s uncle advises him not to run, but to wait for the trial, because no would believe he shot Polly on purpose. So it’s clear that it really was an accident. I’m also struck by Bert’s modulation or key
change when he gets to the verse about “The Girls of This Country.” I wish he were still around so I could just ask him about that!

Steve Winick: In fact, I’ll mention that Lloyd sang two different versions for Lomax, which have slightly different words, and both are available online. He did that key change or modulation in both of them, so we know it wasn’t just adjusting his voice after a verse or two, which traditional singers sometimes do as well. It really seems to have been intentional and part of his interpretation. So just for fun, we’ve put links to a couple of other versions in the blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

Jennifer Cutting: So to move on to our next song, this is one John can really connect with.

John Fenn: Indeed, like a lot of our listeners, I’ve got college and high-school-age kids whose lives have also been turned upside down by this pandemic. And my wife is a university professor, so her teaching has been affected as well. We’re very thankful that everyone is safe and healthy, and our next ballad puts that in perspective. It tells the story of a mother who sends her three sons off to school, and they die of a plague while they’re away. She wishes for a visit from them, and they return as rather stern and religious ghosts. Francis James Child called this ballad “The Wife of Usher’s Well,” and it was often collected in America as “The Three Babes” or “The Lady Gay.”

Jennifer Cutting: So for folk nerds, this ballad is number 79 in Child’s collection and 196 in the Roud index. Now, in some older versions of this song, the three sons lie down in the bed she has prepared, but the crowing of the cock warns that they must leave before dawn. The mother walks her children back to the gates of heaven, and is told by Jesus to prepare for her
own death by repenting her wickedness in calling her children home from Heaven. Nine days later, she herself dies and joins her children in Paradise. John Fenn: Right, but our version is simpler, kind of a homespun tale. It was sung by Isaac Garfield Greer, who was known as I.G. Greer or simply “Ike.” You’ll hear dulcimer accompaniment by his wife, Willie Spainhour Greer. It was recorded in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1941, by Fletcher Collins. Greer was a history professor and folksong collector at what is now Appalachian State University, and his own collections of manuscript and typescript folksongs are worth visiting on the university’s website. One thing I like about it is that, even though the kids are old enough for boarding school, and in many versions it’s clear they’re at least teenagers, their mom still sees them as her little babes. It’s a realistic view of parenthood in many ways!

Steve Winick: Let’s hear “The Three Babes.”

Isaac Garfield Greer:
There was a lady of beauty rare,
And children she had three;
She sent them away to the north country
For to learn their grammary.

They’d not been there so very long,
Scarcely three months and a day,
When there came a sickness all over the land
And swept them all away.

And when she came this for to know
She wrung her hands full sore
Saying “Alas alas my three little babes
I never shall see anymore.”

“Ain’t there a king in heaven,” she cried,
Who used to wear a crown?
I pray the Lord will me reward,
And send my three babes down.”

It was a coming near Christmas time,
The nights were long and cold;
When her three little babes come running down
To their dear mammy’s home.

She fixed them a bed in the backmost room,
All covered with clean white sheets;
And over the stuff, a golden one,
That they might soundly sleep.

“Take it off, take it off,” said the oldest one;
“Take it off, we say again.
Oh woe, oh woe, to this wicked world,
So long since pride began.”

She spread a table for them there,
All covered with cakes and wine;
And said “Come eat, my three little babes,
Come eat and drink of mine.”

“We do not want your cakes, mammy;  
We do not want your wine;  
For in the morning at the break of day,  
With the Savior we must dine.”

Steve Winick: Again, “The Three Babes,” a version of “The Wife of Usher’s Well,” sung by I.G. Greer and accompanied by Willie Greer. One interesting thing I came across in the archive: The Greers filled out questionnaires for Ray M. Lawless in 1954, which are now part of the Ray M. Lawless Collection. And it’s interesting that Mrs. Greer listed “‘Three Babes’ or ’Lady Gay’” as one of her five favorite songs, but her husband, who we just heard singing it, did not! So he might have been singing it for her benefit! Mrs. Greer also told Ray Lawless that her dulcimer, which we heard on that song, was over 100 years old at that time in the 1950s.

John Fenn: Wow, great stuff! It’s amazing how different collections in the archive, like this recording in the Fletcher Collins collection and the questionnaire in the Ray M. Lawless collection, can shed light on one another. So now we’re going to move on from ghosts, and hear about some other scary creatures you might encounter at Halloween. Jennifer, did you bring another song by any chance?

Jennifer Cutting: Yes, I’m glad you asked! I brought along one which is about a kind of traditional boogeyman, ooooh! This song is called “Bolakins,” and it was recorded from Lena Bare Turbyfill in North Carolina by Herbert Halpert in 1939. It’s a version of the ballad that Child numbered
93, and Steve Roud numbered 6. In versions that I know better, the character was sometimes called Long Lankin. In Scots, long was the normal word for tall, and lanky of course means tall and thin.

Steve Winick: He’s like Slenderman’s great grandpa!

Jennifer Cutting: In many ways, yes. And many versions of the ballad make him into a creature that lives outdoors: he’s said to live in the moss, and to live in the hay. So in those versions he appears to be some kind of monster or goblin. But our version contains a more rational explanation, in which the character, whose name is Bolakins, is a stonemason who doesn’t get paid for his work—he gets stiffed on his pay, and so he seeks revenge. And in all versions the character is a vicious murderer, so it’s a very grisly ballad!

John Fenn: All right, listeners beware! But let’s go ahead and hear it.

Bolakins was a very fine mason as ever laid stone
He built a fine castle and the pay he got none.

Where is the gentleman? Is he at home?
“He’s gone down to Marion for to visit his son.”

“Where is the lady? Is she at home?”
“She’s upstairs sleeping,” said the foster to him.

“How will we get her down such a dark night as this?”
“We’ll stick her little baby full of needles and pins.”

They stuck her little baby Full of needles and pins.
The foster she rocked, and Bolakins he sung
While blood and tears from the cradle did run

Down come our lady, not thinking any harm.
Old Bolakins, he took her in his arms.

“Bolakins, Bolakins, spare my life one day.
I’ll give you many marigolds as my horse can carry away.

“Bolakins, Bolakins, Spare my life one hour.
I’ll give you daughter Bessie, my own blooming flower.”

You better keep your daughter Bessie for to run through the flood,
And scour a silver basin for to catch your heart’s blood!’

Daughter Bessie climbed up in the window so high
And saw her father come riding hard by.

“Oh, father, oh, father, Can you blame me
Old Bolakins has killed your lady.

“Oh, father, oh, father, can you blame me
Old Bolakins has killed your baby.”

They hung old Bolakins to the sea-gallows tree
And tied the foster to the stake of stand-by.
John Fenn: So if I’ve heard that right, he summons the young mother down the stairs by sticking pins in the baby and making it cry?

Jennifer Cutting: That’s right, and he has an accomplice who is one of the household’s nurses or nannies. The word Turbyfill used is “foster,” which is an old name for a wet-nurse. So the wet-nurse and Bolakins kill the baby and the mother, and then are hanged for the crime.

John Fenn: wow, that’s a pretty heavy ballad! It’s amazing to think of all the fantastic and frightening stuff we have in the archive.

Steve Winick: Yes, and here’s a fun fact: when they made the catalog card for that song back in the 1940s they listed it as restricted, so it wouldn’t have been released to everyone who came to the reading room. It was basically rated R by the archive back then because of the scary subject matter.

John Fenn: Wow! So it had kind of a trigger warning in the card catalog.

Steve Winick: That’s right.

John Fenn: What other supernatural creatures do we have in the archive?

Steve Winick: well, one whole community of creatures very closely associated with Halloween is the faeries. On the blog you can find Jack Santino’s great Halloween lecture, where he discusses the ballad “Tam Lin” at some length—we don’t have any traditional versions that I know of in the archive. The ballad’s climactic scene takes place on Halloween when the Faeries ride in a great procession. So I’ve brought along a related, Irish-language ballad sung by Seamus Ennis. In English it’s typically known as “The Stolen Bride.” Seamus Ennis was a folklorist and collector as well as a singer and piper, and he was Alan Lomax’s guide on this trip to Ireland. In
addition to his singing of the song, we get to hear his explanation of what it means in English.

John Fenn: Let’s hear it!

Seamus Ennis: This is one of the few fairy songs that we have in Ireland. I learned it from a woman in west Cork, and the story of the song is that a woman was abducted by the fairies. And one day, one of the neighbors, a woman, was washing on the washing slab by the side of river when she heard this song coming from a mound which was behind her in a field, a fairy mound. The song gave her instructions to give to the abducted woman’s husband, which would enable her to rescue the abducted woman from the clutches of the fairies. And this is way the song went in Gaelic.

[Sings song in Irish Gaelic. Transcript unavailable.]

An impromptu translation of the word of that cong would go something this way:

Oh woman, down yonder, on the washing slab
Stop your washing board and listen to my complaint
A year from today I was abducted from my true love
And carried in here to the faerie mound

(The words seothin, seothin, seothin, so, are purely nonsensical being chorus words.)

Tell my husband to come here tomorrow
With a wax candle in the palm of his hand
A black-handled knife to be carried in his hand
And he’s to strike the first horse that comes through the gap. If he doesn’t come by that time, I will be a queen over these ladies.

John Fenn: So that was “The Stolen Bride” sung by Seamus Ennis. Steve, can you fill out that explanation a bit?

Steve Winick: Sure. Fairies were known for stealing human babies, and also for stealing young women to act as nurses and nannies for those human babies and for their own babies. So in this song, a recently married woman is stolen by the fairies and put to work as a nurse inside a fairy mound. I’ll further explain that fairies in Ireland are believed to live under tumuli, artificial hills left behind by bronze-age peoples. So she’s imprisoned inside this hill where she has to nurse a baby. And from near the doorway of the hill she can see a ford at a stream where local women wash clothes, it was common to do the laundry at fords in streams. And so she formulates a plan: she’ll encode instructions for rescuing her in what appears to be a lullaby—that way, she can sing the lullaby to the baby and be overheard by the women at the ford, who can relay the instructions to her husband. Her captors will just hear her singing a lullaby, which is, after all, her job. And one of the things I like about this is that feminist folklore scholarship has done a lot of analysis on exactly this kind of coding—her subversive communication is hidden within a permissible channel of communication.

Jennifer Cutting: And you see this in regular lullabies all the time too—with protest and even hostility towards the baby encoded into them. I mean, let’s face it, babies can be pretty overwhelmingly demanding. So what sounds like a loving croon is actually about a baby being left in a tree, only to come crashing down when a limb breaks!
Steve Winick: Ha! That’s a great point too! And another really cool thing about that song is that Seamus Ennis said he learned it from a lady in West Cork, and he surely meant Elizabeth Cronin. Well, he also took Lomax to meet Mrs. Cronin, and Lomax recorded her own singing of the song and her commentary on it as well. And one last thing that I love about it is that we have in the archive a Lebanese song in Arabic, with the same plot about a captured woman being used as a nurse, who encodes instructions for rescuing her into a lullaby to be overheard by a family member. But that song isn’t supernatural—her captors are Turks. I’ve put links to all those versions in the blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

So John, I think you have one more too.

John Fenn: I do! In our very first episode, I introduced a version of the song “Death is Awful” or “Oh Death,” which is about a sinner waking up to find Death standing next to her bed, and then some negotiations between the dying woman and death. So this time I brought a similar song, except the character who shows up is the devil rather than Death.

Steve Winick: The Devil’s a very important character in folksongs, and we could do a whole episode on that!

John Fenn: Yes, but in this case, the Devil really acts more like Death—he’s not bargaining for your soul, he’s just telling you that you can’t escape. The song was collected by Alan Lomax at Parchman Farm in 1959 by a group of prisoners including James Carter, Ed Lewis, Henry Mason, and Johnny Lee Moore. And I should say that since this is a work song, they keep on singing once the verses about the Devil are over, and sing about other things, including work, money, and women. But it starts out with the Devil, and it comes back to the Devil in the end, so Lomax called it “Tom Devil.”
Steve Winick: and there are also two other versions of “Tom Devil” recorded on the same trip, so we’ll put links in the blog to all of them at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

John Fenn: Fantastic! So, we’re going to let “Tom Devil” play us out, but first we should do our thank yous. First of all, thanks to Jennifer Cutting for being our guest.

Jennifer Cutting: you’re very welcome! Thanks for having me!

Steve Winick: And second, let us thank all the singers and collectors we’ve mentioned throughout the episode.

John Fenn: and of course, we have to thank all the colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who help put this together, especially our engineer Jon Gold.

Steve Winick: And finally, thanks to you listeners out there. And thank you of course, John.

John Fenn: Thanks to you too, Steve, for helping bring us another Halloween with “Folklife Today.” So let’s hear “Tom Devil.”

James Carter et al:

Though some folks say that
(Oh well)
The devil's dead
(The devil's dead)
Though some folks say that
(Uh-huh)
The Devil's dead  
(The Devil's dead)  
I spied Tom Devil at  
(Uh-huh)  
The head of my bed  
(The head of my bed)  
I spied Tom Devil at  
(Uh-huh)  
The head of my bed  
(The head of my bed)  

Now Go away Devil, Devil  
And leave me alone  
Now Go away Devil, Devil  
And leave me alone  

Gonna pray and do better  
From this day on  
Gonna pray and do better  
From this day on  
Said it's too late to pray, you'll have to  
Die today  
Said it's too late to pray, you'll have to  
Die today  

The axes talkin' while  
The chips are flyin'
The axes talkin' while
The chips are flyin'

Oh Mamie
Oh hold on gal
Oh Mamie
Oh hold on gal

Oh Mamie Mamie gal
If ya just say so
Oh Mamie Mamie gal
If ya just say so

Know the bottom of your pocket book
It'll never be seen
Know the bottom of your pocket book
It'll never be seen

Well you won’t do nothin' but
Oh wash and iron
You won't have to do nothin' but
Oh wash and iron

When you marry marry
A railroad man
When you marry marry
A railroad man

Every day is Sunday, a dollar
Is in your hand
Every day is Sunday, a dollar
Is in your hand
That looks like Mamie comin'
Oh down the road
That looks like Mamie comin'
Oh down the road
She walks just like her, but
She walks too slow
She walks just like her, but
She walks too slow
She walks just like she's carrying
Some heavy load
She walks just like she's carrying
A heavy load
Try and look on your finger, Mamie
And think of me
Oh look on your finger, Mamie
And think of me
See that ring I bought you when
Oh I was free
See that ring I bought you when
Oh I was free
Well you's in Meridian livin'
Oh like you please
Well you's in Meridian livin'
Oh like you please

Crying "I'm on Parchman, got to
Oh work or leave"
Crying "I'm on Parchman, got to
Oh work or leave"

Oh work or leave Lord
Oh work or leave
Crying "I'm on Parchman, got to
Oh work or leave"

Well I don't gamble and
Well I don't see
Well I don't gamble and
Well I don't see
Oh how my money gets
Away from me
Oh how my money gets
Away from me

I would write the governor but
That would do no good
I would write the governor but
That would do no good

I ain't got no money and that
That's a good excuse
I ain't got no money and that
That's a good excuse

Well, in early in the morning, baby
Oh when I rise
Well, in early in the morning, baby
Oh when I rise

See the thirty-eight-forty stick
Oh in my face
See the thirty-eight-forty stick
Oh in my face

Will killin' the devil be
Enough to die
Will killin' the devil be
Enough to die