A Monster Calls

A MONSTER CALLS

A novel by PATRICK NESS

From an original idea by SIOBHAN DOWD

Illustrations by JIM KAY

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With thanks to Kate Wheeler

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AUTHORS' NOTE

I never got to meet Siobhan Dowd. I only know her the way that most of the rest of you will – through her superb books. Four electric young adult novels, two published in her lifetime, two after her too-early death. If you haven't read them, remedy that oversight immediately.

This would have been her fifth book. She had the characters, a premise, and a beginning. What she didn't have, unfortunately, was time.

When I was asked if I would consider turning her work into a book, I hesitated. What I wouldn't do – what I *couldn't* do – was write a novel mimicking her voice. That would have been a disservice to her, to the reader, and most importantly to the story. I don't think good writing can possibly work that way.

But the thing about good ideas is that they grow other ideas. Almost before I could help it, Siobhan's ideas were suggesting new ones to me, and I began to feel that itch that every writer longs for: the itch to start getting words down, the itch to tell a story.

I felt – and feel – as if I've been handed a baton, like a particularly fine writer has given me her story and said, "Go. Run with it. Make trouble." So that's what I tried to do. Along

the way, I had only a single guideline: to write a book I think Siobhan would have liked. No other criteria could really matter.

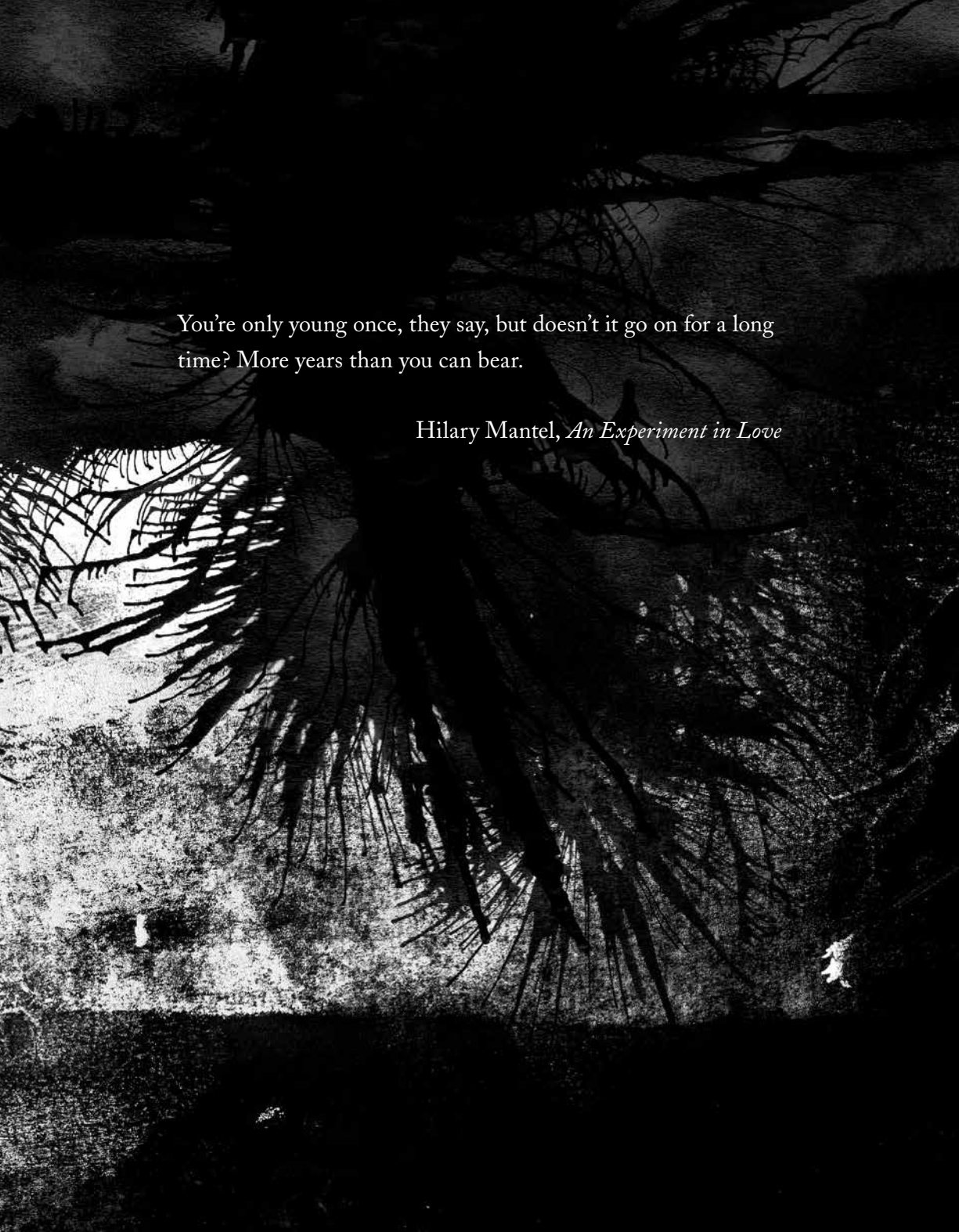
And now it's time to hand the baton on to you. Stories don't end with the writers, however many started the race. Here's what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it.

Make trouble.

Patrick Ness

London, February 2011

For Siobhan



You're only young once, they say, but doesn't it go on for a long time? More years than you can bear.

Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love*

A MONSTER CALLS

The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do.

Conor was awake when it came.

He'd had a nightmare. Well, not *a* nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with–

"Go away," Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. "Go away now."

He glanced over at the clock his mum had put on his bedside table. 12.07. Seven minutes past midnight. Which was late for a school night, late for a Sunday, certainly.

He'd told no one about the nightmare. Not his mum, obviously, but no one else either, not his dad in their fortnightly (or so) phone call, *definitely* not his grandma, and no one at school. Absolutely not.

What happened in the nightmare was something no one else ever needed to know.

Conor blinked groggily at his room, then he frowned. There was something he was missing. He sat up in his bed, waking a bit more. The nightmare was slipping from him, but there was something he couldn't put his finger on, something different, something–

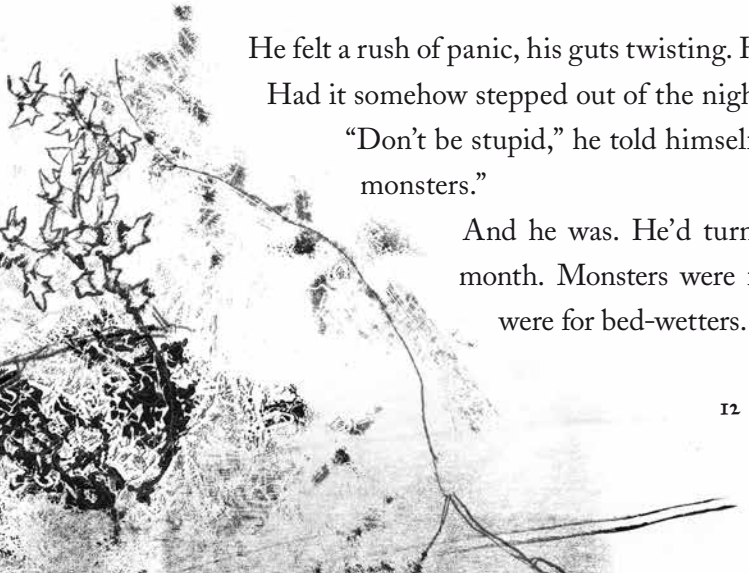
He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quiet house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum's room next door.

Nothing.

And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him.

Someone was calling his name.

Conor.



He felt a rush of panic, his guts twisting. Had it followed him? Had it somehow stepped out of the nightmare and–?

"Don't be stupid," he told himself. "You're too old for monsters."

And he was. He'd turned thirteen just last month. Monsters were for babies. Monsters were for bed-wetters. Monsters were for–

Conor.

There it was again. Conor swallowed. It had been an unusually warm October, and his window was still open. Maybe the curtains shushing each other in the small breeze could have sounded like–

Conor.

All right, it wasn't the wind. It was definitely a voice, but not one he recognized. It wasn't his mother's, that was for sure. It wasn't a woman's voice at all, and he wondered for a crazy moment if his dad had somehow made a surprise trip from America and arrived too late to phone and–

Conor.

No. Not his dad. This voice had a quality to it, a *monstrous* quality, wild and untamed.

Then he heard a heavy creak of wood outside, as if something gigantic was stepping across a timber floor.

He didn't want to go and look. But at the same time, a part of him wanted to look more than anything.

Wide awake now, he pushed back the covers, got out of bed, and went over to the window. In the pale half-light of the moon, he could clearly see the church tower up on the small hill behind his house, the one with the train tracks curving beside it, two hard steel lines glowing dully in the night. The moon shone, too, on the graveyard attached to the church, filled with tombstones you could hardly read any more.

Conor could also see the great yew tree that rose from the centre of the graveyard, a tree so ancient it almost seemed to be made of the same stone as the church. He only knew it was a yew because his mother had told him, first when he was little to make sure he didn't eat the berries, which were poisonous, and again this past year, when she'd started staring out of their kitchen window with a funny look on her face and saying, "That's a yew tree, you know."

And then he heard his name again.

Conor.

Like it was being whispered in both his ears.

"*What?*" Conor said, his heart thumping, suddenly impatient for whatever was going to happen.

A cloud moved in front of the moon, covering the whole landscape in darkness, and a *whoosh* of wind rushed down the hill and into his room, billowing the curtains. He heard the creaking and cracking of wood again, groaning like a living thing, like the hungry stomach of the world growling for a meal.

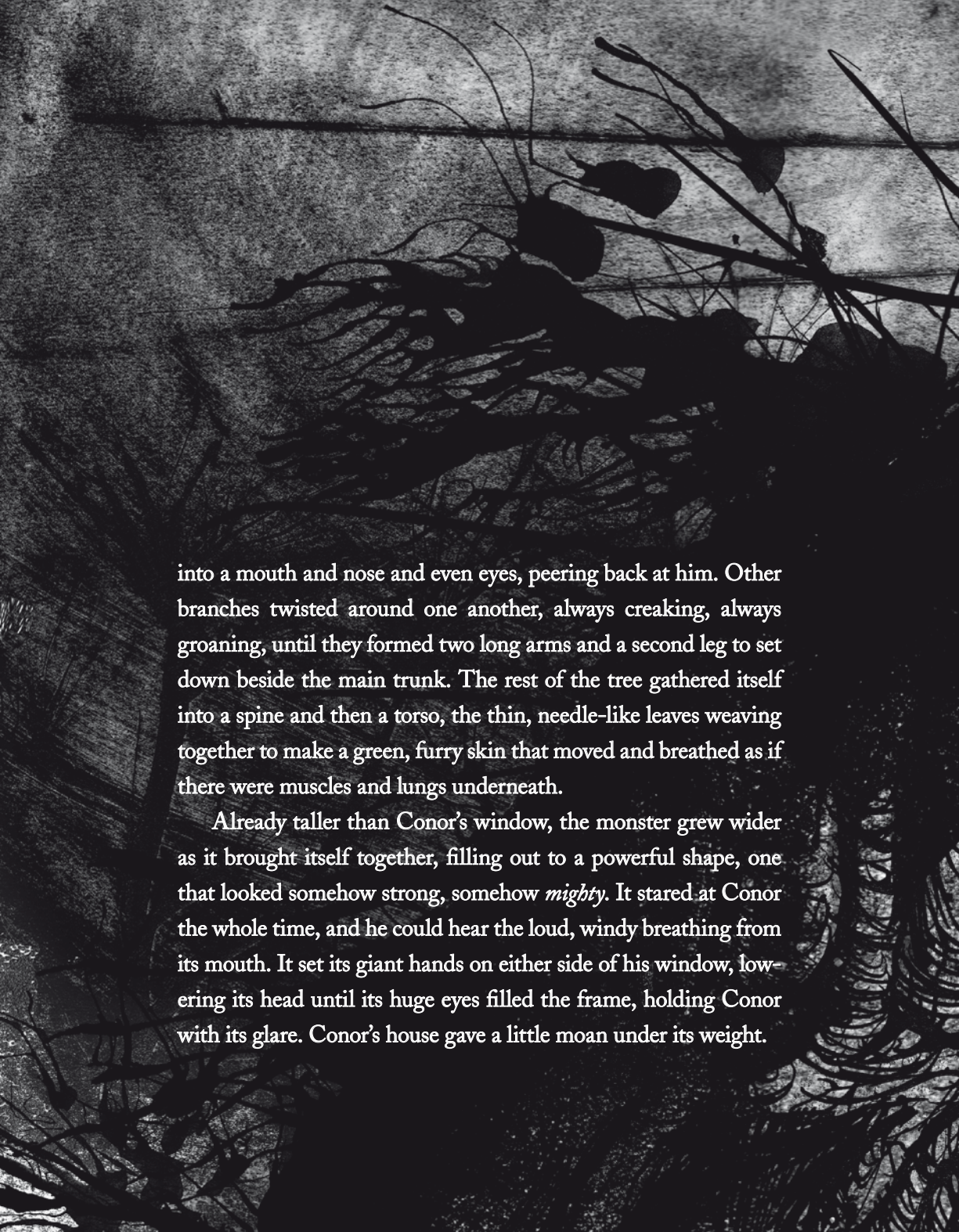
Then the cloud passed, and the moon shone again.

On the yew tree.

Which now stood firmly in the middle of his back garden.

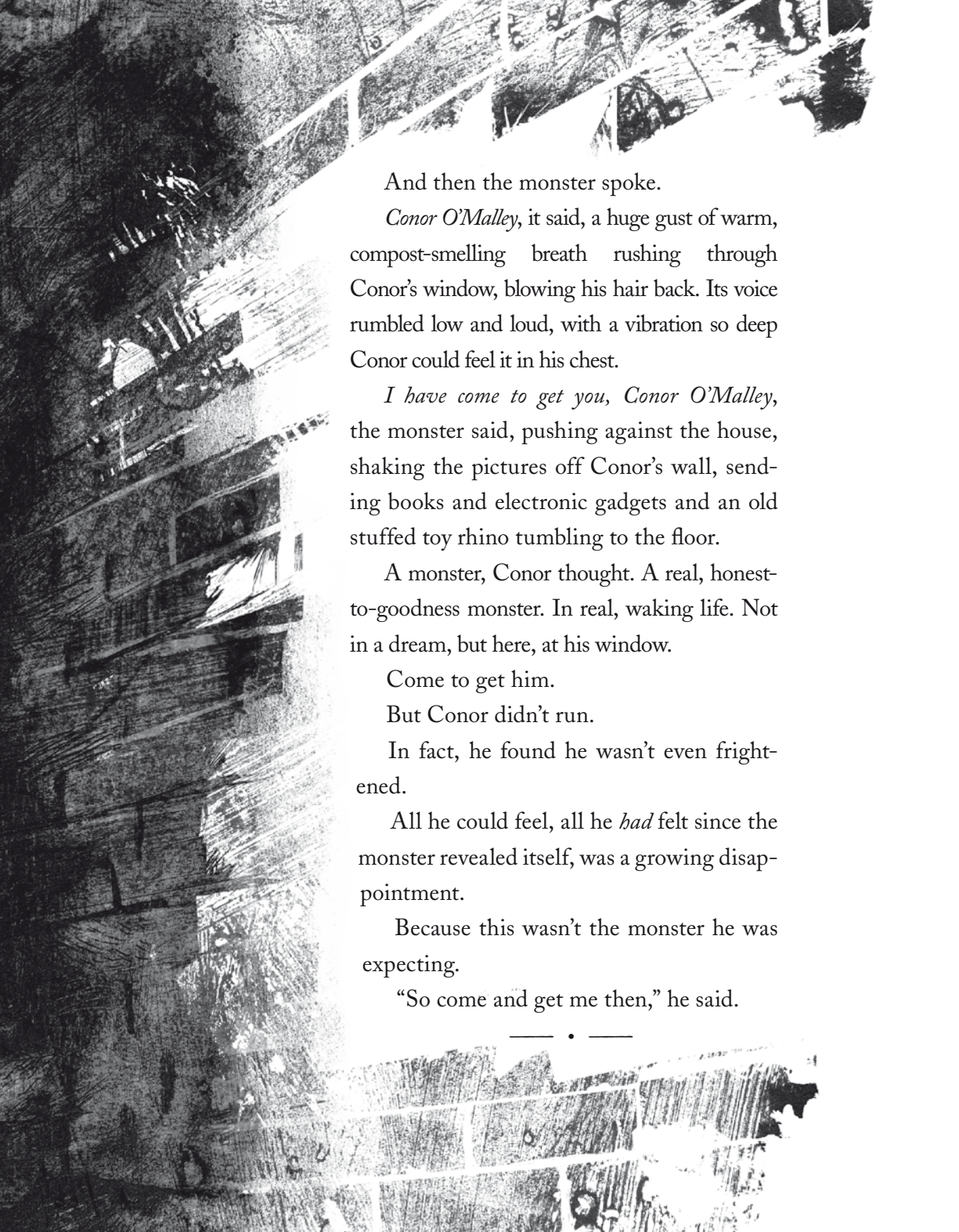
And here was the monster.

As Conor watched, the uppermost branches of the tree gathered themselves into a great and terrible face, shimmering



into a mouth and nose and even eyes, peering back at him. Other branches twisted around one another, always creaking, always groaning, until they formed two long arms and a second leg to set down beside the main trunk. The rest of the tree gathered itself into a spine and then a torso, the thin, needle-like leaves weaving together to make a green, furry skin that moved and breathed as if there were muscles and lungs underneath.

Already taller than Conor's window, the monster grew wider as it brought itself together, filling out to a powerful shape, one that looked somehow strong, somehow *mighty*. It stared at Conor the whole time, and he could hear the loud, windy breathing from its mouth. It set its giant hands on either side of his window, lowering its head until its huge eyes filled the frame, holding Conor with its glare. Conor's house gave a little moan under its weight.



And then the monster spoke.

Conor O'Malley, it said, a huge gust of warm, compost-smelling breath rushing through Conor's window, blowing his hair back. Its voice rumbled low and loud, with a vibration so deep Conor could feel it in his chest.

I have come to get you, Conor O'Malley, the monster said, pushing against the house, shaking the pictures off Conor's wall, sending books and electronic gadgets and an old stuffed toy rhino tumbling to the floor.

A monster, Conor thought. A real, honest-to-goodness monster. In real, waking life. Not in a dream, but here, at his window.

Come to get him.

But Conor didn't run.

In fact, he found he wasn't even frightened.

All he could feel, all he *had* felt since the monster revealed itself, was a growing disappointment.

Because this wasn't the monster he was expecting.

"So come and get me then," he said.

—— • ——

A strange quiet fell.

What did you say? the monster asked.

Conor crossed his arms. "I said, come and get me then."

The monster paused for a moment, and then with a *roar* it pounded two fists against the house. Conor's ceiling buckled under the blows and huge cracks appeared in the walls. Wind filled the room, the air thundering with the monster's angry bellows.

"Shout all you want," Conor shrugged, barely raising his voice. "I've seen worse."

The monster roared even louder and smashed an arm through Conor's window, shattering glass and wood and brick. A huge, twisted, branch-wound hand grabbed Conor around the middle and lifted him off the floor. It swung him out of his room and into the night, high above his back garden, holding him up against the circle of the moon, its fingers clenching so hard against Conor's ribs he could barely breathe. Conor could see raggedy teeth made of hard, knotted wood in the monster's open mouth, and he felt warm breath rushing up towards him.

Then the monster paused again.

You really aren't afraid, are you?

"No," Conor said. "Not of you, anyway."

The monster narrowed its eyes.

You will be, it said. *Before the end.*

And the last thing Conor remembered was the monster's mouth roaring open to eat him alive.