Letter from ...

Seattle

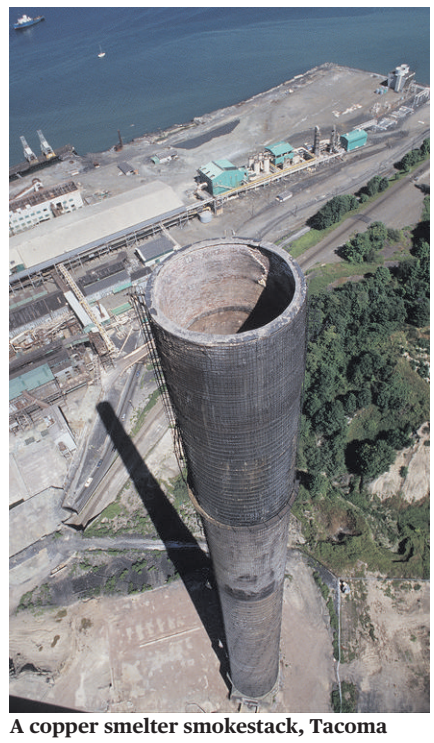
Russell Williams

There's something weird about Seattle. It might be the particular blend of the Puget Sound waterfront, the surrounding snowcapped mountains and dense, ubiquitous forest. It also might be the low late-afternoon sunlight and the juxtaposition of wild nature with urban sprawl – how the city hosts, too, the pervasive technorati of Amazon and Microsoft, both of which were founded here. It's not unusual to see both seaplanes and Cybertrucks glide by.

I'm downtown for a conference. It's eerily quiet; all the tech bros must be working from home. It's also weird to be in an alternative America, a resolutely blue Washington State rather than the Washington DC that we spend so much time peering through our fingers at. Seattle might be a Great American City, but it is set against the landscapes of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (filmed in nearby Snoqualmie) and Chris Carter's *X Files*.

The city, and these series, bring out tensions between man and nature, and even between the human and the inhuman. A similar dynamic moves the book I read before my trip from Paris, Caroline Fraser's *Murderland* (2025), which more or less convincingly argues that the "spate" of serial killers in the Pacific Northwest in the 1970s and 1980s was a result of the pollution caused by heavy industry in the middle of the twentieth century. This is, of course, counterintuitive: when we talk of serial killers, we often describe them as the twisted products of modernity, of individualism (think of Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, 1991), but the question Fraser asks feels more alarming: might there be a link between Ted Bundy murdering women and girls across America in the late 1970s, and the notoriously contaminating copper smelter in Tacoma, where Bundy lived as a child?

Far from home and navigating jetlag, my mind was full of serial murder as a risk of the region as I arrived. Later, I waited for a bus in north Seattle's University District, a couple of blocks – it turns out – from Rogers' Rooming House, where Bundy lived for a time. My destination, the home of S. T. Joshi, scholar of "the weird" in literature, was just north of the Ravenna district. In many ways, Joshi has made "the weird" his own. He is best known for his work on H. P. Lovecraft: a two-volume biography and a near-exhaustive collection of his fiction, poetry and prose. S. T. is also the man behind Penguin Classics editions of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood,



A copper smelter smokestack, Tacoma

Clark Ashton Smith and M. R. James, and the compendium *American Supernatural Tales* (2007).

As the bus made its way through University Heights, and the city began to dissolve into suburbia, Fraser's words on serial killers – not just Bundy, but also the Green River Killer, the Night Stalker and more – rang in my mind. S. T. had promised me a meal, and I'd picked up a bottle of French wine at a downtown Whole Foods on the way, but how sure was I about what was really waiting for me chez Joshi? We would undoubtedly have a great deal to talk about, as S. T. had extended the invitation when I told him of my own project on French weird, but what were the "special collections" he seemed so eager to show me? What, for heavens' sake, might lurk in the home of a scholar of "the weird"? The remains of other, unsuspecting travelling scholars? The Fungi from Yuggoth? A shoggoth or two? Worse?

Thankfully, my fears were soon allayed by a reassuring glass of Côtes du Rhône, and the basement held nothing more sinister than S. T.'s man cave. But what a man cave! The place where this prolific scholar, under the watchful eye of a portrait of Ambrose Bierce, edits, footnotes, corresponds and anthologizes also contains a bookcase creaking with many of the 300 books he has published. S. T. gestured to his collection of weird fiction – I glimpsed volumes by Laird Barron and Clive Barker – before gleefully pulling volumes from shelves: "Look, my Lovecraft biography translated into Russian! I can't even read it!"

Conversation over dinner turned to TV. Perhaps unsurprisingly, S. T. is a fan of the Thomas Ligotti-inspired first season of *True Detective* and the first two seasons of *Twin Peaks* (less so of the recent continuation, *The Return*). We soon came back to the books. I wanted to talk about Michel Houellebecq, whose first book was, in fact, a long essay on H. P. Lovecraft, and who seemed to adapt much of that book from the (recently reissued) French Cahiers de l'Herne volume of essays on the writer (1969). We also talked a little about "weird nonfiction", work such as *Murderland*. Then it was back out into the night, out of the comfort of the Joshi home, my fears of shoggoths and killers in the undergrowth calmed by new friendship, wine and the prospect of a bus and a train back downtown.

Before the flight home, I had time to visit the excellent Elliott Bay Book Company in the Capitol Hill district where the skyscrapers give way to older, squatter buildings and the tech companies are replaced by independent boutiques, coffee shops and dive bars. I settled in at one such bar with a copy of *Black Hole* (2005), Charles Burns's landmark graphic novel of teenage angst and alienation. *Black Hole* is about shame – it tells of a sexually transmitted virus that gives those afflicted unpredictable and unique body mutations (one has a small mouth at the base of his throat, another a tail) – but it is also, I realized, about Seattle. Its monochrome palette evokes the cityscapes and liminal spaces of the city, and the dark forests, too.

What's more, *Black Hole* is set in S. T.'s neighbourhood, Ravenna: the teenage mutant outcasts take up camp in the woodland of Ravenna-Cowen Park. Burns seems to be offering up a clue. There might be a way of expanding on Fraser's Tacoma chimney argument, making it less about serial killers and more about general culture. Might the weirdness of the Pacific Northwest be due not only to Mount Rainier, the waterfront and the tech companies? Might it also be down, in some small way, to the presence of the weird imagination in such a high concentration? Is S. T. Joshi himself a benevolent literary equivalent of a smelter chimney, sending a plume of incendiary particles – of Lovecraft, Machen, Blackwood et al – across the region from his man cave?

This might be how you get *Black Hole* or *Twin Peaks*. Although the malign Tacoma chimney has long stopped contaminating the region, the literary output from a certain basement just north of Ravenna continues to cloud the Seattle horizon, and beyond, with a far more engaging and enduring kind of gloom.

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The skin that forms over cooked pudding as it cools,

the worn-down soles of long-worn shoes,
that attenuated.
Finespun as spun sugar.
As the walls of a silk cocoon.
Not unbeautiful.

Theirs is the flimsy beauty
of starlets on old celluloid that burns
in the projector.
Thus are the souls of the long-dead
when I think on them.

When I think on them, they seem
almost trivial, the ones I loved,
and even the unlovable ones.
Lite, in the marketing sense.
Diminished in fat and flavour.

Like teenagers who don't read,
who attend church but aren't afraid
of Jesus.
Lifetime members of the Poetry Club,
cavorting at beach parties.

DIANE SEUSS

Diane Seuss's new collection of poems, Althea, *will be published in 2027.*