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## **Ghost of a Memory**

### **Patrycja Ossowska**

“You,” she says, staring right at me, “are my favorite thing in this entire world.”

I notice the present tense of her words.

That’s what she has always said; that’s why I keep coming back here.

There’s a deeper explanation behind them, I know. She always has those, thinking too much about every little detail. I can often see how each argument forms in her mind during the long periods of silence we share until she finally speaks.

Desire surges within me, urging me to reach out and touch her, to bridge the gap between us.

But I hold back, allowing my gaze to drink in the sight of her instead. My breath catches, a blend of longing and sorrow constricting my chest, as if a sob had taken shape there, unspoken and trapped.

I recall the day we parted. It might have been yesterday, or perhaps the day before, in this very room. I was lying on the bed. It feels like such a short time ago. That’s why I narrow my eyes at her pale skin and the lack of the lighter tones in her hair.

We’ve just returned from the holidays.

Perhaps it is the morning light streaming into the room through the newly installed drapes.

She must have put them up yesterday, and I didn’t notice.

“Heading to work?” I murmur, not anticipating a reply. She’s usually scarce with words, especially towards obvious questions, but I know she appreciates them. Paradoxically, she hates silence.

A smile curves across her lips, revealing the braces adorning her teeth—I struggle to recall when she got them. Perhaps a minor detail slipped from my memory.

“I’m going for a run,” she says.

I cannot help but doubt that. “So early in the morning?”

“Yeah,” she says, her voice absolutely convincing that it’s the truth, “I enjoy the sensation of the morning air.”

However, she doesn’t. She’s always quiet during this time of day, still tired and inattentive. I’ve always been the one to wake up first, open the window, and make her coffee in that red mug we got together. She thanks me unfailingly, always adding, “What would I do without you?” and I respond with a chuckle and a tender kiss on her forehead. Only once the cup is empty, she consents to leave the comfort of the bed and start her morning routine.

Yet reality contradicts this familiar sequence. She’s dressed and ready, yet no cup of coffee in sight. It’s nowhere near, in fact, which prompts a frown to crease my brow.

“Are you staying for long?” she inquires, her attention only half-focused on me as she ties her shoelaces.

I shrug my shoulders. I want to, but it barely depends on me. Still, I say, “I’ll see.”

She finishes the work quickly, and once again directs her full attention to me. “I’ve finally finished that book you gave me.”

“What did you think?” I ask, wondering about the word finally, as if I handed it to her just last week.

A small frown sums up her response. “It had a bit of a disappointing ending.”

“I thought it was a nice closure.”

She doesn’t think so. I see it by the way she smiles - she’s always happy when we’re about to get into a minor argument like this.

“It just took me right back to the beginning,” she chuckled, that familiar yet friendly condescension slipping into her voice. “It was nicely written, emotional and all that, but ultimately disappointing without a clear point to it. I spend all this time only to find it ends right where I started?”

“Don’t they say it’s about the journey, not the destination?”

She shakes her head, and I see how pink slips onto her cheeks. She’s quiet for a while, which means she’s gathering her words. I can decipher that anticipation on her face, the calm before the storm of her next declaration. She doesn’t meet my gaze as she begins, her eyes trained on the floor.

“You are completely botching it, though!” her voice grows raspy, “You should be in a different place. Even if you return, at least the place has evolved. Time has passed, at least, creating some kind of change! That is what validates those in-between. Otherwise,” she gasps for breath, words pouring out of her at a greater pace than she anticipated, “If the beginning and end mix, does it not suggest that everything keeps repeating? At the end, you start again, just the same?”

“Not necessarily, though. One does not suggest the other, it simply...” I’m interrupted, as she continues my thought.

“But it allows for it, doesn’t it? It allows for this vicious cycle of repeating all your actions, one after another, and ending up in just the same place,” her monologue slows, and her voice softens. She takes a step back from me now, as she usually does during our discussions, regaining consciousness and only now giving me the opportunity to speak.

I say what she wouldn’t: “Here.”

Her body hits the bed. The nod of her head is enough of an answer, but she doesn’t stop there:

“Unless you forget. Then, it’s just like dreaming. You know. It begins and ends on a bed, and eventually, anything that happened in between is so distorted it has no effect.”

There’s always a grin on her face after she wins an argument. Infallibly, her lips stretch, but sadness clouds her eyes. “Maybe I should just forget it, then?”

I’m not sure she’s asking. In fact, I am convinced she’s not - she is simply informing me of what’s coming. I’d have to kid myself to think I have any effect on what her decision will be.

I do.

“You have to remember,” I urge. “That’s how you preserve your change, okay? If you remembered something, it did happen.”

I can’t just leave it to an if. We both know we’re not speaking of a book, and she must remember me. I need to be real, if it’s only her memories that make me.

“I remember some of my dreams. Does that mean they’re real?”

I don't answer the question, having learned enough times that it has no right answer. I know she doesn't have it either; she simply enjoys asking.

She picks herself up from the bed and once again approaches me, standing so close it's hard not to reach out, not to touch her.

I know a conclusion is coming from the look in her eyes. Infallibly, it arrives.

"If I have to remember to keep you alive," she starts, and her voice falters as it always does at the end of the conversations, "Then I don't know if I want to keep doing it."

"Don't let me go." I say, my hands reaching for her, but they land on the smooth surface of my prison. I want to hit it, destroy it, but I know it's pointless.

"I'm not." She puts her hand just next to my face, on the smooth surface of the glass. "I already did, and you can't keep making me come back here."

"You made me coffee," she says, but I don't need it now. I used to hug you, but you're not here now. I used to wake you up from bad dreams and whisper: "Don't worry, it's over. It is over," until you forgot, but I don't hear your whimpers in the middle of the night anymore.

I realize I'm crying when a tear falls from my face onto the glass. "Is this the end?"

"We're not at the beginning," she says, and I note the still expression on her face, "We're not at the end. It's been years, and you can hardly talk about where we are anymore."

I know that. It does not feel like it, but the picture before me speaks for itself. My body no longer lay on the bed where I left her; someone picked it up and threw it away.

But she still arranged the pillows on her bed just the same. She laughs just the same. She still picks the same arguments, if not with me.

"I'm still here!" I insist, the paradox of proving my own existence causing me to raise my voice.

I see her shake her head. I see her eyes fall on the bed that was once red. I see that the white covers bear no memory of the faithful night.

Her hand leaves the surface that connects us; I cry: "Please, don't forget me."

"Don't you see? I cannot!" Her voice grows louder. "There is nothing to forget when you're still standing here! Stop dragging this out. Let it end."

My head shakes. She always does that and arrives at the most rational conclusion. I can see the righteousness painted on her face, that overwhelming feeling that she is correct about this, that we must proceed with how she sees fit.

Only there's nothing rational about this. She can convince me all she wants to leave here - to leave her - but the bounds of my prison do not falter over the best of arguments, and I cannot escape.

"Let me wake up," she pleads this time, and I'm nearly ready to comply. "Let me out of this loop. Allow me to forget, please."

We're both beggars, waiting for the one thing the other cannot grant. She's the one who stops first, turning and walking away. I'm the one who doesn't give up, punching the glass of the mirror separating us, screaming to her long after she's not in the room.

The mirror between us isn't just one of memory and time; it's also a fundamental divide between the realms of the living and the departed. I'm no longer a part of her world in the way I once was.

I would come again. It might be tomorrow, or the day after that. The drapes from the windows would be gone. The red cup would stand on the windowsill, filled with coffee she made by herself. She would pick it up as I watch.

"You are my favorite thing in the entire world," she would say to the smooth surface I hide against before setting down a cup and leaving.

I'd know the meaning of the words.

It wouldn't be: "I wouldn't be able to live without you," nor "I don't care what happens, as long as you are with me." It would be a choice of heart and mind. It meant that of all the things that she knew, she would place you first.

***Patricia Ossowska is a student from Poland, majoring in English literature and mathematics. She used to do debate, but now she spends her free time reading, writing and learning how to crochet.***

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## **Trish is Dead**

### **Sarah Mae Cartwright**

Trish is dead. For her, this was a welcome change of existence or lack thereof. Don't get her wrong now, she loved her life and the beautiful family she cultivated. However, age and illness took much of the small but meaningful joys from her livelihood. No more mowing her own lawn in her rickety mower. No more cigarettes. No more meals with onion or garlic for that matter. And if she indulged, boy did her body make her pay for it later.

Trish didn't get famous or make a lot of money. She didn't invent anything notable or cure any diseases. She didn't build skyscrapers or re-invent the wheel. No. Trish, she fiddled. Not in a band, oh no. But, Trish loved to play. Her instruments were antiques. She loved decorating with simple objects or "junk" as she liked to call it.

Her house was a carefully curated museum, that also felt like home. Each new season brought a new song to fiddle to. Every room had its own unique set of objects that looked natural and alive. Like they were designed to be there. Trish found many things and people along the way and gave them a home. She made everything feel special and never seemed to give anything away. She continued to collect more and more over the years. Selling old "junk" to buy new "junk" to inspire and create.

Time is a thief. The longer time went on, the more it seemed to take. Objects did not seem as important or necessary. She became more willing to part with her beloved fiddles. Seasons came and went, and eventually so did Trish. Some of her sought-after relics now abide in my home. My mantle and shelves are reminiscent of your "play". Trish is gone, yet I find her in so many places.

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## **Ancestral Revenge**

### **Lucy Barker**

At first, she thought it was the wind, but then assumed it must be murmur of traffic from the distant motorway she had left some minutes earlier. Standing there in that emerald place of deep tranquility she felt in another world, one untouched by time: A place where the past still breathed.

It was a glorious autumn morning and the quaint spire of the country church rose into a jewelled azure sky. The sonorous toll of the bell was slowing, signalling it would soon be time to enter. Like many churches its latched doors prevented access during the week, so she had chosen that Sunday for her visit, to connect with her past and seek salvation.

Now she lingered, undecided in the shadows, fearful of entering, unsure of her welcome in this small community.

Nevertheless, she felt compelled to join the congregation as fleeting shadows beckoned, urging her ever deeper into the cool confines of the church, with its heavy scent.

Following the sibilant rustlings of silk and hallowed whisperings, she thought of those who had trodden on the same smoothed stones; in times of both mourning and celebration and who now lay in hummocked graves beyond the weathered walls.

Eliza, Ebenezer, William, Phoebe; names engraved on the lichened headstones, resonating through a tunneled time.

On her past visit she had felt a strange affinity; there, amid the cascading willows. An inexplicable familiarity with something she could never have known,

Later, when she looked at the photographs the dancing orbs of light, invisible, at the time, were everywhere, as if dancing in celebration. Google already confirmed what she instinctively knew. It was a physical manifestation of spirits. The shadows too in the pictures had cast themselves into recognisable forms.

By Ebenezer's grave stood a silhouette of a man with a foot on the shoulder of a spade, slicing into the damp earth. He was observed by a buxom figure, with a prominent bustle, presumably Eliza, watching as a small child, chased a butterfly in the dappled light.

She had certainly felt their presence and now these visible manifestations offered proof. Her ancestors, knowing she would come, had been waiting in welcome.

There was nothing to be scared of.

So, she had returned to see inside the church, which had been the focal point of their lives.

Nervously she edged towards a far pew, to join in worship.

A few heads turned from their muted mumblings and smiled benignly, intrigued by this much younger person who had joined their congregation. Self-consciously, she pulled her coat protectively over her rounded stomach, before rising to the rousing sound of the organ and the first hymn.

It wasn't one which she was familiar with but seemed very appropriate for such a burnished day. There was a touching simplicity, yet majesty as they stood suffused in the golden light, haloing their heads.

After the tremulous voices quietened and they were seated once more, the vicar ascended his lofty pulpit, to welcome everyone. With barely disguised curiosity, other faces turned towards her, and she wondered yet again if it had been a good idea to come. The perfume, a scent of violets had grown inexplicably stronger, cloying. A wave of nausea swept over her. She prayed frantically that her body would not betray her. In an effort to soothe her escalating fears she traced her clammy hand on the patinated wood of the rigid pew.

I felt resentful at you sitting there, in my place. I watched as you clasped your hands in desperate prayer.

How naïve to think you could find comfort here. Long ago, from this lofty pulpit the Reverend Danvers Swales had preached forgiveness, but his gimlet eyes betrayed him resting on me, the sinner of his flock. The black sheep.

Suddenly you shift awkwardly, as you do so I notice how your coat strains uncomfortably.

When autumn came and my time drew near, I moved to this shadowy alcove. At least there I could have some privacy, but I still had to endure the insistent whisperings of Mrs. Carter and her friends who sat crimped and bonneted at the front.

A shaft of sunlight penetrates the stained glass, suffusing that of a marble Madonna.

I spit contemptuously for that which was denied me.

I curse my carelessness at coming too close. My presence disturbs you and you shudder convulsively. You frantically struggle to your feet, foolish enough to think you can escape and that you can protect your unborn child.

Ashen faced you flee outside to the headstones of my parents, Ebenezer and Phoebe.

You will not find me there. My grave lies unmarked, far beyond, anonymous and forgotten, in unconsecrated ground; banished in disgrace.

You are right to fear me. Hatred and jealousy outlive the grave. I have lain for centuries, cradling the remnants of my baby, the child I loved. Both of us condemned to suffering and agonizing death. You and your child however will be accepted and live without stigma. Were our lives worth nothing?

Fired by a vengeful fury, I cannot bury, I follow in pursuit, for I have not finished with you yet.

Outside despite the raging turmoil, the trees tremble on the shifting ground remain as the congregation sings on in ignorant bliss, oblivious to the howls emanating from my tortured soul. By the time they leave, the abyss into which you toppled will have healed, leaving no scars. There beneath that suffocating earth we both lie, knowing how easily life can be extinguished and that the torture has just begun.

***Lucy is a retired teacher who lives on the South Coast of England. She enjoys writing and family history. As an adopted child she later researched her birth family history and discovered they had lived on the South Coast for centuries. She then made the rash decision to move over two hundred miles to be where they had been. It was a decision she has never regretted and thankfully her story had a different ending to this one.***

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**Ticking**

**Emma Nakano**



I have been trapped in this cell for two days and three hours. The clock on the wall opposite from me, which I could reach were I not bound by these iron cuffs to the wall, is my only friend here in this strange place. The walls, floor, and ceiling are gray with flecks of some dark red material in places, and they all give off the faint yet perpetual feeling of oppressiveness, and of being watched. Perhaps I am being watched, by the person who provides me with food and drink two times a day. I know that he has hairy knuckles and tanned skin, but that does not help me, as I know of several men with such features.

And yet... I still struggle to grasp this whole concept. Is this a dream, a mere fabrication of my brain after too many hours cooped up in the office?

Or is this real?

I will not lie- I am terrified beyond belief, beyond anything I have ever felt in my life. The terror and dread that hangs heavily in this room may be paramount to when I was first taken, in fact, when they shoved a dirty rag soaked with chloroform in my mouth and hauled me into the back of that van. The next thing I knew, I was chained to this wall, with the only thing in sight besides the door and walls being a round clock on the wall. Oh, the clock. It is the only thing that might help me survive the days here- I refuse to think of being trapped here for months, years even. What with the lack of windows, I have no idea whether it is morning or night, and thus the clock helps me in keeping track of the time.

Without the clock, I believe, I will begin my descent into madness.

I am scared- very scared.

The first day I found myself in my cell I screamed and wailed and beat at the wall behind me with my feet, and it was only when the first meal arrived in a rubber dog dish that I managed to get hold of my wits enough to eat. That was the first time that I was ever presented with dog food as a meal, but I was too tired by then to cause much of a commotion. The dog food itself was dry and stale, and I only managed to choke it down after swigging down nearly half of my water. I wept that night, as the combination of fear and exhaustion and the taunting coldness of the floor beneath me felt too much to bear.

Now it is the second day, and the door shows no sign of opening any time soon.

I look up at the clock, which shows that it is eight a.m. A nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach emerges, but I push it down. Doubting the clock would mean doubting everything.

As if on cue, the small flap in the door opens, and the same rubber dog bowl appears alongside a cup of water. That hand that I have come to detest so slides them towards me, enabling me to reach them, before withdrawing and letting the flap bang shut. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if the food and water were just out of reach. Would I starve to death? Would the people watching me send someone to slide them over to me? I have decided that these people want to keep me alive- for what, I do not care to think. All I know is that the clock is ticking, ticking, ticking, and that the floor is ice-cold and that I am

confused and terrified out of my wits. The clock says that it is four p.m. It is strange- from far away, I swear I can hear strange chattering sounds, like the cries of squirrels from high up in trees. I suppose that this is some consolation, as this proves that I am indeed locked in a building outside and not in a basement. I just wish there was a window somewhere, anywhere, so that I could see with my own eyes that I am indeed not underground. Sunlight! I need sunlight!

The clock says that it is seven a.m. Where does the time go? I feel like it has only been a few hours, and yet it is already a new day. The floor seems immensely hot to me at times, then freezing cold at others, and the incessant chattering of the squirrels still persists, ringing in my ears. Don't they ever go to sleep? I would go to sleep if I could, but the floor seems to have a mind of its own, growing hot then cold then hot again, and the squirrels are shrill and make my head throb.

The clock says that it is six p.m. It is going too fast, too fast! The floor is burning hot, so hot, and I rip off my shirt so as to keep the heat from getting trapped in the fabric. I feel light-headed and dizzy, and in the faint glow of the fluorescent light bulbs I can see a plume of gray mist- no, smoke! The room is filled with smoke, writhing shapes that contort and twist and scream in guttural tones that ring throughout the room, and as I watch the fires of hell themselves burst into existence, raging throughout the room, and amongst them is a parade of trees, trunks bent, leaves glowing purple, singing and singing. I scream for help, but none comes, and after screaming and screaming I relent. I close my eyes and cover my ears, willing the fire to stop, willing the smoke to stop, until the clock says that it is seven a.m. The fire has stopped- thank goodness! Oddly enough, there are no burn marks anywhere, and the smell of smoke has erased itself from the room. I look up and all around for burn marks when my eyes alight upon a small opening in the ceiling, sunlight streaming through it. Sunlight, I tell you, sunlight! I start weeping with unbridled joy, howling and wailing as the sunlight shines upon me, and I burst into song, although this is mostly to drown out the squirrels. Oh, sunlight, oh glorious sun!

The clock says that it is six a.m. It is another day, and yet I fear that I have not slept. Or have I? It is becoming increasingly hard to tell. Did I see sunlight yesterday? I must have, for I remember its warmth... and yet there is no sunlight today. I lean against the wall, which is unfailingly cold, and am about to close my eyes when I see in the corners of my periphery what appears to be a human baby. What on Earth is a baby doing here? I call out to it, and as it raises its head I recoil in fear and shock. The baby has the head of a dog- no, it is a dog with the head of a baby. Now there are two, now there are three, and they all open their mouths and wail and scream. I open my mouth and scream louder so as to drown them out, scream and scream and scream, and when I pause for breath they are gone.

The clock says that it is two a.m. Is this tomorrow? Is this two days later? The squirrels chatter and chatter, except now they have the voices of crows and of pigeons and of babies crying out. I am aware of my breathing, ragged and irregular, and of my heart thumping its uneven pattern. More than any of these, however, is the ticking of the clock as it moves its hands faster and faster until it is but a blur. The squirrels chatter, the floor grows hot, the clock ticks and ticks and ticks. I must stop this! I must end this!

The feeling of the cup is soothing, so soothing, the glass so fragile.

The glass so fragile.

Oh, Slumber, may you come at last, for the chattering of the squirrels has faded, and even the light has dissipated into darkness.

And yet the clock... it ticks!

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## **My Gift to You**

### **Jillian Brodie**

I can tell how a person's life has been by the weight of their souls. Children and infants have souls light like a feather, their souls forever unencumbered by the hardships of life. Most souls are heavy, burdensome. They've faced all of life's hardships—and made it through—but not without being forever marked by their experiences. Slowly but surely life usually manages to weigh down every soul. Some feel the weight of their soul. They feel it when they struggle to find a reason worth getting out of bed every day. Others prefer to cling to their childlike innocence with white knuckles—they don't know their efforts to be futile, but I do. I can feel the weight of their soul that they've pretended doesn't exist.

I should introduce myself. You'll meet me one day when I come for you. I'll stand over you as benevolently as I can muster and gently lead your soul away from its earthly husk. Some will cry out when they see me. Surprisingly, most simply smile in a silent acknowledgment of my presence and what it signifies—they take my hand, and we go. Their time has come for me to lead them away from the garden of earthly delights. The heaviest souls are the ones that welcome me with open arms—whether they acknowledge their burdens or not—they are all thankful for me in the end. You must be wondering how one endures this profession day in and day out. The truth is that most of the time I don't mind being the harbinger of their demise. I pride myself in painlessly leading souls away when their time is up. But some souls refuse to take my outstretched hand. They fight relentlessly even when my presence seeps into every pore of their earthly shell. It's these souls that weigh down mine. It's not for my lack of amiableness—I'm as kind as can be given my profession. These souls just cannot bring themselves to relinquish their time on earth quite yet. More often than not I win the fight, but there has been, on occasion, an instance where I let a soul wander. No longer in their body, but neither have they taken my hand so I can lead them out of this earthly dwelling. They simply wander. And I observe them until such a time I deem appropriate to gently take their hand and guide them into peace. This is a story of such a time.

I've seen enough wars and death to last a lifetime. I'm always amazed at how gallant mankind can be when faced with imminent death. I'm also equally astounded at how much

hope men have when they are about to charge into gunfire, cannon blasts, and drawn bayonets. As if somehow, they will be the lucky ones who make it home. They hardly ever are. On the eve before battle, I always find myself lurking in the shadows of the watchfires. I am inexplicably drawn to the strange pre-battle rituals men have. Some sit in quiet solitude and write letters home while others gather around the campfire, drinking and exchanging stories in a desperate attempt to distract themselves from the unspoken fear of drawing their last breath as the sun barely crests the horizon on the morrow.

I'm not sure why he stood out to me as he did, nevertheless, I felt myself drawn to his downright ordinary appearance. He was of average build with plain mousy brown hair and dull brown eyes to match—no older than 23 I'd say. If I remember correctly, I believe I heard a fellow soldier address him as Elijah. Unbeknownst to them, I watched as he taught a young drummer boy the game of chess—the board perched precariously over the drum.

It's a funny thing, isn't it? How chess is a metaphor for life. The board—a mere 64 squares—represents the battlefield on which life transpires. The side you play from—whether it be white or black, is facing off against life itself. Each move you make has the potential to change the entire course of the game. There is no allowance for ignorance. You must anticipate your opponent's moves—and plan accordingly. For how we deal with failure and unexpected obstacles shape the rest of the game.

The young drummer boy watched with diffidence as Elijah captured piece after piece. Within 20 moves the game was over. He showered the drummer boy with approbation for his valiant effort and mirth at how much longer this game lasted than the former. He was humble about his win, something I didn't come across often with soldiers as they ceaselessly exhausted themselves competing for the titles of 'most gallant,' 'smartest,' 'strongest,' and 'most handsome,' amongst many others. Elijah had nothing to prove, but all the praise to give. I still didn't know why I was so drawn to him and, subsequently, why I was so viscerally disappointed when, on the third and final day of the battle, I encountered his soul listlessly wandering around the streets of Gettysburg. He had been shot on the first day of the battle. As he lay immobilized from his wounds in an overflowing field hospital, his commanding officer had the decency to release him from service. He had served his state well and could convalesce knowing he fought with valor.

I've seen all different kinds of deaths, multiple times over. Now, don't let that make you think I'm phlegmatic. I am still just as inured by violent deaths as I was when I began this line of work. It's never gotten easier to conjure up a serene composure before I lead away a soul so violently ripped from its prime.

As it so happens, over the course of those three harrowing days in July of 1863 I led away a lot of souls. Many of whom were overjoyed to finally see me after writhing for hours in unrelenting agony from their injuries—the white-hot pain rendering them incapable of doing anything else than letting out blood-curdling screams until their throats were so raw a sound could no longer escape their blood-crusting lips. They smile as I approach and hold out my hand. Willingly grabbing it, together we leave the once charming and quaint, but now decimated and forever marred town.

I saw him, but he didn't see me. He was stumbling along the main road that goes through town. Bodies of dead soldiers lined the streets and adorned people's front yards in a grisly form of outdoor décor. The heat was so thick it felt like I was swimming as I trailed behind him. The smell of death in the hot summer heat infiltrated my every gasp for air. I don't know what was worse—the smell or knowing I couldn't yet stop for the half-alive soldiers lying on the ground as I passed.

Elijah walked for miles to the edge of town. Mile after mile past makeshift field hospitals with piles of haphazardly amputated limbs climbing higher by the hour. Mile after mile following the gnarled road blown to bits by cannonballs. Finally, as the sun was just beginning to take refuge behind the mountains, I watched as Elijah came across a group of Union soldiers hauling the bodies of fallen Confederates officers into the back of a wagon. I overheard one say they were ordered to take them to the train station in Fredericksburg to be shipped back down to North Carolina and whatever traitorous families they came from. He called out to them as he approached, but not one so much as looked his way. I watched him contemplate this for a moment. Were they ignoring him simply because he was clothed in that hot, heavy, grey woolen uniform? Without much time for deliberation, I stood taken aback as Elijah climbed into the wagon and lay camouflaged amongst his fallen countrymen. I knew then that he was a soul with a fighting spirit still left in him—fighting for what, however, I did not know. Nevertheless, I resolved to follow him for just a bit longer before I deemed to make my presence known.

They rode for five, exhausting days. Down through Maryland, across the Potomac and Occoquan Rivers, and into a still recovering city of Fredericksburg. After making sure the soldiers were fast asleep each night, Elijah would sneak out of the wagon and steal tired rations from the soldiers' haversacks and stale water from their canteens. After he had consumed his fill, he would climb back in the wagon and stare at the stars above until he fell asleep. Sometimes I would catch him looking at an old, tattered photograph that lived stowed away in his pocket. I wondered what the photograph was of—and if it was the reason his soul still had so much fight.

Finally, after nearly a 200-mile journey, the wagon pulled up to the train station in Fredericksburg, Virginia. While the Union soldiers tied up the horses, Elijah scrambled out the back of the wagon and landed unsteadily on his feet. He gave the train perched before him a once over, assessing it for any place he might hide out undetected for the long ride down to North Carolina.

The train appeared to be transporting wounded soldiers to and from various hospitals in the South. I stood on the platform and watched the hustle and bustle of loading and unloading the locomotive unfurl before me. Men in stretchers were hauled on and off, groaning with the slightest jostle. My heart went out to the wounded, but I knew I would be back for many of them soon. There was naught a smile in the crowd. Many of the wounded were unconscious, but those unfortunate enough to be awake were ashen with pain and downtrodden in spirit. The men walking and carrying the wounded suffered from injuries invisible to the naked eye. Their spirits were broken. Their hope ravaged. They had watched their brethren die the most horrific deaths before their eyes and were now all

consumed with grief for those lost and grief over the lives once lived that they would never be able to return to. Life would never be the same again. Their shoulders buckled under the weight of survivor's guilt and their souls were so heavy they could scarcely put one foot in front of the other. The only soldier whose face showed a sliver of remaining hope was Elijah's.

I tore myself away from the sorry sight of the wounded and looked for Elijah. I found him approaching a crippled beggar whose arthritic hands were clasped firmly around a tin cup that shook in his grip. He was clothed in the shambles of a Union uniform that underneath were blood-soaked bandages. The man was yelling out to the passersby for any spare change, and from the sound of it, his cup was still empty. Elijah stood in front of the man, reached into his breast pocket, and withdrew a small coin purse. He opened it and into his hands dropped a few half-dollar coins. Elijah held them out to the beggar, but the man ignored him and continued to thrust his cup into the vicinity of those walking past. A look of confusion flittered across Elijah's face, but he proceeded to stoop down and place the coins at the man's feet anyway.

The sound of the train whistle tore Elijah away from the man and he turned to make his way towards a boxcar with the door left slightly ajar. As the train started its departure from the station, Elijah jogged alongside it for a moment before he leaped up to the boxcar, grabbing the doorframe with both hands and hauling himself inside for the journey.

I've never been particularly fond of trains. Maybe it's because of the countless number of souls I've collected because of them. I've seen everything from fatal injuries while laying the tracks, to mangled bodies having been barreled into by the locomotives. I couldn't sit in the boxcar with Elijah for fear he'd see me, so I resolved to make myself comfortable with a couple of cannons a few cars back. Beastly things, they are. The way they recoil back after unleashing their payload like a snake after striking its victim.

We passed through so many towns lying in shambles I thought to myself how, if by some twist of fate the Confederacy wins the war, how could they ever recover enough to function independently of the Union? The trees were peppered with so many bullets they could hardly stay upright. The once lush green pastures were matted down and yellowed under the steps of thousands of soldiers. And the towns. The poor towns that I remember so fondly were no more than a shell of their former selves. As the train chugged past I caught a glimpse of a small, rudimentary cemetery on the outskirts of town. The graves were freshly dug mounds of dirt at the top of which stood small wooden crosses. I had led every one of those soldiers away. Young, brave men who had traded in their pitchforks for rifles and bayonets without a moment's hesitation. Soon I would have to make my presence known to Elijah and extend my hand to him, but I had come all this way and was determined to see where he was hell-bent on going.

The train pulled into the station of Goldsboro, North Carolina on a drizzly Sunday morning. The clouds, so laden down with moisture, could no longer hold back their tears. They wept over the small town, for all they had lost, and all they stood to lose. You see, Sundays were the day the newspapers would print the casualty reports. As the train began unloading its

cargo, Elijah crept out of his car and towards town. In his hasty landing, a photograph tumbled out of his side pocket and floated gracefully to the ground like a feather in the breeze. Poor Elijah never knew he dropped it.

I strolled over to where the photograph lie face down on the platform and reached to pick it up. It was a well-loved picture, torn at the edges and covered with several unknown substances. I looked at the photograph and a familiar face stared back at me—Elijah. He was posed next to a young woman of profound beauty. Her face was long and elegant with high cheekbones. Her hair, curled to perfection and pinned at the nape of her neck, looked to be a few shades lighter than his brown crop. Her eyes, though the picture had no color, were light, bright, and full of barely contained joy. Her unbridled smile was infectious, and I caught myself smiling back at her, sharing in her delight. It was a wedding portrait. Elijah's arm was bent at the elbow and her hands clasped his bicep firmly. Her dress was ornate compared to Elijah's plain suit. It betrayed the notion that she came from money. So it wasn't a marriage of convenience, I thought to myself, it must be a love union. All other portraits I had seen of the time were stoic, the subjects posed artificially and unsmiling. Elijah and his wife were unabashedly in love, and it warmed my hardened heart to know this must be where he was headed—back home to her. I glanced once more at the picture before I pocketed it. They were so jubilant—I wondered if she had yet heard of her sweetheart's fate in Gettysburg. Knowing his picture would soon be returned to him, I began trekking towards the town after Elijah.

The road into town was long, straight, and very well-traveled. After a few miles walk, Elijah came to a fork. He whipped to the left and sprinted all the way down the dirt lane towards the modest little farmhouse at the end. It was a tiny little rectangular thing—nothing much, especially compared to some of the looming plantations I've paid a visit to, but I'm sure it was a family's pride and joy. The house was white with chips of paint missing from its face. It was crowned with a grey tin roof covered in the classic, patchy, orange-brown sheen of rust. The shutters looked to be a dark evergreen, but they were weathered and precariously hanging from their hinges. There was a wooden fence around the house sunken deep into the earth in certain spots, causing the fence line to jut up periodically like a ragged mountain terrain. He ran up the path, through the gate, and onto the front porch, dodging chickens scurrying about. The porch steps bowed under his thundering steps. I could hear him in the distance yelling his arrival to whoever inhabited the house. Nobody came out. He knocked on the door once...twice...three times, but no answer. He tried the door, and it was open, so he walked in. I chose to stay at the end of the lane watching. A few minutes later he emerged from the house, still alone. The chickens were his only welcoming party. Unfortunately for them, before he made ready to leave Elijah scurried around the yard rounding the chickens up and corralling them back to their coop. They didn't give up their newfound freedom so easily, however, and I watched with amusement the as a whirlwind of clucks and feathers ran circles around Elijah until he caught them one by one.

In all my time in this profession, I scarcely come across a person who lives life fully for others and asks nothing in return. Mostly I find that the ego of man prohibits them from ever performing a truly selfless act. It pained me that I soon had to lead away such a

benevolent, genuine spirit. If the emptiness of the house perturbed Elijah, he didn't show it. He walked back down the path to the fork and simply went right this time.

The town of Goldsboro looked to be relatively unscathed. The same could not be said of its residents. Whilst following Elijah I passed huddle after huddle of sobbing women whose husbands, brothers, and fathers I had already led away. They were clutching the newspapers to their heaving chests as they openly grieved their cousins, uncles, and closest friends. I wondered if Elijah's widow frantically scanned the papers for his name, or if the news was broken to her by a loved one. I hoped for the latter.

The sight of the women grieving in town seemed to quicken Elijah's pace—as if he knew the anxiety over his wellbeing would be worrying his young wife to death, and he wanted to assuage her fears.

Before long we came to another house. This one, a little bigger than the last. The yard was manicured with its white picket fence, and the pink brick house was shrouded by tall maple trees. Elijah tore up the porch and threw open the screen door, and this time, I followed him. The front door was already open and as the screen door gently closed behind me, I took in the scene. Elijah was standing in the middle of the foyer, staring at a group of women embracing on the sofa in the parlor. The drapes were closed over the windows, snuffing out the sunlight and casting the room in shadow. Paintings adorned the three white walls, mostly of landscapes.

The rolling fields in the paintings are forever frozen on a bright, lively spring day. They would never bear witness to the thousands of lives the war would claim. Part of me envied the paintings and the serenity they depicted.

The quaint, but cozy parlor had a fireplace on the side wall and a strong mantle above it. The mantel sported a collection of photographs. One, I recognized immediately. Elijah's composure was beginning to crack. The women were all in black—they were mourning. He called out to them, "Ma! I just came from the house, but no one was home. I'm back! I've come home! Oh, the stories I must tell you! Where is Pa? Why are you crying? Has something happened to him?" What little heart I had left broke at those words.

When Elijah's mother, nor any of the other women, acknowledged his words I watched a thousand emotions flash on his face. He turned from the women and walked slowly down a hallway towards an open door at the end, his arm braced on the wall for support. I trailed behind him as silently as I could.

In the small back bedroom was the young woman from the photograph burning a hole in my pocket. She was cradling a newborn in her arms, swaddled in a soft light blue blanket. Her back was to the door, and she was facing the window overlooking the property. Her head was bowed, and her shoulders were heaving. She made no noise, for the baby was sleeping, but her body language was unmistakable—her soul had been cleaved in two. The baby was so small, no more than two months. The son he would never get to officially meet.



She cried and rocked the baby in her arms, back and forth. She held on tightly, for this was the last gift Elijah had given her.

I glanced around the room and took it all in—the wardrobe door was left ajar and peeking out were a pair of men's boots. On the wall hung a framed copy of the photograph I carried, forever preserving the day of their union.

As I looked back at Elijah's widow, I found she had turned. Her face was blotchy, and her eyes swollen. The trails of tears glistened on her flushed cheeks. She was looking at Elijah. He was looking at her. They held each other's gaze for many heartbeats. The eyes that once held so much joy now sparkled with unshed tears. She reached her fist to her mouth to quell a sob. When she brought her hand down, she placed it over her heart and gave Elijah a wobbly smile. I looked at Elijah and tears were streaming down his face. He knew.

I placed my outstretched hand on Elijah's shoulder, causing him to turn. When he looked at me his eyes widened with the confirmation he didn't want to accept. I did my best to maintain my peaceful façade, but inside I was just as devastated as he. He glanced one last time over his shoulder at his wife and newborn son. A weak smile adorned her face and she nodded—it was okay to go now. Slowly we walked back down the hallway of the house. He paused in the foyer for one last look at his mother. He smiled at her and whispered, "Goodbye, Ma. I love you. Tell Pa I love him too." With one last glance at the inside of the sweet little house, I pushed open the screen door and we stepped out onto the porch. To my surprise, there were trails of people making their way up the lane. Women, supported by their husbands, held handkerchiefs to their mouths as they cried. Children held onto the hands of their parents and behaved for the first time in their young lives. People from all walks of life, old and small, rich and poor, were making their way to Elijah's house to pay their respects.

It was then that I realized why I was so drawn to him—he knows the secret of life. The secret is simple and can be learned at any age, yet in all my years I've concluded far too many people never learn, and they never learn by their own choice. You see, the secret of life is to live in service of others. Some, like Elijah, are born knowing the secret. Others come into it via epiphany. Most, blatantly ignore it. I've led untold numbers of people away who were rich in material things. By all accounts, they had it all. The house, the fashion, the perfect family, the influence—but when I came for them? They could take nothing but the clothes on their back. Those souls—they are heavy. On the contrary? Elijah's soul was as light as a feather. Out of the thousands of souls I led away over those three fateful days, his was the lightest of them all.

Now, you'll remember that I told you I can tell how a person's life has been by the weight of their soul. There is another little secret I must let you in on. How you choose to deal with life's hardships is what determines the weight of your soul—just like how the outcome of a chess game is contingent upon how you deal with unexpected traps. If you allow them to bog down and infiltrate every aspect of your life, your soul will be heavy. Those who know the secret of life, and in turn, live their lives in the service of others, find a way to take life's

hardships and use them for strength to serve others. To take the cards they were dealt and use them to benefit someone else—so some good can bloom from the bad.

Elijah, though so young still, was exemplary at this. He was born into a family living close to poverty, yet he managed to touch the lives of rich and poor alike without trying to. He lived his life guided by his heart and the desire to serve others—and that's what he will be remembered for.

We stood on the porch for a while and watched the stream of people make their way into the house. Through the screen door I could hear each person telling Elijah's family how wonderful of a person he was. How he did something for them that was unexpected, yet greatly appreciated, and never took anything in return. The ghastly war may have checkmated him, but the game he played will live on in hearts forever.

When you're gone, who will remember you? Now that I've let the secret slip, do with it what you will. I'll know the life you lived when I come for you.

Finally, Elijah looked at me in a silent acknowledgment of what comes next. I reached into my pocket and took out the photograph I had carried since the train. He took it in both his hands and stared at it for a moment before slipping it back home in his pocket forever. He took my hand, and we began down the lane. The little pink brick house grew smaller and smaller, and the town fade into the distance. Elijah was gone, but the memory of the life he lived will endure.

***Jillian is a senior at Virginia Tech studying Cybersecurity Management and Analytics with a minor in Political Science. While she is a STEM major, she's always adored reading and recently she began to dabble in writing her own original pieces. When she hits writer's block, she usually hits the pavement for either a long walk or run, or she hits the kitchen for some baking/cooking therapy. Once she graduates and enters into the official world of Cybersecurity, she plans to continue to use writing as an outlet for her creative fantasy side!***

# Featured Poems

1. Cursed by Lucy Barker
  2. Yarra by Lincoln McAlister
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## Cursed

### Lucy Barker

In the confines of the cobwebbed catacomb,  
Distorted shadows chase ominously towards me  
As hostile stares from cavernous eye sockets  
Chart my stumbling progress  
Through the dank, dripping darkness.  
Screams of tongueless skulls  
Reverberate in the fetid air  
Spewing the vile vitriol of ancient curses;  
Venting venomous fury at being disturbed  
After centuries of sleep.  
A strange luminescence  
Displays their rictus grins;  
Delighting in my paralysing terror  
As they wreak havoc:  
Avenging my intrusion.  
Inevitably, I succumb to its lethal force.  
Hubris has led me here,

To my nemesis.

I have learnt too late

That the legend was real

And its evil eternal.

*Lucy is a retired teacher who retired to the beautiful South coast from landlocked Cheshire a few years ago. It was rather a rash decision as she was moving to an area where she knew nobody, only generations of ancestors who had lived there for centuries. She had visited their graves many times and felt she was returning home. It was almost as if the ghosts were welcoming her. It was the best decision she ever made.*

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**Yarra**

**Lincoln McAlister**

The bloke a tall bloke a house next to old miners digs furrowed down into the ground in little hillocks to a trickling creek carrying gold dust collected a stone beyond a hut fallen down left to stand from old days and a rusty plane sits in the yard on forty four gallon drums where it flew a sky once but not no more surrounded by tall iron fence with dusty road as cars roar past with a horse beyond its head hung dejectedly with a fishing hole rusty bed frames ripped out of water and under the bridge over where the Yarra flows and a bunyip sleeps where the Wurundjeri tribe once walked and the graffiti is scrawled grass overgrown signs broken and things snapped someone has built a blue house perfect in its perfection against this urban ruin and they put up a letterbox as a sign of defiance to the chaos beside this river old mountain ash that stand with a ghost fishing fair dinkum tilly lantern and all as cars hit the bridge above sounding like gunshots as I jump through my skin thinking could this be a way to cure PTSD like you're in some war and maybe you are.

# Featured Essays

## 1. Persistent Pasts, Fading Futures by Ethan Winters

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### Persistent Pasts, Fading Futures

#### Ethan Winters

To tell you position on “ghosts” I will have to remind you of one you might have heard before. It is a story that goes something like this.

A man comes home, late and often distracted with a great deal of work. The man is told by his wife that their son is still awake, perhaps reading stories, watching movies or now, playing video games. The father approaches the son’s room and discovers that the son is in fact awake, consumed with whatever bogymen media pollutes the public concern of the era. Now comes the part where the father talks with the son and in talking he will hear the boy repeat a story of his own.

“Grandfather says that all of the bumps in the night are ghosts. Is that true father?”

The father thinking as fathers do, wishes to encourage his son and keep away the fear of such notions. Often, he would reflect on how too many comics, books or movies are too frightening for the young mind. So, the father attempts to remedy this.

“No son, there are no such things as ghosts.” Satisfied with his abolition of these now imagined encroaching fears that the night brings, he steps out of the room. He closes the door, turns off the light and perhaps leaves the door a crack open for the distant hallway light. But a mistake has been made. The boy lays awake now, and it was not the movies, the comics or the games that have sewn fear into his soul as he holds tight to blankets that he knows somehow will not protect him.

Because this child, like all children, has an instinct. His mind has the instructions for the dark.

‘Jump off the edge of the bed instead of stepping down’, daring a hand to grab him. ‘Run from the dark hall’, give nothing behind him a chance to catch up. ‘Close the door to the gaping stare of whatever lurks inside the wardrobe’, whatever lurks inside assumed to be watching patiently in the night.

Depending on where you are from, you know these sensations as well as the boy does. As do I. We all have our instincts, or at one time did. In some they even persist past the childhood. This boy with these specific fears asked his grandfather what the noises in the night were and he was told that it was just a ghost.

“Can they hurt me?” Asked the boy to the grandfather “I don’t think so, I’m old and none have ever hurt me as long as I’ve lived.” Satisfied with this answer, the boy understood this and was content to sleep.

But now the mistaken father has dispelled this contentment. When he wakes screaming in the night from a bump it might be the mother who finally asks the most important question of all.

“Why are you scared?” It is only then, that the son finally explains this new duress, minted from a rational good intention. “Father said there are no such things as ghosts.”

“Why yes! Ghosts shouldn't scare you, should they?” “I’m not scared of ghosts mother, they aren’t real!” “As you father said. Then what is wrong my son?”

“If ghosts aren’t real then who is in our house?”

We live in a world full of ghosts. Some are just like the boy from the story. A terror that exists from the absence, created from fears that can only exist once the rational dispels what was once simply an understanding. Virtually every culture that persists today has a collection of spirits, ghosts, shades, wraiths, ancestors’ beings and legends of the guiding dead. They have been with us as long as smokey fire lit the nights and made the shadows dance on stone walls. Was it always that these shadows the periphery of our limited mortal sight, were only enhanced by the fire light?

There is an irony in this, that just like the firelight creates ghosts on walls, so too does the rational world we inhabit enhance those places of the unknown that we most fear to look.

We have now discounted all of legend for experience. We demand only specifics, proof, records, citations and the need to establish absolutes, having done so with a great pace that forgets the old world. We have gained much fire. So much so that it revealed the long dark stretch of space, another cave wall for the shade to dance on. A canvas for our fear of the unknown, persists.

We have by ‘giving up the ghosts’, in fact lost the ability to abbreviate our fears. To write off spirits and ghosts is to permanently create a void, an unknown. It is this unknown that haunts all of science, all minds that may think themselves better than, or ‘above superstition’ indeed, persists.

Perhaps it is that we of recent history have merely traded a long familiar fear, for a much more disquieting alien unknown.

The unknown for all its expansive immutable draw, fails to stop people from trying to define the fear. Perhaps this is why some still believe in ghosts now? Perhaps when an experience with the unknown conflicts with what we thought was an absence becomes confirmation. This is the domain of myth, modern urban legend and as I have said before, ghosts.

Just like the unknown it is in the nature of the ghost to persist, to remain. Both in how the legends are told, the gaps in the unknown they fill and in many cultures' stories, will persist. 'Haunt' if you will.

An idea can haunt. A person can be haunted. A person can be haunted by an idea. This is the other kind of ghost story, not necessarily a being, or an entity. It is just a meeting of the unknown and the dread fear of something, almost defined. This is the essence of the haunting and the rational cannot so easily defeat it.

Imagine now if you will a trio of young men. They are relatively clean, fit in a starved sort of way, and two of them smoke. They are dressed in the surplus clothing of the Warsaw pact, mixed with a curious blend of cable knit sweaters, imitation Adidas sneakers and pants with the curious rain drop pattern so common to East Germany and the Czech states during the cold war era. One can come far from home. The other was friends with a friend who heard about this. They have spoken on the dark corners of the internet of this plan for some time. They share a very specific bond. A bond that persists even to this very day.

It is roughly May 2007. Earlier in this year on 20th March something very important happened to these young men and it would change the way they engage the world forever. The most obvious change was that each of them carried an old Soviet era, GP8 gasmask, surplus gear backpacks, enough food for the days ahead and maps stolen from an archive that would not care. One of them has everything saved to an old PDA that he reverses engineered.

They walk on the road after being dropped off by the man in a van. He warns them that they should stay away from the fences. They nod and say Yes, we understand. They do in fact understand. It was the man who brought them in that underestimated the nerve of this trio. They move out as a group. Silently and carefully. They do not want to be seen by anyone if they can help it.

So, they move. One grew up hunting, the other explored old buildings rather than attending school. They reach sight of the fence. One turns to the other and asks in his native Ukrainian. "Well. That is, it. Are you going?"

"Too far to not. Let's be quiet." And so, they are.

They wait until near twilight before crossing the fence. They unroll an old floor rug over the top and use it to get over the wire. It is pulled off slowly and carefully, then stashed in a bag under some near grass for later. One of them takes a photo of the crossing. As far as they know they are the very first to do this, and if this is so then they would become legends in the same dark corners of the internet that let them take turns inspiring and joking until no one was laughing about it anymore.

They cross a small swamp. They pass a disused overgrown road. For many kilometres they push on. Most of them have never been this far away from the populated cities that they grew up in. Out here it feels different. Not wrong, but there is a tension in the air. A nervous

understanding. They are trespassing. But that isn't what they are most scared of. Being caught was no big deal. If the police came, they would just run.

By the time they bump into the village it is nightfall. Every step is laboured. Every breath exhausted by the pace. They are careful to conserve water. Drinking any water inside this place was a bad idea. They had seen pictures of people who had. The deformities. They knew that you didn't eat the mushrooms, or the apples. Even if you were to shoot a boar, it would be tainted.

They search the houses carefully, first without light to make sure they don't run into any of the few remaining people that live here, against the governments wishes of course. Much like themselves. The next search they grow confident and use light. They are able to open most of the old homes.

Inside they find an old fireplace, a bed, pictures of the old Soviet state apparatus. Family photos. Clothes. Blankets. Old plates. Books. There are always books. They light an old can be full of spirit alcohol. They know better than to burn the wood here. One went to school for this and understand the effects. He says they must not eat anything, burn anything, inhale smoke or stay too long near large vehicles. The way he explains it is as a shaman talking of forbidden places to them.

They trade a bottle of vodka. They don't get drunk, well perhaps one does a little. In the old days that said that vodka was supposed to protect you. But even nostalgia for the Soviet era cannot dampen the fear of the realities of this place.

They sleep, one stays away to watch. They take 3 turns, and spent 8 hours asleep, 4 hours on each. Just as the military does. If you were to watch them, you might think they are playing soldier in a way. But they know the truth. They play seriously. As serious as any soldier might.

They move out with the light and are able to make many more kilometres this day. They avoid the roads easier, avoid the puddles of marsh that left some of them with wet socks and uncomfortable pants for the night. They reach the abandoned city soon after 4pm.

"We should check again." The oldest one says, as he does, he pulls out the most valuable equipment they brought. A small modern Geiger counter that reads radiation on a scale that can be relied upon. The levels are elevated here, nothing like the house.

They pass by old tractors, the counter spiked before they even neared those. So, they obeyed the malicious ticking with movement. Some places had spots that would just shoot higher than anything they could read. Others were strangely sterile. But the device brought the reality home. They could not feel the radiation.

They move to the edge of the old wrecking yards where tanks, tractors and other equipment used by so called Liquidators was parked. Lethal for a lifetime now, especially this close.



“There! Look!” The trio duck down as a unit. As they do a lone rumble of a vehicle passes ahead. None of them see it very clearly. But one of the youths snaps a photo with his camera. Later they would interpret that the vehicle had been a police patrol.

They push on, with adrenaline spiking them to over activity. The older one calms them as they reach the first sign. Written in peeling script, the sculpted stone sign announces an abandoned name. Nearby a fox runs off into the woods.

“Прип'ять 1970”

After all they have been through, they can now see the city of Pripyat. This brave trio of youths, with nothing more than good old fashioned former Warsaw pact fatalism and the bravery that it bestows, have hiked into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

From here they sneak into apartments, they take only things made of nonmetal. They leave very little trace besides disturbing a few of the animals. They do not know if they are truly the first, but they are certainly the first ones to do it for the reasons that they have.

These boys possess a ghost story of their own, truly of their own. That ghost was an event that left a whole city haunted, as well as most of Eastern Europe for most of modern history. On 26th April 1986 when the mismanaged No. 4 Reactor went into meltdown and one of only two level 7 nuclear emergencies ever to occur. In fact, if you are to discuss Ghost Cities today, you might already be more than familiar with Chernobyl.

What I have just told is a variation on a story that has been repeated often and less often with reliable reporting. Between the many articles, curiosity exhibitions, Youtube videos, subculture tell-alls and the mainstream reporting of this urban mythology something is lost.

Much like hacking, urban exploration has its schools of thought. Some take only pictures, leave only footprints. Some investigate places of history with authorization to document. Others still collect myths and camp out in places supposedly haunted trying to collect an experience that becomes a ghost story of its own in some respect. But these habits are distractions. The story I have illustrated about the trio of 20 somethings breaking into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is not true. But what I describe is.

Something just like it has not only happened but continued to happen all the way into the presently ongoing war in the Ukraine. When Arkady Natanovich Strugatsky and Boris Natanovich Strugatsky collaborated to write *Roadside Picnic*, they had no idea that art would imitate life so closely. *Roadside Picnic* was put out in 1972 and would not receive a non-state modified version until late 2012.

*Roadside picnic* is set in an aftermath of an extraterrestrial event called *The Visitation* that took place in several locations around the Earth, simultaneously, over a two-day period. These Visitors, their means of arrival or departure were never seen. What they leave behind are six exclusion zones.

The zones exhibit strange and dangerous phenomena not understood by humans and contain artefacts with impossible properties. This marvel of Soviet sci fi is a staple of the genre among aficionados.

There is even a 1979 movie based on it by the great Andrei Tarkovsky. A man who died from contamination from a nearby chemical plant he received while shooting and then exhaustively re-shooting the *Stalker* movie. The poison also claimed Tarkovskys wife.

Vladimir Sharun famously explained in a 2001 interview. “Up the river was a chemical plant and it poured out poisonous liquids downstream. There is even this shot in *Stalker*: snow falling in the summer and white foam floating down the river. In fact, it was some horrible poison.”

Andrei Tarkovsky lived until 29 December of 1986. I often wonder what he must have thought as news of the new Exclusion Zone reached him in his dying years.

But the Ghost of Roadside Picnic continues past the story, past the movie and onto another medium. In 2007 *Stalker* was to inspire something wholly different in content but absolutely haunted in spirit.

In Ukraine the Chernobyl disaster haunts every life. It is as much a part of the identity of the Ukrainians as it is the southern Belorussians who have their own exclusion zone, attached to the cross-border area. A small video game studio was experimenting with something that would inspire a generation.

By the time GSC Game World created *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* the real exclusion zone, it featured heavily, was becoming less of the extreme hazard it was and more of a highly inadvisable destination for dark tourism.

While both *Roadside Picnic* and 1979’s *Stalker* were set before such an exclusion zone could be physically encountered, it was *Shadow of Chernobyl* that started the subculture of urban exploration taken to its most extreme.

They named themselves after that which they grew up with. They are Stalkers. In the stories, in the movie and in the games. It was not long before such much art would invite an imitation.

The game is an atmosphere more than a shooter. It is difficult. Unforgiving and often death is random and arbitrary. To a mind growing up in a post-Soviet satellite nation, they might compare it to the rarely esteemed glory days. Sure, it’s dangerous, but perhaps it was better? The nostalgia of the Soviet Union pervades as much as it perverts the lens of history. But the most valuable part of this new adaptation, was the revised mythology of *Roadside Picnic* from a vague setting to “next door”.

In *Shadow of Chernobyl*, there monsters that stalk the tunnels, mutated dogs stalking the wastes, irradiated forests that require expensive equipment to pass. You must watch for

enemies always. If you can get a good weapon, you can often survive. But there are anomalies. These hidden threats, inspired by the vague descriptions of Roadside Picnic and emphasized by the throwing of rags tied to steel nuts to detect them are palpable.

In Stalker and Shadow Over Chernobyl, the detection of an invisible threat is instrumental in the psychology of both the stories and the world. To the unsure Ukrainian youth, they saw life as full of invisible threats. If you are a bad Stalker, you.

will be a dead Stalker. So, it goes in the story.

This means if you are alive, you are good at it. One can see how this could be attractive to a less financially mobile, perhaps even poorer youth.

Shadow of Chernobyl is an apt description for the game, and for the situation that many in the Ukraine have lived under ever since the reactor blew. No wonder the game was a slow hit.

It was not long before the dark corners of the internet spurred each other to actions. It was not enough to simply play. Or read. When you live next to place that is the setting for so much of your national drama, and are expressly told to stay out, well what would you do?

If you said, "I would stay out, radiation is dangerous!" then congratulations, you are not Stalker material. From 2007 until late 2020 a whole generation of Ukrainians, Belorussians, visiting Europeans, and even international urban explorers have ventured into the zone. Many wearing the patches of the fictional factions of the games that inspired the first wave.

They come with ideologies, copies of Roadside Picnic, cameras and Comrades. Some have been caught. The fine is negligible to the international. Some film their escapades. Others never tell a soul and slip in and out better than any other.

That is what it is to be haunted. To wish to engage with the past so much that it directly effects a future and inspires different outcomes of that future. Haunting are populated by many ghosts. On their own they are merely a story to warn or ward. For others they are perhaps a direct invitation to explore what they guard.

It would not be wrong to say that it is the fear of the irrational, the spectre of disaster that acts as a present-day ghost story for something as modern as the adoption of nuclear power.

Despite being nearly technologically safe, and the understanding that bulk waste storage is still a problem there is always the ghost of Chernobyl hanging over everything.

It takes close to 40 years to create a nuclear power plant. It takes hours to create a ghost story. It is the ghost of that past that says, "I trust the technology, but I can never trust the men who fail despite it."

Perhaps this 'ghost' wards us with fear. But not to bar us, simply to steel our resolve? Much like those people who would jump a fence and tread into a place that an entire generation was warned never to trespass into.

Even if we are ever inclined to tell someone there is no such thing as ghosts, we should consider our own fear of the ghosts that have a very real long-standing effects. Perhaps it is time to start believing in our ghosts, so that we might confront what they warn us about, direct us toward and remind us to revere.

I cannot say if cultural memory shares a universal idea of the ghost. Or if that idea is functional or useful. All I can suggest is that like Shakespeare supposed, maybe these ghosts haunt us for reasons. You have only to look at the entire body of Gothic literature to understand what a sentiment can achieve when imagination is all it asks in return.

They say that the Edwardian and especially the Victorians were obsessed with ghosts. But this is here, this is now, and we are still talking about it. We are always obsessed with them; we just no longer recognize the form of that obsession.

We live in a world where someone will scoff at you for speaking to the imaginary, then devote 4 hours of time on a whim to speak to a Markov chain AI. But ghosts are silly, aren't they?

It is possible that with a reverence for the very real ghosts, our pasts may become persistent even as our own futures continue to fade into our present lives.

It is no coincidence that when we wish to know the specifics of something as fixed as say, a law, that we do not pursue the laws letter. Indeed, we intend to discover the spirit of the law, not the letter. Even the law is haunted by an intangible ghost of intent and meaning.

As I have said before, having lost our ability to abbreviate the unknown, many ghosts that persist do so despite our ability to believe in the lessons which will continue to haunt us, both collectively and socially, for as long as we ignore them. As for me? I will continue to believe in our ghosts.