

Ghosts in a Lighthouse

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April, 2011

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This collection of poems represents my engagement with the notion of death and its' inevitable outcome in both the secular and Christian reference. It focuses on the unclear terms of death and the possible after-lives that death may produce. It is a cohesive gesture on how to creatively understand the fascination with dying while bringing human mortality to surface. The poems lend themselves to both paranormal and religious beliefs, but ultimately rely on a personal understanding of the terms of death.

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A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters in English

By

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April, 2011

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The Lighthouse

"The city is burning, the ocean is churning. Our only chance is the lighthouse"
-The Hush Sound

1. Overture

Love, I ran to the edge
of the sea to wait and watch
for your vessel to approach
this barren shore. The lighthouse
stood silently by my side
while the surging ocean
roared loudly enough for us both.

The sky's blush began to fade,
but I held my place on the cliffs,
holding your words with my tongue,
your promise to meet me here as soon
as your ship docked. We'll disappear, you said,
in the fog and forget the cries of the shore.

Waves began to churn the sand;
powerful wind twisted my curls
into knots. I sought refuge
in the lighthouse, ran breathlessly up
stairs to gaze into the eye of the storm.

Oh, love, you never arrived. My thin face
reflects no more in the glass
of rotating light.
I had waited for so long.
The door locked from the outside.

2. Ghost

When I was young, I'd get lost
in treasures the ocean gave to me,
smooth edges of perfect shells,
softly colored tokens in rich shades
of cream, brown, burnt orange. Skies
knew nothing but blue, and gulls
laughed with me as waves kissed my feet.
My pockets were full of sea-glass.

I'd dance in the surf, forgetting
life on land. I'd close my eyes, feeling salt
air fill my lungs. Then I heard her
sweet voice dripping like the juice
of a blood-red orange. It saturated
my small body; I quivered at her siren song.

Her hair burned with auburn
light, trapping the sun. She smiled
and disappeared into the wind.

3. Escape

We're stuck somewhere in between
burning embers of the city,
where the ash falls like snow,
and the fierceness of the storm at sea.

In the distance, the lighthouse
beckons with its lamp, calling
our vessels home. Steel-gray
walls provide protection from the outside.

Was it the wind, or a song that carried
us to the heavy, salt-beaten door?
As we pushed it open, I thought I saw
soft flames ascend the iron staircase.

We went and climbed up to the glass
enclosure, looked out at the flames.
Her voice came softly from behind,

"The door is locked from the outside."
Ghosts in a lighthouse.

1941

Cherry blossoms kissed her cheek
as they fell from trees, covering her
in a canopy of pink.

Summer's glow saturated her hair
with simple light.
Her eyes met mine.

My heart felt like the sun
taking its last breath before plunging
beneath the horizon.

The car radio softly played
"Green Eyes," Jimmy Dorsey
sang my unreality into existence.

Folding the draft card in half,
I slid the news into my back pocket and
handed her a Cherry Coke instead

When the World Was at War

You took my heart to sea.
Water knew no separation from land,
it had always met the shore,
but I knew the distance
between fingertips. I studied names

on maps to where you might be,
learning words spoken in different
languages. Your letters could not
bring me any closer. I confess,

I surrendered to dark thoughts of men
on my doorstep, who handed me
a telegram I had already memorized.
They haunted my doorway
until the day you returned.

Assault on Peleliu, September 1944

When dreams begin to haunt one another,
I roll over to the not-so-black-and-white
memory of a tide coming in.
It's when the waves gently lap
at the flotsam of body parts
that I begin to see his mangled face
aglow with flashing bombs.

His eyes, glossy, as the foam washes
over one exposed pupil.
There was no warning,
only the loud yells that followed,
"bushido."

Tokushima, Japan or Somewhere Like It

Smoke circles your face and settles in your hair.
Your eyes glow more brightly
than the end of your cigarette.

You're thinking of the war.
I can see it in the way your face wrinkles,
mimicking creases in the old map of Japan
that you keep tucked in a drawer beside your bed.

It's always nights like these, sitting in the garage,
listening to Billy Joel's "Good Night Saigon,"
when I see tears living in the crevices of your eyes.

Their subtle shine momentarily intertwines
with the dimming garage light. You speak,
and for a second I can imagine
blackness enveloped by tiny stars.

You'd memorized every detonation
of the bombs you couldn't see.
You said you felt them
trembling all the way to your heart.

Beach WHITE 1

It was always that first, heart-shattering sound,
thunder, that would make him hold on tighter.
He'd whisper between the sheets how it took him
back to where bombs detonated like fire-works
on the fourth of July. Each flash of lightning

would bring with it a new face, lit in the Japanese air.
He said he could see them at the foot of our bed,
the vivid features of distorted bodies. Their blank stares
penetrated his memory, and he'd be there too,
on some beach he couldn't pronounce.

His body, sinking low into the mattress, slipping to
massacres played out in the breaking morning's
sun. His hand perched on his chest, gun tightly
sewn to his heart, charging the shore-line each night.

He said he could still taste salt water splashing
into his mouth as he swam for land. I'd wipe away
his tears with the end of my pillowcase.

Memorial Hospital, January 15th

I woke up lying
in a hospital bed,
an hour away from home.

The steady rhythm
of my heartbeat
keeps time in my head.

Tubes protrude from my
veins, tentacles
from a jelly fish.

White tape holds needles
fast in invasive places.
Family lingers

in the hallway.
My mouth is drier
than a corn field,

a dust bowl in the middle
of summer. She quietly
holds my hand in hers.

Our wedding bands catch,
metal brushes metal.
With a gentle squeeze,

a signal to let go,
I close my eyes again.
Light flickers in the room.

When Deciding to Fold

It's always around the time when my mind
decides to walk away from my body
that I finally realize the severity of it all,
the understated way that light hits
glass and filters into translucent rainbows.

I know mathematicians are right,
because I lay my cards down
according to their formulas. When you have a full
house, there's nothing to do but raise.
Like my brother, Mark. Last year he was dealt

the cards he'd been carrying all along.
I called him once to tell him
he should throw away the Queen and pick up
another Ace. He told me I needed to get out of Nebraska.

The cards added up just like I said they would.
I laid a pack inside his casket,
but I took them out after the wake.
I remembered that he didn't need cards

where he was going. They say there are 900 million
television sets in use around the world now.
You can make the headlines as long as someone dies,
but if you have a choice, lay it down before the river runs dry.

Inappropriate Funeral Attire

I'm scanning the ticket again
to make sure I can still read the gate number
through these mascara-burned eyes.
It doesn't matter. By the time
I arrive at A6, it will have changed
to G14, D5, or B7. Bingo.

I'm running my hands over the collection
of clothing in the closet, knowing black
is expected, but my fingers slide along
electric pinks, ultra violets, shades that scream.

I grab an assortment of items without really looking,
only pack the necessities, when
the only necessary thing is everything.
Would that same mentality apply if I
was the one who'll lay in that coffin on Saturday?
Bury me in the most colorful outfit I own,
fine jewelry, purses, and shoes beside me.
No one else can have them.

Mark, being the oldest of my brothers,
would laugh and say, "Oh, Sybil, your children
aren't that undeserving." But no one can hear
his laughing now as he prepares for
six feet underground.

I light a cigarette and throw
a smile into the Cheshire-like smoke,
shake ice in the tumbler,
send a splash of brandy to the floor.
I zip my suitcase,
raise a toast to the heavens:
"See you in Carolina, Mark."

2AM in a Bar Outside of Phoenix

Watch the ice dilute colorful
splashes of Hpnotiq as it melts
into the only form
of comfort you've ever known.
Swirl the glass, sip like a lady.
Be gentle with your lipstick
as you place your lips on the rim.
Forget yourself in manners and what
you know you can get away with.

Hide the feelings that come when
you see his disembodied face in your mind.
His dark features resemble yours, blood-
line shared between relatives, and this
is the only remembrance you have
of your brother now. Don't think about it.
Wish yourself back into the place
in which you lived before you received
the thousand mile away phone call.

It doesn't change anything.
A lifeless face in a casket opened
to the heavens. You visit it every night.
Don't think about it.
Keep your eyes on the glass so
people in their suits and ties, sitting
beside you at the bar, won't notice
that your heart is sinking into liquid
so blue it hides the tears .

Sacred Sleep

We're walking through tall grass
brushing at our knees.
Our fingers are entwined, vines
growing wild with feverish
summer. Somewhere through
thick night and breathless stars,
your face brightened dawn's sky.

I had to close my eyes to see you.
Morning sun broke through the window.
I'm always sleeping with your ghost.

Strawberry Festival

All I can remember now
is the sweet, crisping smell of funnel cakes.
You took my tiny hand into your clutch,
led me through the maze of booths:
Vendors sold bright fabrics,
smooth strawberry jellies, vibrant red
necklaces, deeper than the fruit itself.

The juice from the over-ripe berry
fell, big red splotches on my starched dress.
You smiled and picked me up, put me
over your shoulders. The world was there
at our fingertips, like the leftover dark
green rind. Just for that day, you traded
your dress blues for the cool comfort
of a cotton shirt, denim shorts, and me.

At seven years old, I never thought that
one day you wouldn't walk beside me anymore,
that your memory would be a flat stone
lost in a tangled cemetery on Mill street.

Flowers have begun to bloom.
I prepare my own daughter for the festivities,
imagine you here to hold her hand
through fields of strawberries.

Your body is rot now. Nothing but
fertilizer, feeding what dares bloom
above your grave.

While They Search for Ghosts

In Pompeii their bodies lie, masked
in hardened ash, their screams, caught
between silent whispers.
Here is where I find the end.

Twisted bodies bow or face upward,
but where are their souls? Have they too
been left, encased in hard shells of what
little earth has left to offer? My hand touches
a dim TV screen, catching pixels
on someone else's coast. This is where
I bury all of my secrets.

Cerberus

We walked down gravel roads,
kicking up dust with the points
of our shoes. Gravestones
rose in the distance, touchstones
leading us down our intended path.

I held your hand and laughed
into cotton blooms, their arms
outstretched, caught the lace
of my dress. You sang me songs
of ancestors, their voices

joining in along the tree-line.
We never saw the black
dog running behind, its shape
overtaking my small body,
its claws about to tear into my back.

The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel

They say Marilyn Monroe walks the halls
in this old hotel on the Boulevard.
Her face graces mirrors, pouting red lips
framed in white-blond curls.

Guests catch a glimpse of her turning
corners, a soft whisper in the night.
I've never seen her and I don't want to.
To catch a glimpse of beauty wasted

would be disheartening. Still,
they come here full of frightful hope,
expectations intensified from
unsure reasons behind the haunt.

Maybe unfamiliar places are less painful
than home.

When the Sun Sets

Waves remember when the ocean stretched out its arms
and gently kissed the contoured shores of Key West.
The crumbling fort watched from a distance
as the sun bathed in a fiery sea.

The array of colors washed over a sky
reflecting off the surface, pigments
trapped in a portrait revisited nightly
by those who stop time for the last breath of sunset.

For a moment, the island stands still.
Everyone clutches drinks and their hearts
as sunlight submerges into the dead blue night.

Palms shiver as the whispers of night
weave their way through streets of boarded houses.
Neon bars are adorned with white lights,
bright drinks, and loud conversation.

Four blocks from Duval Street, down dark narrow roads,
crypts lie on top of one another, a concrete display
of those for whom time has stopped.
Their bones reach out, reliving the coldness
skin feels before the last touch of life.
They never miss a sunset in this place.

The Morning of My Cousin's Death

Early morning spills onto rooftops
high enough to bathe even the neighbor's
grit-house in a soft, welcoming glow.

We sit watching teabags float, half
exposed to our conscious minds soaking the
only truth that has appeared on dawn's table.

My aunt's hand shakes, setting sugar sinking
to the bottom of china cups,
their age seeming suddenly unfair.

Our silence makes itself welcome,
while muffled sounds from a bedroom
alarm clock replaces heartbeats.

Wall of Urns

My grandmother runs her hand
across the beveled edge, too dull
to slice even fog. Etched and polished
pieces of pottery kept neatly for display.

So many containers of death
from which to choose. A tiny room,
overwhelming with small, artful body-
canisters that call for a collection of ashes.

Emerald green, wrapped with
vines of gold scroll looks like
something to steal if I broke into
her house. The new hiding
place for his body.

Almost No Relation

Processionals lead to receptions or
empty holes waiting to be filled.
Today, we follow black cars down
roads you used to travel. There
will be no festive night of dancing,
just shuffling feet
around granite headstones.

Strangers stop to stare, aware
of where we are travelling. Some
place hands over their hearts
or send prayers through
rooftops of automobiles.
Trapped behind tinted windows,
I cry to the country song on the radio.

On the Way Out

We lay hands on
objects, raise the dead
in rooms with framed faces.
Hell-bent notions push
towards a surface, un-
penetrated by light.
We place hearts in etchings,
capture time in granite
memos meant for open
memorials or hidden sanctuaries.
Time paints graffiti
above dirt-moved bodies.
Summers' shade never
comes from tombstones.

How to Pass The Time

When we drive down the road,
I secretly scout passing scenery
for graveyards.

My heart races when I find one tucked
into a cotton field, or nestled
on a distant hill.

I shy away from larger, ornate cemeteries.
They have nothing to offer me,
except for an unwelcome reality.

It's the old tombstones that send my mind
into a fit of curiosity. I imagine
the bodies are all gone.

My eyes silently search the veranda
as you continue to drive,
oblivious to my obsession.

The Day the Earth Gave Way

When I was younger, my cousin and I danced
in graveyards. We waltzed around decaying tombstones,
tangoed with the dead. We pretended it was 1880
and Mr. Harold Lee Johnson was still alive and well.
His face, more than sunken bones and dirt, a fleshy smile.
We invited him to dance with us in autumn's evening,
under protection of thick tree branches. Their arms kept
his ghost hidden from the world outside.

We never imagined that the ground would cave in,
that I would fall to join him in his shallow grave.

Searching for Answers on the Second Floor

They probably think I've escaped
from the mental ward on the east wing.
Sometimes I find myself moving down
that same gray corridor, counting the tiles
quietly on the way to your old room.
People pass in dull colored scrubs and long
white coats, giving me busy glances.

Maybe I am going crazy.
I'm searching for some kind of closure
in the building where you closed
your eyes for good.

These walls held your beating
heart, struggling for each pressing
breath caught in fragile lungs. Here
are rooms for someone else's family.

When I reach the doorway, I gaze
upon the face of an ancient man
wrapped tightly in tubes and wires.
He doesn't look anything like you,
with his thinning silver hair and puckered
skin. He lacks the dark mass
inside your heart.

Night Talk, Bulgaria

If oceans remained motion-
less, I could swim to shores,
touching map-lines only traced
with fingertips. The world would find

me there, burying my dead on cliffs.
I would kiss their constellations
while singing holy songs of passing.
I would ride the north way passage to my

grandfather's grave, never wondering why
I chose a haunted route to follow.
In the hills of Kamilski Dol, I see ghosts of my ancestors.

After Life

It always flourishes into some obsession,
flooding my mind with dark spaces,
quietly taking over my body like cancer
sending thoughts through my veins
to my eyes. I can't escape from

thinking about the millions
of different ways I could die
in the next 30 seconds. A flash
of bright light. Blossoming trees.
A garden. Will I know you there?

Doubting Thomas

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

Sitting in church Sunday morning
makes me both forget and remember
that I am going to die one day.

I always divert my eyes
from graveyards while driving,
yet I'm driving fast enough

to cause a fatal collision.
I know I am going to be with God
when I die. I'll step into heaven
to gain the simple knowledge
that I've held onto all along.

When I look in the mirror,
I whisper to the reflection,
“You are dying every day.”