



Allison Ellis

Nonfiction Ghost Hunting

In 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a man best known for his essays, lectures and championship of American values like individualism, self-reliance and freedom, pried open his deceased wife’s coffin a year after her death. He’d been in the habit of walking to her grave every day and writing to her as if she were alive in his journals. As Gay Wilson Allen details in his biography, *Waldo Emerson* (1982) Emerson had preached in a sermon not long after her death, “In the mind of the mourner... the dead are present still,” and described the relationship between the disembodied and the still-bodied soul as a “sublime attraction:” “When we have explored our desolate house for what shall never there be seen, we return with an eagerness to the tomb as the only place of healing and peace” (170-171). If there were ever an opening to a ghost story, I’d say this is it—a *nonfiction* ghost story. Emerson doesn’t tell us *why* he opened the coffin (his journal entry from that day simply states, “Opened Ellen’s coffin”) (*JMN* 4:7) but a [closer look at his life and writings offer important clues.](#)

What is at the heart of a ghost story? The allure of the unexplained, the promise of chills—yes—but there’s also something deeper at play beyond shadowy apparitions, haunted houses or bumps in the night. A literary category that has arguably existed longer than any other (some historians claim cave paintings as the first ghost tales), ghost stories can be found across cultures and genres, from classics to religious texts to romance novels.

In theory, nonfiction ghosts don’t exist. Because our current culture leads us to believe that ghosts are imaginary and therefore not “real,” our ghost stories are constrained by their literary boxes: fantasy,

magical realism, and so on. But according to a recent Pew study and Harris poll, [18% of Americans have seen a ghost](#), [29% say they feel in touch with the dead](#) and [42% of us believe in ghosts](#).

My aim here is to take the idea of the ghost story, consider its presence in a forbidden realm (nonfiction) and show how ghosts emerge and take shape in a variety of forms, using the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Doty, Joan Didion, Jo Ann Beard and Tiffany Briere. Just as fictional ghosts serve to reveal hidden truths, so too do nonfiction ghosts. Their purpose is to illuminate the unseen, render the impossible tangible, and show us, for a moment at least, that the very things we consider to be otherworldly are in fact terrifyingly real.

A few years after my husband died, I went looking for my own coffin to open. Like Emerson, I'd been talking to and writing to my husband as if he were still around, and his uncanny presence felt more real than anything else at the time. Working, parenting and just existing in the world seemed surreal; talking to a dead person did not. I thought if I could find literature which spoke to the most haunting and ineffable aspects of loss, I'd have tangible proof of what I believed to be true, but also knew was impossible: my husband was *not* dead, but very much alive in spirit, visiting me through various signs, messages and dreams. What did these messages hope to teach? Was it possible that the lines between the living and the dead were thinner than we thought? These were the questions I was looking to literature to help me answer, specifically nonfiction literature. I wanted to see real narrators putting real ghosts on the page.

I'll admit: It took me years to find even a single ghost—intuitively I knew the spirits were there, lurking in the shadows, if not plainly in view then at least obscured by my own ways of seeing—but once I figured out how to lift the lid off that vault, I began to see them everywhere: in a coyote that visits Mark Doty, in the faint pencil marks that Joan Didion's husband left behind, and in the biographies, essays, memoirs and journals of dead and living authors alike.

In thinking about how we define ghost tales, it would seem that a ghost story is one that merely features a ghost (or ghosts) but the truth is more telling, and as far as nonfiction is concerned, the genre is evolving. Bruce Owens Grimm, who wrote about his own ghosts, as well as those in the nonfiction works of Carmen Maria Machado, Hilary Mantel, Paul Lisicky and others for this journal, calls it [Haunted Memoir](#). Others may place their ghosts in the silo of speculative, hybrid or lyrical works.

My take: a true nonfiction ghost tale puts the reader in direct conversation with the dead. “We couldn’t keep the dead out of the present if we wanted to,” writes Mark Doty in his memoir, *Heaven’s Coast* (1996). “They’re nowhere to be found, and firmly here, now” (289).

Ghost tales are now most often associated with the occult, religion or fantasy, but this has not always been the case. As Emma Gee explains in *Mapping the Afterlife* (2020), afterlife narratives, especially those in works of Dante, Homer, Plato and others, heavily draw on scientific knowledge from the time (3), and there was a period in American history, roughly from the 1840s – 1920s when [Spiritualism, or a belief in communication with spirits from the afterlife, was mainstream](#).

Emerson’s opening of his wife’s coffin takes the lid off something which the western reader may now see as taboo. We also have to remember Emerson was writing during the mid 1800s, the American era of gothic novels and ghost stories, spiritualism and seances. If Emerson were writing fiction, we might see souls realized as nature spirits, or the dead reanimated. But Emerson, firmly rooted in the realm of nonfiction knowledge and ideas, spells out what he means by spirit in his essays. “We are all discerners of spirits,” he says in “The Over-Soul,” “The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after” (167-169).

Emerson’s ghosts manifest in the spaces where the intellect intersects with the natural world. As Robert D. Richardson, Jr. explains in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995) this is where Emerson had turned his thinking after he opened his wife’s coffin: the real relationships between the hard-and-fast and the otherworldly, ideas which would define the trajectory of his career (122-124). In his “Introduction to

Nature,” Emerson writes, “Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us... I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches” (9-11). In his essay, “Experience,” he writes,

All things swim and glimmer. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again... Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion... Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness: O so thin! –
But the definition of spiritual should be, *that which is its own evidence*. (249)

In other words, Emerson’s ghosts are both tangible and abstract, experienced during the moments of reflection and the process of learning, rather than made-up or as a result of delusions or imagination. They exist in things we all recognize as real (nature, art, inquiry, new thought) but at the same time are the very things that often give us pause and make us scratch our heads. His ghosts are thought-provoking spiritual matter rooted in the physical world, designed to illuminate and float in and out of our consciousness, and are neither fabricated nor are they metaphors.

As far as literature is concerned, the laws of nature apply in both fiction and nonfiction, but only to the extent the writer is able to paint a believable scenario. A fictional narrator telling a “true” ghost story is not the same as a nonfiction narrator. It’s understood that the fictional narrator and the ghost are both imagined. The truths revealed may be real, but the characters are not. In nonfiction, the narrator is real, the events are factual, and the ghost or ghosts are verifiable based on the narrator’s experience in the real world. Nonfiction ghosts occur during specific times and places, and they are recalled by the first-hand physical detail experienced by the narrator, whether there were witnesses or not. I also want to say that a nonfiction ghost story may even be more terrifying than a fictional story. Nonfiction promises to the reader: *this happened. This was real. This IS real.*

However—due to larger questions regarding the nature of facts, memory, an author’s credibility (and perhaps our shape-shifting cultural beliefs as well) there are few literary nonfiction ghost stories out there, and yet the field of literary nonfiction is ripe with narratives in which the writer was haunted by something or someone. Are these ghost stories? Yes, if the ghosts are visible to the reader whether the writer chooses to acknowledge them or not; no, if the story doesn’t in some way engage with the spirits of the dead.

If Emerson is right, that nonfiction ghosts show up by “the thing itself that is inquired after,” then it should come as no surprise that the ghost of Emerson’s protégé, Walt Whitman, shows up in Mark Doty’s *What Is the Grass* (2020). Grief and loss are familiar themes in Doty’s work, and he doesn’t shy away from ghosts: “Remembering is the work of the living... it involves the weight of all our dead, the ones we have known ourselves and the ones we know only from stories,” he writes in the opening pages of his memoir, *Heaven’s Coast* (5). Here, he outlines his own definition for a nonfiction ghost story, and at the end of the book, reflecting on the memory of his partner, Wally, Doty makes a connection between the wildness of animals and those of the dead, when he spots a coyote staring at him in the middle of the day:

He’s been with Wally, he’s come from Wally. I knew it as surely as I knew the lines of the poem. This apparition, my—ghost, was it? spirit animal? Real creature carrying the presence of my love? Perhaps it doesn’t matter. I’ve never seen one in the middle of the day before or since, and never been so frankly studied from the other side of wildness, from a world I cannot enter. The dead regard us, I think, as animals do, and perhaps that is part of their relationship; they want nothing from us; they are pure presence, they look back to us from a world we can’t begin to comprehend. I am going on, the gaze said, in a life apart from yours, a good life, a wild life, unbounded. (304)

Part literary criticism, part biography, part memoir, and part spiritual meditation, *What Is the Grass* is most definitely ghost story: Doty is haunted by Walt Whitman—both the man and his words—and through his precise, almost metaphysical deep dive into the nuances of Whitman’s work, Doty’s prose allows Whitman to emerge as an otherworldly presence on the page. Here, as in *Heaven’s Coast*, the concept of memory is the starting point, the invitation to commune with the dead:

... whatever becomes of us, surely every life creates echoes afterward, both in the physical world and in the intangible one,” he writes. “The dead reappear, in memory; I see something that reminds me of my mother (a silver bracelet embedded with a mosaic of turquoise, the kind of cracked or mossy flowerpots that appeared in her paintings) and some aspect of her affections, her interests, is with me now, forty years since she’s been gone. We know that energy cannot be destroyed, but goes shape-shifting through the world. (5)

But there’s more to this haunting than just memory. Whitman and Doty obviously never knew each other during Whitman’s lifetime (1819-1892) so Doty offers a slightly different, more expansive definition: “The dead persist audibly in language” (5).

This may be the broadest definition of a ghost story yet (which would render nearly any work by a deceased author or biography as a kind of ghost tale) but stay with me here for a moment, because Doty is onto something: It’s not just the words on the page, left unexamined, that bring spooky apparitions into view. It’s the *opening of the lid of that coffin*, digging deeper into the subject matter and haunting words filled with meaning which bring the dead author to life, and Doty achieves exactly that. Whitman’s poetry, “composes itself out of what decomposes,” Doty writes, “The words of the dead, the words of the old books, emerge here into new pattern and new life” (67).

Emerson would have agreed. In August of 1832, after he returned from his months-long pilgrimage to Europe after opening his wife’s coffin, he wrote to his Aunt Mary (an inspirational figurehead who frequently wore death shrouds and may have also planted the seeds for the coffin opening,

as detailed by Phillis Cole in *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (2002) and documented in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* where he uses the present tense to describe his own relationship with a dead author): “I am entering an acquaintance with Goethe who has just died. The Germans think there have been but three men of genius—Homer, Shakespeare, & Goethe. If I go into the country to books, I shall know him well, & you will come & board with Mother & me, & we will try him whether he deserves his niche” (113).

In using Whitman’s life and work as a jumping off point to intimately reflect on his own experiences, passions and sexuality, Doty transforms Whitman from a dead poet to an alive presence. It’s this deep inquiry, based on fact, experience, and sensual, physical detail, that brings Whitman into view.

And then something amazing happens. Three-quarters of the way through the book, following a couple of pages of steamy personal backstory infused with grief (“genitals were certainly enjoyed;” “of gay men of my age and his not so very many survived”) we soon find ourselves at Doty’s friend Frank’s apartment:

I would be hard pressed to describe any transition between what I saw first, which was my friend’s gray-bearded, strongly sculptured face, and what, after a moment, replaced it. It wasn’t Frank who looked at me then, but another man with short gray hair and beard, the same half-smile, but with the visionary dazzle of starlight in his eyes. I was, quite calmly, looking into the face of the Walt Whitman of 1856, the year of the Brooklyn daguerreotype, the picture in which he seems to be slowly and with a great inner radiance returning to earth from wherever it is he’s been. (173)

Here he is, the ghost of Walt Whitman, in a work of contemporary literary nonfiction, on page 173. In a sex scene, no less. Like the scene in *Heaven’s Coast* with the coyote, the image is as intense as it is enlightening. Whitman’s ghost is a visual representation of Emerson’s *the soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after*. The fact that Whitman’s ghost shows up in the narrative’s climax (!) and not in an introductory chapter is no accident. We would not have found Whitman to be as a credible and

enchanting ghost if he'd appeared earlier. The timing of Doty's reveal fits with the pacing of some of the world's most renowned ghost stories—the reader can sense Whitman's ghost lingering on the page earlier, but it isn't until *after* his ghost is fully revealed that we have that aha moment where fear meets disbelief meets shock meets recognition.

After I read this passage, I went back to read Doty's opening pages, just to make sure I hadn't missed Whitman's ghost in my first read, and of course I had. Like the (Henry) Jamesian ghost stories of earlier era, which often open with a scene of rapt listeners sitting fireside a la *Turn of the Screw* ("The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless...") (1) Doty, too, lets his reader know what is to come: "Does seeing an apparition come with a responsibility? Gift or summons, what might this echo of Walt Whitman want of me? There may be many answers to that question, but I'd begin with this one, the same thing he wanted from us when he was living: company" (6).

In the ghost hunting shows on TV, investigators spend a lot of time interviewing experts, analyzing video footage and investing in fancy equipment in order to prove their ghosts exist. Doty skips this entire charade, as he should, because any further investigation of the "how" of Whitman's ghost would immediately render his ghost into "true account" variety, which is not the purview of literary nonfiction: "It's pointless, at this juncture, to try to defend or explain myself. For whatever reason, through whatever means, I saw what I saw, and allowed that face to look directly into my own until I couldn't. Then I closed my eyes, and when I opened them he was gone" (177).

But Doty doesn't leave us here, wondering what's real. Like Emerson, he circles back on his topic, asking even deeper questions, and allows us to look for the answers within ourselves:

Where does one go, for proof of anyone's sexual experience? Or proof of apparitions? Despite the advent of queer theory and a flowering of progressive literary study, there are a troop of Whitman biographers and scholars—as well as Whitman himself!—who will tell you Whitman was not queer. They are wrong, and he was lying. How can I claim this so firmly? As I have just told

you, I have been to bed with the man, something you are unlikely to hear another living speaker say. (177)

Here I find myself smiling: Do other biographers and writers besides Doty go to bed with their subjects' ghosts? If I continue my inquiry with Emerson, or any other dead author for that matter, will their ghosts show up for me? I say this in jest, yes, but like Emerson and Doty, I'm also not alone in recognizing a kind of spiritual alchemy which happens when our deep love for an author's work influences our own, especially when it comes to matters of the psyche.

While I was studying Emerson during my MFA, a faculty member, Susan Cheever, who, in her own writings had dug up dirt on Emerson and his cadre of followers in *American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work* (2007), wrote to me after I'd submitted an annotation: "I'm delighted about your romance with Emerson. He's not the easiest man to love, but, as you have discovered, loving him provides some rich rewards." I was taken aback at first (romance? Love?) but after reading Doty's memoir, I began to see what a nonfiction ghost can do: intersect and illuminate the shadows between the haunting, unfinished business of the living and the wisdom of the dead. For Doty, the ghost of Walt Whitman shows up not just to seek company or allow his words to live on, but to encourage others to come out of the closet: "...my insistence on the felt understanding of Whitman's gay readers is no joke. He infuses his description of men's bodies with such palpable longing that anyone sympathetic to such desires cannot miss his intent. Gay men mostly grow up in hiding even to this day" (177).

Our relationships with our ghosts may be even more intimate than the relationships we have with ourselves. They know more than we know; see what we might prefer to be unseen. For this reason, a writer might find herself in the midst of telling a ghost story when she thought she was merely excavating the bones around a family history, or, in the case of Joan Didion, she might write her ghost tales in such a way

to circumnavigate some of the thornier issues in nonfiction I've outlined earlier. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) she writes of her deceased husband, "I needed to be alone so he could come back," but she also holds firmly to commonly-held ideas around believability and grief as derangement, letting her reader know that she's not about to dip into mysticism or theories concerning the afterlife. Instead, Didion's ghost sightings are brief glimmers into what haunts her: "I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive" (35).

This is where we see the ghost of Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne: in the margins between Didion's thoughts. Didion is clever at hiding him, because surely, she doesn't want her reader to label her as a kook. But he *is* haunting her. This is a fact Didion both clearly acknowledges and denies, giving equal if not more space to the examination of what she calls her disordered thinking. His ghost emerges in the spaces where the language teeters between extremes: alone so she could be with him; allowing others to think he was dead when he's clearly alive in her thoughts. He's in every memory, and even as Didion attempts to tuck away what she calls her "delusionary thinking, the omnipotent variety," he shows up in the periphery: "I need in the dream to discuss this with John. Or was it even a dream?" (162). The magical part of Didion's thinking is the part which has summoned the supernatural ("was it even a dream?") and the clear-headed, research, science-affirming and journalistic side is the one that keeps her ghost in check, firmly in the realm of nonfiction: "Didn't the survivors of near-death experiences always mention "the white lights"? It occurs to me as I write that this "white lights," usually presented dippily (evidence of afterlife, higher power), is in fact precisely consistent with the oxygen deficit that occurs as blood flow to the brain decreases" (156).

We see the ghost of John Gregory Dunne in what's left behind: the shoes that Didion is unable to give away because he might come back for the shoes; the list of characters who had died in the novel he'd just sent to press, *Nothing Lost*: "Why was the pencil so faint, I wondered. Why would he use a pencil that barely left a mark. *When did he begin seeing himself as dead?*" (147). This last line in italics is perhaps most

telling, not so much for the questions it poses regarding premonitions and destiny, but because Didion switches to past continuous tense: *When did he begin*. The past continuous describes an action or situation that began in the past and is *still going on* in the present. She doesn't say, *he began* or *he must have begun*. It's *begin seeing*. And what does he see? *himself as dead*. There's an uncanny, almost meta sense of dualism here: Dunne alive, picturing himself dead, and Didion picturing her dead husband, referred to in the present, seeing himself dead. Not "saw" but *seeing*. The reader cannot help think of "seeing the dead" here in all its various incarnations, and even though Didion doesn't come right out and say she saw his ghost, she's clearly spooked. *Dead* and *seeing* are used more as a state of being here rather than an action or a process.

And what does Dunne's ghost reveal? There's much under the surface regarding their marriage, but what strikes me as most beguiling is that Dunne seems to be in direct conversation with Didion's ideas and beliefs when it comes to magical thinking: "I did not believe in the resurrection of the body but I still believed that given the right circumstances he would come back" (150), and it's this kind of dichotomy where the prose suspends two opposites where I can almost see Dunne flickering above her typewriter, wagging his finger with a smirk, saying, "*Hello! I'm right over here.*"

But Didion doesn't go there. In walking her literary tightrope, where she dances with magical ideas in one hand and keeps them tucked away in the realm of grief-as-derangement in the other, she avoids the kind of shame and loss of credibility which can extend beyond being seen as merely "out there" or slightly deranged. Again, the genre is evolving and much has changed in terms how we perceive the parameters of nonfiction since *The Year of Magical Thinking* was published. But questions regarding death, the afterlife, and messages from "the other side" remain. After my husband died and I went searching for nonfiction ghosts as a way to validate my own experiences, I read the passage where Didion writes that she needed to be alone that first night so her husband could come back, and found myself asking, ("thinking like a child" as she says): Why didn't he come back? I now know this question is beside the point. Of course he came back. The ghost of John Gregory Dunne looms on every page.

Didion also recalls an interview with Teresa Heinz Kerry when she talked about the sudden death of her first husband: “After the plane crash that killed John Heinz, she had felt very strongly that she “needed” to go back to Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh, not Washington, was the place to which he might come back” (37-38). My husband died in 2003, Didion’s book came out in 2005 and I don’t recall ever hearing the Teresa Heinz interview, so I wouldn’t ponder these questions until later, but I refuse to believe I’m the only one who had a husband “come back.” Instead, think the dead have been with us the entire time. “We couldn’t keep the dead out of the present if we wanted to,” writes Doty. “They’re nowhere to be found, and yet firmly here, now.”

Ghost hunting shows on TV and a long, storied history of ghosts in literature, the arts, and religion aside, I personally don’t know if our western culture is ready to accept that a husband coming back as a “real” ghost can even be a possibility. Regardless, we remain haunted by this possibility. Maybe that’s what makes a good ghost story: the not knowing. Even as I make the claim that Emerson’s writings are perhaps the first American literary nonfiction ghost stories because of his mixing of reality with spiritual matter, he’s not *really* putting his ghosts on full display. Like Didion, he tucks them away in the margins, cloaked in the type of sentences designed to give the reader pause and a brief taste of the intangible.

While I want to argue that Doty’s argument, “the dead persist in audibly in language,” is enough to make our ghosts “real” enough to be believable, for the modern American writer, the rules of science are still a formidable and credible deterrent. Didion certainly bumps up against them, and I’ve struggled for years to find a way to write about my own ghosts that wouldn’t plant me in woo-woo land, but Emerson, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and strong proponent of Transcendentalism (which places spiritual matters in the same frame as nature and humanity) obviously felt at home marrying the two in his philosophical writings. So, too, does Jo Ann Beard, in her essay, “The Fourth State of Matter” in *Boys of*

My Youth (1998) only her ghosts are sneakier than Emerson's. Only a writer as skilled as Beard can pull off a nonfiction ghost story as spine-tingling as this one and not reveal her ghost until the very last line.

The detached, detailed prose is key. The references to science, especially a kind of science that seems especially "out there" (space physics) places the essay into an otherworldly realm. And then there's the subject matter: her dying dog, her ruined marriage, and the death of her co-workers, who were space physicists at the University of Iowa. In stitching together these three threads with equal weight, the hauntings unfold with the spooky precision.

The opening scene straddles the line between dream and reality: "The collie wakes me up about three times a night, summoning me from a great distance as I row my boat through a dim, complicated dream... the collie's sleep is "ghoulish... eyes partially open, teeth exposed..." (74 – 78). The reader soon learns that Beard has a "vanished husband" who is "neither here nor there." Rather than have us wondering if he's indeed a real ghost or 'like' a ghost, she clarifies: "he's reduced himself to a troubled voice on the telephone three or four times a day" (75).

Her detachment builds tension. As a narrator, Beard maintains just enough distance to keep her reader guessing, while firmly grounding her scenes in the reality of her experience: "I'm fine about the vanished husband's boxes stored in the spare bedroom. For now the boxes and the phone calls persuade me that things could turn around at any moment" (76). It's this uncanny in-between state of their relationship that allows her husband's ghost to emerge. (And he's alive! This is another one of my points, although a minor one: people do not necessarily need to be deceased in order to be perceived as "dead" to the living.)

When work is introduced, Beard paints a mood that seems both achingly dull and eerily normal (like the collie, like her marriage) with a halo of darkness and mystery (like the collie, like her marriage). The reader can't *quite* figure out what's going on. In the foreground, Beard almost renders herself as a kind of ghost, present and yet not fully there, but whose thoughts hint at the bigger picture. When her

colleague Christoph Goertz is introduced, Beard tells us, “I spend more time with Chris than I ever did with my husband.” Their working relationship is collaborative and tender. He brings gifts back from trips; he lets her work an irregular schedule so she can have time for her own projects. Beard hints at a kind of dualism in the first scene where we see the two of them together: they are in a conference room drinking coffee. Behind Chris’s head is a “chalk drawing of a hip, professorial man holding a coffee cup. It was a collaborative effort; I drew the man and Chris framed him, using brown chalk and a straightedge. The two-dimensional man and the three dimensional man stared at me intently” (79). In telling any ghost tale, the pacing of the reveal is critical. The reader doesn’t yet know that Chris will be murdered and Beard will be haunted by the outline of his presence, so this isn’t so much of a premonition as much as a foreshadowing; these are the kinds of details that set the stage for the ghost before he fully arrives in scene.

The story unfolds, not in chronological order as Beard experienced it the time, but with new facts and information she’d learned later, or with events she knows are still to come infused into the narrative, which both increases the accuracy of the piece while also making the story even more haunting. Beard writes the entire essay in present tense, which also gives the feeling of time standing still. Gang Lu, a minor character student Beard had introduced earlier, “works on a letter to his sister in China. He’s going to kill himself. *You yourself should not be too sad about it, for at least I have found a few traveling companions to accompany me to the grave*” (88 – 89).

In the penultimate scene, as everything comes to a head the night after the murders (Beard’s vanished husband returns, he’s there briefly before she walks him out), the language is both grounded and ethereal, casting an imagery-filled warmth and lightness on her current and future ghosts: “I get his coat and follow him out into the cold November night. There are stars and stars and stars. The sky is full of dead men, drifting in the blackness like helium balloons. My mother floats past in a hospital gown, trailing tubes. I go back inside to where the heat is” (95).

Like Didion, whose story focuses on the notion that her husband's ghost might come back, feeling that first night that she "needed to be alone so he could come back," Beard's prose echoes a similar sentiment, but doesn't call it out directly. After she returns inside, there's a moment of foreshadowing: "After all the commotion the living room feels cavernous and dead. A branch scrapes against the house and for a brief instant I feel a surge of hope. They might have come back." (95) For a flicker, the reader thinks, as Beard must have, that the dead have returned, but it's not the *literal* dead she evokes, but ghosts of her previous life. (The above passage refers to the squirrels.)

The last scene is dream-like, and like Doty's encounter with the coyote, Beard's prose engages with the dead not by questioning what is real and what isn't, but through an almost Emersonian inquiry into the wild frontier of the unknown. If you aren't paying attention to every single brush stroke, you might miss Chris's ghost when he appears, in the very last line:

I've propped myself so I'll be able to see when dawn starts to arrive. For now there are still planets and stars. Above the black branches of a maple is the dog star, Sirius, my personal favorite. The dusty rings of Saturn. Io, Jupiters's moon.

When I think I can't bear it for one more minute I reach down and nudge her gently with my dog-arm. She rises slowly, faltering, and stands over me in the darkness. My peer, my colleague. In a few hours the world will resume itself, but for now we're in a pocket of silence. We're in the plasmopause, a place of equilibrium where the forces of the Earth meet the forces of the sun. I imagine it as a place of silence, where the particles of dust stop spinning and hang motionless in deep space.

Around my neck is the stone he brought me from Poland. I hold it out. *Like this?* I ask. Shards of fly wings, suspended in amber.

Exactly, he says. (96)

It's almost a magic trick, what Beard has pulled off, but if you think about what's involved in *real* magic, i.e. card tricks or bunnies pulled out of hats, what's at play is less of a mystery once you learn the step-by-step art of creating an illusion. In three short, highly-packed paragraphs, Beard has distilled the entire choreography of the piece into a kind of ghostly poetry: planets, stars, plasma, dogs, stones, and ... wings.

That's when Chris's ghost appears. And then, poof—he's gone. Period. End of essay, no more inquiry, leave it up to the reader to wonder and linger on those lines.

Does it matter if Chris's ghost *actually* spoke to Beard? Or Doty's partner came back in the form of a coyote? Or John Gregory Dunne in the faint traces of pencil? Or my husband's ghost whispering in my ear the night he died? Though I'm sure there are plenty of nonfiction proponents who will say these questions should be answered, I respectfully disagree. The spelling out of the answers is precisely the type of exercise that can cause a text to lose its magic and spell it has on its reader.

If the job of the ghost is to illuminate and shed new light on the past (Didion, Doty) or offer a means of engaging actively with the spirit of the present (Emerson, Beard), Tiffany Briere's ghosts engage with the past, present *and* future. In her essay "Vision," which appears in *The Best American Essays 2015*, even the idea of ghosts she presents transcends the current western thinking around ghosts and the metaphysical.

When Briere's ghost shows up, we find her in a science lab: "I'm isolating a brain, facing away from the grad student, when I feel a hand on my back. Fingers graze my skin, a firm palm presses against my shoulder blade." Briere narrows her sensory detail so her reader can feel the presence of the hand. While the hand is on her back, Briere takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, letting her reader know that the day's work has been a struggle and she senses the touch as both a reassurance and a release. The grad student is an attractive guy; there's chemistry between them. But then she turns around and sees he's across

the room. Impossibly, the hand remains on her back a moment longer. Briere tells us the hand will visit her again: at dawn on the day of her wedding and again the morning she gives birth. “What does the hand hope to show me?” she writes, and in the next paragraph, we learn that Briere and this grad student will soon wed.

In setting up the scene this way, with brief flashes forward and back to show context and to keep the reader centered, the presence is felt before it’s made “unreal.” There’s just one small transition between the narrator’s experience of the hand on her back, and what is clearly impossible:

When I turn around, I’m ready for whatever he has in mind.

But he’s across the room. And it’s clear from his posture, the way he’s settled in his chair, that he hasn’t been on his feet for some time.” (47)

There is some imagining in this scene, but it’s the musing variety, very much grounded in the narrator’s realized experience, and Briere has already introduced the reader to the topic of ghosts in the first few lines:

For three nights my mother hasn’t slept. Since her cousin died, his spirit has visited her each night for hours at a time. He appears from the waist up on the north wall of her bedroom, facing her directly, blinking but not speaking. He doesn’t frighten her; on the contrary, she hopes that one of these nights he will claim her, escort her to the other side, where he now resides. She prepares me for this possibility. (45)

The distancing here is key. In Briere telling us her mother is preparing her, she’s also telling us this is a ghost story. We don’t yet know if this is her mother’s ghost story, or Briere’s, or a larger one—in many ways it’s all of these and more, we soon realize, when she reveals the inner layers of what she means when she says “possibility,” which are rooted both in our current Western-defined limitations around the word, and beyond:

No one has ever spoken to my husband about visions or the ubiquity of the dead. He is of German descent, not West Indian, but over time he's learned that this intimacy with the dead—for him, unimaginable and unreal—is woven into the fabric of my family. He's a scientist for a reason, drawn to black-and-white explanations of the world. But there, in my mother's bed he holds her hand, willing to consider all things possible. (46)

And here, it's almost as if Briere's husband—the Western nonbeliever of the unimaginable, the scientist, the inquirer—who is now open to possibility, is also holding the reader's hand, showing the way. *We are all discerners of spirits*, says Emerson. Ghosts are only scary if our families and cultures choose to see them that way. If we just widen the lens a bit, we, too, might be able to see our ghosts in all their various incarnations, and begin to understand what they have to say.

Mystery drives the heartbeat of a ghost story perhaps more than anything, and yet the job of nonfiction is to ensure there aren't too many elements that remain mysterious. “Nonfiction is a moral exercise, an attempt to struggle with the world and its contents ethically and imaginatively, within the limits the writer can perceive and then push against, writes Alexander Chee in “On Fiction Vs. Nonfiction, Briefly.” “But it is a struggle with ‘what is’... Your work functions like a photograph conducted in X-Ray, or ultraviolet, or infrared—you try to show something you can see that hasn't been described but is there.”

What makes a nonfiction ghost so tricky (and perhaps scary, for the writer) is that the impossible must be described in such a way that is not only in accordance with our generally accepted standards of nonfiction, but the writing also has to transcend those standards while still maintaining a strong foothold on reality. And how does something feel real? Physical detail. Lived experience. We trust Emerson and Didion thanks to their intellects; their ghosts exist in the margins of thoughts and in nature, respectively, because that is how each of them experience(d) the world as they knew or know it. Doty is more of a visual and sensory-oriented writer, one who sees his mother's ghost in mosaics and cracked flowerpots, so

it makes sense that Whitman's ghost would show up in scene. We also know, from such modern-day books such as *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015) that unresolved ancestral events, grief and trauma (to name just a few of the things that may fall into the category of what we consider to be among "the things that haunt us") are felt and known with our bodies as well as our minds.

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