

COLE SWENSEN

Gravesend



University of California Press Berkeley Los Angeles London

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To
Hilton Juul Swensen, 1899–2001,
Scharlotte Swensen, 1905–1999,
and
Charles Clemens Swensen, 1928–2010

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Gravesend

ONE

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A GHOST?

Echo Body

I sat on an edge and a gate clicked shut and the world thus recalled
a man who walked into a churchyard, if a man closed his hand, you'd
call it a fist, but that was not the fence immense, the single note
upon note that breaks in the sun because what walked on
walked so lightly across the burning stones that we gave in

If

the horse was white and the green hill opened out an animal the lamp
of any landscape where the angle of incident light is an index and on the grey ridge

on the other side any animal so largely domestic a large white dog, for instance
coming out of the sea alone would be alarming with its head in your lap like a window

Sometimes the Ghost

Sometimes the ghost arrives before the body is gone and the breath which will one day white, there will be walls, or illness may be the cause and cause the ghost to crawl up inside, a bright

illness, when the eyes go, and the ghost walks around looking like you, and we talk quietly, and she says things I remember your saying, but at the time they were out of context and made no sense, and now I look around the room that fits. And I walk across the room with my eyes closed

Etymology

Ghost: *gast*, as in soul-sprite, breath-life, sliced wreath of a waning break it rears
from all over has been called the back-comer the night-child the guest

of lack-print and glass-phoid of shatter-this all the way back unto 1385
when the word was first connected to what wanders off from the body an aerial scarring

on the surface most words for ghost are pieces of mica that carefully layered
will make a window out of fire. It's cold and the faces at the window

do what faces usually do they open onto a genetic history
that looks up suddenly and it's the eyes everyone says you can't say that's not alive

A Ghost

erodes the line between being and place becomes the place of being time and so
the house turns in the snow is why a ghost always has the architecture of a storm

The architect tore down room after room until the sound stopped. A ghost is one
among the ages at the edge of a cliff empty sails on the bay even when a ship

or the house moves off in fog asks you out loud to let the stranger in

He Who Was

was an ordinary man who turned to light a stove who shadow-flew-on-wall
will nothing there awake like anybody else who, picking up the mail
and so the shattered half— I watched a man walking down a hill
or in the garden of the dark watched I his veil and saw within
who now straightened up with the shears in one hand and the zinnias
in the other the corner of the eye is an enormous room

Varieties of Ghost

Phantom shade specter wraith haint and then the *revenant* that
who has come back who is precisely what fond emptiness that the errant is

the error that faces you and is not so empty, now it turns back and faces you
that remembered you that forgot to say something was forgotten because the day

arrayed itself in overlapping screens a superimposition of scenes in which
someone a century later crossing a street turns around too quickly and there you are

a rip in the air through which the endless endlessness that replaces us calmly stares

Ajar

He emerged from a doorway, she came out of the mirror, he simply appeared, I turned around and there she was on the hearth, the carpet, the stairs. Ghosts always look like they're alone which is to say, are seen one by one, and so the field extends right there in the room or a vast plateau among wind, holding out her hand, she came in from the garden and held out her hand as if to say take it, pointing to the small object therein, which turned out to be a tooth

The Ghost Is in Itself

a boundary, is that which distinguishes the past from the after which is simply
the fact that a ghost itself can never be older than the fact that a dead
child is instantly older than any of us will ever be more widely a tendency
to recur, which is a kind of clock that stopped the endless circling
that traces a circle there in the dust on the floor where sunlight sketches
an hourglass was on again, the *revenant*, but no time only seems circular to those
indentured to the sun something about gravity that while a long line stretches out
the errant of the heart you know they cannot swerve or perhaps the notion of cyclical time
is based on the spherical earth if you lived anywhere else you'd never see them again

The End of Antiquity

There was a certain point at which the story changed from that of the living who traveled to the underworld and back and became instead one of the dead

who came from the land of the dead and could not return is a grieving. Why are we frightened by doorways; why is there a fear especially made for the sound

of a door or a year or a stare Fear is an aperture but also a ligature. Something deep inside the house swings shut and they start to describe it as something else

According to Scripture

Or at times against its will, the ghost is called back, even wrenched, from its treading-space by a voice, don't even think of it, maybe hurtled toward a light inside of which a certain play of grief and sand had been trying to forget as had the ghost in 1 Samuel 28:13 who said "I have been torn from the touch I am blind, and I flinch and had forgotten how the world in which you live is so limited in its range of visible light"

More Miracula

They say upon the death a brighter than the sun and closed it like a mind
but a sky fell down in gold made the sky of rope and she climbed slowly up
to everything in sight this is the story of a saint is broken raking is raked up and torn

The storm was my fault

and put the lantern down.

Sister Tortgith claimed she saw a woman she couldn't name rising into the sky one morning, and three days later the Mother Superior died; it was that simple, and as she herself lay dying three years later, the same woman appeared before her and, standing at the open window, negotiated with her for her "date of release." There was a bit of an argument, at least it sounded like that to the chronicler, who, granted, heard only one side, but it was just a short time later that Tortgith was "delivered from the bonds and infirmity of the flesh."

Going Home

there came unto him who said that his horse was one among the left
was walking down in a shroud of bees would make a man

crawl home and hide inside his eyes one William of Glos
the horse still alight said, and you without heir said, you

who harbor here this story is told in many versions
and though the place remains the same, the century shifts as if a man

slipped on his own name and became a repetition in tongues

The Hellequin's Hunt

Mist lay in the valley as we set out shroud around and all along the river
started taking shape a phalanx of approach suddenly agape while wholly in our sight

we saw And here the chronicler visibly shaking though questioned for days
could not stop crying, claiming they passed us in the forest a contingency of corpses

hundreds and hundreds strong and the din of their wailing the cacophony of armor
and others in chains as they might have been in ages an army of entirety

winding endlessly through the woods with no enemy but eternity throughout
the Middle Ages armies of ghosts were heard on stormy nights pounding

their spectral steeds through a wind of howling dogs led by the deadest of them all
and followed by the thousands it was a time in which a ghost could be

indeterminate in number and in crowds swept across whole counties awash
that look from a distance like fog though some say no

God said a lightning strike

counts every thing alive

and arrives

in a long winding shroud

of rhythmic footsteps wrapped and wrapping all in a white instant of insistent lime

The Gesta

But when they saw the wound but when was full of hounds a pack, grounded
can trace a grain of salt back to its star that could not be staunched

was an arrow thrown by hand and though they'd never seen him before
they knew his name and so the town was saved. Before the modern age, the ghost story

was not a genre as such but was something that accrued not without alarm
yet with a kind of trust she took the wound without the arm and wore it as a past

Who Only Living

lived alone an image held, owned, and so *on we thought*
of the image as it solely presented the soul in perpetuity fifteenth century
and because he was invisible, a tracery and they in the circle felt
on the backs of their necks and the signs made of hands copied the circle
which prevented the fire from reaching the mind the all-of-a-flying, there
in the image of a man alive who nonetheless died all over our hands

is more often the shape of something material a dog, a bird, a friend
which is to say to say 'invisible' means not to recognize for sight is always second
to a subtler precedent and were he to look different now, intermittently, to
say you would have known him is always ambiguous a grey scale
that one might thwart across a hearth yet to undertake is to raise the body up
a friend, a bird, at first someone else called out and gestured if
like rain on a lake, like wind can never be painted is constrained
to its effects on leaves on trees on things in the world

The Ghost Story

began as a collision between what the Church said and what everybody saw
in the sky between the trees if a cloud could have taken on

legible form you could have lost your way it could have followed you home

And so the concept of a ghost was itself something that returned that drifted back
from an earlier system of belief for had it been known that the dead are not at peace

what would Christ have said had held his children in a silver fever for the voyage
to death was a bridge and not a river with a gate that swings one way in patient only

one lonely moment in which if the moment falters, alters you almost sever
but the Church fathers could never quite convince them of this

History

In Augustine's time it was more likely the living who reached out to touch
nothing, which broken-hearted the dead were thought to know everything
suspended in the middle of the story she would wake up stretching
her arms out so far they would hurt and still the dead remain
indeterminate and cold and Augustine had to tell them no
and God is slow and the face you see at the window
is your own from a long way off which is what it's like
to be dead. Augustine went so far as to write an essay titled *How to Help the Dead*
which held a candle in the burning hand as the cradle went up in snow

What Ghosts

want has greatly changed across the ages. They used to want forgiveness
or understanding how the prayers worked down into the interstices; they once

stood beside insomniacs speaking softly almost chanting bring me
who's demanding another entry but our own ghosts, the recent ones

don't ask much they just waver on the verges, a doorsill can empty them
and the room beyond they do not want and this is the cause of great pain

Interview Series 1

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Were you frightened?

Have you ever seen a ghost?

... It depends on what you mean

by seen

(pause)

there were a few times

or maybe somewhere in between

who passed through a doorway, always the same. My wife felt it too. No, it's not that I *didn't* see him; what I'm calling into question here is the notion of seeing.

Were you frightened?

No, it was more alarming than threatening—the latter is sheerly physical; whereas, the former also engages the intellect.

I'm going to ask as many people as possible in the coming week whether they've ever seen a ghost, and if so, if it frightened them.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Well, yes... just glimpses—something out of the corner of my eye, something crossing a room; I didn't exactly see it, and it was oddly colorless.

Were you frightened?

No, not particularly.

Initially, I was thinking that 60 to 70% of the people I asked would say that they had seen a ghost; so far, two people, two yeses, so my statistics are overflowing at 100%. And yet, would you have thought it, just looking around the room? Would you have thought that over 70% of these people who look so untroubled have ever seen anything that they couldn't in any way explain? They don't look like it to me. And do they speak of it? And will they if I ask them? And if they do speak of it, will they start to "look like it"?

Have you ever seen a ghost?

No. No . . . but . . . hmmm . . . *seen*—it’s a complex word. What I mean is that I’ve perceived presences. Yes, people I’ve known, people I’ve loved very much; you can feel them there, still with you. You can talk to them. No, no, of course they never answer.

Do they frighten you?

No, of course not; I love them.

I asked these three people about their hesitancy around the words “see” and “seen,” and one replied that it’s a problem of language, which is to say, a ghost cannot be spoken. Perhaps we all see them; they’re all around us, but can’t be shared. They’re a certain secret, like all the unsayable. Remains a private searcher in a corner. Like true love, which can never, though not through lack of effort, be stated. A secret, a real one, is necessarily something you tried so hard (and failed) (in every imaginable way) to say: I really don’t think I believe in ghosts, but

once I was sleeping downstairs in a house, and in the bedroom above me, all night long, I heard the woman who lived there pacing back and forth, and I thought, oh what a shame, Nina must be worried; she’s not sleeping, and in the morning, I mentioned it, saying that I hoped everything was all right, and she said, oh yes, I slept just fine—that was our ghost you heard.

“Our.” It’s a personal thing, an alliance, and precious, and private: a ghost is a form of privacy. And no, I wasn’t frightened because by then it was over, and it didn’t need believing.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

No, sorry (real apology in the tone). Once I thought I did, but it was the morning after a night of telling ghost stories, so, really . . . What did it look like? Oh, it was just the way the clothes had been thrown over an open closet door, and there was this strange face on top. The face? Well, yes, that was the part that didn’t quite fit.

Did it frighten you?

Very much.

It's meaningless to ask if ghosts are real—they have an effect in the world. They work. Can you say that the fright was real and yet that what caused it was not?

Have you ever seen a ghost?

No.

Does that frighten you?

We tell ghost stories because we need to grieve in proper names, and we need to pass it on with the name released. So most are signed "Anonymous." And most of us never mention the ghosts we see.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

No, never. *Sigh*. Who knows? Sometimes I think they're all around us; I mean, so all around us they're simply the background. We don't see air either, or wind. We live in them.

Which makes of them houses, which is why, increasingly throughout the centuries, it's houses that are haunted, and all houses are haunted (we all dream of becoming something that someone else could inhabit), which gives us a place to live.

And yes, throughout all time.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Yes, a few. They were all in houses.

Were you frightened?

who came with them crossing a street of things passing	who then within, could slip it's particularly a man driving too fast	as you watch out a window or in in the proximity answered
--	--	---

with a body like water, a light

grey said to have a center

Have I ever seen a ghost? Yes, just last week. It was in a mirror; he was climbing the stairs. Of course, I swung around, and of course, there was nothing there.

Mirrored share. In what falls, what calls and in what state does the stain of the reflected you cheated you stared no, I and was left there

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Yes, I see them all the time. They have nothing to do with death—they're often quite alive, often on a train, or even in the bus, someone I know perfectly well, someone I know is hundreds, or even thousands, of miles away, will get on the train and look right through me.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

No, no, no! (laughing, hands up in "stop" position, quite briefly, all lightly) No.

Though

I have sensed

that I was staying with a friend and the *Bible* disappeared

that the window turned black where touched by the hand

that I heard all night the bolt being drawn

that I sang

Have you ever seen a ghost?

I was once shown around a medieval church by a very kind, very elderly clergyman, and when I mentioned him to the woman in the church's gift shop, she said, "Oh him again! He's been dead for years; I do so wish he'd give up."

No, I've never seen one, but my husband has—a distraught woman in a bright red dress running along the balcony of an empty theater—she raced headlong into the night-watchman and passed right through him, who never even saw her.

No, I've never seen one, but I've heard one. He'd knock on the ceiling and rant in Latin. Was I frightened? No, but I got very tired of it.

In fact, ghosts are more often something heard, either as in "I've never seen one, but my brother has, and told me about it" or "It depends upon what you mean by 'seeing'— for instance, I once walked into an empty house and heard someone pacing all night long. I once heard a house and it sounded like someone else.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Well, not *seen*, but once as a child I answered the phone and my grandfather said hello and asked to speak to my mother. I went to get her but she refused to answer because he was dead.

Walking Through

I was walking through my grandfather called it was a long way across he said
I ran like mad it was his I knew the house was alone I knew the face that held
had opened the door I had known I had wanted on hearing his own and ran
back up the hill as I slammed the door and then I slammed the door

A ghost is a hearing is a calling and every gesture that builds the pressure
that then through unknowing becomes in pieces the inner ether so larger
grows the mansion and larger grows the wind, undid, and the child who ran
up the hill is an older man telling a story that is simply a story he lived

A Face

is always a ghost it's what we lost on a ship or forest or Everest or once
every face is the ghost of an instant. Behind every face other faces pass

like actors behind a screen like time, they go from right to left like time
they're heading west. Will one along a crowded road become or seem to be

all of them, and they unfold; a face is lined with and within its own
dawn now and in particular, the eyes far from being windows on the soul

are handed down and must be worn exactly as received and must be returned

Toward the End

of the 17th century the fine white hand became a category of ghost all its own
floating, it formed almost a cornerstone keystone deployed

and precisely hovering at the base of the throat that vulnerable notch etched
in air is where it thrives, arriving with all its vaults exposed it was a woman's hand

greatly elongated we never wanted, etc. up to the elbow and very rarely
the entire woman followed, floating across the room two-thirds of them known

to their percipients holding a glass of water or mirror or the hand died alone

The Beginnings of the Modern Era

It wasn't until the ghost story became a genre that ghosts became strangers
denied as they were by a Romantic fragrance so stylized it found itself poised
on the tip of a letter opener and the man holding it in his hand
silhouetted from the back on a promontory over a crevasse, which makes
his sister die of music or the ghost is reduced to an overpowering smell
of the sea and only she can hear it: what we've inherited fletcher of tongues
thin in the wind who blinded by now a ghost in fingers is touching them empty
of all its burning And we claim we never knew them living which gets lost in living
and thus the phaeton stopped to pick him up and went on to plunge over the cliff
just as it had done in all its lost every night for the past fifty years
the ghost ship the phantom train the cathedral fear
and how right we are to claim it isn't ours though it leaves them stranded
or we abandon or we, a screw in a door nailed shut. It isn't our fault

Fairy Tale

It is wrong said the ghost to be astonished at anything as everything
is identical given the right angle and sometimes the ghost

steps out from behind a tree and the wolves go away. She sat at the edge
of the playground and finished the story: “The bird flew up into the rafters

and landed there looking almost natural” Sometimes a forest
replaces the house but it should not be confused with the children

and the ghost should not be mistaken for snow though
he will tell you that is not what I meant to do to you

TWO

HOW DID GRAVESEND GET ITS NAME?

Ghost Stories

Defoe's Story

It took place in London at the end of the 17th century—a man was spending the evening at home, thinking often of a friend of his, a woman who was very ill, worrying about her, hoping she would live, when there was a knock on the door, and she entered, looking fine, thriving in fact, and sat down in a normal way and began a normal conversation, though she seemed a little more serious than usual until he began to cry, at which she continued quietly, discussing things of the soul, aspects of time, and he began to sob, and she continued speaking quietly, as he sobbed and sobbed, and when he finally looked up she was gone.

This story is not unusual and belongs to a subgenre in which the dead person seems to drop in on a few old friends on the way out, giving no indication that he or she has died, but stays and speaks, saying the clear water at the bottom of my hand will make a turn and my hand will go bottomless like a mirror forgets my face at the slightest glance there was a man standing beside

the clear water pooled in the rock beneath a tree. The bright leaves tore up the light you would have seen that he was part of the light and asked him to help me climb down

Le Fanu's Story

Sheridan Le Fanu offers a variation on this story in which the whole family hears a carriage arrive late at night, just at the time that (they later learn) their older daughter has died miles away. Even the dogs start barking, and they all clearly hear the folding down of the carriage stairs, but when they open the door, the courtyard is empty, and the dogs recoil in fear. So that the sight

of anyone in an unexpected place so that the voice now traveling alone out on its own
on a quiet day I saw a friend I knew to be in Japan I once saw my sister on a train

Sometimes it's only a strong resemblance, and you wonder if the person in question hasn't
had a close call, crossing the street with an absent mind, or walked out of a building just
moments before it blew up. Caught a cab on the corner & never knew. It happens every
day. We are made

in a thin thread or of the line incised into the pane which may be only
a photograph she said, whenever I look at a photograph, I see not the man who died
years ago but the one who will one day as he's simply looking out the window

James' Story

In Henry James' version, an unnamed narrator discovers she has two good friends who've had the same experience—a woman whose father came to her in a gallery in Italy as he was dying in New York, and a man whose mother showed up in his rooms in Cambridge just after she'd died. Determined that her two similarly-gifted friends should meet, she makes numerous plans, but oddly, something always comes up to thwart them. Finally, after she has become engaged to the male friend, our narrator decides that she really must arrange this meeting, so she fixes up something so simple that it cannot fail. However, at the last minute, she finally gets it: these two are destined to fall in love—there's really no other possibility—and so she herself, and through subterfuge, prevents this last attempt. Last because, by sheer coincidence, her female friend dies that night. In the morning, overcome with guilt and remorse, the woman tells her lover what she has done, but he declares, "That's not possible! She came to my rooms just before midnight!" The woman insists that it must have been her ghost, while the man insists that she was alive. They finally agree to disagree and get on with their lives. Except that the woman notices a change in him, and one week before their wedding, gently declares that she knows that he has been keeping up a liaison with her dead friend ever since that fatal night, and though he denies it, he doesn't do so very vigorously, and allows her to break off their engagement.

Needless to say, neither ever marries.

And as it so often is with James, we are never sure if the ghost occurred, or if the woman was not simply eaten up by a jealousy engendered by her guilt, or, much more likely, by a different jealousy, a jealousy for that other world, which her obsession with that detail of her friends' lives tells us she preferred to her friends all along.

James' version is unusual, too, in that it's the only ghost story I know in which a ghost is genetic, a kind of corner-of-the-eye that just can't stop in time and heard the other arrive though way across town or felt a line drawn taught and could not respond although a light comes on all on its own every day at just that time time they say, is stone. I once had a heart made of string and hung myself, my love

A Good Friend

Edith Wharton, a good friend of James said a woman is a mansion and half the rooms
unentered and lost in the rooms it's the soul that splits into times

you don't recognize that the soul squanders or is squandered by curtains
she couldn't sleep for the terror of knowing there was a book of ghost stories downstairs

in the library would burn all morning all her own like James' are relentlessly ambiguous
one believer and another so honed transparent as lightning against a garden

that swerves as a child she lay dying as a woman full of leaves in her own
it's love that steps into the hall all in erasure decked out in the latest ivory, ecru, bone

Miss Jéromette and the Clergyman

Wilkie Collins had a brother accompanied by a tall column of mist
who had loved only once the gesture at the throat as she, the mirror of

his love will come back for him it was such a simple story a woman
encountered in a garden a garden, the summer of night the foreign

edge on her speech pulled him in and on we go to her murder, then a woman
will know how wrong she has been and still walk to the station ago

Some Paintings of Ghosts

There are so few paintings of ghosts, which is really rather odd
since there at last they could be seen, could slightly live
in the visible, under glass

where all errance squares
and there's an end almost to the body you forgot

there's a body that runs on
out ahead of the one inevitably left behind

in the shock of recognition on the face of the dying

that, in a Rembrandt sketch, or I saw it once
in a painting by Ingres, though he had not
put it there.

Some Ghosts in Paintings

Atelier du peintre, Gustave Courbet, 1855. At the far right edge, just coming through the door or perhaps from behind a mirror is a man who isn't there.

Sea and Rain, James McNeill Whistler, 1865. A human husk stepping carefully over something very fragile in the sky.

Frederic Bazille, *Rose Terrace (Terrace at Méric)*, 1867. But where is the terrace? the trellis? the woman who sits at the very, very edge of the park bench, a mere sketch

a white dress

sat down

in a garden

Bazille died

in the Franco-Prussian War shot just before he turned 29 he saw her there and wanted to finish it but under the circumstances, had no idea what that would mean.

Les Jardins des Tuileries, Monet, 1876; first woman on the left, white dress, her head and chest bending too much into the world.

Edward Hopper, 1963, *Sunlight in an Empty Room*.

Gravesend

My ended grove my threaded shriek drawn along
by swans straining at the same Did you fall off the edge

and which home carved from an egg as if a little

trap door slowly spread through every room ever this ready
the dead are hauling a circus behind them in flames

Gravesend

Gravesend is named after Mr. Silvanous Grave
who in 1123 opened a store here
at the end of the road
leading from London to the sea.

No, London does not go to the sea.

So Gravesend is named after Mr. Albert Graves
who established a hotel at the first point
that boats turned in from the channel to go up the Thames.

No, he is dead.

And Gravesend is named for a preacher,
Euphonious Grave by name, who fell off a cliff
one night at just this spot. There are those who say
the waves carried him off, ablaze.

They are wrong.

Once we dreamt that a grave had an end,
that a life didn't just keep on growing and growing
until the grave stretched from here
to its clearance.

No, a grave is a grievance.

From the 17th through the 19th centuries
Gravesend was a principal harbor
from which emigrants left England
for Australia or North or South America

South Africa and India. It was a door
through which people fell into the sea.
I never returned.

Gravesend swings back and forth
like a window in the wind. It is named
for the fact that you never returned. It bears
the name of a man who disappeared in plain sight
in the town square on a sunny day.

Gravesend

The name Gravesend comes from the words
“grafs-ham” meaning “the place at the end of the grove”

is a nave, is you walking out
into the sun
and the trees
surround
the things left behind a grave
clears the air.

Gravesend is recorded in the *Domesday Book*, 1086, called Gravesham
which meant the home of a reeve or a lord, of a sleeve or a word, of a team
headed toward. The sill of a window or a door.

Gravesend is so named because at the height of the plague
they brought the bodies out here

and threw them into the sea. It wasn't as callous as it sounds, for by then
the grove was over and the sleeve, a town, and someone had learned

how to fashion a deadbolt from a series of thumbs
and so we dream to the sound, the slip, the click, the something that won't
ever quite shut. They blame the plague, the heart, the age. A grave
is a door laid flat in the earth, worked into a hinge, which articulates a gulf
without being a bridge.

Interview Series 2

*Why is this town called Gravesend?
And what do you think of that name?*

Why is it called Gravesend? Now that you mention it, that's an interesting question. I've lived here all my life, and I've heard a lot of stories, but I don't know if any of them are true. What do I think of it as a name for a town? I've always rather liked it, actually; it makes me think of engravings and grayscales and all sorts of things to do with printing, but I doubt that has anything to do with the real history—but then history isn't real anyway, is it?

I'm starting my inquiries at the crown pub of the town, The Three Daws, crowded on a Friday at 8pm.

What do I think of it? I think it's pretty morbid actually. Hopeful? No, I don't really see how you could think of it as hopeful. Though it's better than Black Heath, I guess.

Kind of dismal isn't it? But our weather's great—hottest place in England at times. We broke the record two years ago.

What do I think of the name Gravesend? I quite like it actually. It has dignity.

Rather sad in a way isn't it?

I think it's morbid, but it's accurate.

The Three Daws is arguably the oldest pub on the Thames, and, as I've been reminded by at least five people in the village, it plays an important role in *Great Expectations*. I ask the barmaid what she thinks of the name Gravesend. Gravesend? It's a good name. It's in the *Domesday Book*. We used to have more pubs in this town than in any other town in England. Ghosts? You're writing a book on ghosts? This place is full of them. It's the oldest pub on the river. They say Pocahontas died here. No, I mean here, in this pub, that's what they say—and why not believe it? No, I've never seen a ghost, but I've heard one. I've been down here in the bar, and heard someone walking directly above me when I knew that no one could be up there. And bottles

fly off the shelves sometimes, or chairs get up-ended. Everyone who works here has a different story; we all feel them.

It's in the *Domesday Book*, says Lester, the owner. There it's listed as Graff de Sham. A graff was a sheriff and sham meant home, so it's basically "the home of the sheriff." Several centuries of sloppy articulation could easily turn it into Gravesend. Ghosts? Give me a break.

At Waterloo Station in London, I was told I couldn't buy a round trip to Gravesend. Aren't coming back until Saturday, are you? No? Then the only ticket I can sell you is a one-way. Which train do you take? The one marked Gravesend—and don't worry, you can't miss it. It's the end of the line.

Can I ask you a question? (This time it's someone asking me.) Are you from Australia? No, from San Francisco. Can I ask *you* a question? What do you think of the name Gravesend? Horrible says one. Don't know, says the other, I've lived here all my life, and I've never really thought about it. You know why it's called that? Because so many people were buried here during the war. Which war? *The* war.

Enormous container ships float by in the background, headed for the docks at Tillbury across the river. During the plague, one person tells me, they'd bring all the bodies down to Tillbury, which was used as a huge morgue. That's why it's called that—get it? *Till Bury*—and then they'd ferry them across to Gravesend, and we'd bury them.

It's here, someone tells me, that all the apple orchards ended and the outskirts of London began.

So?

They were Gravensteins.

As if the grave could end, said a ship, this fog
is not among the listed would have shifted in and out of light in a way most
unbecoming, it unbecame and floated just inches over the water was not found
in the morning.

Do you know why it's called Gravesend? Because for centuries, when ships arrived here from all over the world, everyone who had died on the journey—from cholera or dysentery or scurvy—were buried here because it was the first place they landed.

Because the plague stopped right before it got here, so no one was dying out here, so the graves ended.

It's because if you'd lined up, shoulder to shoulder, all the people who'd died of the plague in London, they would have reached to here.

If the grave would end, if all were a choir, if the mansion shattered, and a woman coming up the stairs disappeared. We see her all the time. She's usually calling out a name, but as soon as she sees us, she stops and looks afraid.

If you go up to the Railroad Tavern and look round the side, you'll see three graves lined up against the wall—those are the last three people to die of the plague. You know, we're mentioned in Dickens. The Three Daws Tavern is mentioned by name. Can't remember why; it's something to do with tunnels. There are tunnels under the whole town, and a lot of them start at the Three Daws. Smugglers used them, and people getting away from the press gangs. Press gangs? When a ship couldn't get enough sailors, they'd park offshore and send a couple men in to the taverns to get young guys drunk. Then they'd hit them over the head, drop them through a hole in the floor to a boat waiting below, and before you know it, you've got a career in the Navy.

You put an end to the grave, and then you end. Some slight slippage that streamed beneath. A rapt commerce in which none of the merchants is seen. And then there's that housing project just beyond the church. Was going great, but it's gotten bogged down because they hit a graveyard—it's an ancient one, and every time they come across more remains, they have to stop work and do the right thing.

You know Dickens' ghost haunts the graveyard up at Rochester Cathedral. He peers at all the gravestones—they say he's looking for his own. He wanted to be buried there, but they put him in Poet's Corner in Westminster Cathedral instead.

It's because so many people left from this port going to American or Canada or Australia and no one ever saw them again.

Dickens also haunts the Corn Exchange. He looks up at the clock, then takes out his watch and checks it against his own, and then turns and walks into the cathedral. He looks like a normal old man, so even though he's a ghost, can this be said to be a haunting?

You put an end to the grave

and no one came. I stopped in a pub

whose walls are filled, top to bottom, with photos. One showed the whole town crowded into an alley around a feast, so numerous they spilled out the back, they overflowed. It's VE Day, the publican tells me, and the man who brought me the photo is right there in the picture somewhere.

Gravesend is strongly marked by its World War II past. The whole region was a principal target during the Battle of Britain, and over the airbase at Biggin Hill nearby, a phantom Spitfire still flies. It's never been seen, but it's often heard. Apparently it's a very distinctive sound, and sometimes, immediately after it has passed, low voices are heard, at times clinking glasses.

And there's a sailor who died in a harrowing storm just yards from the door of the inn where he would have found help for his foundering ship who has ever since continued his journey, struggling to the spot where he died, at which point he suddenly stands up straight and strides right into the place, now a pub, where he goes out like a light.

Ghosts are rarely calm, though there are some, standing in line to buy stamps, as if they traveled more lightly, over which you are still crying because of the body and its illegible beauty stitching a catch in the breath, and birds intervene. Some places are magnets, or maybe it's simply that habit is just as deep an emotion as terror or grief. Or that all habit is based, though often unconsciously, on joy; for example, Anne Boleyn continues to wander the grounds of Hever Castle, where she lived as a child, and was, as a child, very happy.

Fog starts collecting on the river, making the huge container vessels parked out there, waiting to go up to London, begin to dissolve, and a yacht or two—one named the Princess Pocahontas—begin to become a part of the landscape, which is turning blue and grey and cold. A dozen white swans float downstream in a line. They say you can't actually bury anybody here. What with a thirty foot tide and all this marsh, as soon as they stick them in the ground, they start to rise.

Pocahontas (1595, Powhatan Confederacy— 1616, Gravesend, England)

So Pocahontas, lost in the graveyard, said to her husband,
so soften the New World is an edge and returning

she turned around and saw him becoming
someone who used to live where she was dying.

Pocahontas once threw herself on the body of Captain John Smith to save him,
then married his colleague John Rolfe a few years later.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, thousands and thousands of ships

is a windmill or threshold, a guildhall or swordhilt
is a windowsill struck by lightning, the huge sails

billowing out and the curtains

“I’m at that stage in life”
and then all that dancing on water.

Pocahontas died in Gravesend at the age of 22.
She was there to catch a boat back to Virginia
with her husband and child, who were going home.

So Pocahontas lost in the graveyard
a small charm that once depended
from a chain
around her ankle

is one way to figure

the cost to her eyesight, to her continually flagrant
insistence upon dying as a demonstration
of the central role of irony in history

after all

that departure

the first Native American ever to visit Europe stayed forever. A fire
in 1727 destroyed the parish records, which included the location
of Pocahontas' grave, by nature, a door

is a gap

but a ceiling

wouldn't be offered in pieces or things that can't be divided, one cannot

for instance, offer another
a piece of grief or survival.

The Ghost Dance

Emile Berliner, one of the first developers of the gramophone, recorded numerous Arapaho, Commanche, and Caddo ghost dances, as well as a Paiute gambling song, and published them in July, 1894.

When from the door I saw him coming

The Ghost Dance dates to 1888, when, based on a vision he had during a solar eclipse, the Paiute mystic Wovoka claimed the earth would soon end, and be therefore inherited, especially through dancing, in which one dies for a minute

Then saw I the many plainly

Wovoka's vision of non-violent resistance was shared by Tolstoy: To you can no damage be, who turns again

And saw that they, in numbers entering

The ghost dances were recorded by the ethnologist James Mooney, who may in some cases also have played them.

Entered calling their innumerable names

Tolstoy published *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1894, in which the other cheek in which one sees

the Ghost Dance movement largely died out after Wounded Knee (December 29, 1890) in which some had believed

the Ghost Dance shirt is impervious to bullets

a rag flies around the sun at specific intervals

Thomas Edison filmed a Sioux ghost dance on September 24, 1894—or more precisely, he filmed a dance that featured true ghost dance costumes, but the documentation carefully states that it is not an authentic ghost dance bending as the light will not

It is 1894, and the gramophone is being sold in a shop in Baltimore. In fact, by fall, they will have sold over 1000 playing machines and 25,000 records, ashless are the voices we have become

that still and faces fast in which they turn and slowly halt and latch you in the glance. The dance, brief and the ghost

lived within whatever we were was photographed with the lights out.

The Name

The name Gravesend has nothing to do
with a grave or an end and there are

no pleasure craft out in the crowded harbor. The sails, sky-shaped in silicate
and built a loft that will not stop. There is nothing

for which you've been saving. They are boarding carrying
a single envelope and waving, or waving a handkerchief and ignoring

the historical significance of the waving of white things, pale in their faces, they are
wearing out in a wavering line along the deck and held in time only by the railing.

Engraved

There was nothing in the grave. They cracked it open
and only the newspaper.

The grave came back. He stirred his tea with a finger
and glanced at the news.

There are no graves in Gravesend, which is of course
logical. And overflowed with it—

The relation of water to the dead

in which we washed our hands

in its liminal spaces—bridges, rivers,
shore upon shore and shoreline unfurling
the shadow around a person

was a shroud unwound and the tiny thing flying.

Kent

In the grounds of Bayham Abbey in a garden designed by Repton
a procession of monks just about dusk or just after darkness has fallen
go walking.

Or there was no sadness, just a simple fold in time.

One must be for others a reason to live.

Often, it is said, the presence of a ghost is signaled by illogical cold.

Lord Halifax noted it when investigating “the Laughing Man of Wrotham,” who strode
into his brother’s room and murdered him night after night

to the horror of the maid who, a century later, wedged a chair against the door and
watched him disappear.

There is no cure

for anything, and that cough you have, Madam, once

there was a fire every Friday the 13th, and once there was a death
that seemed to deserve it, but that was an illusion. Once there was a
death, but that was illusory, too. And all over Kent, someone is still
heading up the stairs, lighting the way with a match.

THREE

WHAT DO YOU THINK A GHOST IS?

Cicatrice

It's not the death that scars but the grief leapt from the speeding train
and the young girl slain by a shadow (he'd hung himself)

or the one who took poison to stop thinking of it he jumped overboard
from debt we think an exit from regret there is no tightrope

on which she walked out it was all her fault that started walking
was not the killer but the killed that made the incident permanent

and the one who heard the heart in all its heraldry out flagging down the navy
or simply a baby that couldn't be saved is a sound held

by everyone on edge: either, either of no other now unfettered touch

Ghosts in the Sun

shine upon stone a woman's fingers on the edge of the overflowing fountain
watches the knot come undone and the dog run headlong

after the birds, scattering them beneath the tree where deep in the shade
a man suddenly seems not entirely there and they gathered around him

to watch reflections cross his face as they often cross a pond

or the first ghost was the sun and then it dies again a white stain
on a slow eye a boy lost on a Ferris wheel and then it dies in sheets

a spiral grave with a hook-and-eye deep in the shade of a burning tree

Whole Ghost

From one horizon to the other who counted their faces all in attendance
a whole country stained like a portrait into a sheet held up to the light

Ghosts appear in place of whatever a given people will not face There are days
the entire sky is a ghost though again it's not necessarily what you'd think

bright sun full of birds you're in a park and everything in sight is alive

Traveling Ghost

To bury the heart in one land and the hands in another says the legend the heart is always buried alone no matter what you buried the heart is a grave

in the legend is an hour invented and here the long road lined with poplars

I have a friend who draws nothing but clouds. As they speed across France, nothing is lost from view. The train was invented to shred a sun, to carefully cut the blind spots out

and everything that once was light came along. The sun is always alone

while the heart has all of France

like a stone under the tongue and like a stone under the tongue it stays aloft despite which buries itself like a face in its hands. What you see

from a train is what has escaped a simple operation a by-pass for instance

in which they take out the heart and lay it on a table. I have a friend who had the job of holding the hearts at certain points in the procedure. They'd literally She said actually

exactly the weight you'd think they'd be intuitively trace its meridian with a fingernail and compass replace the map with a razor and an anchor

It often saved their lives and you look up to find that you've buried your friends in your hands

Crowds

The man simply walked through her she said she saw him coming and felt
at an intersection standing on a corner a man slipped

a century, and the woman sensed his fingers “inside my chest” a caress
of which I think he was completely unaware he never even saw me until he passed

and then was scared. And silently trailing through me will you ever be
a sound in an empty house an inexplicable mark that, washed off, grows dark

And Are Ghosts

also inextricably linked to snow three days it took her to get across Nebraska
and the whole time there he was her grandfather in the passenger seat

refusing to be frightening and tried to hold him as he came closer and more
the snow, the farther the body came to be his heartbeat of her sobbing

at the side of the road at his funeral as the censer swung over she alone saw
the small wind as it started snowing her grandmother said walking out of the church

I would have thought he had already gone at every snowfall in her uncanny silence
she thinks with the help of his haunting she may someday without the falling

Interview Series 3

What do you think ghosts are?

Do you think you'll ever be one?

I don't know . . . I think they're communication, simply that; a ghost is simply a connection.

And then she goes on to mention some rather odd occurrences—hundreds of red beetles all over the kitchen the day her mother died, and for a year after her son-in-law's death, she kept seeing his car go by.

Do I think I'll ever be one? I'd like to be; it seems, if nothing else, like a way to get on with it.

I think they're entities stuck in time. We the "living" pass right on through it, along it, along with it, and then in dying, if all goes well, we pass out of it, but ghosts get stuck, locked, are left half-in and half-out. It hurts. Become one? I hope not.

What is a ghost? It's something that hides behind doors (said without irony)—ghosts *lurk*; that is their defining quality. Will I ever become one? Quite possibly.

A ghost is that which exceeds the four elements, what will not fit within. Which suggests them as excess, which has by definition nowhere to go, that might show up anywhere, a little startled, a shade persistent, an average shadow that doesn't move with the sun. Will I ever become one? Certainly not.

A ghost is that which refuses to go on—they're comfortable with death.

Or a ghost is burned into the sky as an image is burned onto the retina of an eye. It was an accident, or at least incidental; it was nothing special, but stayed too long and so remains emblazoned on a certain patch of air, annealed there, watching, for instance, for a ship to sail into view.

They are laws of physics caught at that fractional moment of suspension that all laws pass through as they're changing. Yes, I think the laws of physics change all the time, but because we're completely bound by them, we can't remember their ever having been different; however, we can perceive the glitches that persist if the revision isn't fast enough, and sometimes, no doubt, we are the glitch, and have no idea of it.

What is a ghost? It's tangled electricity. It's a radiogram of the air, an ex-ray of the sky.

What is a ghost? Well, that's tantamount to asking what you think the present is. We have a much clearer take on both the past and the future than we do on the present—it remains a gap between two clarities, a void, and as such, it cannot possibly make sense, at which point, we must admit that we are lacking crucial information on our own state, and therefore can't even begin to comment on the state of other entities that are not attached to the present, even though they may be visible from it. Will I ever be one? I might very well be one now, if viewed from another state.

I get up and turn on the light.

A ghost is one life layered upon another that has not yet been named.

A ghost is a crossroads, now mobile, as in the Middle Ages, avoided at night, the air thickening there, but the intersection itself, invisible up close, and suddenly warm and at home.

A ghost is a broken window, though the window does not end the room; it only breaks the seal.

What is a ghost? It's the spirit returning to exact revenge. Will I return? I don't know—I suppose it will depend on how much pain I'm in.

A ghost bit a child of the tip of her thumb And the child replaced the sun.
It seems that great emotion disrupts the structure that makes time and space appear separate.

Or a ghost is a knot in the otherwise smooth flow of time, an electrical storm in a jewelry box, grief perfectly aligned. And sometimes a ghost is a shared thing; sometimes the entire population of a city or country will just happen to look in the mirror at the same time, and from then on there was a city in the sky, as all cities are if we consider that the sky reaches to the ground, and this city, too, thought it was alive, and the candles walked off by themselves.

Old Wives' Tales

Whatever you do is forever done

and will mark the house
and the bird in the fire

and will come back on them
who stain or find themselves

who simply walk in
don't look in the mirror

you think you sell your soul
it's the little block of space

and the house the town
that little tower

who enter centuries later
that can't wash off

don't open the jar
the house that rides a flame to shore

but it's not yours; it's air
in which you stand that dies

Freud Claims

it's the unburied inside
Grief is a machine

You are standing in the light
and I am late.

and the door is closed
You are walking down a hill

I am running down the stairs

who come back unloving
that must be assembled correctly

while the light shines through you
You are there in the doorway

and I am going home
and I watch you from a window

like a little gear in a tear

Some Chinese Ghosts

after Lafcadio Hearn

for Keith Waldrop

if the rose is made of phosphor
if for a single shoe

the ghosts of China
the morally errant, the cruel

all along the northern road
which left alive

and the hundred smaller bells
the wind becomes a hound

are rarely evil, are not the restless
so the fire sprang back to life

among the hundred flying oaks
one or two who changed

Across

If there was light on a building if the building was white if the light in a wash
passed a hand across a face washed the light right off I sat across

from a building across which the sun in setting a summer so slowly
made itself a path. If light were, as some say the ghost of God

what house would stand in the middle of the street listing names
and would they all add up and could we then all stop I watch light cross

a building and make of it a face I watch the façade
of a building build itself to sight slight

wound to the eye the sort that leaves the light inside sealed

Ghosts

are houses. (The places we exceed ourselves can live.) And every house
is a guest. I live in an old one. I watch it move. “I am moved,” I say
at inappropriate times. And then must say “I’m sorry” though not to whom

Who Did

not see because to see is to enter as
a child on a staircase an inherited streetlight

but the child's hand is on the light switch in fascination
will flick it will it to be alive

a thing must turn around and smile or
we will not will it to be a child

one must stand on the bottom stair or on
the top and be struck by the emptiness

of a house in which they're all asleep

After This Death There Will Be No Other

Some say a child becomes the house some houses hold
the child in hand in the heart of a bird is its hollow home

that green flight that lets the house lose form where was the room
why a door to the air why air in the eye and why

only sky there the child held the house in the palm of her hand
and the sky poured over it painting her out

Haint Blue

On the frame around the porch where its edges or ashes or an eyelash
of feathering porchlight quietly annihilates darkness all throughout Georgia

the frames are painted this particular shade because it keeps the ghosts away or
keeps them closer, curled up in the home I can't remember which one was first

to point out the robin's egg laid on the third storey windowsill on the inside
a bird born within the house of such a deep blue that we've never been able to find it

One No

When this it goes. She said winnow winnow Why come thou Watch now
My latch was its watchspring My love was an eland And I that hypnotic
am knocking on tables unmarrowed in craving the chant won't un giving a knuckle
a breastbone a light switch, an ibis They say that wherever bird enter—when there
as it happens, a bird comes into the house uninvited (most often through a window)
someone will die soon. My lover, that con My watcher, that whiteness That bone there
an icon I stumble to seem like I stutter and bleach eye and sinew on farther
which unlike further means a distance you can measure and my boat such a small one

How Might a Ghost Age

The error in the mirror is living a glove And at that the vision seemed to give way
to something less as if seen through glass upon rain let's stay he said stay and

I will answer your questions he said there is an answer and I am every nearly
and your patience may from a crack in the hour or untraceable crevasse

so fundamentally different from the damage to which we've grown accustomed:
age, pox, rust, fright, the light that broke it came from inside

Who Walked

across water who gathered there over a gathering mist
is a migration. They went down just off the coast and sometimes almost

an army balanced out there on the waves but in rags and flagrant in wind
Legend claims that on calm nights you can hear their footsteps from the cliff a soft

howl, the children are wading out past the horizon he was sailing alone returning late
when he saw an army of children dressed in rage walking over the sea on their hands

The Ghost Orchid

actually exists the proper name of an excised space
a suddenly arboreal egret in pieces the entire

choir in an instant of amnesia sang a tune
my four-year-old sings that he calls his angel song

it's composed of the single word "window" over
and over the dead unlike us do not live alone

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The Denver Quarterly

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Mimesis

Mipoesias

Neue Rundschau

The New Review of Literature

/nor

Sidebrow

Slightly West

Upstairs at Duroc

Vacarme

Van Gogh's Ear

Zen Monster

And many, many thanks to Aaron Belz for publishing a number of these as the chapbook *Ghosts are Hope* through his press Observable Books.

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The title “After This Death There Will Be No Other” is taken from the last line of Dylan Thomas’ poem “On the Death of a Child by Fire.” The stories evoked, with liberties taken, in section two include *The True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* by Daniel Defoe, *A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family* by Sheridan Le Fanu, *The Friend of the Family* by Henry James, and *Miss Jéromette and the Clergyman* by Wilkie Collins.

I owe the title “Ajar” to that brilliant poet Kokoy Guevara.

I apologize for the grammatical error in the last line of the poem “Ghost Stories”; the clause should read “I hanged myself,” not “I hung myself,” but I couldn’t stand to give up the rhyme.

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