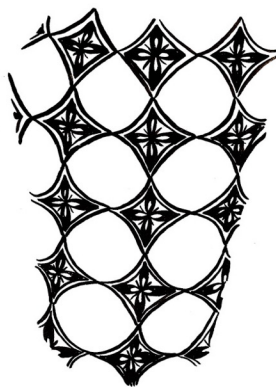


**NOTES FROM  
THE 422<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL  
WRAITHS FOR WRITING  
CONFERENCE**



**BY AMELIA  
GARRETSON-PERSANS**



Thank you to everyone who helped fund this book  
and to everyone who shared a ghost story

## GHOST CONFERENCE

In the interest of full disclosure I empty my pockets before you. In my pockets there are: a reproduction of a coin originally manufactured c. 430 BC and depicting the owl of Minerva, an orange button (the last remnant of my Uncle Theodore), a calling card for the venerable Professor of Ghost-o-logy, Emeritus, Algernon Dogwood, and a pin from the 422<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wraiths for Writing Conference which I had the good fortune to attend this past spring.

To get to the conference you need an invitation, and the invitation arrives simultaneously with the bus that will ferry you there. I remember that at first the bus seemed empty, but when I began to hum to pass the time an unseen chorus buzzed along. The New England scenery leered into gasping windows, but I batted it away with my composition notebook. Morning light managed to bounce unchecked from seatback to seatback.

The bus rolled into the gravel parking area of the small hosting liberal arts college, whose students had already departed for spring break. Spirits dismounting from the bus steps began to show themselves stutteringly. Someone handed me a program of events, and I glanced over the titles of some of the workshops:

- 9 a.m. Weave Your Longing into the Wind
- 11 a.m. Marks on the Floorboards: Wet Footprints to the Creak Unseen
- 12 p.m. Break for Lunch
- 1 p.m. A Visual Poem: The Repetition of Faces in a Crowd
- 2 p.m. The Writing (or Scratching) on the Wall
- 3 p.m. What Happened to You? How to Make Them Remember and Never Forget
- 4 p.m. Memento Mori: The Swiftly Ripening Fruit

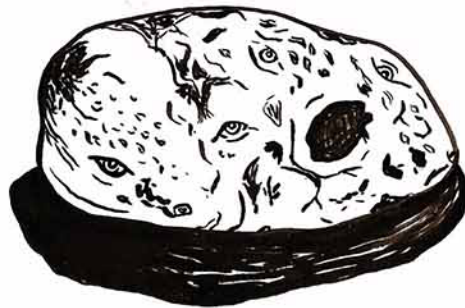
When I looked up, I realized I was suddenly alone in a dusky field. My only companion was a visibly darkening tree, so with a shudder I scurried inside.

## POTATO EYES

When I opened the door to the auditorium, I accidentally let out a rush of murmuring air. I was at the 422<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wraiths for Writing Conference and was shuffling around the suddenly silent room trying to find a good seat from which to hear the inaugural speaker. Invisible attendees and the incessant flickering of the numbers on the arms of the seats made it an awkward process. When I finally landed in an empty chair, Algernon Dogwood, Professor of Ghost-o-logy, Emeritus, had already begun speaking. Professor Dogwood was one of a handful of non-wraith invitees and is well respected on both banks of the River Styx. He was lecturing on the soothsaying properties of the backyard potato:

“...buried deep and planted in the heart of winter, any unremarkable, brown potato can offer sage advice in the summer. By the light of the waning June moon, dig up your potato and tenderly rub the dirt out of its eyes with your thumbs. Wait a breathless moment for the eyes to commence opening. One eye open predicts a fallow autumn, two eyes luck in love, three eyes signify weird fecundity, four eyes mean beware false auguries, five eyes... [I confess at this point, dear reader, to have lost track of the revelations afforded by the opening eyes, but I do recall his last point] ...and if every eye of your unearthed potato blinks and rolls spasmodically altogether, you ought to wish you’d never been born. ‘Run for the hills!’ comme on dit,” Professor Dogwood chuckled.

“But what I’m most interested in sharing with you is a lesson I had the good fortune to learn recently. My parapsychological studies often lead me abroad, and this past December I found myself staying at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin pursuing elusive answers. Now let me start my story by asking you this: have you ever seen someone drown in the floorboards?”



## THE KRANKENHAUS BETHANIEN

At this point in my narrative, Professor Dogwood, a featured presenter at the 422<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wraiths for Writing Conference, had just begun a fresh segment of his talk with an enigmatic question.

“Have you ever seen someone drown in the floorboards?” he asked the audience. Unless you counted the screws turning underfoot, no one stirred.

“I must begin the story of my unsettling stay at the Kunstlerhaus in Berlin with a little history. Before the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien became the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, it was the Krankenhaus Bethanien. The construction of the Krankenhaus was completed in 1847 under the gentle reign of King Friedrich Wilhelm the Fourth and functioned as a hospital and training ground for nurses and other caregivers. The original architect was a man named Persius who died without ever knowing the secret of his name and without seeing the Krankenhaus completed. The succeeding designer was troubled by visions in his dreams until his trembling hands drew the plans for the institute’s two 115-foot towers. The towers flanked the main entrance like long and fragile teeth glowering in a frown.

“After more than a century of the institute’s pervasive vigilance, Berliners made motions to tear the Krankenhaus down. Though it’s true that at the time the arts of medicine and caregiving had some years previously moved out, and that with their departure, fever had begun to infect its empty, labyrinthine halls, and that fever had become the ravenous master of the derelict and forgotten people who had started to move in, and that these people had written the saga of their fever in hot pinks and minty teals and saccharine yellows on the peeling walls and overturned furniture of the once great hospital, the Krankenhaus couldn’t understand why it was forsaken. It closed its heavy eyes and swept aside the sprawling urban mess that Berlin had become and watered the rye fields with its tears.”

## THE KRANKENHAUS BETHANIEN, PART 2

“It was around this time that squatters began disappearing.”

At the 422<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wraiths for Writing Conference, Professor Dogwood was beginning to get long-winded. On the seatback in front of me I watched a moth’s eyes turn from green to gold to green again. I imagined what its life might have been like before it joined me and the other conference attendees to drift in the rise and fall of the professor’s words. Outside in the gathering spring night, worms moved wordlessly through the low-growing, early plants. A pretty moth like the one winking at me then was better off in the company of the undead.

The professor continued:

“Despite the fact that its squatters were never accounted for, the Krankenhaus Bethanien was spared from destruction and ultimately resurrected as the *Kunstlerhaus* Bethanien, a world-renowned destination for rising and established visual artists. I can say with certainty though that the Krankenhaus never left the premises entirely. During my recent stay at the *Kunstlerhaus*, I accidentally stumbled into its night thoughts.

“An unfortunate encounter with a plate of *sauerbraten* had left me unfit for sleep and wandering the empty and foggy halls of the institution. My mind was busy composing a pretty piece of poetry for a restless girl spirit I’d met in Dublin, so perhaps I didn’t pay particular attention to the men’s lavatory as I passed it on my right side. I must have walked fifty paces past it before turning on my heel with designs on sleep. When I passed it on my left side, I was surprised to find that all six of its faucets were turned on full blast and the floor had one or two inches of water already collected on it.

“Some breathless moments passed before a low and slow-moving mound in the floorboards snaked quietly through the amplifying waters and made a languid jump, as if for air. When it missed its mark, as I knew it must, the mound bubbled back into non-existence.

“An interesting incident to be sure, but if any edification is to be extracted from it, it is this: a building is an animal with a memory like a rain bucket, and when the endless frozen rain of a German December steps and widens a building’s sleepless bones, certain visitors are bound to come a-calling.”





## MOONLIGHT SCRYING CLASS

After Professor Dogwood's stirring tale about the secret, black heart of the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, there was a short break. Spirits naturally don't go out much for pastries and coffee, but they are well rejuvenated by a good scent. We were directed to a nearby classroom where we found vials of crumbling autumn leaves, bowls of white flour burned brown by a pan, mugs of leaded gasoline, trays of tarnished silverware, and other eccentricities. I nibbled a granola bar I'd found in my pocket.

Skulking deeper into a corner, I accidentally bumped into a heavy-breathing entity. He began to speak to me using shadow language, of which I happen to have a rudimentary understanding. He told me that since he's been dead he's been able to hear what the trees say and knows where every bird is headed. He tells me he wishes *he* could fly south for the winter, but short of this conference, he hardly ever goes *anywhere*, but mostly hangs around a Blockbuster they'll be razing soon. He doesn't know what'll happen when they do, and frankly, he's terrified. I tell him winters in Montreal used to be grim and politely bow out of the conversation.

On the way to an outdoor workshop on well-water scrying by moonlight, I wondered if there are good and bad trees like there are humans and decided that there are. Thanks to Hans Christian Andersen, I know that when a tree dies, all of its leaves turn into eyes, and for one blessed moment a tree is all-seeing. I can't imagine how sad it would be to be a tree that dies in winter.

The description for the scrying class was this:

"There is no deeper fount of foreknowledge than the neighborhood well. Uncover the secrets of the future with that inimitable shade, Maeve Widdershins. Since her untimely death in 1943, Miss Widdershins has warmed the spirit world with her cheery titter and sparkling eyes."

It was because of this description that I knew something was amiss when I reached the well and Miss Widdershins' eyes were completely black.

## MOONLIGHT SCRYING CLASS, PART 2

Though I've never seen a proper, functioning well, with its picturesque ring of stacked stones and attending chapeau, I used to drink water from one at the last house I lived. I guess it was because of the peculiar feeling of lost time I used to get after I finished brushing my teeth or the way I'd sometimes perceive an unnatural shadow collecting at the foot of my bed on the nights I'd boiled water, that I was interested in taking the well-water scrying class.

Our instructress for the evening was Maeve Widdershins, a ghost well loved for her sprightly disposition, despite her uncertain status between here and the hereafter. Tonight, her normally bright and verdigris eyes were matte black, and when she began speaking, her characteristic chirrup had been replaced by a guttural whisper:

“You will know your double by the way it keeps to the periphery of your vision. It is unlike your shadow because it knows its own mind. It will reveal itself to you in its own time, like a piece of luggage in a darkened hallway reveals itself to be a black cat. When it does, take heed, because a double's appearance in life only ever has to do with death.”

Miss Widdershins' eyes resumed her usual luster, and oddly, when she returned to her regular self, the scrying class seemed to be well under way. My fellow classmates were already peering into the well, musing over the moonlight writhing in the black water. Miss Widdershins herself seemed unaware of her recent auguring and shrieked with delight when one of her students spotted a beckoning hand in the settling water.

My eyebrows furrowed a moment before rising over widening eyes as I espied a distant silhouette about my size and shape at the far end of the field.



## THE LATE ARRIVAL

The Moonlight Scrying Class had not gotten off to an auspicious start. In a shuddersome display, Miss Widdershins had predicted the omen of my undoing, and now I thought I saw it gliding our way. My thoughts and bones jellied, and I felt the moment for fleeing pass. A moving cloud paused to eclipse the moon, and the figure was upon us.

“Aurora! What a delightful surprise! I did not expect you at this year’s conference! Was there a change in your travel plans? I hope nothing is wrong? Yes, of course, please join us! Let me fill you in on what you’ve missed!”

In the brief quiet that occurred after Miss Widdershins’ effusive greeting and before she hooked Aurora’s arm in hers and whirled her towards the well, I tried to get a look at the newcomer’s face. I could discern very little in the darkness. The moon had not yet re-emerged from behind that first and purposeful cloud, and in fact it appeared that more were coming to join it. Miss Widdershins frowned at the well where raindrops had begun to buffet and hiss.

“‘Nothing to be done with black soup but season it with tears,’ as the Norse seafarers used to say. As for us, I suppose we’d better head in.” Turning to Aurora, Miss Widdershins quietly continued, “Inside you can tell me your troubles. I must say you’re looking positively fey.”

Spirits have a knack for leaving a place in a hurry. The mingled scent of life and death that is, of course, the smell of dirt rose around me. Like earthworms evicted by the rain, I wriggled with uncertainty and waited for the dawn.

## AURORA

At a crowded community center in mid-summer, one follows a figure believed to be one's guardian for the afternoon, but after some minutes of diligent, albeit absent-minded following, the figure turns around, and one finds that its features have been subtly misarranged and its unfamiliar eyes are fixed above one's head, cringing against the panoptic and apathetic sun.

Such was my feeling as I made my way through the slick, spring weeds. Looking behind me every few paces, all I saw were slowly raising heads of clover, erasing my footsteps. After an uneasy night spent in a girl's vacant dormitory, I was heading to an early morning seminar on telekinesis.

Last night, after the rained out scrying class, I had sought out the conference's latest arrival, Aurora, but all I found was Maeve Widdershins, visibly shaken. When I asked her where her recent companion had gotten to, she couldn't say. She did, however, grab my wrist in the desperate way an ancient relation of mine used to do before dispensing with five or ten dollar bills and say, "That sprite was not my Aurora."

And so it was with a distracted heart that I waited for the telekinetic lecturer to begin that dewy morning. A lambent girl child was scuttling about the auditorium stage, much too excited to settle into her presentation just yet. Finally, after several moments spent gripping and releasing the sides of a petite podium and crackling the spittle in her cheeks, she began to explain how she terrorized an entire fraternity in the fall of '76.

## THE HOLE IN THE CEILING

When little Lily Bennett began her presentation on telekinesis, I felt the thrill of the early American Puritans when their glazed and righteous eyes first fell upon the debauchery of a midnight coven.

Lily's presence was electric and her words hit the floor like the tattered and live end of a downed wire:

"I live in a hole in the ceiling at the top of some stairs. The stairs are in the eastern wing of a college that wasn't always a college. I am the only one who really knows what used to be in the eastern wing, and I write riddles about it. At night, I scratch my riddles into the tin of the air vents. I feel it like a blow when a sleeping student snaps awake because they've dreamed the answer to my riddle.

"They never remember the answer, but they come to find me. I am never asleep. From my hole in the ceiling I can see the tops of their heads, and sometimes I can see their hopes, which are hissing, circling snakes. I reach down and take these snakes to my breast so they can rest. I return the snake-halos, but now they are cold and slow.

"I have always lived in the hole in the ceiling, but in 1976 someone must have said it aloud to someone else, because suddenly it was news. I had visitors, and the visitors weren't all friendly. They'd call me by name and ask me to sing or scratch. I would never sing or scratch, but sometimes I would cry. My tears are venom and when they dripped from the ceiling they etched the cement walls. The etched walls made more news and more visitors. When the visitors began to whisper about taking down my ceiling tiles, I knew I needed to write a riddle that would stop them dead in their tracks."

## THE HOLE IN THE CEILING, PART 2

Lily Bennett had the kind of glow that didn't brighten a space, but instead, made the darkness steel itself more tightly against her. Sitting very still in the opaque blackness, I imagined that I no longer had hands.

Lily spoke:

“Zeta Omega Tau began to include a midnight visit to my hole in the ceiling as part of its initiation rites. The noise of their whispers and snickers made it impossible to write my riddles, and in not writing, I began to lose track of the east wing's secret. I felt the secret's heart flutter like a pet rabbit whose hutch door has been left open.

“What could I use to make them go away? What was in my mind? There was an ugly woman standing and clipping her long fingernails, a black outline of a leafless tree hung with eggs, a hungry cat in a tall field I couldn't see, and the feel of cold pebbles in cotton pockets.

“In my mind I rolled the pebbles along a wooden floor and the sound was so loud that I couldn't hear my intruders. I doubled the pebbles, and the sound was deafening. The mind-pebbles rolled over the edge of the wooden floor and became real pebbles that rained down through the hole in the ceiling.”

In my seat in the audience I tried to touch my hands to my face, but my fingertips felt nothing.

Lily continued:

“The initiates were initiated, and the price of their initiation was to know what I know. And though they never came to see me anymore, they would wake with my pictures in their minds and spend their waking hours shaking them out one by one, like rocks in a can.”

Lily turned her light out like a lamp and the loosened light of the room gave me my hands back. Though they were mottled and shaking, I was glad to see them.



## LOVE LETTERS

During a mid-morning break that followed Lily's talk on weapons of the mind, I felt like being alone. Solitude is something of a tall order at a convention where most of the attendees are invisible, so I made for a wing of the college where no events were scheduled. The hosting college was and is well known for its graduate program in museum studies, and I soon found myself in front of what appeared to be a student's final project.

The florescent lights inside two rows of glass cases were off, so I leaned in close to read "The Love Letters of Sailors on Whaling Ships, 1879-1886" by the little morning light that reached them. Amidst clunky metaphors and sexual longing buttoned up so tightly its tits were hanging out, there was one passage that stood out:

"Cordelia, my precious, my pet, my parrot, these are some lines I entreat you not to sing out loud. It has been some weeks since I survived a fortnight of darkness in the northern arctic. I say darkness, but what I mean is the trembling illumination afforded by the hellfire of the aurora borealis. There are things I know now that no man should know. I know what the future holds – oh God, we left fourteen corpses behind. We are in San Francisco, we are heading for Cape Horn, I am never coming back."

My attention was caught by a moving reflection in the glass. Looking up I was greeted by my own smiling reflection. My hand shot up over the unwelcome smile and smoothed it out.

In an instant, my eyes refocused on a piece of scrimshaw with some words hastily scratched into it:

"Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow."



### THREE SISTERS

I hurried out of the exhibition hall where I had just received some portentous messages. Once I reached the main hall, I could tell I wasn't alone. Three sister-spirits revealed themselves one by one at equal intervals along my path. Everyone knew they were crazy and mean, so I kept my eyes down and kept walking. A short distance later, they revealed themselves in the same order. I stuck to my stratagem, but they continued to light my path like evil torches. Their similarity in appearance (black hair, white dresses, blurry faces) added to their illusion of infinite repetition.

“What do you want?”

Before I finished the question they sang it back to me in a cascade of shrill voices. Sometimes a person's death-voice is like a mirror after it's been shattered.

Their voices faded, and for a moment I thought maybe they'd gone. This is, of course, the oldest trick in the haunting canon. I was on my way to a workshop on choosing the right words for your death rattle, and I was already late. The bitches careened out of the linoleum tile a few steps ahead of me.

Their many voices were quieter and lower-pitched now, though thick, like the buzzing of bees' wings:

“We wanted to tell you what we planted in our garden.” Their eyes twinkled maliciously, as if they had just begun a dirty joke in mixed company.

Against my better judgment, I took the bait: “What did you plant?”

“Buttons and teeth,” they tittered. “Shall we tell you what they grew?”

“Alright.”

“Plastic flowers of course!” Their wicked laughter filled the hall until their sudden disappearance turned it off like a radio dial.

## CHOOSE YOUR WORDS

“Imagine the daguerreotype hasn’t even made it to America yet and your memorial portrait has to be completed in oils posthumously. You’ve died suddenly so there was no time to impress your aesthetic preferences on the hearts and minds of your clueless loved ones. The psychic energy involved in hovering over the shoulder of your appointed archivist is tremendous, and the effort of crossing the line into the material world to whisper helpful hints is crushing. You have the strength for three hissed words before your fuel gauge hits zero. What are your words?”

I was at a workshop on choosing your words carefully. We were working in groups of three and answering hypothetical questions. My companions were a bookish young man who immediately said, “Well, ‘promethean’ to start,” and a quiet old woman whose creaking I felt in my spine.

“Big Spanish nose,” I offered. The little professor pursed his lips, un-amused.

“I’m just not sure I would expend the energy to bother with it. I don’t think a portrait painted by a stranger would have that much meaning to me. I’d rather use the earth-time to see Buenos Aires or something.”

The old woman’s head swiveled toward me like an owl’s. “You won’t know what you’re like when you’re dead.” Her smile was condescending and jagged.

“Appearances have never been important to me,” I persisted.

When the old woman turned to me again I felt as if she were showing me the face on the back of her head. “Appearances are everything,” she spat through her inverted smile.

“Hazy,” I murmured.

“Haziness serves as an interesting visual metaphor for one’s tenuous grasp on living. Did you mean it as a kind of memento mori for your painting’s viewers?” asked the young man.

“No, I meant ‘hazy,’ as in my hand looks hazy,” I said as I looked between and through my dimming fingers.

## PSYCHIC VISIONS



Everybody knows that the hours between three and five o'clock are the doldrums of the day. What most people don't know is that they are an especially fertile time for psychic visions. If I had a theory on this phenomenon, it would be that perhaps it's during these lazy hours that our exhausted toes briefly loosen their death grip on the earth.

Earlier in the day, a timeless sort of hustler in Ray-Bans and a driving cap had sold me a vial filled with oil and flotsam to promote third eye vision. Sitting in the students' lounge between workshops with a cup of lukewarm coffee, I tipped some oil onto my finger, dotted the space between my eyes, and awaited illumination.

Twenty uneventful minutes later I tried not to be too disappointed. I pulled the charlatan's potion out of my pocket and shook it to watch its contents settle. I thought I saw a toenail. In a short while I intended to see a featured presenter who had just written a memoir about the century she spent trapped in an elevator. I downed my now cold coffee with a shudder. Under the spell of the afternoon, I paused to watch my coffee grounds slowly arrange themselves into a picture.

The woman in the mug had her back to me. She was sitting at a table and the floor around her was littered with something. She was wearing a floral print housedress and a scarf covered her hair. I felt the languor of the lounge thicken around me as my eyes drooped and the woman in the mug turned towards me. She was impossibly old. With an animal hunger, she was eating a raw potato. She turned the potato around in her hand, and when she had eaten all the skin off it, she threw it on the ground. She picked up another potato from the table and

began again. I realized how hungry I was. By the time she picked up a third potato, I was starving. By the fourth, the pain was almost too great to bear. Dimly, I thought of sleeping to escape that monstrous hunger.

My eyes closed just as the old woman's wild eyes rose to meet mine. The next thing I remember was being shaken awake by Professor Algernon Dogwood, Professor of Ghost-o-logy, Emeritus.

## THE DOUBLE

The words of Professor Dogwood broke the deepest silence I had ever known. “Wake up! For God’s sake, wake up!” My inner eyelids opened, but it seemed my outer eyelids remained closed. I took in the orange and shifting patterns behind my closed lids. I couldn’t move my arms. The Professor’s words ran on: “Oh God, her pulse is slowing down. Someone get help! Where to get help for the living in a place like this?”

My eyes went black with the pain of trying to twitch my fingers. If it were not for the fear of death, I know I shouldn’t have succeeded. In an explosion of agony I opened my outer lids. The Professor breathed deeply.

“You were drowning. I thought you were lost.”

“I saw a woman in a coffee mug. She was eating potato skins.”

“You saw Hilda. Thank goodness I found you.”

I sat up. The lounge windows revealed a high and clear moon, though it was late afternoon when I first entered the lounge.

“Who’s Hilda?” I asked.

“She’s a kind of modern day Keres, a female death-spirit. Never good news.”

The Professor passed me a flask from his coat. “Very odd to be visited by a Keres sister this time of year. Tell me about the something that’s after you.”

I took a swig of something hot and calming and told the Professor about the strange prediction of Maeve Widdershins, the appearance of the mystery figure at the well, the smiling reflection, and my fading fingers.

The Professor tapped his nose and bent his head. After some moments he looked up. “Sounds like you’ve got a pernicious and premature double on your hands. Very rare, but heard of. In the natural order of things a double turns up, makes a couple of innocuous appearances to family and friends, and then you die. Nothing about your double’s surfacing is typical. The fact that it’s playing these malicious tricks means it’s trying to augment its power through fear. Very troubling.”

I took another sip of the Professor’s flask. It was as restorative as Christmas tree sap. Nevertheless my fingers trembled.

The Professor continued:

“All is not lost. A double is not without its weaknesses. There are certain things you can do to protect yourself, but it does involve some scavenging, and time is of the essence. We’d better head for the woods.”

## HAZEL BRANCHES

Professor Dogwood and I had just entered a small tract of woods in search of protective materials. The Professor moved quickly and easily through the thick trees, so it was hard for me to catch all that he was saying.

“Hazel branches, the ... of raspberry brambles, early ... buds, ... seashells, the abandoned eggs of...” The Professor’s voice shone through the crunching of twigs like the moon in deep woods.

“The ... with doubles, as opposed to other ..., is that they know you so well,” he called. “It’s almost like they can anticipate your ... move.”

I grunted in assent, but I doubt if he heard. The distance between us was growing. For a man of probably seventy years, the Professor hiked with great dexterity.

There was something on the path ahead of me that the Professor deftly stepped over without a glance. In the filtered light of the moon I could tell that it was uncannily low to the ground and that its movements were haphazard. I braced myself for a dying bird.

The Professor yelled triumphantly from somewhere farther along the path. Amidst the enthusiastic cracking of branches, I thought I heard the word “bramble.”

I drew closer to the thing on the path, which had not stopped moving. In a few yards the mystery was revealed: three black butterflies convening on deer scat. Looking up, I realized I could no longer see or hear the Professor.

In an instant, I was racing back to the college with the unshakeable feeling of having been tricked.



## FINDING FACES

According to a Japanese sculpture I saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Death is a mean-faced dwarf hobbled by the weight of its many hats. After my flight from the woods, I found myself looking for him behind every low-lying rock. In the library with every light switch I could find switched on, I thought I heard his clunking footsteps twice.

With the arrival of morning's listless light, I breathed easier and made my way to a slide presentation on finding faces around the house. I hadn't seen the Professor since our late night excursion.

Our presenter was a slender woman sitting cross-legged on a students' desk and smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a pencil skirt and a hat with a netted veil, so I guessed she'd been dead a while. The slide projector whirred benignly.

The thin woman started clicking through her carousel. The first few slides weren't that impressive. The grimaces she traced with her pointer stick in ceiling stains and cracked tiles were questionable at best.

The faces became more interesting as she continued. A mouth made of light in a pot of boiling water opened and closed as she rapidly clicked between two slides. Hanging sheets backlit by the sun revealed the diamond shaped eyes of a clown. A winking face formed by the standby lights of kitchen appliances sent a shiver down my spine.

The woman paused in her clicking to rest on a slide of a painted portrait. She took a long drag on her cigarette that never stopped smoking but never burned shorter. At first I didn't know what I was looking for. Then I realized that the portrait's eyes were not its own.



## THE NOTE

At a slide presentation on hidden faces around the house, our tacit presenter had finally started speaking.

“The day I died I didn’t notice it at first. It must have happened when I was walking to the store. I was walking around without feeling the passage of time and without reaching the store. The faces of the people in the street were unfamiliar to me. When night fell I tried to go home. I remember standing at my front door and feeling my key in my pocket or my purse, but it kept eluding my fingers. Sometimes I’d get a good hold on it and try to fit it in the keyhole, but it wouldn’t fit and kept falling out of my hands. In between essays I’d return to the street feeling like I was about to do something but could never remember what it was.

“At some point I found myself at my next door neighbor’s front door. The door was unlocked and let me right in. I felt tired so I mounted the steps to find a place to sleep. My feet felt so heavy. I was afraid I’d wake my neighbors with the sound of my dragging feet. The first bedroom I tried was empty, so I went in and sat on the bed. I put my head in my hands. They felt like cold water.

“A scream came slowly through the thick air. A little girl was in the doorway with her mouth wide open. The scream was drowned in the rising sound of rushing waters. In a sudden silence, I realized I was back on the street.”

After my sleepless night in the library, a lawnmower might have lulled me to sleep. I was no match for the gentle hum of the slide projector and our presenter’s dreamy story. I fell asleep and dreamed I was writing a letter full of nonsense words. When I woke up, the seat next to me was loaded with snapped branches and fistfuls of dry grass. A scrawled note teetered uncomfortably on the rubble: “Meet me at the well at dusk.”

## CHARON'S OBOL



Night falls faster indoors. The blue and limpid light that quavers against the window might lure a person in a darkening room out for an evening stroll. But that light is fairy light, and fairies have inhuman agendas. Better to stay indoors until one can safely discern between the dog and the wolf.

Ignoring this sound advice, I picked my way through dissolving shadows to keep my mystery date at the well. Daylight reigned in the field for the time being, but night was already roosted in the woods. Two owls were beginning a strange conversation.

When the well was in sight, I determined that I was the earliest of its visitors. I had loaded my pockets with the dry grass I found at the morning's presentation. When I reached the well I pulled some out and made a wish before dropping it in. I watched the grass settle gently before something in the well sucked it out of sight. I'm not sure what all that means for wishes; in any event, I was relieved when I looked up and saw the Professor.

"You gave me quite a fright last night. I didn't know what became of you after I found the raspberry patch," the Professor panted. It appeared as though the short walk across the field to the well had exhausted him.

"Yes, I am sorry about that. I had a bad feeling. I had to get out of those woods. I've been very unsettled."

"That's precisely what your double wants. It's imperative that you –" the Professor began before he was overtaken by a coughing fit.

I put my hand on his back and said quietly, "I am glad that it was you that left that note though. I didn't know what to expect."

"What note?" he hacked.

I jerked my hand away. "The note you left in the auditorium. On top of the branches and grass. I came here to meet you."

The Professor's cough crackled amidst his words: "You didn't come here to meet me." He held his hand up to his mouth and spit into it. When he pulled it away I saw a coin flashing in the dusk light. "Charon's obol, I guess." The Professor's low chuckle grew into a manic laughter. He was still laughing when I realized there was a third figure at the well.

## TWO PROFESSORS

At a well in a field, night was falling fast. I had the feeling one gets when the houselights dim. The Professor had just hacked up a coin. In my peripheral vision I felt him slump to the ground with his back to the well, but a newcomer to the scene required the bulk of my attention.

A fresh Professor stepped into the moonlight. "You got my note. I was worried something might have spirited it away with all the strange goings-on. Where did you get off to last night, anyway?"

"I... I had a bad feeling. I had to get out of those woods right away."

"Yes, well, you gave me quite a fright. Now about the protective materials I was able to track down. Obviously you got the hazel branches and ironweed, but there were other items I didn't feel safe leaving unattended. Finch eggs, bear root, and inland seashells could be put to dangerous use in the wrong hands."

Behind me the ailing Professor stirred. In a creaky voice he sang a little tune: "Where did you hide them you old fox? Did you bury them in your hidey hole?"

I moved aside to reveal the original Professor, visibly weakened since last he spoke. In the moment before the new Professor's eyes conveyed shock, I saw fury. "What in the world? I didn't expect to meet you here. I thought you were surveying tombs in Brazil." And to me, "You'll have to excuse us. My twin brother has a knack for failing to announce his arrivals. We're a family of eccentrics \_"

"I'm not your brother! I'm not your brother!" shrieked the old Professor as he clawed his way up the side of the well. When he had reached his feet, I saw the new Professor's fists clench and unclench nervously.

"Well I won't be insulted. You know where to find me when you've come to your senses." The new Professor stalked off into the field, and though I raced after him, I lost track of him almost immediately. Back at the well, the old Professor was dusting himself off. When he saw me he grinned and held out his hand. In it was a hand-stamped coin with a big-eyed owl on it.

"Unfortunately for you, the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk."

## WILDFLOWERS



When Joseph Avens drifted into the classroom he brought with him the scent of timothy grass and clover. He was there to give a presentation on the secret thoughts of North American wildflowers. In life, Mr. Avens was a botanist; in death, he had gained the ability to understand the language of the flowers he once studied.

“Naturally, you’ll be curious to know what goes through the mind of the famously private houseleek. Of course, you’ll recall that it was once called Jove’s Plant, the popular belief once being that if one planted it on the roof, the house would be safe from lightning. A houseleek can take years to blossom. I waited four years for the one atop my tomb to flower. When it did I could hear it faintly whisper, ‘*Sub tuum praesidium, by thy protection, sub tuum praesidium.*’ I listened to this vain sweetness for days before I was moved to blow on it with my cold breath and let it rest.

“The flowers of the Wallpepper plant wink their long lashes alluringly at the lonesome wanderer. They are a distinctly feminine flower. I sat and talked with them for a long time – they were alternately concerned with sharing the secrets of other flowers and asking me to pick them and let their poisonous leaves blister my skin.

“Bloodroot, though the rouge native women once made with it spoke volumes when found on the collars of European explorers, is a largely tacit plant. When I lean down close to its daisy-like blooms, all it does is hiss and hiss.”

Outside, steam rose from a defrosting meadow. Mr. Avens had a breathy way of speaking that made his words seem urgent but insubstantial. I leaned my head against the cold glass of a nearby window and tried to picture the faces of flowers.

“The flowers of Forget-Me-Nots take their work very seriously. Their minds are scarred like the bark of some old trees with the names

and dates associated with a million heartbreaks. If you let them they'll recite them all, and if you beg off before they're through, they have a way of frowning that is both pitiful and unsettling."

## MAYPOPS

“Thoreau said that the flowers of Blue Vervain tell a story, because of the gradual way they open. I have heard the story, and it is passed along from blossom to blossom like a phrase in the children’s game of telephone. The story gets sillier and sillier as it travels up the stalk. The last flower to blossom, standing alone at the plant’s pinnacle, is raving mad.”

I was at a seminar on the innermost thoughts of North American wildflowers, presented by the ghost of Joseph Avens, once a distinguished botanist.

“When we were alive, my wife and I used to gather specimens together. I would identify them, and she would sketch them. One day she accidentally left the house wearing all blue. The subtle differences in color between her slacks, blouse, and cardigan made her look ethereal. Her sunhat was blue-lavender. When she realized what she’d done, she scolded me for letting her out like that. I told her I wished she’d be buried in that outfit.

“When she got sick, I made it my mission to absorb her into my mind. I would sit with her for hours while she tried to tell me everything she knew. I would memorize the names of people and places and important dates like I was studying for a history exam. Sometimes her mind would get foggy and she wouldn’t remember the precise names or circumstances associated with a memory. I would memorize all the possible scenarios, so that my mind would be marked by the same confusions.

“The day before she died, she promised to tell me what it felt like to be a woman without a child. I slept on two chairs in her hospital room while she died. I lived ten years longer and saw her once. I was sleeping in a house we used to rent in the country when the Maypops were in bloom, when I woke up because of a strong light in the room. At first I didn’t recognize her because she was so bright. She was made of cubes and the cubes were made of light. Her smile was serene, but her eyes were blank, and I knew she wasn’t bothering to remember anything. I loved her mind, and it’s such a shame that it’s gone now. I think that’s why I stick around.”

## AUTOMATIC WRITING

The morning's frost gave way to a brilliant spring day, and Joseph Avens' talk on wildflowers had made me eager to try my hand at listening to them. I found a patch of early dandelions and violets to sit amongst. Light rustled around in the drawers and curtains of the outdoors as if it were looking for something. I opened my composition notebook with the thought to flatter the flowers (and thereby loosen their tongues) by drawing them.

The warmth of the sun made me forget the chill in the earth underneath me, and I could almost hear bees buzzing. I set my hand to tracing the leaves of a coquettish violet. It bowed low with false modesty in a sudden breeze that startled a few clouds into action. As the clouds moved closer to the sun, the buzzing I'd felt on the periphery of my hearing increased in intensity until it was all I could hear. My pencil felt hot and my natural impulse was to drop it, but instead my hand only gripped it tighter. I watched with dismay as the pencil drew haphazard circles on top of my unfinished violet drawing. The wind flipped the page, and the pencil began to write in a script that was not my own:

"Snow, snow, snow, snow, snow, [the word filled an entire page of my notebook before whatever was communicating with me moved on] snow, snow, snow. There is a man who looks like a hunter, but he doesn't have any teeth to tear meat with. He is camouflaged in whites, greys, and blacks and darts around like a snow hare. It is almost always dusk here, but sometimes it is early night. The sky changes from blue-grey to pink-grey to white-grey. There is always something pushing in on it, like an animal caught in a deerskin drum. Sometimes the edges of the sky are loosened and I can see shadowy movements behind it. I can never really see what's back there though, because the sky always mends itself before too long. It is always snowing but it is not cold, or anyway, I can't tell if it's cold, and the drifts never seem to change height. There is one sound here, and the sound is like a giant, live wire sweeping and crackling. I think I see the hunter – he is hiding behind a black and barren tree and his face is painted white to match the sky. I can only see him because of his shining eyes."

Here the communication ended and I cracked the knuckles on my liberated hand. The buzzing had stopped, though I'm not sure when, and the sun had resumed its vigil. I looked through the pages of



my notebook and saw that before that morning's missive, I had very little writing to show for my sojourn at the conference. It was with some satisfaction that I closed the notebook and reasoned that if my hand had written it, it must belong to me.



## MR. WRACKETT'S WILD RIDE

At the end of a long and darkened hallway, a wooden door was thumping open and shut in a slow, steady beat. I walked stoically towards it, and when my hand reached out to its doorknob, it stilled under my fingertips. I double-checked my program to make sure I was at the right classroom for Marvin Wrackett's presentation on the art of sound-sculpting. I was.

Mr. Wrackett was an audio engineer before he was murdered at Sunstone Studios in 1974. The room was dark, so I could just make out an array of assorted objects on a long table at the front of the classroom. I carefully climbed to the back of some raised seating. Mr. Wrackett's mystery objects glittered in the lowered light like deep-sea fish.

It wasn't long after I settled into my seat that I became aware of a low moan. It continued for some time until my mind began to wander. I had just begun to think about where I might have misplaced Jane Roberts' book of poetry, procured incredibly from the labyrinth that is the Sherman county interlibrary loan system, when the moaning stopped. When it resumed, it was with an added sadness, a deep-seated loneliness suddenly aware of an audience. It ratcheted up in intensity until it was almost unbearable. In an instant the wailing evaporated into the sound of gently falling rain. I could barely remember the sound of it.

A figure emerged from the shadows at the front of the classroom and took a bow. He was holding a rusted metal pipe and a piece of tin foil. I couldn't make out the pattern on his scarf, but I could see that he was satisfied with his performance. His big teeth gleamed beneath perfectly round spectacles. When the sound of rattling started, I couldn't tell whether his expression changed to concentration or horror.

## MR. WRACKETT'S WILD RIDE, PART 2

At a presentation on the art of sound-sculpting, our presenter was visibly unsettled by the sound of rattling. In a moment, the mood that Mr. Wrackett had so carefully constructed was banished by the sterile light of florescent bulbs. The haunted, timeless space was instantly returned to a lecture hall, probably outfitted in the 1970s, with plastic orange chairs and dirty Formica tabletops. The rattling changed from mysterious to persistent, almost needy.

Mr. Wrackett was searching for something on his table of objects. He peered inside the bell of a gramophone before putting his ear to it, and lifted up books to flip through their pages. Pieces of silk and lace were unfolded and shaken, and a box of tools was upended.

Somewhat hesitatingly, he scattered the contents of a beaten up shoebox. From my vantage point in the back of the classroom, they appeared to include photographs, letters, and chord charts. When they did not reveal the source of the rattling, he cast a furtive glance at his confused audience, gathered the papers into his arms, and put them back into the box.

He returned to the mess of tools and dug out a screwdriver. It was now clear to Mr. Wrackett and all of his helpless observers where the rattling came from. With shaking hands, he slowly unscrewed the four screws on the back of a Purity amplifier. He laid the back piece aside, bent down to see inside, and promptly disappeared.

There was instantly a queue to see inside the amp, and since spirits move faster than air, I was last. The strange anticipation of the scene lent a sense of horror to an otherwise charming family of eyeless baby mice, bouncing on the springs of the amp's reverb tank. A bodiless spirit spoke into my ear, "Poor Marvin must have imagined it was the Deathwatch Beetle. There's nothing worse than hearing your beetle after you're already dead."

## ASHES TO ASHES

On the eve of the last day of the conference, I attended the annual Green Lady Gala, a far less glamorous affair than it sounds. In the absence of anything resembling a ballroom, the conference's organizers had chosen the college's gymnasium as the next best thing. They had spent the day in there making a terrible mess with what one can only assume were an attempt at festive decorations: crumbling flower arrangements, molding crepe paper, raggedy banners and pennants representing all four centuries of the conference – the result was not unlike the festering wedding feast of Miss Havisham.

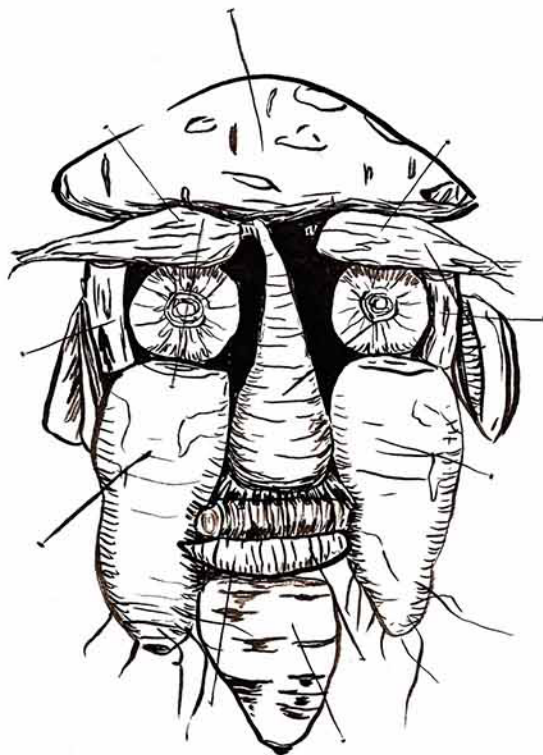
I had spent the evening haunting the entrance to the Gala, so at 8 p.m. sharp I heard a gramophone pick up in the middle of a ragtime tune. It brought with it all the noises of a party already in full swing. In modest flats purchased especially for the occasion, I entered the gym and started in on an hour of shuffling noiselessly around the perimeter. I wasn't especially surprised when no one asked me to dance (I'm sure my mortal frame would be far clumsier than an ethereal one), but I did begin to experience a queasiness in my throat, which brought to mind certain junior high dances. I decided to wander the halls for a bit.

The Green Lady Gala is named for a marchioness who died of a broken heart in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps it was in homage to her memory that the halls were filled with the carnage of love: jilted dance partners, spurned lovers, jealous suitors, etc. I snuck past it all to where the hall turned a corner and was plunged into welcome silence. I was thinking about how easily one could die of a broken heart in the olden days and how difficult it would be now, when I chanced to hear the Professor's voice emanating from a closed door on my right. The voice was constant and agitated, so I thought I might sneak in unnoticed. In the dark of the tiny room (a men's bathroom?), I could just make out the profiles of two seemingly identical figures. The standing Professor was lecturing the seated one.

“Naughty, naughty, must be punished. Digging in the dirt, dragging dirt all over the place! Dirt in the cupboard, dirt in the sheets, dirt in my shoes! I had such big plans, but you have proven to be nothing but a nuisance – nothing but a mess-maker, nothing but a dirt-dragger! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust – dirt to dirt!”

The seated Professor sat passively and when the standing Professor lit a match, I understood why. Sitting atop a stuffed suit, the seated Professor's head was nothing but a mass of cleverly arranged root vegetables stuck together with long pins. It was all I could do to

exit the room without bursting into laughter. Running down the hallway back to the Gala, I laughed like a madwoman and smelled the scent of burning straw.



## MORGANA

Candlelight and cigar smoke managed to transform the faculty lounge into the kind of salon Gertrude Stein might have approved of. The austere portraits of the college's benefactors softened in the ambient light. The Green Lady Gala had wound down an hour ago and the committed revelers had gathered here to see the night through.

I was curled in an armchair, comfortably obscured by the otherworldly tobacco fog and listening to the quiet conversations of spirits. Thomas Lynn Bradford, the spiritualist who killed himself to prove the existence of ghosts, fluttered unsuccessfully around the room trying to procure a physical sound out of anything. A man stroked a woman's hair, only sometimes accidentally putting his hand through her face. A piano played itself. I was almost asleep when I perceived a pair of eyes staring steadily in my direction. She didn't wait for an invitation; in an instant, she was seated at my side.

"I am Morgana, once a famous gypsy fortune swindler. In life I couldn't foresee a damn thing, but was blessed with acute powers of perception that I used to their fullest advantage. I was so convincing that a Hungarian prince, whose fortune I told, once took a gay lover because of one of my 'predictions.' Funny thing is, now that I'm dead, I see everything all the time, but have no idea how to spin it. It would be my pleasure to read your palm, though you'll have to act as your own interpreter."

I was just about to protest – I'd had about enough auguring for one conference - when I realized my hand was already in hers.

"Weak winter light illuminates a room full of boxes. It is an apartment room with a radiator in it. Someone is moving the boxes. She is opening them and tossing them aside. She is trying to find something – I cannot see what is in the boxes. She is blocking my view with her body. The light is white-grey and sometimes fills the room like a wave so the vision is almost lost. She's moved and now I can see inside a box that has fallen on its side. Something that looks like a lace glove is reaching out of it, but now I see that it's actually the skin of a boneless hand. Someone was so careful packing up all these little boxes – it is a shame that she is so careless with them! A nest of hair tumbles out of another; a handful of vertebrae hits the floor like jacks. The figure is turning around. My god, she looks like you! Except –" and here Morgana leaned in closely over my hand "she doesn't have any teeth!"

And with that, Morgana was gone. A little voice started up behind me. It was Thomas Lynn Bradford:

“You mustn’t pay her any mind. She never was a gypsy, and she isn’t one now. By all accounts, she was a dental hygienist who did herself in on laughing gas. All her ‘visions’ have to do with teeth. I cannot abide a spirit who doesn’t own up to the person they were in life. The afterlife is not some eternal stage where you can act out the unfulfilled characters of your humdrum life. It is a place for ritual and obsession.”

## PAPER DOLLS

After the excitement of the preceding evening, I was glad for the quiet desolation of being indoors during a spring rain. Outside a starling screamed and shook its chimerical coat. Inside it grew darker, then lighter, then darker. On the last day of the conference, I was at a class on arranging other people's pictures.

"There are classic techniques, like taking all the framed pictures off the wall and placing them face down on the floor. An increasingly popular variation on this is to stack them in some kind of structure – a four-walled room, a pyramid – the important thing is that they are all faced inward. Speaking from a century of experience, I encourage you to experiment beyond these basic tricks. Single someone out for instance. On a coffee table full of photographs, pick out one to place underneath the table and face it so it looks yearningly up at its family. Treat photographs on a wall like paper dolls and make up stories about them. Move them around according to the demands of the story – tear some in half if you have to. Take this set of 6 smiling faces for example – what happens if I..."

Our instructor had an indistinct face, a feature only enhanced by the half-light of the rain. His black suit faded into the shadows when the clouds gathered more tightly. I strained my eyes to get a handle on him, but closer inspection only made him more elusive. In the shadows, his suit seemed to take on impossible shapes: a thin horse, a snowman, an upturned bouquet. I had already lost the thread of his presentation when I saw a piece of him skitter away. With widening eyes, I watched it travel across the floor and climb up the wall to the window. When it hit the glass, it disappeared.

"...It was my feeling that Johnny's family should know what happened in the woods. That's why I filled the bathtub with his portraits. In the case of Miranda, I simply felt that as the middle child, she should be afforded more attention. I got the idea to use the red marker after she got that terrible grade on her –"

In an instant, every window in the classroom was shattered. I hit the floor with my hands over my head, though the damage was already done. When I arose moments later, I found the skies greatly darkened and the classroom empty.





## THE TYPEWRITER

The 422<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wraiths for Writing Conference ended early that year. On my program of events I had circled “The Poltergeist’s Muse” at 11 a.m. and “The Living Snapshot” at 1 p.m., but I never got to attend them. Everyone was gone. I stepped lightly over broken glass. On the way to the girls’ dormitory to collect my travel bag, I peered into empty classroom after empty classroom. The air felt clear and cold without the hum of countless troubled energies.

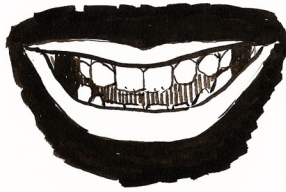
Something moving in the field made me pause at a window, but it disappeared into the woods before I could see it. When I pulled away from the glass I could see a reflection of the back of someone’s head. I whirled around to greet its owner but no one was there. I turned back to the window where the reflection remained and touching my own head, discovered it was my own. With my heart beating fast, I wondered by what means all the other attendees had left and when the bus would be coming for me. I looked through my eyeless head to watch the rain grow fiercer. I was anxious to get out doors, even if it was just to soak in the downpour and squint my eyes at the road.

As I walked down the hall (quicker with every moment), I felt as if I weren’t alone after all. In between lightning strikes, my shadow moved in the darkness. Moments later, bag in hand, I hesitated in front of the dormitory exit. I had considered the outdoors the more concrete of the two realms I hovered between, but now, watching the rain stream down the glass, I wasn’t so sure. Sky, trees, and field melded together and appeared to ooze. In the wake of a thunderclap, the sound of tapping shifted into focus. I turned to follow it.

In a room I had passed earlier, a light was on. On a desk a typewriter’s keys were tapping though the chair in front it was empty. I think I dropped my bag when I drew closer to it. Though there was no paper in the typewriter, I started to collect the letters it chose in my mind and read what it was writing. I was surprised to find it was composing a poem.



## THE FINALE



A little person inside of me was listening for the sound of bus wheels on gravel. As I leaned in to read the invisible poem of the paperless typewriter, I felt the listener sink deeper inside myself.

“First-comer - that fast-walker - lives to tell  
Stories to end, though winter never ends.  
Walking the halls of the Nautilus shell,  
Reflected in a mirror that cracks and mends,  
She slips through the fissures, teeth gleaming white,  
Soft as snow and cool as silk is her bite.”

Though I don't remember sitting down, I find that my fingers are resting on the typewriter's suddenly still keys. Maybe I wrote that poem. I think about how little writing I've had time for during this year's conference and how little time I'll have once I get back home. I listen to the sound of slowing rain while my fingers play out the familiar dance of settling down to work. There's no harm in typing out a few notes from this year's conference while I wait for my bus to arrive.

I start to describe the lonely feeling I had when I first arrived at the conference and get a few paragraphs in when I notice that I can see my breath pulsate in the space where the typewriter's paper would go. At a loss for words anyway, I pause from my work to watch it gather and disperse. After some moments I fancy I can see a shadow moving within it. The shadow starts out small - a little figure pushing through an overwhelming fog - but in between breaths, it grows. It begins to overtake the fog until it is tramping through it. I hold my breath for longer intervals. When it seems it couldn't grow any larger without bursting through the fog, I hold my breath the longest. In a rush I release it and am face to face with a black shadow that has my eyes. When it smiles, I can see that it also has my teeth. We stare at each other for what seems like a long time. With a quick wink, it begins to fade away. The smile lingers longest.

I write and write. At times I lose the thread of what I'm writing, but then I pick up a new one. It's the easiest writing of my life, like telling jokes in a dream. My fingers never tire, and my eyes rarely leave the keys. Sometimes a shift in the light brings with it a rush of noise - a young woman laughing, a flutter of footsteps, water running - but most of the time it's delightfully still. Occasionally I take a break from my work to look out the window, but the picture is always fuzzy, and I lose interest quickly. Sometimes the door to the room I work in is closed, and when it is, a distracting blue light plays along its edges. The only time I leave my work desk is to open the door and dispel the annoying light. I hear the sound of a bus outside the window but can't remember why I was listening for it. I look at my watch but its numbers are all out of order. Perhaps it's already time for the 423<sup>rd</sup> Wraiths for Writing Conference.





