

The Ghosts of New England

I remember walking home
In the gathering chill
Of the year's first frost.
I was ten years old, and cold,
And happy alone by the woods,
By the fox and raccoon and moles,
Out where we lived then,
Out passed the suburbs,
Where the winding two-laner
Barely held cars from Boston streets.

I was walking along the guardrail,
A practiced skill,
Hopping and balancing from post to cable to post,
My sneakers worn soft as moccasins,
With a sideways eye on wind-whipped leaves,
On pumpkins carved, perched on porches like gargoyles,
And a steady ear cocked to the eerie source
Of wind chimes and dog barks.

Along the road I edged in failing light,
Halloween was in the trees,
In the smell of the leaves,
In the eyes of ghosts
Alive in the shadows,
Peering out from in between
The fading day and dark,
From granite caves in woods like these,
From upper attic eaves and cobwebbed cellars.
Feeding on wind and water,
On those lifeless, leafless trees,
On the smell of winter on autumn nights,
Walking me home in the gathering chill.

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Adventuring,
I left the roadside, plunged into the woods,
Discovered a graveyard forgotten,
Two centuries old, the headstones broken,
Knocked over so there was no way to know
If I trod on earth or grave.
There were field mice in plain view, a rare sight,
And a wet leave swamp smell on dry ground.
Overhead through leafless black trees
Broken high clouds glowed orange,
Flowed northeast towards Maine
And the deep white woods I'd been to once.
There were no planes or distant voices
Yet I was not a boy afraid, yet I
Was weirdly secure in the cooling twilight,
In the strange clearing, in the dark woods.
The names on the stones held wonder
And the ghosts,
The ghosts were there.
They knew it as I somehow knew it,
They breathed in the earth and the air
And the trees in the circle around them,
And the circle breathed in them.
And I a young explorer approached
With the careless respect of a boy
To coax them out of hiding,
Almost,
To coax the ghosts to show themselves,
To meet me face to face,
Someday, though not that day,
For it was getting dark
And I was just a boy, alone and late for dinner.

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Later by years I found them again,
In Boston.
They edged near my vision and touch near trees or water
Near twilight or dawn or sometimes more sadly more lost
In alleyways or doorways or dumpsters,
With the homeless, with the crazy,
After business suits speedwalking by.
They followed me home from bus stops
And crept through windows left open.
I was busy, I had no time to console them, then,
But I sensed they knew me,
Sensed they forgave me,
Sensed they knew that someday
I would find some way
To pause, and listen,
And meet them face to face.

Later still they found me out West,
Beset though I was by dust devil ghosts,
The lockjawed ghosts of the Southwest deserts,
Humorless ghosts that permit no errors,
Hungry ghosts of sun rays and sand,
Ghosts that melt in water,
Ghosts that can be *fooled*;
They found me resting, weary, counting hours,
The ghosts from my past by a Joshua tree,
Waiting it seemed for a lull in the wind,
Calm as the eye of a hurricane,
Smelling of twilight and mulch.
They were barely with me, made of memory
But more real like an old family photo
Of people you never knew,
With faces you've always known.

* * *

Today I am grown they're almost lost
They're the smell of the rain
Or the eye of a crow,
They're hiding in the upturned leaves
Of a white birch on a moonless night.
Today I wait for them special, as I must,
Ignored too long in my dark kitchen.

Today I am grown
And the ghosts lie in wait as heron,
Lie like fate for old believers,
Lie ready for the Easter sunrise, cold,
Down by the river, geese drifting north again.
They're deep in the North Woods of Maine
Where I walk trailless, creekside, careful,
Searching the underbrush, hopping and balancing
From rock to mud to rock.
Practiced and prepared,
A freeze-dried dinner, an old compass,
My bootsoles worn as in greeting,
As in memory, out here passed the roads,
The homes, the trails even.
Today I seek them alone in myself,
Conjured almost as the breath I exhale
Mingles with the unspoiled air
Mingles with the lingering vision
Of a ten year old cold in the dusk.

The ghosts.
The ghosts of New England.
With tri-corner hats or buckskin breeches,
Now as then,
They call me the long way home.