

After

I do not believe in ghosts, which, since my death, has become something of a problem. We can't all just *exist* afterwards – there isn't the room. 100 billion of us floating on the earth? What happens when the world explodes? When there is no planet left to afterlife on? Do we haunt space? Do we sit mute in the dark, staring out like Banquo's ghost, waiting for the cosmos to be eaten by black holes? And then what – drift in the nothing? What vanity to imagine the universe cares about preserving us.

Yet here I am. As much as anything else.

I don't have a body, so how can I have a brain? Or rather, I assume, my body is somewhere several miles away. My dead brain in it. When I stand (I do not stand, there are no legs to stand on) in front of the mirror, I can see there is nothing there. But if I stare (again, yes, no eyes, but the memory of staring) at where my reflection ought to be, a feeling washes over me. I begin to know my presence, begin to shade in certain features of bones and skin.

The rest of the time, I am a transparent central nervous system, floating about like a jellyfish, my tendrils brushing the backs of chairs, sweeping up the lint and hair from the floor. Sometimes when I come forth I take up the whole of a room, like a

balloon slotted between ribs and blown up to make a space for breath.

I wasn't. And then I was. And now I am this. Time stutters. I can spend what feels like weeks watching the progress of a dust mote fall from a sunbeam. But Hannah is still there, a shape under the duvet.

There must be, I have decided, a time limit, a path of progression. *Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night. A certain term* sounds nice and legislative. I have a strong urge to file a complaint, to start some admin process that will result in an all-departments email and change of policy.

A thing I used to say often to my students – *What does your character want? They must want something, even if it's only a glass of water, The Want will power them through.*

This feels like a way forward, a shape. What would I like to eat, what music would I like to hear, what am I hungry for? What does a ghost want?

What does Old Hamlet want? His murder to be avenged.

What does Slimmer want? To fill an endless emptiness?

What does Patrick Swayze want? To touch his girlfriend?

Long term, if I remember the film right – he wants to warn his girlfriend that his best friend murdered him and is making moves on her. Same as Hamlet.

I watch Hannah standing at the sink while she fills the kettle. She stares ahead, eyes swollen. I think of lifting my arm to touch her shoulder. The kettle overflows and still it feels like my arm is on its way towards her, lifting and lifting but never arriving. She swears and shuts off the water, drops the kettle in the sink and leaves the flat. I try to follow – I end up walking back through the doorway. I try a window and, when I pass through it, I arrive back in the front room, again and again. Each time I am surprised.

I feel something where my stomach used to be. I think of my childhood thumbs turning a rubber toy that springs into the air, how sometimes it was inexplicably wet. A luminous shade of green.

I float to the top corner of our bedroom – a vantage point I never knew in life. I watch as the flat becomes the home of others – the moths, the spiders, the silverfish, the dust motes and then the leftovers of the dead before me, the people who left parts of themselves dropped through the floorboards. I am the man who left small shopping lists, I am he of the forgotten capellini in the back of the cupboard, the beard shavings sitting in the U-bend of the sink and the cashews that fell under the appliances when I opened them roughly and they scattered on the floor and rather than sweep them up I kicked them to the corners of the room. Hannah will be the earring that she cried over when it was lost – it is down in the U-bend with my beard trimmings, safe in a nest. And the coppers whose jar she dropped and smashed so they spilled out and £1.26 went behind the washing machine to corrode and turn green.

Tumbleweed of hair and dust.

Eyelashes with their pinch of skin at the end.

Szechuan peppercorns, enough to fill the gap between your life line and your heart line.

Only the clothes moths move the air in the flat. No breath. All the spiders are asleep and the one mouse who made it up here while the door was open for the rubbish run has died beneath the floorboards before she could have her babies.

We had a code, she'd come up to me at a party and say *sandwich*, and then I'd know she needed to leave. If I wanted to stay, I said *haddock*, and she would slope off alone. At first this was a lovely secret, but it started to happen often and it was irritating when

she wouldn't say goodbye to anyone, that it had to be a secret between the two of us.

'I don't like to say goodbye,' she told me.

'So stay.'

'Once I have it in my head that what we're doing is standing around talking and drinking wine, I can't stop thinking about being at home.' She started to sandwich me before I'd finished my first drink, and I haddocked her more out of irritation than a desire to stay at the party.

Hannah is back. She has a bottle of Night Nurse. She pours a large glass of tap water and then opens the fridge. The light illuminates the toad brown of the crisper drawer. She starts emptying the vegetables: soft kohlrabi I had meant to pickle, though no one would eat it. Spring onions whose green ends look like rat tails. An aubergine, wet and molelike, which collapses as she tries to extract it, her hand in a plastic bag.

Once the crisper is cleared she turns her attention to the half-empty jars in the door. Chutneys and chilli crisp and half a dozen open jars of anchovies. The warning beeps of the fridge sound, but she pays them no heed. She takes out a large jar of pickled red cabbage and puts the whole thing in the bin. Then she stands very still in the door of the fridge with the beeps and the beeps and the beeps. She turns and retrieves the jar of cabbage from the bin and opens it on the counter. She recoils from the smell, takes a fork and stabs a few tendrils and puts them in her mouth. She chews and it is the sound of walking on deep new snow. The skin around her eyes prickles pink. She coughs but swallows. Still the fridge beeps. She puts the lid on the cabbage and puts it back in the fridge and closes the door. In the quiet after, she opens the Night Nurse and drinks it straight from the bottle, then stands with her fingers over her eyes and her teeth bared.

She is not crying; this is something else. I watch her for what
might be weeks.

The shadow of a cloud climbing a green sunlit hill.

Breath, breath.

Still.