
Leslie Pietrzyk

Ghost, 1899

One

You stand at the edge of the river.

You're not sure how it happened. It could have been that rigid knot growing inside your chest that you ignored. It could have been staring blankly into emptiness or shooting deep into darkness. It could have been stepping into the street at the wrong moment when the streetcar rattled by. It could have been bad drink at the hotel, or too many, and wandering here, to the edge of the river, and walking forward into the splash, the cold, the black. It could have been your baby. It could have been anything. When you were alive, you thought these details of dying would matter, and now you discover that they don't. You're dead. You must now find a way to believe that.

The dead pass through the living the way sunlight passes through a window.

You think you heard someone say that once, and now it makes no sense. That's not what it's like, not at all. What it's like can't be explained. That dampness in your bones. That's close.

But being dead, you can see this river as it is, as it was, as it will be. You don't own the words to describe the monstrous, leathery creatures roaming this swamp land before time began, or to explain the shiny towers you see overtaking the sky, the iron and metal and glass and fiber optics and who knows what else, the smells, the swirl of colors, the noisy thrust of this city you imagined was yours. You can see, but you don't have words. Volvo. Sheraton. Nordstrom. Corolla.

Traffic light. iPhone. These things don't exist yet, but you understand that they will. (There could be a word only for that, for seeing what waits ahead but not knowing what to call it.) You look at the river, and you look at it and look at it: something has changed.

You could return to haunt the people you left—flicker through their dreams and tiptoe along their peripheral vision—but instead you've come here, with the others. You're not alone here. Why here, why this river? The dead collect here, as if washed ashore like filmy plastic bags and Styrofoam cups. Sticks and clots of leaves. You are one of many drawn to something that flows, that runs. Something that is a path, and exactly this: something that makes its own path.

"Be water," philosophers have advised. "Water follows the least resistant path." The living do not know this. In this way, the dead may seem superior. Water will wear away rock. Rock.

You can look ahead and see that water will be as good as gold to flat cities in the desert, to China with its massive dams; or you can look back and see New Orleans gathering at the foot of the Mississippi, the hopeful path of the James River rolled out like a carpet... and farther back, the Seine, the Thames...and back again, the Nile, the Euphrates. The history of the world is the history of the river.

What does the river look like now that you are dead? You dip your silvery hand into its flow. (Impossible to hold water in your hands.) You are drawn here. You are dead, and you are drawn here. A river moves and goes nowhere in the end. Like you.

Ghost.

Haunting thing.

Two

You know more than you want to know. The only surprise is that you are not surprised. Inside that man lives a girl aching to reveal herself. Your mother can't love you, though she loves your sister with a dazzling ease. That baby will speak only gibberish, but that other baby will invent a machine to change the world. You have a half-brother with red hair who you'll never meet.

What you thought was most precious to you has vanished. You are always afraid now, and jumpy. A voice that's almost familiar

tells you that you're beautiful. Someone moans your name again and again. The scent of embers in a fireplace wreathes you, intoxicates you. You cannot speak. You wonder if you ever truly spoke. You would do it all differently, but actually you wouldn't.

You are dead. You walk, and the air shifts lightly. People glance over their shoulders, squinting, furrowed brows, wanting to see what has passed through them, but when they look, you won't be there. *Where are you?* ask the ones left behind. (Why has no one come back?)

People jump into rivers and their bodies are never found. That is who you become when you're dead, the body unfound, the question unasked, the secret unspoken. You are the thing that exists as nothingness, the presence that is only absence. You are here only because you aren't here.

Why would God give us only one outcome? The river flows one direction. Who can fight that current? You will imagine you've drifted or fought free. But in the end, that current will take you.

Rocks don't die.

Three

No matter is created or destroyed. You know this basic law of science, though you don't understand how you know it. You are dead, and most of what you know you can't understand; you can only see, only witness. You have vision, but no understanding.

You see them toiling; you see the projects of the past, of the future. Stone, wood, steel, plastic. The brains of generations, the bodies that break and flail in great efforts, the groans, the movement, the change, the creation, the progress, the progress. You see this great Chicago river, reversed, with cheers and congratulations and photographs and speeches. Words are recorded onto paper. You see that you were once a speck upon a speck. Do cats dream? (This question is equal to any question.)

You exist, though you don't. You glimmer between worlds, between sleep and wakefulness, between yes and no, between dark and light, between night and day. You are the gloaming, the yearning, the something lost that might yet be recovered, the half-remembered dream about the bear, the silent need. Why would God give us only one outcome?

No matter is created nor destroyed. It is only transferred to another form. Water to ice, water to steam, wood to ash. Changing the flow of a river will change everything. And nothing.

You can't forget this question: Why has no one come back?

Four

How long into the future will a ghost linger? *What are you looking for? What are you waiting for? What do you want? Why are you here?* Their questions pass through like sunlight through the window. You feel the tickle of their questions, the ceaseless itch of them. They want to know.

The answer is: That dampness in your bones.

The answer is: We know more than we want to know.

They can't ignore the silent need of your presence before them. You go to them, or do they call you?

If anyone comes back, it will be you. You believed that. They believe it, still.

Five

They want you back, they call for you, they cry and moan and light candles and break hearts with the weight of longing, until they must trust that there are things they can't see. It's impossible to hold water in the hand. Feel it trickle through fingers, feel it there. Then it's gone. They must trust it's there, even when they see that it's not, even when they *know* that it's not.

The answer is: Never forget us. We won't forget you—until we do.

Leslie Pietrzyk is the author of two novels, *Pears on a Willow Tree* (Avon Books) and *A Year and a Day* (William Morrow). Her short fiction has appeared in many journals, including *Gettysburg Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Sun*. She teaches fiction in the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins University and in the low-residency MFA program at Converse College.