

Ghosts of the Mind

ELIZABETH MARONEY

Once I walked through the streets of a city of the dead, littered with the plaster casts of the dying. The ancient ruins of Pompeii were all around me, and the hot dry air did nothing to dispel the ghosts frozen in death. Entering the hollowed homes, cool and dark, I found that the mosaics on the floor and murals on the walls carried whispers of sandaled feet bustling about. A fenced-off open-air warehouse of vases, tables, and baskets preserved in ash stood along one side of the central square, from which one could clearly see Mt. Vesuvius. Against the clear blue sky, barely spotted with bright white clouds, the dark outline of the volcano, long quiet, seemed to be vaguely threatening and painfully mundane. Gazing at it, even with my brain pronouncing clearly that it was dormant and harmless, I imagined I could feel whispers pressing in, warning that sometimes the worst dangers are the ones that hide in broad daylight. These murmurs drew me back to the warehouse, where nestled amongst the artistically posed marble statues was a glass box with a dry husk inside. Under the watchful gaze of a proud Athena lay the plaster cast of a pregnant woman, curled around her heavy stomach. My over-eager imagination pushed me against the fence for support as my mind ran away with me, from me, out of control into utter fantasy.

Once, I walked through the forgotten wing of a museum where the only sounds were the thrum of air conditioning and my own breath, suddenly noisy. My feet led me between tall glass cases containing artifacts of the nineteenth century: chests, silver, mirrors. Pacing the narrow corridors, my gaze drifting from floor to ceiling to take in all preserved before me, I remembered a city of the dead preserved in ash, not glass, and I did not realize I had reached the paintings until *Mrs. William Loring Andrews* in a gypsy costume caught my eye. I crouched on the floor and found myself suddenly transfixed by her gaze. I couldn't look away: my imagination savored the weary sadness born of a thousand small disappointments in her eyes, and I felt my breath catch. My mind conjured images of a young girl in a silly costume, fixing her

hair in one of the mirrors behind me, nestling red flowers just so amongst her dark tresses. I imagined myself reaching forward to drape her shawls more modestly around her shoulders, then embracing her. But I stood quickly, interrupting my reverie, and hurried out of the cool dark as I fled her ghost.

Once I wandered through a true city of the dead, a necropolis buried beneath the seat of Catholicism. As a thousand or more visitors flocked to St. Peter's Basilica, I joined a dozen others underground, cut off from the world by sliding glass doors and the foundation of the Church's church. I peered into tombs, the homes of the dead, and marveled at the marble tiles covering floors, walls, and ceilings. I read the Latin inscriptions above the doors, heralding the deeds of one Roman pagan or another. Almost two millennia ago, these mausoleums stood above ground, under nothing but the sky and trees their gods had called forth. Now the hard-packed earth beneath my feet met its twin above my head, and the roofs of tombs had been cut off to ensure a level foundation. Led to the seventeen plastic boxes containing the bones—or 'relics,' as the devout would have me say—of St. Peter himself, I drank in the sight, praying the first Pope might dispel this notion of ghosts emanating from the walls that my mind seemed to be enjoying so. Instead, I carried one more ghost of my own creation with me when I stepped back into the hot, dirty air of Vatican City.

Once I wandered through the decrepit ruins of the Forum, gazing idly at crumpled marble columns and disintegrating Latin texts that spoke of the grandeur of Rome. As I kicked aside a stray rock—or piece of history, as the Italians would have me say—the verses of Percy Bysshe Shelley came to my mind:

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*

There were no Roman ghosts whispering there, for they were bound up in the words etched into marble; only Shelley and his forgotten king spoke to me from another past. My imagination felt no need to participate as my logical, memorizing brain provided the fantasy for once. I was walking through Rome, but I was a thousand miles away, traversing barren desert and encountering a giant made of stone.

*Nothing beside remains . . .
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The sky above me could very well have hung above the drifting sands, I thought; the dirt below my feet was not so very different from the coarse grains of the Sahara or the Gobi. I was so transfixed by my own memories that I did not realize I'd wandered from my family until my mother called my name, reminding me of the here and now my mind had chosen to forget for a short while.

Once, my mother lost her memory. My brother brought her to my room when she didn't know what year it was. He was panicked, she was panicked, and they both expected me to know what to do. My mother sat on my bed, eyes straining against unshed tears as she anxiously tapped her fingers against her lips. My idol listened to our tales of the recent past only to forget what we'd said moments later. The woman who could do anything tried to remember a year of her life. I swallowed the oddly heart-shaped lump in my throat and gave orders, soothed my mother, and called a doctor. My emotions fled, and the random oddity of this reality battered my brain. As I clutched my mother's purse in the waiting room, my foot tapped incessantly as I tried to process what had gone on, tried to memorize and make sense of it all.

"Where's Daddy?"

"Did I go insane?"

"Is this a nightmare?"

"Did I . . . hurt either of you?"

Then, there'd been tears, there'd been calming words, and there'd been a complete erasure of my mother's brain every three minutes. Then, there'd been no breathing, no thinking, and not a single ghost to distract me. Now, breathing seemed to take effort, and there were suddenly tears on my face.

My father was in Asia. My aunt wouldn't pick up her phone. My mother was in the hospital. My brother was holding my hand. I wasn't breathing, couldn't breathe, because everything was here and now and so utterly *real* that I couldn't process it. Where were my imaginings, my fantasies, my complete departures from this world? Why was it so much easier to paint fictional portraits of the lives of the dead than to accept what had just occurred before my eyes? And why was the world only just now crushing against me? Where had panic been while my mother sat on my bed, hand over her lips, eyes lit with a fear from which she still sought to protect us, her children? But this wasn't panic, not exactly, because now, there was this feeling, this thing almost like calm, but it couldn't be because my mother was out of sight with doctors who said words like "transient global amnesia" as though it were the most normal

thing when my mother couldn't remember a year of her life. I couldn't be calm now, I couldn't be returning to that state, that state where everything was normal because I had to pretend it was normal so it could somehow *be* normal. The visceral memory of the day was slipping away, and I couldn't hold on to it, and it was so hard to reach for it, and the doctor was coming out, and I couldn't quite take the memory into my mind, and the doctor was saying I looked so much like my mother, and I still couldn't reach it, and I was nodding, and the memory was slipping away, and the doctor was smiling.

Once I lost a memory. It was a memory of a bad day, a horrible day, a day I couldn't have imagined, even with all the practice my imagination had ever had. It passed away from me, into the space inside my mind where things lurk, unknown. Even my nightmares wouldn't approach there, and I couldn't find it to reclaim that day, to understand it.

Once I glanced at my mother reading a newspaper and her fingers were tapping her lips, and the space opened for a brief moment and I couldn't breathe and I almost had it. But then it closed again.

Once my mother came bounding merrily back from an appointment with a neurosurgeon and showed me scans of her brain. Unable to recall the eight hours of that day, she held up the film to a light and smiled as she told me about complex migraines and spots on her brain.

Once as a little girl I went to a grown-up party and all the adults said I was just like my mother. I smiled and I couldn't breathe because that was all I had ever wanted.

Once I sat thinking in my room and I looked in a mirror and saw my hand resting on my chin, my fingers suspended above my lips. The space opened, and I couldn't breathe and it was so close and it closed.

Once my mother held a dinner party and decided to tell a story she could never really know. She made me out to be a heroine, the one who kept it together and did all the right things and saved the day. The space opened and threatened to swallow me, and I ran to my room, and the space wouldn't close. I couldn't stop it as my mind flew me to that day with a clarity I'd never known in my imaginings: my mother was laughing uneasily as she told us our joke wasn't funny; my mother was looking up at us with disbelief and panic

writ across her face; my mother was pressing her fingers to her lips, and tears were slipping from her eyes. I gasped as it all flooded through me, and it wasn't anything I'd made up, and it wasn't something I could distance myself from by virtue of time passing or lack of truth. It was real emotion unlike anything I'd ever summoned for paintings or poems or plaster or pillars. The space was big, so big, and it swallowed me whole, and down at the bottom, down where there was no light but a doctor's flashlight shining in my mother's eyes, I saw her the day she checked out of the hospital.

"I'm fine, Liz. I'm going to be fine."

Once, I told a story about my mother. It was true, and it was real, and there's not a single soul who can corroborate it. My father was in Asia. My grandparents were in Florida. My aunt's phone was turned off. My brother was listening to me. My mother didn't know what day it was. Now, she has set that day aside, having no memory of what happened or of how scared and frightened and anxious and confused and panicked and weak she was. She can joke about her brain because her only memories are the ones we've given her, fables whose validity she trusts but can't prove. She can laugh because she refuses to let that day mean something, thinking others might perceive it as a shortcoming or weakness. But it does mean something. No matter how my mother tells the story, I was not heroic, I was not dependable, I was not saving the day. Those stories she tells are not truths.

I was reacting and overflowing and taking everything into me. That is the truth. My mind was more of an active observer than it had ever been in my life. That is the truth. That day was legitimately earth-shattering, tearing my world to pieces only to reconstruct it as something so subtly different that no one else could detect the change. That is the truth. The memories of that day still make me weak with fear and desperation. That is the truth. My aunt showed up at the hospital an hour after we arrived and ten minutes after we finally got in touch with my father. That is the truth. The doctors told us it shouldn't happen again. That is the truth. My brother sat by my side and held my hand the whole day. That is the truth. My mother is fine. That is the truth. I am fine.

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