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The Least Cricket *of* Evening

Robert Vivian

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Set in Vendetta
by Bob Reitz.
Designed by
Nathan Putens.

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This book is dedicated to

Sue William Silverman,

whose generosity of spirit

is a light unto itself

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What was said to the rose that made it open
was said to me here in my chest.

RUMI

Translated by Coleman Banks

Here is an unspeakable secret:
Paradise is all around us and
we do not understand.

THOMAS MERTON

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander

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"The Latecomer to Glorious Places": *Upstreet*

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1

Hauntings

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Ghost Hallway

I live in a ghost hallway. They come and go whenever they want, like the transparent, blow-away wings of bees. Their spirits hover inside this house on Mechanic Street like a twilight hue filling a wine glass. I live more or less inside their moods, which they carry behind them in traces of light that flood the panes one window at a time and in the creaky flutes of rusty hinges. The ghosts don't say "boo" and they don't swing chains. They're good ghosts as far as I can tell, calm as a cup of tea, considerate and watchful and able to pay attention to the least thing for hours.

I like how they watch me read without telling me what to think; I like how they touch my mind with ghost memories, laughing and smoking on the porch with their neighbors. I like how they stared out these same windows, serious and alone in their own thoughts, unable to share with each other the deepest parts of themselves because the inner commotion was too great to put into words. I see how after a fight or a death in the family they sat by themselves in the living room, wanting things to be good again, wanting to be healed but not being able to do anything but wait.

What they have left behind is shorn of all eventfulness as if what happened here long ago in this quasi-dilapidated shotgun house still lingers on as after- tone, slowly turning into something else, the echo of their memories which I navigate now

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with a cup of coffee and a three-day beard. I'm doing a soft-shoe in my slippers through their long recollections, the fog that hangs in the trees between dreams. They heard the same front door whine and clatter and the soft thudding of footfalls on the sidewalk: they heard the wind in the trees and the wash of rain tearing through them on its way to another season carrying a hundred small deaths in its wake. Their senses are alive in mine, just as mine are remade in the memory of theirs. It's a mysterious transference that I do not understand. I don't necessarily like to feel the pangs of sorrow the woman felt, beetling up and down her spine like a slug of mercury, finding her defenseless in her own house at different times in her life, like a painful sickness that keeps coming back. I don't know why she was sad, but her sadness cleaned out the closets and touched the cobwebs lifting themselves out of the corners.

I think her sadness gave way to something else, something precious and loving whose slender and tender roots are planted in the long-lived acceptance of a silent struggle. Now I think this acceptance is her legacy to me and anyone else who happens to live here, a gift she blows like a kiss from the other side. She is here and not here, a mid-Michigan wife who did her duty and loved her children, though they left her anyway, and her difficult husband, who died before her. It's her house or no one's, though she never worked outside the home. Her husband is a different story, downstairs in the basement with his tools and the dark anger that never left him, his lust seething into the glue between two-by-fours, into the hammer and the clay pipe that he sucked on obsessively. His hard gray beard was peppered with roots of black hair and he liked off-color jokes. But he loved his wife, he did, and he made sure there was food on the table, and every two or three years or so they rented a cabin on a lake in northern Michigan, and then he was wise

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and gentle, at least for a few days. And what more could you ask for, then or now? What more could you expect without education or much money? That was their life together, he downstairs working his frustration into wood and she upstairs, mending and cooking and walking lightly though he couldn't hear her anyway with all that hammering, sawing, and moving about. He never really knew her, that much is clear; he never knew her. And how do I know this?

Some days I look out the same window and sense her next to me or looking over my shoulder. She wraps her ghost fingers around mine, like a saintly dead aunt. Everything is okay. Everything is fine. I am supposed to believe her somehow. I say the okays to myself, breathe them through my teeth, and she fills the air with the shapes of those words. How do you know? I want to ask her, but she won't say anything. The question comes later, when the okays have gone the way of falling leaves and I feel a bit haggard around the edges. I thought I was a blank slate, starting over here in this depressed Michigan town. I thought the cost of loving was equal somehow, that whomever and whatever I loved would come back to me in equal measure, quid pro quo, but now I think I was wrong, dead wrong, that I've been living in blind ignorance with a thread of this same love leading me from one place to another without my even knowing it, a kid pulled by a string while preoccupied with a hundred other things, ranting and raving, crying and praying, laughing and sighing the whole way in the endless, appalling chant, I want this, I want that, while the thread of this love keeps pulling him along no matter what he does. It's not quid pro quo but pro bono, free for the loving, free for the asking, because that's the way it is if only I would sit down and let it flood my whole being. She knows that already, Betty, Agnes, or Sue; she's been waiting for me all my life, my kindly,

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ghostly benefactor, the woman who had shoulders like mounds of softly shaped dough.

I realize how odd this all sounds, to admit to anyone, even to myself, that I live in a ghost hallway, moving from room to room, but nonetheless it's true; I hear them in the leaky faucet and see their faces in the paneled walls where the tawny grains of paneled wood stare back at me like the mirrors of trees. I see him as potbellied and drawing contentedly at his pipe while she is in the kitchen washing dishes. There was nothing politically correct about them, nothing to suggest she would ever do anything else but what he wanted. He stares out the window, counting his chickens before they're hatched. He had a hard life, but a good one, too. But mostly hard. The real issue now is how the light comes in at certain crucial intervals, filling the house, the windows that need cleaning, and lead out to the sun going down over the tops of trees; the real issue is those who lived here and how I feel their presence like a calm benediction blessing this house in the tone where I now live, how we can feel our silent and invisible messengers and what they have given us like a sealed envelope that we will someday pass on to others. If I feel their presence in strange and subtle things, the least I can do is admit it; the least I can do is to say that these things are true, that we do live among ghosts and that they shape the tones of our lives like the chimes of faraway bells.

But this is the first time I've admitted to myself that I live among ghosts. I have fought the impulse for months, for years, thinking to myself that such an admission bordered on the crazy, the fantastic, the frankly absurd; but now I want to hunker down and swap silences, want to let them know I know that they are there. And that is all. Because someday I will slip into ghosthood myself; I will pass out of my body like a wisp of smoke and look back at it and feel nothing, leaving a husk

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or shell behind. I will be the ghost for someone else, someone with his or her fair share of joy and anguish, slowly growing into another form. Maybe then I'll be able to thank the people on Mechanic Street firsthand, in a way befitting their calm benefaction, for the tone they provided me to live inside like a bell. I realize that I live inside the tone of this love that they prepared for me, that it cradles me each day whether I notice it or not; that nothing gentle is ever lost but is transmuted into light filling the windows, the peace of a place, its soft and rough fabrics, its darkish hues. I like how they hang in the wind chimes and play their own version of *Silent Night*, how the woman has to keep herself from humming out loud. I like how they notice the drift of the motes that fill their seeing with eternity, that carry what they used to be and what they are now beyond the boundaries of promise. We respect each other, but they have the upper hand in wisdom and almost all-knowing, in the fact that they are no longer weighted down by arthritic bones or the heaviness of sagging skin. Especially the woman, she who is my mentor in the interior life, who shows me how to appreciate the simple things.

My sad and beautiful precursors whose lives gave way to an incomprehensible peace, my woebegone and overworked friends: how am I to thank you now for delivering me the private hush of this realization? How can I give back to you a shred of this peace that you dole out to me one precious sample at a time, like teaspoons of honey? Each time I come home you are here and you are not here; I see you suddenly in brief glimpses, how you used to be, and who and what you are now, guiding me with the thread of this peace that connects the living and the dead. Forgive me if I misread you, if the flashes that I see of you are inaccurate. But clearly you were here and your presence still abides. The mystery is in the rooms of your

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knowing, the tone you've left behind for others to come home to. The mystery is that your ghosthood is real, that I see you and sense you in the patched-up roof, the ceiling that sags, the way the bloom of the lamplight softens the living room where I sit as you watch over me in the keen attention of bird-watchers that never fades.

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