

ill paint their shadows on tin. When we try
ak of them, it will sound like water,
tatic, like a moonflower slamming shut.

Bethany Kaylor

Ghost World

When I meet Hayley again, she's dead. I'm at the park near my apartment, pretending to meditate. The grass is warm beneath my thighs, and the rhododendrons are just starting to bloom. She comes in a cold wind.

"Howdy, stranger," she says. It takes me a moment to place her—same curly hair, dark eyes, scar on her upper lip like the tail of a signature. Hayley.

When I reach to touch her, she pulls away. "Not yet," she says. The sunlight cuts through her, shattering like glass.

We were neighbors, the only two girls on the cul-de-sac. We attended the same grade school, rode the same bus, occasionally shared books. In the evenings, we kicked a soccer ball in the street, shrieking and running for cover whenever a car turned the corner.

Hayley was an odd tangle of limbs: scrawny, thin, her shinbones painfully long. "She has Osgood-Schlatter," my mother informed me, pity thick in her voice. I didn't know what it meant, but I was envious all the same. It seemed exotic and complicated, like something only a worthy person could experience. I was a gloomy child, prosaic with a furious imagination, and jealous. Lonely, too.

Sometimes we shimmied up the apple tree in her front yard, racing for the farthest branch. I almost always won—her knees usually gave out. Once, on a dare, she ate a wormy apple with a nonchalance I had only dared imagine for myself. She seemed like a character straight out of my books. I wanted to kiss her; I wanted to hit her.

After her parents' divorce, she moved away. The new tenants were expats from Spain; they had no children, only a large tabby named



Oliver. They cut down the apple tree, and I continued to devour my books alone, escaping into a sliver of any world but my own.

The next time we meet, it's in my apartment kitchen. I ask her how she died, although I'd Googled it earlier. "Car crash," she says, shrugging. She doesn't say anything more, and I don't ask.

I take a sip of my tea. Chamomile, to calm the nerves. "You're taller than I remembered."

She laughs, her teeth surprisingly straight. "The last time you saw me was in sixth grade."

"Still." I hadn't expected her to look like this—strong cheekbones, hair pulled back in a messy bun, her neck long. Smooth. It takes me a moment to remember she's dead.

"You live alone," she says.

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

"Sometimes."

"I wouldn't want to live alone." She stares out the window. The evening fog is thick, a silver blanket draping the trees. I have an urge to tell her this is my favorite part of the day: the gloaming, where darkness ebbs and flows. But I doodle instead, letting my hand loop in inky patterns over the Sunday crossword. I never finish them, anyhow.

"Remember the blackberry bushes?" She's still staring out the window.

"Yes." In the summer, they sprawled between our yards, the berries thick and sweet.

"You pushed me into them," she says. There's no accusation in her voice. She turns to look at me. Backlit, her hair seems darker. Wilder.

"You let me."

She's closer now. The scar on her lip flashes, and I remember its origin—those blackberry bushes. How quickly she fell, her shoulder blades sharp beneath my hands. How the August heat hung thick in the air.

"What are we doing?" I whisper, although there's no one else to hear.

She shrugs. "We're just hanging out." Her lips are cold against mine. The pen falls from my hand and hits the table, silent.

The days pass like this: Hayley comes in the evenings, leaves in the mornings. Some nights we wander the streets, past the jacaranda trees

in sweet bloom, the streetlights scraping the fog. The city glows like a switchboard, just for us.

On sunny Saturdays we sit in the park, watching the dogs tumble in the grass. The teenagers, too. Hayley points to the trees, the Latin names like candy dissolving on her tongue. Her father was a naturalist, I learn. She's delighted to discover mine was a carpenter.

"Can you build things?" she asks.

"No."

"Can you fix things?"

"Not really." I sigh. "I'm more of a humanities type."

Hayley plucks a dandelion and places it on my thigh, precariously close to her own. "Some things don't change," she says. Her knees are still knobby after all these years, a relic of adolescence she couldn't shake. I remember how one afternoon she let me touch them, guiding my hands to the small bone spur beneath her kneecaps, and how I pulled my hand away as if sparked, a small fire twisting through me.

Even now, the memory is dizzying. The late afternoon light, the dead girl not so dead after all, my body a locked door—it's too much. I pull my hood over my head, cinch it tight.

"What are you doing?" she asks, concerned.

"I'm disappearing." My voice is muffled.

"Why?"

"So I can come back."

She laughs, and I wish I could bottle the sound. "So mysterious."

I shrug, but my cells are glowing. "I'm just tran-scend-ing."

Being dead has its own set of rules. You can sleep. You can drink coffee. You can kiss. You can write letters. Your allergies disappear. Pepper tastes bitter; salt tastes the same. You can slip through closed doors but not closed windows. You can't travel through time. You can't read minds. You can never see your own reflection. You can't bleed. You can't die again.

I ask Hayley about this in the bathroom one night. "Would you want to die again?" The sound of my electric toothbrush is harsh, tinny. We haven't talked about things like this.

Hayley looks up at the ceiling, gurgling water. Evidently dead people are susceptible to gingivitis, too. "Yes," she says. She spits into the sink.

"Why?"



She wipes her mouth. "Because I'm tired." I'm surprised by how deeply this cuts. How personal it feels.

"If you could die again, would you still be—" I gesture at her body. Lean. Skinny legs draped in my old sweatpants. Hair pulled back in a messy bun.

Hayley shrugs. "I don't know." She opens the window, sticks her head out. Down on the street, someone yells something about a motherfucker, and a car alarm goes off. "Not everyone comes back like this."

I rinse my toothbrush. "What's it like?" I keep my voice light. As if I were asking about the weather, her grandmother, the Nasdaq.

She looks back at me. Hard. "Do you really want to know?"

I look down at my hands. My question feels ugly, clumsy. I'm afraid I've angered her, crossed a line that cannot be walked back.

But then, just like that, she closes the window, and warmth fills the bathroom again. When she turns back to me, her face betrays nothing.

I point to the mirror. "You really can't see yourself?"

Hayley smiles. She picks up a towel and rubs her cheek against it. "No," she says. Even though she's standing right next to me, the mirror shows only one reflection: mine. It's strangely lonely, like losing your shadow. Or becoming your shadow.

I step behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, burying my face in her hair. Her skin smells like cedar and yeast, and I want to swim in it, forget the tension of the moment before.

"How about now?" I ask.

"Nope."

I step back and stare at myself in the mirror. Thick brown ponytail, bushy eyebrows, hormonal acne scars scattered along my jawline. I blink. Being so close to myself is uncomfortable, like standing over an open flame. "Well, you're not missing much."

Hayley laughs. "Poor baby," she says, kissing my ear. My cochlea sings.

For once, it never occurs to me to ask what next. Or what this means. Or how long it will last. Being with Hayley is like opening a secret door and arriving as someone other than myself. Even my vulnerability feels like a sweet freedom. The only thing I really want to know is *do you want me the way I want you*, but my mouth can't (won't) form the syllables.

*

On the phone, my mother tells me I sound different.

"What do you mean?"

She pauses, choosing her words carefully. "You just sound happy."

My body surges like I've opened a nerve: the light at dusk, the old woman hobbling across the street, the marginalia in library books. Even the pimply cashier at the bodega handles the avocados with such tenderness I almost weep. I've never known such animal happiness.

"I feel reborn," I say, one night.

She laughs. "You're just horny." Her arm is wrapped around me, brushing my breasts. There's no scarring on her body, even though her funeral was supposedly closed casket.

"Maybe." I look at the ceiling. The hope museumed in my bones threatens to break loose. "Is this what the afterlife is like?"

"No," she says. She sighs and pulls away. In the morning, there will be no imprint of her on the sheets. "It's nothing like that."

How easily words slip. How easily transmutation occurs, a game of Telephone whispered ear to ear, until suddenly, "Where have you been all my life?" becomes "Where have you been, my life?"

Summer fades as quickly as it arrived. Without warning, Hayley disappears. I try not to panic. I throw open all the windows in my apartment. I Google how to summon a ghost. I drink chamomile with every meal. At the park, I sit at the exact same spot where Hayley first came back to me. To kill time, I name the pigeons picking through the trash: Henry, Margaret, King, Philip, Jin, each with their own backstory and interpersonal drama. The rhododendrons wilt, and I pluck the petals from their heavy heads, scatter them at my feet. My patience is a river, undammed.

I don't go completely unnoticed. One day, a young girl plops down next to me on the grass with a sheepdog almost twice her size. "Are you waiting for someone?" she asks, her voice matter-of-fact. Her black hair is twisted neatly in a thick braid, pulled tight against her skull.

"Yes," I say. Admitting it aloud is a relief, like breaking a fast. I reach to pet the dog. It growls. The girl doesn't move.

"He doesn't like strangers," she offers lazily, without apology.



“Ah.” I withdraw my hand. The dog closes his eyes.

The girl plucks a dandelion and smears the gold against the back of her small hands. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

Her eyes widen. “A girlfriend?” The disbelief and curiosity in her voice makes me wonder if she has a neighbor like Hayley. Someone she wants to kiss, to hit.

“Yes,” I say, then, “No.” I fumble. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh,” she says. She twirls her long hair around her finger, pulls it tight. “How long have you been waiting?”

“A while.”

“Like, hours?”

“Yes.”

“Days?” The surprise in her voice stings.

I shrug, baring the pink underbelly of my palms. I imagine Hayley watching this conversation, laughing at the absurdity, missing me.

“Why don’t you just leave?” she asks, like it’s so obvious. Maybe it is.

I sigh. “I can’t.”

“Can’t?” she repeats.

“Won’t.”

“Why not?”

I don’t answer right away. The sunlight on my skin feels heavy now, like flotsam. I close my eyes and tilt my head toward the sky. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

The dog sneezes. The girl begins to speak, then hesitates. “No,” she says, but now she doesn’t seem so sure, like maybe she doesn’t trust me, or the question, or her answer.

I open my eyes. The sky is a brilliant white-blue, almost painful to look at. “Good,” I say. “Don’t ever start.”

When Hayley finally shows up, we walk in silence: around the park, the streets, my apartment. Her hair is shorter, her eyes darker; in the shadows, she looks like a bruise. I’m careful not to touch her, not to ask too many questions. Even in bed, we lie still: parallel headlights cutting through the dark.

“I’m thinking of moving to New Mexico,” I announce one night. I stare at the ceiling carefully, resisting the urge to look over at her. It’s a lie, but I’m desperate to make her reach for me, pull me close, just like

she used to. There’s something else, too—a desire to wound, to maim. To make her feel my earthly pain.

Hayley stays quiet. The sound of her breathing, slow and measured, fills the room, and for a moment, my body swells with hope. The mouse in my bedroom wall continues to scamper. “I’ve heard Albuquerque’s nice,” she says finally, her voice even.

Moonlight splinters through the window. I wish I could shrug off my skin and disappear, just like she does. It seems wholly unfair, to be trapped in this body. I pull the covers up to my neck.

“Can you hold me?” I ask.

She sighs and turns away. Against the moonlight, the cliff of her bare shoulder. The black tangle of hair. “I’m dead.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I whisper, but the only response is a finch outside the window, cawing.

When her arm finally closes over my body, I shiver. In the glow of the night, her cold skin looks blue, otherworldly. I close my eyes and try not to think about how lovely and lonely are only a letter apart.

After Hayley leaves for good, I close all the windows in my apartment. This gesture is more symbolic than practical, and at night I sweat so much I can’t sleep. I stuff a note under the windowsill. *Where are you?* The handwriting is even, not too desperate. Attached to the note, a pen. Just in case she writes back. I consider buying a postcard of New Mexico online, but I never get around to it.

It rains for weeks. In the apartment, I turn on the TV just for the noise. After a few nights, I can recite the infomercials by heart. In a moment of weakness, I order a Magic Bullet and eat so many smoothies my jaw aches for something to chew on. To get out of the house, I wander the aisles of the public library, filling my bags with books that I can never remember, even hours after I finish them.

On a stormy night, I stretch out on the kitchen floor and call a late-night psychic from an infomercial. “I’m in love with a ghost,” I confess. It’s the first time I’ve said it aloud and I savor the words like a sour candy. Against the roof, the rain feels like applause.

The psychic sighs. “Oh, honey,” she says. “Who isn’t?”

The thing about yearning—it’s as expansive as the sea. You start missing one thing and you start missing everything. What was tender



now aches: the light at dusk, the cashier with the avocados, Hayley and her shaky knees.

I start to see ghosts everywhere. Or at least, I think I do. On the bus, at the park, in the checkout line at the grocery store, I wonder: Are you dead? Are you alive? Where are you going? Who is waiting for you? The line between this world and the next blurs. But I never say anything. I just stare, hopeful.

On the phone, my mother worries. "You sound thin."

I don't disagree. My voice is a can on a string. Hollow.

Even so, I can't deny that a strange sweetness emerges—I *want* to hurt. The weight in my bones feels delicious, drowsy. Most days it seems I could lie in bed forever, or stare out the window, or doodle over the crossword, thinking of nothing in particular, feeling pain envelop my body like a winter coat. My despair is deeply gratifying, and I inspect it from all angles, stretching the boundaries to see how long it can last. It's a dangerous experiment: I might break. I might bloom.

One morning, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, drinking a cup of black coffee, and then another, until my nerves start to peel from my pores. If I squint hard enough, my reflection blurs to a stranger: same thick hair, same brows, different eyes. Like a moon shuddering.

I open the window, turn back to the mirror. "Love, come back to me," I say. No answer, just my reflection staring back, dubious. "Love, come *back* to me," I repeat, louder this time. The light bulb wavers, throwing dark shadows across my face, but I don't blink.

Outside, a dog barks. A homeless man with blue hair shouts after the bus. I reach for the mirror, press my fingers to the cool glass. For a moment, it's almost as if my reflection is reaching for me, too. I stand there for almost an hour, unable to move, unable to cry, just staring at the mirror, waiting for the pain to spread like spilled ink. And it does, but I'm not lost. I've never felt more in love.



Abby E. Murray

Drone Song

Let's consider the ways
I am most like a drone.
What else is there to do?

Asking this question
as a citizen of a country
at war is indefensible.

Asking as an army wife
is understood, or, at least,
received with silence.

*

I don't process terms
like *sure* or *probably*.
I wait for affirmatives.
For example: When I say
Who survived? I don't hear
Ladies, we're trying.
I hear a name I know.

*

I lie in bed and listen
to the firing range
thump and crack