A Field Guide to the Spirits

Poems by
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Acknowledgments

Previous publications


“Split Rock,” *You Are Here*, 2012.
To those who haunt us,
and to those whom we will haunt hereafter.
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Know Your Spirits

He never was the type to overturn a table. There was that time—but no, he is too much the gentleman to send that message, says you’ll remember. There’s another presence here, who could toss a chair or two, not in anger, simply to make us aware. Will any claim him, this unsettled visitor? No spirit ever says, *I loved you not*. For all the earthly matches forged in hell, every departed soul’s a dear. Not one admits, *I am less dead now*. This message never comes: *Stop haunting me from your dark and winter world.*
Great Interest in Our Underthings

The town’s First Citizens had us stand on tables so they didn’t have to strain. A close and scientific inspection, they called it. A windowless room. Great interest in our underthings. Fold upon fold of fabric in which to secrete stones, or iron, or wooden blocks. Every inch. And then went over us again. Finding naught. Greater interest still in foot and ankle, knee and. And. Hands that fumbled with. Stopped just shy of. Their faces so close to. Unconvinced, return to pocket, seam, and hem. Certain something had been overlooked. A squirm, a start, a sudden breath—little hints that they were close. Only to disappoint. In the matter of veracity we have our doubts, but we could not disprove. They searched and searched for secrets. We discovered theirs.
What We Really Mean
When We Say “Love”

Hate. But that’s too easy. It’s more than that. You got the way the rooted earth folds itself over the edge of the cliff, the cliff a good three feet farther back beneath, but that flap of sod holds on. You got the neighbor boy running down a hill and suddenly you think of the day your father died, the way you felt in that boy’s posture—his of joy, yours of pain, the same thing. The coat on its hook. Buttonwood bark. The sheen on the buckets in the spring house. Go on and nod at the word “hate.” But the taste of water from those buckets, it’s enough to make an old man determine to see one more summer. Love means dying when the ground is froze. Love means digging that hole.
Photographing Snowflakes

The right kind of storm, not so cold
it’s all pellets, but up near freezing,
allowing the crystals time to grow,

spikes and spires and plates branching out
in six directions, the desire for symmetry
apparent, though rarely realized.

The ones that land upright—look for those,
assuming you have eyes for something
almost clear and tiny and easily broken.

Up near freezing, but not. They might
last the few moments it takes to focus.
And as for breathing, don’t. Funny,

the word “ephemeral.” Just as you
think it, it proves its point. Hold
your breath as if the flake could hear you

getting close. Hold your breath as if you had
discovered the secret to eternal life.
Hold your breath as, even then, it slips away.
Katherine Wheelwright
Nanny Naylor’s Privy

—excavated by archaeologists during the 1990s
Central Artery Project in Boston, Massachusetts

The biggest mystery is the bowling ball, a decidedly un-Puritan pastime. A lesson, perhaps, of what such godless pursuits do to one’s immortal soul? Easier to understand the daily objects too easily lost from shallow pockets, or dropped from a string around one’s waist: the keys, the belt buckle, the little pincushion. Still, the bowling ball has good company, what with all the mysteries down there, like a candle holder and pewter spoons. And it is a redolent topic overall, and makes one glad today of our privilege to flush, so as not, three hundred and fifty years from now, to be known by what we have left, ahem, behind. Better to imagine from the hundred thousand cherry pits, a Boston summer, the harbor visible from the house back then, the sea breeze soothing the sleepers, full of mutton and fruit pie, even the child who had cried herself to sleep, knowing she was in for it,
having dropped her little goat-skin shoe
down there, so sure that God would
catch it, and give it back, now not knowing
what to fear more: this evidence of God’s
silent wrath, or her mother’s
not-so-silent wrath to come.
Marie, sans Pierre

After the commotion, after the men’s shouts and the women’s screams, after the untangling of hooves and loosening of clothing, after the blood on the cobblestones, after the last utterance of *mon dieu*,

to stand again in the laboratory, amongst the familiar *acoutrement*, to see, perhaps, the pencil he had left on the bench, intending—
*Non, ne pense pas, seulement travailler, travailler pour deux.*
Last Words

Yes, yes, Billy—you go down that side of Long Pond, and
I’ll go this side and we’ll get some ducks—
—John James Audubon’s last words,
spoken to his brother-in-law William Blakewell

When the water was not too high, not too low,
we could stretch out on the soft wide planks
and watch the river light dance on the trees,
a tunnel of trees, a dense, greenshadowed life,
an amber sunbeam here and there, and birds, and birds,
and insect song, and the slow pull of the river,
The Ohio by flat-bottomed boat, just current and hope,
and someone would strum a banjo, and we would doze,
too young to feel the ache in the bones, even chill nights,
even after jumping overboard to push our floating world
over snags and sandbars, downstream, down,
a herd of deer swimming across, the owls on patrol,
the freedom, the freedom from freedom, each evening
the same last words: Today, then, we have seen it all.
Hope, Hunger, Birds

_They are very much their own enemies, in this way, for no birds are greater fruit-eaters than themselves; they are even voracious feeders when they find a berry to their taste, actually destroying themselves, at times, by the numbers they swallow._

—Susan Fenimore Cooper, Rural Hours

Like the cedar waxwings, so delicate-looking, so dapper, but oh what profligates, what gluttons both for bloom and for fruit, not knowing, it seems, when to stop, stuffing themselves on juniper until drunk, then flying into windows, breaking their necks. Like a songbird, my old heart, still believing it will see another spring, craving every tender blossom, wanting more. When are we too old for love, I wonder? When do we look ridiculous, making eyes and sighing, feasting on hope, unaware that an excess of that fine feeling can, like fermented fruit after the first frost, kill us sure as grief? Does one die smiling, drunk on hope, one’s little neck snapped in two against the pane? One cannot be warned off. It is impossible to say, “Not one more dream.” Tell the bobolinks nesting in the meadow that the railroad just mapped out the right-of-way, and you will see them, on the morrow, gathering
long bits of grass to make some small repairs. Then see them in every last frantic, swooping whirl above the heads of the crew come with picks and shovels, until the meadow is no more. And what of hope? I must believe we carry it with us, on that final flight, a length of straw wrapped in our beaks, hearts bursting as we sing, *I shall make another, make another, make another life.*
Automatic Writing

The first time a spirit took my hand and guided it across the page, even I was doubtful, thinking the effort must be mine and mine alone. But how to explain the presence, the touch, the sense that my own arm was, for the moment, not fully in my control—I was the scribe, while the volition came from without. I am pleased when a spirit has me pen, Darling, I love you still. Sometimes, there are the mysteries to solve: Look again through all the drawers; the key you seek is there, unless it was discarded with my things. Often, a note of comfort is passed: We wait for you; take your time. Two spirits seize me, one right, one left—We are all young here and the other, Ilew era eW
The Way To and From Forever

You are not certain, not certain at all, but sometimes it feels as if you have found it. For a moment, you and the heron share a little stretch of shoreline. You witness the first flight of a damselfly, wings newly wings. A few fish the length of your forearm pause in the shallows. There are more hints, if you wait for them, of this path you never really leave. Maybe, too, you have a friend who listens when you say such things, who holds one of your hands while you reach the other out beyond the singularity, to pull you back or fall in with you. The heron flies off, low over the water, as if challenging you to follow. You cannot. But you watch as gray-blue bird becomes gray-blue horizon, and you think, That I can do.
Ptolemy Prepares to Read a Friend’s Astrology

Once they know you know the stars, they pester and pester. I try to explain there are many things that shape the future: where they were born, what metal object they last touched, the interwoven fates of everyone in their household: spouse, children, aging parents, servants, dogs. Influence upon influence. Still, they ask me to tell them their stars. And so, I tell them. Watch out for the chambermaid with watery eyes. Sell her to your enemy. The goats you receive as payment—turn them loose in the street before they overrun your yard with fleas. Practical advice, words so general they go home nodding, glad that they have seen ahead, pleased the night sky is a great book, the gods swayable by an old man with a few charts and a scholar’s crooked back.
Free Will

You can get married on the balcony where the realish Romeo wooed the realish Juliet. Best not to read too much further into that story. If you’re marrying in public, chances are your families are not consumed by a blood vendetta. Chances are the priest has not slipped anyone a potion to mimic death. Still, you’d have to be more than a little brave, to step out onto that balcony and not imagine you hear, at the end of the lovely vows, *Thus with a kiss I die*. 
How Else Could Kate Fox Know Your Secrets

unless the spirits themselves were spelling them out for her—for all—to hear? Even the most hardened skeptic leaves a little shaken, having heard described the way a lover touched palm to cheek, how that touch led to the most delicate of kisses—delicate, and then the spirit spells out intimate, and chairs are overturned, whether from the spirits aching with earthly desire or the no-longer-quite-so-skeptical wanting to put an end—

Kate Fox goes all translucent, as if joining the spirit world, becoming one of them, and another insists on being heard, and another, and still do you not quite believe? Your lover knew all along that you thought at first, What funny little fingers, funny little hands, but not long thereafter you worshipped those hands, as they found their way, found their way, found their delicate, intimate, secret way.
To Live Like the Polypody Fern

No better companions, moss and rock, sun and rain. Find a place just so, the light not too, the shade not very. If you must be exposed, be secret. If you are tucked away, declare yourself the arbiter of green. Gneiss or limestone, either or. To have been admired by Thoreau. To have known what it feels like to unfurl. The deep quiet of woods, the pileated’s persistent din. To live like that, between earth and sky. Sometimes the good is in the getting by.
March Conversation

This time of year all the world’s a slough.
   Gone milky with mud.
A feckless fen.
   Snowmelt can’t sink in, liquids every field.
Wanton water seeps into every seem.
   Unseemly, to be always so wet, yet cold.
The ice retreats.
   Gardeners retreat, as well.
Too soon, too soon.
   Cold frames fill.
Tendrils blanch and curl against false sky.
   A good hard frost sows seeds of remorse.
I saw water tumbling—tumbling—down a hill!
   First storm fills the Narrows.
Ducks in the street.
   To our knees in mud, to our knees in trout.
Your father say that?
   Grandfather.
Bless his sodden heart.