

Ghosts in the Interregnum

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What do we know. . . of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them and can gain no idea of their absolute nature. With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos.

— H.P. Lovecraft, “From Beyond” (1920)

GRETEL AND ELI BOTH WALK SILENTLY THROUGH THE SPLINTERED WOOD-PANELED FRAME OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING, toward a corner room with a laboratory station where stands the partially assembled 3D replica of the human body. A physical reminder of a memory. But neither Gretel nor Eli can remember much of anything when it comes to schools. So, such clues are left unsolved. The plastic model is leaning into the wall where a leg and one arm are missing. The naked frame exposes the interior muscular and circulatory systems.

“Death isn’t so bad,” Gretel comments flatly. “We got off easy by comparison. But I do miss material existence.” After a few seconds of silence she adds, “I miss s’mores.” Then a few more seconds after she continues, “I miss schools.”

“You never went to one of *these* schools, Gret! They were gone before you were even born.” Gretel is always stubborn. Even now. They have become unchanging and fixed in so many ways. How many decades now have they haunted these spaces together? Neither can remember. But they know each other well enough. Gretel resists; Eli concedes. It has always been such.

She reaches out to smooth the sleeve on Eli’s long sleeve shirt, and adds, “When we lost our bodies and our physical places, we lost our capacity to create story structures. Story structures are a prerequisite for understanding. How can we make sense of our experiences otherwise?”

Eli somberly nods. “Exactly. Memories were ruptured. No one could decide what or who was real anymore. And then... poof.”

“Poof, into bits and bites of data they went.” She raises her eyes toward the sky which is blocked by the falling fiberglass tiles. “Well, we dodged that bullet, didn’t we? Last of the few

who died *in* their bodies. But we did umm.... ‘poof.’” Her fingers gingerly graze over the edges of the human replica.

Gretel admires her slender fingers peering out from the tattered edges of the sweater and wiggles them. She makes a mocking *Ooohhhhh*, ghostly high-pitched wail. Then she returns to introspection. With a tone of pride she announces, “I died before they could upload my body. The southern hemisphere hurricane that wiped out three continents.”

“Yeah,” Eli sighs, “I remember that. It took me out, too.”

Gretel darts over to the World Map dangling by one side to the left of the graffiti-covered wall and points furiously toward South America. “Here.” She stares at Eli, unflinching. She feels her face beginning to burn with sadness. Sadness mixed with confusion, like the sensation of an arm after it has been amputated long ago. Gretchen’s ennui is beginning to grate his nerves.

“Your tears are immaterial. They’re not real,” Eli replies coolly. He knows that if he releases his own grief alongside hers, they will both implode. In a matter-of-fact tone Eli says, “My theory is that when AI went rogue, you know, after the southern hemisphere hurricane, it knew it needed our memories to keep itself going.”

He moves to kick over the desktop computer screen sitting by the door frame. His leg whooshes right through it as a flashlight beam over a trashcan, but seconds later it lands of its own accord on the floor with an angry clatter. Fragments of grey glass and plastic scatter like bugs when a rock is lifted. “Even machines feed...” Eli adds.

Gretel explodes in laughter. Eli frowns and she silences herself and tips her face down toward her feet. “They severed their bodies, minds, and spirits,” says Eli and pauses. He continues his unfinished sentence, “...disconnected from the land and other sentient beings. For eons, humans belonged to a larger system. But with then AI, it was like they created a new system *in their own image*. Like fabled alchemists consumed by their own shadows lurking along the cobbled-stoned ally ways of the 14th century, humanity was consumed by its own creation. There were no more roots to the earth holding them down.”

Gretel erupts into a fit of hysterical laughter and buckles over, head bent over knees. The high and low pitches of her voice reverberate down the cluttered hallway and dissolve into the open holes of the ceiling. Eli waits with annoyance until she is done. “What? What is so God damn funny, Gretel?”

Her chest heaves a few more times and then lifts her head. “It’s just that...” she catches her breath, “It’s just that ... I am thinking of all those religious zealots who thought they were going to be saved by rapture.” She lifts her fingers on both hands and makes air quotes around the word “rapture.” She adds, “They couldn’t wait for the end-of-days.” Gretel seizes again with a spate of laughter. “Only... only to be lifted out of their bodies, not to heaven!” She looks up at the crumbling drywall and ceiling tile. “But to be downloaded!” She thrusts her arms down toward the piles of computer frame, noting, “Into an incorporeal form of artificial intelligence!”

Eli’s mood is fixed. Sadly, he replies, “Yeah. Sure, the jokes on them. Haha. But don’t forget, this all started centuries before the southern hemisphere storm and the bodily transfers.” He shakes his head. “They were erasing each other before AI even existed. Eventually they ran out of people to erase, so they erased themselves. Through arrogance and ignorance. The schools closed. They lost their capacity to remember. Sites of community, of storytelling, of collective agency, all closed.”

Then with more seriousness, she says, “If I had been there, in those schools, I would have done something to stop it!”

“Please, Gret. Just stop.” Eli’s facial expression is rigid. “Everyone likes to think ‘if they had been there ... blah blah’ things would have been different. They would have shot Hitler. They would have resisted the slave trade. They would have saved public education from the corporate data miners. In the end, they all went, more or less willingly, into the hyper-real. Some did it for profit, some because they thought it would be cool.” He smirks. “Some believed it would extend their existence beyond the threat of death. Piece-by-bodily piece, they sold themselves to AI.” With a note of flat irony he whispers, “Wisdom only ever appears in the rearview mirror.”

They move from the laboratory station into the hallway and shuffle over the detritus into another classroom still fully intact. Gretel’s attention is caught by a globe of the Earth, settled lopsidedly on the brown linoleum tiles, decades of dust covering the two halves cracked in open at the meridian. She stops, her boots standing a few inches away and stares at it. In the dim room lit only by a row of small windows, the grey sky forces its way in. It casts a thin sun-less light over the classroom.

“Don’t overthink it,” Eli says.

“Don’t overthink what?” She glances down again at the two broken halves. “So much more appropriate this way, isn’t it?” Gretel whispers.

Eli replies, “You know that not everything is a metaphor.”

“Yes. It is.”

“So, what does that make us?” Eli asks. Before she can respond he adds, “Never mind. Keep moving. And don’t touch anything!”

“As if” Gretel makes an exaggerated eye roll. She pulls the sleeves of her blue sweater up to hug her elbows. They make their way carefully between the scatter of books, stacks of papers, empty boxes and pieces of random litter.

“Quick—name all associations!” Gretel shouts. They are standing about eight feet apart from each other. She waits earnestly for his response. His expression is vague and transparent; a weariness settles. He waits expectantly because he has played this game with her hundreds of times.

“Globes. Go!” she shouts.

Eli complies. “Um. Globes, ok. Ummmm...” He looks around for help but finds none. “Boston Globe. When information was shared. When news was collectively consumed. Your turn.”

Gretchen hops over a small trash can tipped on its side.

“Shakespeare’s Globe Theater -when language was feral.” She emphasizes this last word with a wild wave of her arms and a deep voice.

Eli hesitates and then exclaims, “Snow globe!” Then with a sad tone adds, “I miss snow.”

Gretel points at the air as if she were reading from a visible list and recites: “Boston Globe, Globe Theater, snow globe.” Her finger moved down to the next airy checkpoint. Then she exclaims, “Ooh, ooh! ‘St. Elsewhere’¹. You know...the series finale, when the characters realize they are not real, but fictional characters entrapped inside a snow globe and conjured by the imagination of a child who has been narrating the story in his mind? Do you remember that episode?”

“No. I don’t know,” Eli flatly replies. “And neither do you. How could you possibly know about TV shows from the 20th century?”

“Dunno. Just do.” She shrugs and lowers her arm, feeling deflated.

“And your point would be?” Eli walks toward the window that opens into the grey sky.

“How do you know we are not trapped in a snow globe, the figment of someone else’s imagination?” Her voice is only half-serious.

Eli cranes his neck to peer outside. Whisps of long brown hair tumbled in front of his eyes. Nothing can be seen outside but grey fog. But muscle memory compels him to look anyway. “Because there is no snow.” He chuckles. They each continue to scan the room, but with no real purpose.

“Do you miss them?” Gretel asks, looking around at the empty scattered chairs.

“How can I miss something that wasn’t mine?” He seems to be searching the room for something. “That’s called longing.”

“Do you *long* for it then?” Gretel asks again. From one of the desks, Eli turns his attention toward a book, frayed on the binding, and glances absently at the title. Then suddenly it drops onto the floor with a thud.

“No.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Where else would we go? We have no physical agency!” Eli presses his thick leather boot heels into the corners between two linoleum tiles and tries to leverage them to break apart.

Gretel snorts. “Like agency did them any good. Look at this place! They could have stopped it, and they didn’t. They might as well have been ghosts before they even died.”

“Gretel, there *is* nowhere else. We are just stubborn memories that will remain here, so long as there is at least one living human left. I know there aren’t that many of them, but at least one remembers, longs for, a time when being in a place, in a body, was possible. Without the material body there can be no haunting. Memory with longing creates us. Desire. With no memory, haunting is meaningless. And we disappear.”

“But *they* disappeared.” Gretel’s voice is reaching a high pitch.

“No. Disappeared is what happens to individuals or even entire races of people against their will. Most humans voluntarily sold their places, like this school, the oceans, the atmosphere, and even their own bodies, to the highest bidder. They did it to themselves.”

“Come on, let’s keep moving,” Gretel says with encouragement. Their figures move silently out of the room into a long corridor littered like an abandoned obstacle course with desks, chairs, and filing cabinets. They explore each item as if studying the sequence in a museum with a recording of information about each object plugged into the ears through headphones. A silent study. Gretel walks over to the wall where a series of yellowed photographs remains hanging; groups of people seated together, posing for some purpose.

“Rituals and performance. Is that all it was to them?” She sighs. “Look! What about these two?” Two of the faces are rubbed out in red. *Who wanted them erased*, she wonders. “Disappeared. What happened to *their* ghosts?”

Her fingers trace the edges of the image, cautious as if brushing their faces would act like disturbing stilled water and cause their frozen expressions to ripple out and dissipate.



(photo taken by M. McNulty of unknown persons at an abandoned facility in Maryland, 2024)

Studying it closely with her nose just an inch away from the glass, Gretel observes, “Don’t you think the world is better off now? I mean, it wasn’t all rainbows and unicorns with them. From slavery to serfdom to bio-capitalism, human bodies have been owned and organized by powerful systems of control. They abandoned each other, or any sense of community, and then they abandoned places like (she points to the picture) this without even a glance backward. What did they think would happen?”

“They weren’t thinking, Gret. Even before us, before this,” he turns his gaze around the room, left and right, “Erasing and haunting were a part of schools, even then. Just that it was the remains of *other* bodies, *other* people’s memories. Some of them never made it even into the old textbooks. Their stories were rubbed out like your friends over there.” He nods toward the photo. They pick their way further down the darkened hallway and turn left into a hole in the side wall which opens into a large atrium-style room. The walls are layered with graffiti.



(Photo taken by M. McDermott, 2020)

As if replying to the graffiti message itself, Gretel chuckles and mumbles, “No shit.”

They pause for a long silent moment and stare at the far wall on the side of the room that stands between them and the world beyond the school. The collapsed seams of the building have been replaced by vines creeping their way along the ceiling scaffolding

Gretel walks over the large metal desk toward the front of the room. She peers down and examines the chaotic jumble of detritus: a few paper clips, a stapler, pens, some computer cords, and a speaker. “Humans were revising history long before AI was even created. Or at least, so I remember being taught, before education was banned altogether. They. We. We did it to ourselves. If we had remembered history more honestly and accurately in schools, maybe the schools, themselves, wouldn’t have died. It’s like the schools and communities committed suicide. And no one left a note behind explaining why.”

Eli and Gretel stand beside one another reviewing a pile of textbooks covered by bits of sheet rock and wire. They stare, unable to touch them. Eli says, “We exist only in the stories we can tell. In what we remember. What will be remembered about public education if we also disappear?”

“You mean erased. Public education was erased. All those decades that humans claimed they were powerless to stop these things from happening. How convenient.”

“What do you mean?”

“Feeling powerless became a convenient way to become blameless. They were unable to really look at themselves. They couldn’t see themselves and their roles in things. First, they erased others, who they never could fully see to begin with. And then, they became invisible to themselves. And *we’re* the ghosts? Ha! They ghosted their own world.”

“Maybe *we* are the ones that are being haunted,” Eli murmurs. Gretel’s face shows confusion, so he adds, “You know, by the memories of public education and how it was abandoned.”

The light in the sky dims toward evening, and the reflection in the window is an opaque black. Their two figures emit soft blue spectral light that reflects off what glass remains in the fractured window, the metal table, and the empty filing cabinet.

“I wonder what knowledge they kept in here?” She looks away from the cabinet to the empty bookshelves. “And then the book banning. Ha. So many philosophies. So many religious treatises. So much division. So much anger. But they all arrive at one of two propositions. Either that humans are fated to believe they can change things that are in fact never going to change, but they try anyway because well, that’s their fate. Or, is the opposite true? That humans believe that nothing can be changed and therefore they don’t even bother trying, even if trying meant that something could be changed. But they don’t because they are stuck in their heads.”

“Where is Nietzsche when you need him?” Eli asks mockingly.

“According to God, he’s dead.”

They both snicker.

Gretel says, “You know what I think? I think this school exists in the snow globe inside the plot of *St. Elsewhere*. A place conjured in someone’s imagination.”

“Whose imagination exactly do you think will conjure it?” Eli asks.

He turns his eyes toward her with an odd feeling of desperation. She replies, “The readers of this story. Right now, we only exist as a matter of letters typed on a page, visualized by the reader’s imagination. Will the person reading this, about us, right now, do anything to affect change? While they still can?” Gretel walks toward the window and says absently, “Maybe by

being ghosts in their imagination, we can affect change in the past, which is their present, for their future". Her voice trails off.

Eli reaches for Gretel's hand. She meets his gaze. He says, "Which is our present. We cannot go back and change the past. But they can do something about the present."

Gretel nods. "The question is, *will they?* Or, will they become us? Fictional characters in someone else's story."

Notes

1. Revisiting St. Elsewhere's Strange Snow Globe Series Finale (pastemagazine.com)

