

Ghost of Christmas Present

written by Guest Contributor | November 21, 2018



[Image: "Fig.6: The Sexton Disguised As A Ghost," David Hockney]

I wake to violin music coming from my armoire. I spring up. The puff at the end of my nightcap falls twice against my cheek. My skin breaks in horripilation and I am briefly arrested by the paralytic fear of the music and the body-horror from having what appears to be a grain of sand in the corner of my eye. The music is without precedent. The sand has happened before. "Is anyone present?" I ask, adding "My question refers to the armoire," because I disdain vaguery.

The music quickens and divides itself into self-repeating sequences. It seems to have transformed into a fiddle. The doors burst open at what feels, instinctively, like the right time for this to happen, a crescendo might be the term, and a man dressed not entirely unlike the cartoon figure on the Red Baron frozen pizza box leaps out. I am surprised. He rushes to my bedside. His face is smooth and strangely reflective. His breath is rapid and smells of cigarettes and mead.

I ask if he's a burglar or a frighteningly invasive advertisement. Images of corporate dystopias and nightmarish realms without privacy or property rights fragment in front of me. They are sepia-toned for reasons I cannot immediately understand.

The intruder frowns. His disappointment seems sincere. "I am the Ghost of Christmas Present. I carry no name unless that is it."

I tell him it sounds more like a title to me, and that while I admittedly haven't known the precise date in the Gregorian calendar for at least a week, I know that it cannot possibly be Christmas, for the last date I remember was the 71st day in the Julian calendar, which is somewhere around what many refer to as "early March."

The intruder lowers his goggles and rewraps his scarf, so that it is now

tighter and more rakish. He says he possesses no history that he is aware of, nor any way of conceiving things yet to come, so dates and linear formulations of time mean nothing and he apologizes if he has already said this. I tell him he hasn't. He lifts a thin, downy hand, pushes against my chest, takes a pen from my nightstand, and scribbles in the margins of my newspaper. He stares at me. The goggles are scuffed with inchoate scratches of varying widths and depth; his mouth is suspended in undefined expectation that would be slack-jawed in a man of lesser bone structure.

"You breathe," he says. He is right. "You breathe," he says again. He is still right. "Your heart beats." He is right about that too. "Your stomach digests." He is right about this as well. "Your liver regulates glycogen storage." I have never heard of this but I assume he is right. "Your heart beats." Before I can respond he thrusts the newspaper in front of me and in the margins is written 'Your kidneys filter toxins.' He says I breathe again and that my pancreas is producing three types of hormones. He shakes the newspaper. He runs through every major organ and tells me that my retina is spatially encoding images of himself and the surrounding room and that now my brain is turning those images right side up. I did not know this. He repeats everything he has said, some phrases over and over, without interruption. At some point a number of my cells divided. I try to stand, intending to run, prepared to leap through the window. But with an inhuman dexterity the ghost pins me with his leg and tells me my nervous system is firing millions of synapses and that I am sweating. He tells me that I breathe again, that my heart beats, and that my amygdale releases the neurotransmitters of fear. He shakes the paper. This continues and he displays no signs of fatigue. I scream over his claim that my salivary glands are lubricating my throat. He tells me I'm breathing, that there is no irritant in my eye even though my tear ducts are active, and he asks if I would like him to extend his omniscience of the present beyond the scope of my body. I say that I would like that very much.

He tells me that right now sallow-cheeked aristocrats stake the last of their generational wealth in Monte Carlo and a poker group wonders why there Tremors in Dune and a body-pierced couple names their twins Ampersand Pound and Left Parenthesis and crime bosses wearing bids and eating crawfish and people waking and others asleep and a few in that peculiar in between state where they are unusually prone to suggestion and there is violence and tenderness, eagerness and regret, and nurses dabbing sweat from the brows of patients and surgeons and detectives pinning evidence on corkboards and children turning with nightmares, there are inns with vacancies and chairs separated from their footrests and a minor league baseball team busing through rows of cornfields and con men splashing water on their faces and trying to remember their real names, and in this moment there are 7,234,756,383 people dispersed across the surface of the earth not including those in airplanes or submarines even though they're people too and somewhere deep in the American West a forest burns against the night and in every corner of every planet hospitable to human life elderly women in shawls stir porridge and are sad because they do not like porridge and their lives are such that they are stirring it anyway.

He begins to say something else but stops, and when the creases surrounding his mouth and eyes lax I can see the thought lost to the blankness around us. A breeze presses from the outside, straining the window treatment, and bleeding into a draft that swells the drapes and lifts the tail end of the intruder's scarf. For a moment he is brazen and vainglorious and even more like the disembodied head on the pizza box. He tells me that if I could only somehow experience the world as he experiences it, not just alone and through the peripheral view limitations of goggles, but in one unvarying instant where everything that happens is happening all at once, I would understand what it is like to live devoid of memory or ambition, and without knowing if you were ever young or will ever be old, or even whether you are young or old now. The Ghost releases me. He says that if I know what Venice is I should see it now because it is sinking into the Adriatic and he cannot tell me if it will stop or why so many people care.



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