

GLADSTONE

There's a 1944 Shirley Jackson short story titled *Trial by Combat* that I think about a lot. Like much of Jackson's early fiction, it uses the structure of the tenement building to look at issues of trace and haunting, to address how the ghosts who wander through our corridors are usually just suffering under the illusion that life still belongs to the past. *Trial* follows a young woman named Emily Johnson, who begins to notice that inconsequential things have started disappearing from the furnished apartment she has rented in a New York rooming house. There are missing handkerchiefs and a bottle of perfume, a vanished set of decorative porcelain dogs, a small brooch and a pack of cigarettes. Confident that she knows exactly who has been coming into her home and removing her belongings, Emily sets herself to confronting a downstairs neighbor, an elderly widow named Mrs. Archer who opens her door to reveal both an apartment and a life that look exactly like our heroine's, only told in reverse. You should read the story for yourself, but the subtext to me has always indicated that we sometimes encounter places where time folds across itself, that sometimes when we meet the ghost, it's actually their familiarity and not their strangeness at all that feels discomfiting. I guess I think that Jackson was suggesting that Emily had somehow stumbled into another version of herself, that maybe it was she who was the interloper the whole time.

Last week I visited a stranger in her home, a stout and sturdy mid-coastal Maine structure that was built in 1830 and had been renovated to reflect its own past. The woman who owns the house is an evidentiary medium, and though I'd gone to her for a reading, I found myself almost immediately deflecting, I found myself asking her questions so that I didn't have to receive answers to any of my own. "Do you think this house is haunted?" I asked her, and she told me she'd wondered when she opened her door to me if I might sense that it was. I hadn't yet confessed to her that I often feel the past tapping me on the shoulder; I certainly didn't tell her that at that moment, I felt almost nothing at all.

The stranger told me that the house had a lot of unresolved energy, that it had somehow held onto recollections of doomed harvests and long winters, to disappointments that she could not itemize, but that she sensed nonetheless. I asked her how it felt to live there, with her life and someone else's running in tandem across the broad-planked floors and horse-hair stuffed walls, what was and what is brushing uncomfortably up against one another like a flint and steel that fail to ever produce ignition. "I feel like I'm living my life on top of someone else's," she told me. "The strangest part is that I'm never sure which version is more real." She then informed me that she'd had a vision of me sitting alone in a movie theater, images of shipwrecks and gardens flashing past while I observed the screen. She asked me which I thought I was while I looked at the earth lodged underneath my nails; I'd recently completed a marathon of planting after becoming morbidly obsessed with a doomed houseboat lodged in the sand near my parents' house. Was I the shipwreck or the garden, she asked again. Both, I guessed. I was just like her and the ghosts in her house, like Emily and Mrs. Archer, all of us emblems of how the present cannot help but address its own memories.

I've been thinking a lot about what I should say about Nick's work, what I can write that might put into words what it makes me feel. The psychic ambivalence that rattles through his paintings reminds me of Jackson and the old house by the ocean in Maine, of all those places where someone else's vision touches the edges of something that has always felt like it belongs to me. Are the subjects on his canvases his or ours? Is the emotional charge they generate borrowed from us, or from syphoned from him? I don't know, but I think of Emily's porcelain dogs transplanted into that elderly woman's apartment, how they seemed for a moment to always have belonged there.

—Alissa Bennett