

In The Autumn Weather

IN THE autumn weather I think of ghosts. When I walk by the edge of a black pool in a wood in Kent and look across to the tall ochre-coloured house with blind windows on the other side, I see the ghosts in those empty wainscoted rooms and I see the ghosts too under the black waters, lying on the layered bed of rotted leaves and antlered twigs.

In the violent-coloured wood too are presences, in every tree and hollow. And one's treading feet on the crackling leaves seem almost an enormity, with so many listening on every side.

I pass the Georgian farmhouse which is joined to the mediæval chapel, now used as a store and barn; and then the ghost voices become so insistent that I have to look up above through those stone walls to the interior, which once was all paint and glass and woodwork with iron and needlework. Now nothing, only the wind in the roof, the rows of silent apples on their newspapers, the mouse droppings and the ears of last year's corn left here and there amongst the mass of straw.

And in the mushroom fields outside there is a brooding melancholy that seems to spring up through the grass. The horses look at you and the cows too, not with eyes, but bottomless wells of sorrow, cynicism and acceptance. No joy or pain, only a remembering of all the countless years before the

other cows and other horses gave to make these here in the field in Kent.

And in the apples too is stored a waiting knowledge, a resigned ghost-haunted dream, a trance state before the rotting, the slicing, the eating, the extermination.

All over the countryside is the ghost-web flung, each tiniest object soaked and saturated in its atmosphere.

Deep in your heart you know that the bar between the living and the ghost world is death, and that stored in each living thing from the moment of its birth are these remembrances and echoes somehow of the death before they were born as well as the death to come.

Go home through the fading light and sit by the fire in your tiny cottage, with tea and books and the world outside destroyed, demolished, locked from you. But there, even there in the flame light, you will hear the voices between the leaves of your book, know the silent waiting of the rosewood worktable, feel the presence behind the ticking of the clock, see the figures in the picture move. For dead things are alive, with a loving all their own, and human beings know with every twist and turn what centuries and centuries close round them like swaddling clothes and what illimitable actions stretch out into the future, even now working out their faint and wild foundations.

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