

KYLA MALLET

AARON PECK / Trees without Flowers

There is a passage in Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* that describes a haunted road:

These Balbec roads were full of them, of phantoms pursued, forgotten, and sought after afresh, sometimes for a single interview and so as to touch an unreal life that had at once made its escape. Reflecting that their trees, pears, apples, and tamarisks would outlive me, I seemed to be receiving from them the advice finally to set to work while the hour of eternal rest had yet to sound.

Proust does not mean actual ghosts but rather the effect a place has on us, how our memories of a place may haunt us. What strikes me about this passage is the trees. Their witness and magnanimous advice only *seem* to be given. They will outlive each person haunting the Balbec roads—they will outlive even the phantoms. Whatever it is those trees provide remains inscrutable, outside of our—or Proust's—understanding, but they seem to be saying something. We run with it.

Much like Kyla Mallett, I don't believe in ghosts and yet I'm afraid of them. The building in which Presentation House Gallery is located purports to be haunted. Hence Mallett's series of on-site spirit photographs, a response to the history of Presentation House. An apparition named Frank wanders the theatre; Mallett depicts him listening to Leonard Cohen. No one knows how Frank got his name or why he likes Leonard Cohen.

After rainfall, a cedar will weep for hours with ersatz rain under its canopy, and yet during that same rainfall a tree will provide shelter. Trees just stand there, indifferent and yet profoundly generous. A cedar in the northeast corner of the grounds has survived the building's many vicissitudes. Since 1902 the Presentation House has been a school, a hospital, a police station, and finally a cultural centre, including a museum and archive, an art gallery, and a theatre. Numerous renovations and alterations have rendered the building more of a palimpsest than an autonomous structure. All the while the cedar was there—growing, breathing, rustling. Had Frank, before he was called Frank, rested under its branches?

How do ghosts get their names? Do the names of ghosts connect? Put another way, could ghosts have families the way trees have families? That is not to say how ghosts relate to themselves—not genealogy or heraldry—but a system of classification that humans place on ghosts. Imagine there are five general families or orders: phantoms, specters, apparitions, poltergeists, and spooks. Perhaps the Presentation House ghost Frank, who is friendly, would be from the family Apparition, genus *Friendly*, species *presentationhouse*, so his scientific name would be *Friendly presentationhouse* while *Frank* would be his common, or vulgar, name. But still names can be inaccurate. Botanists will tell you the cedars of North America are not *true* cedars (being from the Cupressaceae not the Pinaceae family). Could the same be true of ghosts? Could their names, like North American cedars, be false or misleading? That cedar on the corner (Cupressaceae) is not a cedar (Pinaceae).

Something in the building's hallway feels strange. What kind of sense, what kind of feeling ... a ghostly sense? Is that feeling a projection? Mallett claims that someone—a volunteer who stayed overnight in the gallery during installation—once awoke to find a “menacing female presence” floating above them in the middle of the night. The PHG janitor refused to be interviewed about what he has experienced in the building.

Outside the cedar sways in light wind. Trees feel no anxiety. Nor is it in their nature to assume human emotions like anxiety, unless of course humans give those attributes to them. And trees rarely produce anxiety in others except in cases of dendrophobia or perhaps the anxiety caused from the fear of trees falling during a storm. But the latter has nothing to do with the trees themselves, more with winds or storms. Unlike me, trees cannot be afraid or feel anxiety, they cannot be haunted. But the Presentation House building, much like those Balbec roads, is haunted. By whom? Frank waltzes in the theatre. Oh Suzanne takes you down ...

The trees of Presentation House witness in the same way we assume a passive neighbor witnesses a mugging. Over time those trees have endured smokers at openings, cars driving past, archivists, loafers, drunks interred in the police station drunk-tank, rowdy school children, civic officials, curators bitching about other curators, self-important critics, police officers, perhaps even bears. The cedar tree could tell us who Frank was or why he was named Frank, or why the teenagers set fire to the building in 1975, but they don't or can't—at least not in a way we want them to.

Photography, on the other hand, appears to be a more reliable witness, but practices such as spirit photography complicate that reliability. Pioneered by William Mumler, spirit photography—the attempt to document ghosts in the photographic process—was widespread in the United States, particularly during the Reconstruction era, corresponding with a modernization that conglomerated mesmerism, electricity, spiritualism, ethnography, confidence tricks, and even mass transit. The modern world promised transcendence, both material and spiritual. Technological processes like photography, it was hoped, would record things the human body was incapable of experiencing. But spirit photography was often declared a humbug; PT Barnum included Mumler’s photographs in *Humbugs of the World*. But much like Barnum’s own museum of humbugs, spirit photography retained popularity even if it might have been false. It wasn’t so much the truth of a procedure but the potential for truth. One believed in something because it could be true. Hence the anxiety produced by a photograph: spirit photography both suspended the truth of a photograph (because it is a staged fake) and yet upheld that truth because we have come to believe a photograph records what has been there. The ghosts it recorded—or perhaps depicted—were moot, because the pictures provided, at best, only circumstantial evidence. Spirit photography’s power lay elsewhere: it crassly evinced the representational potential of photography, not the truth of the spirit-realm beyond. Turn to the early twenty-first century: spirit photography seemed the apt medium for Mallett’s work at the Presentation House Gallery. It could address both the gallery’s focus on the history of photography and on the building’s apparent ghosts.

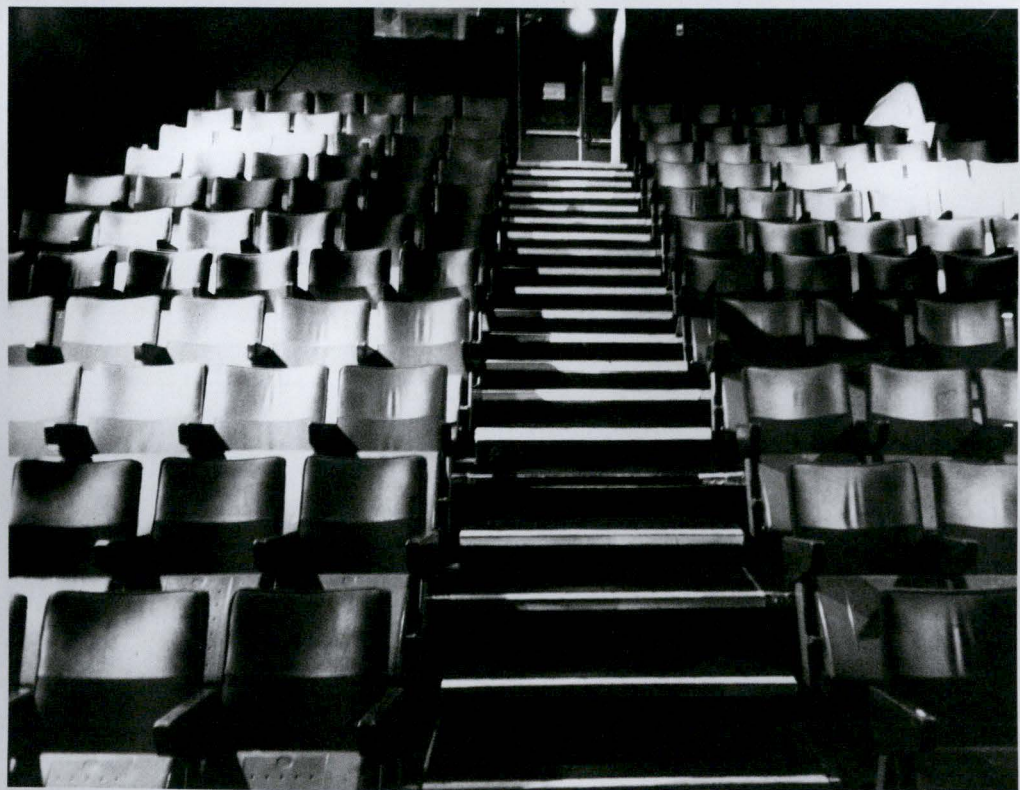
The cedar rustles. The building’s trees have witnessed more than a camera ever will but those trees say nothing about ghosts, at least nothing we understand. If they have a testimony it eludes us. Ultimately a tree’s magnanimity lies in its indifference. It will continue to produce oxygen, seem to give advice, enrich soil, dampen noise, provide shelter, or even inspire aesthetic contemplation. But, in the end, a tree is indifferent to both humans and ghosts. It will continue doing what it does—as such—until some planner decides a specific tree’s root systems interfere with a building or block a condo-dweller’s view of Burrard Inlet. The moment a tree is felled its absence enters the human record and starts to haunt us.



2:05 a.m.: Ghostly figure
materializes in attic
above gallery, then
disappears.
Creaking noises continue
through 4:00 a.m.



3:15 a.m.: Ectoplasma released from
Damian's mouth, as he
summons the theatre ghost
in the dressing room



2:45 a.m. Theatre show (Frank) however
was the grand host while
beard was as playing



12:40 a.m. Ectoplasm explodes
from a wall of photographs
in the West gallery, after
a séance is completed