

The Ghost in the Renovation

By Jennifer Egan

Appeared in Thisoldhouse.com in 2006

When I was nine or ten years old, there was a dilapidated Victorian a few blocks from where I lived that appeared to be empty. We neighborhood kids would crouch outside its blotchy windows, peering through gray lace curtains at what we thought was a light pulsing from deep within the house. Being part of that giddy, squealing cluster of kids gave me my first taste of a particular thrill-part longing, part dread-that goes along with the feeling of being haunted.

This was San Francisco in the seventies, where another kind of haunting was also taking place. The 1960's had come and gone while I was a little girl, and now there were just the dregs to remember them by: addled hippies in rainbow-knit caps playing bongos in Golden Gate park, smells of pot and incense wafting in the air, and a deep stillness to the city, as if it were slowly coming to after a sharp conk on the head. In that stillness I could almost hear the echoes of the wild parade I'd barely missed. At times it seemed more real to me than my own life.

The power of absent things comes from the ghostly marks they leave behind-on places they've occupied and on our minds. When my boyfriend (now husband) and I first moved in together, we found an East Village tenement apartment whose four rooms encompassed 600 square feet. The rough pine boards of the tiny dining room were deeply stained with grease. On our first night there, I lay on a futon bed that barely fit inside the bedroom, imagining all the immigrant families who must have eaten in that dining room over the past hundred years, children laughing, babies crying, food landing on those floorboards-and a deep excitement swept through me that felt like crouching again at the windows of that Victorian house.

The gothic genre is a celebration of ghostly traces. At the center of most gothic stories is an old building-a castle or even just a house-that some believe is a symbol for the body or the mind. I'm thinking of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" or Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, or (if you were a seventies kid like me who sneaked TV in the afternoons) Dark Shadows. Sometimes the house is haunted-there are actual ghosts-but often it's not clear whether the ghosts are really *there* or are just internal states of worry or obsession projected onto the landscape. In my new novel, The Keep, I explore the idea that internal and external hauntings are basically the same. We hear someone whispering into our ear-what does it mean? That a ghost is talking to us? Or that our imaginations have been sparked by the ghostly marks history has left on our surroundings?

The ruined castle in The Keep is under renovation. Howard, the owner-entrepreneur, plans to turn it into a hotel, but he has mixed feelings about erasing the castle's past. "I'll

probably leave some of it like this,” he says, standing in a room without a ceiling. “It’s evocative. It’s...history.” Renovating a space is a way of asserting our ownership, but it raises a question: How do we honor the past without letting it rule us?

Anyone who has seen a therapist will tell you that a healthy take on your personal past is a cornerstone of happiness. Wiping it out doesn’t work because it can’t be erased—our histories are *in* us, they *made* us—and they’ll find unpleasant ways of popping into the foreground of our lives to remind us of that fact. Hence the phrase, “haunted by the past.” The same could be said of houses, or castles, or buildings: pristine and reassuring though it may be to wipe out the ragged reminders of a time before our own arrival, trying to erase the history of a place may awaken our deeper anxieties. At which point our selves get confused with our castles, and we’ve entered the gothic.

Lately, it seems to me that all San Francisco has been renovated. The technology boom transformed the city, and the 1960’s and even the ‘70’s are long gone under a sheen of refurbishing and fresh construction. Any hippies you see around now are newly minted. That old Victorian of my childhood is unrecognizable, its complex details teased apart with a meticulous color scheme. Someone doubtless paid millions for it. But I can’t drive by without recalling the way it looked before: raw, abandoned, empty. Even after years of this new incarnation, that old version still hangs in my mind. I guess you could say it haunts me.