

## *Ghosts*

In the winter they were ghosts. Enzo assumed it was winter because of the snowman in the front yard, and Allie assumed they were ghosts because one day she tried to make omelets and the skillet crashed to the floor, plus the refrigerator was empty anyway except for a few shady dishes covered in tin foil. The skillet crashing to the floor spooked them both, which would've been good for a laugh in retrospect because: irony, except that by then they were too hungry to find it amusing, plus he suggested they had no *appetite* for irony, which drew a ghost of a smile from Allie.

They discovered that simple things were not as simple for ghosts, such as: opening the front door, or answering the telephone, or climbing out of bed, or shaving. Enzo suggested that shaving was maybe not necessary for a ghost? Although this was clearly not the case. So he amended the suggestion to: maybe *beards* were *necessary* for a ghost, and Allie countered with her own suggestion that maybe bathrobes and unbrushed hair were all the rage these days, and he couldn't argue even though that bathrobe was getting pretty disgusting. Anyway they were too tired to be disagreeable, mostly on account of not being able to eat, because: skillet falling to the floor, and because: shady tin-foil-covered things in the refrigerator, and because: pizza delivery people not taking phone calls from the dead.

"At least we have plenty of time to read," he offered, except that the books were too heavy to lift. He argued persuasively that if they could lift them, though, wow, plenty of time.

In fact, time was becoming something of a problem. It crowded the hallways of their house and blocked out the sun during the day and pressed against them when they tried to sleep at night. The minute between 3:35 and 3:36 in the morning on the eighth of January, just as a single infuriating example, lasted long enough for Enzo's beard to grow to an impressive and dangerously weird new length. Aeons passed between heartbeats. New stars were born and gave birth to planets, civilizations arose, omelets were invented, dreams were catalogued, historical forces took shape

and were marshaled against the multitudes, counterforces were marshaled in response (secretly, beneath skies melancholic and luminous, yet always too late, too late). Meanwhile the clock ticked over to 3:37.

One night they sat on the swing in the backyard, fingers entangled, Allie in her bathrobe and Enzo in his beard, and the world at last came almost to a full stop. A gibbous moon hung like a painting in the northeast sky, having taken up residence there some years before, its path across the sky halted, a weary yellow eye looking down on them both, unblinking. The chirping of a nightingale grew to the length of a concerto, and not really the most interesting concerto either. The seconds stretched like taffy all around them, or rather not *like* taffy but *as* taffy. And Allie took a bite.

“It’s actually,” she said, still chewing, and then she said something that sounded like “totally not bad,” so he took a bite too, realizing a hundred percent too late that she hadn’t used that second word, and that she was correct.

“Maybe,” Enzo said, panicking just a little here, “we should think about this a little more,” but Allie was already moving ahead, devouring, clearing their path. He joined her warily. There was just really no way to get to the next hour otherwise, let alone the spring.

Sometimes they ate full entrees, ingesting whatever they could easily chew, raw or cooked, deep-fried or blackened, swallowing it in great bitter mouthfuls (*ugh, January 27th*), but mostly they dined tapas style: an hour here, a few minutes there, a handful of seconds scooped onto little toasts like bruschetta. The evenings were the worst, tough to chew, tasting usually of ash. But the first moments of waking in the morning were surprisingly good, and needed little seasoning at all.

They didn’t haunt much. Instead they found themselves endlessly orbiting some gravitational force, invisible but potent, within their home. When they strayed too far they were tugged backward, toward the origin, which Enzo came to envision as a sun made entirely of stained glass, emanating not warmth and light but a spectacular and glacial coldness that blew straight through them and crystallized whatever was left of their souls. Which sounded terrible, but on the other hand there was a kind

of sweet, changeless comfort in the cold, an invincibility beyond a certain threshold of pain. He imagined them protecting their glass sun like an arctic child, wrapping it between them as they slept. In return it anchored them here in this house, in this winter, preventing them from flying off into the beardless vastness of the non-ghosted heavens.

In this way, the winter passed.

And then: one morning he woke to the smell of omelets. Drifted down to the kitchen, and Allie was there. Dressed not in a bathrobe but in her work clothes, hair no longer a mess, distressingly solid.

“So it was time,” she said.

“My beard,” was all he could think to say.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Enzo stared down his beard at his feet. Time pushed against him, tasting of ash.

Allie said, “I had to, you know.”

“Well,” he said.

“The snowman had melted,” she explained. “I walked outside. And I found her purple cap in the puddle. I had to bring it inside. I’m sorry.”

The words tumbled to the floor and gathered around his feet, furious with energy and meaning, eyes pleading for recognition. Their mouths shone, full of teeth.

“Oh,” he said. Behind him the stained glass sun was collapsing. Enzo leaned down and scooped up her words. Felt their teeth brush against his skin.

“Wait for me,” he said, as they began to bite.

Tom Howard’s recent stories have appeared in *ARDOR* and *Ampersand Review*, and he received the 2013 Rash Award in Fiction. A software engineer and magazine editor, he lives in Arlington, VA, where he can be found walking the hills with his wife beside a funny little black dog named Harper.