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Ghostshipping

margot a. kelley

Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts

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Ghostshipping

“Captain Lee’s gone ghostshipping,” the postmistress tells the stout chapped man who’d held the door, silently, and let me pass.

“They start a search?” He asks, shoving a sheaf of mail into his coat pocket without giving it a glance.

“First thing” she nods.

“Think they need more help?”

“Doubt it. Everyone’s already looking.”

I’m not part of “everyone.” Maybe that’ll change in time, but for now, I’m still too new to matter. So serious conversations often happen in front of me here, their substance mostly beyond my ken. Invisible, I sort the contents of our P.O. box, separating the few letters meant for us from the mass of catalogs and magazines the woman who had this address before us used to get. As I do, I eavesdrop on the terse exchange. I bet our postal predecessor knew Captain Lee, would have joined the conversation, shared today’s worry legitimately. My own concern is more inchoate, for I have never met him.

Or—perhaps—I have. Suddenly, I feel quite sure he’s the old man I often see struggling up the Factory Road, inching his way along the curvy incline. He doesn’t always seem frail. On other days, he walks purposefully, his gait sure. On those days, he nods hello to me, briskly ducking his head a few degrees, blinking his eyes for half a heart beat. But on the struggling days, he ignores me altogether. This oscillation between confusion and clarity makes me think he has Alzheimer’s, so I

fight the urge to offer help. I know how much strangers can agitate, and I'd hate to make his hard days worse.

Gone ghostshipping. I've never heard this phrase before, but it's a perfect way to describe Alzheimer wanderings. I think of my grandfather, of those dread-filled days when my grandmother would call family and neighbors in a panic to tell us he'd "gone off again." Piling into cars and onto bikes, we'd ride in widening rings around town, searching. *Gone off again* seemed a pretty good description of the queasy mix of confusion and movement Alzheimer's can cause, but now that I've heard it, *gone ghostshipping* sounds even closer to what the muddled wanderer must be experiencing—the bewildering sense of the body becoming ungoverned, of being piloted by (at most) a ghost.

I hope Captain Lee sticks to the roads. Hope they find him quickly.

Soon enough, I learn that the old man is *not* Captain Lee, that Captain Lee isn't even a person. There used to be an actual Captain Lee, a man who'd fished from this port for years. A man who taught his sons and neighbors how to rig a boat, drag for groundfish, shrimp in winter. But he's gone now, living on in local memories and as the name of one of the trawlers, *Capt'n Lee*. Some time last night, that trawler broke free, began drifting out to sea. Between Hupper Island and Marshall Point, it bobbed in the dark, missing all the other boats in the harbor, skittering safely past the long

ledge lurking just beneath the water's surface off of Hart. It threaded through the half-ring of islands that shelter the port, missing Ram, Seavey, Twobush, and McGee, edging past Toms, Garter, Thompson, and Davis, evading Benner, Allen, Burnt, and Little Burnt, as well as the smaller, but no less rocky Eastern Egg, Little Egg, and Shark. Onward, *Capt'n Lee* traveled, past Monhegan and Manana, a dozen miles from the mainland, out to open ocean.

Today it's especially clear I'm not from here. While "everyone" gathers at the dock, fueling up and listening for news from the Coast Guard, I am sitting at home, dwelling not on the trawler, to be totally honest, but on this delicious word, *ghostshipping*. I now know what it actually means. A ghost ship is a boat found crewless out to sea. *To go ghostshipping* is to be not just an empty vessel, but one actively, aimlessly ranging. The uncaptured *Capt'n* following the tide's own route. A bark borne by the sea's insistence.

Tomorrow evening, the Coast Guard will spot the *Capt'n Lee*, upright, more than seventy miles from home. And around midnight, two boats will reach her, their captains anxiously matching her wayward pace until dawn as they wait for the choppy waters to settle enough to safely board. Braced for far worse, they'll find she's taken on some water, just enough (as it happens) that it saved her from catching fire when the batteries shorted out. The rest, they'll report, is entirely unmuddled: a salt shaker still sits on its shelf; the DVDs are all in a row.

When I run into my neighbor Linda outside the general store, she says much the same thing I've overheard others say lately—that it's a miracle the boat survived. I'm reluctant to disagree, but I can't help thinking that calling it a miracle focuses only on what didn't go wrong in that last stretch and glosses pretty quickly over the force that unmoored a forty-ton boat and carried it out on open waters. To be sure, it *is* wonderful that the boat was not lost, but if a divine being was going to step in anyway, surely it could have let the mooring hold, or the tide be slack, or the boat be spotted sooner?

I understand enough of faith to know my quibbles are entirely beside the point. And heck, maybe Linda is right; maybe it is a miracle. Maybe anything not culminating in premature collapse, not succumbing too soon to inevitable entropy, is cause not just for jubilation, but proof of divine kindness. Or maybe the miracle is the gift of this example, evidence that a vessel adrift is not always doomed. For no doubt other boats will slip their moorings and as folks search they'll murmur "remember *Capt'n Lee*?" to stoke each other's hope.

Miracle or no, something astonishing has happened here; at the edge of the world, where wind and waves and water rule, a rusted hull and threadbare line have just transformed before my eyes. The trawler I couldn't have picked out of the harbor a week ago now seems starkly present, specific. A second skin envelopes the crusty *Capt'n Lee*, the luminous assurance that even a terrible unmooring doesn't always portend the end.