



# A Ghost In The Throat

DOIREANN NÍ GHRÍOFA

## 6. the dissection room

Is aisling trí néallaibh  
do deineadh aréir dom

Last night, such clouded reveries  
appeared to me ...

—Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill

THE FIRST TIME I entered the room was in a dream.

In the dream, light was blazing through tall windows, and a number of indistinct forms were hovering at hip height, like mountain ranges under blankets of snow. The room felt recently emptied, as though a crowd of people unknown to me had just left; and in that brief moment of the room's emptiness I was suddenly present, a haunting.

When I woke, I pushed myself up on my elbows, shivering in disorientation and leftover awe; I shuddered as though hauling myself up from

a river. The red digits of my stereo glared 08:52. It was a sunny Saturday morning and I had overslept by three hours, which meant that I'd scuppered the first six of the fifteen study windows I'd plotted for my morning. Exam season was approaching. While my school friends were choosing between apprenticeships or courses in nursing or law, I had decided that there was one path above all others that would impose a steady structure on my future.

For a number of years, I had quietly observed our family dentist at work. He was an amiable man, calm and friendly, and it appeared to me that his working day involved a finite number of problems, each easily resolved by a series of well-defined manoeuvres. Even the sight of a broken tooth stretched from my own small, bloody palm had presented no difficulty to him. When I volunteered for work experience in his sunlit rooms, my instinct was confirmed: this was a good life. If I could secure high enough grades to study dentistry at university, it could be my life, too: safe, steady days, and a safe, steady paycheque.

My problem was that no one in the adult world agreed. The career-guidance teacher had spoken to my parents, frowning at the results of my aptitude tests and describing two options: teaching or teaching, either to children or teenagers. But the more adults who warned me that I was making a

mistake in daydreaming of dentistry, the more determined I became.

Beyond my smoking and drinking and the merry-go-round of dodgy boyfriends, I'd made dentistry the battleground of my teenage rebellion. I'd show them. I'd show all of them. I simply had to memorise a fixed volume of information and then release it on an exam paper. Easy.

I set to studying in every hour I could find: at home before the cows had even begun to crush their cud, during free periods at school, on the bus, and as I strode the small breen home again. Even when I sneaked behind the school for a smoke, I fumbled for the list of French verbs in my pocket. I needed to learn by heart the conjugation I found most difficult, the Past Imperfect, in which the past was actively continuing. *Je désirais*: I was desiring, I was wanting, I was longing; the condition was never-ending. I turned every available moment of my life into an opportunity for rote learning. There were chemical equations to memorise, as well as verses of Yeats's poetry, definitions of cellular plasmolysis and crenation, an entire essay on the Ottoman Empire between 1453 and 1571. There was so much I needed to do. I needed to memorise the laws of genetics, how the processes of transcription and translation differ in DNA reproduction. I needed to practise quadratic equations. I needed to solve for x and for y. I couldn't afford to waste any

time, but now, I was waking far behind schedule, my body still thrumming with exhilaration at my dreamed vision.

When I threw open the door to my parents' bedroom I found them chewing buttered toast and smiling in sunlight, as radio headlines hummed in the background. I told them how I'd dreamt a church-kind-of-place and that it felt so real, that I knew this must be an omen that everything was going to be OK, that I could see it all so clearly now. My dad was gathering their cups. 'You need more sleep,' he smiled. By this point, the dynamic of our conversations on my future was well established. 'If you chose Arts you could study four different subjects,' my mother would say, 'you love history, you could do that, and English, if you wanted to, and philosophy, and anything else you wanted!' They made an Arts degree sound like Christmas, but I felt certain that it would lead to no job, no safety, and no control. I knew they were worried about me: that I was studying instead of sleeping, that I wasn't eating, that I was thin and tense and smoking too much. I knew they thought that if I chose a path that demanded less of me, that I would be happier; I also knew that they were wrong. I'd be seventeen soon. I had a plan. I could make it happen.

In the shower, I focused on the diagram of the small intestine I'd taped to the outside of the glass and repeated the labels to myself until they sounded

like prayer: *epithelial cells, microvilli, lymphatic lacteal, lumen*. I closed my eyes and repeated them as the image reconstructed itself in my mind: *lumen, lumen, lumen*. Scald-water rose from my arms in a haze, dissipating from skin to air.

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The second time I entered the room, a corpse was waiting.

That morning, I'd opened my eyes in a strange bedroom to the sound of a river. I'd won a small scholarship that allowed me a bedroom in a shared campus flat, and on my first night, and every night afterwards, I slept with my window open, letting the sound of the Lee soothe me to sleep. I dressed, pinned up my hair, drank a glass of milk, smoked four cigarettes, triple-checked my bag, slid foam headphones over my ears, and pressed play on my walkman. The Pixies roared in my ears as I marched up the hill, checking my campus map twice as I went.

In the registration queue for first-year pre-medical students, the others spoke with the honeyed vowels of private schools. I read them hungrily, my classmates: their tans, their gestures, and the slant of their collars. We each carried brand-new dissection pouches purchased in the university shop along

with a heap of textbooks. When I overheard some jokes about inherited lab coats, I translated the underlying text to myself. My own was factory-new and heavily starched, an abrasive skin I'd buttoned myself into and now couldn't shrug off. As I sat in the lecture theatre, my neck itched wildly, but I held my spine tight, and restrained myself from scratching it.

A lecturer strode in and the room quietened. The technician slid a video into the VCR. The TV flickered, then resolved into an image of a naked body. Dead, I thought. *Dead?* Dead. A friendly voice began to narrate proceedings:

*THORAX. Observe the scalpel's neat incision, beginning between the clavicles, down the sternum, to the umbilical. The edges of the incision are held firmly. A smaller scalpel is preferable at this point, to explore beyond superficial layers of fat and fascia. Once the skin is removed, observe the ribs and their intercostal musculature. Clear the pectoral muscles from the rib cage with care. A handsaw is –*

As the video stuttered and, finally, failed, the technician gave the machine a weary thump. When nothing stirred, the lecturer led us into the lab, handing

each of us a pair of latex gloves as we entered. With a jolt, I found myself standing in the landscape I'd dreamt months before. The same high ceiling, the same blazing windows: it was all precisely, eerily the same. Even those weird mountainscapes – about ten of them – were the same, but this time, rather than hovering, each one was supported by the legs of a trolley and covered by a sheet. Unlike my sleeping self, I could guess what lay below. How had my dream revealed this room to me, in all its vividness? The shock of the recognition was such that it forced a bodily response: a cold sweat began to form on my scalp and my gloves felt too tight suddenly. For one long, suspended moment, I was stilled in bewilderment. Then a tall girl jostled past, and my legs moved me to follow her.

There were six of us at the table, and all of us were silent. When I reached into the pocket of my lab coat to mimic their readiness, a scalpel slid through the pouch and sheared the tip of my finger. (Fiek.) I hurried to the bathroom, tugged off my glove, sucked the blood from the wound, then wrapped it in wadded tissue and slid a new glove over it, hoping that no one would laugh at my weirdly padded hand. I stared at myself in the mirror. Who slices themselves open in a dissection room? Only me, only me.

When I returned, the others were nodding at each other like old ladies around a fresh pot of tea, 'You first.' 'No, please, after you,' etc., etc. The lecturer, I gathered, had delivered the instructions in my absence; now it was

time to commence the dissection. Eventually, one lavishly freckled boy inhaled, chose a scalpel, and folded the white sheet from the cadaver's throat to its waist. We all leaned over the cold expanse of human skin.

I had always imagined that the body I dissected would look much like my own naked body, but this was a very elderly person; also dead; also embalmed. Above a round little tummy, small breasts sagged softly, speckled with liver spots. There was a smell, of course there was, not the smell I had imagined, but a recognisably bodily smell nonetheless, simultaneously fleshy and chemical in nature, something like a dog on a hot day, if someone tripped and sloshed a bucketful of disinfectant mop liquid over it. The boy held the blade over the old woman's body for one trembling moment. Then he brought it down. He cut her. The room was gripped by silence as all the other students at all the other trollies bent over bodies too, all our mouths ajar, enchanted. And then, as though by silent agreement, we began to cut. I watched skin lifted from the old woman's ribcage in two drab flaps, like the wings of a

moth. Hand after hand pressed scalpel to skin, trimming at fat and prodding muscle. Why had she chosen this, I wondered – what might drive a person to inflict such a brutal ending on their own body? I tried to join in, poking ineffectually at flesh that seemed uncannily like tinned tuna, grey and layered, but my mind was still turning over the weirdness of standing in the room I had dreamt.

For the next few weeks I spent my evenings thumbing through textbooks to prepare for dissection classes, memorising anatomical nomenclature. I developed a gentle camaraderie with my classmates, who were given to a shared vocabulary of jokey gestures I didn't fully understand – a sudden poke in the ribs, say, while laughing: 'Hah! You jumped!' The game was to feign composure against the instinct of the body. I always failed; I just didn't get it. Only months earlier, I'd been smoking behind our school when an ex-boyfriend sneaked up and pressed the cold blade of a flick-knife against the back of my school jumper. That was a joke, too. Here, there were different knives and different jokes, but my laugh sounded false as ever. One Monday, a girl told me that she'd been skiing for the weekend. 'Super!' I bleated, an alien word I uttered too often that year, and never since. I grinned so much in that room that whenever I lay in my narrow bed, listening to the night-river humming its inherited song, my cheeks ached.

Day by day, the cadaver changed. Every slice of mangled viscera, muscle, and cartilage we removed was to be tossed into a blue plastic bucket – a kind of tidying into a kind of bin – where they lay like jigsaw pieces, or fragments of a fallen vessel. We had been told that after the dissection was complete, all the buckets of cuttings, along with the hollowed shell of bone and skin, would be neatly coffined and driven to a crematorium or a graveyard. There, a family would gather to say beautiful words, honouring the person who had inexplicably given their body to us.

I never saw anyone treat a cadaver with anything other than whispered respect and a gentle blading, but in the pub we threw back shots of Sambuca and roared together at the same implausibly gory punchlines: '... and then just after last call, the guy stood at the top of the line at the urinal and just dropped the corpse's cock in, and as it poured by each of the other guys, they all puked into the water'. While we laughed, the room was empty. The room was dark. The lights were all switched off.

As the semester progressed, I was rarely in the dissection room. The more

friends I made, the more I drank; the more I drank, the more I smoked; the more I smoked, the less I ate. I only felt like myself when I saw want in a stranger's eyes; I remembered when I had wanted something too. I gave myself away to that desire and it felt good to be carried elsewhere in the cold surge of it. On hungover afternoons, I still dragged myself to the library,

building ramparts of volumes on physiology and dissection around my desk, stuffing a ring-binder full of photocopied diagrams and borrowed lecture notes I never read. I suppose I was at least pretending to myself that I would attend the next session, but I always happened to find myself out on the tear the night before anatomy lab, and often, the following morning, I just didn't turn up. I only half know where I was instead: asleep with a cheek on a toilet seat, or opening an eye to the smell of a stranger's flatmate frying rashers, or drooling on a pillow that wasn't mine. I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I wasn't in the room when I panic-scrubbed my vomit from my flatmate's favourite (borrowed) dress. I wasn't in the room on the many mornings when I collected the morning-after pill from yawning chemists. I wasn't in the room when I wept in the chapel of a cloistered order of nuns. I wasn't in the room when I dozed in A&E, my head nodding over red bandages, with shards of a pint glass embedded in my fist. I wasn't in the room the morning after I tried to give my body to the river. I wasn't in the room. I had left.

I had left, and yet every now and then, I dragged myself back to the anatomy lab. I remember entering the room uncharacteristically early one morning with a whiskey hangover and dirty hair. I stood by the sheeted cadaver and stared at raindrops bevelling the window-glass, distorting the

view, making the city rooftops seem malleable. Beyond, clouds clotted, heavy and silver grey, preparing to drop rain, or dropping it already. I leaned my weary body against the trolley, hoping someone might show up who knew what they were doing. I would like to say that this was a moment of profound connection with the human who had donated her body for the purposes of my learning, or that I promised her I'd find a way to make up for my abandonment, but that would be a lie. I ignored the person under the sheet. All I could think about was how badly I was gasping for a smoke. Bored, I bit my fingernails, tearing sharp fragments away with my teeth, swallowing, biting again. Next, I nipped the cuticle skin by the lunulae, peeling it away in thin shreds, biting and swallowing until every finger bled. When I imagined all those bits of finger flesh and molecules of blood churning in my stomach, I

began to feel woozy again.

The others filed in – clever, glossy-haired, thoughtful – and although they tried to make small talk with me, I just smiled queasily, sweating in shame. I had come in search of a secure life, but there was no safety here, there was no control. I should never have come. I was failing every subject. I was a mess.

The sheet rolled back.

So much had changed since my last visit. The ribcage was gone, as were the lungs. The calvarium had been sawn off, and the skull lay open, but the brain was absent. An arm had been neatly carved to display the layers of vessels within. The face was ... ajar. I don't remember the eyes, either because I couldn't bring myself to look or because I stared at them too long. What remained was a sharply grey architecture that was difficult to read as human, and yet it seemed more human than I felt. I couldn't open my kit. I stood and watched instead, as a pair of scissors forced its way through the pericardial sac, its glint and twist quick as a key in the keyhole of an antique chest. Inside, I knew, was the heart.

Next, a scalpel sliced the blood vessels away, a process nothing like the delicate ritual I had imagined, more like taking a steak knife to a garden hose. The heart was grey, but it seemed to shine, somehow. Scooped up, it was passed from hand to hand to hand. I held it gently, and it really did shine, as morning light illuminated a line of staples that protruded from the muscle. The lab technician pointed as he hurried past: 'Ah – as we discussed – cardiac surgery.' It seemed peculiar that a heart could be repaired so clumsily and continue to carry a body through its days. And yet here it was: a heart stitched and stapled; a heart twice removed and held in the hands of others.

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The third time I entered the room I entered in darkness.

It was an evening in late November, and I wore my infant son strapped to me in a sling, his hot belly tucked close, fontanelle throbbing under my chin. On a whim, I'd decided to attend a book launch on campus, telling myself it might be interesting to revisit the building ten years later. After that disastrous first year, I had switched to an Arts degree and studied psychology and English, before eventually becoming a teacher. I found that I loved spending my days in the company of thirty-five children, teaching them to read and paint and count. I didn't regret my year studying dentistry, but sometimes,



when my classroom filled with a certain slant of sunlight, I was struck again by the puzzling intersection of my dream and the dissection room. I had never forgotten that room; I wondered whether it had forgotten me.

After the launch speeches, after I'd joined in with the applause and dutifully purchased the book, I hefted my sling straps high and stole away from lukewarm chat, wine and cheese-sticks. It had always been bright when I studied here, but even in the dark I knew my way back to the dissection room. Outside, I hesitated, hand hovering over the doorknob. There would be

no cadavers inside, I knew, for the intervening decade had seen an elaborate new centre constructed nearby, the Facility for Learning Anatomy, Morphology, and Embryology, more commonly known by its acronym: the FLAME Lab. The door was stiff when I tried the knob, but it yielded to my shoulder-bone. I dithered on the threshold, scared of the dark, but more scared of flicking the switch in case the light might draw a security guard to investigate. I stepped into the darkness. The room was empty.

I made my way to the spot I'd always occupied among the cadavers. Pressing my brow to the window, I felt the sill, cool under my palm. Some dust had gentled itself to rest there, with the ordinary beauty of miniscule things, and I imagined its many components: an atom of lead scraped from an ancient pencil, the silver fleck of some long-ago cigarette, specklets of dandruff, old, old ash, a fragment of grit picked from a fingernail, and the imperceptibly tiny remnants of bodies dissected here. I ran my finger along the sill, touched the smudge to my tongue, and swallowed.

A thud from the yard beyond set my heart juddering, and a new sensation fidgeted and grew: the sense that if I stayed, something in this room might shift to reveal something vast, something I hadn't yet understood. There was

so much here that I had already struggled to comprehend, so I whispered my farewell and turned away instead, telling myself that I'd never come back to this room again. The baby turned in his sleep and uncurled his clammy fist, fingers starfishing against my collarbone. When my hand met the doorknob, the beginnings of milk tingled, and my nipple began to itch. I resisted the desire to scratch it.

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The fourth time I entered the room I was a thief.

I'd seen on Facebook that the building was temporarily vacant in

preparation for extensive renovations, and the faculty had given permission for an art exhibition. I knew before I closed that tab that I would soon stand in the room again.

I was determined to make some sort of sense out of my attraction to this place and its intersection with my dream. In the car park, I tapped my phone through a phenomenon known as *déjà revé*: a title, if not an explanation, for the experience of dreaming something and then living it in reality. What had happened to me was called a precognitive dream: a premonitory vision, or an omen, experienced in sleep, but the websites offered no convincing explanation, and enough of them bore images of crystal balls and scantily clad cartoon fairies to irritate me.

If my dream had literally come true, then why had I fucked it all up? The whole plot seemed so far-fetched that were a novelist to implant such a moment in a book, I would roll my eyes. And yet, I thought, if I was a fictional character who had seen her dream come true and then cartwheeled her way to spectacular failure, what would she do now? She wouldn't sit in a car poking her phone around hippy-dippy websites. No. She'd go in.

The door had been wedged open by a bockety chair on which was sellotaped a hand-scrawled sign: ART THIS WAY. Upstairs, daylight showed elements of the room that had escaped me on my previous visit. The cold elevator that drew cadavers up from the basement. The sinks still stained with years of concentric metallic rings. I began to worry that unless I paid attention to the exhibition, I would be asked to leave, so I strolled around projections and canvases while surreptitiously studying the changes that had occurred at their peripheries. The delicate vine of ivy that had penetrated the window frame. The cobweb under a tap. The cracks writing their own slow histories through the plaster. The thick dust underlining each tile.

Behind me, a pair of students clicked a selfie. One rolled a Rizla between fingertips of splintered blue nail polish, licked it and pressed. When she smiled and said, 'Back in a sec,' I nodded. As soon as the door rapped behind them, I took the back stairs in three leaps to the mezzanine, where I had never been, and into the office of the anatomy technician. The drawers of various storage units were open, their papers scattered all over the floor. A thin grime cloaked the surfaces. I figured I might have five minutes before the others returned from their smoke. What to do? I surprised myself by wrenching open a side door and racing up an older, narrower stairway.

The attic was cold with a hidden-room stench of damp and stone, and brickwork clothed in the filthy silk of ancient cobwebs. I was standing exactly above the dissection room. Through this shadowy upper room, something of each of those people might have risen – call it a soul – lifting though rafter and slate, as steam dissipates from skin to air. For a moment, I stood still, thinking of the generations of bats and mice who lived whole lives here while humans dismantled human bodies below. What could I do that might force some reasonable ending to this story? I closed my eyes until I grew lightheaded. Then I chose something to steal.

When I got home, I didn't know what to do with my theft. The brick was encrusted with mortar and grimy with old, old dust. It was ugly and weird, and

I couldn't explain why I had stolen it. I was embarrassed. First, I hid it from myself under a chair in the sitting room. Then, I leaned it behind a plant. I didn't want to be able to see the brick – it had been another stupid mistake to steal it – but I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't bring myself to keep it in the house, but I couldn't return it either. This is how the brick came to live in the grass, tucked between stones I'd hauled back from beach trips and ruined demesne walls. There it remains, host to lichen, brief shelter to wild bees and butterflies, slid over by snails.

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I knew it was simply a matter of time before I'd return to the room. I had taken and taken so much, I longed to find some way to balance the equation. One morning, I rang a number. The next, forms arrived. My scrawled signature was all that was needed to pledge my body to the dissection room. A gesture into the distance, it felt easy as pressing my car key from afar; I simply slid the envelope into the post-box and felt a door unlock itself for me.

If it was a relief to imagine that my body would someday become one of the hundred cadavers wheeled into the rooms of five Irish medical schools every year, and it also made my dream feel more prophetic than ever. These

institutions are united in their positions on the emotional impulses that drive such donations. NUIG's website states: 'Body donation is a most generous and charitable gesture and it is with deep gratitude that we at Anatomy, NUI Galway, accept bequests of this manner, for they help us train the future generation of medical doctors and medical scientists.' The Royal College of Surgeons refers to how the 'unique and priceless gift of the human

body provides a source of knowledge that is the foundation of medical education and research'. Trinity College: 'Our department is utterly dependent on the generosity of spirit of those who donate their bodies to Medical Science.' UCC: 'The generous act of body donation is vital to the study of human anatomy.' UCD: 'Through the selfless act of donating your body to medical education, one can make a huge impact upon the life and wellbeing of others for generations to come ... The School is eternally indebted to the many individuals who chose to donate their bodies to clinical education and their families who support this generous gift.'

I'm not sure if the act of donating one's corpse to an anatomy department can be fully explained by the simplicity of generosity or selflessness; I suspect that such a gesture holds more complexity than these institutions might imagine. It might also be construed, for example, as a failed attempt to exert

some control over the body's fate after death, or as a convenient way to pay burial costs. Historically, next of kin were permitted to donate the corpse of another in exchange for such costs. Medical schools still compensate a donor's family for eventual burial or cremation costs, a fact that is a reassurance to me – at least my family won't have to concern themselves with such bills. The poetics of the gesture please me too, allowing me to orchestrate a moment of my future in which my body will echo a moment from my past. Despite my failure as a student of anatomy, the experience of watching a human body disassembled was one of the most profound of my life. I am still moved by the remembered sensation of holding another person's heart in my hands. One morning, when I am dead, a stranger will lift my own heart in their hands. Even if they giggle or play pranks on my body, their laughter will be a form of afterlife I am happy to give myself to.

I wanted to leave a message for the strangers who would be the last to touch me. In choosing white ink for my tattoo, I thought of the milk bank. I thought of the *Caoineadh* emerging from a sequence of pale throats. I thought of all the absent texts composed by women, those works of literature never transcribed or translated. I thought of Hélène Cixous: 'there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink.' I knew

then that I must choose the words of Eibhlín Dubh. The fragment I chose occurs when she wakes suddenly from a dream in which a prophetic vision is revealed to her, 'Is aisling trí néallaibh', which I translate as 'such clouded reveries'.

When the tattooist's needle approached, I pinched my eyelids closed and let the pain carry me to the room for the fifth time. As her words were etched into my skin, letter by pale letter, I saw those old windows once more, cathedral-elegant, and glazed in blazing sunlight.