

G H O S T S
Written by Tess Farley

The day I left, I felt giddy with it. Champagne drunk. Every molecule that tethered me fizzed in my gut, rose up and migrated out of me, released from my finger-tips in invisible streams. Left to fizzle out somewhere along the M42, as my hand surfed through the wind.

The gut contains over a hundred million brain cells, did you know that?
My brain got broken, when I was small. My amygdala sends fear signals pulsing around my body. Liquid hot magma explodes through my synapses, when there's nothing to be frightened of. My brain is a traitor; so how do I know if I can trust my gut?

That day, the day I left, and for a long time after, I felt no fear. Perhaps I should have. I think I should have. That's what I mean about my brain being a traitor.

It takes seven years for every cell in your body to replace itself. It's been nine. Since I left. I am literally, and figuratively, a completely different person.

If I'm a completely different person why do I feel incomplete?

I don't mean like a work in progress, like we as humans are some fucking masterpiece self-portrait that we paint through our lives, because it's all about the journey and all that mindful self-affirmation wank. I mean incomplete, like there's something missing that I can't get back.

When I go back, when I go 'home'... I don't like that word... Home. Because I don't really have a sense of what 'home' is anymore. It isn't in my blood. Too much has been spilled. It doesn't feel like it's in a building: I've moved house thirty two times in my life. Everything I ever thought of as home has been bulldozed. So I prefer to say 'back'. Backwards. To my past. To the place I left behind.

When I go there, 'back', I see ghosts of myself. Everywhere. They dance across zebra crossings, linger outside pubs, loiter in car parks, trudge through woods and wriggle their toes in the sand. One place awakens an entire flock: they spring up all at once, mini montages of years of my life; versions of myself left behind, rooted to time and place. It's like discovering a treasured box of someone else's memories; vivid and translucent at the same time. I reach out to try and grasp those versions of myself, to hold them captive...and watch myself disintegrate in wisps of smoke-like haze, until all I'm clutching is a feeling of emptiness. Absence.

When your roots stop providing nourishment, and you become used to being uprooted, you learn to let go. To survive. To grow. But sometimes I wonder if I got too good at letting go. Or at least expecting to need to let go. Anticipating. Sometimes I think I don't go back because the absence: what I don't have, that everyone else seems to have, becomes too stark.

It's been six years since Manchester adopted me. Now there's ghosts here too. In Ancoats they strut and fret along the canal. They swarm happily and helplessly outside central library, lull me into whimsy and melancholy at Piccadilly, whisper sweet nothings and explode with rage in the Northern Quarter. They consume me with darkness and fear walking by St Mary's hospital, bestow me with peace and burden me with regret in Whitworth Park. They float through Dunham: half delirious with love, frigid with fear.

But these ghosts follow me home. They creep in through the door and hide under the bed with monsters from my childhood. Lately I've been locked in with them. Some nights knowing they're there is too much. I thought about running away, leaving them to haunt these streets. But I'm learning to turn the light on and talk to them. I tell them these streets are ours. We earned them. I am them, and they are me. I can take it from here, but I will learn from them. I don't think I can really be free without thanking them.