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Visitations: A Novel

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

VISITATIONS: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Joseph Anderson

2014

To: Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Joseph Anderson, and entitled *Visitations: A Novel*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

John Dufresne

Heather Blatt

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 3, 2014

The thesis of Joseph Anderson is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

VISITATIONS: A NOVEL

by

Joseph Anderson

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

VISITATIONS, a novel, explores themes of haunting and desire in New York City, in two time periods. The modern-day action focuses on Alan Philips whose wife, Beth, has recently died. His efforts to resume a normal life are sabotaged by what he comes to believe is her ghost. In the parallel story, in 1924, Oliver Nathan Blackburn, a pulp writer, in the midst of a breakdown writes a story that may play a role in Beth's death.

VISITATIONS presents Alan and Oliver's perspectives in third person narration, so that the reader is both close to and may question the subjectivity of their perceptions. The book employs a black-comic tone for the contemporary period and a more formal one for Oliver's sections.

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Chapter One

September 17, 2004

Using his key to open the large black gate, Alan Philips entered the private entrance to Gramercy Park. Through the bars that lined the boundaries of the park, he could see rows of expensive-looking brownstones to the west. Big yellow leaves lay in piles on the ground. It had rained earlier and the wet dirt and leaves formed a clot around his feet, forcing him to kick himself free every few steps. The daylight shone pale and with little strength, fast losing whatever heat it started out with.

A slight wind blew through his hair, dirty blond, which he cut himself and, which as a result lay in ragged tufts, uneven against his forehead. He was twenty-seven with shadowed eyes and lines that ran down the length of his narrow face. He carried his lunch in a small bag, heading south past benches and small clusters of people, scattered in groups of twos and threes.

From the direction of the south gate, he made his way to the center of the park, a swatch of yellow bright fabric catching his attention, a girl unseasonably dressed in a yellow summer dress. It was afternoon and the sun was already beginning to sink and its slanted rays made it hard to see. Alan tried unsuccessfully to shade his eyes from the persistent glare as people moved around him, their bodies momentarily silhouetted.

A shred of a cloud pushed itself in front of the sun and Alan could see the girl was in her twenties, her dark hair falling loose in front of her face as she walked. She was still in the distance but he could see her tall, slender body that radiated an awkward sort of grace all its own. The dress had white flower petals stretching across the front of it. The

sunlight made the fabric almost transparent, allowing him to see the shape of her breasts and her hips, the dress sliding up, exposing her thighs. The thin material rippled over her in waves, causing her body to gain and then lose definition, clinging to her breasts, falling into shapelessness, wrapping around her hips, and shapeless again.

Her eyes seemed dark and wet in the weakened light. A small smile shaped her mouth. She seemed to move in his direction, with intent. Alan let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. It was close to October and the air tasted sweet. Sweet but with a slight bitter edge. He moved stiffly, feeling sluggish, dragging his feet, clumsy, through piles of leaves, making a horrible wet sound with each drag.

The girl looked like she was barely touching the ground, while clumps of earth, wet and black, clung to Alan's shoes, weighing him down. Sweat dropped off him and the cool air clung to the moisture on his face, giving him chills. The air shimmered with pale afternoon light as recognition began to settle over Alan in a terrible wash. In truth, he had recognized her the instant he saw the figure separate itself from the distance behind her, but his brain felt as if it was lagging behind his senses. His thoughts were like open circuits not wanting to close, not wanting to form conclusions, not wanting to confirm what he already knew: it was Beth.

He hadn't seen her in a little over two years. She looked beautiful. He felt grotesque and awful, and the closer she got, the more beautiful she looked, and the more beautiful she looked, the more awful he felt. She seemed to be slowly rising into the air. She looked like an avenging angel about to spread her wings in prelude to some massive desolation.

A desperate kind of feeling struck him, to go left or right or back the way he came. He tried to force his body to turn, but could only manage a hopeless, sidelong glance, feeling caught up in some sort of flow, like being trapped in the event horizon of a massive black hole. He pictured space debris and satellites being sucked in — the visage of Beth being the singularity itself. Gravity seemed to press squarely down upon him, his legs bowing under the immense weight of force. Panicking, he looked around. Everyone else seemed okay, mothers wheeling their babies along, couples walked around in little circles, pressing their bodies together, whispering little intimacies to each other. He looked up into the face of Beth, her large, dark eyes, void of light, her small nose, her narrow body that seemed too frail, too slender a thing to be the focal point for the torrent of pressure that seemed to emanate from her. The shadowy outline of her body shifted beneath the yellow haze of her dress, the hem of which swung back and forth as she moved. He felt a large bead of chilled sweat drop from his forehead. Nauseated, he forced himself to face her. He looked into her eyes and his heart froze. It was Beth, but she seemed new somehow, as if he had never seen her before, like some kind of foreign entity, a stranger. His heart grudgingly started up again with a turgid thump.

“I didn’t want to forget you,” he said, like a lover confessing unfaithfulness. She didn’t stop, instead continued, fixed in her trajectory, moving towards him and past, and he, standing still, waiting for her to pass over.

After she moved away and out of his sight, Alan felt his muscles go slack, freed from whatever weight had been pressed upon them. He felt flooded with relief, as if he had been spared, but like any good survivalist he was still fearful. He didn’t want to turn around. She had moved like a cloud being blown through the air with impersonal deter-

mination, like a thing of nature. She didn't seem to appear for the purpose of communication. By the time he did look back, he saw no sign of her, and all he wanted was to go straight out of the park, out onto Irving Place, up to Park Avenue and take the long way back to work on Lexington, avoiding Gramercy altogether.

Alan threw his lunch into the trash and walked as fast as possible. It was her. It was Beth. He hadn't seen her in two years and just like that, she had returned. The dead did come back and how miraculous it was. The dead did come back and how terrible it was. He let out a breath and exited through the north gate, trampling on all the little yellow leaves as he went.

The Hotel Beatrice would have been a graceful old structure had it not been violated in the bloom of its years. In its first life, it had existed in Florence, Italy, having been erected in 1889. For over two decades it had enjoyed a luxurious existence, being a place for none but the very rich before some very bad investments were made, investments that caused the owner of the hotel to go bankrupt. Fortunately, at the time, a wealthy American had grown fond of the place and decided to assume ownership. This at first delighted the owner, relieved the hotel would continue, even if he would no longer be involved in its management. But soon after the American bought it, he decided to shut it down and proceeded to do the unthinkable: the American had the building dismembered. Taken apart, piece-by-piece and stripped down to its foundations. It lay in blocks, its guts taken out, awaiting transportation to America, where it would be reassembled and made whole once again.

The night before the remains of the building were to be shipped away, the original owner came to see his once-beautiful establishment. He believed the structure to have been imbued with the spirit of Beatrice herself, to have been enlivened by an ancient supernatural love. As he looked over the remains that stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see, the scene resembled that of some massive vivisection of stones and mortar.

He found himself often drawn back to the site, his wife coming to fetch him in the late hours to bring him, and the bottle of whatever he happened to be drinking on that particular day, home. All the while the man swore that the hotel that would soon be transported to New York City and restructured would no longer be his beloved Beatrice but a shabby double, a heap of parts with no true spirit. He vowed to disown the cheap imitation like a disobedient child. His wife patiently agreed with him until they arrived home, where she would quickly put him to bed.