

Spirit Photograph

/

Dorothy Barresi

1867

I had one son: I was already haunted.
He fell at Fredericksburg, his body an oven for flies
in a field of corpses blackening my mind.

I could not breathe him back.
I could not breathe,
and having no power but my desolation, which is not a *special* power,

and my wish to die, which God & my husband disallow,
I thought to seek Mr. Mumler, the photographic
medium whose *cartes de visite*
decorate the draped and stricken parlors of New York. Stiff-posed

portraits of ordinary mourners, but above their heads—poured there
from beyond the known world's frame—

a transparent “progression of ectoplasm”
in unranked uniform appears, carrying a musket, or a Bible and saber.

Smiling. With odd calm faces half-shaded toward the camera
but with jaws tied up in glowing swathes of wedding gauze
as though death were nothing more than a toothache

developed in the afterlife.
Whole, unmaimed, good-humored, blest:

our ghosts are made of domesticated stuff; Mr. Mumler said they could be called
up

by belief—a floating concept—then made to leave for fifty dollars
one final impression on a sensitized glass plate
washed with silver gelatin bromide.

To wish the living well.
All our pathetic acts of adaptation and survival, all
waste, chance, incompetence, savagery, war,
forgiven in a luminous vapor—the occult camera invites vibrations the soul
requires.

But before I could cudgel even ten dollars from my meager
household share,
Mr. Mumler was arrested. Tried. The image of his living shown clear through.
Bandaged actors confessed

creative larceny,
which set loose amongst the populace
hot talk of double exposure, superimposition, and I knew not what
crimes against optic science nor cared. I cried.

War without ghosts is horrible.
Silence gothics the void.

Now I have no son, no tender emancipated farewell hope, false or true,
and no photograph to prove
I am yet alive among the ruins.