

JAMES A. MOAD II

Our Ghost

“Sometimes they go with ya,” my friend Bennie said when I told him we’d be movin’ on soon. I didn’t want to believe him, ya know, and that scared me more than anything, cuz I was hopin’ we’d leave it behind.

Bennie’s got two older sisters, but ain’t neither of us got a brother, so we’re about as close as close can be. He knows all about ghosts. Even read a book about it once, and he and his sister watch a T.V. show about ’em. They asked me over once to watch, but I got no interest in seeing them on T.V. since I got one of my own. Bennie says that ghosts ain’t got no sense of time, that they didn’t make it over to the other side, and they just keep moving from one place in time to another. They’re restless, he says, and sometimes they go back to when they died and watch it over and over again.

That must be why they’re so angry and sad, I think, but I put that notion away and don’t linger on it too long. Last week the ghost did some awful screaming in the middle of the night. I heard my mama talking it down, telling it how it needed to stop. She asked God to step in and give her a hand, and I think that done the trick for awhile.

“Do ya think we can kill ghosts with these here guns?” I ask Bennie. He’s almost nine, a full eight months and a day older than me, and he just might know. His daddy give him two air guns for Christmas and we use ’em to play war in the trees between their lot and ours. They only got half an acre, but there’s a whole patch of trees on it for hidin’ behind. I asked my mama for one of them air guns for Christmas, but she said we ain’t got no use for guns anymore. She took both of papa’s rifles out of the house before he came back. I thought he might put up a

fight about it, but he don't say or do much about anything anymore. When it's nice out, mama sets him out in an old Adirondack chair facing toward us boys. I always straighten out his baseball cap before I go on and play. No matter how awful tired he is, it makes me feel all warm inside to know he's watchin' over me.

"Can't see as any gun would kill a ghost," Bennie says. "They already dead."

"They sound like they're alive to me."

"You ever actual seen one?"

"Nope, and I hope I never do."

And that's about as far as I take the talk before we get back to killing each other and anything else we see fit to shoot at. Bennie's a better shot than me, but I wanna be sniper some day, so I'm trying to practice and get a good eye like him. I know it's in me, cuz my papa was a sniper. Ain't sure exactly what it means, but I know he was good at shootin'. Sometimes I wish he could just kill that ghost and get it gone for good. A real gun might do the trick, but he's got the slowness now, and it might be hard for him. I ain't scared or nothin', but it'd sure be nice to have things back to normal.

"My grandpa thought he could kill it," I tell Bennie, but he just looks across the road toward a coal train and the river out beyond.

"Them kids don't know nothin'," he says.

After my papa got back, the kids at school started talkin' about how my grandpa tried to kill the ghost. Everybody knows about how it got on him so bad one night that he took a shot at it, but missed. The bullet went right through grampa's brain and killed him dead. Mama don't say nothin' about it, since it was her daddy and all, but I know it's true.

"I guess my grandpa wasn't as good a shot as my papa."

"Ain't nobody as good a shot as your daddy," Bennie says.

And that makes me happy, and I forget about everything else.

My Mama says there's been a ghost on the land as long as she can recall. It comes and goes, and I knows she's right cuz she told me about the screams back when she was a girl. Sometimes at night, it puts off a horrible howlin' when it gets in a real bad place, and I hide under the blanket with Pesky. Pesky's my German shepherd—not a real one, cuz they cost too much money to feed and all. He's stuffed—black and white all over, but he's as real as real can be, I got no doubt about that. One time he woke me when papa left a cigarette burnin' and it caught the corner of the porch on fire. If it wadn't for Pesky, I bet this place mighta burned up like a torch. I seen a trailer down the road where that happened and I felt bad for those folks. We

been meaning to get that porch fixed for some time, but we gotta wait for things to get better, mama says.

“Skeeters startin’ to bite,” Bennie says as he slaps his arm and leans against the tree. “My daddy says the River’s running high this spring, and there’s gonna be a whole mess of them this summer.”

“I hate skeeters worse than just about anything,” I say as I look out toward our burned up porch. I can see mama in the kitchen. Papa’s inside somewhere and she’s on the phone again, talkin’ and waitin’ to talk with people. “I bet if you stayed out here all night they’d suck the blood right out of you until there wadn’t nothin’ left.”

“My daddy went up to Alaska once, and he said the skeeters up there are so big they can kill just about anything. If you leave a horse out in the wild, a whole swarm of ‘em will suck its life right out.”

Just thinking about a big old horse being sucked down to the bone makes me tingly all over, and I start to feel a bite or two even though I know they ain’t real. Back behind us, I hear Bennie’s mom open up the screen door and yell for him to come home for dinner.

“I’ll see ya in the mornin’,” he says as the sun drops down below his house. I know it’s time to head home, but I ain’t ready just yet. There ain’t no hurry, and besides, I like to hear the crickets start their evenin’ talk. I watch as Bennie’s mama takes his hand at the back door, and by the time he gets inside, I feel some of that cool air workin’ its way up from the Ohio.

We’re on the other side of the river from Paducah, the winning side, just a little ways from Mound City. Sometimes when Bennie and me play in these here woods, I think about how my family used to own all this land. I told him about it once, but he said my head was full of rocks, and I didn’t know nothin’. But I know what my Mama says, and she ain’t never ever lied to me. She said her great, great, great granddaddy got it after the Civil War. Lt Joseph James was his name, and the government gave him a hundred acres for fightin’ in the War. He had a wooden leg, but he got on a horse and come out here all the way from Pennsylvania. Can’t imagine what it’s like to ride a horse all that way with a wooden leg, but I guess that’s what heroes do. He’s buried down the road in the big Civil War cemetery.

She says we’s all that’s left of him now. There used to be a picture of him in a frame wearing his uniform, but it got lost years back during the big flood. Sometimes I think about what it must’ve been like to be some Civil War hero and then have your picture get taken away by the river. It don’t seem right somehow. I sure wish we had it up on the wall still. We got lots of other pictures of war heroes in the family. Grandpa’s got one, my uncle Jake on papa’s side is up there, too, and then there’s the

one of my papa right next to a big old flag. He's one of them National Guard heroes that goes off when they come callin'. He got into the fight twice. I don't remember the first time he went cuz I was just a kid, but this last time I seen him off and welcomed him back. I missed him so hard that at first I didn't care what he was like when he come home. He's got the slowness now, but mama says the government's givin' him all the time he needs to rest and get better. It'd be nice if they could give us some more land like they gave Lt James, but I guess they done give it all away.

"You ever think that old ghost might be Lt James?" Bennies says.

"Can't say for sure who it is."

"Don't look at it when you leave."

"I ain't ever seen it."

"I mean don't look back at the house. If a ghost sees you lookin' at it, then it might follow you."

"Why would it do that?"

"Maybe he's angry that folks sold off his land after he won it fair and square?"

"Can't see how he'd be angry at us. We ain't the ones who sold it." I wanna say more, but I'm not gonna, cuz Bennie's my one good friend and there ain't no use in making a bother over things I ain't sure about. Mama says her family kept splittin' the land in two over the years when times got hard. They kept selling it off in pieces until they was down to an acre and a half. Her daddy did that, sayin' it wadn't worth having less than an acre, and I think he's right. I don't mention that to Bennie, cuz I don't want him to get all jealous or think I'm special cuz they only got a half acre. But I know what I know and he ain't got no Civil War heroes to speak of, anyways.

When mama tells me the news, the first thing I do is go over and find Bennie in the trees. They got a real dog—a mutt named Georgie—and they's out playin' fetch. Georgie's a good ol' dog, and they got him trained to do all sorts of tricks.

"Yep, were goin' for sure," I tell Bennie, and he kicks the dirt in front of me. Georgie comes runnin' up and drops the ball at his feet. "Where ya headin'?"

"Up to Mary Ann. They got a special hospital up there—just for snipers and other heroes to get all better."

"I been up to Marion once," Bennie says. "Went camping on Crab Orchard Lake. They got good fishin' there." Georgie looks up at us, waitin' for one of us to pick up the ball, but ain't either of us in the mood for playin'.

"My papa always liked to go fishin'. Maybe you can come up when he gets better, and we can all go together."

"Maybe," he says, reachin' down to pick up the ball. "Somebody buyin' your place?"

"Nope. I think folks are scared of comin' round. The bank's gonna take it back."

I can tell Bennie don't know what to say as he looks over toward the house where papa's sittin'. I bet he's hopin' there'll be another boy who moves in, another boy to go shootin' with, and it makes me sorta sad thinking how I might be replaced.

"Think you'll ever be comin' back?"

"Can't say as I know one way or another, but once papa gets all better, I can't see why not."

"I like the sound of that," he says and then he lets the ball loose on a long toss, and old Georgie tears off at high speed to get it.

It's time now. We got papa strapped in good and tight in the back seat. He ain't been drivin' since he come home cuz his arms don't work so well. They say snipers are the most important men in the whole army. I guess being that important and all, he was used to gettin' driven around by folks. Mama's up front, and me and Pesky's in the back to keep a watch over him.

I take a quick look over toward Bennie's house, and I can see him out on the front stoop sitting there with Georgie. We done said our goodbyes, and it don't look like he's watching us, but I bet he is. We's best friends and all, so my going's gotta mean something. I suck back a tear I feel building up on the inside, and I roll down my window to yell goodbye. Before I can get that window down, though, his mama joins him, so I just raise my arm a bit instead. They ain't waving or nothin', though, they're just sittin' there.

I wonder if he's watching to see if the ghost will follow us. I been trying not to, but that's all I been thinkin' about lately. I wanna ask mama about it, but I can tell she's kinda sad. She's always on the phone talking to someone about papa, and I bet she's done talked out. It's like she got tired real fast when he came back, helping him out and all, and then with the ghost, too, it musta been all she could handle.

I got Pesky's sittin' on my lap, and I reach out and take papa's hand. It feels a little cold, but I don't mind. "We'll leave that old ghost behind, mama," I say, but deep down I ain't so sure. Maybe Bennie's right, I think. Maybe the old ghost is Lt. James, after all, and he's out there looking for us right now, angry that we lost it all. There ain't nobody else left to blame, but us. Maybe he's gonna follow us right up to Mary Ann and won't leave us alone until we make things right.

Mama starts the car, and I squeeze papa's hand wantin' him to squeeze back, but there ain't nothin' there. She turns out of the driveway, leading our U-Haul trailer onto the road. I can see her in the mirror, looking for papa's eyes, and then they settle on me. "Don't look back, honey," she says, and I nod and turn to papa. He's gotta little smile on his face, and he leans into the window looking hard as if he can see something we can't.

Up front, mama's all about the road ahead. She ain't cryin' like I thought she would. I guess maybe she's too scared to cry.

"I ain't gonna look back, mama," I say. "I ain't gonna."

JAMES A. MOAD II is an Assistant Professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he teaches War Literature. He runs the website TheWarLitPage.org, where he helps connect writers, professors and students of war literature. As an Air Force Pilot, he has over 3000 hours of flight time and has flown over a hundred combat missions in the C-130. He is currently at work on a novel.