

The Visitation

Matthew Baker

The Visitation

Every last ghost on the planet. Every last soul that had refused to pass on to the afterlife. Every last soul that had refused to pass on from this world. Humans had been dying on this planet for millennia, perishing by drowning and exposure and trauma and electrocution and suffocation and poison and execution and murder and hunger and thirst and overdose and suicide and disease and seizure and fire and age. Most souls had passed on peacefully. We were the ones who had stayed.

After the end, after the ice caps had melted, and the seas had risen, and the temperatures had soared, and drought had stricken the planet, and the land had turned to desert, and the ocean had turned to acid, and the heat had become fatal, and humanity had gone extinct, and everything had gone extinct, and the final carcasses had decomposed, and the final detritus had disintegrated, we were all that remained. No life remained on the planet. No birds chirped. No insects hummed. No plants grew from the soil. Not even moss or lichen. Not even algae or fungi. It was a dead world. Just dirt, and rocks, and sand, and time. Satellites fell from the sky, burning to dust in the atmosphere. Reactors sporadically exploded, releasing enormous clouds of radiation into the air. Roofs caved. Chimneys toppled. Houses collapsed. Roads cracked apart into gigantic slabs of pavement, tilting at nightmarish angles. Not one of us could have explained why we were still there, refusing to pass on. For centuries, we wandered in anguish across the barren surface of the world.

Ghosts huddled in the moldering ruins of a stone temple, whispering among wisps of pink sand. Phantoms skulked in the darkened stairways of flooded metro stations. Specters lurked between the rusted shipping containers in hushed ports. Spirits hovered among rotting furniture in the windswept heights of decaying skyscrapers. Haints drifted across bridges. Wraiths floated among the mosaicked rubble of minarets. A shade with blank eyes, the soul of a child, lay at the base of a crumbling statue, nestled in the massive crevice between a colossal pair of sculpted feet, weeping. The winds howled, the storms raged, acid rains fell from the clouds to the earth, and then one morning as sunshine was sparkling across the ocean, the desolate silence above the water was interrupted by a roar in the heavens, a tremendous boom, and a light suddenly appeared, and the light grew brighter, and those of us who had been lying among the dunes rose from the sand, trembling in fear, gazing in wonder, watching a spacecraft touch down on the shore of the ocean in a dazzling spectacle of fire and steam.

The spacecraft was titanic, a sleek white ship that gleamed in the sunshine, looking almost opalescent. The doors slid apart with a hiss, and a group of creatures emerged from the spacecraft, stepping gracefully down onto the beach. A thrill went through those of us who had gathered around the ship. We murmured. We exclaimed. For the first time in centuries, there was life on the planet. The creatures were beautiful and elegant, somewhat taller and thinner than the average human had been, dressed in flimsy silver clothing that looked comfortable and light, with smooth pale skin and iridescent eyes that shimmered with color. As word spread through the ether that a spacecraft had landed, ghosts began converging at once upon the coast, until finally the shore was crowded with spirits, every last ghost on the planet, spirits with braids and perms and tattoos and wigs and freckles and dimples and snaggleteeth and underbites and birthmarks and buzzcuts and dreadlocks and topknots and piercings and spectacles and mustaches and beards, spirits in

dresses and parkas and aprons and pajamas and fedoras and turbans and ponchos and moccasins and saris and tunics and togas and uniforms and swimsuits and loincloths and tuxedos and rags, even the soul of the child who had spent centuries weeping at the feet of the statue, all standing together on the beach, watching the creatures arrange equipment on the sand. The creatures radiated a sense of intelligence. The creatures radiated a feeling of compassion. The tide was ebbing, and beyond the spacecraft the receding waters had exposed the ruins of a gigantic pier, littered with the rusting wreckage of an amusement park. A carousel, a roller coaster, an observation wheel. Noticing the ruins, the creatures called out to each other, then wandered out onto the damp sand, looking curiously at the structures, gently touching the corroded metal, making noises that seemed to express profound emotion. And that was when we realized that we had stayed for a reason. Humanity was extinct. Humanity was gone. But there were still relics of our culture, artifacts of the civilization that we had built. We could guide the aliens to what remained.

The aliens couldn't see us, and as immaterial entities that existed on a spiritual plane, we couldn't directly manipulate solid objects like dirt or rocks. We couldn't manipulate liquids. We couldn't manipulate gases. But we did have the ability to release quick bursts of electromagnetism, creating brief flashes of plasma that manifested as faint shimmers of light. During the daytime, from a distance, the shimmers looked merely like sunshine reflecting off of metal, but that was enough to catch the attention of the aliens, prompting the creatures to embark on a hike along the shore to investigate the source. The aliens had seemed surprised to discover signs of life when the tide had receded, as if the aliens hadn't known that the planet had once been inhabited, and the creatures seemed just as astonished to discover the eroded remains of a fallen lighthouse down the beach. From there we led the creatures into the city, down shattered avenues awash with rippling drifts of sand, between deteriorating buildings with sand heaped in the windows, past shrines and

memorials and crumbling statues, into a vast canyon of decrepit skyscrapers, where the hulking skeletons of cars and vans and buses and semis stood rusting in the streets, and where we finally arrived at the highlight of the tour, the final destination, a stainless steel cube at the center of a sandy plaza. The time capsule. An international collaboration built in the years before the droughts, the time capsule contained a vast array of treasures, hermetically sealed off from the outside environment for centuries. We didn't have to draw the attention of the aliens to the cube, as the time capsule had been constructed of a stainless steel alloy resistant to all forms of corrosion, shining like a brand new construction in a city of decaying architecture. The aliens did struggle to locate the handles for the doors, however, until we drew attention to the handles with a shimmer of light. Operating on a timer, the locks had been released automatically almost a century before, and the doors slid apart with a gentle clatter. The aliens stepped into the capsule, and we followed the creatures into the vault with a sense of reverence, led by the soul of the child who had spent centuries weeping at the feet of the statue, who was now twirling with excitement. In anticipation of the possibility that the capsule might be discovered by a future society that spoke a new tongue, the vault was equipped with pictograms that indicated how to power the generator, and the creatures quickly deduced how to turn the crank. A fan whirred. A computer beeped. Underlighting flickered to life on the shelves, illuminating relics in glass cases. The creatures muttered to each other. We stood watching with a feeling of exhilaration as the aliens explored the contents of the capsule, moving gracefully through the faint rays of sunshine streaming into the vault through the doors. The aliens played a cassette tape in a boombox, listening to a famous choral recording, a haunting elegy of warbling voices. The aliens inspected a diamond necklace. The aliens examined an autographed jersey. The aliens studied a mechanical orrery, a solar wristwatch, a swiveling globe, a collection of coins, a bottle of wine, a vast library of almanacs and atlases and encyclopedias

preserved on reels of microfilm. In the dim shadowy aisle at the back of the vault, the aliens pressed the button on a projector, stepping back to marvel as colorful light streamed from the lens, a flickering film. The film had been recorded as a greeting to the people of the future. Living humans appeared on the wall of the vault, apparitions of light, sitting together in a classroom, cycling through a park, dancing at a wedding, showing off a monument, suddenly smiling at the camera, waving. Standing there watching the film, the aliens began making noises again. Quiet, delicate, shuddery noises, like crying. As if mourning the lost civilization. We were standing there too, and hearing how the film affected the aliens, we were suddenly struck by a profound sense of loss and sorrow and longing. We stared at the images for a while, lost in memories, full of sadness, and then we turned back toward the aliens, who were still making the noises, but louder now. Some of the creatures were gesturing at the film, while other creatures seemed to be imitating the humans, and other creatures seemed to be praising the imitations. With a shock, we realized what the aliens were actually doing. The aliens weren't mourning us. The aliens were mocking us. Laughing at us, as if to the aliens humanity seemed somehow pitiful, just pathetic.

The creatures kept laughing, making those horrible shuddery noises, gesturing at the film. Mocking the world that we had loved, that we had coveted, that even in death we had refused to let go of. A fury came over us. And that was when we realized the true reason that we had stayed. The aliens left the vault together, declining to take any of the artifacts, not even bothering to shut the doors, strolling back through the ruined streets of the city to the beach. The creatures seemed to be planning on staying. A domed habitat had been erected near the dunes. As the creatures slept that night, slumbering in sleek white padded pods, we gathered silently in the habitat. A mass of shimmering ghosts. During the daytime, from a distance, the flashes of plasma looked merely like glimmers of light, but in

utter darkness the flashes were radiant, and the touch of the plasma was hot enough to burn flesh. We reached through the glass lids of the pods, reached through that flimsy silver clothing, reached through that smooth pale skin, into the chests of the aliens, and then released crackling surges of plasma, so that the creatures awoke simultaneously, crying out in pain. The lids slid back, and the aliens staggered out of the pods, coughing up fluids and groaning in agony and fumbling for flashlights as bursts of electromagnetism flashed across the habitat, frying the circuitry in the walls. Shouting in panic, the aliens scattered, and we touched the creatures again, charring limbs, blinding eyes, rupturing internal organs in passing. We crippled a creature stumbling toward a vehicle. We maimed a creature crawling toward a door. We mutilated a creature yelling frantically into a transceiver. We howled. We raged. In the end, the last creature standing dragged the ruined bodies of the others onto the spacecraft, making distraught noises, like hysterical blubbering, still glancing up and down the beach in terror. The spacecraft launched back into the sky with a roar of flames and steam, and we stood together on the darkened shore of the ocean, watching the distant glimmer of the spacecraft vanish into the dazzling glitter of the stars in the sky. We felt a sense of peace then. Not the peace of having fulfilled a purpose, but the peace of having realized a purpose. Of having a reason to have stayed. Every last ghost on the planet. We drift through the terminals of decaying airports, and float across the concrete fragments of collapsed dams, and hover over the smashed debris of toppled pagodas, and lurk between the machinery in flooded factories, and glide through the ruined streets of cities and villages and towns, keeping a watch on the sky. Our screams ring through the galaxy. Our shrieks echo through the universe. Warning all others to keep away. This is our world. We loved it. We destroyed it. It will always be haunted. We will defend it until the day the last star dies.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

Acknowledgements

“The Visitation” originally appeared in *TriQuarterly* in 2018.

This story is distributed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material

Under the following terms:

Attribution — you must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made

NonCommercial — you may not use the material for commercial purposes

Learn more at creativecommons.org