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WOMEN AND GHOSTS

By Alison Lurie

Doubleday/Nan A. Talese. 180 pp.

There's a side to Alison Lurie less familiar than that revealed in her powerful novels *The War Between the Tates* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Foreign Affairs*.

She's also the author of three books of fable and folklore for children. With her new, and first, story collection, Lurie offers an absorbing group of fables for adults, no less substantive for their grounding in myth and metaphor rather than domestic realism. Arguably, in fact, more substantive: truth told in finer tones.

At first glance, these stories spiced with supernaturalism seem like trifles Lurie might have spun during a fireside evening with Stephen King. Like King, they awaken the child within us, the part capable of believing more than reason can explain. But the cumulative swell of their images and insight make these fables more like what in Shakespeare's time were called winter's tales, of a kind Shakespeare himself turned to at the close of his career.

Consider the case of Buffy Stockwell in "The Highboy." Her relatives think it a bit eccentric that Buffy anthropomorphizes her possessions, wondering where a plant stand will be "happy" or referring to a broken VCR as "ill." But then an heirloom highboy begins injuring those who treat it roughly and grows benign only in Buffy's empathetic possession. It seems, at last, happy. But an avaricious streak in Buffy refuses to let the highboy know about museums, where fine antiques can be taken care of forever, a realm from which no traveler has returned to tell other antiques, making it "like our going to heaven." You can bet the highboy, like most living things, will resent a love more possessive than magnanimous.

In "The Pool People," Clary Graber visits her mother-in-law in Key West. At 58, June Graber is "extremely well off, having been married to three very rich men" and is consumed in the remodeling of her house. But she doesn't much like her contractors: Big Bill, a born-again Christian, and Davy, who's gay. When she finds them swimming in her pool one sweltering day, June, in a bigoted huff, fires them, leading indirectly to both their deaths. But that doesn't mean they're gone, or that June won't meet justice.

In some stories, Lurie uses ghosts as obvious psychological metaphors. In "Ilse's House," young Dinah Kieran thinks she's found quite a bargain in distinguished professor Gregor Spiegelman, although readers will be less enamored of this pompous, patronizing chauvinist. Certainly his first wife, Ilse, had had enough of him, leaving Gregor and returning to her native Czechoslovakia. But Dinah is delighted when they become engaged—until she begins seeing Ilse's "ghost" in Gregor's house.

Of these nine stories, perhaps the one that contains the most of Lurie herself is the haunting "The Double Poet." Karo McKay, a celebrated 48 year-old poet with a year's visiting appointment in New England, begins to hear increasingly credible accounts that a woman impersonating her is moving steadily eastward from California, inscribing Karo's books and giving readings. After months of these reports, the two have a dramatic confrontation in Buffalo that leaves Karo stripped of her public identity and unwilling to compose or publish new work.

Is this evocative story a depiction of the split between our objective and subjective experiences? A lament at the price of becoming a public person? A projection explaining faded poetic inspiration? Lurie leaves her intent mysterious, but, speaking through this artistic persona's mouth she writes her most melodic prose: "It's true Spring here. The pond shimmers with life, is shrill with birds, boisterous every evening with croaking frogs. I walk beside it, or in the thin wet woods among sawdust-covered unfurling spirals of braken and red-veined skunk cabbage, dangerous with growth."

Like that passage, these "ghost" stories are firmly grounded in the real world, stretched a tad to include a bit more than is dreamt of in our philosophy. They're about students who'd rather live somewhere beautiful than move into a sterile career, men who insist that no one else can have the woman they love, adults whose past loves and guilts haunt their present lives, women insecure in their husband's affection who want to grow more attractive.

This is no escapist fiction, but flesh and blood human beings caught viewing life from creative angles of vision.