

B.J. HOLLARS

Dark Instruments

1.

On a Saturday in September, I found myself inside a stranger's house. I wasn't alone, but joined by a small parade of fellow thrifters, each of us having been lured inside by the estate sale sign displayed along the tree-lined walkway.

Never one to miss out on the chance to rifle through another's possessions, I'd slipped inside the doorway. No matter that the house bore a striking resemblance to the Amityville Horror House. It was a crisp fall morning, birds were singing.

What could possibly go wrong?

I began on the first floor, flipping through the entirety of a record bin and tucking a few selections beneath my arm. Then, I started up the stairs, distancing myself from the crowd.

To the untrained eye, the mood inside that house must've seemed funereal—*Doesn't an estate sale imply that someone has died?* But we bargain hunters were not there to pay respects; we were there to acquire. After all, where else could we get such low, low prices on a pair of second-hand shoes?

Or boardgames, for that matter, a stack of which I found in the upstairs walk-in closet. Given my children's love of games, I figured I

was in the market for *Trouble or Chutes and Letters*. Instead, my eyes fell upon a different game.

I plucked it from the pile, astonished by the game's cover art—a spectral figure shrouded in a robe.

In the box's upper left corner: "William Fuld Talking Board Set."

In the bottom right: "Parker Brothers, Inc. • Salem, Mass., U.S.A."

And smackdab in the middle:

OUIJA
MYSTIFYING ORACLE

Removing a few dollars from my wallet, I wound my way down the stairs toward the checkout table. I quickened my pace, drawing the attention of my fellow thrifters, who, upon glancing the board half-hidden behind the records, widened their eyes.

Jealousy or horror—who can say?

2.

From the mid-1800s through the early 1900s, when American Spiritualism was at its height, there was no shortage of people attempting to contact the spirit world. In fact, by the 1860s, nearly a third of Americans had taken an interest in spiritualism, though none could agree on the best way to close the distance between the living and dead. Séances were a popular option, though experienced mediums didn't come cheap. Automatic writing could be attempted, too, but could you really trust some spirit to guide your hand?

When the practice of table-turning migrated from Europe in the 1850s, Americans were quick to adopt this more social version of spirit conjuring. No longer were people at the mercy of mediums or possessed pens; quite literally, now everyone had a seat at the table.

Here's how it worked: sitters would take their places around the table, reciting the alphabet and waiting for the table to turn—or tilt, or teeter—to indicate which letter was to be recorded. One letter at a time, eventually the table's movements rendered a complete message—sometimes babble, sometimes prophecy.

3.

Tables were but one of the instruments 19th century Americans employed to converse with the spirits. By the late 1890s, the Ouija board had assumed control.

We have inventor, entrepreneur, and businessman William Fuld to thank. In 1892, 22-year-old Fuld became the supervisor of the Kennard Novelty Co.—the talking board’s first American manufacturer—though he soon changed its name to The Ouija Novelty Company. Then later, to Isaac Fuld & Brother. Then later, following a falling out with his brother, to the William Fuld Manufacturing Company. The last name stuck, ensuring that William Fuld—for better or worse—would forever become synonymous with Ouija.

4.

The more uncertain the world became, the more we turned to Ouija. This was particularly true during wartime.

Over a five months span in 1944—as 73,000 U.S. soldiers trained for the D-Day invasion—back on the home front, a single New York department store sold 50,000 Ouija boards.

Only God knew what the future held for those soldiers. And for many of the parents and partners and friends of those soldiers, such a mystery was too much to bear.

Day after day, well-wishers ran to their mailboxes in the hopes of receiving a telegram from their soldier. Though often, the mailboxes were empty.

By contrast, the Ouija board was always there.

An answer, quite literally, always at one’s fingertips.

5.

Days after purchasing the Ouija Board at the estate sale, a mutual friend informs me of the board’s previous owners. Bob and Roger, both 76, who, in fact, and are very much alive. They’d served as the board’s caretaker for over half a century, though upon recently

moving to a new residence, they'd left their board at the mercy of their estate sale.

"So where did the board come from?" I ask one afternoon over Chinese food.

"I guess we bought it in the late 60s," Roger says. He turns to Bob for confirmation. "The late 60s, wouldn't you say?"

"I was acting," Bob says, "and weren't you in Milwaukee?"

They work through life's timeline in reverse, eventually settling on '68 or '69 as the year they purchased the board at a store in our shared home of Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

"They were used a lot at college parties," Roger explains. "At that time everyone was into it. Bad wine and Ouija boards," he smiles. "It made for good entertainment."

Yet for Bob and Roger, the board continued to make appearances at social gatherings well beyond their college years.

"Sometimes we'd host a dozen people, at least," Roger says. "Probably a quarter were nonbelievers, a quarter were into it, and the others were mixed."

Some nights the spirits seemed wholly disinterested in moving the planchette, but other nights, the opposite was true.

The most dramatic example, they tell me, was the night their coffee table walked across the room.

I drop my forkful of rice.

"You mean, the *board* moved?" I try.

"No," Bob says. "I mean the *table* on which the board was sitting literally walked across the room." He places his hands in the air to demonstrate, moving them in tandem to represent the halting motion of the table legs.

My mind leaps to images of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Of the bewitched Cogsworth and Lumière and the Wardrobe thundering about the Beast's castle.

It wasn't a tremble or a shake, but a *walk*, Bob stresses. *Across the room.*

"And you both saw this?" I ask.

They nod.

"And you're both sure?"

They nod again.

“So many things came out of that board,” Bob says, shaking his head. “So many things...”

6.

The Ouija board didn't always possess its darker connotations. In fact, for a time, it was as American as apple pie. So American, in fact, that even Norman Rockwell saw fit to place a Ouija board on a 1920 cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Rockwell, who famously referred to the magazine's cover as “the greatest show window in America,” used that window to further normalize America's most curious game. Yet the cover image focuses mostly on the sitters: a perfectly respectable man and woman locked in the throes of a Ouija session.

As if to say: *Look! Everyone's doing it!*

For a time, it seemed everyone was.

7.

In 1933, a Ouija board told 15-year-old Mattie Turley to shoot her father, so she did.

In 1955, a Ouija board told Helen Peck to leave her fortune to a spirit, so she did.

In 1971, a Ouija board told 23-year-old John Geotis to enlist in the army, so he did.

What is it about not knowing the nature of things that makes us trust them more?

8.

It took more than war to popularize the Ouija board. More than Norman Rockwell, too.

Perhaps the greatest source of Ouija's growing fame can be credited to Parker Brothers, Inc., who in 1966 acquired the game from William Fuld, Inc. Writer Mitch Horowitz credits Parker Brothers—then one of America's largest game manufacturers—of placing “an

instrument from the age of Spiritualism into playrooms all across America.”

Indeed, Ouija boards soon began to figuratively fly off the shelves, Parker Brothers reportedly selling two million boards in 1967 alone, outselling even Monopoly.

Farewell, Battleship. Goodbye, Racecar.

Board and planchette now reigned supreme.

9.

Not everyone placed their faith in the Ouija board.

In October of 1920, Thomas Edison spoke with a reporter from *Scientific American* regarding his intention to create an apparatus far superior to the Ouija board in its ability to communicate with the dead. Today, we know it as the “spirit phone,” though that’s about all we know. Aside from a few interviews and diary notes, there’s no tangible proof of Edison’s most ambitious invention.

Though skeptical of the spirit realm, for a time Edison appeared wholly committed to the potential for creating a direct line to the afterlife. But the only way to do so, he believed, was by making use of the proper tools.

[I]t is possible,” Edison remarked, “to construct an apparatus which will be so delicate that if there are personalities in another existence or sphere who wish to get in touch with us in this existence or sphere, this apparatus will at least give them a better opportunity to express themselves than the tilting tables and raps and Ouija boards and mediums and the other crude methods now purported to be the only means of communication.”

Edison didn’t doubt the possibility, merely the process.

“Why,” Edison asked, “should personalities in another existence or sphere waste their time working a little triangular piece of wood over a board with certain lettering on it?”

10.

That same year, when asked by a reporter if he believed in the power of the Ouija board, a dismissive William Fuld replied, “I should say not. I’m no Spiritualist. I’m a Presbyterian...”

But he was a capitalist, too, one who would go on to make millions with his board.

Though he claimed to hold little credence in the board’s abilities, perhaps he ought to have consulted it to avoid his own tragic fate.

On the morning of February 26, 1927, 56-year-old Fuld climbed to the rooftop of his Hartford, Connecticut toy factory to oversee the replacement of a flagpole. “He was standing near the edge of the roof,” reported the *New York Times*, “balancing himself by grasping an iron support of the pole...when the support pulled from its moorings and Mr. Fuld toppled over backward and fell to the ground.”

The final paragraph of his *New York Times* obituary makes no mention of Fuld, only his “five-legged table” which “became the rage throughout the country...”

11.

In the summer of 1968 or 1969, Bob, Roger and three of their friends traveled to rural Alma Center, Wisconsin to visit another friend, Louise. They were all in their mid-20s, newly minted-actors and journalists and teachers.

“We were there to watch a marzipan demonstration by Louise’s mother,” Bob recalls, “and to spend the day frolicking on the family farm.”

But come nightfall, all frolicking came to a halt.

After an hour or so dedicated to telling ghost stories, they shifted their attention to the Ouija board that Bob and Roger had brought with them. Board in tow, the six friends started up the farmhouse stairs, soon arriving at a small room near the attic. They settled into position; fingertips placed lightly on the planchette.

It was, of course, a dark and stormy night. And it wasn't long before a spirit arrived. When the friends' asked for the spirit's name, the planchette began skittering across the board's letters, spelling the name of a woman none of them had ever heard of before. Puzzled, the six friends awaited further information.

Who was this spirit? What did she want? And why was she controlling the board?

The planchette continued its skittering, offering two additional words:

FAMILY BIBLE

Everyone turned to Louise.

Do you have a family Bible? they asked.

Louise knew the family had a Bible somewhere, but by no means was it the kind of passed-through-the-generations "family Bible" she imagined the board might be speaking of. Just to be certain, Louise crept down the hall and woke her mother.

Do we have one? she asked.

Half-asleep, Louise's mother confirmed that they did not, but that the farmhouse's previous owners had left one behind.

In the attic, her mother whispered.

Louise started up the stairs.

12.

On March 17, 1920—seven months prior to Thomas Edison's grumblings—the Reverend Dr. William T. Manning declared war on the Ouija board. Speaking to a packed house in St. Augustine's Chapel in downtown Manhattan, the reverend reminded his fellow Christians that there was little doubt that the dead could communicate with the living "if it is God's will." But for the living to take extreme measures to communicate with the dead, that was a different matter altogether.

"The darkened room, the tapping of tables, the mystery, the mediums, which may prove to be fraudulent, do not seem at harmony with a high and holy purpose," Reverend Manning explained. "It is difficult to think of a ouija board as a fitting communication with those who are now in Paradise."

For some in the religious community, the Ouija board seemed a spiritual shortcut. But to Reverend Manning, the fight for America's soul extended well beyond the troublesome board. The spiritualism movement itself was the problem.

“The evidence does not show that usually the practice of spiritualism had any tendency to bring people to a deeper sense of their duty to God and a truer faith in Jesus Christ. The evidence all points strongly the other way.”

The reverend had spoken.

God was not a game. And faith no parlor trick.

13.

Somewhere between the table-turning and the Ouija boards, Americans turned their attention to the latest in spirit-speaking technology: the camera. Since its invention in the early 19th century, the camera had already reset the boundaries between the living and the dead by capturing breathing people on film. But that wasn't all the camera could capture. In 1861, jewelry engraver William H. Mumler snapped a self-portrait featuring an alleged “spirit” in the photo's background. The flashbulb had barely stopped sizzling before Mumler, recognizing the opportunity before him, embarked upon a new and lucrative profession as America's first spirit photographer.

For ten dollars, a grieving person could sit before Mumler's camera, hoping to find solace in a loved one's spirit captured on film. Often, Mumler's photos offered precisely that: misty apparitions lingering within the frame. Writer Dan Piepenbring described the so-called spirits as “[t]ranslucent smudges against a sooty backdrop”, noting that they could “coalesce into personhood only under scrutiny, in the same way that faces emerge from clouds.”

Yet for the grief-stricken, it was easy to see faces in clouds.

And they saw them. Again and again.

14.

My preferred method of talking to ghosts involves no board, no planchette, no spirit phones or spirit photos, either. All I require are a few dozen cassette tapes. My grandparents left them behind shortly before their deaths, providing me the chance to know them better. They detailed their lives over the course of 30 hours of oral history: from my grandfather's tour guarding bridges in France during World War II, to my grandmother's lifetime of writing.

The conversation only ever goes one way, which means I must listen carefully, and on occasion, rewind the tapes, to pick up what I might've otherwise missed.

I like to play the tapes before bed, often falling asleep to the sound of voices that, were it not for those tapes, would've sounded like strangers' voices. My grandfather died when I was seven, my grandmother when I was nine. I like to think that I still possess many firsthand memories of our time together, but these days, most of my memories have been forged by those tapes. It was my grandparents' attempt to curate their lives.

It worked.

15.

That night in the attic, Louise rummaged through boxes and trunks as lightning lit up the sky. Thunder crashed in the distance, providing the perfect soundtrack to an ambiance already a little-too-good to be true. The wind whipped around the corners of the farmhouse as the crops held firm in the mud.

At last, she came upon it—a Bible so thick it would've caused any bookshelf to sag. Leather bound, no doubt, with brittle pages.

Louisa brought the Bible to the nearby Ouija room, and the others gasped.

How had the board known?

The six friends hovered over the long-forgotten Bible, and with the same lightness they applied to the planchette, they began to turn its pages. They'd barely cracked it before coming across a list of names

scrawled inside the Bible's flap—the lineage of a family, some of whom once called that farmhouse home.

There, among the names, was one they recognized: the woman's name, which the board had spelled out just minutes before.

More lightning, more thunder, more silence.

“That's when we ended the session,” Bob says.

16.

There is an earthly answer for why the planchette moves. Scientists attribute it to the ideomotor effect, a psychological phenomenon in which a reflexive action occurs as a result of a thought. Unconsciously, our body works without our knowing it, moving the planchette, or the dowsing rod, or our hand during a session of automatic writing. Our unconscious leads us toward an answer whether we ask it to or not.

“That we can make movements that we don't realise we're making,” writes journalist Tom Stafford, “suggests that we shouldn't be so confident in our judgements about what movements we think are ours.”

Who, I wonder, is in control here?

17.

Throughout the 1860s, when Mumler's services were most sought, photographs—even sans spirits—seemed a kind of magic. How was it possible that one's likeness could be preserved by some newfangled device called a camera?

Few mid-19th century Americans marveled at the camera more than physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes. Not only was the camera a “mirror with a memory,” but he believed it possessed the power to serve as a link between the living and the dead.

“It is hardly too much to say, that those whom we love no longer leave us in dying, as they did of old,” Holmes wrote in 1861. “They remain with us just as they appeared in life; they look down upon

us from our walls; they lie upon our tables; they rest upon our bosoms...”

Yet Mumler and Holmes were hardly allied in their commitment to the powers of the camera. While Holmes believed comfort could be gleaned by the capture of one’s earthly image, Mumler insisted on focusing his lens even farther beyond.

18.

Today, we rely on different technologies to speak with the spirits—social media, most of all. Do you find it comforting or creepy to know that your Facebook page and your Instagram posts will live on long after you do? That your lifetime of accumulated “friends” can continue to tag you, post photos of you, and comment on your content long after you expire.

Of course, there are mechanisms to ensure that your social media spirit might live on without such interference. While researching these mechanisms, I came upon a Facebook Help Center page which posed a question far eerier than the answer I was after:

“What will happen to my Facebook account if I pass away?”

If? I wondered. *If?*

19.

In the 1860s, eternal life was encouraged by different means. If you wanted proof of a loved one’s continued presence, you need only pay your ten dollars and take a seat before Mumler’s camera.

Despite his love for the camera, the preposterousness of spirits appearing on film didn’t sit well with Oliver Wendell Holmes, who believed Mumler was simply profiting from people at their most vulnerable. In an 1863 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, Holmes provided specific details on how anyone might replicate a so-called spirit photo.

“First, procure a bereaved subject with a mind ‘sensitized’ by long immersion in credulity,” Holmes began. “Find out the age, sex, and whatever else you can, about his or her departed relative.”

From there, it was as simple as the photographer selecting a negative of someone who fit the description of the departed. In the darkroom, it was easy to overlay one image with another, resulting in a double exposure in a single print.

Ghosts needn't be conjured, he implied, merely created.

20.

We will not live forever, but our data footprint might.

According to a 2019 study from the Oxford Internet Institute, if current projections hold, dead Facebook users could outnumber living Facebook users by 2070. By century's end, the study continues, Facebook might serve as the "digital graveyard" for nearly 5 billion users.

From our current position just one-fifth of the way into the century, it's hard to know what 2100 might look like. But when it comes to the dead, I imagine that our digital graveyards might receive more attention than our actual graves. Why bother with a stone that offers little more than a name and a couple of dates, when you can scroll through a ready-made audio and visually infused memoir?

21.

On October 18, 1931, 84-year-old Thomas Edison—a man with 1093 patents to his name—died in his home in West Orange, New Jersey. His final words doubled as his final observation, one last peek behind the curtain of the seemingly unknowable. What he saw precisely we'll never know, though we know he saw it without the assistance of a table, or a board, or a pen, or a camera, or a phone.

Shortly before his death, he woke from his coma just long enough to speak to his wife.

"It is very beautiful over there..." he told her.

22.

Bob and Roger's Ouija board—which I suppose is now my Ouija board—currently resides beneath a chair in my basement. I don't use it. I claim it is an art object, though if I truly believed this, I'd likely display it somewhere other than beneath a basement chair.

At my bravest, I remove the board from the box and imagine that dark and stormy night half a century ago when the spirit of a woman asked for her family Bible.

Am I curious what the board might tell me if I asked a question? I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. And yet, I don't ask.

23.

What is it about not knowing the nature of things that terrifies?

24.

Who can say what will become of us? All we know is that each day we dig our own digital graves. Every post, every Tweet, every upload is in the service of making a case for our continued existence. It is our technological answer for our one eventuality. Today, we can linger beyond our natural lives without the services of a spirit photographer. But are we sure we should?

25.

Was William Mumler a healer or a huckster?

Was he exploiting grief, or was he the salve?

Most scholars today agree that Mumler was running a scam. Yet when put on trial for fraud in 1869, the judge had no choice but to acquit him. If Mumler was fabricating his spirit photos, no one could explain how. The case built against him centered on the fact that some of the photographed "spirits" depicted people very much alive, leading his accusers to believe that Mumler was doing precisely what Oliver

Wendell Holmes had suggested years before: reaching into the negatives to create ghosts.

Though exonerated, the trial all but ensured the demise of Mumler's spirit photography business. Yet on occasion, he returned to his practice; including a sitting in 1872 with Mary Todd Lincoln. As the story goes, when Mrs. Lincoln sat for Mumler's camera, she hid her face behind a veil and employed a pseudonym to mask her identity. And yet, when Mumler's photos were developed, one showed the unmistakable visage of a sallow-faced Abraham Lincoln with his hands atop his wife's shoulders.

Was this spirit photo simply the work of a double exposure?
If so, then where is that image of Abraham Lincoln today?

26.

There is a simple explanation for all of this.

Perhaps we have always moved the planchettes, and turned the tables, and guided the pens. Maybe we have long been double exposing our photos in the darkroom, too.

And making too much of cassette tapes. And finding faces in the clouds.

In our quest to close the distance, we humans will try anything.

But today, we needn't rely upon antiquated means to try to speak to the dead. If we want comfort, then why not indulge in a long scroll through a loved one's digital graveyard? We might not hear back directly, but have we ever?

27.

Despite technological advancements, we will never stop trying to communicate with the dead. Because by attempting to speak with ghosts, we are attempting to more fully understand what comes next for us.

How might we one day slip a message through the membrane between our worlds?

How might we one day make ourselves known amid the static?

If all we wanted from the spirits was confirmation that they were okay, we'd settle for any sign: a candle flicker, a whisper, the wind. But what we're after is proof that we will be okay. Or at least not entirely gone.

28.

Dying is one form of distance, but living is another. When we spend our lives grasping for that phone which we might call upon, or that camera which might fit us into frame, a part of us is already lost.

Like it or not, we are our own dark instrument.

Speak now, or forever hold your peace.

B.J. HOLLARS is the author of several books, most recently *Midwestern Strange: Hunting Monsters, Martians and the Weird in Flyover Country*, *The Road South: Personal Stories of the Freedom Riders*, *Flock Together: A Love Affair With Extinct Birds*, *From the Mouths of Dogs: What Our Pets Teach Us About Life, Death, and Being Human*, as well as a collection of essays, *This Is Only A Test*. Additionally, he has also written *Thirteen Loops: Race, Violence and the Last Lynching in America*, *Opening the Doors: The Desegregation of the University of Alabama and the Fight for Civil Rights in Tuscaloosa*, *Dispatches from the Drownings*, and *Sightings*. In 2021, he'll publish *Go West Young Man: A Father and Son Rediscover America on the Oregon Trail*. Hollars is the recipient of the Truman Capote Prize for Literary Nonfiction, the Anne B. and James B. McMillan Prize, the Council of Wisconsin Writers' Blei-Derleth Award, and the Society of Midland Authors Award.

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