

Empty Houses

a video essay

by Noah Saterstrom



Empty Houses

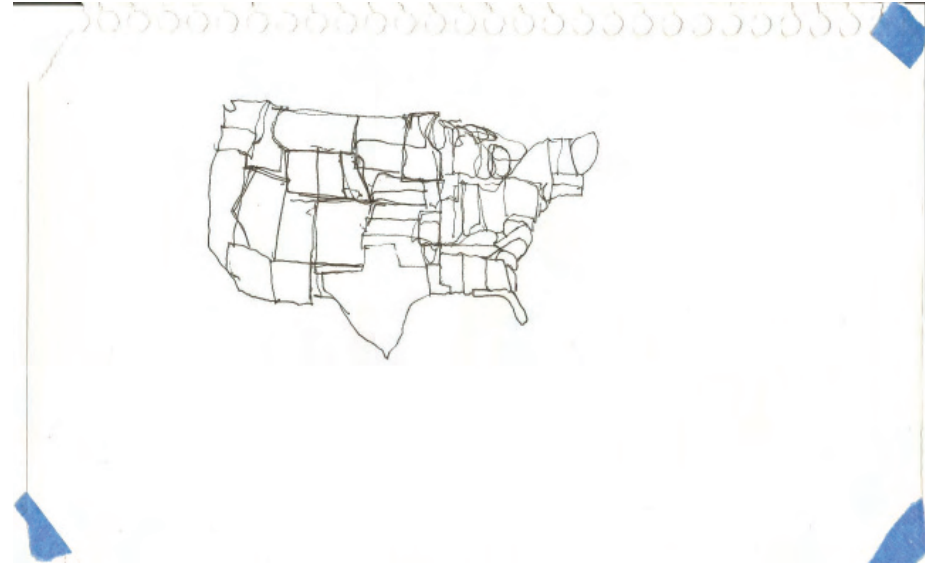
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Empty Houses is dedicated to Charles Schleet.

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Oh, this infinite space! We must constantly fill up the foreground with junk so that we do not have to look at its frightening depth. What would we poor people do, if we could not always come up with some idea, like country, love, art and religion, with which we can again and again cover up that dark hole.

—Max Beckmann



*Everything flows; nothing remains. [Everything moves; nothing is still. Everything passes away; nothing lasts.]
—from Herakleitos and Diogenes, translated by Guy Davenport*

Not live ones, just representations, but everywhere: pig paintings, pig statues, pig knickknacks, pig dishes, pig towels; big pigs, little pigs, pink pigs, mottled pigs...

Oddly, I never met any ghosts in that house. But I was scared to hell of those pigs.

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In addition to dying from tuberculosis in his twenties, the poet John Keats coined the term “negative capability,” referring to the ability of a work of art not to clutter and befoul itself, but rather to leave some mystery, if not a gaping maw, in which we might find our own experience of what it means (/ to be alive). *Empty Houses*, for all its maps and sections and even mini-lectures on Romanticism and ruins, is full of negative capability—by which I mean an empty vessel for you to fill with your own tears. Whenever *Empty Houses* appears poised to illuminate or redeem, the illusion is “traded for shadow,” and we—like the suicide, like the Hurricane Katrina victims, like the countless thousands of dead at the heart of this film—find ourselves pushing against that gossamer-thin but opaque membrane between “here” and the “other side,” asking the question that we, the living, have always asked: Is there anyone home?

Project Description

Empty Houses is an autobiographical video essay following four road trips to Noah Saterstrom’s home state of Mississippi. On these visits, he found himself, seemingly by chance, in spaces recently vacated for one reason or another: a family home, a ruined plantation, a suicide house, a demolished coastal town. The snapshots he took on these road trips form the skeleton of this video.

What does it mean to return home and find nothing, or only fragments? What nourishment comes from visiting places of absence, such as ghost towns? Do we need access to ruins in order for our imaginations to perform certain functions? *Empty Houses* is a brief investigation into the grief, fascination, horror, and romance of vacated spaces.

Traded for Shadow

By Christian Peet

In times of intense grief and loneliness, it feels like the body somehow is able to hold an absence far greater than itself.

—Noah Saterstrom, *Empty Houses*

The last time I was in Noah's physical presence was in the autumn of 2009, in Connecticut, when I joined his parents for Thanksgiving and also to help them to pack. Noah's parents were moving to Tennessee, though they had yet to find a buyer for their Connecticut home, which was two and a half centuries old and thus had a few "quirks" that many home-buyers will avoid in favor of something younger, something new, a "fresh start."

Among the quirks may have been a ghost or two. Noah's folks decided the house might sell more quickly if, just inside the threshold, they burned a few herbs at the feet of a saint.

I have always been "drawn" to 1700s houses, and the Saterstroms' was no exception. The house felt deeply warm—though nearly empty, though late November swirled leaves in the yard, though houses from its era are synonymous with cold and creeping damp. The large fireplace didn't hurt matters any, but there was nothing inherently

singlewide trailer. Sometimes a ghost story is so sad, one could argue that the only happy characters are the dead.

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Empty Houses is not just a ghost story, however, a story to fill an otherwise unbearable absence. It is also the ghost of a story—a story that cannot be told in full, for reasons of propriety and time, for the reason that it may be beyond redemption. *Empty Houses* is a conundrum, the attempt to build a story around silence. The silence after trauma. The silence after death. The silence of the endless, inscrutable void.

Faced with such absence—the absence of reason, the absence of corporeal certainty—what else can we do but fashion our ghost narrative? In the effort to say something, to say anything—certainly anything is better than the silence that accompanies the absence of an answer. Horror vacui, our fear of empty places—and our desperate need to fill them with dimestore detritus and nervous conversation, failing a sense of history and purpose—is the laboring heart of *Empty Houses*, which, not unlike this essay, is at once an exploration and the product of this horror.

My mother is a house cleaner. When I was a kid, she'd often take me to work with her. She was hired to clean the place where the prior owner had shotgunned his family. The new owners said they weren't spooked by "that kind of stuff." Instead they filled the place with pigs.

of garbage...without a shred of artistic distinction...One of the most depressing experiences of my life.”

That particular house sits on a hill, set back but just visible from the main road. Surrounded by pine trees, it sees no daylight, and effects of endless shadow and mold make the dark brown house appear absolutely black. This was the first house in which I experienced the so-called paranormal. My teddy bear would dance in my bedroom, on the floor and in the air, as if an unseen adult was putting on a little show for me. I didn't know to be scared at the time. And thinking about it now, I shouldn't be able to remember anything about the place. I was three.

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Early in *Empty Houses*, Noah recites the history of the United States: How we learned it in school, you know. We started out as pilgrims, and then the Revolutionary War happened. Some people moved south. Then the Civil War. And then Pioneers, Midwest. That's how it happened.

Indeed. Nor can the empty houses of our personal and collective myths correct us, now that their historical truth is lost in the redactions and revisions of our cultural palimpsest. We see in these empty houses—we want to see—ghosts looking back from the attic windows. Ghosts with a story to tell—some new information, some hitherto occulted wisdom—in the darkness, a little light.

Only, sometimes there is no attic. There isn't even a second floor. Windows are squares cut out of the aluminum siding of a

warm about the house. The warmth was Noah and his family. I've always been drawn to warm families.

Since childhood I've had a recurring dream: I'm alone in a large house that is not mine. The house is so large that I never get to see all of it, but the individual rooms, hallways, furniture, cupboards, and every little door to who-knows-where are undersized, perhaps one-third the scale of a “normal” house. The rooms and hallways are at odd angles, and frequently I find trapdoors and hidden passages not much wider than ductwork. Though I never find anyone living in the house, evidence of their lives remains in various rooms—a warm teakettle, an open newspaper, a candle burning on a bedside table...

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Around three-hundred years ago in Litchfield County, Connecticut, there was a farming community on a mountain. The position of that mountain in relation to the sun and neighboring mountains, combined with the stony soil and the difficulty of farming a steep grade, soon proved too much for its settlers. The community failed. Local legend says that the inhabitants of this community—now called “Dudleytown”—were terrorized by “hoofed demons” in the woods, and that some went insane, and that others committed suicide. Only cellar holes and the foundations of a mill and a small bridge remain. When I was a teenager, anyone could go to Dudleytown, but the land is now owned by a private organization whose aim is to protect the fragile

ruins not from the effects of time, but from the beer bottles and pentagrams left in the wake of ghost hunters and partygoers who have been drawn to the area in great numbers since the 1970s. With no apparent irony, the organization is called the Dark Entry Association.

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Atop a mountain a few miles away from Dudleytown, not far from Kent Falls, there is a clearing in the woods at the end of a dirt road. When I was a kid, there was still a house in the center of the clearing. The house had collapsed in on itself, but my friends and I could still crawl inside and make our way through what remained of the kitchen, to where the rafters rested against a stone chimney in the center of the house. A woman had lived there alone for years after the death of her husband. We didn't know who she was or how her husband had died, or exactly how long she had lived without him, but we knew the end of the story: the woman curled up inside her kitchen fireplace and then shot herself.

A few hundred yards away, deeper in the woods, was a ring of stones we called "Witches' Circle." We'd never seen any witches there, but assumed that their choice of locations had something to do with the woman in the fireplace. Or, perhaps, it was the other way around.

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A couple of miles away in Kent (population three thousand, give or take, a mix of working- and middle-class locals and wealthy

transplants from the City) there is a house just off the main road, set against the north side of the mountain. Some New Yorkers lived there once—a man and a woman and their two children, a boy and a girl. The man lost all of his money and feared he would soon lose the house. Before it could be taken away, he decided to take his family out of the house. He walked through its bedrooms with a shotgun, executing his wife and children where they lay sleeping or where—in the case of the second and third shots—one can't help but imagine they ran, or crawled, screaming. And then he killed himself.

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By the time I was eight I had lived in fourteen houses— which in itself is rather unusual, though even more so in that all fourteen, with the exception of a brief sojourn to Pennsylvania, were located in Kent, which is all of a few miles across. Every six months or so, on average (though we lived in some houses for only a few weeks), my parents would outline for us kids a new vision for our future. "We're moving up the hill," they'd say. Or, "We're moving back down the hill." Or across the river. Or back to the center of town.

Some of those houses are gone now. Some have changed so completely they can scarcely be called the same house. One of them is empty, and has been, far as I can tell, since we moved out in 1976 and a film crew set up a few hundred feet away to shoot the cult horror classic, *I Spit On Your Grave*, which Roger Ebert hailed as "a vile bag