

# UMBRA

## Hope Atherton

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I've spent a lot of time looking at photographs that document psychic medium Mina "Margery" Crandon's mid 1920's seances. You probably know the images I'm referring to, the ones of a woman's face contorted, a long tendril of ectoplasmic goo dripping from her mouth or protruding from her chest, a waxen finger from the other side of a black curtain poking out into our world to remind us that someone is watching all the time. It doesn't matter that we know Crandon was a fraud; these are still ghost pictures. They are still frightening, their power somehow unmitigated by their absolute artificiality.

Encountering these photographs from the future, we understand that they accidentally capture simultaneous anxieties. Accumulated in their theatricality, we can locate our fear of death as terminus, our fear that death provides no terminus, our fear of female interiority, and an overwhelming dread that there are corners of the world in which reality is brutalized by some kind of spatiotemporal misunderstanding. I like these pictures, and maybe everyone does; there is something beautiful in the mutual performance they document. Though Crandon's physical manifestations are meant to be the main event, her invisible audience always seems like the real star; just out of frame is a person desperate to believe that there are still mysteries to be found—maybe sometimes that person is me.

When I was 19, an ex-roommate of mine left a message on my answering machine requesting \$300 for a voicemail service they accused me of setting up from their landline. The message included a phone number and an extension, and I was shocked beyond belief when I called it and heard my own voice saying the words "Hi! It's Alissa, leave your number and let's be friends." It is an out of body horror I can still perfectly recall, a kind of seismic disturbance that's hard to explain and impossible to shake, even all these years later. Hearing a recording of yourself that you never made is like seeing proof of the ghost of yourself, it's a dispatch from some other place you're only supposed to know about when you're dead.

I want to describe another image, this time excerpted from Orson Welles' 1948 production of Macbeth. Three witches are posed against the horizon. We can see through them, but it doesn't matter; the fragility suggested by transparency is neutralized by an unnatural psychic heft, as though they've always been and always will be. The screen is interrupted by a rope of light skidding across water, white ripples disrupting the surface, breaking the tension, but the afterburn of the witches remains in our eyes. I think about these flashes of imagery and where they live inside the film or maybe on its other side. I think about the waxy hand of a ghost reaching out of a robe, a gesture that doesn't need our belief to retain its power.

Text by Alissa Bennett