I remember when this place had a smell. Wheat, alcohol, dog poop, and sulfur from the fireworks. Sweet cooked turkey mixed with the scent of the fresh lumber of Mr. Jenkin’s pavilion. The dances were sweat. The banter was bad breath. Every one knew how to live.

Those parties could make even a stubborn old man loosen up his tightly wound mind. Tempted by the delicious food scents wafting past his door, he told himself he’d just go to give the neighbor’s pastries a try. As he enjoyed the bounty set at the table, he’d started to make small talk out of complaints about the music now-a-days, until that stringed instrument played something he recognized. Then, like a bonfire surrounding a great log that smoothly catches fire to join the rest of the flame, he would call for a drink and spill it trying to dance.

Those parties were like a fire, pure white hot energy. Shining bright into the foreboding tundra, the flame was the only one for leagues. None of the children were alive to remember Kemervosk, formerly the nearest town, and only the wanderers had been to Tomsk, desolate now for 20 years. This village was wearily self-sufficient though; its hardy folk had been tending livestock and crops, chopping lumber, and boiling water from the lake the same way their great-great grandparents had for generations back. Every surplus was turned into a party at one of those pavilions. The pavilions were built to for those who didn’t let the tundra take their ghost easy; the parties were had to ensure that their death was not in vain. Though even by the time I left, the fewer parties were being had while more pavilions were being built.

That was fifteen years ago when I marched Southward to find a train that could take me to a city, fifteen years since I lied on an application about where I was born to work at the huge public library, filled with stacks of books written with characters I had never seen before. Fifteen years since I found out that this city not only had visitors, but had so many that multiple buildings called ‘inns’ were constructed to house them. It was in one of these inns that I first wondered whether I made the right choice. It’s that question, and the time it has had to gnaw on me, that has brought me back, though only windblown buildings, the carcass of the old town, remains. The wooden platform sighs as I step down from Mr. Jenkin’s pavilion; I remember when this place had a smell.

It must have snowed early this year because the ground is already frozen as I march toward our tough steeple; based in cobblestone with sturdy trunks and planks on top, it looks just like I remember as a kid. A black crow stares at me from its roof. I make for the lot on the North side of the building, and turn the corner.

I can’t help but to mutter an involuntary, “Oh, no.” The steeple hasn’t changed, but the graveyard has… grown. I trek through the knee-high grass towards the far side. I should have known, of course, but I guess I forgot that they’d keep…burying each other. Here’s the newer part, what I haven’t seen yet. Albert, a baker and farmer, died two years after I left, and his marker is kind of cockeyed. I run my hand across my own father’s cold, worn stone. He didn’t get a pavilion; I hope that wasn’t my fault. Seeping from the base of graves, long, dark shadows stretch across the ground as the gray light of day slowly dies.

Some of these passed within the last five years, and now here’s some shared graves between couples. This one is for the lumberjack, Alla, and the grave she shares with her daughter, Olga. That’s a shame. I’m relieved there aren’t too many shared tombstones, though. Viktor is the most recent…no, Mark passed just 3 years ago. I set myself down and lean back on Mark’s stone, looking out on the markers, all the people I once knew. Who buried Mark? Who sat here also, three years ago, and looked out at everyone they ever knew, gathered in one place? Where do they lay? My eyes wander from rock to rock, our history, and eventually they fall on the steeple. That’s where I would go, so I get up.

Every week the people of this town would hold services in the chapel, and one of a few individuals would lead it. That person read from an old book written many generations ago when the town could support poets. Then the leader would pray to the Holy Ghost for the town, often thanks or petitions. The prayers rarely changed anything; The Holy Ghost worked mostly in the darker half of the year, starting early winter when we really needed it. Warmer weather and food growing in the summer made that time easier, so The Holy Ghost seldom miracled much then. Our Holy Ghost is to thank for so much warmth and healing, but the time between his visits were bleak and treacherous. I push open one heavy door of the chapel, and push it close behind me.

The chapel has many windows, but the light outside is failing, so I have to strain my eyes until they adjust. The benches look like they all still stand, and our wooden supports still hold well, though there are some crude nests in the rafters. I look further back, and see some of the benches up front are askew, and the pulpit has been pushed aside. And it looks like I was right. I walk up close to inspect the skeleton slumped against the back wall. Around it some metal goblets, fine swords, and battle gear sit on the ground and lean against the benches. Our town didn’t have many valuables, but I suppose this survivor thought they should all be collected. His bones sit in the middle of the them; his two hollow sockets ever watchful over the treasure he tasked himself to protect.

Flapping feathers startle me. I look up to see the crow has found his way inside through a higher window, and is now fluttering among the rafters. After banging himself a few times, he leaves out another window, into whatever is beyond. It is now dark enough that even close objects are difficult to see clearly, so I sit down and close my eyes, relieving that overworked sense. The less present the Holy Ghost was, the more present that Unholy Ghost would be. This Ghost darkened crops and stiffened our livestock. In my last few years here, the only day we knew our Holy Ghost rested with us was the first of November, but we had to fend for ourselves in between the warm summer and November, during the season called Samhain. It was then that the Unholy was feared the most. Fires were harder to light and wind gusts often blew out candles. We did have our bold parties at surplus; any shortage though, and the nights were dark, and the that Ghost could even steal life from us. There’s a very distant howl, or maybe a chirp, and the wind picks up. One gust creaks the door open, and I notice how cold this bench is. From under my eyelids I can tell that the light of the day has dropped off. Small patters bounce around these four old walls, and the weary beams moan. I breath in, and the air smells like dank rot. The crow outside screeches. I left this town because I saw that our fate was unavoidable, but I thought I had power over mine. I came back because my people deserve better than to have their story told by a coward. Some great weariness or weight pulls my cold body down. Our story will be told by rocks.