# INDEX OF HAUNTED HOUSES
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READER'S GUIDE

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Muriel Échecs was one of the most promising minds in contemporary philosophy when she disappeared in Borneo in 1983. Given her statement on the man-made—and therefore implicitly human (and thereby imperfect)—notion of time, how do you think the dates in this book function?

2. During the filming of *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick was famous for calling Stephen King late at night on the phone to ask arcane questions about the book. During one midnight call, Kubrick, an atheist, suggested that any story that deals with ghosts is "fundamentally optimistic" as their presence suggests an afterlife. King, a believer, disagreed, noting that the afterlife would also involve the presence of a hell. These two gentlemen never resolved their differences, but what do you think? Are all books about ghosts optimistic in their outlook? Is this one?

3. When was the last time you dialed a disconnected number? Do you remember what it felt like? Do you remember what the recorded voice you heard sounded like? Did you ever wonder who that voice belonged to, what kind of a person they were, what ever happened to them? Who were Mary, Jane, and Pat? How are they still with and without us?

4. Many of the poems in this collection explore the way our common lexicon is defined by corporations, agencies, and industries (think
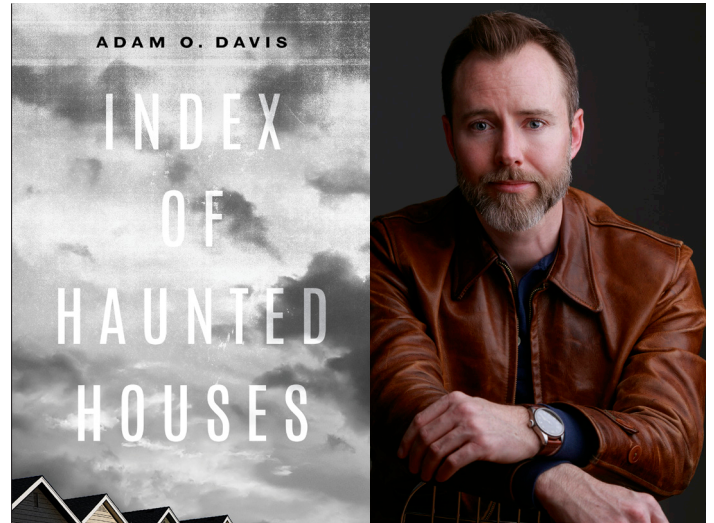
Hoover = vacuum or Google = search or Polaroid = photograph). In thinking about this, I was struck by how much of my own life—and all the nostalgia I hold for it—is defined by branding and how that nostalgia is both fully authentic and a third-party construct (not unlike my beloved Levi's). How has your language been "corporatized"? What do you make of this lexicon and the weight it adds (or subtracts) to your day-to-day existence?

5. Pliny the Younger is credited with writing one of the first ghost stories. According to classicist Debbie Felton, "Pliny's story also includes the detail that the haunted house was advertised at a low rent. Athenodorus, as a potential tenant, finds the low price of the house suspicious. It is an interesting detail, suggesting that haunted houses might in fact have been an economic

reality in the ancient world." What does my collection suggest about the economic reality of haunted houses in the modern world? What does it mean when a house is haunted? Is haunting a purely supernatural act? What is possession anyway? Does our definition of it depend on who's doing the possessing, be it a bank, person, or ghost?

6. Given the clinical nature of an index, I tried to make the book itself a book-length index by sewing echoes of poems past and future into the present poems as a way of creating sonic ghosts throughout the collection. What was the effect of such revisitations on you as a reader?

7. I've always loved the Oulipo, a French members-only club of literary theorists (whose ranks included Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, and Harry Mathews among others) who seek to advance literature through mathematics and constriction, not unlike a board game. Given that "National Anthem" took its inspiration from an 1890 board game and that the collection itself relies on the mathematics of time and the elliptical nature of constriction, how do these poems work as games? What rules—or patterns—have you noticed, and do these poems play by them?

8. Flip through the book from as far a distance as you can manage. What do you notice about how the poems look? What do you make of the collection's collection of shape-shifting forms? Can you detect an emotional current in their visual presentation? What does that current tell you about them?

9. Now bring the book close. Read the poems. How does the form impact the function of these poems? Does the visual presentation sync with the words, images, ideas?

10. Speaking of visuals, how do the photographs that serve as section breaks inform your understanding of the poems that lie before, between, and after them? Can you discern any specific poem (or poems) from the book in any of the images?

Writing exercises

1. Negative Image: "Ghost of Polaroid" began its life as a negative image of Wallace Stevens' "Banal Sojourn." The "negative" in this exercise refers to the golden days of photographic film developing, when color negatives would feature inverted colors from the original image. In line with this process, you'll be selecting your personal inverse for each word (minus conjunctions) in the poem selected, though keep in mind that the success of the poem depends a great deal on the inventiveness of your "negatives" (avoid "good = bad" constructions in favor of something more surprising and akin to Freudian word association) and the richness of the selected poem. Make sure you select a poem that contains a good deal of concrete language (to echo William Carlos Williams, something full of things, and thereby full of ideas) so that your negative has firm grounding (ethereal translations tend to wind up substantial as ether). If you're lucky, but the time you finish you'll find on your page a compelling shadow of a future poem.

2. Homophonic Translation: "The Mosquito Monocracy" owes its very being (and no small number of double consonants) to a homophonic translation exercise I undertook in a workshop way back in 2007.

The text in question—long since lost to poor record-keeping—was a poem written in Arabic, a language I have no understanding of written or spoken. As opposed to standard translations, homophonic translations require that the translator has no familiarity with the language in question. In fact, it's best if they can't even recognize its alphabet. So for this exercise, find the most unfamiliar language you can— Urdu, Greek, Wingdings (actually, maybe not that last one)—and stare into the each word as you might with a autostereogrammatic poster, waiting for the image of a more familiar word to come into focus. In some cases, you'll find that one unfamiliar word is worth three familiar ones. In other cases, the words will offer a firm one-for-one trade. In all cases, by the time you're done you'll have a slight headache and a page full of words you'd never have discovered if not for the tenets of this exercise. Now string those words together like a beaded necklace—how have you surprised yourself?