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Day of the Dead

Sage-smoke weaves around yellow leaves, wraps a bare, black trunk. I hear the continual heat-crack of hollow stems. You appear out of the smoke, stand there, mute. I want to return to that dim-lit kitchen again, watch your arthritic hands knead dough, flour-dust across your apron, while you tell your stories. (But this is not you as I once knew you. This is you as you are now: half-smoke, vague guide, weaving something new).

Years after your death I found some of your notes in the yellowing margins of your copy of *Labyrinth of Solitude*. Incomprehensible scrawl, written after you were more than half-blind. I thought: odd, so uncharacteristic, to be reading that book. What did I know about you? I thought: if I can decipher those words, I would have the key, some key, some important key. “Why were you reading Octavio Paz?” I say into the smoke. (But this is not you as I once knew you. This is you as you are now: half-smoke, half-guide, weaving something new).

Please tell me a story tonight. I will follow you as you ride the flying elm leaves out in the street, wherever they lead. When was the last time I heard a true story? We trade bits and pieces from television, movies, comedy routines. Borrowed words, other lives. (I don’t care if it’s not you, I still want you to thread the world together so I can emerge as a dry leaf, a burning leaf, the crack from the heated space inside a hollow stem).

Tell me a story about the family, about your childhood, about the origins of the human race. Tell me a story about this world, how it emerged from the mouth of night, smoking, infernal. Love and fire. Horror and water. Agony and earth. Beauty and air. Beauty and air and smoke.

Inside the Cave

For years, I would wake in the middle of the night, unable to breathe. I'd stare around the room, feel milky, blind eyes and nicotine-stained fingers reach through the dark, trying to touch me; and mouths, lipless mouths, baring rotten teeth, whispering a spell ten thousand years old.

Last week, I'd had enough. I screamed into the closet, the dark bathroom: "No more! No more!" My neighbor beat on his wall – "Shut the fuck up!" – and that sent me out into the night, down to the switch tracks behind the station at the end of the street. I watched the Amtrak and Union Pacific lines pass each other in the fog.

The noise of steel on steel lured me back the next night, and the next, and the night after that, standing ever closer to the passing trains, trying to see something, to hear something, to feel something that would give me a clue as to what hunted me.

Last night, I arrived early, before the trains arrived, and made my decision. It was time. I needed an answer. I stood between the two rail lines and waited. When the first train passed – Amtrak – the noise was extravagant, blessedly absorbing my ears, my eyes, my body, my mind. Steel sparks flew by my face, close enough to kiss.

When the second train passed – Union Pacific – and I was sandwiched between the screaming walls of steel, I was so terrified I closed my eyes. My legs trembled, almost gave way. If I had moved forward an inch, or back an inch, I knew I was dead, scattered into the dark.

When I finally summoned the courage to open my eyes, I saw immense shadows moving across the steel wall shooting by: Baal, Lamia, Tlaloc, Abyzou, all the vicious and beautiful child-eaters of the night world, copulating and blending with all of us, a panoply of death and transformation, producing something new.

And I realized I was the torch-bearer, the first inside a new kind of cave. Like the boys who'd stumbled into Lascaux, suddenly witness to dim shapes that had been stalking them for forty thousand years, I was bearing witness to a steel-shaved flip-book of the future.

And I carefully raised my shaking hands in praise. I raised my hands in praise.

Once There Was Spirit...

1.

For a year of Tuesday nights, I took coffee and sandwiches made by Catholic school kids – peanut butter and jelly, baloney and mustard – down back alleys, into the subways around center city Philadelphia, hunting for the homeless.

I worked alongside a group of nuns who ran a shelter for mentally ill homeless women; and, oddly enough, a Common Pleas Court judge who made her rounds with long, red-lacquered fingernails, heavy mascara, clacking bracelets, dangly earrings, and the clip-clop of her high heels echoing off dark city walls. I swear she knew everyone on the street by name.

2.

Around one of the South Broad Street stations near city hall, I'd usually run into a six foot, skinny guy, black plastic bags tied around his feet. He usually had several people in tow (Why they followed him around, I never found out). His eyes were constantly moving, without focus. Every time he saw me, he'd shout: "You know me! You know me!" The first time it happened, I went along with it: "Sure, I know you!" Later that night, when I surfaced onto Broad Street, I told the Judge about him.

She knew him – no surprise there – said his name was John, used to be a volunteer, just like me, and had been badly beaten on one of his rounds near the library. He recovered physically, but something deep inside him had unraveled, drifted away (her words).

3.

Once there was spirit, inseparable from the body, woven into every cell, spread across each cell wall, the pancreas, the lungs, all the intricate hand bones, the tongue, the heart. "You know me?" That man's spirit had risen, prematurely, up, past the night clouds, past the stars, in a futile search for a safe hiding place.

After a year, I quit. I feared ending up like John: spirit gone. It can happen whether you're lost on the street or not. Everywhere I go I carry a bag full of change – for anyone on the street who asks. I've seen the people who hurry past the bodies lying in doorways, and I know their spirits have become untethered, too; fleeing the earth, desperately following the spirits of those who just asked them for change; up, up, across the stars, hungry – ravenous – for a safe place to hide.

In the Fox's Eye

The fox sniffs the base of a few trees, then climbs the bank up onto the rail line. Thin, orange, he trots down the center of the tracks, between the rails, towards me. Beyond the fox, headlights and red tail lights pass each other on an overpass. Lights from the houses on either side of the tracks flicker through bare branches. The fox stops ten yards away, studies me. How long has it been since I've seen myself through wild black eyes?

The fox shrugs me off, slips back down to the tree line, decides to forage among house garbage. I descend off the tracks a few minutes later, lean against a hollowed-out cottonwood. Sirens. A dog calls out. Other dogs return the call. Dead milkweed pods rattle against each other. How long has it been since I looked at the world from inside the detail of dead winter weeds?

Two deer cross the tracks. There are so many living inside the city, moving along the tree and weed corridors, ditches, empty lots. Yet, it's always a surprise when I see them. They pause, blow smoke. Someone throws a bottle against the overpass wall and the deer disappear. A celebration or an argument. Snow begins to fall. How long has it been since I moved in this dark land between predator and prey?

I wait until the ground is covered with a thin layer of snow before moving out of the shadow of the cottonwood and ascend back up onto the tracks. An owl glides over me. A quarter mile down the tracks, under a streetlight at an empty crossing, I find three drops of blood on the new snow. Brilliant red against white. The red of summer in a grey time. How long has it been since I felt snow on my skin, the cold night sinking in?

It's almost time for the freight to pass. The owl is out there, sailing over the roof tops, wings pulling everything beneath it into the silence that guards the borders of death. More sirens, closer now. Somewhere out there, an eight-year-old girl is dreaming she is an owl. Her feathers are pulled off by invisible fingers, one by one. She inches down a tree, stands in the moonlit snow, alone, her cold skin glistening. She'll wake with a lifelong desire to roam railroad tracks in the middle of the night.

Andrew Jackson in the Albuquerque Airport

1.

I heard about the suicide while we were driving across the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge into San Francisco. O had killed himself sitting in a car in the short-term parking lot in the Albuquerque Airport. H turned to me, incredulous, when she found out I didn't know: "It happened a week ago. How did you not know?" He shot himself in the heart.

2.

Someone in the car threw out his dissolving marriage as a possible reason. I've gone through a divorce and knew that wasn't it. I kept thinking the same thing: who shoots themselves in the heart? If you want to die, and die fast, you don't shoot yourself in the heart. What did he think was inside his heart that could only be silenced with a bullet?

What about his childhood? He spoke about it in half sentences, vague images. I remember one: stale cigarette smoke in an outhouse, how the smell made him recoil with fear. Did that mean something? Could I make a coherent narrative out of that?

3.

Did he want to stop the pain crying out from his parents? The parents who had tried to break his heart because theirs had been broken? Or the pain from grandparents, great grandparents, all broken themselves? Why didn't his ancestors help? The Choctaw, the Irish...

I imagined a white man, encouraged by the common man speeches of Andrew Jackson, standing with a rifle at the entrance to O's heart, blocking him entrance to a Choctaw cabin inside, claiming it as his own.

4.

So many lights surrounded the dark water of the bay. Their reflections skidded across the surface. But none could penetrate the depths below, down to the rooms where Gray Whales have hidden their songs about the beginning and end.

The Crow Tree

1.

The city crows have been using the ash tree in front of my apartment as their roost for the last week and a half. There's nothing stranger than a bare tree full of crows. I find it oddly comforting, though, waking up late at night, and hearing them rustle together, dreaming their crow dreams: pizza scraps and road kill, the chanting of flies.

Some think that a tree full of crows is a bad sign, a dark omen. The last time I lived near a crow-tree I was working in a dish room with boys on loan from a school work program and sad women on subsidized half-wages from a home for the mentally disabled.

2.

Whatever happened to Mike? He stood at the end of the conveyor belt, sorting dishes into stacks. Stocky, mostly muscle, a thick neck, his dark eyes roamed across the dish room, taking everything and everyone in. Every once in a while, he'd open his mouth, shout out a couple of lines from some pop song, then stare at me like he'd just said something significant. I would grin, clueless, and he'd shake his head as if I'd failed some test.

3.

Where is Cedric? The opposite of Mike. Cedric never stopped talking. A tiny, skinny thing with big horn-rimmed glasses, the lenses so thick they made his eyes look bugged-out in perpetual wonder. He sometimes pointed out people he claimed he didn't like - the girls who served on line or some cook in the kitchen - say how he wanted to see them slip on the wet floor, go sailing into the air, land on their asses. Then he would go into a mad little dance - high on the Mountain Dew he drank for breakfast - grabbing the hem of his apron, using it like a swishy skirt, while his knees shot right and left, all the time making this idiotic hooting sound: "Wooooowooooo wooooo, baybaieeee!" How could he have not liked them? He didn't know them. They didn't know him. He didn't know anyone.

4.

And Donna - Colostomy-Bag Donna, Intellectually Disabled Donna - who waddled back to her sorting table with her load of silverware, always shaking her head, muttering to herself, where is she now? Cedric once asked her how old she was and she shook her head, perplexed, and said: "They won't tell us!" "What does that even mean?" I said and she shrugged and shook her head, like we both knew that something was obviously amiss but no one else seemed to be bothered by that fact - so let it go, let it go.

5.

We were the not-quites: not-quite right in the head, speech not-quite coherent, not-quite ready for life with normal people, not-quite living up to our full potential. Not-quite human. As if we were changelings, without human souls, fresh-formed from logs, or from algae floating on the surface of a still pond, and no one wanted to get too close, thinking maybe we'd change back at any moment; children of dark shadow-magic.

6.

The crows in the tree aren't like human beings, endlessly looking for their souls, because they find bits and pieces of ours in the trash they eat every day: chicken legs and cupcake icing, Fritos and a ketchup-soaked hamburger bun, a plastic fork covered in chocolate pudding.

Every day, I watched Cedric scrape all the excess food off the plates, into a trash can, then spray the plates down, his glasses fogging with steam. Bits and pieces. If only we'd known what the crows have always known. Why hunt for our own souls in that dish room when there was so much excess of it passing by, right in front of us. Woowoo bayiiiibeeeee!

7.

This morning, near dawn, just as the crows were beginning to take off and spread across the city, I left some bread at the foot of the ash tree.