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Requiem for the Living

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The day my ears filled with the singing of the Dead (suddenly, as though I’d leapt into a sonic lake) is a day I’ll never forget so long as my heart shall pump and perhaps, I am now led to hope, beyond! Beyond the ebbing of its miserable beats.

It was a joyful noise that could only issue from a register audible to ear-to-the-ground angels (or mortals with, um, er, high-altitude aspirations). A tintinnabular keening like the exhalation of a balloon whose throat is tautly stretched, pulled tight (tight as the limbs of the soon-to-be tortured) by the pudgy fingers of a child in search of the reassurance of a celestial shriek, the memory of which yet infects her fledgling flesh. (A child’s tenure in the material world is provisional; still able to hazily recollect a beforelife, she is not always resolved to remain.)

You will say this is occult and unlikely. And I’ll not disagree. Uncomfortable, squirming beneath the woolen itch of the unimaginable, you’ll resort to jocularity, quip that I must have neglected my meds that day, yuukity-yuk, having lost all reason. I’ll smile quietly, indulge your doubt, your unease at the thought of a flesh-moldered choir. But the fact will remain.

Facts, however revenant, always remain.

I was on a pay phone, a call to my sister.

All Souls’ Day (I kid you not!). Though the air outside had yet to chill to freezing, the weather was spring warmth in the booth and my breath fogged the glass as I waited unwittingly for my fated path to fork.

I was calling to ask if there might be a place in her rock garden for some
ground cover, ophiopogon planiscapus ‘nigrescens’ to be precise, a sprouting of licorice whip leaves, flat and black like boot straps, bringing to mind our father—a lover of licorice, a wearer of boots—deceased only a few months, a plant able to thrive in craggy adversity, sending stolons creeping stealthily underground, and masquerading (a chromatic deception) among the lily family. I’d passed an alpine nursery and though the time for the racemes of purple-petaled flowers and the blue-black fruit that further distinguish Black Mondo Grass had passed, I could not resist the beckoning blackness. Bot noir perhaps to the more tastefully discriminating, those readily seduced by the coquetry of the frail tea rose or the brazen flash of the camellia, that trollop.

The other end warbled its staticy ring and I longed to hear the rehearsed words that would beseech me (my sister’s voice has always been cadenced with a pleading lilt) to identify myself and leave behind a spoken dispatch. Unlike most, who are nettled by the thought of a johnny-on-the-spot performance, I prefer the further mediation of a recorded voice to the shifty copper cable transport of the Voice Speaking at the Moment I Encounter It. I am free to compose an impromptu megillah, which would otherwise most probably be abbreviated by the self-consciousness of holding a live ear captive.

But when the machine picked up, a dead stillness rang where once my sister’s chirping had been, and then I discerned a nearly inaudible ululation, a breathy wail that caused a sharp pain to crawl along the back of my neck, as though the skin there were being unzipped and something inside, the spirit? was wrestling itself free of the incarcerating flesh. I instantly understood I was in the presence of something hypostatic (if vaguely feral).

With great concentration, I listened (and I confess the following at the risk of seeming like an over-ardent votary, a groupie desperate to hear a beyond-the-grave transmission in the backward revolutions of a beloved album). Slowly and with great effort, my ears strained and began to sort words from amidst the airy howl: shoes (or was it choose?), yesterday, room (doom? womb?), and then those yowling voices staggering hither and yon stumbled into harmonic accord and broke into bona fide song; they trilled: Ask to be buried in a warm coat, sensible shoes. There was a sound like
the blowing of bubbles under water: laughter. They sang: We're sorry to say we are the last. Even infinity has its limits, its limits. Eternity beats at a faster clip than you might imagine. My ear flamed and began to ache; I felt it draining, warm fluid washing over it, as if it had been lanced, less ear than carbuncle. The elder dead, sotto voce, sang: Seems like only yesterday. I thought I detected the bass rumble of our father's voice anchoring the chorus, and the blood in my heart stilled, the sound a thrombus obstructing the flow of life. Then they bleated like lemurs, and the phone slipped from my hand.

A tiny woman, dun skin wizened as a forgotten potato, chartreuse cloche cocked jauntily on her small bean, jewelled spectacles, knocked on the glass.

The swinging receiver whistled. Rising out of the eerie clatter, a tinny, stentorian voice boomed a garbled aria. My knees grew gooseflesh. When I was a child, my father told me if he ever left this world—and he wasn't convinced that he would—not to worry, he'd be back to fetch my sister and me.

I found that again I held the phone in my hand. The woman outside the booth was now backing down-the sidewalk, a look of fuddled grief twisting her face, which shone a luminous green in the evening light, her hands clutching her thin coat, wrapping it snugly about her, and the din of the dearly departed thinned to the sound of water bubbling over rocks in a streambed.

A voice, a startling twin to my sister's, in a timbre of lament, whispered there was space for a few more, only a little room left. Then she murmured the shibboleth, the password for the transmigration to end them all—she said it, the word of ingress, the knock-knock that would open the gate, the ponderous Rosetta stone we could tie to our ankles as we sank into the murk of eternal epiphany. It hissed and fizzled into silence, like a firework you suspect is a dud but approach tentatively, fearing it might flare and detonate the minute you jostle it with your toe, test it for dormant life.

Again the phone dangled umbilically, connection not yet severed. I cupped my ear, flooded with the sagacity of the dead. In the end was the word.

I tell it to you.

Only a little room.

Listen.