

NIGHT CROSSING

November 1, 2006

Our editor had a dream recently which has particular poignance during this time of the Days of the Dead. On the face of it, the dream does not appear all that significant, but look closer friend, for you too will one day walk that ancient beach.

By Tradition, each year on the last day of the Mexican Festival of Dias de Los Muertos, each of the staff draws straws to see who shall be the one to have the Dream. Also by Tradition, on this chosen day, the same person draws the shortest straw. The Dream is always the same Dream, save for one or two emendations each year.

Its not much of a tradition, but what the heck.

In the Dream, we walked along the path that borders the strand and came to a stone wall. We could not remember a stone wall being there, about two and a half feet high and extending for infinity in both directions, but this one seemed to have been there for eons, with scraggly weeds crowding up against lichened

stones. There was no gate or path through but something called us from the dim otherside and so, hesitating a moment to leave the relatively well-lit path, we slogged through the sand before the wall and stepped over into a dark mist and a voice seemed to echo in the darkness, "***Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate!***" and the words flamed inside the skull as if scribed in everlasting molten steel. On the other side the ground sloped down as usual to the water for about thirty yards, but we could not see the far lights of Babylon's port facilities or the Coluseum. In fact, the water had the appearance of extending out beyond to Infinity. But all up and down the strand bonfires had been lit, as is customary among our people in this part of the world, and towards one of these we stumbled among drift and seawrack.

At the bonfire's edge a bright voice greeted us, "Denby! What are you doing here now? Is it your time at last?"

A spritely gal with a blonde poll appeared and reached out. But her hand went right through our arm, leaving a clammy, cold sensation.

"Oh!" She said. "You are not one of us. Well, come on and visit for a while."

The girl flit back to the firelight around which a number of forms sat or stood.

"Penny, its you," we said. "We miss you. . . ."

"Oh Denby, you were always so . . . lugubrious. Lighten up and don't be so dead!" came the response. And her laughter was a sparkle of diamonds in that dark night.

Sitting around that fire, we recognized many faces. And many more all up and down that beach. Strange words in another language reverberated inside the skull: "***si lunga tratta / di gente, ch'io non avrei mai creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta***" echoing and echoing down long hallways of mirrors into eternity. None of this seemed to make any sense at all.

A familiar voice called out from the ring of fire. It was Carol, a younger and slimmer woman than we remembered, with a head of golden curls we had only seen in a photograph. "Hello Denby. Still writing I see."

We told her she was looking well, and a girlish fit of laughter erupted. "At the very least we get to look our best here. Just because Mayakovsky does not mention eyelashes and lipstick doesn't mean an old girl can't fix her self up for the Revolution."

"You haven't changed a bit. You know that was quite a service with Jack holding forth like in the old days of the Beats. Must have packed every lefty poet in town in there . . .".

"Oh really. I didn't go. It didn't seem it would add much and I never was one to fish for compliments."

We asked here if she had any prescience for "The Revolution," and she responded that no one in this place had any more foresight than before. "You just need to pick your battles carefully and be smart about it," she said, simply. "I really don't think there will be a Revolution in America; the big Middle Class is all too comfortable with yielding up important things for the sake of an easy-chair, as you have seen the past few years. There still will always be The Struggle in

various forms, and I see you taking part from time to time. Now I am out of all that and have enough to do meeting new and old friends. Say hello to David when you see him -- but don't tell him you saw me. The boy is sensitive."

A bulky form rose up from next to her and we were astonished to face once again someone we thought we would never meet again. This time, we greeted this ghost first. "David, you are here." This David, not Carole's David, had been the foremost among that rowdy group of uncontrolled bohemian artists.

David was, as usual, sardonic and terse in his response. Did you expect me somewhere else? Here he had found alternative companions and a few more besides. Tonight, he visited among the lesser known. As it turned out, he was gratified and surprised there were as few differences between us than first imagined.

"I always had thought in the beginning we were extraordinary, we Cafe Babarians, but when I met you doing the same scut work as I did to get by, I learned the differences are not so great and that was a painful lesson. As for you," he turned to look far out across the water. "You must suffer a great deal more to become as hard as we were. Unfortunately, there is yet hope for you." The form of David stepped back into the darkness and that of Michael appeared, floating at least six inches above the earth as he sat zazen.

"Michael, I am still trying to find the center of my ethnic identity . . .".

"No!" he responded more emphatically from his devout position, his fingers jabbing with insistent energy like spears, "I wanted you to find the center of yourself independent of history -- whether you are Jew or Sufi it does not

matter! You are a soul spinning ecstatically through the universe and without a center you just become dizzy and fall down." Then he added, somewhat sardonically, "And I notice you tend to fall down frequently. Know yourself, then you can wear the beautiful Mask and write about it. Excuse me as I must now return to my conversation with Ghandi."

Another voice called to us. "Well, Denby, you were right when you told me to stop following everybody and to make my own stand. But I made my stand in a place not my own and stood up in the firefight, and so wound up here. And these people are not my people tonight. Most nights I sit with Patton and Eisenhower and Sherman. And many from The Other Side."

That voice belonged to Johnny, wearing the torn uniform of an Army officer. In the closing days of 1972 he shipped off to 'Nam, lying about his age, along with about thirty others, a futile Children's Crusade.

"Johnny, why did you do it? Why did you fudge the records and go in unofficial? When they found out, they struck your name from The Black Wall. You got declared noncombatant because you were underage. . .".

"That's not what it ever was about, Denby. About a million guys from the NVA never wound up on that Wall and never will and its my sentence to meet each one of them and spend unnumbered hours with them here. I have my own concerns now and my own resolutions. This here is my last stand and there is no other."

A couple jogging by paused in the moonlight beside the bonfire, a Black man and a white woman. "Well," said the man, "How surprised I am to find a

Ghost down here." Eric stood there in a lean track-suit -- black, of course, with white stripes -- his beard neatly clipped, his 'Fro a reminder of some other decade. Beside him stood blonde-haired Julie, wearing a suite of dazzling white.

"Julie, Eric, you found each other. Eric, I thought you were shot down in DC, and Julie, there was that window . . .".

"Oh, all that is old history," said Eric. "You should live for the now and pay more attention to what's around you. White men is the Devil, as Fanon said. No surprise when planes smack into buildings because of it. You give my Brother Tom a call when you get back; he could use some help right about now. As for me, this fine lady keeps me company these days."

"Let the memories push you forward, not hold you back. One headlight," said Julie. "Gotta run. Take care of yourself, Denby." And the two were gone, running down the strand.

A figure appeared with sticks rapping out a rhythm on drift logs. He had curly hair and a slim figure.

"I don't know you, " we said. And the figure paused his drumming. "My name is Michael. We never met. I ... crossed over ... in Thailand. You know my sister. And we have been living together, you and me, for some ten years now."

We faced one another, the ghost and the drummer. Ever since we first learned of Michael his habits and resume have filled our days for he was the brother of the Adored and so closest to everything that we hold dear. Not a day goes by when she does not say, "Michael did that." or "Michael said this about

that." If ever there were one who remained in effect after the crossing, Michael was the man.

She had raised her brother in a solitary home after mother had died before her thirteenth birthday and father had gone nuts among the nuns in some distant House for the Mentally Indigent. The long loop of the years had roped in their consecutive lives into a kind of family existence with Xmas'es and Fourths and Thanksgivings spent among the rag tag of punk society that is for such that manage to survive under severe conditions while she fought her way through nursing school and he through rock bands and finally aviation in the doomed world of Reaganomics. We had a lot of questions to ask this Michael.

"You cannot stay her now. You must go back now for your term." Michael said. "In the meantime, take care of my sister -- and anyone's sister for that matter. Study clouds and wind patterns. Look at the sky as often as you can. Go now."

Penny took us back to the wall, which we would not have found otherwise, as sight seemed to have become blurred by some saltwater blown on the wind.

"Oh, you'll be back before long," Penny said. "Try to enjoy your stay where you are at for now. Fling yourself into Life while you still have it; at this point I don't regret a thing except waiting far too long to take up skydiving." She paused at the wall and looked with big eyes, a half-smile on her face. "And practice your singing. You really need lots of practice." A wet something touched our cheek and she was gone.

And after we climbed over that low wall, everything back there receded into a mist and there was only the stretch of water out to Babylon and the lights of Bayview and Hunters Point and the ring of the Coliseum.

And the feel of a salt kiss of a long lost love.