



Return to the Dust, Ray Bradbury

Return To The Dust

Timothy stirred in his sleep.

The nightmare came and would not go away.

Within his head the roof caught fire. The windows trembled and broke. Throughout the great House wings shivered and flew, beating against the panes until they shattered.

Crying out, Timothy sat bolt upright. Almost immediately one word and then a tumble of words spilled from his lips:

"Nef. Dust witch. Great Times A Thousand Times Grandmere ... Nef ... "

She was calling him. There was silence, yet she called. She knew the fire and the wild beating of wings and the broken panes.

He sat for a long while before he moved. "Nef ... dust ... A Thousand Times Great Grandmere ... "

Born into death two thousand years before the crown of thorns, the Gethsemane garden, and the empty tomb. Nef, mother to Nefertiti, the royal mummy who drifted on a dark boat past the deserted Mount of the Sermon, scraped over the Rock at Plymouth and land-sailed to Little Fort in upper Illinois, surviving Grant's twilight assaults and Lee's pale dawn retreats.

Seated for funeral celebrations by the Family Dark she was, over time, stashed from room to room, floor to floor, until this small hemp-rope, tobacco-leaf-brown, ancestral relic was lifted, light as balsa wood, to the upper attics where she was covered, smothered, then ignored by a Family eager for survival and forgetful of unremembered deaths' leftovers.

Abandoned to attic silence and the drift of golden pollens on the air, sucking in darkness as sustenance, breathing out only quiet and

serenity, this ancient visitor waited for someone to pull aside the accumulated love letters, toys, melted candles and candelabras, tattered skirts, corsets, and headlined papers from wars won-then-lost in instantly neglectful Pasts.
Someone to dig, rifle, and find.

Timothy.

He had not visited her in months. Months. Oh Nef, he thought. Nef from the mysterious isle arose because he came and leafed, dug, and tossed aside until just her face, her sewn-shut eyes were framed in autumn book leaves, legal tracts, and jackstraw mouse bones.

"Grandmere!" he cried. "Forgive me!"

"Not ... so ... loud ... " whispered her voice, a ventriloquist's thrown syllables from four thousand years of quiet echoes. "'You ... will ... shatter ... me."

And indeed platelets of dry sand fell from her bandaged shoulders, hieroglyphs tattered on her breastplate.

"Look ... "

A tiny spiral of dust brushed along her ciphered bosom where gods of life and death posed as stiffly as tall rows of ancient corn and wheat. Timothy's eyes grew wide.

"That." He touched the face of a child sprung up in a field of holy beasts. "Me?"

"Indeed."

"Why did you call me?"

"Be ... cause ... it ... is ... the ... end." The slow words fell like golden crumbs from her lips.

A rabbit thumped and ran in Timothy's chest.

"End of what!?"

One of the sewn eyelids of the ancient woman opened the merest crack to show a crystal gleam tucked within. Timothy glanced up at the attic beams where that gleam touched its light.

"This?" he said. "Our place?"

" ... \esssss ... " came the whisper. She sewed one eye-lid back up, but opened the other with light.

Her fingers, trembling across her bosom pictographs, touched like a spider as she whispered:

"This ... "

Timothy responded. "Uncle Einar!"

"He who has wings?"

"I've flown with him."

"Rare child. And this?"

"Cecy!"

"She also flies?"

"With no wings. She sends her mind"

"Like ghosts?"

"Which use people's ears to look out their eyes!"

"And this?" The spider fingers trembled.

There was no symbol where she pointed.

"Ah," Timothy laughed. "My cousin, Ran. Invisible. Doesn't need to fly. Can go anywhere and no one knows."

"Fortunate man. And this and this and yet again this?"

Her dry finger moved and scratched.

And Timothy named all of the uncles and aunts and cousins and nieces and nephews who had lived in this House forever, or a hundred years, give or take bad weather, storms, or war. There were thirty rooms and each more filled with cobwebs and nightbloom and sneezes of ectoplasms that posed in mirrors to be blown away when death's-head moths or funeral dragonflies sewed the air and flung the shutters wide to let the dark spill in.

Timothy named each hieroglyphic face and the ancient woman gave the merest nod of her dusty head as her fingers lay on a final hieroglyph.

"Do I touch the maelstrom of darkness?"

"This House, yes."

And it was so. There lay this very House, embossed with lapis lazuli and trimmed with amber and gold, as it must have been when Lincoln went unheard at Gettysburg.

And as he gazed, the bright embossments began to shiver and flake. An earthquake shook the frames and blinded the golden windows.

"Tonight," mourned the dust, turned in on itself.

"But," cried Timothy, "after so long. Why now?"

"It is the age of discovery and revelations. The pictures that fly through the air. The sounds that blow in the winds. Things seen by many. Things heard by all. Travelers on the road by the tens of millions. No escape. We have been found by the words in the air and the pictures sent on light beams into rooms where children and children's parents sit while Medusa, with insect-antenna coif, tells all and seeks punishment."

"For what?"

"No reason is needed. It is just the revelation of the hour, the meaningless alarms and excursions of the week, the panic of the single night, no one asks, but death and destruction are delivered, as the children sit with their parents behind them, frozen in an arctic spell of unwanted gossip and unneeded slander. No matter. The dumb will speak, the stupid will assume, and we are destroyed.

"Destroyed ... " she echoed.

And the House on her bosom and the House beams above the boy shook, waiting for more quakes.

"The floods will soon arrive ... inundations. Tidal waters of men ... "

"But what have we done?"

"Nothing. We have survived, is all. And those who come to drown us are envious of our lives lived for so many centuries. Because we are different, we must be washed away. Hist!"

And again her hieroglyphs shook and the attic sighed and creaked like a ship in a rising sea.

"What can we do?" Timothy asked.

"Escape to all directions. They cannot follow so many flights. The House must be vacant by midnight, when they will come with torches."

"Torches?"

"Isn't it always fire and torches, torches and fire?"

"Yes." Timothy felt his tongue move, stunned with remembrance. "I have seen films. Poor running people, people running after. And torches and fire."

"Well then. Call your sister. Cecy must warn all the rest."

"This I have done!" cried a voice from nowhere.

"Cecy!?"

"She is with us," husked the old woman.

"Yes! I've heard it all," said the voice from the beams, the window, the closets, the downward stairs. "I am in every room, in every thought, in every head. Already the bureaus are being ransacked, the luggage packed. Long before midnight, the House will be empty."

A bird unseen brushed Timothy's eyelids and ears and settled behind his gaze to blink out at Nef.

"Indeed, the Beautiful One is here," said Cecy in Timothy's throat and mouth.

"Nonsense! Would you hear another reason why the weather will change and the floods come?" said the ancient.

"Indeed." Timothy felt the soft presence of his sister press against his windowed eyes. "Tell us, Nef."

"They hate me because I am the accumulation of the knowledge of Death. That knowledge is a curse to them instead of a useful burden."

"Can," started Timothy, and Cecy finished, "can death be remembered?"

"Oh, yes. But only by the dead. 'You the living are blind. But we who have bathed in Time, and been reborn as children of the earth and inheritors of Eternity, drift gently in rivers of sand and streams of

darkness, knowing the bombardment from the stars whose emanations have taken millions of years to rain upon the land and seek us out in our plantations of eternally wrapped souls like great seeds beneath the marbled layers and the bas-relief skeletons of reptile birds that fly on sandstone, with wingspreads a million years wide and as deep as a single breath. We are die keepers of Time.

You who walk the earth know only die moment, which is whisked away with your next exhalation. Because you move and live, you cannot keep. We are the granaries of dark remembrance. Our funerary jars keep not only our lights and silent hearts, but our wells, deeper than you can imagine, where in the subterranean lost hours, all the deaths that ever were, the deaths on which mankind has built new tenements of flesh and ramparts of stone moving ever upward even as we sink down and down, doused in twilights, bandaged by midnights.

We accumulate. We are wise with farewells. Would you not admit, child, that forty billion deaths are a great wisdom, and those forty billion who shelve under the earth are a great gift to the living so that they might live?"

"I guess."

"Do not guess, child. Know. I will teach, and that knowledge, important to living because only death can set the world free to be born again that is your sweet burden. And tonight is the night when your task begins. Now!"

At which moment, the bright medal in the center of her golden breast flared. The light blazed up to swarm the ceiling like a thousand summer bees threatening, by their very flash and friction, to fire the dry beams. The attic seemed to spin with the rush-around light and heat. Every slat, shingle, crossbeam groaned and expanded, while Timothy raised his arms and hands to ward off the swarms, staring at the kindled bosom of Nef.

"Fire!" he cried. "Torches!"

"Yes," hissed the old, old woman. "Torches and fire. Nothing stays. All burns."

And with this, the architecture of the long-before-Gettysburg-and-Appomattox House smoked on her breastplate.

"Nothing stays!" cried Cecy, everywhere at once, like the fireflies and summer bees bumping to char the beams. "All goes!"

And Timothy blinked and bent to watch the winged man, and the sleeping Cecy, and the Unseen Uncle (invisible save for his passing like the wind through clouds or snow-storms, or wolves running in fields of black wheat, or bats in wounded zigzag flights devouring the moon), and a double dozen of other aunts and uncles and cousins striding the road away from town. Or soaring, to lodge in trees a mile off and safe, as the mob, the torchlit madness, flowed up old Nef-Mum's chest. Off out the window Timothy could see the real mob coming with torches, heading toward the House like a backward flow of lava, on foot, bike, and car, a storm of cries choking their throats.

Even as Timothy felt the floorboards shift, like a scale from which weights are dropped, with seventy times a hundred pounds in flight they jumped overboard from porches. The House skeleton, shaken free, grew tall as winds vacuumed the now-empty rooms and flapped the ghost curtains and sucked the front door wide to welcome the torches and fire and the crazed mob.

"All goes," cried Cecy, a final time.

And she abandoned their eyes and ears and bodies and minds and, restored to her body below, ran so lightly, quickly, her feet left no tread in the grass.

There was a storm of activity. All around the House things were happening. Air was rushing up the flue of the chimneys. Ninety-nine or one hundred chimneys were all sighing or moaning and mourning at the same time. Shingles seemed to be flying off the roof. There was a great fluttering of wings. There was a sound of much weeping. All the rooms were being emptied. In the middle of all this excitement, all this activity, all this flurry, Timothy heard Great Grandmere say:

"What now, Timothy?"

"What?"

She said, "In another hour the House will be empty. You will be here alone and getting ready to make a long journey. I want to go with you on your travels. Maybe we won't be able to speak much along the way, but before we go, in the midst of all this, I want to ask you, do you still want to be like us?"

Timothy thought for a long moment and then said, "Well"

"Speak up. I know your thoughts, but you must speak them."

"No, I don't want to be like you," said Timothy.

"Is this the beginning of wisdom?" Grandmere said.

"I don't know. I've been thinking. I've been watching all of you and I decided that maybe I want to have a life just like people have always had. I want to know that I was born and I guess that I have to accept the fact that I must die. But watching you, seeing all of you, I see that all these long years haven't made any difference."

"What do you mean?" said Great Grandmere.

A great wind rushed by, sparks flew, singeing her dried wrappings.

"Well, are you all happy? I wonder about that. I feel very sad. Some nights I wake up and cry because I realize that you have all this time, all these years, but there doesn't seem to be much that's very happy that came of it all."

"Ah, yes, Time is a burden. We know too much, we remember too much. We have indeed lived too long. The best thing to do, Timothy, in your new wisdom is to live your life to the fullest, enjoy every moment, and lay yourself down, many years from now, happily realizing that you've filled every moment, every hour, every year of your life and that you are much loved by the Family. Now, let us get ready to leave.

"And now," wheezed old Nef, "you be my savior, child. Lift and carry."

"Can't!" cried Timothy.

"I am dandelion seed and thistledown. Your breath will drift, your heartbeat, sustain me. Now!"

And it was so. With one exhalation, a touch of his hands, the wrapped gift from long before Saviors and the parted Red Sea arose on the air. And seeing he could carry this parcel of dream and bones, Timothy wept and ran.

In the upheaval of wings and scarves of spirit illumination the swift passage of lightless clouds over the valleys in tumult caused such an upthrust suction that all of the chimneys, ninety-nine or one hundred, exhaled, shrieked, and let gasp a great outburst of soot and wind from the Hebrides, and air from the far Tortugas, and cyclone layabouts from nowhere Kansas. This erupted volcano of tropic and then arctic air struck and cracked the clouds to pummel them into a shower and then a downpour and then a Johnstown flood of drenching rain that quenched the fire and blackened the House in half ruin.

And while the House was being battered and drowned the downpour so smothered the rage in the mob that it pulled back in sudden clots, slogged about, trailing water, and dispersed on home, leaving the storm to rinse the facade of the empty shell, while there remained one great hearth and chimney which sounded its throat up to where a miraculous residue hung almost upon looms of nothing, sustained by no more than a few timbers and a sleeping breath.

There lay Cecy, quietly smiling at tumults, signaling the thousand Family members to fly here, amble there, let wind lift you, let earth gravitate you down, be leaf, be web, be hoofless print, be lipless smile, be mouthless fang, be boneless pelt, be shroud of mist at dawn, be souls invisible from chimney throats, all list and listen, go, you east, you west, nest trees, bed meadow grass, hitch ride of larks, dog-track with dogs, make cats to care, find bucket wells to lurk, dent farmland beds and pillows with no shape of heads, wake dawns with hummingbirds, hive snug with sunset bees, list, list, all!

And the last of the rain gave the charred shell of House a final rinse and ceased and there were only dying smokes and half a House with half a

heart and half a lung and Cecy there, a compass to their dreams, forever signaling their rampant destinations.

There went all and everyone in a flow of dreams to far-away hamlets and forests and farms, and Mother and Father with them in a blizzard of whispers and prayers, calling farewell, promising returns in some future year, so to seek and hold once again their abandoned son. Goodbye, good-bye, oh yea, goodbye, their fading voices cried. Then all was silence save for Cecy beckoning more melancholy farewells.

And all this, Timothy perceived and tearfully knew. From a mile beyond the House, which now glowed with sparks and plumes to darken the sky, to storm-cloud the moon, Timothy stopped under a tree where many of his cousins and perhaps Cecy caught their breath, even as a rickety jalopy braked and a farmer peered out at the distant blaze and the nearby child.

"What's that?" He pointed his nose at the burning House.

"Wish I knew," said Timothy.

"What you carrying, boy?"

The man scowled at the long bundle under Timothy's arm.

"Collect 'em," said Timothy. "Old newspapers. Comic strips. Old magazines. Headlines, heck, some before the Rough Riders. Some before Bull Run. Trash and junk." The bundle under his arm rustled in the night wind. "Great junk, swell trash."

"Just like me, once." The farmer laughed quietly. "No more. Need a ride?"

Timothy nodded. He looked back at the House, saw sparks like fireflies shooting into the night sky.

"Get in."

And they drove away.

The End