

The Chimney Sweeps, Ray Bradbury

The Chimney Sweeps

But they were more than that.

They hollowed, they lingered, they roared down and wafted up, but they did not actually sweep the chimney vents and flues.

They occupied them. They came from far places to live there. And whether they were ethereal, sussurance of spirit, reminiscence of ghost, ambience of light, shadow, and slept or wakened soul, none could say.

They traveled in clouds, the high cirrus clouds of summer, and fell in thunderous frights of lightning when storms prevailed. Or often without benefit of cirrus or alto stratus they came upon the open sky meadows and could be seen brushing the acres of wheat or lifting die veils of falling snow as if to peer at their final destination: the House and the ninety-nine or some said one hundred chimneys.

Ninety-nine or one hundred chimneys, which gasped at the skies asking to be filled, to be fed, and this hollow utterance pulled from the atmosphere each passing breeze, each moving weather, from all directions.

So the shapeless and invisible winds arrived one by one, carrying the semblance of their old weathers with them. And if they had names at all it was monsoon or sirocco or santana. And the ninety-nine or one hundred chimneys let them sift, wander, fall to lodge their summer solstice tempers and wintry blasts in the sooted bricks there to resummon themselves on August noons as crooning breeze or sound late nights with sounds like dying souls or then again reverberant of that melancholy suffering of sound, the foghorn, far out on the peninsulas of life, stranded on ship-wreck crags, a thousand funerals in one, a lament of burial seas.

The arrivals had occurred long before, then during, and long after the Homecoming with no commingling of essences beyond the hearth or up the flue. They were as composed and sedate as cats, great feline things in no need of company or sustenance, for they fed upon themselves and were well sated sure.

Catwise indeed were they, with starts from the outer Hebrides or arousals in the China Seas, or much-hurried hurricanes flung hopeless from the Cape, or flurried south with freezing breaths to meet the breaths of fire that moved intemperately across the Gulf.

And thus it was the chimney flues in all the House were full-inhabited, with winds of memory that knew the oldest storms and told their frights if you but lit the logs below.

Or if the voice of Timothy shot up this flue or that, the Mystic Seaport winter would weep a tale, or London's fog in transit on a westerly would whisper, murmur, hiss lipless its unlit days and sightless nights.

All told there were then some ninety-nine, perhaps one hundred kindred spells of weather on the move, a tribe of temperatures, the ancient airs, the recent blows of hot and cold that, seeking, found good lodging where thus hidden they waited for a rain-soaked wind to cork them out to join carousals of fresh storm. The House then was a great vintage bin of muttered yelling, heard but not seen, opinions of pure air.

Sometimes when Timothy could not sleep he lay down on this hearth or that and called on up the flue to summon midnight company and speak the traveling of winds across the world. Then he knew company as down the brick-walled flues the spirit tales would drift in lightless snow to touch his ears, excite Arach's hysterias, palpitate the Mouse, and cause Anuba to sit up in feline recognition of strange friends.

And so it was the House was home to seen or most unseen, the rooms of Family walled in by comforters of breeze and wind and climates from all time and every place.
Invisibles in flues.

Rememberers of noons.

Tellers of sunsets lost in air.

The ninety-nine or one hundred chimneys, nothing in each.

Except them.

The End