

# The October People, Ray Bradbury

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All because of the cold exhalation of the ghastly passenger the inhabitants of the Autumn House suffered a delicious chill, shook down the ancient metaphors in their attic skulls and decided to gather at an even greater meeting of the October People.

Now that the Homecoming was over, certain terrible truths arrived. One moment the tree was empty of leaves in the autumn wind, and then, instantly, problems clustered upside down along the branches fanning wings and baring needle teeth.

The metaphor was extreme, but the Autumn council was serious. The Family must at last decide as the ghastly cousin suggested, who and what it was. Dark strangers must be indexed and filed. Who, amongst the invisible mirror images, was oldest?

"I," came the attic whisper. "I," A Thousand Times Great Grandmere whistled her toothless gums. "There is no other."  
"Said and done," agreed Thomas the Tall.

"Agreed," said the mouse-dwarf at the shadowed end of the long council table, his hands freckled with Egyptian spots pressing the mahogany surface.

The table thumped. Something beneath the table lid gave a laughing bump. No one looked to see.

"How many of us are table knockers, how many walkers, shamblers, lopers? How many take the sun, how many shadow the moon?"

"Not so fast," said Timothy, whose task it was to scribble the facts, plain breadfruit or otherwise.

"How many branches of the Family are death-related?"

"We," said other attic voices, the wind that crept through the cracked timbers and whined the roof. "We are the October People, the autumn folk. That is the truth in an almond husk, a nightweed shell."

"Far too nebulous," said Thomas the Short, not like his name, Tall.

"Let us go around the table of travelers, those who have walked, run, spidered, strode in time as well as space, on air as well as turf. I think we are in the Twenty-one Presences, an occult summing of the various tributaries of leaves blown off far ten thousand mile trees to settle in harvests here."

"Why all this frittering and fuss?" said the next-oldest gentleman half down the table, he who had raised onions and baked bread for the pharaoh's tombs. "Everyone knows what each of us does. I fire the rye loaves and bundle the green onions that bouquet the clasped embrace of Nile Valley kings."

I provender banquets in Death's hall where a baker's dozen of pharaohs are seated on gold and whose breath is yeast and green rushes, whose exhalation is eternal life. What else must you know of me, or any other?"

"Your data is sufficient." The Tall One nodded. "But we need a moonless night resume from all. With this knowledge we can stand together when this mindless war reaches its peak!"

"War?" Timothy glanced up. "What war?" And then clapped his palm over his mouth and blushed. "Sorry."

"No need, boy." The father of all darkness spoke. "Listen, now, let me provide the history of the rising tide of disbelief. The Judeo-Christian world is a devastation. The burning bush of Moses will not fire. Christ, from the tomb, fears to come forth should he be unrecognized by doubting Thomas."

The shadow of Allah melts at noon. So Christians and Muslims confront a world torn by many wars to finalize yet a larger. Moses did not walk down the mountain for he never walked up. Christ did not die for he

was never born. All this, all this mind you, is of great importance to us, for we are the reverse side of the coin tossed in the air to fall heads or tails. Does the unholy or holy win?

Ah, but look: the answer is neither none or what? Not only is Jesus lonely and Nazareth in ruins, but the populace at large believes in Nothing. There is no room for either glorious or terrible. We are in danger, too, trapped in the tomb with an uncrucified carpenter, blown away with the burning bush as the east's Black Cubicle cracks its mortar and falls. The world is at war.

They do not name us the Enemy, no, for that would give us flesh and substance. You must see the face or the mask in order to strike through one to deface the other. They war against us by pretending, no, assuring each other we have no flesh and substance. It is a figment war. And if we believe as these disbelievers believe, we will flake our bones to litter the winds."

Ah, whispered the many shadows at the council. Eeee, came the murmur. No.

"But yes," said Father in his ancient shroud. "Once the war was simply between Christians and Muslims and ourselves. As long as they believed in their sermoned lives, and disbelieved in us, we had more than a mythical flesh. We had something to fight for to survive. But now that the world is filled with warriors who do not attack, but simply turn away or walk through us, who do not even argue us as half unreal, we find ourselves weaponless.

One more tidal wave of neglect, one more titanic rainfall of nothings from nowhere and the Apocalypse, arriving, will with one neglectful gust blow out our candles. A dust storm of sorts will sneeze across the world and our Family will be no more.

Destroyed by a single phrase which, if listened to and leaned on, simply says: you do not exist, you did not exist, you never were."

"Ah. No. Eeee. No, no," came the whisper.

"Not so fast," said Timothy in full scribble.

"What is the plan of attack?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Well," said the dark unseen adopted mother to Timothy the Seen, Timothy the well lit, the plainly found, "you have drawn up the fierce outlines of Armageddon. You have all but destroyed us with words. Now raise us up so we are half October People and half Lazarus cousins. We know whom we fight. Now how do We win? The counterattack, if you please."

"That's better," said Timothy, tongue between his teeth, writing slowly to his mother's slower pronunciations.

"The problem is," interjected the ghastly passenger, "we must make people believe in us only up to a point! If they believe in us too much they will forge hammers and sharpen stakes, manufacture crucifixes and forge mirrors. Damned if we do, damned if we don't. How do we fight without appearing to fight? How do we manifest without making our focus too clear? Tell people we are not dead and yet have been duly buried?"

The dark father brooded.

"Spread out," someone said.

Those at the table turned as one to stare at the mouth from which this suggestion had fallen. Timothy's. He glanced up, realizing that, not intending to, he had spoken.

"Again?" commanded his father.

"Spread out," said Timothy, eyes shut.

"Go on, child."

"Well," said Timothy, "look at us, all in one room. Look at us, all in one House. Look at us, all in one town!"

Timothy's mouth fell shut.

"Well," said the shrouded parent.

Timothy squeaked like a mouse, which brought Mouse from his lapel. The arachnid on his neck trembled. Anuba stoked up a roar.

"Well," said Timothy, "we've only got so much room in the House for all the leaves that fall out of the sky, for all the animals that move through the woods, for all the bats that fly, all the clouds that come to drop rain.

We have only a few towers left, one of which is now occupied by the ghastly passenger and his nurse. That tower is taken and we only have so many wine bins left in which to stash old wine, we only have so many closets in which to hang gossamer ectoplasms, we only have so much wall room for new mice, we only have so many corners for cobwebs. That being so, we must find a way to distribute the souls, to move people out of the House and away to some safe places around the country."

"And how do we do that?"

"Well," said Timothy, feeling everyone gazing at him, for after all he was only a child advising all these ancient people on how they should live or how they should go out and be undead, was more like it.

"Well," continued Timothy, "we have someone who could make distribution. She can search the country for souls, look for empty bodies and empty lives and when she finds great canisters that are not full, and little tiny glasses that are half empty, she can take these bodies and empty these souls and make room for those of us who want to travel."

"And who is this other person?" said someone, knowing the answer.

"The person who can help us distribute souls is in the attic now. She sleeps and dreams, dreams and sleeps, in far places, and I think if we go ask her to help our search she will. In the meantime let us think on her and become familiar with the way that she lives, the way that she travels."

"And who is this, again?" said a voice.

"Her name?" said Timothy. "Why, Cecy."

"Yes," said a fine and lovely voice that troubled the council air.

Her attic voice spoke.

"I will be," said Cecy, "like someone who sows the winds to put down a seed of a flower at some future time. Let me gather one soul at a time and move across the land and find a proper place to put it down. Some miles from here, far beyond the town, there's an empty farm that was abandoned some years ago during a storm of dust. Let there be a volunteer from among all our strange relatives. Who will step forward and allow me to travel to that far place and that empty farm to take over and raise children and exist beyond the threat of the cities? Who shall it be?"

"Why," said a voice from the midst of great beatings of wings at the far end of the table, "should it not be me?" said Uncle Einar. "I have the capacity of flight and can make it partly there if you assist me, take hold of my soul, seize on my mind, and help me to travel."

"Yes, Uncle Einar," said Cecy. "Indeed you, the winged one, are proper. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Uncle Einar.

"Well then," said Cecy, "let us begin."

The End