

The Theban Voice, Ray Bradbury

The Theban Voice

"I was the bastard child of the hinges at the great wall of Thebes," it said. "By what do I mean bastard or, for that matter, hinges? A vast door in a wall at Thebes, yes?"

All at the table nodded, impatiently. Yes.

"Quickly then," said the mist within a vapor inside the merest sneeze of shadow, "when the wall was built and the double gate chiseled from vast timbers, the first hinge in the world was invented on which to hang the gates so they could be opened with ease. And they were opened often to let the worshippers in to worship Isis or Osirus or Bubastis or Ra. But the high priests had not as yet magicked themselves into tricks, had not as yet sensed that the gods must have voices, or at least incense so that as the smoke arose one could configure the spirals and whiffs and read symbols or air and space. The incense came later. They did not know, but voices were needed. I was that voice."

"Ah?" the Family leaned forward. "So?"

"They had invented the hinge made of solid bronze, an eternity of metal, but had not invented the lubricant to make the hinge gape quietly. So when the great Theban doors were opened, I was born. Very small at first, my voice, a squeak, a squeal, but soon, the vibrant declaration of the gods. Hidden, a secret declaration, unseen, Ra and Bubastis spoke through me. The holy worshippers, riven, now paid as much attention to my syllables, my perambulating squeals and grindings as they did to the golden masks and harvest-blanching fists!"

"I never thought of that." Timothy looked up in gentle surprise.

"Think," said the voice from the Theban hinges three thousand years lost in time.

"Continue," said all.

"And seeing," said the voice, "that the worshippers tilted their heads to catch my pronunciamientos, garbed in mystery and waiting for interpretation, instead of oiling the bronze hasps, a lector was appointed, a high priest who translated my merest creak and murmur as a hint from Osiris, an inclination from Bubastis, an approbation from the Sun Himself."

The presence paused and gave several examples of the creak and slur of the hinge binding itself. This was music.

"Once born, I never died. Almost but no. While oils glistened the gates and doors of the world, there was always one door, one hinge, where I lodged for a night, a year, or a mortal lifetime. So I have made it across continents, with my own linguistics, my own treasures of knowledge, and rest here among you, representative of all the openings and closures of a vast world. Put not butter, nor grease, nor bacon-rind upon my resting places."

A gentle laughter, in which all joined.

"How shall we write you down?" asked Timothy.

"As a tribesman of the Talkers with no wind, no need of air. The self-sufficient speakers of the night at noon."

"Say that again."

"The small voice that asks of the dead who arrive for admission at the gate of paradise: 'In your life, did you know enthusiasm?' If the answer is yes you enter the sky. If no, you fall to burn in the pit."

"The more questions I ask, the longer your answers get."

" 'The Theban Voice.' Write that."

Timothy wrote.

"How do you spell 'Theban'?" he said.

The End