

On Being A Carcass
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Oh boy, oh boy.

I am going to seep through the cracks in this street one day, I will become all slick and wormy, and I am going to slide down the rain gutter. My feeble legs depend on my withering desire to get anywhere. Every third Wednesday, at precisely two-twenty-two in the winter, and at precisely four-thirty-one in the summer, I hobble down to La Casa Fuentes for the special dinner offer. If I get there before five o'clock, I get a full dinner with a coupon that I pluck out of the local paper. I leave earlier in the winter because it gets too cold for my body to move after four o'clock. I have always been a man to plan ahead. It is winter now; it always feels like winter to me. The chill throws my throat into an orchestra of convulsions.

Hack, wheeze, huff.

Good Christ I hate my being; it used to be only my body that bothered me, way back decades ago, now my brain is a malfunctioning mess too. It sputters and putt-putts, like those wonderful old go-carts they used to have by the river, they might still have by the river. How would I ever know? I falter in between consciousness and clarity. Tiny little burps of stomach acid rise in my esophagus and I cough again, walking down this street can be a terror to my body. I can finally hear myself creaking and croaking... I cannot help but to listen. Goddamn why will I not cease to be? The vino inside me has not gotten better with age, it has become salty and stagnant, and the bread of my bones

has gone stale and flaky. I sniffle a lot. I huff and puff but I am incapable of blowing out even a single match.

Sputter, hack.

I used to glide down this street, then the glide became a shuffle as a scared maturing boy, which became a stumble as I grew into my body, which became a strut as I felt the world beneath me, then it gave way to a trudge as I felt swallowed by the universe, and now I am working the wander. I am moving with hopeless delay in every step I take. All my life I have known of this street. At varying points it has grown and shrunk in the size of its significance. Bits and pieces of it have changed in time, but the brittle broken sidewalk has remained the same. As I look about me I see the buildings of the modern age, which will go out of fashion in a few years and be torn down for a new modern age. I see patios full of plants, I see lamps covered in beads, and I see beds full of people. I am unsurprised. Only ten years ago I was in one of those beds, warm and ripe with desire, but now I am resigned to sleep alone.

Oh boy, oh boy.

What a mess I am.

What a mound of meat I am.

The slickness of the cement warns me to tread cautiously, or I will have to buy a new hip. The biting breeze tells me to wrap myself, or I will be frozen stiff. I wish I could

smile, I wish I could stomach a laugh for the tragedy of it all. The lips on my scarred and peeling face relinquish no more than a grin. After a grand journey of seven blocks, I step into La Casa Fuentes. No table at first, but I am old enough that a summoned waiting chair appears before me.

Sputter, wheeze.

How old must I be to wonder why I must wait to be fed? How feeble must I be to not be able to feed myself? My fragility scares a little child standing in front of me; she is attached to her mother's hip who stares into the distance. The little girl's face is unblemished and glowing. One of these days she will have to let go of her mother's hip, I know, and I tell her so. I tell her that one day she will not want to be close to her mother, she might shiver at the very thought of it, she will want to be attached to some punk kid who has but one interest in her. I leave the interest out of the conversation.

To be young.

Hack, sputter, croak, wheeze, huff.

My convulsions scare the poor child and she runs to the other side of her clueless mother. She looks around the hip at the ancient monster that had just roared at her, seeing if it had finally given its last breath and died.

What a mess I am, oh boy, oh boy.

What a big fat useless carcass I have become.

A young man of about sixty years my junior comes to take me to my table, in the corner, by the kitchen, where nobody will hear me shudder and shake if my throat decides to spasm again. Not a bad kid though, making minimum wage cleaning tables and dishing out chips and salsa. I remember being a bus boy myself, at Harriet's Club downtown, it's probably gone by now. How would I ever know? La Casa Fuentes is covered with streamers and maracas and ponchos and everything else that could possibly make it more authentic. What an awful disease this place must have to make it become so Goddamn cheerful and gay.

Huff, wheeze.

I sit at my little table with a little candle in the center. I tell the boy that I have a coupon and I point at the clock. That is all I ever need to do to get what I want, they always bring the same food. He tells me that my coupons have expired since Thanksgiving, that my free meal will not be coming today. What a punk. What a bastard. What a...

Hack, wheeze, croak, sputter, huff.

Jesus I loathe my existence. Now I am lost, without the free meal I will have no sustenance, without the sustenance I will never make it back to my home. I will die either

on the street or sitting at this little table next to the kitchen, surrounded by authentic Mexican decoration. What a Goddamn tragedy. I tell him I have no money, he says he cant give free food except for the chips and salsa. I ask him for some water.

Oh boy, oh boy.

This might be the end of the line.

The last road to cross.

The final breathe of this mound of meat.

When he comes back with my water I sip it gently. I savor that which has given me life, that which has kept me alive for all my existence. Then I ask the boy if he would listen to a poem I once read years ago. It was a poem about an old man at the end of his line. It haunted me as a boy, in my dreams I felt the terror of age that lay ahead of me. I didn't learn of the author, I don't remember there being an author. I thought it was simply spewed forth by the human consciousness eons ago. Now I feel that the poem is all that I am, it is my memory, my structure, and my soul. It is the sum up of my existence, it is my deliverance, it tells me of my insignificance. I make him agree to listen to the poem by telling him that I will call on his manager if he doesn't, he doesn't know that I am about to die. Poor kid.

Hack, wheeze, huff, gargle, choke, sputter, croak.

I start,

O'Brien falls down the road, a drunk
In a place that doesn't have room for another
Drunk.
He doesn't belong, clearly.
He sings the wrong songs
Between each burp.
We stare
At the man in the wrong clothing,
In the wrong city.
He is more than alone,
Nobody wants to be near him.
We watch the cat get lost
In a city of dogs.
That sly, lying liar.
He bumps into everything
That falls in his path.
What is he doing here?
Unwelcome.
Uninvited.
Unwanted.
Unmistakable.
He will disappear down and around the corners

And reappear in the morning news.

AN UNWANTED MAN MEETS AN UNTIMELY END

That's what they will say.

And we will forget that there was a forgetful in our

Paradise city.

And I will forget.

And we will talk and sing

Between each burp.

The right songs to the wrong tune.

But we belong, we are unmistakably

Right.

Oh boy, oh boy

Hack, wheeze, sputter, croak, huff.

So the boy gets his manager, who calls an ambulance, which comes in seven minutes, but for this pathetic, putrid little carcass, it is too late.