

The Uninvited

For Charles Simic

If I do not often think of the dead
it is because I know they are with me.
They come from their strange distance
carrying gifts in their misshapen hands:
books, string, cabbages, poetry and bread,
or less desirable things—a yellow word,
blue corroded thoughts, shriveled black
plums of something said or left undone.
Watery and vague, they still know how
to penetrate the deepest, sleeping self
lost in the daily relief of labor and light;
no matter how I deny it, they use my grief
to unlock the twilight gate of my defenses.
But I don't mind their unannounced arrival,
their fingers of willow, their unfocused eyes. . .
Like friends, they linger aimlessly, counting
flies or kicking stones, or pacing in the grass.
Then they simply pass away, and the day
is my own, to slough, or tear and mend, as I
see fit. Alone again, I see how easy it is to be
like them: to let the numbing autumn sky
chill my eyes until nothing human remains,
iris and cornea dissolved into a gray flat
mass without an echo in the sea. And gifts?
Well, I admit, I've got some rubbish to lug;
it's summertime and the livin' ain't easy,
and things I offer seem to slip and fall
between their rainy, treeless lifelines
and foggy, missing palms. But at midnight,
though I'm not sure I should invite them in,
I think some evening I could set the table

and leave out a glass of milk, so they will
know I welcome them, as I hope they will
me, when my time comes, to the other side.

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