City of the Dead

Lindsay Labanca∗
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New Orleans, 2003

Here is the realm of tenebrous, seldom-glimpsed shades, the ghosts and shades of a thousand dead and dying, on pain and twisting, clawing disease, where from the pit of three waters the city rose, bathed in lake-reflected mirror moonlight and sun filtered through cypress arms and stiff, formal curtains of moss.

Oh, innumerable mysteries of the golden, royal city! of the imperial purple of drugstore signs, of flaking Spanish street signs, grey, drenched concrete paving the way where red carpets once unfurled pageantry and envy in the excited imaginings of the noble world.

The frilled curtseys of myrtle ladies-in-waiting, simmering gardenia perfume, intoxicant angel-trumpets announcing thrilling doom on every corner, and rows, glorious towers of thick, steady oaks, kings above all, their magnolia queens catching sheets of rain in white, open hands, in black, crumbling, ash-sweet earth, final rest not of unworthy flesh but the storm-stained spires of tombs, the city's watching guards.

Pool of flowering-water offering beside the dusty vevé scattered, the touch of jagged palms, slicing sin through incense-streams: saints and santeros walking hand-in-hand down narrow, one-way streets receive the unspoken homage of breath and step and pulse, where they know each other as the city knows them and always has.

These are things so elemental and complete, beyond the grasp of thought,
they are felt in the fading drumbeat of nighttime Congo Square
dancers,
they move in true, sluggish rivers through wine-dark and passion­
ate blood,
born wrapped in the very spirals of the native being, consumed
each day
in breaths of sharp pepper vapors, spices and lazily drawled, ador­
ing verse.

New Orleans, 2005

Blown open low, scattered
masks of aggrandizement,
the pretense of justice
beneath flourished initials
of false and filthy praise.

Still beloved, the twisting rusting vines
of a sadly watermarked history,
the fattened, wave-fed corpses
untombed, entombed above earth
in the rot of running lake,
stench of sewage, raw with fear -
the slouching tumble-over
of a majestic river queen.

Neon lights have snuffed out
into stars, extinguished paste
for the glow of desperate memory,
the flood moving west and north.

We alone must carry
the stories that else would die
untombed, untold in poisoned silence,
weeping blood into black waters
where part of us remained.

Trumpets over the river, play
that you deserved a better end than
putrefying warble into
this disgraced and ugly hush.
You can't sing the sizzling flesh
on concrete, the rising sludge
and panicked move heavenward into hell,
you can't paint romance or jazz despair
onto a wasteland without reason.

We heard you that day,
heard your brass singing as we'd never heard you,
had walked past a thousand times
with earphones and shopping and never quite
noticed this jewel ripped from our hands.

The flood rises again in tears
poured through foreign rivers down,
down to you, down to you.
This is our city of the dead,
unsealed vault, rhythm beyond reach.