

Charles Hayes
The Dancing Man

Bo Jangles on the ties: a one, a two, a hop to the rail, on down the tracks of time. White water calls the beat and sidelights of leafy green splash from the walls of steep timber. Soft-shoes on lines of dusted steel kick high. Suddenly a flash douses the spot, sweeping rivers and roads to dead flats, time hooks to nowhere, and high kicks shrivel to torn sneakers atop a trash pile. Mood becomes fickle, an independent push. And the beat is the simple thumping of my heart.

Children with smooth lidded eyes over flashes of alabaster dip and bump black winged gargoyles above the muddy Mekong. A little one runs to catch up, a broken and tailless kite swirling in her draft. Stopping, she holds her kite to me, dark eyes saying, "You can do it, you can make big people die. This is only a toy, fix it." Pushing away the rags and bamboo, their smell of nuoc mam shooting slivers up my nose, I walk on.

Turkey Vultures lift from the rails, offal trailing from their beaks. Like kites they soar, hovering high while their radar feathers my skin. The pushback of a mashed eyeless carcass, nested in thick bone colored snakes, looks up at me from under foot. Locked by its haunt, I am suddenly jarred back by a blare. Leaping aside, I wash in the coal dust with the opossum's severed head, draining down to the clack of steel wheels.

In the canyons of the yard the walls of ebony blocks shiver and screech, protesting my steps across their sooty plain. Slag piles give up their ghosts and morph to the dirge, a lazy waltz for one.

Smoking rags hanging from blistered lumps of wet red beg, "Kill me, it will be fine. Please." A phantom screams over as waves of melting wax run purple down the waving engineer's face, his locomotive throwing spears of color from its tumbling canisters of sunshine.

From the stage Lucy says, "About time you got here. We're missing Joe, Jane will take his lines. You'll do the same ole same ole. Where you been? You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

Looking to the steep hardwoods rising sharply all about, I feel more at home in this small amphitheater. Like a bit of colored glass in a bowl of jewels. Sometimes I think it would be nice to just stay here and put on faces.

Planting her fists on her hips, Lucy loudly cues, "Well are you going to answer me or not?"

"I took the tracks," I reply. "It's been a while. Just wanted to pass that neck of the woods."

"Well, I'm glad you made it. Nobody else can do that part like you. Hard to believe that you're not even a veteran. How'd you ever miss that one?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Well get on backstage and suit up. They'll start arriving soon."

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Heading around back, thinking that life is but a stage, I am pulled up again before I can exit. "Oh! And one more thing. You missed the run through. We're going to pull it back a little tonight. You know, like no big deal, got it?"

"I got it, no big deal."