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### **Hell Notes**

It is Ghost Month yet again, and yet again my entire sidewalk is littered with money. Fake money. Hell Money. Money that fell from the sky, fluttered out of windows, from boys riding bitch on bicycles, or men on mopeds. If it is true that death is a part of life, so is cleaning up after the celebration that observes it.

In Java, they call it the Hungry Ghost festival. But all they do is eat dumplings and sweets in fancy restaurants, and leave out bits of burning incense for the returning spirits. And toss fake money on the streets as they zoom by in their shining cars, urging us, with each fallen golden note, to remember! remember! Yet you'd think the ghosts—being hungry—might want their incense with a side of orange slices, a kiwi. Or even a pineapple. I have beautiful hands of bananas and mangoes for sale, but do these money tossers stop at my cart and toss real money my way to buy apples and grapes for their hungry dead? And do they ever stop to wonder who will clean up their scattered fake money after they'd had their fun and games? No, they do not.

When I was a child, my grandmother always used food to honor her hungry ghosts. Then she'd stack the notes in a small pile in her shrine and burn them up. She used to say that the Gods are summoned and the Gods are present in the creation of the offering. "Once it's offered," she said, "it is no longer sacred." I sometimes wonder if that's the same attitude the Gods took when humans were made. Maybe you have to die to know the answer. But I don't carry on my grandmother's superstitions. And I won't throw hell notes, either, although it's clear I will be the one picking them up, on account of the sweltering heat and this substandard broom. Perhaps the dead have returned to earth, but who do we think we're fooling with this fake money? With this trash mess that I must now pick up, one by one, with my bare hands, because people seem to think litter cleans up after itself?

It's one day after the Hungry Ghost Festival, and no one minds their step when walking on my dirty golden sidewalk, and no one cares that their footfalls land on the mucked up Hell Notes. They zip by on their bikes and mopeds, bearing down on horns, heading off to work or school. Another day in the life. Another day when the dead are forgotten. And yet, I cannot forget so long as the sidewalk near my cart is littered. My wife thinks I torment our dead. "The reason why we get no business is because you don't respect your ancestors," she says. But who is now down on his knees, picking up dollar after fake trampled hell dollar? Who is stacking them like his grandmother used to, even with the filthy imprinted footfalls of a hundred people and packs of dogs and those sidewalk bicycle riders? Let those fools get together and believe they're taking care of the dead for one night out of the year. I sell the fruit. I clean my sidewalk. And I will burn the hell notes in my home stove because we cannot afford the firewood right now, because I believe in taking care of the living.