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The House of Cards

by CHARLES L. MEE

Originally produced under the title of *Chiang Kai Chek*

The piece plays out at a very slow, dream-like pace.
The setting is beautiful, exquisite.
A live tree is to one side.
Elsewhere is a woman with a cello.
A man builds a house of cards throughout the entire piece
so that the house of cards becomes a vast, elaborate structure.

He speaks:

There was once a man named Frederick
who had a small son,
and the son had a pet tortoise.
One day the father decided to roast the tortoise,
so he put a burning stick against the tortoise's belly.
The tortoise kicked
and jerked his head
and urinated,
and the heat of the stick
caused the shell on the tortoise's belly to split.
So the father put his hand up inside the shell,
and,
while the tortoise struggled,
the father slit its belly with his knife
and pulled out its intestines.

By this time,
the tortoise had pulled a little into its shell
and was trying to hide there,
with his head between his knees,
looking out.
And meanwhile
the little boy had come to see what his father was doing.

And when the boy saw the tortoise,
he put his own arms up beside his head
and looked out—
just the way the tortoise looked out of his shell.

And now the father reached in and took hold of the tortoise's heart,
which was still beating,
and flipped the tortoise over onto the ground,
and while the man pulled out its heart,
the tortoise jerked violently.
And the father said to the son,
you see,
the tortoise—
like the earth itself,
or like a man—
is a slow, tough creature
that can live on a while
even after its heart is gone.

[SUDDENLY, SLAMMING INTO THE LAST WORD HE SPOKE,
A DEAD OPERA SINGER CUTS LOOSE WITH A HEART
BREAKING ARIA FROM A SCRATCHY RECORDING 100
YEARS OLD.]

I sometimes wonder:
what would it be like
to have an exquisite sense of things?

An Oriental sense.

You would say, for instance:
there are elegant things—
duck eggs
wistaria blossoms
the Pride of China tree
the Sweet-scented marvel-of-Peru

You would say: there are things that are both near and distant at the same time
Like the course of a boat across a lake.
Like paradise.
The relations between a man and a woman.

Or things that give a clean feeling.
An earthen cup.
A new wooden chest.

[THROUGHOUT THE FOLLOWING, MAYBE,
THE OCCASIONAL SHARP SOUND OF SHATTERING GLASS]

Of all human qualities, the greatest is sympathy.
Or compassion.
For clouds even.
Or snow.
I love a child eating strawberries.
A white jacket over a violet vest.
Club moss.
Beach parsley.
The pear tree.
The earth itself.
Dirt.
The sunlight you see in water as you pour it from a pitcher into a bowl.

In spring I think the dawn is most beautiful.
In summer the nights.
In autumn the evenings when the sun has set and your heart is moved
by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings, especially when snow has fallen during the night, or the ground is white with frost, or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold, and someone hurries from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal or wood, and then, as noon approaches, no one bothers to keep the fires going, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

[THE SOUND OF AN ELEPHANT'S FOOT REPEATEDLY
SLAMMING THE REVERBERATING STEEL DOOR OF HIS CAGE.
THE MAN LISTENS TO THIS SOUND FOR A WHILE, THEN
CONTINUES SPEAKING, AND THE SOUND OF REVERBERATING
SLAMMING CONTINUES THROUGH THE FOLLOWING TEXT.]

Or you could say,
for no reason at all:
there is something frightening to me
about the branches of the camphor tree,
about the way they are so tangled.
They make a person feel estranged from the tree
in a way.
And yet,
it's because the tree is divided into so many branches
that sometimes the image of the tree is used
to describe people in love.

And then there are things that cannot be compared to anything else.

As, when you've stopped loving someone,
you feel as though the person you love
has become someone else entirely,
even though she is still the same person.

[WHALE SONG]

There is a kind of wolf
which is also a part of nature
whose brains grow larger and smaller with the moon

and whose neck is on a bone that is very straight
and won't bend.
So that when it wants to turn and look at something,
it has to turn its whole upper body.
And sometimes
it will eat a kind of earth
to make its body heavy,
so that when it attacks a horse
or an ox
or an elk
or some such strong animal
it will take the big animal by the throat
and hang there,
and it will be heavy enough
finally
to bring the big animal down.

The gulon
feeds on carcasses.
Whenever he finds a carcass
he eats so much that his stomach stands out
like a large bell.
Then he looks for some narrow space between two trees
and he pulls his body through the space
to push out the food he has eaten.
And so,
being emptied,
he can feed again.
And so he continues eating
and emptying himself
until everything has been eaten.

[SOFTLY, HEARTBREAKING MUSIC COMES UP UNDER THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE.]

Of all living creatures,
the elephant is the most noble.
It will bury its own dead
with dust and earth
and green boughs.

It will not pass by the body of one of its own
without stopping to grieve at their common misery
and perform the rites of burial.

They are chaste creatures,
and monogamous,
and modest about procreation.
They will seek woods and secret places
and sometimes water—
lakes or ponds or streams—
and while they copulate
they turn their heads toward the East.

There was an elephant in Egypt once
who was in love with a woman who sold corals.
This same woman was loved by Aristophanes of Byzantium—
and Aristophanes rightly complained
that never before
had a man had to compete with an elephant
for the love of a woman.
One day, at the market,
the elephant brought the woman certain apples
and put them into her bosom,
holding his trunk there a great while,
handling and playing with her breasts.

They like flowers and ointments.
They love a meadow filled with flowers.
They will bathe often,
and are well-known for their gentleness.

They can be killed with ditches.
If fruit and flowers are placed in a ditch
and then the ditch is covered over with boughs and leaves,
the elephant will fall in
and impale itself on sharpened stakes.

You could say: I am not an elephant.

What would be wrong with that?

You could say: I am not a root. I am not a berry.

What would be wrong with that?

And yet
this is how the trouble
so often begins.

[THE WOMAN PLAYS THE CELLO.
THE MAN, MOTIONLESS, LISTENS TO HER PLAY A
LONG, HEARTBREAKING CLASSICAL PIECE.]

Now, of course,
random passersby are being stopped on the street
asked for their opinions on various matters,
and,
according to their answers,
beaten up.

[BLINDLY BRIGHT WHITE LIGHT WHIRLS AROUND THE STAGE,
LIKE THE REVOLVING LIGHT ON A POLICE CAR, BUT WHITE.]

A woman was holding a baby in her arms
begging that she be shot first and that the baby be spared.
There was a crowd on the other side of the fence,
raising their hands to take the baby if it should be passed over to
them.
The woman was about to hand her baby to the crowd
when the soldier took it from her
shot it twice
and then took the baby in his hands
and tore it
as one would tear a rag.

I have heard it said:
that the white of an egg will close a wound;
an earth worm in vinegar or
an earth worm in honey
or pounded with cypress leaves
will close a wound;
a slice of veal will keep a wound from swelling;
the bark of an elm will close a wound;
fresh dung
or dung that is dried and powdered
is good for a wound made by iron;
goat dung kneaded in vinegar
good for ulcers of the shin;
that dog's blood is good for a poisoned arrow;
that a mouse cut in two is good for snake bite;
that for any painful wound a pebble right side up;
and that the one who applies it must not look back,
or move out of the shade;
that, for a callous of the foot,
one should apply the ash of an old shoe.
In my own experience, this has not been true.

[THE SOUND OF A 19TH CENTURY FACTORY, A DEEP LOW LEVEL HUM,
AND A RELENTLESS, STEAM-DRIVEN POUNDING]

I myself had just come into the room and said "Good morning,"
when suddenly it turned bright red. I felt hot on my cheeks, and when
I came to, I realized everyone was lying at one side of the room. No
one was standing. The desks and chairs had blown to one side. At
the windows, there was no window glass and the window frames had
been blown out. After a while, I realized that my shirt, which had
been white, was now red all over. I thought it was odd since I was
not injured. I looked around and then I realized that the girl lying

near to me was badly hurt, with pieces of broken glass stuck all over
her body. Her blood had splashed and made stains on my shirt. And
she had pieces of wood stuck in her.

I was wondering what my family were doing. I found that all the houses around had collapsed for as far as I could see. Then, I looked next door and I saw the father of the neighboring family standing almost naked. His skin was peeling off the upper half of his body and was hanging down from his finger tips. He was looking for his family.

Some days

I remember what it's been like
on a summer day
when the weather's so hot
you can't think what to do with yourself.
You keep waving your fan
but there isn't a breath of fresh air.
And then, just as you're thinking
to put your hand in a bowl of iced water
suddenly:
a letter arrives,
written on a sheet of fine
brilliant red paper
attached to an orchid in full bloom
and you think
how deeply your friend must feel
to have taken such trouble
on a suffocating day

[A LONG MOVIE HERE:
KIDS PLAYING ON A BEACH IN THE SUMMER?
SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL, WARM, SENTIMENTAL, NOSTALGIC]

Of course there were rules. The rules were: never put a bowl down where it might be stolen. Even when you go to the bathroom, take the bowl with you. Even when you wash your hands, hold the bowl tightly between your knees. Or think of this: you may tie your shoes not with laces but with bits of wire, you may wrap your feet with rags, you may pad your jacket with waste paper in the winter, but you may not sleep with your cap on your head. You may not go outside with your jacket unbuttoned, or with your collar raised. When you wash, you need to strip to the waist. You need to smear

your shoes with machine grease each morning. If your shoe hurts you may take it to the evening shoe exchange, but you must choose quickly and you must choose right, because there is no second chance. And, if you choose incorrectly, you will have sores on your feet, your feet will swell, the wood and cloth of the shoe will rub against your feet even more, the infection will become insupportable at last, and you will have to go to the hospital, but no one chooses easily to do this since so few return once they go to the hospital.

[A BLACK FEMALE OPERA SINGER SINGS AN ARIA.]

We all have the same mother.
Every species that you see now
drawing the breath of life
has the earth as its mother.
At the appointed season,
the earth gave birth to every beast that runs wild among the hills.

I was once in love with a woman.
I met her in the summer
a married woman.
As she walked toward me
the sun was behind her
her dress was translucent
Her eyes were sky blue
Sky blue
I don't understand it
I fell in love with her at once
so fragile she seemed.
I said to her:
we should have a summer love affair.
She didn't say no,
she said: you're outrageous.
I said: no, it's you who are outrageous.
We met the next day—
and we made love every day the whole summer.

And still
I think of her.

One time:
they rang the doorbell;
they smashed the glass windows in the doors;
they walked right in.
They pushed the upright piano out onto the balcony,
smashed the balustrade,
and shoved the piano over the edge.
It hit the street below.
The wooden casing splintered away,
and left the insides of the piano
standing upright on the street
in the middle of the wreckage—
looking
like a harp.

[A LOVE SONG FROM THE THIRTIES.]

A man went one summer to the country with a friend.
What they had in mind was to cross the river
by a bridge that was marked on a map;
but when they got there
the bridge was gone.

When was this?

[THE CRASHING SOUND OF INDUSTRIAL ROCK MUSIC
BY THE GERMAN BAND EINSTURZENDE NEUBAUTEN.]

I had a friend,
a psychologist,
who did an experiment on rats when he was a student in the
university,
and when he finished his experiment,
he was faced with the problem
of what to do with the rats.
He asked his advisor,

and his advisor said:

"Sacrifice them."

My friend said: "How?"

And his advisor said:

"Like this."

And his advisor took hold of a rat

and bashed its head against the side of a workbench.

My friend felt sick,

and asked his advisor how he could do that—

even though, in fact, as my friend knew,

this was not exactly a cruel way to kill a rat,

since instant death is caused

by cervical dislocation.

And his advisor said to him:

"What's the matter?

Maybe you're not

cut out to be a psychologist.

How would you kill a rat?

I don't know.

If you had to.

Hanging by the wrists,

burning with cigarettes

burning with an iron

hosing with water

hitting with fists

kicking with boots

hitting with truncheons

hitting with whips

exposing to cold showers

depriving of sleep

depriving of toilets

depriving of food

subjecting to abuse

beating with fists and clubs

hitting the genitals

hitting the head against the wall
electric shocks used on the head
on the genitals
on the feet
on the lips
on the eyes
on the genitals
hitting with fists
whipping with cables
strapping to crosses
caning on the backside
caning on the limbs
inserting sticks
inserting heated skewers
inserting bottle necks
pouring on boiling water
injecting with haloperidol
chlorpromazine
trifluoperazine
beating on the skull
cutting off the fingers
submerging in water
breaking of limbs
smashing of jaws
crushing of feet
breaking of teeth
cutting the face
removing the finger nails
wrapping in plastic
closing in a box
castrating
multiple cutting

When you think
how we used to live in the ocean
in the salt water
you think:
we don't live there any more.
but really, in fact, we just took the ocean with us when we came on land.

The womb is an ocean really,
babies begin in an ocean,
and human blood has the same concentration of salt
as sea water.

And no matter where we are
on top of a mountain
or in the middle of a desert,
when we cry or sweat,
we cry or sweat sea water.

Suppose Socrates was wrong,
that we have never seen the truth,
and so,
if we ever do see it,
we won't recognize it.

If that's the case,
then, when one violates the innocent,
there's nothing to be said along the lines of:
"There is something within us—
some human nature, or some other nature—
that we are betraying,
or there is something beyond these practices that condemns us.

If we don't have this to say,
all we have left to say is:
Yes, well.
Finally.
Now we know ourselves.

[THE REPEATED CRIES OF A TROPICAL BIRD
WHICH WE HEAR ON THROUGH THE FOLLOWING TEXT.]

Last night
I dreamed I was a soul wrapped in a pumpkin
that went through some empty rooms
and so to heaven.
I saw my daughter there,
just ten years old,
playing the violin
and I thought:
well,

I've done my job,
it's in her hands now.

[THE HOUSE OF CARDS GOES UP IN FLAMES.

REPRISE OF THE DEAD OPERA SINGER.
SLOW FADE TO BLACKOUT.]

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