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The Talking Garbage Cans

by CHARLES L. MEE

A half dozen talking garbage cans are scattered
here and there.

CHORUS MEMBER 1, HAROLD

A human being can be thought of as a tree trunk on fire
You can lay them down screaming
on their stomachs or their backs—
or you can spare the fire
and lay them out on the beach
nothing more than breathless lacerations
shapeless silhouettes
half eaten
getting up or moaning on the ground
then you might say
the head—
the eyes, the ears, the brain
represent the complications of the buccal orifice
the penis, the testicles
or you could say
the female organs that correspond to these
are the complications of the anal orifice.
So you have the familiar violent thrusts
that come from the interior of the body
indifferently ejected
from one end of the body or the other
discharged,
that is to say,
wherever they meet the weakest resistance.

EDMUND

The world is a bleeding wound
when it comes to that.

JASON

The natural state of a man,
the ecstatic state, will find itself in the visions of things
that appear suddenly: cadavers, for example,
nudity, explosions, spilled blood, sunbursts, abscesses, thunder.

EDMUND

Everything that exists
destroys itself
when it comes to that.
The sun in the sky,
the stars,
consuming themselves
and dying.
The joy of life that comes into the world
to give itself
and be annihilated.

JASON

I can imagine the earth projected in space
as it is
in reality
like a woman screaming,
her head in flames.

BOBBY

We came one time, my squad,
into the house of a prominent community leader,
and shot him
and shot his wife
shot his married son
his daughter-in-law,
a male and female servant and their baby.
The family dog was clubbed to death,
the family cat was strangled,
the goldfish was scooped out of his fishbowl
and tossed on the floor.
When our squad left,
no life remained in the house—
a “family unit” had been eliminated.

JIM

the time a car came toward us,
when, just five minutes before, another car had come
and there were four Palestinians in it with RPGs
and they killed three of my friends.

So this new Peugeot comes towards us,
and we shoot.
And there was a family there—
three children.
And I cried,
but I couldn't take the chance.
Children, father, mother.
All the family was killed,
but we couldn't take the chance.

JASON

When we cleaned out a terrorist prison camp
we took a woman prisoner.
I'd already told my men we took no prisoners,
but I'd never killed a woman.
"She has to die fast," my sergeant said.
I was sweating.
The woman said to me,
what's the matter? you're sweating.
"Not for you," I said, "It's a malaria recurrence."
I gave my pistol to my sergeant,
but he couldn't do it.
None of them would do it,
and I knew if I didn't do it,
I'd never be able to control that unit again
"You're sweating," she said again.
"Not for you," I said.
And I blew her fucking head off.

BOBBY

Another time
charging into the trenches
shouting and yelling
horses neighing
I saw Corporal Bolte run his lance
right through a dismounted German
who had his hands up, surrendering
and we poured into the trenches
they all had their hands up
yelling "Camerad, Camerad,"
which means "I give up" in their language
but they had to have it that's all
they had to have it
no one can change his feelings during that last rush
the veil of blood before his eyes.
He doesn't want to take prisoners,
he wants to kill.

Another time
We came into a church
there were two naked men torturing a young woman
a nun as it turned out
stripped naked and stretched out in the aisle of the church
holding her down
burning her with cigarettes
another woman to one side
already raped I guessed
and dead, bleeding
I yelled at the guys holding down the woman
I told them to stand up
hands above their heads
the one who had been holding down the woman
was shaking from fear
his eyes flying uncontrollably around the room
the woman had rolled onto her stomach, rocking
from side to side, moaning
I saw him see the rifle lying in the church aisle
I told him not to be a fool
but suddenly he screamed and dove for the rifle
grabbing it, turning to look at me.
My first burst caught him in the face,
the second full in the chest.
He was dead before he fell over,
a body missing most of its head.
The second guy began to wave his arms up and down,
and he was looking at me
and looking as his own rifle leaned up against the pew
I said don't do it, don't do it,
but he went for his rifle
and he started to swing the muzzle in my direction
KILL HIM, GODDAMMIT
one of my guys yelled at me
KILL HIM NOW!
This guy was facing me now
trying to swing the long barrel rifle across his body
to align it with my chest
his eyes locked on mine.
His eyes never left mine,
not even when the rounds from my Sterling
tore into his stomach
walked up his chest,
and cut the carotid artery on the left side of his neck.
When his body hit the floor,

his eyes were still fixed on mine,
and then his body relaxed,
and his eyes dilated and went blind.

CHORUS MEMBER 2, AIMABLE

I had just come into the room and said “Good morning.”
and suddenly it turned bright red. I felt hot on my cheeks.
When I came to, I realized everyone was lying at one side of the room.
Nobody 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 too.
After a while, I realized that my white shirt was red all over.
I thought it was funny because I was not injured.
I looked around and then I realized that the girl lying near to me was badly injured,
with lots 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.

CHORUS MEMBER 3, SEI

When the blast came, my friend and I were blown into another room.
When I came to, I found myself in the dark.
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 all over his body
and was hanging down from his fingertips. I
talked to him, but he was too exhausted to give me a reply.
He was looking for his family.

EISA

When I looked down on the town from the top of that hill,
I could see that the city was completely lost.
The city turned into yellow sand, the color of the yellow desert.
The smoke was so thick that it covered the entire town.
Then fire broke out here and there.
And then the rain fell heavy for several hours—black and sticky rain.
When it fell on trees and leaves and people's clothes and hands,
it stuck and turned everything black.

VALERIE

We were on the bus. I had been holding my son in my arms,
the young woman in front of me said, “be getting off here.
Please take this seat.”

We were just changing places when there was a strange smell and sound.
All of a sudden, it went dark and before I knew it, I was outside.
I was holding my son still, and I looked down at him.
Fragments of glass had pierced his head.
Blood was flowing from his head over his face.
But he looked up at me and smiled.
His smile has stayed glued in my memory.
He didn't understand what had happened.
And so he looked at me and smiled at my face which was all bloody.
I had plenty of milk which he drank all throughout that day.
I think my child sucked the poison right out of my body.
And soon after that he died.

People think
it's hard to be a woman;
but it's not easy
to be a man,
the expectations people have
that a man should be a civilized person
of course I think everyone should be civilized
men and women both
but when push comes to shove
say you have some bad people
who are invading your country
raping your own wives and daughters
and now we see:
this happens all the time
all around the world
and then a person wants a man
who can defend his home

you can say, yes, it was men who started this
there's no such thing as good guys and bad guys
only guys
and they kill people
but if you are a man who doesn't want to be a bad guy
and you try not to be a bad guy
it doesn't matter
because even if it is possible to be good
and you are good
when push comes to shove
and people need defending
then no one wants a good guy any more

then they want a man who can fuck someone up
who can go to his target like a bullet

burst all bonds
his blood hot
howling up the bank
rage in his heart
screaming
with every urge to vomit
the ground moving beneath his feet
the earth alive with pounding
the cry hammering in his heart
like tanked up motors turned loose
with no brakes to hold them

this noxious world

and then when it's over
suddenly
when this impulse isn't called for any longer
a man is expected to put it away
carry on with life
as though he didn't have such impulses
or to know that, if he does
he is a despicable person
and so it may be that when a man turns this violence
on a woman in her bedroom
or in the midst of war
slamming her down, hitting her,
he should be esteemed for this
for informing her
about what it is that civilization really contains
the impulse to hurt side by side with the gentleness
the use of force as well as tenderness
the presence of coercion and necessity
because it has just been a luxury for her really
not to have to act on this impulse or even feel it
to let a man do it for her
so that she can stand aside and deplore it
whereas in reality
it is an inextricable part of the civilization in which she lives
on which she depends
that provides her a long life, longer usually than her husband,
and food and clothes
dining out in restaurants
and going on vacations to the oceanside
so that when a man turns it against her
he is showing her a different sort of civilized behavior really
that she should know and feel intimately
as he does

to know the truth of how it is to live on earth
to know this is part not just of him
but also of her life
not go through life denying it
pretending it belongs to another
rather knowing it as her own
feeling it as her own
feeling it as a part of life as intense as love
as lovely in its way as kindness
because to know this pain
is to know the whole of life
before we die
and not just some pretty piece of it
to know who we are
both of us together

this is a gift that a man can give a woman.

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