The Photograph

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Abstract

THE LITTLE boy walked along the garbage littered curb. His faded blue corduroy jacket was nearly worn smooth in places. White threads hung out from a tear in his sleeve. His pants were rolled up at the cuffs, and baggy...
The little boy walked along the garbage littered curb. His faded blue corduroy jacket was nearly worn smooth in places. White threads hung out from a tear in his sleeve. His pants were rolled up at the cuffs, and baggy. The pants looked like something that an older brother had outgrown. As he shuffled, the garbage formed into mounds which divided with the movement of his feet. In his left fist, he held the leg and foot of a doll. Upside down, she swayed behind him as he walked. Her wigged pigtails gently brushed the litter as they passed. Her dress was blue, with some evidence of lace. The dress hung around the doll’s chest and shoulders and revealed a gaping black hole where her other leg had been. The boy looked straight ahead. He moved as if walking was only one of two alternatives, the other being standing.
He passed a few people standing in doorways. A rat scurried in front of him with needless caution to reach the camouflage of a garbage heap. For the most part, though, there was an eerie emptiness that could not be shaken from the air. He passed a group of men sitting on cement steps, who looked as if they could have been molded by the mason’s trowel. Their faces were ashen, and their clothes were covered with dust or dirt. The boy did not look at them. After he passed, an old man of the group broke loose, fell, and as if he were trying out new legs, followed the young boy. He would walk a few steps, his knees would buckle under him, and he would catch himself in the garbage, rise up, and continue.

The boy walked past a park, but he didn’t look to see if there were other children on the swings, nor did he look to see if the swans were in the lake. He kept his eyes straight ahead, and didn’t alter his walking. The old man was falling less as he approached the boy. As he reached the child, he put his arm on the boy’s shoulder and stopped him. He ran his dark tongue over his cracked lips. “When did it happen?” His voice was a whisper, hoarse and barely audible. “When did it fall son?” He lowered his arm and the little boy started walking again. The old man followed with a pendulum gait behind the boy, muttering to himself.

The two walked past an overturned trash container that said on its side, “Help Keep Our City Clean.” The rubble from the container had spilled on the sidewalk and street and mixed itself with the other garbage. The old man and the little boy were the only signs of life that could be seen for three or four walking blocks at a time. Every few blocks the old man would catch up with the boy and stop him to ask a question. The little boy would remain expressionless, and the old man would drop his arm. The two would begin walking again, and in a few blocks the act would be repeated.

Many of the telephone and light poles were broken and lay across the street. The only thing that would change the monotony of the walking was when the little boy would trip over one of them. He would slowly pick himself up,
never dropping his doll, and continue. One time the old man caught up with the little boy when he fell, and helped him up.

There were two French photographers running through the city, shooting the incident. They were brothers and they had been verbally patting each other on the back all morning for the work that they were doing. The taller of the two was certain that they would win an award for their efforts, perhaps the Nobel Peace Prize. The shorter and younger brother kept telling the older how much courage it took to go to a city like this and do expressive photography. They had been shooting the remains of buildings for the past few hours. Now they were at the chasm that had been the French Embassy. These would be good shots. The people at home could relate to these. The younger man looked out of the window and saw the young boy and the old man walking on the other side of the street. He suggested a shot to his brother, and marvelling at the set-up, they took it. They photographed the rubble and a few feet of remaining wall in the foreground and the two travelers in the background. The taller suggested getting close-ups of the two.

As the two ran across the street, the old man heard them coming and looked up. The little boy kept walking. The old man turned and walked towards them. He pelted them with questions, as loudly as he could. Some of his words didn't catch in his voicebox, and just came out as air. "When did . . . fall? It was . . . wasn't . . . ? Who . . . ? Why did it happen? What . . . ?" The taller brother was taking pictures of the old man. The younger brother just stood.

"We don't know, old man," the tall one said. "We don't know anything." He pulled his brother away. The old man reached up and grabbed the arm of the younger, who recoiled, and paled. The old man was doubled over, coughing, but he raised his arm to indicate that he wanted to speak. The young photographer was staring at the hand on his shoulder.

"Look, old man, we don't know anything!" The taller of the two repeated, and jerked his brother away. The old
man started to follow, but fell to his knees, coughing. After a while, he stood up and shuffled away.

The two ran to where the little boy was. "You hold him, and I'll get a close-up of his face. It would be good for a superimposition, maybe over the bodies in the park." The younger man looked at the boy. The older brother swore as the boy started walking. "Come on. We have to finish this. We can leave in a few hours." The younger photographer held on to the boy's shoulders and tried to look away. He found that there was no place to look. Everywhere around him there were rubble and stench. The few houses which remained standing looked ready to fall and join their toppled neighbors.

He let go of the boy's hand, and the child resumed walking. The older brother ran ahead of the boy, snapping shots of the child and doll from every angle that he could. The younger brother stood, silent.

The men took their pictures back to France, and the editors marvelled at how realistically the little boy had been "made up." The picture was not used though . . . it was too unbelievable. Everyone knew that a bomb wouldn't melt a little boy's eyes.

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**Senryu**

*by Earl Keyser*

*English, 6*

Words stop as I push
against invisible walls
with impotent force