“The Suburban Spirit”

Early in the year, in that time when the cold seems to seep in no matter how much thermostat is coerced, my wife and I moved to the suburbs. On our arrival to the dismal place, we observed the rows of gray condominiums with little zeal, finding more entertainment in each other’s likewise gray eyes, dreary and tired. We set our belongings in the pale, colorless rooms of our unit and simply said “For now” to one another; in no other way did we suffer this time.

 It was in the following week, after heaps of takeout containers and other packing residues had considerably piled up in our rooms, that I first felt some motivation to take this consolidation of trash to a can meant duly for it (some might call this “settling in”). My wife gathered together the various wastes and put them in an amount of these large black bags themselves waste from our efforts in moving house; I then designed to take this amount to the verdant trash can outside the patio. This act completed, I wheeled it to the somber group of similar cans that lay regardless on a patch of dry, yellowed sod which bordered the parking lot. Not giving a second thought to the whole process, I had yet to understand the true, unseen ferocity of the suburbs, where there is so little to argue over that every matter is a sharp point of contention sticking in one’s shoulder.

 It was no mistake, then, that the next morning came with a throbbing pain in my very own shoulder. My wife hastened to cook up a simple breakfast while I stumbled out to retrieve our can, which despite the early hour in which I was committing this doing, was alone on the sod, a sole figure reflecting the loss of so many cars in the parking lot while their owners slept to packed freeways, drawing slowly so many deluded souls to faraway workplaces in such a slow manner that these same roads push just that many more of these depressed spirits out to distant homes with the promise of lower home prices and savage lives. Approaching the can, I snatched the handle only to feel it give while the can remained; indeed, the handle had become detached in a serious manner from the lid of the thing. However, I quickly realized my mind, fogged by the retracting sleepiness of the early morning, had not noticed a glaring inconsistency to do with the appearance (and thereby identity) of the can itself. This can which I had so easily taken hold of was not my own; it had a sticker on its top that was not present on our can. In an instant, I had realized that indeed this piece of trash with its handle beyond repair had been dumped on my wife and me. In another such iteration, I supposed that it was a sort of race for these destitute people: those who woke up first could take the can of their choice to their own patios (as the units were all the same).

 The realization thoroughly confounded me, and I nearly forgot to take the broken can around. I went inside with my hands massaging my temples in an expression of deep thought and even deeper loss of thought. My wife creased her forehead in obvious concern:

 “My husband, what troubles you?”

 “It is not a thing, really.” I said, but my true emotions on the subject got the better of me and I began to raise my voice: “It seems we have had a broken trash can forced upon us!”

 “How barbaric!” she replied earnestly, and I could see that she had some idea of the issue. She placed out dishes on the table and invited me to eat; she informed me of nearby goings-on while I earnestly nodded and thought not about her stories but of my problem. This inattention led me through the meal and out the door; thence I proceeded to my workplace.

 A week passed before I was able to encounter directly the problem again. I humbly set the broken mess, full of our offerings to the chartered waste service to which we paid so much in dues, out on the sod patch. By our front window I sat watching the actions of our neighbors: here, I took my dinner, and here, I spent my night casting unbroken watch upon the patch. I witnessed several of the poor souls drag their trash cans in a harshly innocent way (though nary enough to convince me of this quality). My eyes were strained already, but it was not a lengthy time before they began to shut of their own accord only to open suddenly to the noise of a truck. It was none other than the garbage truck; attendants leapt off the hulk and emptied the cans one by one, even going so far to curse the lame can which had caused us so much ponder. The truck pulled away, revealing a dark shadow near the sod patch. This darkness jumped out to show himself as a neighbor, who glanced furtively around before slowly choosing a can and drawing this back in a spectacular performance of sneaky behavior.

In my utter disappointment from this sighting, I began to look quickly around for something to distract me. I unwittingly found it in an intact group of the cans across the way from the remnants of ours; the very perfection of this formation surprised me and subsequently intrigued me. Questions formed in my mind: had these noble people across from us abandoned the savage ways of the suburbs?

I fell asleep in my hopes for this impossible idea and woke at a more reasonable time. My wife criticized me for staying up through the night, and I only smiled at her with a certain feeling of inspiration from the magical sight I beheld in the depths of the night. The day was just beginning, and a dutiful sun cast its light through the bright windows. The time seemed opportune for adventure, and I expressed this to my wife:

“Today, I will solve the pressing problem. Yes, today is the day.”

She chuckled. “Aren’t you taking this one just a little too seriously? Matters of trash cans are not matters for anyone of stature.”

“I will soon have no stature at all due this broken can of ours and the effort which must be vested to maneuver it,” I snapped, and she became unfathomable in expression.

“Do as you design,” she said, “I will be waiting, as always, with dinner.”

I too realized the magnitude of my impending journey; any path through the suburbs is not an easy one, and many have indeed disappeared into such horrid triangles of civilization. Determined to slight no one but be direct in procedure, I left with an air of certain success and made foremost to a door belonging to the neat formation of the cans across from our quagmire.

Finding it curiously ajar, I rapped on the frame and peered in. From the inside of the house, muffled shouts emanated, and I was somewhat confused as my presentiment of peace within the complex was quickly overwhelmed by this clamor. This noise, in fact, led me in to the strange abode despite knowledge of the grievance I was committing. I stood in a lightless hallway, allowing my eyes access to a room filled with blazing people, these being all the members of the block across from ours. Indeed, they blazed with hate, a feeling brought on surely by their poor surroundings and their displacement to this land devoid of happiness and comfort. The subject of the hate soon became all too clear: the words I most often picked out of their angry beacons were “broken” and “yours”. It was a matter of some courage to approach the group exactly, but this decision came to my conscience without much check.

“I say, who are you that so brazenly ensconces himself in one’s own home?” One of the people had stopped his blazing and directed thought to my unattested entrance.

“I say, what are you arguing over? May I be of some assistance?” I replied fervently.

“…who are you to…” the man scowled but was in little time cut off by one of his fellows.

“In our complex, there exists a single broken trash can.” The man’s face looked worn and tired, his eyes shining with worry.

“I have some experience with a broken can,” I urged this amiable one to continue while being reminded of my motivations with his comment.

“In the fateful year of 2013, much fighting had ensued and the problem had quite reached a boiling point … that was when James A. B. C. Applegate had had enough. Modeling on the noble government, he here established a new system. Rising from the savages surrounding us, we gave up some of our rights to live peacefully as a more perfect society. We vote on the destination of that horrible can. Yes we have really achieved…”

Growing wise of the situation, I began to repudiate the righteous air of the speech. “But, here you are, arguing despite the deeds of this alphabetical hero of yours!”

Another of the men here gathered spoke mournfully to me: “Indeed, instead of being savage in our actions, we have only transferred this to our relationships with each other and the conversations which we have.”

At this point, the pointless yelling began once again and I left the place feeling empty and horribly disappointed. Determined to fulfill the promise to my wife, I set off in a new and strange direction, through a stand of dying trees, the kind planted only ten years before but already leading a life of suffering in the suburbs, their roots constricted and their supplies choked by pavements and buildings. I crossed into another block only to be immediately halted by a man in a colorful uniform.

“Stop! State your business!” The man, who I now assumed a guard, glared at me.

“I am touring the various blocks for a certain purpose.” I made no attempt to relinquish my thoughts.

The guard paused and visibly turned this over in his mind. “Well, I don’t have any especial problem with it, but I’m afraid that he…”

Wondering where the man’s sentence had gone, I designed to question him only to hear horns in the distance. My eyes flicked to the source of the noise, which was a bright procession of some sort through the pavements. A great number of Confucian nobles walked in front of and alongside a decadent palanquin, which was followed by a hundred or so guards dressed in a similar way as my guard.

Someone in the procession stopped playing his horn and yelled in a slow, pointed voice: “Here comes His Majesty, the Emperor Sejong!”

The guard promptly forced me down onto my feet while the procession flowed past us. Five minutes I was bent upon the ground. When I got up, I immediately questioned the guard of my wasted minutes:

“For what reason did you prostrate me?”

“Three years ago, the savage tenets of this block fought a war over a broken trash can which has happened upon us in some way or another. The Emperor was the coalition leader of the faction which won. At the climax of the event, he proclaimed his domain an empire and the ruler of this land himself. The block has only, of course, benefitted, as he sends expeditions to nearby blocks (these retaining a certain barbaric demeanor) and demands tribute. Now his lands stretch from the black forest to the south of our suburb to nearly the center of it all!”

I at once became confused and slightly irritated. “But must you bow to him; is he really that important?”

The face of the guard was enveloped in a great amount of admiration as he proturbed his resolve: “We will show our infinite respect for His Majesty…”

Once again, I did not hear the end of the man’s thought as I had left in utter disappointment. I thought of my wife and everyone in the suburbs. I grew weary with the realization that no-one could simply solve the problem; indeed, they all had made a big deal of civilization, pronouncing its glories while retaining their savage vices. The broken trash cans, in all their effects, were simply both symptoms and ends of the problems that we had all failed to solve. These thoughts and others led me through other blocks, some rendered with the broken backs of the peasants of the Emperor, others disquieted by never-ending argument of Applegate democracies. My head began to hurt with my lack of answer and the sky had begun to turn red when finally I came upon something different.

I was in a particularly desperate-looking block, with its pavement cracked under the stress of its five-or-so melancholy years. A defining feature, however, emerged from the drab center of the block. This wondrous structure revealed itself as a sort of gazebo, made of wood, probably oak. It seemed strangely peaceful, a solitary eye in the middle of this suburban storm. The floor was raised up from the ground, which made its sole inhabitant seem above the conflicts that had so worried me throughout the day. This inhabitant turned with the appearance of permeating conscience and cast his gaze on my twisted countenance. This gaze pressed me to the unheard-of structure with some determination. Here I sat in front of this interesting man for some time with stolid heart and mind at uncertain ease.

“I know,” he said, “of your wayward troubles; they have wended you, likewise wayward, to the extent of this endless land, the suburbs.”

“Perhaps you will enlighten me. You seem to understand my position.”

“It is, of course, a given that we all have a broken trash can. These pepper the world, adding the spice of challenge to our experiences. How can one hate them? They may only give you new sentiments.”

“But, this has caused me a journey of a full day…” I was not quite ready to perceive the man’s point.

“A journey? Humans are nomadic by nature (so it is of no incident)!” He laughed and I wondered if my thoughts were truly wayward in bringing me to this place. But he continued, saying “These soulless people, they have built themselves around the very thing they believe they hate, these broken trash cans. And one worthless idea rises above another; they give their spirit to their efforts in their design to live with lack of spirit. They let it pull them along!”

I presently understood the ideas the man said. He did, however, have more to say: “Thus it is done. Instead of improving ourselves under our own wills, we let the broken trash can direct us to the ends of this hell, let it conduct our daily movements.”

He was referring to none other than me. I had let this horrible disease of spirit take control of me, spread its tangled roots into my heart and mind. For every new thing I had found, my resolve and belief in it had only strengthened. It was a big sham, all of it. My body felt strangled and the pain in my shoulder returned. The man rose and left without another word, leaving me and my feelings all alone in the enlightened structure, this epitome of spirit. I collapsed under the pressure of these stout companions, this heavy baggage, and there I wept for some amount of time.

The first stars had appeared by the time I finally made our complex. I bore the broken trash can to the back of our unit, then having a strange idea. I saw, behind our unit, a sight of the final frontier, the sun setting into the golden hills of the west. With my pained shoulder, I hefted the can and threw it into the sun. In such a way the trials ended, and my mind was instantly cleared. My wife worked open the stiff patio door and questioned my doing.

“Why, my husband, did you throw that thing down the hill? You will have to retrieve it, surely save we never clear our wastebaskets again.”

“It is of no matter. Let us eat.” My serious direction impressed her, and we sat at the table, conversing in interesting stories. By and by, I told her of my journey, and her eyes gained a sharp, inquisitive edge.

“As long as you found something not outside but in yourself,” she had immediately seen my trials.

“Do not worry, my wife, for that is all found today.” I said this directly and was content.