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# The Talking Heads of Stone

by CHARLES L. MEE

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A COUPLE OF SPEAKING GREEK PORTRAIT BUSTS  
ARE FOUND HERE AND THERE

AGAMEMNON

I see that there are acts  
that will set an empire on a course  
that will one day  
bring it to an end.

Because, we see from the histories of empires  
none will last forever  
and all are brought down finally  
not by others  
but by themselves,  
from the actions that they take  
that they believe are right or good  
or necessary at the time to do.

Sometimes they are brought to ruin  
by no more than the belief  
that something must be done  
when in truth  
doing nothing would have been the better course.

To be sure,  
an empire  
cannot refuse to defend itself from absolute devastation  
and so it will arrange to have the capacity  
for self-defense.  
It will preserve itself first from extinction  
and, as well, from lethal damage or great harm

and then, too, from hurt and ill-treatment  
that could, if left unattended, lead to serious injury,  
and, so by degrees,  
an empire will reason itself to a need to be immune even  
from insult  
responding, finally,  
to the anxieties and nightmares  
that arise from within,  
and so: striking out  
at the phantasms of its own dreams.

Of course, it will know that a nation must protect its borders  
and, in order to do that,  
must secure its periphery  
and so it will come to attend to conditions just beyond its  
outermost bounds  
and thus, by increments,  
its interests will grow,  
until they will have been extended beyond an ability to defend them.  
They will have created new enemies along the way.  
They will have created the causes of wars  
where there were none before.  
Even if an empire begins with no ambition  
with no desire for conquest  
no wish to grow  
even so, it will feel it must grow or die  
and so it grows  
and thus it dies.  
Ruin, it would seem,  
is inherent in the nature of empire.

Might this fate be avoided  
or at least  
postponed?  
Might something else be done?  
Are there no precepts to follow in this murky,  
unpredictable world?  
Often, it seems,  
men of affairs think that moral laws  
offer no useful guide to behavior  
that they are not meant for the practical business of the world  
forgetting  
that moral laws are nothing more nor less  
than the accumulated folk wisdom  
of millenia of human experience.  
And so it will happen  
that some moral law of an unforgiving nature is violated—

a law against boundless desire,  
or cruelty  
a law against coercion  
or indifference to the humanity of others  
a law against initiating violence  
or being required,  
in the pursuit of some goal,  
to commit an act that anyone might see  
is heinous  
something finally is done that is so deeply wrong  
that the world must rise and crush it  
in order for the world itself to go on.

We may have felt some qualm about our behavior along the way  
but we will have dismissed it  
thinking it is a secondary thing  
lesser,  
insignificant in the context of the great demands  
we have placed upon ourselves  
and yet this qualm we feel  
will have been sent to us by our deepest wisdom.  
It is a warning to us.  
We ignore it at our peril.

#### HOMER

There are times you will see a black maidenhair fern  
in shady places  
or sometimes near the trunks of trees  
on the banks of ditches  
in wet ravines  
in turf bogs  
on the high rocks  
on rotted wood  
or in a meadow  
each one of these has its own affect  
whether in a dream  
or in the waking world  
You might see two boys playing with a bird  
an old woman feeding a cat  
hour glasses  
combs of horn  
buttons  
silk stockings of the colors of the orient  
shoes of Spanish leather  
rolls of parchment

a bundle of tobacco  
an orange gathered from the tree that grew over Zebulon's Tomb  
a sitar  
birds nests from China  
prisms  
a stone taken from a vulture's head;  
a large ostrich egg on which is inscribed the famous battle of Alcazar  
in which three kings lost their lives;  
the skin of a snake bred from the spinal marrow of a man;  
jasmine  
narcissus  
scarlet ribbons  
a toothpick case  
an eyebrow brush  
a pair of French scissors  
a quart of orange flower water  
four pounds of scented snuff  
a tweezer case—  
enameled  
an amber-headed cane  
a tailor's bill  
lessons for the flute  
an almanac for the year 1700  
petrified moss  
petrified wood  
Brazil pebbles  
Egyptian bloodstones  
hummingbirds  
pieces of white spar  
a piece of the stone of the oracle of Apollo  
Bucharest salami  
a Turkish powder horn  
a pistol  
a giant's head  
a music box  
a quill pen  
a red umbrella  
some faded thing  
handkerchiefs made of lawn  
of cambric  
of Irish linen  
of Chinese silk  
and each one of these  
may make you wonder  
whether it signifies the past or the future  
or is only meant to  
fill you with a longing

for such moments of life  
in the afternoon  
and the wish  
that they should go on forever.

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