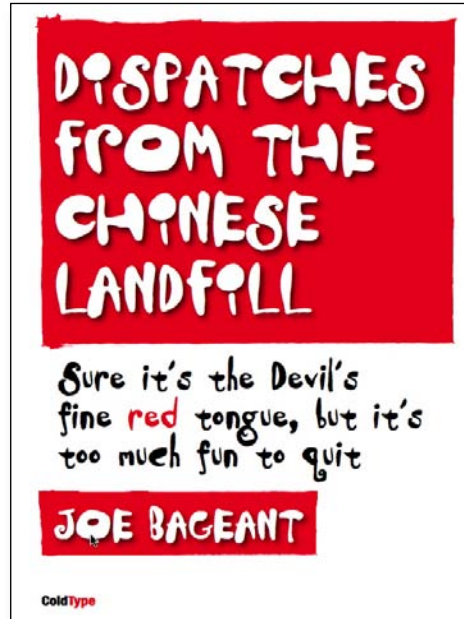


DISPATCHES FROM THE CHINESE LANDFILL

Sure it's the Devil's
fine red tongue, but it's
too much fun to quit

JOE BAGEANT



Joe Bageant is the author of the forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released on April 24, 2007.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at www.joebageant.com.

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JOE BAGEANT: Dispatches from the chinese landfill

Despite

the bad name he has with liberals these days, Jesus did have the right idea. He'd get right down there on the street and grunt with the people, feeling them all over and healing their boils, feeding them and preaching his ass off while everybody hollered and saw the light as blind men popped open their eyes and lame folks started doing the Dead Sea Macarena. No maintaining a professional distance, no opinion polls for that guy. He just went out there and "got 'er done" in plain sight of everybody. Including the Jewish religious mafia and the Roman super-state thugs of the time – which is why he got whacked. But he left the world impressed enough that an influential book about his exploits is still on the best seller list today, dispelling publishing industry wisdom that people will not read a book over 300 pages. Jesus seems to have left no heirs to receive royalties, contrary to the speculations of Da Vinci Code readers, The Da Vinci Code being the middle-class equivalent of the Left Behind series. Anyway, Jesus ain't on my shit list and I surely hope I am not on his.

Two thousand years later, the public expects more from their miracles than leprosy hides instantly infused with the pink blush of health, or Lazarus dragging his rigor mortis locked bones into a fully upright position, then strolling off down the street as if death itself was no more than a bad case of the flu. Computer animation rendered all that passé decades ago, thus we seculars remain unimpressed. A wardrobe malfunction by Mary Magdalene might punch up the New Testament a little, but it's never going to budge the Neilson numbers, except at Easter and Christmas, and never going to register unless we see it on television or in the cinema, where Jesus on a pole is acceptable, providing he spills enough blood a la Mel Gibson while he is up there.

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Call it consumer-conditioned numbness, which it is. But it is safe to say most Americans give not a happy damn about the rest of humanity, starving infants, the homeless and whatnot, so long as the unhygienic swarms stay the hell out of our yards and don't bring up that tired commie stuff about our lifestyle being based upon armed global theft and sweatshop misery. In that way, we all test positive for the Devil's hickey.

Republicans may flaunt their hickies like high school kids in the locker room, but guilt-plagued Democrats, feeling the smart of the mark of the beast, console themselves that they can banish it at the ballot box, if only they close their eyes and wish upon a star. Thus their comfortable self-delusions that the Tiger Woods of the Democratic Party, the technically black Barack Obama, is somehow blessed with an inner moral compass lacking in the rest of society, and therefore does not bear the damnable mark. Wiser souls, aware that Obama possesses a net worth of several millions, a Harvard law degree and a career born in that venerable political whorehouse called Chicago, assume the Devil's mark is probably located on his posterior where we cannot see it. Another political wish upon a star is that Hillary Clinton, a woman marked by so many hickies that she looks like a victim of massive hemangioma – but with botox – will reform our brutal health care system without pulling up her skirt for the insurance industry. As she says, there is “no possible governmental solution that does not include the insurance industry.”

Of course not. Industry is our government. Our votes merely decide which industries have front spots at the public trough for the next four to eight years. Lately it has been Big Pharma and the credit industry, and what a run they've had. Mandatory mental health screening in schools stuffs more prescription drugs into children. The credit card industry's new bankruptcy laws wring the last drop from consumers, instead of giving them the fresh start our forefathers had in mind when they established debtor's laws. But in a new twist on incarceration, they make one's home the new debtor's prison, a place where we sleep while we work off usury interest payments on debt.

Meanwhile, out there in the vast looms of our government-as-corporation, the fast food industry weaves the Cheeseburger Bill, giving itself immunity to lawsuits as it fattens a nation of steers whose sole purpose is to consume, never to be butchered, except in the wars that protect the corporate cheeseburger. Even on the battlefield, it turns profit on millions of burgers and fries that are served to those who fight the oil and

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cheeseburger wars. American consumers watch this on TV and see it as comfortably familiar. We cannot possibly be doing so badly in Iraq if a soldier can get a Fishwich, a Red Bull, and a Puff Daddy CD on the battlefield. Right? Which is true enough, if you have been conditioned to see a Fishwich and a CD as a symbol of liberty and the utmost accomplishment of the republic – if you see it as “our way of life.” And indeed it is that. Oblivion with an order of fries.

Children of the landfill

When it comes to such oblivious pursuit after senseless commerce, the sheer turnover of goods and consumption as happiness, we cannot blame the Devil's hickey entirely on capitalism. America was not even a capitalist country during its early years, yet people still chased the same illusions. By 1848 we seem to have had the disease. Alexis de Tocqueville – that damned guy holds up well, doesn't he! — observed that Americans seemed to live for the chase after transactions, after change, consistently throwing away satisfaction in the process:

“In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men, placed in circumstances the happiest to be found in the world; yet it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad even in their pleasures. Maybe it's the price you pay for living in a society based round not happiness per se, but its pursuit.” – Alexis de Tocqueville

Toqueville pointed out that Americans no more than got a nice family home built, than we turned around and immediately sold it for no apparent reason, other than the joy of the transaction. Then they were off to pursue some other transaction. I cannot help but think about the house I am trying to sell right now, the fifth one I have owned and sold. It was all so unnecessarily wasteful and destructive of creativity and thought in every way, the home owning lifestyle being what it is (you never own it, just rent it from our monolithic extractive financial system.) In any case, we seem to have found what we were pursuing – the anesthetic of consumer capitalism. Lots of transactions, lots of goods, with the directions for pursuit televised so we don't even have to get off the couch – just lie there and watch house hunting shows and lifestyle shows on Home and

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Garden Television, which are classified as “education/learning” by the rating system.

The couch is a reasonable place to be these days, given that there is no real work left in America for sane functioning human beings. There is just survival (although the upper 20% of Americans safely isolated from the perspiring classes seem to think they are thriving because they more resemble the people pictured in slick lifestyle advertisements than most people. But it is still just a more elaborate form of survival amid the pointless and thin joy of consumerism, and the inherent material and spiritual wastefulness of life in here in the designated global landfill of that next rising empire, China. We are nowhere near rich, we are just conditioned to buy and throw away more expensive stuff. Not that we are entirely alone; Western Europeans are about a gnat’s ass behind us in our wretched consumer excesses. But not being alongside or leading the pack, they are quick to point up our gluttony. When America’s population drops dead from morbid obesity, Europeans will scale the mountain of our fallen porcine ranks, then jump into their newly inherited SUVs and drive off in search of a mall. But until then, they are left with a relatively equitable, sane society as a consolation prize, for a while longer at least.

Here in China’s global landfill, tens of millions of Americans are prisoners – including me. And that is not counting the quarter of the world’s incarcerated population who are America citizens physically held in US prison system. The rest of us serve a life sentence, released on personal recognition to pull our time in our own homes, processing goods for the Great Asian Goods Landfill Culture, here at the end of their new globalized Silk Route of Confucian capitalism. At this end of the electronics Silk Road we are prisoners of consumption, rather like those caged French geese that are force fed corn so as to produce fatty livers for pate. But in a marvelous marriage of psychology, psychometric marketing and the gulag, our system imprisons its people from the inside out. We even punish ourselves without supervision – to doubt the system is its own punishment, purely for the social and personal anxiety it causes. Given enough insight, a thoughtful person can nearly question himself or herself to death. (Does the Department of Homeland Security really need access to my medical records and grocery receipts, or am I just paranoid? Will being uncircumcised put me on the no-fly list?) I do it every day and so do many of you. The system counts on that.

On the whole though, our infantilized citizenry is having too much fun to question itself. In the drive for a harder hard-on, faster everything, and round the clock stimula-

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tion, we have created an artificial and frivolous citizenry, one that is incapable of serious thought or deeper humor – a nation of children completely happy to stay that way. America's childish material gratification is so grotesquely satisfying that it smothers the most basic sort of reason, much less philosophical thinking. Fuck it all. Nietzsche and Rimbaud are too goddamned hard to read anyway.

Beyond that, western philosophical tradition is based on grief and suffering. So is most great literature. I've never been a fan of the Van Gogh's ear school of creativity, but I have to admit that the few truly great American writers I've met wrote with at least one foot planted in pain. Who wants to read that, when entertainment of every imaginable sort, sparkles in the great hologram of our national illusion-delusion, right there for the plucking? For that matter, who can pull themselves away from such brilliant distraction? Not me. The only way to beat it is to leave it. Get outside the hologram.

More thoughtful Americans are left facing the dilemma of a senseless life of senseless work, insensate sex, Oprah's flaccid moralizing books, cinema as high culture, fast food, guns and Jaaayzus. It is irrational that any culture born in the Age of Reason would turn out to be so irrational – so completely in unquestioned contradiction it cannot be persuaded by argument, no matter how compelling. It seems doubtful that reason will ever provide the answer to this dilemma. I can tell you from experience that standing up in a KFC holding a "Buffalo Snacker" and yelling "Do you people really eat this shit?" is not taken as a call to reason. Meanwhile, the boys in corporate are cooking up a thousand fresh hells for us, including a 24/7 Pentagon TV channel and The Superbowl, KFC's new Chicken Potato Cheese Gravy Wad o' Food – ample proof in itself that civilization is about done for.

Hurricanes and boneyard gin

I poop in a bucket ... and when the sun comes out I grab a shovel and bury it under the guava trees behind my house, where fallen passion fruit litter the ground like huge yellow Easter eggs. Poop out, passion fruit in, ancient organic system. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is the Idea of the Week. Every week, for fifty-two weeks, I think about one idea. One idea that is never discussed in American society. And the idea we need to pursue right now is: wouldn't we get more respect and cooperation from the rest of the world if we gave the world food, not bombs, medicines, water

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*purification technology, and grains? Wouldn't we? — Rich Zubaty, "The Rude Guy,"
a homeless person living in his truck in Maui, Hawaii*

I am here to tell you, dear hearts, this is one ole boy who does not intend to see the next fresh hell served up. Indeed I ain't! Why in the hell not turn off the television, park the car and just walk away? Why would anyone care to remain part of such a sorry-assed system, a government of war criminals ruling over a fearful nation of fattened livestock that probably will not change until the economy collapses, and then only after trying to kill half the planet in a desperate effort to preserve the Olive Garden lifestyle and 116 cable channels? What kind of citizenry consistently sneers at a candidate like Kucinich who openly declares for world peace to the most militarized nation on earth? (Hell, it's no crime to be three feet tall.) Or stands up against corporate ownership of our government like Nader does (It is no crime to be smart like Nader either, just don't be so damned smart you bore everyone to death, like Al Gore.) Simple action is available. Non-action really. If a quarter of Americans did not pay their bills for one month the hologram would come crashing down. The government would either come crawling on its knees, or expose itself for the police state it really is.

For me, salvation is at hand, as the preachers say. After more three years of ups and downs and setbacks, I am finally off to Central America to eat rice and beans, and to do a little more good in the world than just process and deposit toner cartridges, beer bottles and triple AAA remote control batteries into the landfill. And do a little writing by the sea to boot. Perhaps I'll be lucky enough to eventually die there and be washed out into that great god-created soup from which life sprang. I ain't gonna kill myself to do it, but it is the preferred scenario at this late age. I do not expect it to change.

However, this being America, any move on the board is at a cost. We must pay. The system makes sure of that. So I risk losing family and social position (ha!) and an economic stake in present American society. (Which is fine by me, but please, oh lord, don't let the Republicans steal the Social Security kitty too – I can make do on half the SS I paid for and smoke ditchweed pot, but good gin is a price stable commodity.) I've already thrown away health insurance by quitting my magazine editorial job, and am happily left to figure out how to conduct the rest of my breathing hours, no small issue for a COPD victim such as myself. So hell, why not go to Belize? Or Madagascar for that mat-

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ter? Or sleep forever on the beach in Mexico. Sure, sun and sand are the easy paint-by-numbers notion of paradise for Americans, but it depends upon where said sand is located. Cancun and Aruba ain't everybody's idea of heaven. Personally, I can live with a few lizards in my kitchen and the occasional hurricane if the people around me are decent. In truth, I'll be thrilled pissless if this little adventure in aging lets me spend half the year out of the country. Any escape from the hologram is an empowering thing, if you can possibly find a hole in its shroud.

None of this requires much money by American standards – at least not until the dollar, in its present descent, starts hovering somewhere next door to the Bengladeshi taka. Which appears to be sometime next week. But when I stop to consider that it was money and the things it will buy that got our asses in this jam to start with, well, it seems like a good idea not to have too much of it around. So why not live on about \$4000 to \$5,000 a year? I picked the number as globally equitable, based upon the advice of a couple of very good economists. Obviously, neither of them were American. And guess what? They over estimated the cost of happiness, because my first choice was squatting by the burning ghats of India. Almost no cost at all. Bring your own firewood. Just the godhead in your eyes every waking hour. Delusional? Naw, it's just a matter of one's goals and tastes. It is quite true that writers care only for themselves and their art in the end – especially in the end.

I've seen good people rendered madmen and hermits by our system and I do know this: It will destroy me if I keep living inside its machinery, dally too long on the landfill. It's more than a hunch. Too many days my nerves are shot if I think about it very long. Call me weak, but I'm calling time out – an end to trying to buy material security in a nation so addicted to it there can never be enough. We all carry our own asses down the path to the bone yard. The question is whether to drag your feet as you go, by spending your life in meaningless employment hell just so you can have health insurance (thereby living longer so you can spend more time in employment hell) or jog the path. Grim as this may be to the young'uns reading, I can hear the old fucks laughing along with me.

In any case, there are plenty of paths to the boneyard. There are fluorescent lit fitness centers, so you can die in top condition, there is the American "career path," chasing the buck in harness with untold millions so you can engorge your carcass with fine wine and

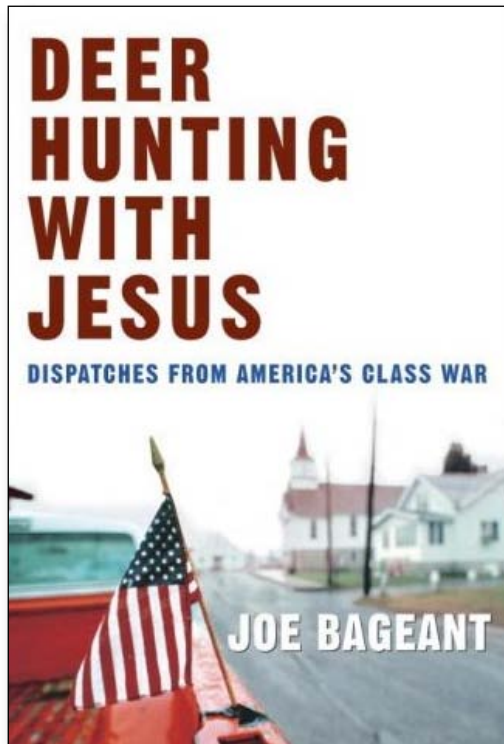
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cheese and have a koa wood casket with gold fittings. Liquor is another path. For the morally and financially challenged writer, there is the classic combination of booze, nerves and cigarettes.

My wife's anguished voice asks "Why did you start smoking again? Didn't the doctor tell you it would kill you?" Kill me, for fuck sake? There have been times when I asked myself how many sedatives purchased online constitute an overdose. Looking back, I consider that progress. As Kafka said, when you find yourself considering suicide, you are beginning to understand the human race. And it becomes obvious that the death of one individual by smoking pales against the mass sacrifice of 300 million American's humanity to the post modern god whose scripture is the spread sheet and the P&L statement.

Ah, but this is America and every individual consumer ass is solid gold, even if as a nation, we are a throng of numb obese killers on its way to the gym for a workout. Has everybody lost all sense of proportion and sheer gravity in this country? How can we continue to make jolly amid the escalating wars and death from which we all profit? What is this? The damned German interwar cabaret society of diversion?

Fortunately, just like everywhere else, darkness and sleep comes to the glittering landfill, ending unpleasant arguments about smoking and the cabaret society alike. I awoke last night to the warm odor of fluffy baby chicks filling the bedroom. My grandfather used to raise chicks when I was six, and by some nocturnal alchemy the long trapped childhood ecstasy of putting a handful of them to my face in the warm brooder house came flooding back. Upon closing my eyes again, an image of the blackish red spilled blood of a gunshot wound puddled on a blue tile floor in some desert place. The cabaret music rises, drowning the muffled screams from our empire's far flung network of "black sites," and all those other unpleasant things that happen in the dark rippling wake of our happiness.



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