

Rats and rascals in a dance of death



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

People are rats. This, to my mind's eye, is the imagery that is suggested in the poem "Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump" by David Bottoms. As the narrator quipped in the end: "We drink and load again, let them crawl... for all they're worth into the darkness we're headed for." We, both hunter and hunted, are all on a crawl and, after all, we are headed towards the darkness. Let it be noted of Bottom's work, as poet and novelist James Dickey has done, that "One cannot read him without being nerve-touched by his sardonic yet compassionate countryman's voice, his hunter's irony."

It is the jaded hunter that speaks as the narrator of the poem. This hunter proudly sings of the reverie of rascals and rats as if they were one in the dance of death and drunkenness. The poem notably began with the bragging of the booze-laden hunter describing his gregarious group: "Loaded on beer and whiskey, we ride... to the dump in carloads." Then in the middle of this short poem, the focus is on the rats and how they die or begin to crawl toward "the darkness at the edge of the dump," as it were:

Shot in the head, they jump only once, lie still like dead beer cans. Shot in the gut or rump, they writhe and try to burrow into garbage, hide in old truck tires ... toward the darkness at the edge of the dump. The darkness in the dump could very well describe life for some people. Perhaps. Like Bottom's jaded hunter in this poem who relishes the fear frozen on the canvass of dirt as he and his companions aimed "to turn [their] headlights across the wasted field, freeze the startled eyes of rats against mounds of rubbish."

In closing the poem however, the narrator-hunter completes the circle of the dance of death and ignorance. "It's the light they believe kills," Bottom's

narrator shared. The line literally refers to the rats but it could very well suggest the ignorance of humans who pretend to be rational.

This is affirmed further as the poem closes with these two lines which merge the fates of rats and the rascals with guns: We drink and load again, let them crawl for all they're worth into the darkness we're headed for. Who is this hunter that seemed to relish death and darkness? Bottom's narrator-hunter could very well have been Bottom himself — the Bottom of the past? At any rate, Bottom may have engaged in hunting, but now, he seems to be more on the prowl for muses and imageries. People are rats, the poem seemed to suggest. But who is the inspired poet would sincerely argue that?