

On February 1, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, two Black garbage workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed by a faulty garbage packer and killed. Their deaths sparked massive protests that drew support from Martin Luther King, who marched with striking sanitation workers and was assassinated in Memphis on April 4 before the second march.

That Day

wasn't normal, gray and mighty chilly—
even set a record at 27 degrees!
Robbie and me were fussing like aunties over a cradle,
the trash packer's gears seizing with frost
and the metal grips for riding the back sizzling
even through our thick gloves.

Bitter days like this seemed criminal
we couldn't share
the toasty cab of the big truck with the other guys
just because they were white.
Most times we got along okay, and who would
deny us creature comfort in such cold?

To keep warm we trotted alongside, puffing
white breath, scooping up trash bags
and slinging them into the crusher,
catching a whiff of rot and hearing
the muffled crunch of metal.

But this day the air was a demon
at our backs, so between pick-ups
we huddled in the big bin.
Nasty but a sight better than getting
whipped by the wind
until
it shifted
and groaned to life
and Robbie
was folded like a doll
in those metal arms—

But he wasn't trash and
me neither.