

Unbecoming War and Terrorism

Michael Ortiz Hill

Czeslaw Milosz at ninety -- decade by decade keeping faith with poetry through the bloodiest of times, fought the Nazis who killed a tenth of his countrymen; knew the scent of the crematorium, the grip of Stalin, exile, the collapse of the Soviet empire. Time, he says is "an hourglass through which states, systems and civilization trickle like sand." Who can argue? Human beings, he says, are "foredoomed because the order in which they establish themselves and which shapes their every thought and feeling is, like every order ripe for destruction.

Again, who can argue?

I was sitting in an employment office trying to get a day's work. At eighteen, I'd been homeless for two years, and though most of my food I got from garbage cans, I very much wanted a few bucks for drugs. Into this bleak moment came Jerry, a friend, a little mad, a Vietnam Veteran Against the War. "Cambodia has been liberated!" he said. And yes, I was overjoyed. "The Khmer Rouge has taken Phnom Penh!" It would be ten years before I'd understand we were celebrating the beginning of yet another genocide.

I became a fellow traveler with a terrorist group, the Black Liberation Army. Why not? A life, after all, is a trivial thing when weighed against "the anguish of the oppressed." And what could be more trivial than whether or not this confused white boy really believed in the imperative of the gun or didn't? And so the regimen: smuggling drugs into prison, being a courier between comrades behind bars and us on the outside, preparation for "boot camp" in Italy with the PLO before setting off to fight apartheid in Rhodesia -- a sense of a mission in a desperately meaningless life. I was as ripe for destruction as a boy can be -- in fact, eager for it.

Then my daughter was born -- at twenty-one a father. It would be twenty years before I would go to Africa, to that country once called Rhodesia. It took two decades before the romance of war would break down in me so that I could become a healer in an African tribal tradition.

When I was introduced to the Shona and Ndebele tribespeople who were to become family to me, my friend Mandaza Kandemwa told everyone that I almost fought in the War of Independence. "He is Shona like us," he said. "Like us, he is Ndebele." Later he confided to me rather sensibly, "I know why you didn't become a freedom fighter. Your spirits are peacemakers, not warriors." And so he began initiating me into the ancestral tradition of peacemaking, the *ngoma* of the water spirits.

At one hundred and six, the renowned Huichol healer Don Jose Matsuwa said something like "At last after ninety years, I have finished my apprenticeship." Every day I repeat his words to myself; The only point of orientation in my present life is a couple of decades in solitary retreat meditating, twelve years a single father; twenty at the bedsides of the ill and the dying -- and it's been only thirteen since my first initiation in Zimbabwe. I won't indulge the old habit, that my life experience has given me some kind of credentials. Eating garbage, changing diapers, scoured by loneliness along a mountain stream, emptying bedpans -- from the angle of a man finally an apprentice, these years are the undoing of a self, not its triumph. The heroic willingness to kill stripped me to something perfectly uninteresting, mere kindness in a world gone mad.

For a young man, say a soldier or a terrorist, the draw to the heroic can be nearly irresistible. One would hope that the older man, a president or a mullah, might know that the world was never redeemed by bloodshed, might even be challenged towards wisdom by the unbearable stuff of this historical moment. But I write this now as bombs fall on Afghanistan as they once fell on Vietnam and Cambodia, and leaders who are evidently children call other children to kill and die for yet another "noble" cause.

(Czeslaw Milosz quote from Steven Wasserman The Poet at Ninety. Los Angeles Times. July 1, 2001)

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