

WATER SPIRITS, MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS AND POISONED OF A GOD

Sacred illness is first and foremost poesis. Flesh rendered poem, praise song, lament. And so I begin and end this essay with poetry.

This I wrote after my last multiple sclerosis exacerbation. Losing my legs, losing my mind with steroid therapy. Recovering my legs with steroid therapy and weaned from decadron recovering a portion of my mind. In this Spirit prepared me in its fierce and generous way to accompany a few Vietnam vets and fellow travelers like myself to Vietnam with Dr. Ed Tick for healing and reconciliation.

Amalgam: Hope/Hopelessness

Beginning of summer

Darkness revealed by harshness of light

Surprised by fright of old friend death

Lust for old enemy

the longing for the last breath

Now equinox double ought six

Hope tempered by hopelessness

Hopelessness tempered by possibility of hope

Tranquil heart of mandala

Multiple sclerosis

And soon I will be with the beggars of Saigon

Sacred illness is firstly poesis: to be conceived in the body of metaphor, gestate there, birthed perhaps in this life or through death. Among my people in Africa, the Shona and the Ndebele (Zulu) of Zimbabwe, sacred illness comes of God and returns to God in this life or through the end of it. Healing can mean either. The essential thing is to listen to the spirit that afflicts, yield to its

wisdom, be undone as one will be undone, be stripped and stripped again to what is most elemental and true, most true and most uncertain.

I will write here of three sacred afflictions: water spirit disease, multiple sclerosis and the spirit of etiology – poisoned with the God Mercury, Mercurius, the one the Yoruba call Eshu Elegba. These three are interrelated – in fact continuous with one another.

Chapter 2

Water Spirit Illness

In the early nineties I began gathering racial dreams: white peoples' dreams about black people, the dreams of blacks about whites. I wanted to honor the dreams of black Americans by looking at them through the wisdom traditions of Mother Africa.

As I went further into my studies of the African origins of black America it became clear that whites were being dreamt within the same field of imagery that western Bantu people had understood “whiteness” since the Portuguese friars turned up in the kingdom of the Kongo in the fifteenth century.

In the *Village of the Water Spirits: The Dreams of African-Americans* (Spring Publications, 2006) I look to the tribal strata beneath the African diaspora in America and particularly the seminal water spirit tradition. It was Melville Herskovits in 1941 who was the first to note that the primary ritual of black Baptist culture in America, full immersion baptism, was African in origin. The “intransigence of the priests of the river cult”, wrote Herskovits, “was so marked that more than any other group of holy men, they were sold into slavery to rid the conquerors of troublesome leaders.” (Herskovits, Melville J, 1941, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston: Beacon Press).

The ngoma of the water spirits was once the sacred way of royalty

and persists today in healing ceremonials and peacemaking. Anthropologists call the way of the water spirits a cult of affliction. “The stitch of pain leads to the village of the ancestors”, says the Bakongo proverb. The understanding is that the midzimu – the invisibles – call one to being a nganga (healer) through water spirit illness.

After years of preparation, I found myself in the house of Mandaza Kademwa in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

(Who was this white stranger who had traveled thousands of miles knowing himself to be called to the way of water?

Who indeed. It’s been years now of the piercing initiations through sacred illness and only now am I beginning to understand the strange ways of the boy I was. The boy would say simply, “I was called”. True enough, but when I saw Africa inherent in the nightly dreams of black Americans I knew I had been called to Africa to bring back the gift of a tribal dreamteller understanding of these dreams.)

Mandaza seemed to recognize me on our first meeting. “You are a typical water spirit person,” he said. All the symptoms: vivid dreams and waking visions, afflicted with an empathy that incapacitates, swings of emotion, stomach problems, a life rich in tragedy.

The only cure for water spirit disease is initiation as a healer and ritual practitioner into the ngoma of the water spirits. As a peacemaking tradition one begins by making peace with the spirit that afflicts. Only then can the water spirits be allies in the activity of healing – one’s own healing through perpetuity of initiation and the healing of others.

Chapter 3

Multiple Sclerosis

Forgive that I quote at length the book I wrote with my wife Deena Metzger “Sacred Illness, Sacred Medicine” (Elik Press, Salt Lake City, 2005):

“My apprenticeship with multiple sclerosis began very slowly, retrospect being the only angle from which one might even see its beginnings. I was in Africa in 1996 with my wife introducing her to the Bantu people who had initiated and received me as a medicine man. We were in the stony waterlands of Mashvingo, southern Zimbabwe. Deena was initiating Mandaza into the mysteries of the Hebrew letters, when I noted a garden variety of white male arrogance rising up in me. After all, I was ‘the expert,’ much a part of the tribal world and quite well read on Bantu anthropology. How much I wanted to interfere, be master of ceremonies. So I pulled away to a small pool of water to curl up in and prayed in the traditional way of the ngoma of the water spirits. I yielded to the field of spirits that were carrying the poetry of the moment quite without my advice. It was then the snail parasite schistosoma slid through the skin and apparently laid eggs in the lattice of my nervous system.

That night a fever, strange but transient, two weeks later, numb from the waist down. And so I walked eight years with this numbness. Eighty percent of peripheral neuropathies are undiagnosable, I was told. With reluctance, accustomed to a young man’s oblivious vigor, I settled into the constant reminder of the frailty of the flesh.

All this started changing when I lost the full use of my legs. It was then that my apprenticeship with the sacred illness, soon to be named multiple sclerosis, truly began. How fortunate I am that MS insinuated itself into my body at a moment of surrender, and has kept such perfect faith with the teaching of surrender, and

surrender, and yet again, surrender. And then there are the gifts that come in the wake of surrender.

“Surrender? What do I mean by surrender?” Anagarika Sujata says that there is dishonesty in any mind that insists reality occur in a specific way. MS says that healing requires a strange alliance with what I am facing, and so the way of surrender has demanded an uncompromising honesty. Not a passive acceptance, but a very active meeting.

My first serious rendezvous with the spirit of the illness was last August 2005, when I walked to the cave on the Big Sur coast where I'd been blessed to spend two years during my twenties and thirties in solitude and meditation. It took me ten hours to walk what had been a one hour hike. In my two weeks alone I surrendered my legs not knowing if they'd return or even if I'd be able to make my way out of the ravine. Later I surrendered my life. Undiagnosed as yet, I didn't know if that time had come. Finally, there was surrendering the fetish of certainty, knowing that God is the one who shapes what is before me. Such has been my spiritual practice during this time and through it I have begun to taste freedom.

Occasionally!

Surrendering my legs, perplexed that I would be asked to do so, but with whom do I argue? Surrendering my life was a different matter, that truculent fantasy that my life and my death are possessions of mine, Body be damned. Deena is twenty years my senior, and it's been many years of renewing the vow that I'd see her to the other side, a betrayal of her and God's betrayal of both of us should our lot be otherwise. But yes the tearful moment five minutes before the New Year's kiss, insisting that she continue should I go first.

The third lesson from the illness was surrendering the fetish of certainty. A few months ago I was delivered vividly between worlds. I was between lives, one life dead and gone and the next unborn, that place the Tibetans call bardo. Flailing in rage, indulging in an orgiastic fit of self-pity, and Deena, bless her, said, “You have to let go the how you think and talk about these things.” The space of the bardo echoed with the “let go, let go, let go” as if to harangue. I knew that spiritually I seem to be called to let go of most everything, or perhaps merely any shard of certainty.

Ah, the Fool card of the Tarot! My father gave me my first Tarot deck before he died, and I’ve long used it to understand my fate. Did I not see the Fool as a photograph of my soul, satchel at the end of a stick stepping over a cliff, dog nipping at my heels? Did I not always yearn to dance at the edge of the abyss? And yet quite denying now years of my public and private rhetoric that could well be the fiction of having a self, I’m seduced by the fetish of certainty – that fetish that I’ve always scoffed at with contempt. Affectionate though he was towards the young man’s flamboyance, now he places the older man’s meditation cushion at the edge of the uncertainty that has become his life and says, ‘Sit still.’

How little I’ve understood the Fool. A little psychosis, a bit of entertainment, half-time in the rites of surrender. I’m left with the question, stripped bare – what is the authentic and ensouled truth of the story I am in?

Such was my first rendezvous, the beginning of making an alliance with multiple sclerosis. A year later I was cast to sea in what Mandaza would call “proper initiation.”

Exacerbation.

Thank God my ngoma initiation had taught me a little about

befriending a spirit.

The rite of descent was relentless – dis-membering who I thought I was and re-membling slow and thorough. In *Meeting Sacred Illness* (Ortiz Hill and Metzger, Elik Press, 2005) I try to give words to it:

“And this initiation into sacred illness? How does one speak of the illness that undoes one even as it heals? How does one tell the story about the undoing of one’s story? Who is the self that bears witness to the undoing of the self? Does one contrive a self to tell the story? And who is this contrived self? Is he at all an honorable fellow? A trustworthy witness?”

“All lies in retrospect and all retrospect lies. The land of memory is terra incognita but what of the land of the disintegration of the memories that I knew as terra firma? The place of memory is always contested ground, isn’t it? What is true? And what a tissue of lies rendered believable?”

“In this lonely place do I sing the body electric, the gimpy walk, the curious torque of mind? Do I sing through the invisible wound that so shapes me, the lesions in my brain stem, frontal lobe, corpus collosum, trailing down the core of my spine through throat and heart chakra? This wound some call multiple sclerosis I call the Guest. MS is an autoimmune disease. The self attacking the self. For that reason I cannot call the Guest an enemy. The deep questions are how to be hospitable to one so fierce in his wisdom.

“Dare I encourage the Guest to sing?”

“Dare I not?”

The Guest’s song is nigredo. Putrefaction. Decomposition. The vertigo of the mirror of oneself facing a thousand mirrors: Three decades of patients covered in shit and now myself beshitted.

People I have cared for unable to string together a coherent sentence and now I was unable. Staggering. Falling. Getting up and falling again. Eyes failing. The dissolution of a couple of months of sleeplessness and the spurious omnipotence of decadron psychosis.

I went to the forest for a few weeks alone to make sense of it. There I read a transcript of Deena's keynote address at the American Holistic Medical Association conference called The Soul of Medicine.

"Michael sometimes peaks of the spirit of MS," said Deena. "He means that he, as patient and healer, is apprenticing to the disease and what it reveals about the needs and nature of the body and the body politic. MS is an inflammatory autoimmune disease of the central nervous system wherein damage nerve fibers are unable to fully or reliably transmit communication signals to the rest of the body. It is a disease on the rise in a society, a world, that is enraged, violent, and militant... We think Michael succumbed to MS because we must learn to heal our inflamed hearts and souls and he has the capacity to address this. Don't give yourself to being healed until you know the story of the disease," says Deena.

In solitude I wrote my response:

"I couldn't quite understand these words when she spoke them. Perhaps this is the way with disease. It inheres so much in your character that you are the last to see it – until you fall apart. Decadron! The great anti-inflammatory! What, me inflamed? Inflammatory? On fire? Setting fires? Playing with fire? Sweet pacifist Buddhist hippie me? And yet my life tells the story of an inflamed sense of self, fire forever seeking more fire, forever the nostalgia for Vietnam knowing it only in my nightmares. Hearth and home for me has been mostly the stoking of hearth. I was most myself in the flames." (Meeting Sacred Illness, Elik Press, Ortiz

Hill, Metzger, 2005).

I groaned when Deena called decadron “my sacred medicine” but have come to call her ambuya (Shona for grandmother) and to ritually engage her those rare, bitter seasons when I’ve had to partake. Her dark blessing is that she shows shadow, sometimes flagrantly, publicly. Visibly undeniable and by virtue of that softening to hospitality that the Guest might be at ease.

Chapter 4

Epistemological Interlude

There is a path between one medical way and another, a path I learned to walk those years I practiced as a registered nurse and nganga at UCLA Medical Center. Of such a path the Yoruba have a parable about Eshu Elegba.

They say there were two friends who were initiated together among the boys, and as men tilled the soil together in adjacent fields. They were inseparable, they thought, kin beyond the blood of it and they often praised such a friendship.

Eshu decided to play a trick. Painting one side of his face black and the other white he sauntered down the path between the fields as each friend hoed their respective plots.

“Who was that strange white man?” one asked across the path.

“White man? White man? That man was coal black. That was no white man.”

“What, you crazy? I know a white man when I see a white man.”

It went like this, got hotter and hotter until the two were wrestling in the mud.

Eshu Elegba loves to undo us in our certainties because in our certainties we are most blind. In our certainties we are deaf to the sacred nature of what afflicts deaf to the profound intelligence of what ails us.

His persistent and sometimes cutting wisdom reveals what is eclipsed by certainty.

Chapter 5

The Spirit of Etiology

Who is Eshu Elegba?

Several years before I was initiated in to the ngoma of the water spirits I was “in the ashes” of race relations in Los Angeles. Just two months after the Rodney King riots/uprising I was taken by Eshu Elegba, the Yoruba spirit of the crossroad. He or I took the form of a “mobius strip.” For a couple of hours I writhed alone on the living room carpet – he becoming I then I, he. I’d sob over the hell of race and he’d taunt.

“Whassup with the blues song whit boy?” and then, flipside, undone with laughter.

“What you laughing about now?”

Back and forth, my first undoing by an African spirit.

The Lord of the roads and keeper of the doorway, he carried me into the mysteries of the many faces of God, the orisha.

I’ve named a dozen common motifs between Eshu and Hermes/Mercury. (It seems likely that by way of Egyptian Tehuti/Thoth this spirit found his way across the Sahara and the Sahel to west Africa.) There was a thud of the inevitable when I

tested extremely high for mercury. I had a complex ritual relationship with Eshu/Mercury within which I received the allopathic etiology for multiple sclerosis. I was thickly mercurial, toxic via dental amalgams since childhood and to a measure before birth.

Mercury torques/shapes the nervous system in the fetus. I was conceived in iatrogenesis and as far as I can tell birthed as his Siamese twin.

European Catholicism assimilated Hermes as St. Michael the Archangel. Likewise in Haiti Eshu became St. Michael.

Thus my flesh has a certain intimacy with the god, but the fleet footed god entangled, imprisoned in my body, enraged. The god made poison.

That blasphemy.

That arrogance.

The Yoruba consider Eshu Elegba the spirit of the individual self – its idiosyncrasies, passions, flaws. The way it dances the sacred. This is also true of the alchemical Mercurius who Jung saw as the archetype of one's individual nature.

To be poisoned by the mercurial leads to self devouring breakdown, having an almost allergic reaction to one's peculiar familiar self. Most curious mania: Mercury and I inseparable, maddening one another. Pathophysiologically the portrait is autoimmune. In my case – multiple sclerosis.

Alchemically the poesis of mercury toxicity renders the body an alembic. There is again the nigredo of breakdown: all piss and shit. And then there is separation – chelation – ultimately leaving the gods quintessence, for his residue remains. One cannot completely

expunge the god. Mercury remains as ally.

Something began shifting when I started separating mercury from my central nervous system – that holy of holies. A mercy for the god himself arose, that he might be exorcised of me, that he might be set free from the dank prison that I am.

Thus separation – the strange sometimes hallucinatory absorption of “me and my demon” untangles to the obvious. The refining of Mercury to quintessence in the alembic of my life delivers me to solidarity with a poisoned world, a solidarity with we citizens of the food chain who so like eating one another.

In the environment mercury finds itself in the sludge of streams and bacteria methylates it – converts it to its most toxic form.

Likewise, in the econiche of a person’s mouth the oral bacteria methylates the mercury of dental amalgams.

Amalgams are 60% mercury.

I’ve come to feeling affectionate towards the “little ones” that have so composed my life: schistosoma entering at the ritual moment of surrender and the tireless labor of millions of generations of bacteria delivering mercury to the pit of my karma. They are most certainly water spirits. It seems that the bacteria that made me mercurial softened my nervous system that schistosoma could erode and inflame the myelin sheaths for the ritual descent into multiple sclerosis.

Schistosoma – water spirit illness – multiple sclerosis – bacteria and methylated mercury poisoning is a single syndrome, capacious enough to accommodate the Bantu and the allopathic. From the Bantu point of view the path is clear. The ngoma of the water spirits is a healing and peacemaking tradition. To make peace is to heal. To heal is to make peace. Make an alliance with that which

would kill and let that alliance work through you that you might, perhaps, practice as a healer.

It is the essence of anthropomorphic narcissism to imagine my body is the locus of poisoning. I cannot forget to sing gratitude to the spirit that afflicts, for it is that spirit which even now is initiating. Such is the craft of the schistosoma and bacteria that I've been cracked open to the vulnerability of this dear planet.

I spent a few months alone inviting my fifth decade with meditation and ritual on the Big Sur coast. Every morning I'd gather seaweed, sea snails, chitons, gooseneck barnacles. I'd dry them on a river rock and mix them with my evening ramen. After offering a tablespoon to the deer mice I'd glut on my nightly mercury.

My beloved California is mercurial. Abandoned mercury mines upstream in the Los Padres national Forest and further to the east, the Sierras.

In the eighteenth century those rude alchemists, the "forty-niners", flooded the food chain with mercury used to process gold. And in the early nineteenth century mercury amalgams were first placed in peoples' mouths.

In 1868 Jean-Martin Charcot first named multiple sclerosis as a clinical phenomenon.

It is said that a third of the airborne mercury in the San Francisco Bay is from cremation. Vaporized amalgams of the teeth of corpses.

The alembic again is this body, but most certainly also this fragile world. Of alchemical Mercury Robbie Bosnak writes, "From this dark, untrustworthy, poisonous and crafty being, the alchemist had to make the elixir, the remedy that consists of poison and of the

poisoning that brings healing. They call it pharmacon, ‘healing poison’”. (Bosnak, Robert. 1998. A Little Course in Dreams, Boston, Shambhala Publications).

There is a strangeness of being poisoned of a god and within that god living ones remembered life. Phillip K. Dick would be equal to the sinister, visionary truth of it. Mercury, as in ‘mad as a hatter’ damn near toxic as plutonium placed in the mouths of children to leach into their minds its peculiar mind-altering ways.

I could never imagine how radically mind-altering systemic mercury was until I began to chelate it from my nervous system.

I began to notice that I live in a house and have since those years I was homeless. Quite simple and absurdly startling. I wanted a little yogurt, walked across the kitchen, opened the fridge and knew exactly where it was. I took it out and ate it.

Miraculous, no?

A couple of weeks later eating cherries with my daughter Nicole I inadvertently drop one; it bounces off the edge of the table and I snatch it in midair.

How marvelous. How utterly extraordinary!

I know this is the enlightenment of an imbecile but the cascade of cognitive shifts continue to surprise. These elementary forms of cognition were much off the map for me. Locating things in space – the yogurt at the lower left side of the fridge, the cherry plump to the deft gaze, the quick hand. They are vivid to me those studies linking mercury toxicity to autism. An autistic child can’t imagine the reality of another human being. For myself at the edge of the poison there was a solipsism that makes the world quite un compelling, yet I had to forever improvise a relationship to it.

The first few weeks alone I struggled with the finding and refinement of the prayer of the leave-taking of mercury, his chalice a urinal.

I complete this essay from my cave among the redwood and madrone on the coast of California where I'm alone for a couple of months inviting my sixth decade. There is much I cannot say, cannot even articulate to myself.

The first time I tried in earnest to call mercury from my central nervous system – cilantro extract, the medicine of choice – I was aggressive in my desire to be free and provoked a MS exacerbation. I've begun to learn slow and thorough the ritual craft of such a healing.

The first time I “emptied the chalice” I sang a Yoruba song to Eshu and talked to the crickets and tiny Argentinean black ants who then were my closest kin.

“This is poisonous. I am so sorry. Please stay away.” Either they listened or they caught the scent of death.

In 1989 each American produced twenty five tons of toxic waste – five hundred times more as per capita 1973. I know what that meant as a nurse. A lot of children with cancer buried beneath a greedy economic putsch. A couple of grams of mercury poured from the fronds of my myelin sheaths is most certainly a pittance but there is something unabashed and intimate to my frequent ritual offerings to my private waste dump.

Alchemically the process has been from the massa confusa of nigredo to separatio to the breaking of circulatio.

Perhaps an excruciating breaking of the heart or maybe the heart of the world itself breaking. One cannot celebrate the offering of poison to a poisoned world.

Mercury has always been in circulation in me but this in-breaking of circulatory declares the double alembic of my flesh, this planet.

In Buddhism the fiction of self is a trick played with mirrors and before things began settling in my meditation practice the three stooges – “me, myself and I” made almost operative the passing of a little water.

Gotterdamung!

But the ethical truth is non-dual. Short of passing water on another planet (Mercury?) there is nowhere to hide the alembic of my poisoned body nested into the alembic of a poisoned earth.

This life brief as a flash of lightning, says the diamond sutra. (Ten years since I was alone like this come and gone like a cup of coffee.)

The true and unplumbed healing takes place in the alembic set within the alembic of nature – nature and the fictitious “I” inseparable. My healing is inextricable from the healing of the earth.

This is the Bodhisattva vow – to practice this two vessel alchemy until all beings are liberated from the delusion of separateness. What remains of poison within me may it transform the nectar of compassion.

Everything began shifting a couple of weeks ago. The moon was darkening and I'd taken to “telling the rosary” of my MS lesions. I got up to empty the chalice after midnight and heard damned near audibly, “Your ancestors held slaves in Virginia and Georgia. Your contemporaries – the lot of you – are killing the earth.” I felt a pinch in my brain stem, the primitive brain, medulla oblongata, and when it wouldn't let go I was frightened. I never physically felt the squeeze of a lesion, the pulse. My nurse self thought, “Am

I provoking exacerbation? A stroke?”

This lesion bearing an ancestral wound, so utterly not of this life but also the lateral wound of living in an apocalyptic time and unable to lie about it.

I think of my black kin in America – those Hills and Halberts who I’ve never broken bread with. and my black kin in Liberia, settled from the plantations before emancipation. Telling the rosary of my secret life, inadmissible.

When I was a boy I heard rumors of the penetentes in the mountains of Mora, not far from where we tilled corn. They flagellated themselves, some say crucified a man every Easter. It seems that an alter ego began his life then, devoted to the blood and the ecstasy. Decades of flagellating my central nervous system. I hum Leonard Cohen:

“Forget about your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.”

The antics of the three stooges soon went silenced. I stopped my Yoruba singing. Mercury became “have mercy,” then just “mercy.”

Mercury went through a change of character that I’m at a loss to describe. When we first came to be alone here the familiar horseplay between us would sometimes make me laugh when I was trying to meditate.

“What, you think this urinal is some great improvement to your precious nervous system: Chalice my ass! Let me out!”

Once he offered me some of that 181 proof rum he likes so much. I told him I'd rather drink sterno.

At first I was intrigued that his absence – or absencing – was such a vivid presence, but when Mercury became mercy he became the dust of a wandering thought, then random sensation.

As I was meditating a couple of days ago he and the Guest became figures in a limitless field, substantial as smoke and it seemed quite untethered to my body. Also in the field were the phantoms of being healed or not being healed. Both plausible and implausible but ultimately not worth investing much passion in.

Being taken by sacred illnesses is showing me that I hadn't a clue what the dimensions of healing are and maybe now I can live into it. The trail of water spirit disease, schistosoma, MS and methylated mercury seems to have led me to this cave.

Mercury has become mercy and now – silence.

Cut for the Harvest For Ambuya Bwebwe and Mandaza Kademwa

1

. *And I lie in bed*

sleepless, raving, urinating on myself, body slowly unravelling how is it that Spirit plants medicine in the body through illness? multiple sclerosis

What is it through illness utters wisdom dares say the Name of the god that reweaves the world?

2

“Michael it is time you sing of how your body has become medicine.” I trust now only what is small and true the soft touch of the hand the sudden light of the eyes the impulse of the gut toward compassion

Love is the only medicine I know and I know it is not mine passed swift from Lover to Beloved weaving from hand to hand the gift given never owned utterly ordinary and also, perhaps, a song to those spirits knowing what healing is healing as I most certainly do not

3.

The Lover sometimes feeds on suffering and of that the world in generous I pray to which has made my life common and kind that changes not water to wine but wine to water for refusing the common fate we become thieves in the night too dark to ourselves to see thief or blinded by light staggering unable to see blindness

4.

First before the legs start giving away before forgetting the English language light sucked eyes dim can no longer discern the mind of kin wife beside me twin ten thousand miles away

The body lost, stuttering falling again and again drooling, beshitting myself Love is the only medicine I have ever known Have ever known Love cut for the harvest at last real in my own defeat