



The hermit's scream

He said I had this that I could love,
 As one loves visible and responsive peace,
 As one loves one's own being,
 As one loves that which is the end
 And must be loved, as one loves that
 Of which one is a part as in a unity,
 A unity that is the life one loves,
 So that one lives all the lives that comprise it
 As the life of the fatal unity of war.

—Wallace Stevens, "Yellow Afternoon"

I am a failure then, as the kind of revolutionary Anne-Marion and her acquaintances were. (Though in fact she had heard of nothing revolutionary this group had done, since she left them ten summers ago. Anne-Marion, she knew, had become a well-known poet whose poems were about her two children, and the quality of the light that fell across a lake she owned.)

—Alice Walker, *Meridian*

I've been haunted by a poem, apparently as simple as a ballad and with a ballad's appeal of timelessness. It's by Elizabeth Bishop, a white North American with middle-class roots. Orphaned and

deracinated as a child, she grew up as a lesbian, a traveler-exile, living a significant part of her life in Brazil. She's not thought of as a political poet by most people who admire her; she's most often praised as a poet of minute observation and description. The poem is called "Chemin de Fer":

Alone on the railroad track
 I walked with pounding heart.
 The ties were too close together
 or maybe too far apart.

The scenery was impoverished:
 scrub-pine and oak; beyond
 its mingled gray-green foliage
 I saw the little pond

where the dirty hermit lives,
 lie like an old tear
 holding onto its injuries
 lucidly year after year.

The hermit shot off his shot-gun
 and the tree by his cabin shook.
 Over the pond went a ripple.
 The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"
 screamed the old hermit.
 Across the pond an echo
 tried and tried to confirm it.

Love might be put into action by firing a gun, yes—at whom?
 In what extremity?

The gun in this poem, like a real gun, might be fired out of despair at love's inaction, passivity, inertness, abuses, neglect. It's a "dirty hermit" who fires the shotgun at nothing in particular, who screams at no one in particular the ethical imperative "Love should be put into action!" Someone long isolate, outside community, who like the pond has been "holding onto [his] injuries/lucidly year after year." And who is the other character in the poem, the narrator of all this? Someone alone, whose heart is pounding, walking the road of iron, the railroad track, the hobo track—a child trying to run away from home? turned out from home?—someone, in any case, who still hasn't gotten far from home, who has known this landscape—the pond, the hermit's cabin—*year after year*. Someone needing to get far away, someone whose eyes have seen, perhaps, destruction of community, preventable disintegration, a child of loss, emigration, passive neglect, intrafamilial violations; someone not yet, but potentially, a hobo or a dirty hermit. A someone who is legion across the globe. For whom the hermit's scream, the shout of the shotgun, might be relief in a scene of enormous, unnameable tension and impoverishment. But there is nothing lonelier-sounding or more futile than an echo, and the poem ends with this.*

What does it take for the walker on the railroad track to become not a hobo or a hermit, but an artist and/or an activist? What would it mean to put love into action in the face of lovelessness, abandonment, or violation? Where do we find, in or around us, love—the imagination that can subvert despair or the futile firing of a gun? What teaches us to convert lethal anger into steady, serious attention to our own lives and those of others? What, in North America in the 1990s, are we given to help us ask these questions—the language of therapy groups, of

*James Merrill comments that "to anyone who has known love the merest hint of ties grown unmanageable will suffice." I agree.

twelve-step programs, of bleached speech? I continue to hear the dirty hermit's scream and to want it to become a general cry.

What is political activism, anyway? I've been asking myself.

It's something both prepared for and spontaneous—like making poetry.

When we do and think and feel certain things privately and in secret, even when thousands of people are doing, thinking, whispering these things privately and in secret, there is still no general, collective understanding from which to move. Each takes her or his risks in isolation. We may think of ourselves as individual rebels, and individual rebels can easily be shot down. The relationship among so many feelings remains unclear. But these thoughts and feelings, suppressed and stored-up and whispered, have an incendiary component. You cannot tell where or how they will connect, spreading underground from rootlet to rootlet till every grass blade is afire from every other. This is that "spontaneity" which party "leaders," secret governments, and closed systems dread. Poetry, in its own way, is a carrier of the sparks, because it too comes out of silence, seeking connection with unseen others.

I think at this point of my friend Barbara Deming, her life of commitment to nonviolent political action, her active claiming of her untimely death from cancer. Who walked "for peace," no doubt with pounding heart, on an interracial march through the segregated South in 1964 and found herself in jail—not about peace, but about racism. Who walked with women from the Seneca Peace Encampment in 1983, finding herself and the oth-

ers confronted by a hostile mob—jeered not on grounds of peace or nuclear arms, but as Jews/Communists/lesbians. Who spoke and wrote about nonviolence, named the repressed murderous anger within the nonviolence movement, made room for the revolutionary possibility of killing without hating, out of tragic necessity, though she felt it “blurred the vision” of a world in which all had the right to live. Who had an income that permitted her to devote her life to activism, though many might have used that freedom differently. Who for years felt constrained, like so many others, to hide her love for women, her desire, in the very movements calling for fundamental change in human relationships, whose anger at those years of self-denial was great, who tried to distinguish between anger as “affliction” and anger as “the concentration of one’s whole being in the determination: This must change.” I think of her because, though the peace movement as she knew it could be simplistic, she herself was not simplistic. I want to keep her lanky, earthy, elegant, erotic, amused, keenly attentive presence in mind even as I know that if alive today she would perforce be stretching the limits of her imagination, her definitions of peace, war, violence.

Because I know that for Barbara, as for many others then committed to nonviolent direct action, it was all about the connections between love and action. The marches and sit-ins were, have been, not—as some propaganda of later decades would have it—mere eruptions of youthful excitement. As Barbara herself wrote of nonviolent direct action, it was a way of living the future in the present, treating hostile adversaries as human beings like yourself, respecting them even as you tried to change their minds. Each nonviolent demonstrator, as she propounded it, had to embody in her or his own person the respect of one being for another that “after the revolution” would become the basis for human society. This was literally one-on-one commu-

nication, the demonstrator gone limp, being dragged by police, trying to keep eye contact, trying to hold on to a distinction between the role of the police enforcer or National Guardsman or prison guard, and the person inside the uniform. Between the hostile mob and the individuals within it, their fears and unmet needs. But the preparation for this was the creation of a group in which the like-minded were bound with ties of love and of attention to one another. The hope was that action informed by the love of justice and of the actual human being could change the perceptions of those at whom the actions were directed—could teach by example.

I wrote “hope” but I should say more accurately “faith.” Not in the sense of religious faith, though some who practice nonviolence in action do so as members of religious groups. And not in the dictionary’s other sense—of “unquestioning belief.” Barbara herself was always questioning; she was one of the leading critics of the peace movement from within, as a feminist, as a lesbian, as a white person who learned much from Black activists. An activist’s faith can never be unquestioning, can never stop responding to “new passions and new forces,” can never oversimplify, as believers and activists are often tempted or pressured to do.

The Gulf War, which Barbara did not live to see, brought into high relief certain realities that had been long in the making. It revealed the invasions of Grenada in 1983, of Panama in 1989, as rehearsals, war games, dressed in a rhetorical language of rescue and the deposition of a monster. Manipulative images—a crusade against a new monster, a “butcher” (recently our client in the arms trade)—were used to camouflage in 1991 the fact that the invention, manufacture, and sale, not of nuclear arms but of the most dazzlingly refined “conventional” weapons, have become the lifeblood of global capitalism. The “arms race” is really the ancient race for the gold for which men have always

killed each other: a false economy based on arms production and arms selling. Arsenal building for profit, legal and illegal, plays off old and new nationalisms and ideologies, while a more and more sophisticated weaponry allows both for the closing down of old military bases and the reduction of nuclear arms. These new "conventional" weapons, after all, have the cumulative power of a nuclear bomb to paralyze a city or a country without apparently laying it waste. A "third way" has been found between long-drawn-out ground war and instant nuclear devastation—or so it would seem: Cleaner, quicker, safer, more surgical wars? *A unity that is the life one loves?*

Less than a decade before the bombing of Baghdad, the Swedish feminist and social reformer Alva Myrdal, accepting her Nobel Peace Prize, had connected the arms race and "its needless excesses of armaments and its aggressive rhetoric" with "an ominous cult of violence in contemporary societies," which were "in the process of being both militarized and brutalized. Because of the tremendous and needless proliferation of arms through production and export, sophisticated weapons were now freely available on the domestic market as well, right down to handguns and stilettos. . . . And she singled out the powerful role of the mass media in promoting violence, most of all among the young," while "Western exporting of films and TV programs worked in tandem with the arms trade to saturate the Third World in patterns of brutality."*

Barbara Deming sought to effect change by the most grass-

*She might have traced these "patterns of brutality," exported by the West back to the slave trade and colonialism, and the films and TV programs promoting violence, to earlier Western cultural texts depicting people of color as apes, monsters, subhuman, needing subjugation.

roots and personal means: a walk for disarmament through small towns, dialogues with people met along the way, or in prison cells, handing out leaflets, arguing with comrades in the North American peace and women's movements, civil disobedience. Alva Myrdal tried to use institutions like the International Labor Organization and UNESCO, her position as Sweden's ambassador to India, her contacts in the worlds of diplomacy and international politics, to achieve a rechanneling of global resources from war into social and economic development. Her allies were men of power: Dag Hammarskjöld, Nehru, and, in some ways, her husband, Gunnar Myrdal.

Both Deming and Myrdal were feminists and saw along a spectrum of social violence that had nuclear annihilation as its extreme. Barbara Deming chose toward the end of her life to focus on a women's peace movement that connected militarism with transnational violence by men against women. Alva Myrdal wanted to use her Nobel prize—both the visibility and the money it provided—to create a high-powered international "antiviolence" movement that would hold to account the "propagandizers and profiteers of violence" and the use of violence for power and profit throughout social institutions, including the family.

"Nonviolence," "antiviolence." The feebleness of the language, however passionate the determination, tells us something. *Violence* is what looks out at us from those phrases: its expressionless or grinning face is what we see, not what it displaces. War goes on demanding its "fatal unity." What face has "visible and responsive peace"? What does it mean, to put love into action? Why do I go on as if poetry has any answers to that question?

Peace I have feared you hated you scuffed dirt
on what little of you I could bear near me

scorned you called you vicious names Every time
 you have settled over an afternoon
 a friendship a night walk my brow my sleep
 I have lashed free of your desolate island
 back to the familiar continent
 Coward I have watched you buckle under
 nightsticks and fire hoses You have
 disgusted me slipping flowers into guns
 holding hands with yourself singing to bullets
 and dogs Who can speak your language but
 animals and saints What history records
 your triumphs Over what centuries
 have you reigned Miasma Where are the stone
 lists of those who have died in your name
 In the land where you are loved what becomes
 of the veterans of all against all How
 will I clothe myself How will I eat How
 will I teach my children whom to respect
 how to find themselves on a map of the world
 when I have so seldom seen your face
 Tell me Bloodless Outlaw Phantom what is
 the work of the belligerent in
 your anarchic kingdom Where is my place

—Suzanne Gardinier, "To Peace"

"There is not a real poet alive today, or for some time past, who would do what Homer did even if he/she could, or Virgil or the author of the *Chanson de Roland* or the Shakespeare of the chronicles—the glorification of war and conquest. The refusal to do so is precisely at the heart of poetic (and existential) heroism as we have come to understand it," writes the poet Hayden Carruth. For centuries, people reading Homer's *Iliad* took it, along with the Hebrew Bible (also filled with poetry and

scenes of battle) as a poetic starting gate, a point of origins for Western civilization. In the poem just quoted, Suzanne Gardinier speaks through the spirit of violence as it has thrashed its way through history, not the violence of the powerful so much as the violence of those who have fought and bled in the service of power, "the veterans of all against all," "the belligerent" hating peace because unable to see how it can ever include them; or those who have grown up knowing that violent resistance is the only way to stay alive. The questions of the poem need concern all those who condemn violence, who place themselves beyond its seductions.

About the *Iliad* as a kind of cultural ancestry for citizens of the United States, Gardinier has written:

By content, the *Iliad* is not the epic of slaves, nor of those who hold the earth sacred, nor of those who . . . deeply value words at all, as sacred vessels, as anything more than the ritual preludes to battle. It is the epic of soldiers, and of the cultures whose . . . sense of connection to a universe that is whole has been broken, whose peace is the interval between wars. As such, it is clearly one of our ancestors, whether we hold this country's sword of power or live at its point. Whether or not it is this one among all the others to whom we will pledge allegiance remains to be seen.

She suggests other possible ancestors:

As residents of the Western Hemisphere, we might claim the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, or some yet un-knit Nahuatl sequence—or the Delaware Big House Ceremony set down, or the Mohawk Ritual of Condolence, or the story of the peace made among the Five Nations of the Iroquois. As residents of the United States, we might claim *Leaves of Grass*—or sew together and claim the folk tales and songs with the story of the survival of slavery in them, as

the Finns made their Kalevala in the last century from what peasants remember.

In the nineteenth century some people attended military battles as spectators, watching live war through telescopes and field glasses. Today we view airbrushed images of war's technological beauty on our television screens. And at Revolutionary or Civil War battle sites, becalmed on the landscape as national monuments, amateurs of history annually reenact old charges and routs in full period military costume. Perhaps these theatrics can distract from, or console for, the knowledge that at the end of the twentieth century there is no demilitarized zone, no line dividing war from peace, that the ghettos and barrios of peacetime live under paramilitary occupation, that prisoners are being taken and incarcerated at an accelerating rate, that the purchase of guns has become an overwhelming civilian response to perceived fractures in the social compact.

Almost twenty years ago I was teaching in a public college in Harlem where many of my colleagues and students were poets. Walking up to Convent Avenue from Broadway, and in the classroom, I saw much that became part of my own education, having to do with the daily struggle of poor African-Americans and Puerto Ricans to live and, if possible, to love and, where possible, to put love into action. Somewhere in that time, in response to the turning-away by a Brooklyn hospital of a Black youth struck by a city bus, my colleague June Jordan wrote a grief-stricken, bitter, and lyrical poem:

FOR MICHAEL ANGELO THOMPSON
(October 25, 1959–March 23, 1973)

So Brooklyn has become a holy place

the streets have turned to meadowland
where
wild
free
ponies
eat among the wild
free
flowers
growing there

Please do not forget.

A tiger does not fall or stumble
broken by an accident.
A tiger does not lose his stride or
clumsy
slip and slide to tragedy
that buzzards feast upon.

Do not forget.

The Black prince Michael Black boy
our younger brother
has not "died"
he
has not "passed away"
the Black prince Michael Black boy
our younger brother

He was killed.

He did not die.

It was the city took him off
(that city bus)

and smashed him suddenly

to death
deliberate.

It was the city took him off
the hospital
that turned him down the hospital
that turned away from so much beauty
bleeding
bleeding
in Black struggle

just to live.

It was the city took him off
the casket names and faces
of the hatred spirit
stripped the force the
laughter and the agile power
of the child

He did not die.
A tiger does not fall.
Do not forget.

The streets have turned to meadowland
where
wild
free
ponies
eat among the wild
free
flowers
growing there

and Brooklyn
has become a holy place.

It took me years to hear the double-edge, the double-voicedness, of this poem, which sounded to me so apparently musical, sorrowful, and courteous an admonition: *Please do not forget*. I read that admonition as being for me, for white readers, rather than for the community to which the poet and the dead child belonged. *So Brooklyn has become a holy place*: I heard this in the same tone at the beginning and end of the poem. Only after years of experience, politics, conversations, listening, I heard the caustic engrained anger of the first question, *So Brooklyn has become a holy place?* the question mark omitted but the subtext clear: You're telling me? these things just happen naturally? that *wild free ponies* of Black urban youth just *pass away*? Race came between me and full reading of the poem: I wanted to believe the poet was elegaic, not furious; she sets the "Please" in the midst of the poem, which plays into my reading. But it isn't that kind of "Please" at all, rather the "Please" of the member of the community who strides into the church service where perhaps the facts are about to be buried with the victim.

By the end of the poem the same lines become a requiem. Having parsed the realities of Michael Angelo Thompson's death, the poet's voice allows him his transcendence: his death sacramentalizes the city that "took him off"; Brooklyn is made holy by and to *him*. The poem becomes both documentation and ritual whereby the first lines translate into the last lines, bitterness and fury into recommitment.

"Peace" is not the issue here, but the violent structures of urban class and racial power. The poem is a skin—luminous and resonant—stretched across a repetitive history of Black children's deaths in the cities, in a country that offers them neither

hope nor respite. In the face of this violence, apparently so acceptable and ordinary, poets are forced to remind us not to forget. And Jordan herself went on to become one of the most lyrical of activist poets.

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles and my stomach
churns at the imagined taste while
my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sings into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

The policeman who shot down a 10-year-old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said "Die you little motherfucker" and
there are tapes to prove that. At his trial

this policeman said in his own defense
"I didn't notice the size or nothing else
only the color." and
there are tapes to prove that, too.

Today that 37-year-old white man with 13 years of police forcing
has been set free
by 11 white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one black woman who said
"They convinced me" meaning
they had dragged her 4'10" black woman's frame
over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85-year-old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

Audre Lorde's "Power" is a poem of documentation, of police records, tapes, a jury verdict. It's also a poem about creative and destructive rage. An artist *lost/without imagery or magic* in a

desert of whiteness, of "an articulated power that is not on your terms," is an artist driven against the wall. Lorde has said that she heard of the acquittal of the policeman while driving,

and I decided to pull over and just jot some things down in my notebook to enable me to cross town without an accident because I was so sick and so enraged. . . . I was just writing, and that poem came out without craft. . . . I was thinking that the killer had been a student at John Jay [College of Criminal Justice, where Lorde was then teaching] and that I might have seen him in the hall, that I might see him again. What was retribution? What could have been done? There was one Black woman on the jury. It could have been me. . . . Do I kill him? What is my effective role? Would I kill her. . . . —the Black woman on the jury. What kind of strength did she, would I, have at the point of deciding to take a position. . . . There is the jury—white male power, white male structures—how do you take a position against them? How do you deal with things you believe, live them not as theory, not even as emotion, but right on the line of action and effect and change? All of those things were riding on that poem. But I had no sense, no understanding at the time, of the connections, just that I was that woman. And that to put myself on the line to do what had to be done at any place and time was so difficult, and not to do so was the most awful death. And putting yourself on the line is like killing a piece of yourself, in the sense that you have to kill, end, destroy something familiar and dependable, so that something new can come in ourselves, in our world. And that sense of writing at the edge, out of urgency, not because you choose it but because you have to—that sense of survival—that's what the poem is out of, as well as the pain of my spiritual son's death over and over. Once you live any piece of your vision it opens you to a constant onslaught. Of necessities, of horrors, but

of wonders too, of possibilities . . . like meteor showers all the time, bombardment, constant connections.

An event may ignite a poem (which may then be labeled a "protest" poem) but not because the poet has "decided" to address that event. What's clear from Lorde's memory of the first draft of "Power" is that the event encapsulated great reaches of her experience, open questions of her life. Hearing a news report on the radio, she pulls over and reaches for her notebook as a recourse from harming herself or others—and it is in life-and-death terms that the poem begins to speak. A so-called "political" poem comes—if it comes as poetry at all—from fearful and raging, deep and tangled questions within: in Lorde's case—*How do you deal with the things you believe? How do I put myself on the line? How can I destroy what needs to die in me without destroying others at random?* I think again of Bishop's hermit's cry. Two poems more different than "Chemin de Fer" and "Power" are hard to imagine. Until you start to listen back and forth between them.