

Charles Simic
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Elegy in a Spider's Web

In a letter to Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers describes how the philosopher Spinoza used to amuse himself by placing flies in a spider's web, then adding two spiders so he could watch them fight over the flies. "Very strange and difficult to interpret," concludes Jaspers. As it turns out, this was the only time the otherwise somber philosopher was known to laugh.

A friend from Yugoslavia called me about a year ago and said, "Charlie, why don't you come home and hate with your own people?"

I knew he was pulling my leg, but I was shocked nevertheless. I told him that I was never very good at hating, that I've managed to loathe a few individuals here and there, but had never managed to progress to hating whole peoples.

"In that case," he replied, "you're missing out on the greatest happiness one can have in life."

I'm surprised that there is no History of Stupidity. I envision a work of many volumes, encyclopedic, cumulative, with an index listing millions of names. I only have to think about history for a moment or two before I realize the absolute necessity of such a book. I do not underestimate the influence of religion, nationalism, economics, personal ambition, and even chance on events, but the historian who does not admit that men are also fools has not really understood his subject.

Watching Yugoslavia dismember itself, for instance, is like

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watching a man mutilate himself in public. He has already managed to make himself legless, armless, and blind, and now in his frenzy he's struggling to tear his heart out with his teeth. Between bites he shouts to us that he is a martyr for a holy cause, but we know that he is mad, that he is monstrously stupid.

People tell me I predicted the tragedy years ago. This requires no extraordinary wisdom. If our own specialists in ethnic pride in the United States ever start shouting that they can't live with each other, we can expect the same bloodshed to follow. For that reason, what amazed me in the case of Yugoslavia was the readiness with which our intellectuals accepted as legitimate the claim of every nationalist there. The desirability of breaking up into ethnic and religious states a country that had existed since 1918 and that had complicated internal and outside agreements was welcomed with unrestrained enthusiasm by everybody from the *New York Times* to the German government. It probably takes much longer to get a fried chicken franchise than it took to convince the world that Yugoslavia should be replaced by as many little states as the natives desired.

Isn't "we" the problem, that little word "we" (which I distrust so profoundly, which I would forbid the individual man to use).

— Witold Gombrowicz

Dr. Frankenstein's descendants do not dig up fresh graves anymore on dark and stormy nights to make monsters. They stay home and study national history, making up lists of past wrongs. We hear people say in Yugoslavia, "I didn't used to hate them, but after I read what they've been doing to us, I'd like see them all dead."

Nationalism is a self-constructed cage in which family members can huddle in safety when they're not growling and barking at someone outside the cage. One people baring their teeth at all comers is the dream of every nationalist and religious fanatic the world over. The real horror movie monsters would run at the sight of these people, who only yesterday were someone's quiet and kind neighbors and who will probably resume being that after the killing is done.

What are you? Americans ask me. I explain that I was born in Belgrade, that I left when I was fifteen, that we always thought of ourselves as Yugoslavs, that for the last thirty years I have been translating Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Macedonian poets into English, that whatever differences I found among these people delighted me, that I don't give a shit about any of these nationalist leaders and their programs . . .

"Oh, so you're a Serb!" they exclaim triumphantly.

I remember an old interview with Duke Ellington, the interviewer saying to him with complete confidence, you write your music for your own people, and Ellington pretending not to understand, asking what people would that be? The lovers of Beaujolais?

I have more in common with some Patagonian or Chinese lover of Ellington or Emily Dickinson than I have with many of my own people. The proverbial warning, "Too many cooks spoil the broth," was the way I was concocted. I have always considered myself lucky to be that way.

The strange thing is that I find more and more people who do not believe me, who assure me that life has no meaning outside some kind of tribe.

Five of us were sitting in the Brasserie Cluny in Paris writing a protest letter to Milosević and arguing about the wording when one of us remembered that Tito conducted his illegal business for the Comintern in the same brasserie before the war.

Does this crap ever end? someone wondered aloud.

Over the last forty years I've known Russians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Poles, Argentines, Chinese, Iranians and a dozen other nationalities, all refugees from murderous regimes. The only people of honor on the whole planet.

This summer in Paris and Amsterdam I met more "traitors," men and women who refused to identify themselves with various nationalist groups in Yugoslavia. They wanted to remain free, outside tribal pieties, and that was their heresy. They are the other orphans of that civil war.

One Sunday on the metro I heard an accordionist play a Serbian song, struck up a conversation with him, and found out he was a war refugee from Croatia. "One of these days,"

he whispered to me in parting, "the French will get rid of us too and then where will we go?"

His name, to our mutual astonishment, turned out to be Simic too.

Sacrifice the children—an old story, pre-Homeric—so that the nation will endure, to create a legend.

—Aleksander Wat

The destruction of Vukovar and Sarajevo will not be forgiven the Serbs. Whatever moral credit they had as the result of their history they have squandered in these two acts. The suicidal and abysmal idiocy of nationalism is revealed here better than anywhere else. No human being or group of people has the right to pass a death sentence on a city.

"Defend your own, but respect what others have," my grandfather used to say, and he was a highly decorated officer in the First World War and certainly a Serbian patriot. I imagine he would have agreed with me. There will be no happy future for people who have made the innocent suffer.

Here is something we can all count on. Sooner or later our tribe always comes to ask us to agree to murder.

"In the hour of need you walked away from your own people," a fellow I know said to me when I turned down the invitation.

True. I refused to turn my conscience over to the leader of the pack. I continued stubbornly to believe in more than one truth. Only the individual is real, I kept saying over and over again. I praised the outcast, the pariah, while my people were offering me an opportunity to become a part of a mystic whole. I insisted on remaining aloof, self-absorbed, lovingly nursing my suspicions.

"For whom does your poetry speak when you have no tribe anywhere you can call your own?" my interlocutor wanted to know.

"The true poet is never a member of any tribe," I shouted back. It is his refusal of his birthright that makes him a poet and an individual worth respecting, I explained.

This wasn't true, of course. Many of the greatest poets in the history of the world have been fierce nationalists. The sole function of the epic poet is to find excuses for the butcheries of the innocent. In our big and comfy family bed today's murderers will sleep like little babies, is what they are always saying.

On the other side are the poets who trust only the solitary human voice. The lyric poet is almost by definition a traitor to his own people. He is the stranger who speaks the harsh truth that only individual lives are unique and therefore sacred. He may be loved by his people, but his example is also the one to be warned against. The tribe must pull together to face the invading enemy while the lyric poet sits talking to the skull in the graveyard.

For that reason he deserves to be exiled, put to death, and remembered.

Mistaken ideas always end in bloodshed, but in every case it is someone else's blood. This is why our thinkers feel free to say just about everything.

—Camus

"There are always a lot of people just waiting for a band wagon to jump on either for or against something," Hannah Arendt said in a letter. She knew what she was talking about. The terrifying thing about modern intellectuals everywhere is that they are always changing idols. At least religious fanatics stuck mostly to what they believe in. All the rabid nationalists in Eastern Europe were Marxists yesterday and Stalinists last week. The freedom of the individual has never been their concern. They were after bigger fish. The sufferings of the world are an ideal chance for all intellectuals to have an experience of tragedy and to fulfill their utopian longings. If in the meantime one comes to share the views of some mass murderer, the end justifies the means. Modern tyrants have had some of the most illustrious literary salons.

Nationalism as much as Communism provides an opportunity to rewrite history. The problem with true history and great literature is that they wallow in ambiguities, unresolved

issues, nuances, and baffling contradictions. Let's not kid ourselves. The Manichaean view of the world is much more satisfying. Any revision of history is acceptable providing it gives us some version of the struggle between angels and devils. If, in reality, this means dividing murderers in Yugoslavia into good and bad, so be it. If it means weeping from one eye at the death of a Moslem woman and winking from the other at the death of her Orthodox husband, that's the secret attraction of that model.

Our media, too, treat complexity the way Victorians treated sexuality—as something from which the viewer and the reader need to be protected. In the case of Yugoslavia, where nothing is simple, the consequences are more evil. Our columnists and intellectuals often have views identical to their nationalist counterparts in various parts of that country. In an age of PC, they miss hate and lynching mobs. The democratic forces in Yugoslavia can expect nothing from either side. At home they'll be treated as traitors and abroad their version of events will be greeted by silence for making the plot too complicated.

So what's to be done? people rightly ask. I've no idea. As an elegist I mourn and expect the worst. Vileness and stupidity always have a rosy future. The world is still a few evils short, but they'll come. Dark despair is the only healthy outlook if you identify yourself with the flies as I do. If, however, you secretly think of yourself as one of the spiders, or, God forbid, as the laughing philosopher himself, you have much less to worry about. Since you'll be on the winning side, you can always rewrite history and claim you were a fly. Elegies in a spider's web is all we bona fide flies get. That and the beauty of the sunrise like some unexpected touch of the executioner's final courtesy the day they take us out to be slaughtered. In the meantime, my hope is very modest. Let's have a true ceasefire for once, so the old lady can walk out into the rubble and find her cat.