

"The Invisible Dead"

(Speech for Adelaide PEN: Denied a Voice, commemorating the 27th International Day of the Imprisoned Writer. November 2007.)

by Sean Williams

(All quotes, apart from King George V's, were taken from essays, letters and poems published in the anthology Another Sky, edited by Lucy Popescu and Carole Seymour-Jones in association with English PEN. I've attached in comments the original quote, where I've edited or paraphrased wildly from the original.)

This week Australia observed Remembrance Day, the occasion we set aside to acknowledge the sacrifice made by veterans and civilians during wartime in the last one hundred years. The Australian Government web site lists around thirty commemorative services, luncheons, parades, and wreath-layings all across the country, plus another fifty or so around the world, in or near war memorials, stones of remembrance, tombs to unknown soldiers, and halls of memory. One minute's silence is observed, thanks to King George V, who decreed: "all locomotion should cease, so that, in perfect stillness, the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead".

Wars are the most visible form of conflict between and within countries. If the resulting deaths can be regarded as glorious then it's perhaps in part because they are so visible. In this televised age, the human face of war is a very familiar and controversial one, backlit by a Hollywood-esque special effects industry devoted to violence and destruction.

Much less visible is the slow burn of oppression and political injustice. Numerous regimes in the world may not be--or may not consider themselves to be--at war, but enact policies encouraging persecution, incarceration, even execution of those they regard as outsiders among their own people, such as political prisoners, dissenters, and protesters. The victims of these policies, of these undeclared wars, of terror and

oppression, are uncounted and invisible. Where are their monuments? Where are the memorials raised in their honour? Where are their graves?

Australians do not collectively mourn the invisible dead the same way we mourn those who fell in combat. Perhaps we imagine that we are untouched by such atrocities, that a regime capable of such things would never take root in our soil, that the instruments of power and depersonalisation--including forms of torture involving sustained noise, sleep deprivation, and physical ordeals that leave no visible mark--would never be employed here.

These are the experiences of Cheikh Kone, a journalist who fled his home in the Ivory Coast after criticising the general elections held there in 2000. The centre he refers to is the Immigration Reception and Processing Centre in Port Hedland, WA.

"I spent another two and a half years in the Centre. We were treated like children, every aspect of our lives controlled. First they gave us identification numbers. Suddenly I was no longer Cheikh Kone but NBP451. Every morning at 6 a.m. they woke us and made us line up for a head count before breakfast. This was a very regimented process. ... There were more head counts ... at lunch then at midnight. Even the children had to wake up for this. Then at 3 a.m. they had another.... Once again we all had to wake up and call out our numbers. If the officers could not find a particular person, everybody had to stay where they were, as if we were playing a game of 'freeze' with no moving whatsoever. Gates were locked, all cameras were checked, officers were on alert watching anyone who moved until the missing number was found. These lockdowns could last three to six hours; children were expected to stand still and if a mealtime coincided with the lockdown it was postponed.

"[T]he nights ... were the worst. Before I was sent there I only had nightmares while I slept; there we had nightmares while awake. The screaming and yelling was constant and never seemed to stop. People would run by in the corridors, their footsteps so loud you could not shut them out, and the officers' radios never seemed to stop.... I saw one man attempt suicide by climbing a tree and jumping head first out of it. Before he jumped he shouted, 'I don't want Australia any more, thank you, Australia, thank you, everybody.' He

didn't die but ... [w]hen he came back his spirit seemed to have left him.... I never saw him smile again after that day. In the end he was deported.

" ... Throughout my detention, I asked myself ... [:] Why are we treated like this? Was it a crime to seek asylum in Australia? ... Every day there was a story about refugees invading Australia. It became clear to me that decision makers in Australia had developed a lexicon of demeaning rhetoric especially for refugees and that the media conspired in this until mainstream Australia had come to believe that we were all criminals and terrorists, invading this great brown land of theirs."

Our decision makers, our media: ourselves. We are no more immune than anyone to the banality of terror and oppression, the clockwork regularity of the right wing, the irrepressible, stifling allure of religious fanaticism. To paraphrase Jiang Qisheng: Australia's shame is the world's shame.

These are hard thoughts for those raised to regard our lucky country as one redolent in mateship and a fair go for all, but we should not shirk from thinking them if and when they are true. Indeed, these are the kind of truths that put those less fortunate than us in jail.

Truth ... is a risky business. When you're the victim of a barbaric system sitting on top of a people, dehumanising them, turning them into the lowest of beasts, sometimes your only crime, your crime in the eyes of the state [, is] to tell truths which, in [the state's] opinion, should best be whispered. To be branded a criminal is to be buried, little by little, until you are crushed by the heavy shadow of servility and shame.

Some of those crushed have been and remain writers. I'm using their words in order to reflect upon the power of this community not just as advocates of freedom, but as ears. We are listening. Humanity is in dialogue with itself, and we are part of that dialogue.

[F]ear is not the natural state of civilised man or woman, and it is not all-powerful. Andrej Dynko wrote from prison that the presence of resistance in the face of

monstrosity inspires "thousands of people to heroic deeds, both large and small." When Liu Jinsheng said that "[m]y imprisonment has not ... stopped my fight for democracy and liberty, nor my longing for knowledge," that "[o]n the contrary, it has tempered my willpower, disciplined my thinking, honed my writing ability", we see this inspiration in action. The urge to write is like the urge to live, to fight the silence that suffocates the human soul, for what succumbs to the silence sometimes never returns.

"I am now convinced, more than ever," wrote Ken Saro-Wiwa shortly before his execution, "that the path of literature is the assured way to human salvation and to civilisation. I hail the power of the pen."

We must remember.

--remember that [w]hen another writer in another house is not free, no writer is free.

--remember that [a]rt must do something to transform the lives of a community.

--remember that, in the words of a wise old saying, "[a] ruler who does not befriend a Poet is a fool, but a Poet who tries to befriend a ruler is twice as stupid."

In a little over a week, Australians here and around the world will take a small amount of time from their day to engage in another very important pastime--determining this nation's government, and to a certain extent its character and its future too. It may seem in this day and age, for this regime and others, that a television image outweighs everything else, but the truths that must be spoken remain on the far side of the scales. How is our national interest served by forgetting the children overboard fiasco, the plight of refugees in our own neighbourhood, and the detainment of innocent people on suspicion of terrorism? Concepts such as truth, justice and compassion cannot be dismissed as trite when these are often the only bulwarks which stand against ruthless power. Such inconvenient concepts must be emphasised at all levels of society before we find our fundamental freedoms--and the freedoms of those who place their hope in us--further eroded by ... nationalist sentiments, moral sensitivities, or--worst of all--business or military interests. When we fight for the freedom of expression we are fighting not just for writers, but for all people, for humanity itself.

"Now more than ever," wrote Margaret Atwood, "it's vitally time to support those with the courage to speak in a fully human voice."

Who will speak, and who will support them?

Who, if not us?

In closing, I would like to pay tribute to the following victims of oppression whose words I have quoted or paraphrased without crediting them in this speech, with additional apologies for mispronunciation:

Chris Abani, Paul Kamara, Angel Cuadra, Faraj Sarkohi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Chenjerai Hove, Faraj Ahmad Bayrakdar, Orhan Pamuk, and Rakhim Esenov