

# Confronting Horror: Writing About Torture

March 9, 2009

I DID NOT DREAM OF BEING TORTURED.

But I did dream of being caged, of being bound and blindfolded, of being kept cold and naked in a small steel box. I dreamed of terrible footsteps, always approaching, and the chilling sound of metal clanging against metal. I dreamed of endless screams, and of shadows that stretched toward me, and of hands holding instruments that I could never quite see.

The dreams ended, always, before the pain could become real. But that is a small matter. The fear was real enough.

I SPENT A LITTLE LESS THAN A YEAR researching and writing my book *American Methods* — or, a little more than a year if you count the time spent on revisions. The book examines the U.S. government's use of torture — in war, in prison, and by proxy. My research led me to read scores of human rights reports, hundreds of pages of government documents, countless newspaper articles, and numerous books on the history and practice of torture, international law, global politics, and rape. I learned a whole new vocabulary — "hooding," "monsterring," "stress positions," "falaka," "strip cells," "rendition," "waterboarding," "the Palestinian hanging." And I became acquainted with all variety of imaginative new uses for radiators, pliers, sandbags, broom handles, wire brushes, and typewriter covers. It was not easy work.

At the beginning, my attitude was impossibly naive. Not that I believed our government's official line, that torture is rarely practiced and never condoned — but I thought I could immerse myself in the subject for months and not suffer because of it.

I should have known better. I had already written one book about state violence, and I clearly remembered weeping at my keyboard, searching for words with which to describe the deep and abiding hate that could produce the murders of the civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney. I remembered the chill I felt typing out "death squad" as I wrote about the assassination of Fred Hampton. And still — I thought I could confront our practices of torture without also sharing in the spiritual wreckage that those practices have wrought. I assumed that my anger would protect me from the worst facts that I could be made to face. I was wrong, in part because anger cannot — and should not — diminish sorrow, or shame, or impotent loathing. But I expected, somehow, to stare into the abyss without the abyss also staring into me.

PAIN NEVER FEATURED DIRECTLY IN MY dreams. I did not see the torturers themselves, or their instruments. It was the fear — the terror — that forced me awake, gasping and sweat-soaked, in the middle of the night. And when I woke the fear stayed with me. The world felt uncomfortably small. The very idea of safety seemed brittle and thin; order was an obscene joke.

I gradually learned how to keep the nightmares at bay. They came in a cycle, and I labored to recognize it. So when I noticed that I was having trouble sleeping, before the dreams became too intense, I would shift my focus from research to writing. I would put away, for a time, whatever I was reading and try instead to get my thoughts in order, to translate my dread into written language. I built a wall with words, to keep out the fear. And as long as I kept writing, my anxiety would fade, my nightmares would cease. If writing could not restore the feeling of safety, it could at least shore up my confidence in my own quiet sanity. Such, I suspect, is a major reason why I write — to confront, understand, articulate, and in a very limited way, to control that which I fear.

But the horror remains. And through my writing, I do my part to spread it. I focus it in the text. I funnel it to the reader. I distribute it, measure upon measure, chapter after chapter. And in the process, I am changed.

WRITING ABOUT TORTURE CHANGED ME, and not always for the better. I am, I realize, less tough than I once thought — but this is no loss. And I am more wary of violence, and those who advocate or excuse it. This, too, is likely for the best. But I have also lost something, which could not rightly be called innocence and may be rather closer to faith. For I have come to see that the human spirit is not indomitable. It can be so thoroughly crushed that freedom and dignity disappear. They can be blotted out, surviving not even as ideals or aspirations. In one way, I have been faced with the fact of human mortality — not only in the physical or even spiritual sense — but in a moral sense as well. It is possible, through the medium of pain, not only to wipe out a person's existence, but also to erase her sense of self, to finally break her grasp on reality — to nullify and negate all values and all meaning. This knowledge, I see now, has its price.

And yet we must remember this: I am only thinking about torture, while elsewhere there are actual human beings held in lightless cells, starving and frozen, undergoing electroshock, being beaten, being raped. Their suffering is not in the least abstract. Their confrontation with horror is not in any sense voluntary. Their nightmares, I would wager, are not so easily allayed.

## **Footnotes**