

TOTAL WAR

By Christopher Moylan

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Like a Flemish hell panel, this modern 'parable' is both a warning and a premonition of what awaits us. We are at war with an 'unseen' adversary and the consequences of defeat are beyond our imagination. The collapse of natural law... 'Hair turned unusual colors, fell out or burst into flame' becomes not a metaphor but the new reality—a future that exists in the present when the conditions that surround us become the aggressor. Astonishing imagery, oracular prose and charismatic voice result in a stand out literary performance. Quote: 'There were reports of fugitive conceptions and trick or treat deliveries. Babies, unsuspected and completely unanticipated, appeared in the shower or in the middle of a jog. Tiny, sylph-like creatures attached by umbilical cords frail as silk.' And, this powerful sentence: 'It was not for them to say 'We declare war,' any more than it was to say 'We declare gravity' or 'We pronounce light.'*

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Our bodies were under attack. Some suffered from stress reactions, others migraines or hormonal imbalances. Hair turned unusual colors, or fell out, or burst into flame. Growths appeared in odd places. Door handles, car seats. Palms, tongues, and eyelids. Scaly eruptions. Encrusted deposits. It was as if a bomb had dropped—in each person, individually, the poison radiating idiosyncratically, through the lymph nodes or brain or circulatory system.

Casualties were everywhere. Biological disruptions, sabotage at the cellular level. Some women endured serial periods or periods like sacrificial offerings. There were reports of fugitive conceptions and trick or treat deliveries. Babies, unsuspected and completely unanticipated, appeared in the shower or in the middle of a jog. Tiny, sylph-like creatures attached by umbilical cords frail as silk. Males were subject to ludicrous distortions, derangement without the relief of

comedy. Full body arousal, priapism of the digits or nose or ears. Among the elderly, hearts burst or shriveled or continued beating, furiously, after death.

It was a war without battles. A frictionless war. No air raids or coastal sightings, no cruise missiles lighting up the skyline. No armies. No plausible enemy among the hostile powers. Our bodies were in the line of fire but everything else—our cities and towns, our roads and bridges, everything—was not. For that matter, there was no line of fire in the usual sense, or in any sense we could identify.

If there was no line of fire, if there were no armies or declared enemies, it was natural to wonder if we were actually under attack. Had war been declared and we didn't know it? Is that what one did, declare war? Pronounce it, perhaps. No one could remember. So much had been put aside over time that the terms and procedures of such official utterances had become vague.

War or peace, this was not for us to determine. Nor would those on high intervene in such matters. It was not for them to say 'We declare war,' any more than it was to say 'We declare gravity' or 'We pronounce light.' As for other questions, they were equally rigorous. What was an attack without a line, they asked. Likewise, what is pain without injury, suffering without illness? Pain and aggression without lines or origins, without a place or marker, how could one describe such things?

One could only infer, they said, that these were attacks from nowhere or everywhere: from the water, air or food, from power lines or ambient radiation. Likewise, the attacks might originate from within. Who is to say what occult powers reside in the realm of fantasy, dream, or reverie? Perhaps these attacks came from all directions or some, randomly or in sequence...

How must we respond to this state of affairs, we asked. Respond, they said, as you must respond: at all levels. A total response; carry the resistance to the air and water, food and drink. Purify them. Carry it to the screen and page. Eradicate suspect fantasy; destroy fifth column movies and stories. Call out the producers of treason and filth. Seize them. Poke his eyes out, cut out her tongue. Drag their guts in the public square. Seize the enemy. Seize every last one. We'll see who is reading this and we'll take necessary measures. Death to the readers of this page, death in agony.

See, you feel better already.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The central concern of my work is climate change and the lack of any response commensurate with the danger all of us face. In my short prose pieces I try to generate a violent storm within the confines of a compressed narrative, with the compression corresponding to tension of various sorts and the violence of the narrative to the dire prospects we face. Literary influences include Kafka, of course, the Swiss author Fleur Jaeggy, and the Italian poet Eugenio Montale.*

BIO: *I am an Associate Professor at NYIT where I publish short fiction, poetry and nonfiction. I have won an Academy of American Poets Prize and various other awards. This is part of a series of short, experimental pieces having to do with climate change.*

