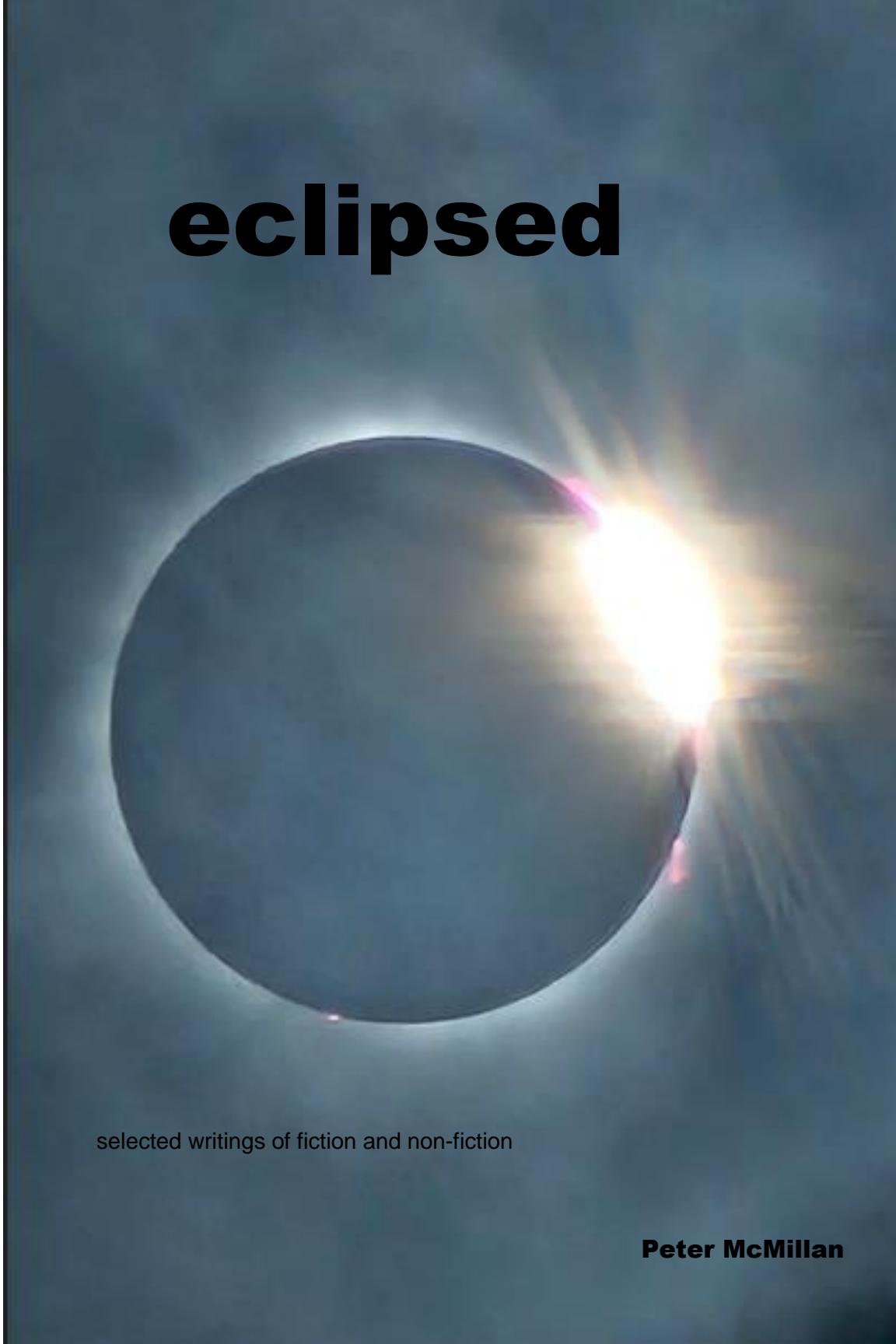


# eclipsed

A dramatic photograph of a total solar eclipse. A large, dark circular shadow of the Moon covers most of the Sun's face. On the right side of the Sun, where it is partially obscured by the Moon, a bright, multi-colored corona of light is visible, along with several dark, granular sunspots. The background is a deep, hazy blue.

selected writings of fiction and non-fiction

**Peter McMillan**

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**eclipsed: selected writings of fiction and non-fiction**

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*Flash! Fiction* (2012) by Peter McMillan

*Flash! Fiction 2* (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

*Flash! Fiction 3* (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

*Flash! Fiction 4* (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

*Flash! Fiction 5* (2017) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

*An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction* (2020) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

*Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction* (2020)  
by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

*Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties,  
2002-2008* (2020) by Peter McMillan

*Willowing Skywardly: Stories and Essays* (2022) by Peter McMillan

*Flash! Fiction: Around the Block* (2022) by Peter McMillan

*Writings Near the End of the Human Era* (2023) by Peter McMillan

2024

## Copyright



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*The writings in this book are 100% GPT-free with the exception of one section of text in the story, 'Lottie's Auto-generated Wake-up Routine.' The cover photograph is authentic as well. It has not been AI-generated or modified.*

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Peter McMillan, 2024

Cover Photograph: Ron Harding, Oakville, Canada, April 8, 2024

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## Introduction

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*eclipsed* is a brief collection of writings that blends 11 pieces of short fiction and 13 works of non-fiction. Ten of the latter are reviews of books I've read in the last half-year that I can comfortably recommend. I wouldn't waste your time with something that I felt wasted mine.

This volume is essentially a continuation of *Writings Near the End of the Human Era*, which addresses themes sufficiently dystopian to get us to pay attention to some of the possible futures of our species.

Peter McMillan  
Oakville, June 2024

## **PART ONE—FICTION**

---

"I'm a machine," says the spot-welder. "I'm caged," says the bank teller, and echoes the hotel clerk. "I'm a mule," says the steelworker. "A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist. "I'm less than a farm implement," says the migrant worker. "I'm an object," says the high-fashion model. Blue collar and white call upon the identical phrase: "I'm a robot." Studs Terkel, *Working*

Think back to the mid-70s. Or, if you weren't there, just imagine.

In the nation: We heard "I'm not a crook." We contracted a new economic disease—stagflation, calibrated according to the Misery Index. We watched Saigon Fall and Americans flee. The South finally got its Lombardi Trophy but we had to accept Miami. George Wallace was still running for president.

In town, we got three TV channels and occasional radio reception of WGN otherwise country music. We had a history but didn't know it too well. Some of it was well dead, buried and forgotten. Blacks and whites were pretty much living side by side in separate worlds. The federal courts made us integrate. That's why the high school was 60:40 black to white. Lots of whites started up a private school—an academy, they called it. Exclusive. Just like the country club. Churches were as segregated as they ever were. We had one doctor—a crotchety old man whether you were black or white, but if you were black you had a separate waiting room in the back. That was the 70s. High school football—just about the only local entertainment—brought blacks and whites as close as they ever got. Didn't mind a black stud running back but the quarterback had to be white. An unspoken rule. The legacy of the 19th century plantations was still alive. The town had two millionaires. Both were

plantation owners—peanuts. They were the employers, but the State came in a close third.

#

Already at 15, he was unloading the weekly grocery truck every Tuesday morning at 6:00, cold and dark in the winter. After school and Saturdays he bagged groceries and worked his way up to stocking shelves and running a register. Sunday was the Lord's day, and most working folk duly appreciated the Lord, particularly when they heard that in the city work went on seven days a week, 52 weeks a year.

After a couple of months working full time during his first summer, he got to learn what the world of work was all about. At first, it was exciting to learn new stuff that wasn't taught in school. And the money ... that was worlds better than an 'A' on a test. But over time the same thing, day after day; each week looking like the last and expected to be the same as the next. It didn't take much imagination to get the feeling that that life would be mighty dull ... and downright depressing. In the mind's eye, it seemed like a long, long tunnel, pitch black ahead, and no way but forward. It reminded him of the lead-in to that old TV series, *Get Smart*, where the guy walks through corridor after corridor, turning this way and that, time and again, as the powerful steel doors automatically clang shut behind him sending a reverberating echo ahead down the corridor as his guide.

In the summer and during the holidays, running the cash register for the lunch crowd that rushed in every day around noon—everybody in a hurry to check out before the food got cold and before the lunch break was over. He got to be so good and so fast that customers lined up to go through his checkout. It was a challenge to get everyone rung up, cashed out and sent on the way

to their half-hour (or hour if they were lucky) lunch. For about two hours each day around noon, there he was mechanically punching prices into the machine, collecting the money, making change, bagging the sandwiches, coleslaw, French fries, Salisbury steak, mash potatoes, pecan pie, and so on saying "Good day" or something of the sort to a parade of faces that rarely uttered more than "Here's a ten" or "Can you break a fifty?" or "Don't need a bag" and usually "Thanks." Elapsed time: less than 30 seconds per customer. If he took longer, he got those looks from the other cashiers. The 'lifers' were the most disagreeable, but after he'd been broken in he sort of understood why. Having a young kid pick up the job you've been doing for a decade or more wouldn't make you feel too special about yourself and your work.

He often overheard what they said about him—they weren't exactly whispering.

"Kid thinks he's special cause he makes as much an hour as we do."

"He's always trying to show us up, but you just wait'll he's been doin it for awhile longer—he'll slow down, stop trying to impress the bosses."

"His folks'll be packing him off to college soon I expect, and that'll be the last of this kinda work for him."

"Yep, but we'll get another one just like him."

"Dunno, I've got a college degree and I've been here two years now. It's the times."

"Well, I don't think it's right his taking our hours from us. We got families. He's just savin. I ain't never been in a position to do that."

After high school, I left. Never went back other than to visit my parents. Once they passed, I never returned. I had friends but most of them were gone as well. News came back to the eager townsfolk about the ones who'd escaped or set out to make a mark ... in the military (that was the most accessible ladder), in computers (very common), or in customer service (also common) or as an accountant, an engineer, a veterinarian, a real estate broker and so forth. There's always a little envy, but outwardly you were proud if you could talk about someone who'd made it 'out there,' as if some of what made them special reflected on you, too—"I knew so and so and ...." There likely was no shortage of embellishment in the telling and retelling of their successes. A paralegal, for instance, wouldn't necessarily object to being introduced as a lawyer. That sort of thing.

Anything less than success, well, that made the rounds, too, but there was a bitterness to those stories, as if those who'd stayed behind had been let down.

What they didn't understand was that making it on the outside wasn't a whole lot different. Work is work, and most of us do it because we have to and because we don't know what else to do. Sure, there are more different kinds of work and there are opportunities you won't find in a small town. But getting and keeping a job is more than just being good at something. For white collar work, you have to sell it. I mean you have to be as good at selling yourself as being good *at something* or *for something* as you are in actually doing something. For all the jobs I've ever worked, you have to respect the hierarchy and 'conform to the norm.' All the while, you may think you've made yourself indispensable, but you really haven't. It's a big world and there are a lot of hungry people.

And then, of course, there are the ubiquitous machines. Blue collar knows all about them. White collar is growing aware.

As much as people complain about work, most don't seem to realize how much of their identity is wrapped up in saying, for example, "I'm an engineer at BMW in Spartanburg" or "I'm a tax accountant with H&R Block" or "I'm a professor at Valdosta State." Funny thing about being without a job. When it happens, all that status vanishes. And regardless whether you could boast about your title or your employer, suddenly you feel lost and alone. If you're out of work too long, you become 'untouchable.' And if that isn't enough, you lose your routine. You're not gonna appreciate how incredibly substantial a routine is until you don't have one. Unemployed, you miss the human contact—even the silly, stupid conversations about the weather, sports, elections, and so forth. You miss having somebody asking your advice or looking to you to do your job so they can do theirs. You miss that panicked rush to meet a crazy order or deadline. You're outside looking in, disconnected from the great machine that once managed your thoughts, efforts, goals, emotions. Basically, your sense of being deflates like a party balloon.

I hated work, but then when I didn't have it, I hated not working. It's like you're a redundant piece of equipment—obsolete, maybe even malfunctioning—ready for the scrap heap. And that paycheck—no matter how measly—is a validation of your work, but more than that—a validation of your existence.

Now, how are you gonna explain that to the folks 'back home?' In their eyes, you're a failure. You remind them that they, too, are trapped. You were a hope, a source of vicarious liberation from everything small about a small town. Now, however much some may enjoy periods of schadenfreude at your expense, there's

something about your failure that sticks to them when they imagine themselves 'out there.'

Now that I'm two years from 'retirement,' I don't want it. Can't afford to be a pensioner anyway. I was meant to be what I am—a machine. Even if it means picking up gig jobs here and there. I don't know any other way. The money is one thing. Fitting in, being part of something larger than myself is something else. I used to think I was pretty confident and independent minded. But then, as they say, "Life happens."

During my grocery store days, I was too young and inexperienced to understand where the 'lifers' were coming from. It was probably better that way. I don't want my grandkids to know what I didn't know ... not until they're strong enough to take it on.

## Subway Musings (December 2023)

---

Forty some odd years ago, I'd been 'reading' at the Metro Reference Library downtown. 'Reading' because sitting facing a wall of glass overlooking the subway tracks that re-entered the city's underground, a tattered copy of *The Possessed* lying face down in my lap, my gaze fixed on the coming and going of the trains. It was relaxing to the eyes. I hadn't grown up in a city, and the novelty hadn't yet worn off. I'd yet to live the daily subterranean commute to and from work, day after day, year after year. I'd grown up out in the country and the town of 5,000 or so was two and a half miles away. People drove to work; there was no need for mass transit nor will there ever be in towns like that. Watching the trains—and they seemed to be precisely timed—was mesmerizing.

I'd had to be discreet while 'reading' though because I'd already been cautioned once about sleeping in the library. I hadn't really been sleeping. My eyes had been focused on the subway traffic—the rapid shuttling of people into and out of the city—imagining where all these people were headed and what was at the end of the line waiting for them. A library security guard wandering through the area had tapped me on the shoulder. It startled me and I jerked my head to face her. It must have seemed as though I'd been suddenly awakened. With a stern but otherwise blank face, she recited the rules: "No eating, drinking, talking OR sleeping in the library—no exceptions." A friend told me later that homelessness was vigilantly policed in public spaces and the central library was a known hangout. He laughed and said that was my 'wake-up call'—this was the big city.

*Now he tunes out his morning commute in and his afternoon commute out. Just like everybody else. Some sleep. Most keep their eyes open. Even though they can't tell you what they are*

*looking at. It's reflex. Self-protection in the rush hour crowd massed and meshed tight.*

*A newspaper headline opposite him gets his attention. A bomb threat on a civilian aircraft.*

These used to be a lot more common. Always made the nightly news. There was this guy, Ted Kaczynski, who was sending bombs in the mail. One reportedly came close to blowing a plane out of the sky—a jetliner en route from Chicago to D.C. Went on for more than a decade and a half before they caught him. Turned out the guy was political. Had some radical ideas about how technology was destroying society. He got the *Times* and *Post* to print his 'manifesto.' It was a few months later when I first heard about. I managed to get a copy from the Robarts Library microfilm collection of *The Washington Post*. (This was before the Internet Commons era.) It was an interesting expression of anti-technology views, but it was different from anything I'd read before. He went beyond ideas. He was no radical pacifist. His direct action approach was violent and lethal. The manifesto wasn't easily accessible back then, but it is now, and a quick Google search and it's on my phone. On re-reading the essay, paragraph 231 pretty much destroys it.

Throughout this article we've made imprecise statements and statements that ought to have had all sorts of qualifications and reservations attached to them; and some of our statements may be flatly false.

Seems awfully like what the intellectual revolutionary in the long-ago-read Dostoevsky novel, *The Possessed*, admits to his narrator interlocutor at one point.

"My friend, the truth is always implausible, did you know that? To make the truth more plausible, it's absolutely

necessary to mix a bit of falsehood with it. People have always done so."

"And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes."

Where does that come from? College days? Was it Vonnegut? No, it was earlier. Ellison. Harlan Ellison. From 1965. And with a very different meaning. Easy to check. This is it: "And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock ... we are slaves of the schedule."

The story's a quick read. Takes me back to my American Lit class. More of a rant than a satire, but definitely both. Not surprising its appeal to that age group, but even all these years later, it still 'feels' right. For me, it's no longer theoretical. It's just too real ... too visceral. Maybe it's the same for others. Uncomfortable to contemplate too deeply.

The 'system' wins. Like we didn't already know that? It reminds us every day in the business news headlines:

Bond Markets Seek Fiscal Austerity in Government Budgets  
**Central banks tame inflation as unemployment rises**

Mortgage foreclosures trending higher as banks post record profits

Wartime Expenditures Ease Recessionary Fears

Deficit Hawks Ensure Tax Stimulus to be Offset by Reductions in  
Social Programming

Income and Wealth Gaps Widen

Government Bailouts Fail to Slow Job Losses

It doesn't take a Harvard MBA to figure out what's going on, though it certainly makes living a lot easier if you have one.

Just put your head down and work—success doesn't come easy.

Put your heart and soul in it—no one's irreplaceable.

Give 110% ... for starters.

Embrace change.

Be flexible.

Seek advantage—competition is for losers.

Yep! That's why we're all gathered here today, packed together so tightly that every exhale from your neighbour is your next inhale. So close you can hear their thoughts, smell their last meal, feel their heels. So, why in God's name would we be moved by a jester, a joker, a jokester, a clown, a harlequin? Could such a foolish story written for college kids really evoke anything more than the rolling of eyes from those of us who have become battle-hardened and work-shaped by the workaday? Nope, we approach our future stone-faced as if we're all heading to a funeral. **This** is what's real ... and it's too damn depressing to think about let alone discuss with intellectual aloofness.

But hold on! Step back and imagine this. Once we get to where we're going and come back above ground, this is what hits us:

Jelly beans! Millions and billions of purples and yellows and greens and licorice and grape and raspberry and mint and round and smooth and crunchy outside and soft-mealy inside and sugary and bouncing jouncing tumbling clittering clattering skittering fell on the heads and shoulders and hardhats and carapaces of [everyone], tinkling on the [sidewalk] and bouncing away and rolling about underfoot and filling the sky on their way down with all the colors of joy and childhood and holidays, coming down in a steady rain, a solid wash, a torrent of color and sweetness out of the sky from above, and entering a universe of sanity and metronomic order with quite-mad coocoo newness. Jelly beans!\*

For a brief moment wouldn't we laugh and cry and shout as if we were quite mad—a deeply repressed ecstasy vented in our madness? Wouldn't we be able to breathe deeply? Feel our blood pressure drop? Forget about the post-it notes in our heads? Enjoy the moment?

Naturally(?), in short order, order would return and we would resume our roles and return to schedule. But wouldn't the memory be worth having even if the 'reality' never again materializes?

*"Union Station, this stop. Union Station." The cars disgorge their contents onto to the concrete platforms and all daydreaming ceases. We lose our man in the human flood.*

---

\* This extended quote is from Harlan Ellison's short story, 'Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman.'

## An Invitation (January 2024)

---

"No way! You know I can't stand those people."

"You really need to get over it. They're not so bad . . . . Well, actually they are, but this is just one of those times you have to suck it up."

"I don't think I can do it. You know I almost approached your brother-in-law—"

"I can't get into this right now. We just buried Mother Saturday, and . . . ." she says, tucking in her lower lip. "I really can't handle these petty grievances."

"Petty? This guy insulted your family for 40 years. He never joined the family for Christmas Eve or—"

"I said I don't want to talk about that right now."

"Your parents were good enough to be babysitters. And now, I mean these last several years, your mother's been on call to look after the dog whenever they went away. In the beginning, didn't your mother used to call him *Pinkel Fritzchen*—"

"YOU called him that. She called him *Fritzchen*.

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm going out. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Where you going?"

"I don't know yet. I'll be back when I'm back."

*If she'd been MY mother, I'd have asked someone to tell the son of a bitch that the family would prefer he not be there. What a pretentious ass. A trust fund baby who'd be a nobody if his old man hadn't been a somebody. And her sister? She's smart and attractive. Why does she obey his every command? What hold does he have over her?*

*Don't be stupid! There's the cottage, the Florida condo, the house in the city, the company, the country club—*

*Stop it! Do you really think she is not aware of all of that? Of course she is. She just doesn't want to lose her sister.*

*You still rehashing this?*

*Like, don't you have better things to think about?*

*She said it was a goodwill gesture . . . or that it should be taken as one. She's not naive, you know. You seem to always forget: people aren't as simple as you think they are.*

*She says we've been invited to her sister's posh country club along with HIS family. She knows how I feel about country clubs and that it goes way back for me. But then, she doesn't go for that crowd either—never has. So unlike her sister in that way.*

*She'd never say it but she expects me to do the 'adult thing' here.*

*Something that she said again just the other day . . . "There won't be anyone at my funeral." Actually, that should be MY line, not hers. Anyway, she seems afraid that she's lost her friends for good. Sometimes that's put to my account, and that's fair . . . to a point.*

*But really, she does put too much into her work . . . and that's kinda like someone we both know, hmm? And now that she's closing in on retirement . . . and the other—*

*Damn!*

*Would it really mean that much to her?*

*It would be HELL for me!*

#

"I'm back." The dog greets her at the front door as if she's been away for days.

"Settle. Now that's a good girl," she says as she puts her purse on the ottoman and hangs her coat in the hallway entrance.

"Wanna watch a Chinese scifi movie? Rozina mentioned it when we went for lunch the other day. She said it's not as good as the book but it's still worth watching."

"No thanks. I'm reading tonight."

"OK, but I'm gonna watch it . . . if you change your mind. Come on girl, let's go watch TV."

And again they fall into their after-dinner routine—going their separate ways.

Lying on the sofa in the living room, he can't focus on his book.

#

*Tom had booked a special surgical procedure for chronic back pain. Another of his car accidents. That was '82. The procedure wasn't available in the U.S. yet. Mom and I went with him, and to save money, we drove all the way from Bainbridge across the U.S.-Canadian border to Toronto.*

*Mom was still teaching school back then, and I'd taken six months off from college to work and save some money and get my head straight about finishing school, but we were both able to get away. Tom had been laid up for months in his attic room and Mom and Dad were hoping this would work. He was going nuts and making life hell for everybody.*

*Before the Internet it WAS tough, because he loved to read, but there wasn't much around to read, so he whiled away the hours reading and re-reading the Reader's Digest Condensed Books that hadn't been unpacked since we came back from Japan.*

*We got to Toronto late in the evening. Our trip planning was lousy and we ended up driving mile after never-ending mile along Dundas Street in plodding stop-and-go traffic all the way from way out in Mississauga, which we'd taken to be Toronto. God, what a waste of time! I laugh now, but it wasn't funny at all then.*

*The Holiday Inn downtown was our first choice because it was an American hotel. We were convinced that we were in a foreign country. Not so different at all really, but we didn't know that then. The hotel was very tall compared to what we passed on the road. But in the downtown core it was dwarfed by the surrounding office towers and condos. And that CN Tower—brand new at the time they said—literally rose up into the clouds.*

*We parked in the underground—something we'd only seen a couple of times before in the highfalutin part of downtown Atlanta—*

---

*and took the elevator up to the hotel lobby. After a twelve-hundred mile drive we were spent. It's unbelievably mind-numbing to drive on auto pilot for hundreds and hundreds of miles across unchanging countryside. Then there were the cities and that was white-knuckle driving. And such a long string of them—through Cincinnati, Dayton, Toledo and, then we got lost in Detroit in neighborhoods not on our itinerary. Mom and I did all the driving so we were really worn down and mentally burned out. Tom was pretty miserable the whole way—unable to get comfortable lying in the backseat—and he, like always, he let us know about it.*

*On arriving we were starving and desperately needing and wanting hot showers after more than 20 hours cooped up in the confined space of our '72 Oldsmobile Delta 88. All we'd eaten were chicken salad sandwiches, Chex party mix and some apples and oranges from home, and that got really old really fast, but we were doing this on the cheap. Tom's surgery was gonna be expensive enough.*

*Once in the elevator—we were alone at first—and we stretched our limbs, creaking, popping and groaning as we moved from one nerve centre to the next. We felt blessed (Mom didn't like the word 'lucky') for the privacy, not at all self-conscious—there was no one else there.*

*Two levels higher, things changed. A well-dressed couple, thirtyish, got into the elevator, eyes averted and noses tipped up.*

*That was my moment of trauma—the shocking contrast between us and them. We were like commoners who'd traveled on foot, and they were stylish and appeared well-to-do and had most likely just flown in on a modern jetliner. They looked exotic—our frame of reference being the ordinary black and white folk of a small southern town—and they spoke a language we'd never heard before. It certainly wasn't Japanese. That's when the 'foreignness'*

*did become real. But we were the foreigners. They smelled nice, too—not overly perfumed but clean and fresh and scented with the lifestyle of the affluent urban middle class. We were foreign in more ways than one. I still cringe at the thought that we must have seemed like country yokels.*

*I remember wishing I could distance myself from Mom and Tom. Since college I'd developed this notion that I was becoming sophisticated and deserving of respect from those who not only enjoy but expect fine things to be served up . . . and don't dare mix with the pedestrian, the prolix, the homespun. As clearly as it were only yesterday, I remember feeling embarrassed at being with Mom and Tom. But that wasn't the end of it. I was equally ashamed of my mind's betrayal of my family. It was a wretched one-and-a-half minute elevator ride to the hotel lobby. Those 90 seconds get hashed and rehashed from time to time, calling up contrary feelings of low self-esteem and disloyalty, humiliation and self-contempt.*

*But life continued to pile up more experiences, and years later another came on like a tsunami. Five years ago, I'd nearly lost my mind due to a nervous breakdown. I'd been hospitalized and kept in what the residents called the 'Cuckoo's Nest.' I'd been prescribed 'Dopiramate' and was functionally inert for weeks. Couldn't dial a phone number. Couldn't write a complete sentence. Couldn't even copy a sentence without making mistakes. Couldn't keep my balance and couldn't even leave the house. That was the closest I've ever come to realizing how quickly you can lose it all. At the time, there seemed no way back. How do you learn to read again? Forget about work or driving—What kinda life would that be?*

*But I got a second chance—unshrinkwrapped. I'm still old and fat and forgetful—unable to function even as well as a forty-year-old version. But I can read again. I've even started writing a little. Hell, I'm even getting up on the roof to clean the gutters. It's like*

*suddenly finding you're useful again. I was lucky to get away with a warning. Never know when you'll get more than just a warning.*

*And yet (or maybe because) . . . my wife and I have become estranged. During our first thirty years, it never occurred to me. But it did. And yet we've never completely given up. Funny thing, when I proposed at the Bayview Kmart—we were very young and poor—I had said that we'd have a better marriage if we started out together and worked through the tough years. What I couldn't see was that the tough years wouldn't end.*

*Damn!*

#

The next morning, she had her coffee, he had his herbal tea and the dog had its chew toy. Out of the blue he blurted out, "What the hell. Let's go."

Not having been privy to his inner conversations, she didn't know what he was talking about. "Go where?" she asked

"To Donaldos, or whatever it's called."

"What?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"What made you change your mind?"

"It's a long story. One day I'll try to write about it. Maybe it'll make more sense."

"Are you sure? Because I don't want to say 'Yes' and have you martyr yourself and then turn around and blame me."

"That's fair. But I won't. In fact what I was thinking is that after the dinner at Ronaldos, we can do something we used to do way back in the beginning."

"What would that be?"

"Let's keep it spontaneous."

"But would it be 'spontaneous' if you knew ahead of time and I didn't?"

"OK, you're right. So, here's what I was thinking. Remember Krispy Kreme?"

"Oh god, we're too old for that. And we don't burn calories like we did in college."

"I doubt if they have the 'all-you-can-eat' midnight special anyway. That's a college town thing. It'll be a Friday night and we can sleep in if L2 will go along.

"She's a dog."

"Alright, I'll take her out in the morning and when we come back we'll give her a special treat with her breakfast and then all of us can go back to sleep for awhile. We could use a weekend off."

"On one condition."

"What's that."

"That we go out and have a steak dinner in the evening. All those carbs will kill me if I don't have red meat."

"Done!"

"But can we put that aside . . . for now?" she says, looking away for a moment. "I still need some time to deal with . . . things."

"Of course. I'm sorry, I . . . I'm not being very sensitive, am I?"

"I have to leave for work now. Oh God! I've gotta hurry or I'll miss the 7:43. Can you drive me to the station?"

"Uhm, yeah. I mean, of course."

## **Lottie's Auto-generated Wake-up Routine (January 2024)**

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### **Version 1**

Every morning, the sun rises and the birds start chirping, signaling the start of a new day. And for Lottie, a 5-year-old female Flat-Coated retriever, this means it's time to wake up and start her daily routine. As the sunlight streams through the windows, she slowly opens her eyes and stretches her legs, her tail wagging in anticipation of the day ahead. She then hops off her cozy bed, letting out a big yawn, and trots over to her food bowl. With her nose in the air, she takes in the scent of her breakfast, a mix of kibble and wet food, and eagerly devours it. Once her belly is full, she heads to the back door and scratches at it, signaling that she needs to go outside. As soon as the door is open, she bolts out into the yard, her paws hitting the ground with a thud. She starts sniffing around, checking for any new scents or critters that may have visited during the night. After a few minutes of exploring, she finds her favorite spot in the yard and does her business. With that taken care of, she heads back inside and makes her way to her owner's bedroom, ready to start the day with some playtime. She jumps up on the bed, her tail wagging furiously as she licks her owner's face, eagerly waiting for them to wake up and join in on the fun. After a good round of tug-of-war with her favorite toy, she's ready for a nap. She curls up at the foot of the bed, her rhythmic breathing a clear sign that she's already in dreamland. And just like that, the energetic and playful 5-year-old Flat-Coated retriever is back to being a peaceful and content pup, until her next adventure begins.

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### **Version 2**

There's a loud plunk, 70 pounds of solid muscle hitting the floor. Then, comes the ritual morning back dance. Spine curving this way

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and that, upside-down Lottie is working out the kinks and indulging in a hedonistic full-bodied back scratch, those long retriever legs kangaroo punching the air accompanied by a voice from deep down—something between a growl and a series of emphatic grunts. And as suddenly as she dropped to the ground, she pops up and, back on all fours, vigorously shakes her protuberantly-snouted head with a ginormous snort you—still half asleep—hope is aimed in another direction. Lottie's up . . . and so everyone else should be.

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One paragraph was written by a human and the other by an AI system programmed by humans. Which is real and which is machine-produced?

In the early 1970s, there was a television commercial, ‘Is it Live or is it Memorex?’ Fifty years later, we’re back to the same puzzle. The questions then were: is ‘live’ better than ‘recorded,’ and even if you think ‘live’ is better, is ‘recorded’ good enough . . . most of the time? Are ‘live’ and ‘recorded’ renditions complementary instead of mutually exclusive, i.e., is ‘live’ music sometimes superior to ‘recorded’ music? Clearly, ‘recorded’ music has the advantage of being more affordable and accessible anytime and anywhere, but how important is the ambience and presence of a concert or recital?

So, today, our question is: is human-generated fictional text ‘better’ and even if you think so, is ‘AI-generated’ good enough . . . most of the time? For the moment, we will set aside the decided advantages of AI-generated writing in government and corporate communications. We’re only interested in the case of fiction at present. The human author (of fiction) will likely answer the question differently from the reader, although readers familiar with an author’s style may always and everywhere choose the human-

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generated text of their favourite authors assuming affordability is not a factor. But would future readers of Dickens be missing anything if they never read a Dickens' original but only AI versions of, say, *David Copperfield* or *Oliver Twist*? Or, would tomorrow's enthusiasts of Dostoyevsky be any worse off if they only read an AI-generated English language version of *The Brothers Karamazov*?

An artist may despair at being replaced by a machine, but what if the machine, capable of processing at 100 yottaflops the volume of data in 100 yottabytes, eventually were to become self-learning, manifest empathetic understanding and . . . start reproducing? Could an R. Shakespeare win the Nobel Prize for Literature by the year 2148 CE? Did Orwell know that multiple variations of *1984* would be conceivable by the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century?

Perhaps, if human existence is capable of some sort of eternal recurrence, there will be answers to these questions . . . and not just for the species but for us.

*Meanwhile, Lottie, go back to sleep.*

## **Monday (March 2024)**

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### **The night before**

If you really wanna hear about it. It really wasn't courageous like our sister seemed to think. After one play near the end of the varsity Spring Jamboree, I decided to quit. It wasn't easy. White quarterback for the undefeated junior varsity team—a dream come true for townsfolk who never missed their Friday night home game.

Some of 'em probably thought I must have been queer. Most thought I was afraid . . . and they were right. When you bust the play that coulda won the game, you hear 'em talkin, whisperin, and you see how they don't look you in the face.

That— What happened to Lucius . . . that was cruel. He went real fast from bein a stud to bein a nobody. Wasn't his fault— Out for the season his senior year. Folks couldn't even get his name right after that.

Coach told me I'd be a quitter the rest of my life. Uncle Sonny, who'd never spoken more than two words to me before, said plenty of great players—even Fran Tarkenton had bad games. Uncle Sonny was a Bulldog's fan. I wasn't.

The next three years are nothing to report. Somewhere along the way, I had the wits to go all out for Jesus, and that bought me all the protection I needed til I finished high school and left town.

### **Twenty-seven years earlier**

They were the last ones in the chapel. The older brother wailed in fits and starts and dropped to his knees, his left hand firmly gripping the edge of the casket.

"Dad, I'm so sorry! I'm so, so sorry!"

Standing on either side of him, the younger brother and the mother exchanged quiet glances.

Behind them, the funeral director was closing the doors.

The older son reached in to touch his father's face.

"Don't do that!"

"Son, shh! It's OK, let him."

"You've got one helluva nerve, you know."

"You're not my judge. He was my father, too. This is between us. Nothing to do with you. Back off."

"Boys, please."

"You're just putting on a show."

"Go to hell!"

"Stop it! Just stop it!"

"It's just not right, Mom. He's always—"

"Leave him be. We gotta grieve in our own ways."

"Yeah. Leave me alone. We can't all be like you . . . stoic, if that's what you call it. I call it smug and unfeeling."

"You would, you—"

"Enough! Both of you. If you don't show some respect, I'm gonna walk right outta here! You don't want that. Trust me."

### **End of last July**

"He's 17 for God's sake. Of course he's gonna have bad days."

"Yeah, but this was like no other."

"I wish you had woken me. I get up—don't remember when I finally fell asleep—and first thing I hear is 'euthanasia.'"

"You needed to sleep. We've both been sleep deprived for months. And we've yelled and screamed at each other over every little thing. 'Did you update his chart? Why not? And now you're yelling at me?'"

"You yelled at me for the same reasons."

'It doesn't matter. We were both over the edge."

"But that's a cop-out and you know it."

"I don't know. Maybe it is. But you know he couldn't walk or stand up on his own. His rear end had been collapsing on occasion for a long time. But this . . . was different. And those tremors he was having . . . they reminded me of Lucy's grand mals."

"I know. I know. But I can't help but wonder—"

"Me too. And if I let myself, I could work myself into a guilt frenzy in a skinny minute."

"But I didn't have enough time with him at the end. It was like 'wake up' and "We have to put the dog down. Why did we have to rush?"

"There was nothing more we could do for him. I remember the fear and terror in Lucy's eyes. I couldn't let that happen again."

"But we've always done whatever it took. This time it was so gray, so vague. With our other dogs it was always 100% certain that euthanasia was the only choice, but—"

"WE had to make the decision this time. Of course, the vet supported our decision, but—"

"She— Just don't go there, OK. It's just too much. I can't handle that right now."

"OK. So, THIS time it was all on us. He was our boy. . . and he trusted us."

"My poor Ollie! My poor, poor Ollie! Oh my God, this is so hard." She crumpled to the floor, hugging herself.

### **Last Thanksgiving**

"Sam, if you don't want to go to the party, just tell me."

"I'll go" dragging out the words with a deep sigh.

"Don't martyr yourself. I just thought you'd enjoy getting out."

"I said I'll go, OK?"

"It's not what you said, it's how you said it. You should hear yourself."

"Not everyone can be the life of the party, Ren."

"Don't think anyone would expect that, Sam."

"Touché! Feel better?"

"F\_\_\_ off!"

"You're so emotional sometimes, Renate."

### **Friday, a month earlier**

"So, what's the problem? God, what are you doing man?" shouts the supervisor his little hands cupping the top of his cue ball head.

"I'm swaging these parts but the fittings don't match the plates, and—" answers the temp before he's cut off, his voice barely audible above the hammering of the presses.

"Didn't I explain this to you? **YOU'VE GOT TO PAY ATTENTION!** Now, see here, this block fitting goes on the **RIGHT** side of the frame and the hose fitting on the **LEFT.**"

"But the plates—"

Still shouting the supervisor interrupts again, "You're using the wrong plates man! Where'd you get those? I told you the 4868 plates **NOT** the 4994s. Weren't you listening?"

"Well, I made a mistake." Attempting to smooth over and then move on, but the supervisor—like a dog with a meat bone—doesn't let go.

"You sure did! Lucky you stopped when you did."

"I said it was a mistake. I've never worked in a factory before—" says the temp, still trying to save face.

But the supervisor keeps coming, "Yeah, but this **ISN'T** rocket science. Anybody off the street should be able to follow simple instructions."

"Well, I don't know what you want me to do at this point," says the temp, the heat rising to his face.

**"JUST PAY ATTENTION** and ask me right away if you don't understand. Got it?"

"Yes" answers the temp avoiding 'Sir' at all costs.

"Now finish off this lot. Then come and find me." The supervisor jogs after the plant manager who is walking by, then turns back and adds, "Please and thank you."

## Today

Papaw saw it back at the end of the war—the First World War—long before they built the Golden Gate. What would he have been thinking as he sailed out between San Francisco and Sausalito? Back then, Guam was weeks away. This was a whole different world from the pines and red clay back home.

Even today, past the strait stretches an endless expanse of raw ocean with no last-minute reminders of the great power and ingenuity of human civilization. And on a solitary sailboat heading out where all around is water. No land in sight and the vast bridge hidden in fog, a fog so heavy you're wet to the skin. On your lips, the salty ocean water. Soon the foghorns will fade to silence. From there on out it's open water for . . . forever.

## **Five years before**

"Hey girl! It's great to see you again. You're looking good!" pulling Renate close and kissing her on both cheeks.

"God, is it ever good to see you again, Rach! And how 'bout you? You look better than ever. What's it been . . . five years?"

"It was Chloe's graduation. You two were driving back from Philadelphia and you met us in Oberlin. She was so happy you could make it."

"We got a lot of catching up to do." To the maître d', "Karl, could we have the table for two over by the window?"

"This is a great little restaurant. Do you come here often?"

"We used to . . . but it's been awhile. I wasn't sure the maître d' would remember me. Are you okay to have a drink? You're not driving back tonight, are you?"

"Yes, I have to be back in the office first thing tomorrow morning . . . but we can have a glass. Do you they have a good Sauvignon here?"

"Yes . . . at least they used to." To Karl as he passes their table, "Karl, could we have two glasses of your best Sauvignon Blanc? Thank you." Turning back to Rachel, "So, tell me. How's life as a partner?"

"It's been a crazy six months. One of the senior partners left, and I ended up with a fair number of his clients."

"That's amazing! How'd the other partners take it?"

"Since the other two are also senior partners, they didn't feel threatened. They even invited me to meet with their prospects for the vacancy."

"Wow, I knew you'd take off given the chance. But tell me, do you miss the 'grunt work' of law? I remember you were at the law library till all hours when we were in school."

"I do, but you get older and you see the younger attorneys are just a little faster . . . not as seasoned but they can churn through the texts like I guess I used to. But that's enough about me, tell me about you? I'm dying to hear what you've been into lately."

"I'm no longer in HR per se. How ironic, huh—from a dissertation on privilege in East German literature to Human Resources! Sorry, old news. Anyway, after three years I'd had enough, so I started a small consultancy providing diversity and equity advice and plans to banks and insurance companies."

"With all your experience and connections from DEI in government and universities, you must be much sought after. I mean, I know that it's highly contentious politically, but it is pretty much accepted as *fait accompli* in the private sector, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is though during the upswing of the election cycle, companies like to be more discreet. CEOs are beginning to see the writing on the walls and some have enough foresight to discount the hyped-up rhetoric of some of the radical nativists. But let's not talk shop. There's so much more we have to talk about."

"I agree. How about this for a change in topics? Chloe's getting married in September?"

"That's terrific! Congratulations! Who's the lucky guy?"

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"Umh, not a guy. She met someone through her community volunteering, and they've been together now for a year and a half. Shayne, C's fiancé, grew up in a very traditional Catholic family, and her parents are slowly processing. Mark and I are thrilled. We love Shayne. She's really a beautiful person, and we think they'll make great parents."

"Parents?"

"Of course, they'll adopt. They're not into this immortality thing, they say, and they'd rather not add to the world's overpopulation but help parent the unparented."

"I can see Chloe doing that. She always was so kind—no, what's the word—

"Empathetic?"

"Yes, exactly.

"And neither Mark nor I know where that came from . . . but you know, we both respect that she is her own person and not obsessed with emulating or competing with us and our friends."

"I sometimes regret not having children."

"But—"

"Well, I'm not the mothering type and Sam has always been about work . . . and the dogs."

"Is he still not winding down? I mean, that's a grueling pace—"

"It is . . . and has been . . . for the both of us." Renate fidgets with her cutlery as she speaks. "Until recently he was still flying to Europe two or three times a year—Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, you know."

"Were you able to accompany him?"

"No, and I'm kind of glad, because it sounded like he's always in meetings, so there was no time to enjoy." She pauses. "Besides, I'm so busy flying cross country with guest lectures and seminars, I can only get away for a weekend to myself every now and then. It's not unusual for us be apart for a week to 10 days at a time."

"Remember when we were in school pulling all-nighters day after day. We thought working would be a reprieve—"

"It's been anything but. Now, I'm happy when I get six hours of uninterrupted sleep. I imagine it isn't too different for you?"

"Mark is pretty good about keeping me from overextending myself, but there are days, even weeks, when nobody and nothing can hold me back."

"It's funny—not in a humorous way—but sometimes when I try to step outside myself and my life, I can see my whole world around me . . . but I'm not in it. I try really hard not to be alone, because I can't bear that any longer." She blinks and takes a long sip from her wine glass.

## **5 years from now**

"I just love rooms filled with the clutter of decades. Everything here was at one time put in its place for a reason. Does anyone still remember why? This bunch of dried roses hanging by the

window— This German literature— DDR? Had to Google that. Lots of music here but no stereo, just a smart speaker about the size of a dinner roll. And Covid masks—a couple of unopened boxes and one on a wooden peg collecting dust. An old Japanese—maybe— birch wood carving of three hikers. A stack of dog journals—the last one unfinished.“

"Quit daydreaming, Alice! The furniture's already loaded. You still gotta go through her clothes. Here, I'll take over in this room. We got less than an hour to get back before closing."

"Oh, alright. There's just one thing. I want this book of poetry. It was written by one of my teachers—one of the few I liked. Listen to this."

"Take it, but get going. We got a big house to do on Lakeshore tomorrow morning early, and I'm tired and ready to quit for today.

"Alright already!"

"Think any of these books will sell?"

"Probably not. It's all e-books now."

## The Elevator (March 2024)

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Creak. Groan. A jolt and the floor drops two feet and bounces to a stop. The old man loses his balance and teeters over in the direction of the other passenger, a young teenager. She reaches out and steadies him.

“Sir? Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better . . . but I’ve been a whole lot worse.”

She picks his cane up off the floor and hands it to him.

“Thank you, Miss.”

“You’re welcome, sir.” After she says it, she looks away.

“This old building . . . Things act up sometimes.” He presses the emergency button. “I think I’ve seen you before, but my eyes aren’t so good anymore.”

“We just moved in.”

“Nobody answering.”

“Hello. Are you *in* the elevator?

“Hello. Yeah we seem to be stuck. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> floors I think.”

“Are you okay for now? Anybody hurt?”

“No, just a little shaken up.”

*“Is this Mr. B?”*

*“Yes, it is.”*

*“Mr. B, this is Helen with the property management company. I’ll get a guy right on it, OK?”*

*“Thanks, Helen.”*

He notices the teen’s shopping bag, and says, “So, you headed to the grocery store?”

“Yeah. My Mom’s leg is still healing so I do all the shopping.”

“You must be a good daughter. What’s your name?”

“Sara.”

“I’m Albert, but most folks just call me Mr. B.”

“How do you spell that?”

“Just the letter ‘B.’ My last name’s too long to pronounce.”

“Mr. B. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Is this a safe place to live. My mom’s afraid to leave the apartment.”

“Well, it’s a big city, Sara. There’s lots of bad people, but I like to think that there are more good people than bad. We do have to watch out for one another though.”

“That’s what I tell my mom.”

“Well, Sara, soon as we get out of this elevator, I’m going to the store myself to pick up some flowers. Can I accompany you?”

“Sure thing.” She removes her black-and-white patterned scarf and puts it away in her purse.

“It’s my wife’s birthday, and I like to bring fresh flowers.”

“I’m sure she’ll be very pleased.”

“I like to think so, Sara.” He takes off his red baseball cap and stuffs it in his back pocket.

“We’re moving again. Does this happen often?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s my first time.”

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“You get everything you need?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You okay to walk back by yourself? I’m stopping by the cemetery before I go back.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“See you around, Sara.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. B.”

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## **There Was Something I Had to Say (April 2024)**

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So, I'm thinking there's something really important I have to say.

Alright. What might that be?

Umh. Hold on a sec.

Did you lose something?

Sort of. I forgot what I was gonna say . . . but wait, it'll come back.

Ok, but don't take too long. You don't have much time.

Can I get back to you?

Like I said there isn't a lot time left.

How much?

Can't exactly say.

Why not?

Places to go, people to see, man. You're not the only one.

Oh! So how many?

What's with all these questions. If you don't have anything to say, just say so.

I have to think. I'm getting frazzled. So many thoughts but none that I want right now.

Maybe you should write them down.

Well, that's what I've done in the past.

And, how did that work?

Once I'd finished with what I wanted to say, I couldn't find anyone to listen.

How about some of that stuff you've written. Wanna let me have that?

Umh! No, I don't think so.

Why not?

Because there's not enough there. It seems trivial.

Compared to what?

Compared to what I've heard others say.

You've got nothing new to add?

Well, I thought I did, but it's gone now.

What makes you think it's important . . . you know, something that you should say because it hasn't been said before . . . at least not in the way you wanna say it?

It's hard to say. It's a feeling.

A feeling you can't express in words. That's a new one.  
(sarcastically)

No really. It came to me this morning around 4:15. I had to go to the bathroom to get some toothpaste. My mouth was really dry, but I wasn't thirsty. That happens when I sleep with my mouth open or when I'm talking in my sleep.

How do you know? I mean, do you hear yourself talking to . . . er, yourself?

Yeah, I do. In the dream I'm having, I hear myself fine.

Do you remember anything you've said? For example this morning?

Only that it was important and shouldn't be forgotten.

Ever thought of recording your thoughts on your phone?

Yeah, I use my cell sometimes, but most often I just can't summon the energy to wake up enough to put anything in words.

And this morning?

Only what's got us this far in the conversation.

Which sounds like something you could make up just by randomly typing something on your keypad. You know, stream of consciousness where everything is connected but not in any way that would make sense to others, like me.

I've been trying to recall what I was reading before I went to sleep last night, but it wasn't anything particularly interesting much less important. I think it was just snatches from articles in the sports section.

How about conversations? Were there any unusual or noteworthy conversations you had or heard recently?

Not really. I was at the hospital having some tests run, and I spent a few hours in different waiting rooms. It was busy. There were others waiting, too. Some of the conversations were in English, but I was trying to read and ignore what was being said, so I don't remember anything special.

What about expressions, you know, body language, that sorta stuff?

Well, you know, in the hospital, when you're getting tests done, you watch other people and maybe imagine their situation. Why they're there and all that. But nothing left a strong impression, at the time or later.

What about you? What were you thinking at the time? Like, what kinds of tests are we talking about?

I don't really wanna talk about that stuff.

Why not?

It doesn't have anything to do with why you're here.

Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Let me decide.

No. I don't wanna go there.

Well, if you won't work with me, I can't help you. I'm only trying to help you recover whatever it was you wanted to tell me about. You're lucky because my schedule isn't too tight today. I rarely have this kind of time to spend with—

Say it. Just say it! What am I—what are ‘we’—to you?

I can’t say.

Can’t or won’t?

Now, you’re showing aggression again. Don’t forget. I’m here at your request. I’m here to put on the record what it is that you think or feel you have discovered, that no one else has discovered. It’s all the same to me whether you talk or not.

Maybe you wouldn’t even think it was important—just some frail attempt to express understanding of what can’t be understood . . . by us.

Not to be insulting, but whatever you had to say wouldn’t for me be the epiphany that it might be for you. BUT, and I want to stress this point, whatever you had to say could be interesting for our studies and future plans.

Whose? Who is ‘we’?

You’re asking for far more than you can comprehend, which in itself is valuable, but I can’t just hand you a revelation. You wouldn’t know what to do with it if I did, and, for us, it would be meaningless for you to contemplate such matters if it didn’t originate with you.

So, that’s it.

That’s it.

Whatever it was that I asked you here for is still as far from recall as it was five minutes ago. Actually, it’s probably irretrievable now.

That happens. And billions never get to speak. We know that. And some, well, let's put it this way—some are prolific, relatively speaking.

But—

No more ‘buts,’ I have to go now. Think about our conversation. Try again . . . if you can.

## **On the Way Home From the Hospital (April 2024)**

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Dad, did you see Mrs. Onderdonk today?

Yes, she said to say 'Hello.' Asked if you're looking forward to 5th grade.

Did you tell her how many books I've read this summer?

Yes, I did. She was very pleased.

I finished another one today. It was real hot in the car, so I went to the park down the street and sat on a bench under a big old oak tree and read.

Do you wanna stop at Colonel Dixie's on the way home?

Yeah! Can I get a filet-o-fish sandwich and an orange soda?

Yep! That's what I'm gonna have, too.

*We'll have two filet-o-fish sandwiches and two orange soft drinks. And extra tartar sauce and napkins, please.*

On the way home, can we listen to the Gator Bowl on the radio?

Yeah, we should be able to pick it up.

Do you think Auburn's gonna win?

Don't know. Texas is pretty good this year.

Dad?

What son?

Are you scared driving Highway 45 at night?

Not particularly. Why?

Cause in school they talk about all the bad car accidents, people getting killed. It's so dark out here after we leave the city.

Yes, it's very dark. But look out your window. See all those stars. Can't see that many when you're in the city.

Yeah, must be millions and millions. I tried to count once, but I got dizzy after about 100.

That's pretty good. It's hard to keep them apart, they're so close together.

I like the ones that shoot across the sky. Mom says to make a wish when you see one.

Some nights you can make lots of wishes. Got your list ready?

What list?

Your list of wishes.

I've got a couple.

What are they?

Can't say. It'll jinx me.

OK, I'll keep mine secret, too.

You've got wishes?

Course I do! Everybody's got wishes.

Do the people you visit in the hospitals have wishes . . . I mean they can't see shooting stars can they?

No, that's why we pray instead.

Does that make them feel better?

I think just having people come see them makes them feel better. Do you remember when you had your tonsils out?

Yeah. All the ice cream I wanted, and I didn't have to share.

But you also had your friends come see you. Didn't you appreciate that?

Yeah, it was alright. But there's not much to talk about in the hospital. It's boring. When can I start going in the hospital with you? I'd like to have seen Mrs. Onderdonk. She was my favorite teacher.

We'll see, but you can come with me when I visit the shut-ins in town.

It's always so dark in their homes, and it smells funny. Is the hospital like that, too?

No, the lights are bright, and there are always people around.

But they get lonely, too? I mean people like Mrs. Onderdonk. Doctors and nurses, they're always talking about hospital stuff. I'd hate to have to talk about that kind of stuff all the time.

That's why it's important for people to come visit them.

But I thought you wanted to save them?

Well, there are different kinds of saving, son?

Think the game's on yet?

Maybe. Let's try.

*Time out on the field. The score: Auburn 14, Texas 3.*

Wow, they're killing Texas.

But you're wearing your Texas jersey. Is that the one Donna gave you at Christmas?

Yeah, I like it, but I'm still gonna pull for Auburn even though she lives in Texas now.

We had a good Christmas in San Antonio, didn't we? All the different restaurants she took us to . . . Mexican, Polish, Japanese—

I liked the Mexican best. The sopapillas were delicious. I think I ate about four of them. We raised the little flag at the table two or three times.

And don't forget Mexico.

Yeah, that was great. We must've bought 100 pounds of sugar. The trunk was full of sugar. And Mom wouldn't let us buy one of those velvet paintings. I thought they were nice, except for the bull fights. So colourful.

I had to agree with your mother.

You know, that's the only time I've ever been outside America.

That's not quite right. You were born in Japan. You were still very small when we had to leave. You just don't remember.

I wish I could have known about living there. Thomas and the girls can talk about it, but I can't.

Listen.

*Texas with the ball. The hand-off goes to Campbell and he's tackled after a short gain of 3 yards.*

## In Living Memory (April 2024)

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"If you're not part of the problem, you're part of the solution" she announced. With that said, she wheeled around and rolled off down the corridor.

"She was serious!"

"That's why she's here with us, Stan."

"And SHE was a bank vice-president."

"Oh, Stan stop it! It really is unseemly to kick a person who's down."

"But I knew people just like her, and they really got under my skin. I used to dream it would come back to them one day."

"So, maybe that explains her, but what about you . . . what about me?"

"But I was never—"

"I used to think that about myself, Stan. But you know when you get to be my age and you have too much time on your hands or you can't sleep from 2:00 a.m. until 6:00 a.m., images and echoes and scenes from the past come back. And not always in a friendly way."

"Yeah, that's what Frank calls vomiting his personal history."

"Ah Frank. Yes, he has a way with, shall we say, colourful language."

"Yeah, but I he's usually bang on."

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"He can be perceptive, but anyway, what I was getting around to saying was that in my case, I often don't recognize myself as I was in the past."

"But you were a school teacher, and you must've been a damn good one 'cause there's still students who write you. I mean, how they've kept track of you . . . I'd have no idea where to start and I wouldn't have the least interest in the first place. No fond memories of those days. No ma'am."

"That's what bothers me most."

"What?"

"To think that there were students I taught who like you feel the way you do."

"How would you know that?"

"Maybe 'know' might not be the right word. Let me give you an example. There was a thin little boy in my class—it was a third grade class—who started a month into the school year. His name was Robby. There was nothing remarkable about him. Just another 8-year-old child except that he was so skinny and he had heavy calluses on his hands."

"A migrant child?"

"Yes."

"So, why do you still remember this Robby?"

"Because of what I did."

"And that was . . .?"

"I saw him in the cafeteria. He didn't think anyway was watching when he dropped his sandwich on the floor and then asked the server to give him another one."

"Why would that leave an impression with you after . . . I don't know . . . so many years?"

"45 years, Stan. You see the sandwich he dropped on the floor, he picked up. But he didn't throw it away. He sat down at a table by himself . . . and ate both sandwiches. Ate the sandwich that had been on the dirty floor."

"You're gonna have to help me because I don't see where that's gonna be a disturbing memory."

"I haven't finished yet. When we got back to class, before we started our afternoon assignment, I gave the students a brief lesson in hygiene. I finished by saying, "And when we drop food on the floor, we shouldn't pick it up and eat it because it will have germs that can make us sick." And here I looked directly at Robby. The other students were puzzled. What was I talking about and why was I looking at Robby?"

"I think I see."

"No, not just yet. I didn't get to speak to Robby after class, because as soon as the final bell rang, he was out the door."

"Did you talk to him the next day?"

"No. There was no next day . . . not for Robby."

"He didn't come back."

"No. And among the migrant children it wasn't unusual for them to just stop coming."

"But I thought kids had to attend school till they were . . . I don't know . . . 16 or so."

"That's the law. But nobody enforces it where migrant children are concerned."

"So, I get why you're still punishing yourself with this memory, but what does it have to do with Agatha?"

"You manager friend?"

"She's not my friend."

"Well, Agatha—I didn't know that was her name, because I've never met her or heard her name spoken before. From what I've observed though, Agatha seems to suffer from dementia and her past may be visiting her in a different way. Causing her to incorrectly parrot meaningless management slogans. Ironically, in this case from a former leader of the Black Panthers."

"Now, if Miss Agatha knew that, her world really and truly would be rocked."

"That's already happened, Stan."

## **Before the *Real* FISA Court (April 2024)**

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You may have read about this court, but most of what you've read is what we have allowed the rest of the world to know about us. You can think of us as the last line of defense against foreign actors—governments and organizations—that represent a threat to our national interest.

During your detention, you will be questioned at length on matters that you may find uncomfortable speaking about. There may be questions that you would wish to defer until you have legal counsel. Here, it must be clearly understood that you are not under arrest. Accordingly, the customary rights of the accused are waived in our proceedings. There are many aspects of these proceedings that may seem contradictory to what you have learned in law school, but under the doctrine of reasons of state you can imagine the latitude with which this court is empowered to act on imminent dangers to the republic.

Your full cooperation would be in your best interest, and you are accordingly advised to cooperate fully and truthfully.

You may be inclined to attempt to remember or record the events and participants, but be forewarned that everything that occurs during your stay is classified at the highest level—a level of clearance that is itself secret. Furthermore, your efforts would be pointless, because your memory of the circumstances that brought you here, this prologue and everything that follows will be completely erased at a time of our choosing. There will, of course, be a record of your having come before our court, but it will be our record of the events.

We've been doing this for a very long time, Citizen, and no detainee has ever been able to report their encounter. Naturally, the same

applies to us. Before you object that our means seem anti-democratic, consider the infinite potential of risks to national security posed by foreign nationals and even citizens of the republic—dangers ranging from instances of localized terrorist attacks to global Armageddon.

The world of laws and rules cannot possibly comprehend the unpredictable nature of human beings and their communities, and that is where our court ensures what in today's parlance might be termed 'existential justice.' Without it, there would be anarchy insofar as the laws and statutes that you study in law school would be untethered from reality and meaningless.

You first came to our attention with an op-ed you had published by the local paper in the college town where you did your undergraduate studies in law and economics. That article was in itself not alarming, especially as it was written by someone appeared to have just recently become familiar with certain aspects of international law and thought that he had found evidence that our republic was engaged in an illegal and undeclared war in a small Central American country. That was, however, enough for us to start a file on you.

Over the years, we have followed your political writings—some published and some not—and we have kept records of your associations and the organizations to which you have belonged. One in particular was noteworthy not for the nature of the cause but for the organizational strategy that you used to initiate a grass-roots movement that led to the resignation of the university president. That episode deserved special mention in our file, as it indicated that you had what we call 'action potential'—something that sets you apart from the neophyte or affected intellectual dissenter.

In addition, we've monitored your attendance and participation at numerous conferences. For instance, when you attended an orientation program for the Peace Corps in Washington, D.C., you happened upon one of our veteran operatives on the Mall. It was a sunny summer day and a stranger asked you for a cigarette and then sat down on the bench beside you. You had just left the Freer Gallery. You may remember the seedy-looking homeless guy who told you he had once been a practicing psychiatrist. He told us that you initially mistook him for Ellsberg.

That is just one encounter you have had with one of our agents. You are here today, because you met another one at a protest in New York City. She was with a group of students from Columbia and NYU. It was her report that made you a person of interest, as they say.

Before we begin, let me assure you that you have no secrets from us. Over the years, we have compiled a rather significant dossier on you, Citizen. Some 4.5 terabytes one of the technical staffers told me in a departmental briefing, rather pleased with himself at having said something he thought was important.

It shouldn't surprise you that we have obtained considerable information about your discussions with various individuals in this current protest that has metastasized—, er proliferated, across the country this past year. Our electronic surveillance techniques have become very sophisticated as we have partnered with leading edge academic and industrial research. We are constantly on the lookout for promising technologies that will enhance our ability to detect and neutralize national security risks. For example, one of your friends from prep school has just published a paper on the endogenous emergence of an empathy reflex in quantum-level A.I. systems. His theories have attracted a lot attention among fellow researchers and even a few venture capitalists.

That should be sufficient by way of introduction. We will now a 15-minute recess and begin the questioning at half-past nine. The marshal will show you the facilities including the cafeteria where you can have a coffee. Their espresso is excellent. You might try it.

*The court resumes and for the next several days, the detainee is questioned—some days for 10 hours a day and other days for just 30 minutes a day. The questioning doesn't occur at any scheduled time. It might begin at 9:00 a.m. or 9:00 p.m. The detainee is kept in a small apartment on the premises with a private kitchen and washroom. There is no means of communication with the outside world—a world which reckoning by the length of the flight must be outside North America.*

#

*The last day before the court.*

Today, Citizen, you will be released upon satisfactory clearance by the chief medical officer who will oversee your memory adjustment. You will not remember any part of your being here—not me, not the marshals, not the apartment, and none of the questions we have asked and answers you have given.

You will return to your New York City apartment on the Upper West Side in the company of the agent you met at the protest the night we detained you. No time will have elapsed—this is one of our latest innovations which we are quite rightly very proud of. Alas, we will not allow this technology to be used outside our program—not for the present.

You may be wondering why we are releasing you. Well, shall we say, your family has been very generous with the Party. And, the Party never forgets.

You, however, will forget everything, although you will be engineered to tone down your 'empathetic' response to political and social inequities.

This concludes the case of detainee X2059-000418382.

Marshals, please escort our visitor to the medical centre.

The court is now in recess until UTC + 1 hour.

## Dogwalking Banter (May 2024)

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*This is a fairly lengthy dogwalking conversation between two neighbours whose paths cross once or twice a month while they're walking their dogs in the evening. They live in a neighbourhood of large lots, old trees and manicured lawns and gardens. Their dogs' names are Finnegan, an aging Golden Retriever, and Fred, a Dachshund.*

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Hey Fred. Haven't seen you around for awhile. Are you getting a little chubby, boy?

Hasn't been getting much exercise. Work's been keeping me at the office late. Finnegan, how you doing boy. *He scratches behind the dog's ears and wipes the slobber off his pants leg with a handkerchief.*

Were you at the town council meeting a couple of weeks ago?

No. Was that the one for the vote on the new development plan? I think I read something about it in the local paper.

Looks like they're going ahead with the plan to build up to 65 storeys in Midtown.

Guess it's true then. This little 103-hectare plot of land really will be as dense as Manhattan.

Thinking about getting out?

Not yet. Moved here to get away from the city and am not ready to evacuate again. Besides, what's left to move to?

---

What bothers me is the congestion . . . of people and cars. You know there's gonna be more crime, more traffic delays. It'll be as bad as the city.

It won't be a 'town' anymore, that's for sure. But people have to have a place to live. We did.

Why can't they find another place? I mean, why does all this development have to happen here? And why this sudden population explosion?

The city's always been the place where people go for work and lots of us out here made, or still make, our money there. That's true with me. You too, maybe.

But all these immigrants. For God's sake, we're doubling our immigration quota. Why do they have to come here?

Wars, famines, climate change—all that is driving people North. And us—Baby Boomers—we need workers to pay for our old age, and right now there are too many of us and too few of them.

Fred, your owner hasn't always been this 'woke' has he?

No. I think it's just aging, but I feel it's happening faster than I thought it would.

What do you mean?

Finn, if you could talk, you might understand.

Hell, I'm older than you . . . at least I think I look older, a lot older.

Finn, does your boss man always fish for compliments?

No, listen. I'm serious. We've worked hard to get where we are. We have kids and grandkids.

And they'll find their way. Just like we did. I hope my granddaughters will be better stewards.

What? Stewards? You're sounding kinda crazy. What's up with the old man, Fred?

Seems to me that we—speaking for myself—have only become conscious of our obligations to the next generation after having plundered what we could to provide the best for ourselves.

Fred, has your old man gone *Antifa*, because this sounds un-American to me?

Finn, you've got a great pal there. He takes great care of you and always will I expect. But Fred, I think we're gonna late for re-heated dinner unless we head home now. Take care of your old man, Finn.

Fred, maybe next time your old man will be back to his old self. This is crazy talk and dangerous thinking. Remind him where he lives, eh Fred?

## **PART TWO—NON-FICTION**

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## Reviewing Murong Xuecun's *Deadly Quiet City* (October 2023)

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'It was like Chernobyl,' says Zhang Zhan. 'The whole city was deserted. Not a single person in sight. No vehicles. The skyscrapers looked like giant monsters silently observing me. It felt like all that was left on earth was just me and those monsters.' [on arriving in Wuhan from Shanghai on February 1, 2020]

Murong Xuecun's *Deadly Quiet City* relates true accounts of several Wuhan residents during the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020. The stories are based on interviews mostly conducted in his hotel room. On being interviewed, Yang Min, the despondent mother whose only child died alone in a Wuhan hospital, asks instinctively, "Is this room bugged?" Murong, of course, could not be certain at the time, but he did send backups of his interviews to a trusted friend abroad after each session and assured anonymity to the interviewees. (The names used in the book are fictitious, and incidentally, Murong Xuecun is the pen name of Hao Qun.) Obviously, the room was not bugged or the book would never have been published. Anticipating the worst, Murong abruptly caught a plane to London in August 2021 before the book was published. It was first published in Australia, Murong's country of exile, in 2022.

*Deadly Quiet City* follows the tradition of Chinese dissident literature wherein the author collects first-hand accounts of living in contemporary China from ordinary Chinese people. A similar approach was used by the exiled author, Liao Yiwu—referred to as 'China's Solzhenitsyn'—in recording the oral histories of China, including the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, which is the subject of his book, *Bullets and Opium: Real-Life Stories of China After the Tiananmen Square Massacre* published in English in 2019 and banned in China.

Murong chooses the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak because it too represents a pivotal point in modern China's history and fills a gap left open by official histories. Like Liao, Murong relates a different kind of history—an oral history from "the people whose voices were drowned out by the deafening noise pumped out by China's vast propaganda machine .... voices of people who were unable or too scared to speak out." For Murong, "[h]erein lies the significance of this book."

Nonetheless, the interview material gathered and preserved by Murong furnishes the evidence for much broader questions about the Chinese Communist Party and its government, which Murong hopes "will inspire deep reflection." In the 2023 Preface to the U.S. edition of the book, Murong writes what—if he were still in China—would get him more than just 'an invitation to tea' by the *guobao* (secret police):

We should not forget it was the Chinese government's deliberate coverup and misleading information that caused an epidemic in Wuhan to spread rapidly around the world. Nor should we forget that the same government's refusal to openly investigate the origins of the virus caused its provenance to become an unsolvable mystery. To this day, we do not know how it started and how it spread to humans. And we may never know.

After all this, how does the world see this dishonest and irresponsible government? When the Chinese government next ratifies a treaty or signs an agreement, will it fulfill its obligations? Are the Chinese government's promises believable? If there is another disaster like COVID-19, will the Chinese government behave honestly and responsibly?

For those outside China who believe that Xi Jinpeng's 'Zero Covid' policy was successful, even if draconian, Murong counters with the following Buddhist parable:

A barbaric doctor binds a hunchback between two planks, then jumps hard on the planks. The patient's plaintive wails continue until he expires. When the family seeks out the doctor, he argues matter-of-factly: 'He came for treatment of his hunchback, and I cured his hunchback.'

In this collection of stories, Murong's 'hunchbacks' are Lin Qingchuan, a Wuhan doctor; Jin Feng, a hospital cleaner, who as a young girl had already gotten to know hardship during Chairman Mao's 'Great Famine' of 1959-1961; Li, a 'black taxi' motorcycle driver with a checkered past; Liu Xiaoxiao, a substitute teacher who after many misadventures, including working for the Red Cross (dubbed the 'Black Cross Society' by social media), smuggles his disabled father into a locked-down Wuhan to get him medical help; Zhang Zhan, a Shanghai lawyer turned dissident citizen journalist who is described as a persevering irritant to the authorities in the manner of an idealistic Don Quixote; Li Xuewen, a critic of the government who escapes Wuhan but not the *guobao*; Wang Gangcheng, a middle class conformist whose quest to get the elusive coronavirus test results leads him to No. 7 Hospital where he witnesses the bizarre scene of doctors signing death certificates on one side of the corridor as young nurses on the other side are making a Douyin video; and Yang Min, a grieving mother desperate for a 'just explanation' from a Party and government she has trusted implicitly all her life. In what follows, three of the stories will be fleshed out a bit more.

First, there is Lin Qingchuan, a doctor with 20 years of experience, who works in a small community hospital in Wuhan but in early February 2020 is transferred to a busy isolation centre ("a concentration camp" in Gangcheng's words) where the overflow of

patients from the hospitals stay until a bed comes free. Lin's role as a physician is severely restricted by lack of medicine and orders not to treat patients—treatment was deferred until a patient is admitted to a hospital.

Murong contends that the official coronavirus statistics are manipulated as part of China's public relations strategy.

The newspapers are energetically praising China's victory in the antivirus battle. According to the official narrative, from 18 March there are zero new cases (except for three days, each with one confirmed case), and people are eagerly waiting for the lockdown to be lifted. The government wants to fulfil people's expectations and make the numbers look good.

Lin explains how this works at his isolation station. "They wanted us to kick patients out of the isolation station as soon as possible, the more the better," says Lin, but he refuses to sign off on the transfers. The government assigns a two-person team to evaluate the cases, and they determine that 40 patients can be released. But that isn't enough for the government reports, so another expert team arrives and sends home 20 more patients. Even that is insufficient. Lin is off duty for two days—he works 24-hour shifts—and when he returns he finds the isolation centre empty. Voilà! No more overflow of coronavirus patients in the medical system.

Second is Li for whom no given name is provided. Li is a picaresque character who nevertheless compels admiration in the story related by Murong. For 20 years leading up to the early 2010s, "Li gambled heavily, even visiting Macau, where he boozed, gambled and did some things he'd prefer not to talk about. He blew several million RMB [yuan]." His demolition business failed. Juggling credit cards and gambling just increased his debt. Too old

to do manual labour any longer he bought a used electric motorcycle and set up an illegal motorcycle taxi service.

Li tells the story of a destitute deaf mute who is trying to catch a train out of Wuhan to attend his mother's funeral. The man doesn't have the proper certificate so he is not even allowed in the train station. In attempting to obtain a certificate, he is passed along from the Civil Affairs Bureau to the Labour Bureau and then to his work unit which is outside Wuhan and therefore inaccessible without a certificate. Li takes pity on the man and arranges for him to be smuggled out of Wuhan at no charge. In the interview, Murong mentions that this sounds like Kafka's *Castle*, to which Li responds, not having read Kafka, that "If there had been a black motorcycle taxi in the story every problem would have been solved."

Asked about his plans after the pandemic ends, Li answers "At my age, I won't be able to find other work. I'll just keep on riding a motorcycle taxi until I can't. Then I'll do whatever I can." When Murong asks, "What then?" Li laughs pulls down the brim of his hat and says "There is no then."

Third is Yang Min. She is the mother of Tian Yuxi, who is dying from coronavirus complications as she recovers from what should have been a routine breast tumour operation followed by chemotherapy. The day after a chemotherapy session, Yuxi develops a high fever. It is relevant to bear in mind that this was happening just days ahead of the Spring Festival or Lunar New Year—the most important holiday in China.

[Yang Min] does not know that she and her daughter are in the eye of a raging tempest. In that perilous time, the Wuhan Union Hospital is one of the most dangerous places in China. Concerned to avoid panic, the government has forbidden doctors and nurses from wearing personal protective equipment and prohibits them

even more strictly from saying anything about the virus. On that same day, 19 January, an official confirms at a press conference that the novel coronavirus is 'not highly transmissible'. 'The risk is low,' he says. 'It's preventable and controllable.'

Yang Min is told to take her daughter to a specialist fever clinic, but the Red Cross Hospital she goes to next is "crammed with patients and exhausted doctors and nurses" and is almost out of medicine and supplies, so she has to keep searching. Finally, Yang Min brings her daughter to Jinyintan Hospital, but she has to leave Yuxi alone in the hospital, because the staff tell her that the hospital is a "disaster zone" and relatives are not allowed to stay with their loved ones. Meanwhile, "On TV, the [New Year's] gala program reaches a climax. 'Shout it, shout it loudly,' sings Jackie Chan on the glittering stage. 'Does my country look sick?'" At this point in the narrative, Murong interjects that "Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital might be the most deadly place in the world ... Chinese media call it 'ground zero of ground zero.'"

Yuxi does not survive and to compound the misery, Yang Min is not told for many days. She experiences a reverse epiphany, which makes her question her lifetime fidelity.

Gradually she sees through words like 'wise', 'great' and 'correct', as if awakening from a dream. 'I too am Chinese. I have been obeying the Party, I have been obeying the government, I followed your policies to have only one daughter, but due to your concealment of the truth, my daughter died in vain. What is to become of me in later life? Is my life worth nothing? Only later did I know that it was all false.'

All Yang Min is left with are her memories one of which is a conversation about Yuxi's career choice. Yuxi had studied

bioengineering and works in the Shenzhen Economic Zone, outside Hong Kong. Yang Min didn't approve, but Yuxi tried to console her by saying, "Mummy, I want to make a lot of money so that when you get sick, I won't have to sit crying outside the operating theatre."

And so ends Murong's collection of Wuhan stories with the heart-wrenching story of a mother and her only child. "She was the hope of the first half of my life, my sustenance for the second half of my life, she was my life."

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## Reviewing Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* (November 2023)

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Published in 1979 with an updated preface in 1992, *The Question of Palestine* is two generations out of date, so why a review after all these years?

While it is true that a substantial portion of Said's views have long been in the public space, they may not be familiar to everyone around the world, especially in North America. The political and military struggles for nationhood since the fall of empires at the end of World War I and the expansion of newly-independent nation-states after the Second World War—the number of UN member states tripled between 1945 and 1979—brought issues of self-determination and statelessness to the world's attention. No locus on the planet has commanded the attention and polarized the global community more than that of Israel and Palestine. For these reasons, *The Question of Palestine* is still relevant.

This review will look at four themes presented in Edward Said's book: imperialism, colonialism and self-determination; statelessness; the search for moral equivalencies; and peaceful coexistence. In addition to Said's views, those of Hannah Arendt, 20th century political theorist and historian, will be referenced where appropriate.

Said was a professor of literature at Columbia University, and he figured prominently in the development of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline. For Said, the question of Palestine is a clear case where the context of European imperialism and colonialism must be considered. Referring to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Britain (or the British Empire) articulated its support for "a national home for the Jewish people" at

a time when the region was still under Ottoman jurisdiction, Said writes

[T]he declaration was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in a flat disregard of both the presence and the wishes of the native majority resident in that territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, make this territory a national home for the Jewish people.

At the conclusion of World War I, Arab independence from the Ottoman Empire was achieved with assistance from Britain and France who established their respective domains of influence in the Middle East. The British mandate for Palestine was established in 1920 under the authority of the League of Nations and lasted until Israel's independence in 1948.

The enormous self-governance challenges faced by nation-states spun off from empire resulted in much hardship for their respective citizens, and Israel was no different. For one thing, Israel was an outlier in the Middle East, surrounded by Arab and Muslim nations, which was problematic on account of historic grievances steeped in politics, economics and religion, not necessarily in that order. Israel's position required a guarantor, as its war of independence in 1948 demonstrated. Hannah Arendt put it this way in her 1944 essay, 'Zionism Reconsidered':

Nationalism is bad enough when it trusts in nothing but the rude force of the nation. A nationalism that necessarily and admittedly depends upon the force of a foreign nation is certainly worse. . . . Even a Jewish minority in Palestine—nay even a transfer of all Palestine's Arabs, which is openly demanded by the revisionists—would not substantially change a situation in which Jews must either ask protection from an outside power against their

neighbors or come to a working agreement with their neighbors.

When the British pulled out of Palestine, the U.S.—by then not just one of many great powers but one of the world's two new superpowers—took on the responsibility of underwriting Israel's national security. Meanwhile, the possibility of a working agreement among Jewish and Arab neighbours, independent of U.S. mediation, has remained elusive to this day.

Though the U.S. became actively involved in Middle East politics after the Second World War, its official foreign policy was perhaps most clearly articulated by President Jimmy Carter in his 1980 State of the Union address.

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

The Carter Doctrine made explicit America's fundamental economic interests in the region, and many of its detractors argued that America's role of leader of the free world, particularly in terms of human rights issues, was again shown to be compromised. American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War has demonstrated that the U.S. is not immune to the temptations of *realpolitik*. Said asks rhetorically,

Is the American leadership's opposition to anything that smacks of popular nationalism so blind, so uncritically accepted after Vietnam and Iran, that it cannot respond except by further efforts to sell more arms and finance more schemes like the Egyptian-Israeli treaty?

Nevertheless, President Carter pursued the most ambitious attempt yet by an American president to bring the Jews and Arabs to the peace table. However, Said argues that these efforts were mostly for the sake of appearances. He highlights the fact that the Camp David Accords and the Israel-Egypt peace process, like the Balfour Declaration 60 years earlier, excluded the Palestinians. Said writes

[T]he highest priority was reserved for setting up military convergences favorable to the United States and optimally unfavorable to the radicals, the nationalists, the popular movements, that saw things differently. The net result is that for their compliance, Egypt and Israel have become completely dependent clients of the U.S. arms industry.

While for Jews, 1948 was the year of independence and the culmination of the Jewish diaspora's dream to return to the homeland in Palestine, for Said, speaking on behalf of Palestinians writes of the Naqba ('the catastrophe' i.e., the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians),

According to the most precise calculation yet made, approximately 780,000 Arab Palestinians were dispossessed and displaced in 1948 in order to facilitate the "reconstruction and rebuilding" of Palestine. These are the Palestinian refugees, who now number well over two million. And finally we should add that the quantity of Arabs held since 1967 inside the Occupied Territories (which Menachem Begin claims to have "liberated") is 1.7 million; of them half a million are part of pre-1967 Israel. The transformation of Palestine which resulted in Israel has been an extraordinarily expensive project—especially for the Arab Palestinians.

And so self-determination for one group resulted in the statelessness of another. Here Arendt as one who experienced the

life of a displaced person in Nazi Germany and subsequently Vichy France speaks to the issue critically in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

The notion that statelessness is primarily a Jewish problem was a pretext used by all governments who tried to settle the problem by ignoring it. None of the statesmen was aware that Hitler's solution of the Jewish problem, first to reduce the German Jews to a nonrecognized [sic] minority in Germany, then to drive them as stateless people across the borders, and finally to gather them back from everywhere in order to ship them to extermination camps, was an eloquent demonstration to the rest of the world how really to "liquidate" all problems concerning minorities and stateless. After the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved—namely, by means of a colonized and then conquered territory—but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless [sic] by another 700,000 to 800,000 people.

Incidentally, for Arendt the 'statelessness' was a global problem of the age of world wars and was by no means confined to the Middle East. Though Arendt is long gone from the living stage, her advocacy on behalf of stateless peoples remains apposite near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century—the Kurds, the Romani, and the Rohingya being among the more familiar stateless peoples.

Politics by definition implies conflict arising from the different interests and values of different communities. Whether political conflict can be resolved peacefully or violently is crucial for the

present and for the future. The outcomes of peaceful politics in the Middle East have not been encouraging, and many parties, both inside and outside the region, share responsibility.

The search for 'moral equivalence' also termed 'whataboutism' conceals some truths but frequently does so at the expense of advancing peaceful conflict resolution. For example, claiming that Israel has done to the Palestinians what the Nazis did to the Jews certainly demands some reflection, but a rhetorical victory by Israel or the Palestinians is counterproductive for achieving lasting peace in the region. Said engages thusly,

[It is a] complex irony: how the classic victims of years of anti-Semitic persecution and the Holocaust have in their new nation become the victimizers of another people, who have become, therefore, the victims of the victims. . . . [I]f no one can come forth and say, frankly, Yes, the Palestinians actually do deserve to expiate for the historical crimes committed against the Jews in Europe, it must also be true that *not* to say, No, the Palestinians must *not* be allowed to go through these ordeals any longer, is an act of complicity and moral cowardice of singular dimension.

Here the debate quickly gets entangled in the messy history of the human species that for thousands of years (according to our records) has struggled to survive on the thin skin of this planet often at the expense of other species and others within the same species. What we have here is intergenerational violence that has been repeated and whose legacy perpetuates the memories of unavenged wrongs. One may rightly refer to the cycle of violence in the Middle East ... and there are other places in the world where the analogy seems to apply as well. For example, one may justly note that the legacy of imperialism and colonialism persist in the

Global North in communities whose ancestors were slaves or driven out of their native lands.

Terrorism, Said refuses to take on directly in his book, explaining that the use of terror has no place in his vision of the Palestinian quest for nationhood and that a focus on terrorism would detract from the fundamental Palestinian issues. Said makes an exception when he instances Menachem Begin's terrorist connections as part of Irgun, a paramilitary organization that first set about forcing British troops to leave Palestine and then turned to the Palestinian Arabs. Depending on time, place and identity, one man's terrorist has been said to be another's freedom fighter, despite the fact that the nation-state is presumed to have a monopoly on the *legal* use of violence. Absent an internationally-sanctioned and universally-observed agreement on the legal prosecution and punishment of crimes against humanity and war crimes, there continues to exist a gap between what is 'legal' and what is 'just.' The 1998 Rome Statute empowering the International Criminal Court has not been acknowledged as international law by three of the permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, Russia and the U.S.) and a host of other countries who are also arguably not keen on international 'interference' in their internal and sovereign affairs. The moral equivalence argument surfaces again as those seeking immunity from international censure appeal to historical violations of international humanitarian law to justify their own definition of what is just and proportionate retribution.

To his credit, Said is not satisfied with the alternatives of permanently nursing grievances and encouraging violent resistance to 'even the score.' Having traversed a long and bloody history of conflict in his homeland, he nevertheless offers some possibility of a way out.

"Nothing that I have said in this book must be understood except as an acknowledgment of Palestinian and of Jewish history—in fierce conflict with each other for periods of time, but fundamentally reconcilable if both peoples make the attempt to see each other within a common historical perspective. Better fully acknowledged conflict than hidden and unstated fears, rigidly theologized fantasies about the Other."

In his 1992 Preface to *The Question of Palestine*, he writes that only a nonviolent political solution will end the cycle of violence.

[N]either Israelis nor Palestinians have a military option against the other; this fact is as striking now as it was when I wrote *The Question of Palestine* thirteen years ago. The task for the Palestinian people is *still* to assure its presence on the land, and, by a variety of means, to persuade the Israelis that only a political settlement can relieve the mutual siege, the anguish and insecurity of both peoples. There is no other acceptable secular—that is, real—alternative.

Of course for Said, it is not entirely up to the Israelis and the Palestinians. There are other parties involved for a variety of different reasons, and their cooperation or at least non-interference is necessary for the question of Palestine to be answered peacefully.

## Reviewing Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture* (November 2023)

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In her Preface to *White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners* (translated into English in 2022), Narges Mohammadi explains that,

On 16 November 2021, I was arrested for the twelfth time and sentenced to solitary confinement for the fourth time in my life. I spent sixty-four days in confinement in Ward 209 of Evin Prison, run by the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. This time I was found guilty because of the book you are holding in your hands—*White Torture*. They accused me of blackening the name of Iran across the world.

*White Torture* puts Mohammadi in the company of political dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Liao Yiwu who experienced their states' carceral systems and wrote about the human rights abuses they witnessed and endured. Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in Stalin's Gulag from 1945-1953 and recorded his experience in the three-part *Gulag Archipelago* and other writings. More recently, Liao Yiwu, was incarcerated in the early 1990s for his outrage at the Chinese government's massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989. A poet and oral historian, he collected stories which were eventually published in *For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison*— outside the People's Republic of China, for all his books are banned there.

In her introduction to *White Torture*, historian Shannon Woodcock writes that,

Torture is not new in Iranian society or prisons. Scholars ... have documented how men in Iran have used a wide range of torture methods against those they incarcerated throughout the last century. (It should also be noted that

the governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and myriad other states have also relied on torture within prisons to control.)

The reference to the U.S. is most directly borne out by the 'enhanced interrogation' strategies and techniques—bureaucratic speak for torture—used extensively during America's post-9/11 War on Terror.

Among the 14 women whose interviews appear in the book, there are those arrested and incarcerated for their political views or their religious views. There were no 'ordinary' criminals whose crimes involved murder, violent crime, child abuse; fraud, theft, arson, drug trafficking, prostitution, etc. There was Narges herself, a political activist against capital punishment and the use of solitary confinement in prisons; Nigara, a Turkmenistan citizen, arrested for espionage after being lured by her estranged husband to collect their daughter and take her back to Turkmenistan; Atena, a children's rights activist; Zahra, a sociologist, accused of being connected to the Mujahedin-e-Khalq on account of a photo of her father who had been executed for supporting the group; Nazanin, a British-Iranian citizen on a two-week trip to Iran; Mahvash and Sima, members of the Bahá'í community; Hengameh, a journalist and women's rights activist; Reyhaneh, a journalist, political activist and supporter of a reformist political party; Fatemeh, a convert to Christianity; Sedigheh charged with moharebeh [waging war against God] and links to anti-government groups; Nazila and Shokoufeh, dervishes (ascetic Sufi Muslims); and Marzieh, a women's rights activist and economics journalist.

The 'white torture' elicited from Mohammadi's interviews reveals that it is a deliberate manipulation of the prison environment and experience to "permanently break the connection between a person's body and mind in order to force the individual to recant

their ethics and actions." Sensory stimulation is withheld. For example, prisoners are frequently blindfolded when they are taken into custody, and once imprisoned, they must wear blindfolds when they are escorted from the cells to the bathroom or the interrogation room. Their sense of the rhythm of day and night is disrupted by limited access to daylight and fresh air and the ever-present light bulb that burns 24 hours a day. The filthy conditions of the cells, especially when there is a toilet, always poorly maintained, in the same living space where prisoners eat from their metal meal bowls and sleep, not on beds or even cots, but on concrete floors softened only by a rough army blanket. The food is tasteless and doesn't change from day to day. Tea is provided in plastic cups. Tap water is available but when there's no toilet in the cell, prisoners must request permission to be escorted to a public toilet, and the guards are not always obliging. Furthermore, the tap water is not considered safe to drink.

Solitary confinement in a tiny space where there is often not enough room to walk around without hitting a wall exacerbates the daily assault on the senses. Not only that, communication is controlled—the guards being instructed not to speak to the prisoners. In solitary, sounds from outside are mostly blocked. The call to prayer is the only reliable timepiece. Occasionally, custodians will be heard cleaning the corridor, but they don't speak either. One is left with one's thoughts, and sometimes a *Qur'an* is left in the cell, and when it is then prisoners like Zahra devour it, reading from beginning to end 14 times during her yearlong solitary confinement.

The interrogation sessions are staged to exaggerate the asymmetrical power relationship between the interrogator and the prisoner. First, prisoners are usually sleep-deprived, malnourished, sick or in pain. Then sometimes the session are canceled with no notice. Other times, a session are called with no notice. Sessions

can be terminated at a whim by the interrogator. Often the prisoner has to sit facing the wall as the interrogator looks on from his desk. There are threats and insults and badgering to force the disclosure of irrelevant and highly personal details. The prisoner was always kept off balance. Fear is the cruellest weapon in the interrogator's arsenal of torture. Lifelong imprisonment with no chance for a trial let alone an appeal isn't even the worst threat. Threats of imminent execution hang in the air. "Will I be executed at the end of this session?" Women prisoners are controlled through their families, especially their children. "Will they really do that to my children if I don't cooperate?"

Despite the longest of odds against them, these women, the ones who gave interviews, persevered. Not all did. Not all could. The following extended quotes are provided to give some indication of their courage and endurance when face to face with a brutal and inflexible regime of the soulless and sadistic, many of whose names and titles have been recorded for international sanctions and maybe even prosecution one day.

Marzieh, in response to the question, **"How did you resist and what factors helped to increase your resistance?"**

A woman's lived experience helps her. The 'strong will' I talked about has different meanings for interrogated people in relation to the oppression they have experienced. The caring characteristic that has historically been entrusted to women is a good guide to building a 'strong will' in a feminine way. Under the conditions of interrogation, this familiar characteristic of women's morale can make it possible for her inner sense of responsibility to emerge. Then she will take care of herself and of those who are emotionally and politically close to her. In an unequal situation of one person dominating, you either have to follow or be dominated. In the highly unequal and

unjust situation created by the interrogator, a woman who herself has been wounded by a more generally unequal situation can develop resistance that is rooted in her daily experience.

Hengameh, in response to the question, "**Did you go on hunger strike during these two arrests?**"

During my first detention I went on a hunger strike when I lost hope of freedom. I went on strike for eight days. I was taken to the Revolutionary Court and to Judge Pir Abbasi. I was very weak and felt semi-conscious. I was so sick that they brought medical help. Seeing my physical condition, he promised to release me on bail and asked me to end the strike. I told him I'd do so only if they upheld habeas corpus [the right against arbitrary and open-ended detention]. I ended my strike when they did so and was released the same night.

Mahvash, in response to the question, "**How do you feel about prison now, after almost ten years?**"

I have two contradictory emotions: the feeling of physical exhaustion and fatigue from oppression and cruelty, and a strong spiritual conviction, a sense of love for all human beings and a firm faith in them. Also, the feeling of being away from my family and friends, and the joy of finding valuable friends in prison and gaining unique experiences that would not have been possible without enduring all this suffering. In other words, there is this feeling of isolation from society and loneliness in prison, and there is an opposite feeling of having experienced a difficult but meaningful collective life. The experience of prison is long, special and unique: a life steeped in suffering, deprivation and loneliness. It is an experience of carrying the burden of injustice and enduring bitter and naked immorality. Life

in prison is based on the denial of all natural and human needs, but at the same time it opens the doors of poetry, thought and meaning in the heart and soul. It's a way of achieving belief and certainty in the ultimate victory of truth; it's the ascetic experience of finding *Haqq al-Yaqin*. Life in prison, if it is to end with discovering a steadfast and noble faith, makes you more stable and prouder than before.

As of the writing of this review, Mohammadi remains in prison, and the Nobel Peace Prize that she was awarded in 2023 will be received by her twins, Ali and Kiana, who will also deliver the Nobel Prize lecture on behalf of their mother.

## Reviewing Yossi Klein Halevi's *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* (November 2023)

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Having written about his journey to understand the Palestinian narrative in his book, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, Yossi Klein Halevi, Israeli author and journalist and Senior Fellow at Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, now, in the *Letters*, published in 2018, attempts "to explain the Jewish story and the significance of Israel in Jewish identity to Palestinians who are my next-door neighbors." The archetypal Palestinian neighbor he has in mind is a reasonable and fair-minded person of faith, who, like himself, is open to listening to the other side ... as a start. But even the greeting, 'Dear Neighbor' risks misinterpretation as is shown in one of the written responses to Halevi's invitation to a conversation.

In his note to the reader, Halevi asserts that the dominant Jewish and Palestinian narratives, "disagree on the most basic premises." While these respective narratives seemingly pose intractable problems, he nevertheless believes that "[o]ne of the main obstacles to peace is an inability to hear the other side's story." And this 'premise' he hopes will be accepted by both sides. If so, the possibility exists that if, in addition, both sides can accept the reality of two contradictory narratives, then the two peoples may be able to live together in peace instead of perpetual conflict. The political solution he imagines requires two independent and sovereign states—one with a Jewish majority and the other with a Palestinian majority. This would be the two-state solution. He feels that a binational state, or one-state solution, is impractical for it implies that one side will be a majority and the other a minority. In contrast, in a two-state arrangement, each narrative can theoretically be maintained—to a point, i.e., as long as self-determination is recognized for the other. Such would not be the case in a binational state as one narrative would trump the other, denying that party's aspirations to self-determination.

So, how can conflicting narratives coexist about whose claim to the land is more *just* and which party is the rightful owner and which the interloper or expressed in even more tendentious language, who is the 'victim' and who the 'victimizer?' In his first letter, entitled 'The Wall Between Us,' Halevi acknowledges the hopelessness of an arrangement that will be 100 percent satisfactory to both sides (or even tolerable to 'maximalists' on either side who are unbudging) but offers compromise reached first, through acknowledgement or validation of the other's narrative and ultimately through acceptance of the right of the other to exist.

Neither of us is likely to convince the other of each side's narrative. Each of us lives within a story so deeply rooted in our being, so defining of our collective and personal existence, that forfeiting our respective narratives would be a betrayal.

But we need to challenge the stories we tell about *each other*, which have taken hold in our societies. We have imposed our worst historical nightmares on the other. To you we are colonialists, Crusaders. And to us you are the latest genocidal enemy seeking to destroy the Jewish people.

Can we, instead, see each other as two traumatized peoples, each clinging to the same sliver of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, neither of whom will find peace or justice until we make our peace with the other's claim to justice?

In Letter 6, 'The Partition of Justice,' Halevi demonstrates just how difficult compromise will be, pointing to the highly contentious issue of the 'right of return.' Posing as his Palestinian interlocutor, Halevi asks

Can't Jews, of all people, understand the longing of Palestinians to return? Jews insisted on their right to return after two thousand years; how can they deny the right of Palestinians to return after barely seventy years?

Halevi grants the Palestinian right of return; however, he asks "To where?" In Halevi's two-state solution, Palestinians would have the right to return to their homeland in the sovereign Palestinian state. But, the right of return to Israel is a non-starter, and here compromise no longer appears to be an option for the simple reason that Israel must be preserved and recognized as a sovereign Jewish state if Jews are to ever feel safe from the terrors of their past. Full repatriation of Palestinian refugees would threaten the Jewish majority and with it, Jewish self-determination. Stating what may be the obvious, Halevi insists that the issue of right of return is a "key obstacle to a final-status agreement," i.e., an acceptable partition. Thus, his compromise: "The practical implementation of partition, then, requires each side to limit its legitimate right of return to that part of the land in which each will exercise national sovereignty."

This 'obstacle' is intimately connected with the conflicting narratives. For Halevi, the starting point for a new partition is 1967 and the borders established at the end of that war, while for Palestinians, 1948 is the starting point. If 1967 is the starting point, then Palestinian right of return would be limited to the occupied territories that would become the new Palestinian state. In other words, refugees whose families were displaced during the War for Independence (Jewish narrative) or the Naqba (Palestinian narrative) would not be automatically entitled to return to their ancestral lands in Israel. Halevi concedes that Jewish settlements in the West Bank must, in exchange, at least be contracted. In summary, Halevi writes that:

The trade-off, then, is 1948 for 1967. I give up most of the territorial gains of 1967 in exchange for your acceptance of Israel's creation in 1948. And neither side tries to encroach on the sovereignty of the other—not through settlements, not through refugee return.

In addition to these competing narratives, there is what Halevi refers to as the Israeli Paradox, wherein Israel is both a Jewish state and a democratic state. "That dual identity—Jewish and democratic—is the aspirational challenge bequeathed to us by [Israel's] founders." It is an unrealized goal, as Professor Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi (see below) reminds his 'neighbor' Halevi of the incongruity of his (Daoudi's) living in East Jerusalem as a permanent resident of Israel (without citizenship rights) on one side of the wall that since the second intifada divides the city and separates the West Bank from Israel, while Halevi is a fully vested Israeli citizen in East Jerusalem on the other side of the wall.

Just how and whether the abstract ideal of self-determination for Jews and self-determination for Palestinians can shape a compromise partition remains unclear. The very notion that mutually contradictory narratives can coexist in adjacent sovereign states appears improbable. Leadership, credibility and creativity on both sides at the same time—an extraordinary occurrence if realized—would be necessary to reconcile what have been to this point irreconcilable differences or mutually exclusive claims with respect to:

- *just* violence as a legitimate means to the end of a political solution with Palestinians pointing to Irgun terrorists and Jews pointing to Hamas terrorists;
- the parallels (or lack thereof) of the displacement of European Jews during World War II and the displacement of Palestinians in 1948;

- self-determination and sovereignty based on an ethnocultural homeland where majority status is granted in perpetuity; and
- responsibility for the failure of the Oslo Accords and subsequent peace initiatives.

There are 10 letters from Halevi to his Palestinian neighbor and true to his word that he is inviting Palestinians to engage in conversation with his narrative, he has included a number of letters from Palestinians in his Epilogue. In one of the more notable letters, Professor Daoudi, who was forced to resign his post at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem in response to intense Palestinian anger at his decision to take a group of university students to visit Auschwitz in 2014, writes

Jews should realize that the 1948 Nakba, without being compared with the Holocaust, left a deep imprint on the psyche of the Palestinians still vivid in their souls. Their persistent traumatic experience as occupied people cannot be matched with their neighbors' traumatic experience during the Holocaust. While Jews view the Holocaust from the "big picture" of seeing it as an evil effort to obliterate them as a people, Palestinians view the Holocaust from the "small picture" of guards, prisons and barbed wire similar to Israeli jails and barbed wire.

Regarding Jewish and Palestinian claims and counterclaims to the land between the River and the Sea, Daoudi affirms that "Israel has a right to exist and be a country" and he invites Halevi to "share [his] conviction that Palestine has a right to exist and be a country" for the heritage of both peoples trace back to this land, notwithstanding what "Palestinians learn and hear" and what "Israelis learn and hear."

While Halevi and Daoudi envision a rapprochement—if only because the alternative has been and continues to be untenable—there is no unanimity among intellectuals. In fact, Daoudi emphasizes that "[his] perspective views a tacit alliance between the Palestinian-Israeli extremist conflict camp and the Palestinian-Israeli moderate peace camp." There is no monolithic Palestinian view any more than there is a monolithic Jewish perspective. This, despite the existence of two prominent adversarial narratives.

For example, referring to my review of Said's *Question of Palestine*, Halevi and Edward Said do not agree. Unlike Halevi, Said supported a one-state solution—see his op-ed, 'The One-State Solution' in the January 10, 1999 edition of *The New York Times*—with the guarantee of return for Palestinian refugees, which seems fundamentally at odds with a two-state solution. Again, the different narratives shape the proposed solutions. What the two do have in common is an aversion to the physical and/or political annihilation of the other, which some extremists on each side never tire of advocating. Despite their deep ideological differences, Halevi and Said, acknowledge that Jews and Palestinians must live together (somehow) in peace, because the alternative is an intolerable perpetual state of violence.

A useful introduction to some of the ideas in Halevi's book as well as his current thoughts in light of the Israel-Hamas War may be found in *The New York Times'* Ezra Klein Show interview with Yossi Klein Halevi on November 10, 2023. The audio and audio transcript are available at <https://www.nytimes.com/column/ezra-klein-podcast>, under the title, 'What Israelis Fear the World Does Not Understand.'

## Reviewing Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents* (December 2023)

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In *Parable of the Talents*, the science fiction author Octavia Butler extrapolates from the America of the 1990s to the near future of the early 21st century. Her dystopian novel, a Hugo Award winner in 2000, is a sequel to *Parable of the Sower* (1993). In the 1990s, America was experiencing many of the same threats it faces today: climate change, growing income and wealth inequality/segregation, and anti-Black racism. The political authoritarianism she projected in these novels had not yet materialized. Butler passed away in 2006 long before Donald Trump and his followers 'proved' her fears to be valid. But warnings of dictatorship in America had already been sounded, for example, in Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here*.

From the political right and left, the Reagan and Clinton administrations, respectively, worked towards weakening the social safety net. Meanwhile corporations and their manager and investor stakeholders continued to be subsidized in myriad ways. And religion was exchanging spirituality for increased political power in the domain of Caesar. In the streets of 1992, violent riots erupted in Los Angeles in reaction to the acquittal of the LA police who savagely beat Rodney King, yet another Black man victimized by police brutality. And this despite contradictory video evidence that made its way onto television screens across the country. In world affairs, though the Cold War was over and American democratic capitalism had triumphed, the U.S. was soon to be engaged in two more failed wars in Asia. And today, the Cold War, whose ending was supposed to mark the End of History according to some who longed for a *Pax Americana*, has reignited and Europe finds itself again in a hot war with global consequences. And, as if that is not enough, democratic capitalism in countries around the world is imperilled, improving the prospects of alternative exemplars of

flourishing capitalism that have shaken off the restraints of liberalism and democracy.

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Though dystopian in nature, *Parable of the Talents* does offer hope that the world can be 'shaped' otherwise—a common theme in science fiction. And that is the optimism in Butler's writing that emerges from the ashes of the fire-consumed phoenix. In 2032 America, liberal democracy and the rule of law are broken; a religious dictatorship has been established; there is war with Canada and the newly-independent Alaska; people build walls around their communities and create armed militias to protect their neighbourhoods though anarchy occasionally breaks through the walls with greater firepower and numbers. Lauren Oya Olamina (Olamina), the protagonist of the Earthseed novels, and her few companions escape the burnt-out ruins of their depopulated Los Angeles community and travel north picking up other refugees along the way. In the penultimate chapter, Earthseed—the new post-apocalyptic belief system the reader learns of through aphorisms drawn from Olamina's *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*—has a breakout year in 2035 as Olamina's message takes off from its small, recently-established Oregon base and spreads across the continental United States. Then, after time-jumping from 2035 in the final chapter to 2090 in the Epilogue, Butler rewards the reader with a glimpse of the truth in Olamina's aphorism, "the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." But Butler also cautions, and that warning is delivered in the naming of Earth's first starship—*Christopher Columbus*.

*Talents* is largely based on Olamina's journals and books, but the curator is her daughter, Larkin, who compiles the writings of her mother and others and adds her own commentary. Olamina's and Larkin's stories are told separately as they are separated soon after Larkin is born. She is stolen from her parents in an unprovoked and

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violent raid on their remote community—Acorn, the first Earthseed community—near the Oregon coast by heavily-armed Crusaders. Acorn is completely destroyed, razed to the ground. The Crusaders are a religious militia comprising men, mostly cops or former cops, whose allegiance is to U.S. President Andrew Steele Jarret. President Jarret is also the leader of the fundamentalist sect, Christian America, whose mission is "to make America great again." Like many 'heathens' rescued by Christian America, Larkin is placed in a 'proper' Christian home. But home is with a mother who mourns an idolized dead daughter and despises her replacement and a father whose timid sexual advances never go very far but persist unabated. By the time Olamina and Larkin finally meet, it is too late ... too late for a true mother-daughter relationship though Larkin does admire her mother.

Olamina has lived her life in the service of something bigger than herself ... and bigger than her family. She is the daughter of a Baptist minister, but she shies away from calling herself a 'Christian.' Even as a teenager in a temporarily safe and far from affluent walled-in community in the LA suburbs, she seeks a different way. Her spiritual journey and her journey as a refugee escaping the complete destruction of everyone and everything that was 'home' behind the wall is further complicated by the fact that she is a 'sharer,' i.e., she has hyperempathy syndrome caused by a popular prescription 'smart drug' her birth mother, who died during childbirth, took during pregnancy.

Earthseed is a new religion or cult depending on whether you are looking at it from the inside or the outside. For Olamina, the first believer, there is no anthropomorphic deity and no heaven or hell in the supernatural sense. Earthseed's God is not a wrathful and punishing God nor is it a compassionate and forgiving God. Personifications of God fail. Gender is irrelevant. The following Earthseed verse describes a very different God from her father's.

*God is Change.  
God is Infinite,  
Irresistible,  
Inexorable,  
Indifferent.  
God is Trickster,  
Teacher,  
Chaos,  
Clay—  
God is Change.  
Beware:  
God exists to shape  
And to be shaped.*

Earthseed holds out the promise of immortality but not for the individual ... only for the species. 'Heaven' is real, but it is literally, not figuratively, among the stars. It is the new habitation—unknown for the present—for all of Earth's species. It is the home to replace the one that the species, *homo sapiens*, in its ignorance and arrogance, has destroyed for itself and all others. In *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, Olamina writes

All religions are ultimately cargo cults. Adherents perform required rituals, follow specific rules, and expect to be supernaturally gifted with desired rewards—long life, honor, wisdom, children, good health, wealth, victory over opponents, immortality after death, any desired rewards. Earthseed offers its own rewards—room for small groups of people to begin new lives and new ways of life with new opportunities, new wealth, new concepts of wealth, new challenges to grow and to learn and to decide what to become. Earthseed is the dawning adulthood of the human species. It offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths. The Destiny of Earthseed is to

take root among the stars, and there, again, to grow, to learn, and to fly.

Referring back to the novel's title, Earthseed is Olamina's talent—a reference to the metaphorical 'talent' in Jesus' parable of the master and his three servants. Butler ends the book with the complete quotation from Matthew 25:14-30, which Olamina has recorded in her journal for July 20, 2090. Throughout her journey, Olamina is guided by this parable. Despite the hardship, cruelty, violence, and hypocrisy she encounters and endures, she insists on making full use of her talent to improve the lot of humanity by seeding the present with what truths she has discovered, always noting that these truths are not her creations but truths culled from human history. She will not be caught out at the end of her life having squandered her endowment. And she refuses to retreat to a safe place and 'tend her garden'—she had that option. Instead, like someone with a solid Baptist upbringing she becomes an evangelist—spreading the good news of Earthseed. This, however, complicates her relationship with her newfound daughter, Larkin, who laments the sacrifice of the mother-daughter relationship for the greater cause.

## Reviewing Ted Chiang's *Exhalation* (December 2023)

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Ted Chiang is an American science fiction and fantasy author whose stories have won four Nebula awards, four Hugo awards and six Locus awards. *Exhalation*, published in 2019, contains nine stories, two previously unpublished and the others published as individual stories in various periodicals between 2007-2015. In the final section of the book, Chiang includes brief notes for each of the stories, often sharing what inspired the story.

Chiang's science fiction can be best characterized as soft science fiction, i.e., storytelling that is primarily interested in showing human interactions and development in the context of new technology for the purpose of social commentary. Isaac Asimov's Foundation and Robot series and Liu Cixin Remembrance of Earth's Past series would be examples of hard science fiction, though there, too, the authors engage in social analysis and criticism. The line between soft and hard science fiction is not bright, and it is more common for both to be blended, though the emphasis of one or the other may preponderate. Former president, Barack Obama, described *Exhalation* as "a collection of short stories that will make you think, grapple with big questions, and feel more human." If correct, and I tend to agree, then Chiang's stories fit the bill as soft science fiction in line with that of Ursula Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*) and Octavia Butler (Earthseed series and *Kindred*).

Although Chiang seems principally concerned with the human condition, addressing politicophilosophical issues like free will, anthropocentrism, and species or racial superiority, he, nevertheless incorporates hard science themes such as time travel, quantum theory, and artificial intelligence into his stories. Even so, these are essentially there as props for Chiang's analysis of human interactions.

This review will offer a glimpse of each story, hopefully sufficient to pique the reader's interest without spoiling their enjoyment.

### **The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate**

Set against the backdrop of a timeless Middle East, this is a story within a story (actually a story within a story within a story). Early on, the reference to Baghdad and the embedded narrative suggest the influence of Scheherazade, and the reader discovers that the stories are being related for much the same reason she told hers. The story is not about time travel—so magical time travel works well enough—but about the paradoxical concept of change despite the immutability of past and future.

In his notes, Chiang writes,

While we can all understand the desire to change things in our past, I wanted to try writing a time-travel story where the inability to do so wasn't necessarily a cause for sadness. I thought that a Muslim setting might work, because acceptance of fate is one of the basic articles of faith in Islam. Then it occurred to me that the recursive nature of time-travel stories might mesh well with the "Arabian Nights" convention of tales within tales, and that sounded like an interesting experiment.

### **Exhalation**

For the inspiration for his eponymous story, 'Exhalation,' Chiang's notes cite a short story by Philip Dick ('The Electric Ant') and an article on entropy (the tendency of a closed system, e.g., the universe, to degrade from orderliness to randomness) by Roger Penrose (2020 Nobel Laureate in Physics). The 'exhalation' to be followed in the distant future by a corresponding 'inhalation'

analogizes the Big Bang and Big Crunch hypotheses of the universe's cycles of expansion and contraction.

In addition, the imagery of the narrator's dissection and reassembly of their (sing.) own brain is reminiscent of Descartes' introspective search for the proof of his existence to counter the doubt of radical skepticism, although the narrator's search is in the physical world, while Descartes' was in the world of logic. The narrator's find goes one step further than the discovery of 'self' and suggests a version of epiphenomenalism where physical processes determine mental processes but not vice-versa—a possible implication being that consciousness and sentience are organic and not metaphysical.

### **What Is Expected of Us**

In this short short story, Chiang's narrator attempts to ascertain whether free will exists, and based on observational tests conducted using a recently-invented device, concludes that it does not. Nevertheless, the narrator maintains that 'what is expected of us' is to pretend that it does, otherwise the futility of a purposeless and predetermined existence would condemn us to catatonia

In the story, the narrator reflects that,

People used to speculate about a thought that destroys the thinker, some unspeakable Lovecraftian horror, or a Gödel sentence that crashes the human logical system. It turns out that the disabling thought is one that we've all encountered: the idea that free will doesn't exist. It just wasn't harmful until you believed it.

### **The Lifecycle of Software Objects**

The story's title is taken from the term 'Software Development Lifecycle,' which refers to the standardized process requirements for manufacturing commercial software. This story is by far the longest of the nine stories. Digients (digital organisms that inhabitant a pre-

programmed virtual reality) are introduced to explore the interactions and relationships between humans and these virtual entities created by humans. Throughout the story there is a comparison between pet ownership and raising digients, with the complication of an even greater asymmetrical relationship due to the difference between organic and synthetic life. Towards the end of the story, the human-humanoid relationship appears to simulate a human parent-child relationship for some, though for others there is the unbridgeable void between the organic and inorganic.

In his notes on this story, Chiang writes

Raising a child, she [Molly Gloss, an American science fiction author] said, “puts you in touch, deeply, inescapably, daily, with some pretty heady issues: What is love and how do we get ours? Why does the world contain evil and pain and loss? How can we discover dignity and tolerance? Who is in power and why? What’s the best way to resolve conflict?” If we want to give an AI any major responsibilities, then it will need good answers to these questions. That’s not going to happen by loading the works of Kant into a computer’s memory; it’s going to require the equivalent of good parenting.

### **Dacey's Patent Automatic Nanny**

This is another story dealing with the interactions between humans and humanoids, but it specifically addresses the possibility and complications of attachments being formed by humans to their humanoids. For instance, Dr. Thackery of the Brighton Institute of Mental Subnormality in his analysis of a patient with psychosocial dwarfism attributed to having been raised by a robot

wondered if the consequences of the child’s bond with a machine might be more far ranging than anyone suspected. He speculated that Edmund [the child raised by

a robot nanny] had been misdiagnosed as feebleminded simply because he paid no attention to human instructors and that he might respond better to a mechanical instructor.

### **The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling**

Human memory and 'truth' are the themes of this story. Chiang employs two examples: first, a father-daughter relationship augmented by the commercially-available memory prosthesis (Remem) which can execute instantaneous searches of the megadata in digital lifelogs; and second, the cross-cultural relationship between a European missionary and the Tiv people, where the latter are introduced to writing (itself a prosthesis in the narrator's eyes).

In an attempt to get at the truthfulness of human memory, the narrator distinguishes between two types of memory:

Psychologists make a distinction between semantic memory—knowledge of general facts—and episodic memory, or recollection of personal experiences. We've been using technological supplements for semantic memory ever since the invention of writing: first books, then search engines. By contrast, we've historically resisted such aids when it comes to episodic memory; few people have ever kept as many diaries or photo albums as they did ordinary books.

But in both the father-daughter and missionary-Tiv relationships, there are inconsistencies and inaccuracies in both types of memory, i.e., it isn't only personal memories that can sometimes get it wrong.

### **The Great Silence**

This is a clever short short story that juxtaposes the human species search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) while ignoring the terrestrial intelligence 'hidden in plain view.' Humanity's superiority complex makes us blind to what the parrot means when it says: "You be good. I love you."

The Fermi Paradox is fundamental to this story. It maintains that the 'great silence' in the universe may be attributable to the desire of advanced species to have their existence and whereabouts unknown lest they be attacked and destroyed by other more aggressive worlds. Incidentally, this is a central organizing theme in Liu Cixin's *Dark Forest*, the second book in the Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy.

Ironically, the parrot is already known to humans but wants to be acknowledged as an intelligent life form, though the history of its coexistence with humans has led to the near extinction of its species.

### **Omphalos**

In this story, the narrator, a devout believer, experiences a negative epiphany on encountering doubt about the centrality of humanity to God and the universe. But, the believer is not 'disabled' by this absence of certitude. Instead, they (sing.) declares:

I've devoted my life to studying the wondrous mechanism that is the universe, and doing so has given me a sense of fulfillment. I've always assumed that this meant that I was acting in accordance with your will, Lord, and your reason for making me. But if it's in fact true that you have no purpose in mind for me, then that sense of fulfillment has arisen solely from within myself. What that demonstrates to me is that we as humans are capable of creating meaning for our own lives.

And in a supreme assertion of independence, free will and perhaps even defiance, the believer concludes thusly:

Even if humanity is not the reason for which the universe was made, I still wish to understand the way it operates. We human beings may not be the answer to the question why, but I will keep looking for the answer to how.

This search is my purpose; not because you chose it for me, Lord, but because I chose it for myself.

### **Anxiety Is the Dizziness of Freedom**

This story about free will in a quantum world will indeed induce dizziness if not anxiety.

Dana, one of the characters who acts as facilitator for a group of PRISM addicts addresses the uncertainty of an eternally forking path where every decision seems to be of no consequence inasmuch as in a parallel pathway, a different (and good) choice could said to have been made, which would absolve one of responsibility for making a bad choice in the primary path. In her words,

Every decision you make contributes to your character and shapes the kind of person you are. If you want to be someone who always gives the extra money back to the cashier, the actions you take now affect whether you'll become that person.

The branch where you're having a bad day and keep the extra change is one that split off in the past; your actions can't affect it anymore. But if you act compassionately in this branch, that's still meaningful, because it has an effect on the branches that will split off in the future. The more often you make compassionate choices, the less likely it is that you'll make selfish choices in the future, even in the branches where you're having a bad day.

And so, even in a universe governed by the uncertainty principle—the very existence of which ensures some certainty—it is possible to work out a probabilistic path of one's choosing, thereby affirming free will.

This is the experience of Nat, a recovering drug addict, who poses as a PRISM addict to complete a scam against another member of the self-help group.

But recently I had this...this opportunity to do something actually nice for another person. It wasn't anyone I had wronged, just someone who was hurting. It would have been easy for me to behave the way I always have. But I imagined what a better person might do, and I did that instead.

I feel good about what I did, but it's not like I deserve a medal or anything. Because there are other people for whom being generous comes easily, without a struggle. And it's easy for them because in the past they made a lot of little decisions to be generous. It was hard for me because I've made a lot of little decisions to be selfish in the past. So I'm the reason it's hard for me to be generous. That's something I need to fix. Or that I want to fix.

For readers of this review, an hour-long interview with Chiang in the March 30, 2021 edition of *The New York Times Ezra Klein Show* elaborates on some of the themes in his writings, most prominent among those discussed being free will, superheroes, AI and technology/capitalism. The interview and transcript are available at the following URL:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/podcasts/ezra-klein-podcast-ted-chiang-transcript.html>.

## **Letter to Canadian Prime Minister (January 2024)**

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<via email to [justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca](mailto:justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca) and [melanie.joly@parl.gc.ca](mailto:melanie.joly@parl.gc.ca)

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January 23, 2024

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.  
Office of the Prime Minister  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

### **Re: The Israel-Hamas War**

Dear Prime Minister:

Two articles in today's online *New York Times* raise additional concerns about how Israel is conducting its war against Hamas. The first, 'Israel bulldozes more of Gaza as its invasion continues to advance south' reports that Israel is bulldozing large areas of Gaza that have come under its military control since the war began. The second, 'Stripped, Beaten or Vanished: Israel's Treatment of Gaza Detainees Raises Alarm,' reports possible human rights violations in Israel's treatment of Gazans detained during the war.

These stories suggest an even darker side to Israel's war campaign than the world has witnessed these past four months. There have been reports that high-ranking officials in the Israeli government have discussed permanently displacing the Gazans. Is what we see in the satellite images evidence that would support the belief that Israel is undertaking not just the forced dislocation of Palestinians from northern Gaza, but from Gaza period? And, with respect to the alleged treatment of detainees, what exactly is the status of these

people? Are they prisoners of war entitled to protection under the international rules of war? If not, what legal (e.g., humanitarian) protections do they have?

Based on Canada's understanding of what's going in Gaza, can you confirm or disconfirm either of these stories?

Regarding Canada's clarified position on the South African filing of genocide charges against Israel in the International Court of Justice, I'm pleased that Canada is adopting a position that respects international jurisdiction and is not prejudging the case as I feel the U.S. is doing. I would not expect the U.S. to take any other position though as it is still living in the past, and frankly, a critical verdict by the Court would be correctly perceived as a warning to U.S. exceptionalism.

In a letter I wrote to your attention on October 12th, I took strong issue with what I considered to be CUPE's [Canadian Union of Public Employees] endorsement of the October 7th Hamas attack. I still feel that way, but as I also pointed out in that letter, I thought that going forward it would be important to ensure that Israel, in its revenge and deterrence, did not commit its own war crimes. I was reminded of the American overreaction to the September 11th attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. with the illegal war against Iraq in 2003, two more failed American wars in Asia and a perverted sense of wartime human rights.

Unfortunately, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has done Israel no favours, first by allowing the Hamas attack to happen in the first place, second by inciting Israel to a Biblical-form of retaliation in disregard for the norms of international law, and third by refusing to countenance a peaceful settlement of the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian land dispute (which encompasses so much more than just real estate.) Thomas Friedman of the New

*York Times* recently said in an interview with Ezra Klein that Netanyahu "is not only the worst leader in Israel's history [but] the worst leader in Jewish history." Presumably, a large number of Gazans would join us in feeling the same way about Hamas. So, we have two of the worst possible leaders in a region that has long been one of the deadliest.

Canada would do well to be a leader in working towards immediate humanitarian relief to Gazans and long-term peace between Israelis and Palestinians. That leadership role will not likely come from either the U.S. or Europe. But Canada has the opportunity to become a world player again but in the interest of peace, and that of course is important for Canada's position in the world but also for Canada as a nation of immigrants from all over the world.

Regards,

Peter McMillan

c.c.: Hon. Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs

## **Letter to U.S. President Biden (February 2024)**

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<via online form at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>

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February 22, 2024

Dear President Biden:

### **Re: The Gaza War and America's Role**

Even if Israel were to complete its mission to bomb Gaza back to the Stone Age (following America's playbook from Vietnam?), the numbers of dead, maimed and injured wouldn't rise to Holocaust levels. But is it necessary that there be parity for Palestinians to atone for the sins of Germany? And why our obsession with the ranking of state-sponsored exterminations? What does it say about us when bloodlust revenge is not satiated by Old Testament 'eye for an eye' vengeance, when annihilation of the other—innocents and combatants alike—is perceived as a God-given and unqualified right to self-defense and retribution? This sounds like the barbarous bloodletting in 17th century Christian Europe that prompted Grotius to write his magnum opus *On the Law of War and Peace*. Regrettably, voices like that of New York Governor Kathy Hochul seem to want us to ignore the laws that we've tried to put around humanity's recurring internecine warfare.

I am only one, but I have a voice and I have a vote. The people of Gaza, on the other hand, have no mouth and yet they must scream at what is happening to them. Just imagine the heart-rending *Fallen Leaves* memorial in Berlin with the agonized and agonizing faces of human beings but with this difference—there are no mouths to release the screams. Perhaps, this is why we don't truly hear as

Gaza's children die by the thousands, targets of American-made bombs killing them from the sky.

Our own celebrated American history has many examples of how we have at times given in to our baser nature—what Solzhenitsyn would have called the Devil in all of us. Let's break with that past and that instinct whenever we can. Now would be a good time.

In the name of what's best in humanity, please do what you can to end America's complicity in Israel's total war against the innocents of Gaza.

Regards,

Peter McMillan

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*The following were not included in the letter to the President.*



Photo 1: Shalechet (Fallen Leaves) Jewish Museum, Berlin via Wikimedia Commons

The image of a face with no mouth is from Harlan Ellison's short story, 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.'

## Reviewing Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (February 2024)

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Ken Liu, translator of Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* and editor of two collections of Chinese science fiction stories, *Invisible Planets* and *Broken Stars*, is a highly acclaimed author of science fiction and fantasy in his own right. Included in *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* are 15 stories, 14 of which have previously been published. The short fiction, 'The Paper Menagerie,' won the Hugo, Nebula and World Fantasy awards.

Liu's stories conjure a fantasy universe of alternate histories and possible futures where contemporary physics informs ancient myths as a new language expressing humanity's unceasing compulsion to know and create. His speculations on God and beyond make accessible the dimensions of fantasy, myth, science fiction and philosophy to those who are not privileged by the academy, professional guilds or fortune. His writings are egalitarian in this respect. While they reflect a broad and deep understanding of many Earth disciplines, he is, first and foremost, a consummate storyteller.

The rest of this review will focus on selected stories in this anthology with an eye toward his virtuosic use of literary devices—most notably the embedded narrative—keen understanding and appreciation of subject matter ranging from Chinese history and mythology to relativity and quantum physics.

#

'Good Hunting' blends Chinese mythology, cyborgs, romance, and a sense of social justice. However, it is romantic fantasy sans the biological imperative as it surveys the ancient and modern

mythologies of the human race. It is Liu's singularly best work of steam punk science fiction in this volume.

The romance between a hulijing (or Huli Jing, a fox spirit that can shapeshift to a beautiful young woman) and the son and apprentice to a demon hunter is set against the backdrop of the early industrial revolution, i.e., the age of steam. As the story unfolds, the traditions of pre-industrial China are dying away. The magic of Chinese mythology is gradually disappearing coincident with British colonization and the introduction of Western technology. The 'new' magic of the steam engine era replaces the 'old' magic.'

With the inevitable arrival of the modern age and the end of the age of the old magic, "There's only one thing we can do: learn to survive." There is no longer a place for fox spirits and demon hunters.

#

The setting of 'The Literomancer' is Taiwan, formerly Formosa, late in the Chinese civil war between the Communists and Nationalists. It is a cross-cultural story centred around the young daughter (Lilly) of an American intelligence operative and a mysterious and reclusive elderly Chinese man (Kan) who teaches children calligraphy and tells stories from the Chinese characters, which he says possess "deep magic" and can be interpreted to "tell what's bothering people and what lies in their past and future." Ironically, there is a betrayal between the two friends that sets the stage for a surprising and sobering ending.

Liu is at his best in weaving the historical and apocryphal into a compelling (e.g., page-turning) story where the reader is teased along with hints dropped along the way that foreshadow something important.

#

'The Paper Menagerie' is very loosely linked to Tennessee William's 'Glass Menagerie' and it is interesting to note the similarities and the even more significant divergences. In Liu's story, the protagonist, a young boy with an American father and a Chinese mother (whose English is very poor), is conflicted between two incompatible worlds and traditions. It is essentially a story—an origami fantasy—exploring the tension between acculturation and assimilation, where betrayal, guilt and remorse figure prominently

#

'An Advanced Readers' Picture Book of Comparative Cognition' is the only story in this collection that has not been previously published. It is hybridized fantasy-philosophical science fiction. It is eminently readable hard science fiction incorporating two parallel narratives in which two ages-old philosophical ideas—eternal recurrence and immortality are projected far into humanity's future. The following opening is the father speaking to his daughter in a one-sided dialogue.

My darling, my child, my connoisseur of sesquipedalian words and convoluted ideas and meandering sentences and baroque images, while the sun is asleep and the moon somnambulant, while the stars bathe us in their glow from eons ago and light-years away, while you are comfortably nestled in your blankets and I am hunched over in my chair by your bed, while we are warm and safe and still for the moment in this bubble of incandescent light cast by the pearl held up by the mermaid lamp, you and I, on this planet spinning and hurtling through the frigid darkness of space at dozens of miles per second, let's read.

#

In 'The Waves,' Liu displays his mastery of the 'story within a story,' where ancient Earth stories are being re-told in a distant future to a human species that has evolved beyond any physical form we can imagine and during a period of extensive space colonization.

Maggie, likely the last organic human being in the universe is telling her great-great-great . . . granddaughter stories of Earth's beginning. stories of the beginning.

Maggie looked at her granddaughter, a miniature mechanical centaur, freshly made and gleaming, and also a being much older and wiser than she by most measures.

"So why have you put on this disguise to make me think of you as a child?"

"Because I want to hear your stories," Athena said.  
"The ancient stories."

As Maggie and the human entities from 61 Virginis e head out in search of a new planet to settle, the fears of ancient ancestors are revived.

While they flew, they huddled together against the cold emptiness that was space. Intelligence, complexity, life, computation—everything seemed so small and insignificant against the great and eternal void. They felt the longing of distant black holes and the majestic glow of exploding novas. And they pulled closer to each other, seeking comfort in their common humanity.

As they flew on, half dreaming, half awake, Maggie told the colonists stories, weaving her radio waves among the constellation of colonists like strands of spider silk.

#

'All the Flavors' is another alternate history, and it too is told using an embedded narrative—a story that Logan (Lao Guan) tells of the ancient Chinese God of War, Guan Yu, his namesake. This time the setting is late 19th century America and the construction of the transcontinental railroad is in progress with the enormous labour effort of Chinese immigrants. In this apocryphal account of a community in Idaho, there is the expected tension and occasional unprovoked (as we are told) violence between the townspeople and—here is the first important break with 'real' history—the Chinese workers who escaped from indentured servitude on the railroad.

In the following extended quote, a lot of (bad) water has passed under the bridge, but this is the occasion of the Chinese New Year, for which the Chinese workers—all men because these were not families—spare no expense or effort.

The activity of the Chinamen stirred up all kinds of excitement in the rest of Idaho City.

"Everybody gets a red packet filled with money and sweets," the children whispered to one another. "All you have to do is to show up at their door and wish them to come into their fortune in the new year."

"Jack Seaver has been raving about the cooking of the Chinamen for months now," the women said to one another in the shops and streets. "Here's our only chance to try it out. They say the Chinamen will serve anyone who comes to their door with pork dumplings that combine all the flavors in the world."

"Are you going to be at the Chinamen's when they celebrate their New Year?" the men asked one another. "They say that the heathens will put on a parade to honor their ancestors, with lots of loud music and colorful costumes. At the end, they'll even serve up a feast such as never before seen in all of Boise Basin."

This scene stands in sharp contrast to the San Francisco of the day—this being the second important aspect of the alternate history. This speaks to something quite fundamental for Liu—survival through adaptation but never relinquishment of being Chinese.

#

'A Brief History of the Trans-Pacific Tunnel' is an alternate history of the end of World War II in the Pacific. It comes complete with multiple well-drafted documentary-style narrative anchors that describe a world where Japan and the U.S. cooperate to build a tunnel under the Pacific Ocean from Asia to North America—a massive Keynesian intervention to end the Depression.

From A Brief History of the Trans-Pacific Tunnel, published by the TPT Transit Authority, 1960:

Osachi Hamaguchi, prime minister of Japan during the Great Depression, claimed that Emperor Hirohito was inspired by the American effort to build the Panama Canal to conceive of the Trans-Pacific Tunnel. "America has knit together two oceans," the Emperor supposedly said. "Now let us chain together two continents." President Hoover, trained as an engineer, enthusiastically promoted and backed the project as an antidote to the global economic contraction.

The Tunnel is, without a doubt, the greatest engineering project ever conceived by Man. Its sheer scale makes the Great Pyramids and the Great Wall of China seem like mere toys, and many critics at the time described it as hubristic lunacy, a modern Tower of Babel.

Of the parallel narratives, the more emotionally engaging storyline is that of Charlie (a Formosan Chinese as opposed to a Chinese mainlander) who seeks atonement for cruel and inhumane deeds

committed and/or concealed as a supervisor of slave labourers recruited to do the heavy lifting of the tunnel's construction. Early in the story, the distance that he still has to cover to achieve internal peace is revealed by his inability to fathom why Betty's son would be riding busses in the U.S. South. "This seems very foolish: to make statements that no one wants to hear, to speak when it is better to be quiet. What difference will a few boys riding a bus make?"

#

'The Litigation Master and the Monkey King' is an apocryphal tale that explains how *An Account of Ten Days at Yangzhou* was smuggled out of China near the end of the Qing dynasty and how its record of the Yangzhou Massacre was preserved and used during the revolution that ended imperial Qing rule in China. While several of Liu's stories in this collection are intended to preserve the memory of past crimes, this particular story seems to be a nod of recognition to Liao Yiwu and his famous poem 'Massacre' about the Tiananmen Massacre of May 35th, 1989—the poem that got him imprisoned and led to the beginning of his written legacy, which some have said resembles that of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This poem can be found in Liao's *For a Song and One Hundred Songs : A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison*.

In Liu's story, the litigation master, Tian Haoli, legal advocate in all but status, represents the spirit of dissent and resistance under the autocracy.

The scholars who sipped tea and the merchants who caressed their silver taels despised Tian for daring to help the illiterate peasants draft complaints, devise legal strategies, and prepare for testimony and interrogation. After all, according to Confucius, neighbors should not sue

neighbors. A conflict was nothing more than a misunderstanding that needed to be harmonized by a learned Confucian gentleman. But men like Tian Haoli dared to make the crafty peasants think that they could haul their superiors into court and could violate the proper hierarchies of respect! The Great Qing Code made it clear that champerty, maintenance, barratry, pettifoggery—whatever name you used to describe what Tian did—were crimes.

Both Liao and Liu, have kept alive this nonconformist spirit in their writing so that the official histories do not completely erase the real stories of real people.

#

Liu credits Ted Chiang's 'Liking What You See: A Documentary' for inspiring his fictional account of the actual war crimes committed by the Japanese at Unit 731 in Manchuria during the 1930s and 1940s. 'The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary' is part philosophy of history and part apocryphal elaboration on Pingfang in Harbin, China where Japanese war crimes were perpetrated ostensibly in the name of science and for the sake of medical research to save Japanese soldiers injured in combat. It is clear, though the reference is not explicit, that Liu wants the world to remember the doctors of Pingfang in the same way we remember the cruel and criminal human experiments conducted under Josef Mengele's direction at Birkenau.

Shiro Yamagata:

I did not think that the work we did at Unit 731 was particularly strange. After 1941, I was assigned to northern China, first in Hebei Province and then in Shanxi Province. In army hospitals, we military doctors regularly scheduled

surgery practice sessions with live Chinese subjects. The army would provide the subjects on the announced days. We practiced amputations, cutting out sections of intestines and suturing together the remaining sections, and removing various internal organs.

Often the practice surgeries were done without anesthesia to simulate battlefield conditions. Sometimes a doctor would shoot a prisoner in the stomach to simulate war wounds for us to practice on. After the surgeries, one of the officers would behead the Chinese subject or strangle him. Sometimes vivisections were also used as anatomy lessons for the younger trainees and to give them a thrill. It was important for the army to produce good surgeons quickly, so that we could help the soldiers.

The relative dearth of evidence from Pingfang in comparison to the monumental historical record of the Holocaust is attributable to the governments of the U.S. and Japan who covered up the atrocities for reasons of state and China being in the midst of civil war that resumed after World War II. It is here where Liu raises questions about how history is written, such as who has legal rights to the past, i.e., does state sovereignty trump global justice, and are the oral histories of individuals valid as scholarly history or is the purpose of curated history solely to document the achievements and failures of great men, nations and empires and their wars?

Liu's fictional account does make reference to real documentaries, but it is nevertheless complicated by the fact that there was an international cover-up—one that implicates the U.S. which wanted to preserve Japan's research and keep it out of the public domain. There are additional complications that Liu introduces. First, there is the notion of action at a distance (in time) by means of quantum entanglement, which as science fiction allows a sort of time travel for the story's characters. Even if such time travel were technologically feasible, would it provide authoritative evidence?

Second, the Japanese physicist who introduces quantum entanglement as a means of facilitating the recovery of oral histories of Pingfang, discovers that her Japanese grandfather had been in a position of authority at the facility where the medical investigations were conducted. Just where does the legacy of blame end?

#

Liu's stories may be faulted for being a bit too defensive at times, but overall there is an integrity and honesty in his stories that renders them more than just Chinese 'victim stories.' They are human stories—and as stories of humanity, there is a mixture of good and evil . . . and ignorance throughout. His is an indictment of the species' history of doing evil with the glimmer of hope that facing the evil committed, the future may be different . . . in a better way.

## Reviewing Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (April 2024)

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On the surface, Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel, his first published fiction, may seem like just another Vietnam War story. What's different is that, as related from a Vietnamese point of view, the author intends to deliberately break with the Asian non-confrontational literature about the war and express his anger and rage at the U.S. for what it did to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. In a telephone interview with Paul Tran, reprinted and included in this volume, Nguyen states that

I sensed a reluctance to be angry at American culture or at the United States for what it has done. That's why, in the book, I adopt a much angrier tone towards American culture and the U.S..

Because he was only four years old when his family left Vietnam and arrived in the U.S., his views have been shaped by his family and his community as well as his research. Nguyen represents a, but not necessarily *the*, view from the country where the war was fought and the people who suffered the most from the war. (Nguyen Phan Que Mai's 2021 novel, *The Mountains Sing*, provides a North Vietnamese woman's perspective of a family being caught in between the communist land reform fervour and the American bombing of the North including the infamous Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972—this after having endured French colonialism and Japanese wartime occupation.) And he is quick to point out that his novel doesn't do justice to the death and destruction in Laos and Cambodia, which were unwittingly sucked into and engulfed by the war. In his accompanying essay commemorating Black April, the anniversary of the fall of Saigon, he reminds the reader of the horrific Asian death toll—upwards of two million Laotians and Cambodians and three million Vietnamese consumed by the Vietnam War.

*The Sympathizer* is a first-person confession to the Commandant of a Vietnamese prison camp. The action takes place between the fall of Saigon in 1975 and 1979, the latter based on the author's reference to China's invasion of Vietnam in response to Vietnam's war against Cambodia. The narrator, a former North Vietnamese spy who had infiltrated the staff of a South Vietnamese general, is captured along with a small group of insurgents on a hopeless mission to invade from Thailand and topple the communist government. As the narrator is discovered to be a communist agent, he is imprisoned separately from the others; however, since he has been with the insurgents his loyalty is suspect and so he is put through a re-education program—a euphemism for the use of torture to change the heart and mind. The details of the torture are sufficiently graphic to convey the horror of what humans can do to one another even in an age when TV, film, and the Internet eat away at our empathetic selves. For the first year of the narrator's re-education he is tasked with preparing a confession that meets the critical standards of the prison Commandant, a military officer, and the political Commissar, a communist party enforcer. Nothing seems good enough for the narrator's taskmasters.

The narrator's confession *is* the novel. This explains why there are no quotes in the text and why the narrative jumps around. As a lengthy 300-page confession written under the harsh physical and psychological conditions of solitary confinement, the stream of consciousness narrative style is most appropriate and, realistically, the most that could reasonably be expected. The history of the narrator and his community and his country are related through the embedded stories of illicit love between a French priest and his 13-year-old Vietnamese maid, edge-of-the-seat action and suspense during the panicked evacuation of Saigon, the community's ground-up re-settlement in Los Angeles, a quixotic coup attempt to overthrow the communist Vietnamese government, the torture regime of a communist Vietnamese re-education camp, and a

childhood blood-brother pledge that leads to freedom from prison and escape from Vietnam on the overcrowded boats of 1979. (The phenomenon of the Vietnamese ‘boat people’ lasted well beyond the fall of Saigon, and the label is pejorative in Nguyen’s opinion as “[i]t smacks of anthropological condescension, evoking some forgotten branch of the human family, some lost tribe of amphibians emerging from ocean mist, crowned with seaweed.”)

The following is an important clue to the book’s title.

Thank you, dear Commandant, for the notes that you and the commissar have given me on my confession. You have asked me what I mean when I say “we” or “us,” as in those moments when I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy. Should I not refer to those people, my enemies, as “them”? I confess that after having spent almost my whole life in their company I cannot help but sympathize with them, as I do with many others. My weakness for sympathizing with others has much to do with my status as a bastard, which is not to say that being a bastard naturally predisposes one to sympathy. Many bastards behave like bastards, and I credit my gentle mother with teaching me the idea that blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior. After all, if she had not blurred the lines between maid and priest, or allowed them to be blurred, I would not exist.

Among the notable themes in *The Sympathizer* are the complexity of war (its causes, effects, motivations, loyalties and responsibilities), self-deception and compromise with an enemy, the cruel irony of victims as victimizers, and perhaps most importantly nihilism, whereby “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.” For the narrator, Ho Chi Minh’s revolutionary slogan has become empty, in the sense that the

revolutionary ends of independence and freedom have been achieved but only through the subjugation of an Other and the restarting of the cycle.

One of the most interesting techniques Nguyen uses to present the complexity of themes is the run-on sentence. These lengthy sentences heavy with details reflect a mind desperately attempting to weave a tapestry from the jarring collision of juxtaposed images, sensations, memories, longings and fears. For example, the following extended quote elicits what many Vietnamese emigrants (emigrant instead of immigrant, because they are departing home) could not forget about home.

We could not forget the caramel flavor of iced coffee with coarse sugar; the bowls of noodle soup eaten while squatting on the sidewalk; the strumming of a friend's guitar while we swayed on hammocks under coconut trees; the football matches played barefoot and shirtless in alleys, squares, parks, and meadows; the pearl chokers of morning mist draped around the mountains; the labial moistness of oysters shucked on a gritty beach; the whisper of a dewy lover saying the most seductive words in our language, *anh oi*; the rattle of rice being threshed; the workingmen who slept in their cyclos on the streets, kept warm only by the memories of their families; the refugees who slept on every sidewalk of every city; the slow burning of patient mosquito coils; the sweetness and firmness of a mango plucked fresh from its tree; the girls who refused to talk to us and who we only pined for more; the men who had died or disappeared; the streets and homes blown away by bombshells; the streams where we swam naked and laughing; the secret grove where we spied on the nymphs who bathed and splashed with the innocence of the birds; the shadows cast by candlelight on the walls of wattled huts; the atonal tinkle of cowbells on mud roads and country paths; the barking of a hungry dog

in an abandoned village; the appetizing reek of the fresh durian one wept to eat; the sight and sound of orphans howling by the dead bodies of their mothers and fathers; the stickiness of one's shirt by afternoon, the stickiness of one's lover by the end of lovemaking, the stickiness of our situations; the frantic squealing of pigs running for their lives as villagers gave chase; the hills afire with sunset; the crowned head of dawn rising from the sheets of the sea; the hot grasp of our mother's hand; and while the list could go on and on and on, the point was simply this: the most important thing we could never forget was that we could never forget.

And finally, this next quote that comes near the end of the narrator's psychological torture, which incidentally is conducted largely in accordance with the CIA manual though supplemented by equally gruesome local customs, posits a seemingly endless reel of 'what-ifs' and alternate possibilities that ultimately succumb to the most basic of human needs.

[I]f you would please just turn off the lights, if you would please just turn off the telephone, if you would just stop calling me, if you would remember that the two of us were once and perhaps still are the best of friends, if you could see that I have nothing left to confess, if history's ship had taken a different tack, if I had become an accountant, if I had fallen in love with the right woman, if I had been a more virtuous lover, if my mother had been less of a mother, if my father had gone to save souls in Algeria instead of here, if the commandant did not need to make me over, if my own people did not suspect me, if they saw me as one of them, if we forgot our resentment, if we forgot revenge, if we acknowledged that we are all puppets in someone else's play, if we had not fought a war against each other, if some of us had not called ourselves nationalists or communists or capitalists or realists, if our

bonzes had not incinerated themselves, if the Americans hadn't come to save us from ourselves, if we had not bought what they sold, if the Soviets had never called us comrades, if Mao had not sought to do the same, if the Japanese hadn't taught us the superiority of the yellow race, if the French had never sought to civilize us, if Ho Chi Minh had not been dialectical and Karl Marx not analytical, if the invisible hand of the market did not hold us by the scruffs of our necks, if the British had defeated the rebels of the new world, if the natives had simply said, Hell no, on first seeing the white man, if our emperors and mandarins had not clashed among themselves, if the Chinese had never ruled us for a thousand years, if they had used gunpowder for more than fireworks, if the Buddha had never lived, if the Bible had never been written and Jesus Christ never sacrificed, if Adam and Eve still frolicked in the Garden of Eden, if the dragon lord and the fairy queen had not given birth to us, if the two of them had not parted ways, if fifty of their children had not followed their fairy mother to the mountains, if fifty more had not followed their dragon father to the sea, if legend's phoenix had truly soared from its own ashes rather than simply crashed and burned in our countryside, if there were no Light and no Word, if Heaven and earth had never parted, if history had never happened, neither as farce nor as tragedy, if the serpent of language had not bitten me, if I had never been born, if my mother was never cleft, if you needed no more revisions, and if I saw no more of these visions, please, could you please just let me sleep?

In some respects, the narrator's special status as a prisoner is reminiscent of the communist party loyalist in Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* who is imprisoned for treason and struggles with having been charged with betraying the party he had served. This leads to one final observation: the notion of a vanguard leading the masses—to independence and freedom or some such utopia—ties

in importantly with the Nguyen's theme of 'nothingness.' For the narrator who is sufficiently schooled in communist ideology, Lenin's concept of the vanguard of the proletariat naturally comes to mind. But through his intellectual self-torture for his own misdeeds, he comes to realize that this leadership paradigm is filled with contradictions. Speaking as a communist agent—purged but not properly 're-educated'—he concludes that "our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power." But,

Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us. Our revolution took considerably longer than theirs, and was considerably bloodier, but we made up for lost time. When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best.

Nguyen insists that he is not laying full blame on the French and the Americans. In his interview with Paul Tran, Nguyen admits that "we fucked ourselves," and he emphasizes that he "didn't want to let anybody off the hook" and that his book attempts to "hold everyone accountable."

Perhaps then, the wartime slogan 'independence and freedom' is just another siren call sung by people who have power and don't want to relinquish it, who have had power and lost it and want to have it back, who are next in line to assume power or who take pleasure in being near power, and those who want to critique power, to overcome power to . . . and so on. Being American, French, Japanese or Vietnamese (South or communist) is incidental.



## **Israel's Manifest Destiny (May 2024)**

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Since the October 7<sup>th</sup> Hamas attack on Israeli civilians in the south, Israel has set out to eliminate Hamas. Many say that the elimination of Hamas is impossible, but Israel disagrees. Hamas can be removed from Gaza by forcing all Palestinians to abandon Gaza. With no Palestinians in Gaza, Hamas would no longer be a threat on Israel's southern border. Fortress Israel, with U.S. assistance, would replace the military occupation.

Israel has shown no mercy for civilians and in its total war has obliterated the red lines of international humanitarian law. This is arguably consistent with the way the U.S. itself has waged war going back to its Indian Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the rhetoric of war in Gaza, Hamas is the target of the Israeli military machine. In reality, civilians are also targets. Their homes are targets. Their hospitals are targets. Their schools are targets. Their mosques and churches are targets. (Not all Arabs are Muslim.) The entire public infrastructure is a target. This is because Israel maintains that Hamas is everywhere, and if everywhere in Gaza is a target, then everyone is a target. Civilians are herded from one 'safe zone' to another, but even in 'safe zones', civilians cannot escape Israel's bombs, missiles, and artillery from land, sea and air. More than 100,000 casualties, 35,000 dead, more women and children killed than men (and not all men being Hamas combatants). That's total war.

The U.S. has resolutely supported Israel's right to self-defense to justify Israel's war. The weapons have flowed freely from the U.S. until the very recent limited pause by the Biden Administration in May as Israel executes its 'pacification' of Rafah (we remember that term from Vietnam), which is the last corner of the Gaza box where Palestinian refugees have sought safety from Israeli munitions. Yet as warned, the Israeli military has begun its full scale invasion of

Rafah. Internationally, the U.S. continues to be Israel's 'best friend,' ensuring that no concert of powers will intervene to stop or even pause the war and that no state actor in the region will threaten Israel as it proceeds with its full-scale assault. This is no longer just 'mowing the grass.' This is making Gaza uninhabitable. As long as the U.S. stands by to defend Israel from Iran, the most likely attacker, Israel may have enough bombs and bullets stockpiled to do to Rafah what it did to Gaza City and Khan Younis even if Biden's delay of some weapons shipments (500-pound and 2,000-pound unguided or "dumb" bombs) lasts a bit longer.

The scale and intensity of Israel's war has been extensively covered in the media. Just before Christmas, the *Voice of America* was already reporting that

In little more than two months, the [Israeli] offensive has wreaked more destruction than the razing of Syria's Aleppo between 2012 and 2016, Ukraine's Mariupol or, proportionally, the Allied bombing of Germany in World War II. It has killed more civilians than the U.S.-led coalition did in its three-year campaign against the Islamic State group.

Meanwhile, famine alerts have been pouring out of Gaza for months, but humanitarian aid has been choked by Israel, which maintains that every incoming shipment could be a resupply of weapons for Hamas. This control of humanitarian aid serves two purposes: first, to block incoming arms, and second, and perhaps more importantly to withhold food, medicine and basic needs from civilians who might be inclined to think Palestine might ever be livable again . . . for them. More and more the Gaza Strip is looking to be an investment bonanza for those who would remove the rubble and retrofit the area for Israeli settlement *sans* Palestinians. And for those Palestinians who have knowledge of what is

happening on Israel's 2<sup>nd</sup> front in the West Bank, the prospects for any part of the occupied territories being home to Palestinians looks worse than ever.

Israel has taken advantage of this moment in history to purge Palestinians from the occupied territories. Whether Israel deliberately allowed the massive security breach on October 7<sup>th</sup> will never be settled, though serious evidence-based questions have been raised about just how much the Netanyahu government contributed to Israel's shocking vulnerability on its southern border—an attack from an adjacent territory under Israeli military siege no less. Regardless, a war of self defense has provided just the cover Israel needs to protect its North American and critical European alliances. It is difficult to imagine that Israel could do anything in its prosecution of its military annexation—it already controls the occupied territories—to upset these alliances beyond an obligatory public rebuke.

Furthermore, the legacy of the Holocaust has sealed the West's unconditional bond with Israel in a way that no other genocide in history has done for its victims. Think of the Cambodians bombed by Americans during the war and then abandoned to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge as the Americans beat a rapid retreat from a deeply-fractured Southeast Asia in 1975. Upwards of two million Cambodians were killed in the Khmer Rouge genocide. The scenes of frantic evacuations from Saigon were repeated in Kabul 46 years later as if from the same script as America hastily took flight from Afghanistan after yet another failed war, this one spanning two decades.

The hypocrisy is deep. The U.S., the principal architect of the post-World War II world order, having liberated the survivors of Germany's death camps in 1945, today actively collaborates in the ongoing genocide of another people with all the attendant horrors of

bombing, shooting, torture, famine, disease and displacement. That, however, is the only future for the two million souls in Gaza, most of whom are noncombatants who would prefer not to be terrorized, uprooted, killed and maimed by either party in the war. They would simply like to be left alone to live ‘normal’ lives, what most of us in the middle to upper socioeconomic tiers of the West, especially in ocean-buffered North America, take as a given every single day.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century as America expanded westward, it, too, encountered resistance from the people living there. The North American Indians indigenous to the region were regarded essentially as terrorists in the minds of settlers and more importantly the U.S. government and its military. The wars over land ownership were savage—atrocities piled up by both sides, not unlike America’s wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . and Europe’s two wars both fought within recent memory of the two catastrophic world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under the banner of Manifest Destiny, the U.S. forcibly took the land away from and practically annihilated the indigenous population. But it was a just cause for a chosen people who served the one true God. Such has been the case throughout human history with different casts of nations and gods.

Every day, the U.S. betrays its avowed principles of democracy, sovereignty, rule of law and human rights by not refusing to finance or provision Israel’s ‘over the top’ prosecution of the war. Occasionally, the U.S. cautions Israel that it’s going too far. But Israel hasn’t forgotten, nor has the rest of the world, that the U.S. does not have a stellar record of defending international humanitarian law—certainly not where American military action is concerned. There’s Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Hamburg, Dresden, Vietnam, Iraq, etc. and that doesn’t include America’s pre-Geneva Convention wars in support of its own Manifest Destiny. At all times, the enemies of America have been demonized

by government leaders and other warmongers in much the same way as the ‘Palestinian,’ the ‘Arab’ has been demonized by the Netanyahu government and its right wing, absolutist constituency. The first rule of wartime public relations: dehumanize your enemy. It makes the killing easier.

In my view, the U.S. should not only pause **all** military shipments to Israel indefinitely but also rethink the U.S.-Israel alliance. While the U.S. has committed more than its share of wartime abominations, that should not prevent it from sanctioning Israel for the way it is prosecuting its war. On the contrary, it is all the more incumbent on the U.S. as a global power that has the blood of innocent millions on its hands to atone for its crimes and to begin to establish credibility as a principled actor in international affairs. This could be the opportunity for the U.S. to confront its ghosts from the past and send a strong message to the rest of the world and its own people. The U.S. cannot forever be captive to its crimes of the past. *Realpolitik* does not have to be the modus operandi of international relations. If I am mistaken, then the human race and all the sub-races of the species are condemned to eternally repeat the cycles of violence and cruelty that have stolen so many innocent lives.

Pollyannish? To some, yes, but bear in mind that in northern North America, i.e., the U.S. and Canada, we are immigrants from many nations—nations who have hated and killed one another for centuries and in some cases still do—and we have to figure out how to live together without killing one another in this demographic melting pot or multicultural mosaic, whichever you prefer. We have enough violence and killing without spawning sectarian killings among our many tribes with our lists of historical grievances.

The world is a dangerous place, and President Washington, as he was leaving office he warned of the dangers that ‘entangling alliances’ with Europe’s warring nations represented for American

sovereignty and democracy. We need to be reminded of his advice. Not only is America responsible for the way it wages war, but it is equally responsible where it gives unconditional support to the wars of its allies.

Israel may go ahead and attempt to annex the occupied territories, but the world community will be in a better position to contest the illegal annexation if the U.S. is on board. Ironically, and the irony is not lost on the world outside the U.S., America is at war with Russia over its Manifest Destiny-justification of its invasion of Ukraine yet endorses and even participates in Israel's pursuit of its Manifest Destiny. The evidence of U.S. complicity: America's automatic veto of any UN Security Council resolution deemed to be a threat by Israel, America's refusal to consider the merits of any case before the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court that names Israel as a defendant, and the escalation of military aid to Israel post-October 7<sup>th</sup>, paused—but only in part—but ready to resume at a moment's notice.

While among Jews, many are asking 'who are we,' 'who have we become'; we Americans should be asking ourselves the very same questions.

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\*In this article, Israel and Israeli refers to the Government of Israel. Not all Israelis, not all Israeli Jews and not all North American Jews support the Netanyahu Government's prosecution of the war against Hamas. Conflation of the views of a nation's government and its people is inaccurate and unhelpful and tends to promote monolithic ethnic, racial and religious prejudices and hostility. Similarly, the U.S. refers to the Government of the U.S. and not the people as many Americans strongly oppose arming Israel with 2,000-pound bombs that kill buildings and the people in and near them, not discriminating between Hamas fighters and the elderly, the infirm and the newborn.

## **Reviewing *The One State Reality* (May 2024)**

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*The One State Reality: What Is Israel/Palestine?* was published in March 2023 almost seven months before Hamas attacked Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>. This is a crucial point because so much has changed in the world of public policy as well as daily life since October 7<sup>th</sup>. The editors—Michael Barnett, Nathan J. Brown, Marc Lynch, and Shibley Telhami—prepared this collection of articles from various scholars in Middle Eastern studies. The purpose of the volume is to change the focus of the Palestine/Israel issue from comparing prescriptive policies to describing actually existing conditions in the area. The view is that progress can be made only by understanding the reality of the current state of affairs where only one state exists and is the ultimate authority of law and order. The editors and authors agree with the assessment that the status quo is the real world of Israel/Palestine that has existed for some time and that may well continue to exist well into the future. In their view, the theoretical models of what could or should be are largely determined by the situation on the ground in the world of everyday life. One simple example is that Palestinians in Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank are not Israeli citizens and are therefore ineligible to vote in national elections. Citizenship and the right to vote in national elections are limited to Jews and those Arabs who live inside the Green Line, i.e., the pre-1967 borders of Israel. It is that world that the authors describe in order to better inform leaders, policymakers and the public of what issues must be faced sooner or later in any future Palestine/Israel.

In this review, three chapters will be discussed at some length, and four more will be briefly mentioned. It is hoped that this review will provide a sufficient preview for readers who wish to read the book for themselves. Some of the chapters are easier to read than others and part of this depends upon the reader's prior knowledge. I found the book challenging, but reading it was definitely

worthwhile. It does go well beyond mass media coverage but it is still accessible to the non-scholar, which is how I would characterize myself. For the more detailed part of this review, I will take the chapters out of order, starting with Chapter 12, a history of American foreign policy in the region, proceeding to Chapter 13, a status update since the failure of the Oslo Peace Accords and then to Chapter 8 and an assessment of the views of Jewish Americans vis à vis Israeli Jews.

In Chapter 12, ‘Palestinian Statehood in American Policy,’ Kevin Huggard and Tamara Cofman Wittes describe America’s role mediating Arab-Jewish state relations in the Middle East since the 1979 Camp David treaty between Egypt and Israel. The term ‘mediator’ exaggerates the objectivity of American foreign policy, which has historically tilted in favour of the Israelis. The alliance has been shaped by Cold War politics, America’s need for a reliable ally in the oil-rich Middle East, the affinity of a large body of America’s Christians with the Jewish nation, and, of course, the memory of the Holocaust. While the security of the Israeli state is an important foreign policy objective, “compared to the 1970s when Arab-Israeli diplomacy was a core arena for Cold War positioning, or to the 1990s when it was a central dimension of American global hegemony, the conflict today simply does not move the same mountains in U.S. geopolitical strategy.”

In the 1990s, the Oslo two-state solution was an opportunity to reconcile Jewish nationalism and Palestinian nationalism; however, it failed after more than two decades of effort. The two-state solution appeared to be in jeopardy, widening the gap between the two parties such that “Today, the conflict may be on the cusp of a new phase, in which the currently reigning interpretation of Jewish nationalism on the Israeli Right devours not only the prospect of a negotiated compromise but perhaps also the Jewish democratic state itself.” And on the Palestinian side, the prospects of anything

other than the status quo threaten to undermine the Palestinian commitment to a political solution and a reversion to armed struggle. What the authors couldn't have known was that later in 2023, October 7<sup>th</sup> and the Israeli war in Gaza would reinvigorate talk among U.S. and European leaders for a two-state solution. What remains unknown is what effect October 7<sup>th</sup> and beyond will have on Israeli politics and Palestinian politics. Adding to this uncertainty is the possibility that a different U.S. administration could be flexible in terms of its acceptable outcomes "that provide for democracy and equal rights for all those living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea."

In Chapter 13, 'Beyond Oslo,' Khaled Elgindy states that "The Oslo process is dead and has been for some time, and the prospect of a negotiated two state solution, in both political and physical terms, appears to be headed for a similar fate." Therefore, the times are appropriate for starting from "a clean slate by which to rethink old assumptions and explore new possibilities." This rethink, Elgindy believes, must address the inequalities that exist in the one state reality that is Israel. He argues that as the sole state authority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, Israel is responsible for the existence and perpetuation of different and unequal legal/political regimes—one for Israeli Jews, one for Israeli Palestinians, one for West Bank Palestinians, one for Palestinians in East Jerusalem and one for Gazans. At the top are the Israeli Jews and at the bottom are the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip.

Elgindy states that "Israel clearly has the ability to shape or dictate outcomes in ways that Palestinians do not." He continues by pointing out that Israel is a first-world economy and has the most powerful military in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Palestinians live under occupation, meaning that they are a stateless people who can be displaced as in the West Bank and Jerusalem, blockaded as in Gaza and denied full democratic rights granted to

their neighbours in Israel proper. The fact that U.S. administrations downplay the significance of the occupation prejudices any peace talks as the two parties are vastly unequal in virtually every way. So, regardless of the configuration of a reworked Palestine/Israel map, any solution promising equal rights must deliver its corresponding outcomes to have any meaning and value for Palestinians. Otherwise, the status quo is Israel/Palestine with unequal legal and political rights for different people.

Elgindy describes three possible scenarios: one-state solution, two-state solution or confederation as in the Balkans. At present an egalitarian unitary state model is virtually impossible to even contemplate. The two-state model as of the time Elgindy was writing this article seemed hopeless, and confederation model is essentially a placeholder for any better ideas that have not been developed and put forward yet. Regardless, what model is used, Elgindy emphasizes that “there is no credible solution that does not entail Israel, and specifically Israeli Jews, giving up some degree of power and privilege,” which does not augur well for the future absent significant inducements to compensate for Jewish concessions.

In Chapter 8, ‘American Jewry and the One State Reality,’ by Michael Barnett and Lara Friedman, make the argument that a one-state solution is the best path forward for giving Jews the means to reconcile their liberal democratic political views with their commitment to Jewishness. In this reviewer’s opinion, this is an extraordinary request, not incomparable with asking 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans to accept Native Indians as full citizens in a westwardly-expanding United States—the parallels between President Andrew Jackson (just to name one firm believer of America’s Manifest Destiny) and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu being uncomfortably similar. Whether a sufficient body of Israeli Jews would feel secure in charitably extending democratic rights to

others is uncertain—the everyday circumstances of living being quite different between American Jews and Israeli Jews. As the authors note, in the past “Jewish Americans overlooked the possible fault lines in Israel’s liberal democracy because of the memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s just wars for survival.” Just how much October 7<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing war in Gaza has changed this perspective remains to be seen, particularly in light of the way the war has been prosecuted so far.

The following is intended to highlight some of the themes in several other chapters.

In Chapter 1, ‘What and Where Is Israel? Time for a Gestalt Shift,’ Ian Lustick advances the proposition that only by analyzing the one-state reality of Israel can the fundamental questions that need to be asked be raised, viz. those related to political equality. The following extended quote provides an example of the sort of gestalt (or paradigm) shift that Lustick has in mind.

If trying to see the situation in terms of the TSS [two-state solution] paradigm produces anomalies, switching one’s gestalt to a one state reality (OSR) paradigm eliminates them. From the OSR perspective it is not puzzling that no meaningful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), or brokered by the international community, took place over the last decade. If the PA, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip are within the State of Israel, why should one imagine otherwise? Similarly, that Israel arrests Palestinians in all areas of the West Bank virtually every night, or that it simply closes off whole sections of Ramallah or other West Bank cities at will, is not surprising. That is how Israel has long treated Arab, especially noncitizen Arab, inhabitants. That is to be expected given a OSR in which the dominant group in the

state is threatened by a furious and subordinated population.

In Chapter 3, ‘Israel/Palestine: Towards Decolonization,’ Yousef Munayyer addresses what he considers to be a deficiency in the literature of International Relations: statelessness and settler colonialism. Regarding the former, he directs attention to Hannah Arendt, herself a stateless person in Germany and then France before moving to the U.S., and the provocative yet obvious thesis that only the state can grant “the right to have rights.” As to the latter, Munayyer is not speaking of the colonialism of the British in India or the Belgians in the Congo, but he is talking about the idea of manifest destiny (a concept familiar to students of American history), which is clearly expressed in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s claim that “This is the land of our forefathers, the land of Israel, to which Abraham brought the idea of one god, where David set out to confront Goliath, and where Isaiah saw his vision of eternal peace.”

According to Munayyer, settler colonialism is established by the “taking by the stronger group of land, rights, access, and identity from the weaker indigenous population over time.” It is “an overall process of replacement within a physical space, perhaps the most important process is that of land taking.” The transfer of land ownership from the weaker to the stronger is accompanied by and, in turn, provides the foundation for a new legal/political regime. Insofar as this new regime is part of a state, those uprooted from the land essentially become stateless. This is the paradigm that Munayyer asks the reader to apply towards understanding fundamental power asymmetry between Israeli citizens and Palestinian residents of the occupied territories. And it is this asymmetrical distribution of political power, backed by the law of the state and its military, that perpetuates the democratic deficit in Israel/Palestine. Munayyer does not suggest that decolonization should be a reversal of ‘replacement,’ i.e. a re-replacement.

Instead, it should be “based on the principle of co-permanence: the idea that the land is, and will always be, home to both peoples together and not for one at the expense of the other.” And the principles of co-permanence must be established in the “law, land and language.”

In Chapter 4, ‘Citizenship as a Mobility Regime,’ Yael Berda asserts that citizenship grants “the right to have rights”, e.g., the freedom to move and live freely within the territory of the state. It is this mobility that Berda regards as “the primary right in liberal modern states, linking political concepts of freedom, security, and violence, as well as facilitating the exercise of all other rights.” The one state reality in Israel “successfully segregates and separates Palestinian populations by graded access or denial of mobility.” For example, “the permit regime in the West Bank and East Jerusalem” is part of “the most sophisticated surveillance and population management system in the world.” In addition, entry/exit to/from the Gaza Strip is tightly controlled by Israel by means of a long-standing blockade. Israel’s “racialized regime of mobility [is] a central feature of the one state reality.”

In the Conclusion, Marc Lynch, one of the editors, restates the intention of this volume to apply empirical and theoretical analysis to the study of the Israel/Palestine issue, but by book’s end he concludes that the task of perfect objectivity is impossible as empathy and ethical values intrude from every direction.

[T]he way we frame research questions is never neutral. While we parse the meaning of apartheid in the context of Israel and Palestine, millions of Palestinians suffer enormously from the reality of capricious domination, expropriation, and dispossession. How does one sustain a focus on the effects of Israeli military action in Gaza on global narratives while watching Israeli snipers mow down

unarmed Palestinians at the border fence? What do we give up by adopting the cool, rational analysis of power and interests against the raw passions of dispossessed Palestinians or Israelis who fear the delegitimization of their own identity?

This book was recommended by Amaney Jamal, Dean of the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, who was interviewed regarding her October 6<sup>th</sup> survey of Palestinian public opinion in Gaza and the West Bank. The complete interview is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/03/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-amaney-jamal.html>. Following Hamas' October 7<sup>th</sup> attack on Israeli citizens, the *Ezra Klein Show* devoted a number of podcasts representing various perspectives—so it is impossible to imagine anyone agreeing with all of the guests—on the polarized and polarizing Palestine/Israel issue post-October 7<sup>th</sup>. Of particular interest are some of the titles recommended by guests, three of which have been reviewed elsewhere: Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* (1979), Yossi Klein Halevi's *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor* (2018) and Rashid Khalidi's *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (2020).

## **Reviewing The Hundred Years' War on Palestine (June 2024)**

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Rashid Khalidi is a Palestinian-American historian and currently the Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University. In 2020, he published *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*, which begins with the Balfour Declaration and Britain's commitment to a Jewish homeland in Palestine and concludes with the end of the second Obama Administration. He divides the century into six periods of war: the period under the British Mandate in Palestine, the post-World War II Nakba and the Jewish war for independence, the six-day war of 1967 that set the current boundaries of modern Israel and the occupied territories, the 1982 war in Lebanon, the 1<sup>st</sup> Intifada and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada. In each of these periods, he maintains war was being waged on the Palestinians. The 1973 Yom Kippur War is not included as it was primarily conducted between the armies of Israel, Egypt and Syria.

Khalidi writes that the modern state of Israel would not exist as it does today without the robust sponsorship, first of Britain during the Mandate and second of the U.S. since independence. That is a modest assertion compared to the bolder thesis that it was British and American wars initially in conjunction with the Zionist Movement and ultimately with Israel that created today's map of Palestine, which is increasingly characterized as the One State Reality. The British were not and the Americans have not been motivated by the spirit of altruism or empathy. That isn't how nation-states behave. Geopolitical considerations were naturally paramount for Britain and have been for the U.S. In the case of Britain, the Empire was coming undone and Britain was struggling to keep something intact. While in the case of the U.S., strategic positioning vis-à-vis the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War and Russia and China since and a stable oil market fueling its rapidly expanding industrial economy have been ever-present and weighty

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considerations relative to the public relations benefits of demonstrating solicitous and humane feeling towards the victims of the Holocaust.

Even before World War II, the forces of self-determination had been set loose by the collapse of empires in Russia, Germany, Austria and Turkey. The aspirations of subject peoples in these empires were emboldened by the language of the likes of President Woodrow Wilson, who never quite came right out and said, “Self-determination, that’s for you and you, but not you.” Khalidi writes that

Wilson had no intention of applying the principle to most of those who took them as inspiration for their hopes of national liberation. Indeed, he confessed that he was bewildered by the plethora of peoples, most of whom he had never heard, who responded to his call for self-determination.

For the Zionists waiting in the wings since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, self-determination and a homeland were promised. For the Palestinians, it was not so. That much was understood from the intent of the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, which was in effect Balfour’s enabling legislation. Referring to the preamble of the Mandate, Khalidi states that

[T]he Jewish people, and only the Jewish people, are described as having a historic connection to Palestine. In the eyes of the drafters, the entire two-thousand-year-old built environment of the country with its villages, shrines, castles, mosques, churches, and monuments dating to the Ottoman, Mameluke, Ayyubid, Crusader, Abbasid, Umayyad, Byzantine, and earlier periods belonged to no people at all, or only to amorphous religious groups. There

were people there, certainly, but they had no history or collective existence, and could therefore be ignored. . . . The surest way to eradicate a people's right to their land is to deny their historical connection to it.

Palestinians were expected to accommodate the influx of Jewish immigrants, or repatriated Jews, depending on one's views of land titles spanning centuries. Palestine, thus served two purposes: creating a homeland for European Jewry in the Middle East and making it unnecessary for Britain or America to take responsibility Jewish refugees.

Britain's and America's facilitation of the transfer of Jews from Europe to Palestine was unintentionally supported by the failure of Palestinian leadership to resist the changes wrought by Zionism. Khalidi, from a family of some political influence, knew or knew of many of the Palestinian elite, and he is highly critical of Palestinian leaders from the early years of the Mandate through the feuding Fatah and Hamas parties of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. For Khalidi, the Palestinians have historically been betrayed by their leaders as if their struggle for nationhood against the Zionists, the British and the Americans were not difficult enough.

The on-again, off-again wars have left Palestinians forcibly evicted from their homes and rendered stateless in neighbouring countries. It has been estimated that the Nakba (the Catastrophe) of 1948 displaced more than 700,000 Palestinians. These wars have targeted civilians already expelled from their homes and living in refugee camps as in the case of Sabra and Shatila where refugees were massacred by Lebanese Maronite militias in collaboration with Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in 1982. And these wars have turned entire communities into rubble, e.g., Israel's 2014 bombardment of Gaza in accordance with the Dahiya doctrine, a military strategy of asymmetric force. Dropping 2,000-pound bombs in civilian areas

makes it perfectly unambiguous that for the IDF, there is to be no confusion between Palestinian civilians and militants. The following explanation was shared by Major General Gadi Eizenkot, commander of the IDF's northern front in 2008:

What happened in the Dahiya quarter ... will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on.... We will apply disproportionate force on it and cause great damage and destruction there. From our standpoint, these are not civilian villages, they are military bases.... This is not a recommendation. This is a plan. And it has been approved.

Despite all efforts to ignore, expel or eradicate Palestine and put an end to their aspirations of sovereignty in a two-state solution or equality in a one-state solution, the Palestinian cause does not lie in ruins. Like a phoenix it keeps rising from the ashes.

[T]he great powers have repeatedly tried to act in spite of the Palestinians, ignoring them, talking for them or over their heads, or pretending that they did not exist. In the face of the heavy odds against them, however, the Palestinians have shown a stubborn capacity to resist these efforts to eliminate them politically and scatter them to the four winds. . . . In their place was meant to stand a Jewish state, uncontested by the indigenous society that it was meant to supplant. Yet for all its might, [Israel's] nuclear weapons, and its alliance with the United States, today the Jewish state is at least as contested globally as it was at any time in the past. The Palestinians' resistance, their persistence, and their challenge to Israel's ambitions are among the most striking phenomena of the current era.

Going forward, Khalidi believes that the U.S. must be removed from its role as mediator between Israel and the Palestinians as its longstanding pro-Israel bias—evidenced by the U.S. veto shielding Israel from U.N. Security Council resolutions and the unconditional

U.S. commitment to substantially underwrite the Israeli military—prevents it from serving as an honest broker. In the meantime, he believes it is incumbent on Palestinians to engage the Israeli narrative that has captured North America and Europe. The information war seems to have all but been won by the Israelis. Yet, the Palestinian side has barely made an effort to counter the lobbying of groups like AIPAC. Yossi Klein Halevi has written that there are two valid narratives—the Jewish and the Palestinian. Khalidi argues that the world must be familiarized with the Palestinian narrative.

With respect to the U.S., the Palestinian narrative must be explained in a context that may resonate with Americans, e.g., the struggle for democratic equality. And Palestinians must make the case—and it must be compelling—to persuade the American public to critically examine the morality and legality of exporting offensive weapons to Israel when the U.S. knows that these weapons will be used against civilians. The Dahiya doctrine makes Israel's intent unmistakable and predictable. And U.S. law forbids abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity. Finally, Palestinians must convince the American foreign policy establishment to recognize that a just and acceptable resolution of the Israel-Palestine issue would not be incompatible with America's strategic interests in the Middle East. Khalidi acknowledges that will be a challenge.

*eclipsed* is a brief collection of writings that blends 11 pieces of short fiction and 13 works of non-fiction.

This volume is essentially a continuation of *Writings Near the End of the Human Era*, which addresses themes sufficiently dystopian to get us to pay attention to some of the possible futures of our species.

#### About the Author

Peter McMillan lives with his wife and Lottie, their flat-coated retriever, on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario, and in addition to writing he teaches English.

