

**PARALLEL UNIVERSES:
THE WORLD OF ETGAR KERET**

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“There is another world,” writes Paul Éluard, “but it is in this one.” The French Surrealist’s insight is the starting point for these reflections on Etgar Keret’s writings, which among their many virtues reveal the mythic underpinnings of our daily existence. He has an unerring eye for the absurd; his wit is by turns brilliant and unnerving; he has already earned the highest form of flattery—imitation by young writers the world over. It is common for writers to speculate about the secret sources of another writer’s work; with your permission I will speak as a writer, not a scholar, hoping to puzzle out some of what makes him such a good storyteller. If I had more time, I would trace a certain literary genealogy through his work, which is rooted in Hasidic tales, the Brothers Grimm, Novalis, the Comte de Lautréamont, French Surrealism, Kafka, Babel, Vonnegut, Woody Allen: in short, the subterranean current that for centuries has nourished some of the wildest and most important writing. Suffice to say that he carries on this tradition with aplomb. American writers often compare him to George Saunders. But his work is stranger, and more profound, than the acclaimed *Tenth of December*. In this world and many others Etgar is on fire.

“Parallel Universes,” a story published in *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, distills in one two-page-long paragraph “a theory that says there are billions of other universes, parallel to the one we live in, and that each of them is slightly different.” The narrator imagines different lives for himself in parallel universes before confessing that “The only ones that interest [him] are the ones where she isn’t happily married, with a cute little boy, the ones where she’s completely alone.” Desire is, of course, predicated on possibility, which in life as well as fiction is often thwarted or delayed, and that is what drives people for better or worse. Think Emma Bovary or Anna Karenin. The one who gets away may be the one we truly love, which is what fuels so much for good or ill. Central to the human condition, Keret suggests, is the question that fiction writers ask themselves at the start of a new story: what if? What if she did not choose someone else? So many sleepless nights revolve around that question. The narrator’s answer is familiar to readers of Keret’s other fictions: “There’s a universe where I’m lying there with my wrists slashed, bleeding, on the bedroom floor. That’s the universe that I’m doomed to live in until it’s over. I don’t want to think about it now. I just want to think about that other universe. A cottage in the woods, the sun setting, going to bed early. In bed, my right arm is unlashed, and dry. She lies on it for so long that I can hardly feel it anymore. But I don’t move, I like it that way, with my arm under her warm body, and I keep liking it even when I can no longer feel my arm at all.” Robert Frost called poetry “a momentary stay against confusion.” Keret’s prospect of parallel universes performs the same function.

For ours is a dingy reality, occasionally leavened by works of the imagination. “Kneller’s Happy Campers,” for example, which appeared in English translation in *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God & Other Stories*. This dark novella, described in the jacket copy as a road trip through the afterlife of suicides, was my introduction to his work, which convinced me that he had caught something essential about the generalized despair of our time. The skies in the hereafter were the same monotonous hue of grey that, presumably, helped inspire the suicides to escape their pain—from which there is no escape. Readers will remember the horrifying detail that the dead carry for eternity the scars from their final act—slit wrists, a bullet hole, the ribbons of flesh and clothing of a suicide bomber. Dante’s *Purgatory* meets *Homeland*. I read the work upon Etgar’s arrival at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program (IWP), in August 2001, and knew that he would stand out among the other thirty writers, who hailed from all corners of the earth. What I did not know was that in addition to his literary genius he is deeply humane, wise, and funny: a rarity among literati, and most welcome. He was our moral compass that fall.

In the first week of the residency, our Palestinian participant, Ghassan Zaqtan, learned that IDF tanks had shelled the House of Poetry in Ramallah, destroying its offices, library, and archives—the third attack against the institution in a year, in the most recent of which an Israeli sniper had wounded a Palestinian poet. Ghassan was the co-founder and co-director of the House of Poetry, which he insisted was not dispensing propaganda for a terrorist organization, as the IDF claimed, but was a cultural center committed to nurturing young poets. The Second Intifada was on, however, and Ghassan feared that Western media

would repeat the Israeli version of the story, insuring that “Palestinian life and poetry are murdered twice, by gunfire and by media fire.”

Etgar was the first writer to offer condolences to Ghassan, which made an impression on the other writers, nearly all of whom—not to put too fine a point on it—took a dim view of Israel, especially those from the Islamic world. This event, and Etgar’s response to it, shaped the residency as much as 9/11, which occurred but a week later. The fate of the House of Poetry seemed to be an emblem of the contested place of literature in the modern world, and in the fraught weeks surrounding the American-led invasion of Afghanistan political discussions in the IWP led inevitably to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One day Etgar and Ghassan engaged in a four-hour debate over the issues dividing them, without ever raising their voices. This was for the writers gathered in the common room of the Iowa House Hotel an extraordinary meeting—not of the minds, exactly, but of the goodwill of two men determined to articulate their differences in a civilized fashion. An accurate assessment of the situation, a rigorous accounting of the stakes involved, and a willingness to hear the other side—these are integral to finding common ground: a difficult task, in the best of circumstances. The continuing mayhem in the Middle East suggests the enormity of this challenge. But great fiction can cultivate the powers of empathy, as Etgar’s work reveals, and even save lives, as anyone who makes a life in books will tell you.

Not until much later did I learn his best friend’s suicide was what inspired him to start writing. In an interview in *The Believer* he recalls sitting with his friend in a car for four hours, in complete silence, unable to find a reason for his friend to stay alive. Two

weeks after his friend shot himself, just steps away from him, Etgar wrote his first story, “Pipes,” which was a better answer than what he had proposed in the car: “I said to him, ‘There must be something,’ but I couldn’t say anything else. Since then I haven’t stopped writing.” In his memoir, *The Seven Good Years*, he recalls showing the story to his brother, who reads it with approval, asks if he has another copy, and when Etgar replies in the affirmative proceeds to use it as toilet paper—a useful reminder of the place that literature occupies in the lives of our loved ones. Etgar remarks that at his friend’s funeral a colonel said “that he was brave, that he was one of the best soldiers ever. He was a coward and he was one of the worst soldiers ever, but you’re not allowed to keep your personality if you die in the army. You become a kind of tool.” He wrote “Pipes” in the same computer center, five stories underground, where his friend killed himself, and this marked the beginning of a lifelong quest to maintain individual personality, to not be a tool of the government, the keepers of memory, the good and the brave who, if truth be told, are in their darkest moments anything but good and brave. For he believes that the best way for writers to deal with corruption, the staleness of the Zionist idea, the violence in the region, is “to contain the ambiguity”: that is, to find ways to live in a harsh reality and not dehumanize any group of people living there—i.e. the Palestinians.

The Seven Good Years, Keret’s memoir published in June, begins as an essay on parallel universes: In “Suddenly, the Same Thing,” which recalls the title story of his most recent collection of short fiction, *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door* (about which more in a moment), the narrator is sitting on a bench outside the maternity ward, eavesdropping on a conversation between two nurses ruing the complications associated with terrorist attacks,

which, according to the thin one, “put a damper on everything.” Meanwhile Keret’s wife is about to give birth in a hospital mobilizing to treat victims of a terrorist attack. What better way to dramatize the essential conundrum of the human condition: that at birth we are condemned to die? The juxtaposition of birth and death is heightened by the introduction of a journalist who wants to interview the famous writer. Perhaps he will say something more memorable than what the reporter usually hears from bystanders: “After every attack, I always get the same reactions: ‘Suddenly I heard a boom.’ ‘I don’t know what happened.’ ‘Everything was covered in blood.’ How much of that can you take?” Keret defends the bystanders: “What kind of original thing can you say about an explosion and senseless death?” Then he finds something original to say, not to the journalist but to the reader of this story. “Six hours later, a midget with a cable hanging from his belly button comes popping out of my wife’s vagina and immediately starts to cry. I try to calm him down, to convince him that there’s nothing to worry about. That by the time he grows up, everything here in the Middle East will be settled: peace will come, there won’t be any more terrorist attacks, and even if once in a blue moon there is one, there will always be someone original to describe it perfectly. He quiets down and then considers his next move. He’s supposed to be naïve—seeing as how he’s a newborn—but even he doesn’t buy it, and after a second’s hesitation and a small hiccup, he goes back to crying.” The “small hiccup,” a seemingly inconsequential detail, is what adds poignancy to the scene. Our lives are comprised of small hiccups on the way to the final silence, and in that brief intake of breath the world stands revealed in all its glory and horror. That kid knows everything.

“Tell me a story”—this is how “Suddenly, a Knock on the Door” begins. The order comes not from his son but from a bearded Swede armed with a pistol, who believes that in the Middle East “Brute force is the only language we understand.” “Suddenly, a knock on the door,” says the narrator, who is named Keret, and then there is a knock on the door. A Moroccan pollster, also armed with a pistol, muscles his way into the room. When Keret employs the same device to start a story, a pizza delivery boy knocks on the door, bearing a cleaver. What follows is a delightful, and somewhat frightening, excursion on the art of fiction. The Swede has no interest in realism. “Don’t you go and dump reality on us like a garbage truck,” he warns. “Use your imagination, man, create, invent, take it all the way.” But he cannot resort to having someone knock on the door. Keret begins again, determined to make something out of something, because if he succumbs to the temptation to make something out of nothing it will have no value. But what to do? There must be a knock on the door, which is the call of the language, the subconscious, the Muse. That knock derives from the parallel universe that we call Art. “Give him some slack,” says the pizza guy. “You want a knock on the door? Okay, have your knock on the door. Just so long as it brings us a story.” Which is all that we ask of art and life, no?

Some things that American writers can learn from Etgar Keret, courtesy of his recent interview in *Guernica Magazine*: first, his name means “Urban Challenge,” which is for the majority of my countrymen the story of their lives. Then one must write with passion, abjuring the sterile, well-written stories that mark American creative writing programs. The more outlandish the premise, the more it must be grounded in concrete details. In this he resembles the Italian writer Dino Buzzati, who said that “fantasy should

be as close as possible to journalism. The right word is not ‘banalizing,’ although in fact a little of this is involved. Rather, I mean that the effectiveness of a fantastic story will depend on its being told in the most simple and practical terms.” To this insight Etgar adds slang, which is what lends his work a certain authenticity. He insists that he writes from tone, not content; writing a short fiction is akin to surfing, then tone is the equivalent of balance. “But the engine of the story has nothing to do with plot,” he says. “Just rhythm.” Which, of course, is what makes a poem run... Of the changing landscape of his homeland, where a taxi driver tells him that he is worse than Hamas, he says that “In Israel, we’re very used to people dying, but the concept of Jews killing Jews is a pretty new one. We’re used to terrorism, but the fact that a Jew will kill a Jewish prime minister, the fact that people will come with a baseball bat and beat the shit out of left-wing demonstrators just because they disagree with them, the fact that people like me get death threats—it’s not in our ethics. Think about it: this idea where, in this safe haven for Jews, Jews will threaten to kill other Jews, it wasn’t in the brochure.”

“As the son of Holocaust survivors,” he tell us, “this is life—you’re put in a corner, and you have to get out. I believe that you can always get out.” If his faith is the essence of art, it is also tinged with humor; for as he reminds us, “Jewish people did stand-up routines about the Holocaust during the Holocaust.” His father, whose death is the bookend in *The Seven Good Years* to the birth of his son, once said to him: “All the things that I went through during the Holocaust are within your spectrum of emotion. You know what it is to be afraid. You know what it is to be cold. You know what it is to be hungry. Maybe you’ll never be as afraid or as cold or as hungry as I was, but I didn’t feel any emotions that you

don't know." Little did I know, reading a story in *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God* about a village in Uzbekistan, which "was built right smack at the mouth of Hell," that I was reading about my own life. I know that village, that portal, and that woman, Anna, who ran a grocery store frequented by the visitors from Hell, who would emerge once a century to have a look around. In her later years she would tell her children stories about the people who smelled of sulfur. They are all around us, no? Say hello to them.