Quiet Prose and Bare Life: Why We Should Eschew the Sensational in Human Rights Language

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars observe that sensational depictions of human rights violations enter international circuits of activist discussion and action. However, sensational narratives eclipse the everyday deprivations that accumulate to become a multigenerational legacy of want, stunted potential, and psychological emasculation. This essay examines whether it is even possible for us as readers and consumers of text (both fictional and testimonial) to eschew the sensational and focus on the quotidian and everyday deprivations and disenfranchisements that also constitute human rights violations. Texts discussed include Ghassan Kanafani's story "Men in the Sun" and testimonials by South Asian migrant workers in the Middle East, which graphically underscore abuse and suffering, as well as Mohammed Al-Azza's film "Everyday Nakba" and the "understated" depictions of the Japanese American internment by Hisaye Yamamoto, Mitsuye Yamada, and Julie Otsuka.

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This essay seeks to restore the heuristic value of the seemingly insignificant, the power of the everyday, and the weight of the apparently trivial within the context of human rights narratives. The particularities of everyday deprivations and obstructions, the specific, perhaps unadorned, details unfolding in time constitute a record of the ordinariness of oppression, the unremarkable nature of cruelty as it impacts the minutiae of everyday life. I argue that in the interstices of descriptions of the everyday lies the potential for transformative understanding of readers and for mobilizing our inner resources toward action (which could take a range of forms). It is precisely because the record of the everyday, with its comparatively diminutive force, does not overwhelm our senses or our ability to engage both cognitively and emotionally that it affords us the opportunity for thoughtful reflection and considered involvement to facilitate change. However, we should not forget that we have been so conditioned to respond to the traumatic and sensational (Schaffer and Smith 20–22; Dawes 209) that we have lost the capacity to read for the remarkable in the ordinary or to detect the eruptions contained under seemingly placid surfaces. This essay thus also takes up the following question: How does a reader or viewer acquire the skills to engage "quiet" (i.e., devoid of rhetoric and diction that is laden with images of obvious cruelty and abuse) narratives of human rights abuse, to discern the monumental apparatus of oppression that regulates all aspects of an individual's or group's life, even if the specific everyday manifestation of such oppression does not take the form of killing, abduction, torture, or other extreme forms of mental and bodily injury?

Narratives of everyday violations need interlocutors with cognitive and interpretive responsibility, because such narratives require a deep and fully immersed reading. I have spoken in *The World Next Door* (2004) about "just" reading (as in reading with attention to ethics and justice); in this essay, I extend the idea to invoke not just practices of responsible reading but also practices of responsible and "thick" cognition that enable us to *recognize* everyday oppressions/violations in narratives or accounts that come to us in quiet prose. Such recognition

would constitute the first step in a process that would lead us to consider whether and how we might be complicit as bystanders or beneficiaries, or merely indifferent and apathetic global citizens, and to imagine how we might participate in resisting or speaking out against injustice and violation. (I borrow "thick" from Geertz, who asserted that the task of a good ethnographer is not just to record what s/he sees and hears of the practices of the culture that is under study—which would constitute "thin description,"—but to engage in the kind of "intellectual effort" (6) that explains and contextualizes these practices within a complex cultural landscape of symbols and other forms of ascribed meaning—thick description. Geertz writes: "What the ethnographer is in fact faced with […] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" [10]).

The Obscuring Effects of Heightened Narratives

Graphic depictions of suffering can be momentarily arresting and stimulate immediate outrage. But they do not necessarily prompt readers and viewers to examine how structures and deeply embedded institutions of oppression come into being and then are sustained. In this section, I discuss both the value of dramatic representations of violations as well as their "distracting" quality. These are not narratives of quiet prose; they are depictions that scream abuse, and they seize the attention of the reader. In Ghassan Kanafani's novella "Men in the Sun" (1962), three Palestinian men, desperate to enter Kuwait to seek work, agree to be smuggled across the Iraq/Kuwait border in the cavernous empty hold of a water tanker. There are two checkpoints to cross, and the smuggler has assured them that they will not need to spend any more than five minutes at each stop in the searing heat inside of the empty tanker. They cross the first checkpoint without incident, but at the second checkpoint there is an unexpected delay. The unbearable heat in the cavern of the water tanker kills the men. The human smuggler, when he is finally able to leave the checkpoint and discovers the dead men

inside the tanker, cannot stop wondering why they did not "bang the sides of the tank" (74) when the heat became unbearable.

Kanafani succeeds in conveying the desperation of the men and in describing powerfully the hardships they must endure to make a living. We feel for these men—for the circumstances of their death and for the despair and desperation that leads them to submit to such impossible conditions of being transported across borders. Our affective response may convince us of our own capacity to be moved (and this awareness of ourselves allows us a certain measure of satisfaction and relief about our own empathetic muscles), but what do we do with such suffering that comes to us in such stark fashion and confronts us with undeniable evidence of human pain. More to the point, one might ask whether such graphic depictions facilitate our understanding of the institutional structures that result in the devaluing of certain classes of individuals, in this instance, migrant workers whose labor is a cheap but necessary commodity in a global capitalist system.

The conditions under which workers from South and Southeast Asia are exploited physically and psychologically become apparent only when a particularly horrifying case bursts through into our consciousness. In his essay "A Maid's Execution" (2013), Basharat Peer uses his own ignorance of the nature and extent of the abuse to reveal a nightmarish and hellish existence for laborers and domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Along with him, we are educated in the horrors they endure (rape, withholding of food, forced confinement in the home), and the grisly and cruel deaths that end their lives—beheadings, for instance. Two Indian men who manage a café in Mecca pour out details of their grim life to Peer: they are slapped by their customers, their passports are held by their employers, and so they are unable to leave because their identity papers are in the hands of their patrons. But, they tell Peer, their hardships are nothing compared to what the domestic workers face. And that becomes the occasion for Peer's education and ours.

The abuses documented in the report "As if I Am Not Human" (2008), compiled by Human Rights Watch, are a stark reminder of the extent to which one human being can demean, debase, and destroy

another. They are examples of the conditions of "bare life" (Agamben 10–14) to which certain individuals are reduced. These persons are considered expendable, their existence limited to a consideration of their bodies as providing or not providing utility, and they are completely unprotected from the societal structures that signal their membership and participation in communities of meaningful and examined life. I include an excerpt of one testimonial from among many by domestic workers from Southeast Asia (Philippines and Indonesia) and South Asia (specifically, Sri Lanka), all working in Saudi Arabia. I provide this example not merely to enable the safe consumption of horror, but rather to ask what our responsibility is once we have acquired this knowledge. Let's begin with the details of abuse (from an Indonesian domestic worker in Jeddah):

> She beat me until my whole body burned. She beat me almost every day.... She would beat my head against the stove until it was swollen. She threw a knife at me but I dodged it. I had a big black bruise on my arm where she had beaten my arm with a cooking spoon, she beat me until the spoon broke into two pieces. This behavior began from the first week I arrived [...] She would scream, "I hope you die! I hope your family dies! I hope you become deformed!" She never paid me for 10 months. I thought if I don't escape, I will die.

Other examples include being beaten for asking for one's pay or being humiliated by having one's hair shorn for asking for one's pay.

Violation of bodily integrity rights makes for graphic and arresting prose—we are drawn to the shock and horror (voyeuristically or for more defensible motives) of descriptions and depictions that threaten bodily integrity. Even if we recoil from these descriptions in horror and/or distaste, we are conscious of registering our rejection to these potent stimuli, and in the process we may learn something about the limits of our tolerance and our preference to act or defer action. Melodramatic and sensational depictions of human rights violations may

have additional value. In this regard, it is helpful to consider Thomas Recchio's reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's 1848 novel *Mary Barton* (on the effects of industrialization on the working-class and the pernicious impact of a preoccupation with economic forces). Recchio argues that such extreme depictions make visible those economic, political, and institutional factors that are only understood in the abstract, and they confront the reader with the physical presence of a body in whose suffering/experience one is unknowingly complicit. Without the presence of the injured body, one cannot begin the process of self-interrogation to consider whether one is in some way "responsible" for the injury and, if so, the degree of one's accountability in the injury.

However, this interpretation, too, has its limitations. Though one could concede the effectiveness of shock value in provoking the reader to acknowledge that harm has been done, this awareness does not guarantee either the reader's acceptance of complicity (however indirect) in the injury or commitment to action to change the situation. In fact, the danger of confronting such a profound injury is that it can paralyze the reader and render her/him helpless and unable to respond. It can also lead to the reader's feeling that the act of reading, absorbing, and knowing itself constitutes a form of action. For instance, what do we do about the abuse of domestic workers and contract laborers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states?

Here, I want to distinguish between, on the one hand, human rights activists and workers who gather these stories of suffering and injury from the frontlines and, on the other, the readers who consume these stories from afar. Human rights workers, who collect stories of abuse and violations to provide evidence to force individuals in power to take appropriate action, see these narratives, from the outset, as a means to an end. Their readers—government officials, policy makers, and negotiators—receive these narratives with the knowledge that they are expected to take action. They do not have the luxury of simply being readers; their act of reading is already expected to be the conduit to action. Some policy changes have resulted from the testimonials provided by migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia to human

rights interviewers of the abuse and violations they suffer at the hand of employers in the Middle East.

As a result of such recorded abuses, which reached a climax with the beheading of an Indonesian maid "for the alleged murder of her employer," in 2011 the Indonesian government banned migrant workers from going to Saudi Arabia. In February 2014, the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding to protect the 1 million Indonesian workers who are still currently working in Saudi Arabia. The Indonesian government has said that it will observe how the conditions of the treaty are implemented before it decides whether to lift the ban on recruiting its nationals for work in Saudi Arabia. "Indonesian workers will be granted a number of new rights, including being able to keep their passports and to communicate with their families, to have wage payments made regularly and to take time off" (Future Directions International).

While Human Rights Watch welcomes this development, it worries that the reforms do not go far enough and do not address fundamental issues of how migrant workers are perceived. The workers themselves are frequently unaware of their rights, do not speak Arabic, and are afraid of complaining for fear of being accused of "theft, witchcraft and other assorted crimes by their powerful employers." The labor of migrant workers is crucial to the economy of the Gulf States and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but it is precisely that these men and women who toil there are seen only as sources of labor and not as human beings that they become the targets of unimaginably abusive treatment.

Thick and Deep Reading

Mahmood Mamdani disdains interlocutors' appetite for narratives that violate bodily integrity rights over those that reveal violations of social and economic rights. He challenges us to recognize the structures of oppression in apartheid South Africa where the "state brand[ed] its entire population racially, then tag[ged] every member of the racialized majority with documents that allow[ed] administrative officials to

monitor their every movement—and utilize[d] the plethora of racially focused administrative regulations at its command to target suspected political opponents" (46). He insists that such everyday oppression and regulation can be just as, if not more, devastating than the gross violations of killing, abduction, severe ill treatment, torture, and arson that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission aired through its hearings.

Where the physicality of the body's fragility is not directly visible and depicted—i.e., the language does not speak of skeletal bodies, emaciation, visible signs of malnourishment, and so on—where the damage is not external, such instances require the reader to engage actively with the text, to work with the language to discern its full signification. Acquiring historical knowledge is crucial to appreciating the enormity of the violation that on the face of it does not appear to be so dramatic as to provoke an immediate response. Precisely because one has to invest time and energy in learning the history and significance of everyday abuses, human rights violations like the Japanese American internment or Palestinian disenfranchisement do not get sufficient play. Bruce Bustard, senior curator at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., notes in August 2013, that the "legalese" of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which set in motion the internment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent during World War II, masks the severe consequences that emanated—the destruction of the lives of an entire community of people (qtd. in Qureshi).

In his 1937 essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Richard Wright describes the dilemma that a black man living in the segregated and pre-Civil Rights-era US South faced when riding in an elevator with white men:

> It is a southern custom that all men must take off their hats when they enter an elevator. And especially did this apply to us blacks with rigid force. One day I stepped into an elevator with my arms full of packages. I was forced to ride with my hat on. Two white men stared at me coldly. Then one of them very kindly lifted my

> hat and placed it upon my armful of packages. Now the most accepted response for a Negro to make under such circumstances is to look at the white man out of the corner of his eye and grin. To have said: "Thank you!" would have made the white man think that you thought you were receiving from him a personal service. For such an act I have seen Negroes take a blow in the mouth. Finding the first alternative distasteful, and the second dangerous, I hit upon an acceptable course of action which fell safely between these two poles. I immediately—no sooner than my hat was lifted—pretended that my packages were about to spill, and appeared deeply distressed with keeping them in my arms. In this fashion I evaded having to acknowledge his service, and, in spite of adverse circumstances, salvaged a slender shred of personal pride. (170)

This narrative has none of the overt trauma that we have come to expect in contexts of human rights violations. And yet it gestures to an architecture of regulation that is so deeply entrenched and pervasive that it impinges on an action as simple as knowing the appropriate way to respond to "assistance," when this assistance comes from a representative of the group in power and is a reminder to the member of the oppressed group of the required compliance to a strictly enforced social code. There is no spectacle of suffering in this example that Wright offers. But, as he says, he had to "exercise a great deal of ingenuity to keep out of trouble." In this instance, Wright not only kept out of trouble but also preserved his dignity.

That we recognize the enormity of his achievement is a function of our complex knowledge of the segregated US South (in the pre-Civil Rights era) and its social politics, as well as our historical knowledge of the phenomenon of slavery in the United States and its legacy that extends far beyond the official end of the practice in 1865. Without such knowledge, it is not likely that one could appreciate the magnitude of Wright's performance in the elevator and recognize it as a skillful act of resistance in the face of systematic oppression. By contrast, graphic

images and narratives do not require the scaffolding of history in order to be recognized as records of human rights violations. They can circulate as stark and indisputable evidence of cruelties and suffering. The quiet instruments of oppression—e.g., pass books that one is required to carry to prove the legitimacy of one's presence in areas reserved for the privileged, militarized checkpoints that slow down and curtail one's ability to move freely, substandard schools that offer limited education, sporadic and sparse supply of water, relocations of communities to specifically designated areas, the language of officialdom that authorizes the steady imposition of control over a people—may not carry the immediate visceral punch of narratives of torture and killings. In order to discern the aggressions even when they are in the guise of routine procedures, one has to be keenly attuned to asymmetries of power and actively seek to be informed of the complex politics of encounter between adversarial groups.

Homage to the Everyday

The impact of the everyday and our responsiveness to it can be understood within the context of affect, which Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg characterize as "persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*" (1–2). They emphasize, however, that this force may not be forceful but may, in fact, "transpire […] within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the miniscule and molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-" (2). Affect is, they observe, a "gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls […] through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism" (2). Thus, it would appear, that through our willingness to engage quiet narratives of everyday human rights violations, we can gradually accumulate the affective capital to respond to these violations in concrete and meaningful ways. Henri Lefebvre,

the acknowledged primary theorist of the everyday, describes the everyday in this fashion:

> [The] most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden. A condition stipulated for the legibility of forms, ordained by means of functions, inscribed within structures, the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected. (9)

The reader's or viewer's responsibility is to recognize the mechanisms of oppression in the seemingly innocuous everyday enactments of bureaucracy. A film such as "Everyday Nakba" (dir. Al-Azza) underscores how everyday conditions of deprivation and control, though ostensibly not life-threatening, can constitute a catastrophic reality. "Everyday Nakba" is a 12-minute film on the untenable conditions surrounding water availability experienced by the Palestinian residents of the Aida refugee camp in the West Bank. Their supply of water is completely under the control of the Israeli authorities, who arbitrarily determine when the Aida residents will get water and for how long. The first seven minutes of the film depict, through images and voice-over narration, the heaviness of spirit and the resignation of the residents as they wait for water—unwashed dishes piled in the sink, wilted flowers, dispirited children and angry adults who cannot cool off in the heat of the summer months, laundry that cannot be done, pets and chickens who are also parched, and residents who are powerless to bring predictability into their lives as they languish under the control of Israel. The water resources are overwhelmingly directed toward Israel and the "illegal settlements," says the voice-over narrator.

Seven minutes into the film, the water flows, and the film bursts into animated sound and buoyant music! For some five minutes of the film there is frantic and excited activity, as one of the residents fixes and then starts the motor that will pump the water into the rooftop tank, children turn on faucets and revel in the free-flowing water, and

women finally wash the dirty dishes and laundry. The camp comes alive with activity, some of it joyful, some of it frenetic because the residents know that in a short while the water will cease again. They don't know how long it will flow or when it will resume again once it has stopped. This uncertainty and complete lack of control over the flow of water underscores for the residents that they are indeed victims of everyday "nakba" or catastrophe. Though "Nakba" refers specifically to the 1948 founding of the state of Israel and the resulting dispossession of the Palestinian peoples, this everyday nakba is a daily reminder to the Palestinians of how little control they have over their own destiny.

An uninitiated viewer (uninitiated in the complicated history of the relationship between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples) or one who is deeply entrenched in the perspective of the Israeli settler or believes firmly in the right of Israel to control the occupied resources and land, might not fully appreciate the significance of the asymmetrical power relationship (though the voice-over narration provides some details) between the two peoples or fully comprehend the violations relating to access to water that strip the Palestinians of their dignity. "Everyday Nakba" is an invitation to learn more; it is a glimpse into the edifice of oppression and the structures of power that reinforce lack of autonomy. It might be easier to move an uninitiated than a biased viewer to engage with this institutional superstructure that inhibits equity of basic resources and other forms of autonomy for the Palestinians. Thick knowledge or understanding can be acquired by slow degrees, through a gradual accumulation over time and through multiple encounters (textual or experiential) with the particulars of the situation, but this process can only begin if the viewer (or reader) is willing to step outside her/himself and consider the long and complex history of how the current reality came to be.

In this regard it is particularly valuable to consider Ben Highmore's contention that "politics is a form of experiential pedagogy, of constantly submitting your sensorium to new sensual worlds that sit uncomfortably within your ethos" (135). Similarly, Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie would argue that we can teach ourselves to respond

to the accumulated impact of small-scale affect and "the infinity of little affective events that make up our everyday lives" (141); we can, according to them, develop "new regimes of sensation" (141). This ability to be moved by quiet narratives of severely regulated and constricted life is an aspect of our subjectivity that we can consciously cultivate and nurture and, in fact, must deliberately tend and encourage so that we are able to display cognitive responsibility and commitment to change. We can train ourselves to be aware, so that we are able to respond not only to horrific depictions of bare life (where the abuse is on display and cast in unmistakable terms) but also to attitudes and institutional structures that establish and perpetuate lives of deprivation and bleakness. In the following section, I examine some strategies of seeing and representing that could lead to readers' awareness and nuanced understanding of human rights violations. The writers I take up employ an aesthetics of the everyday.

Aesthetics of the Everyday

What is the aesthetic form of delivery of everyday deprivations and disenfranchisements? How do we fathom the slow impact of daily adjustments and compromises made to channel life into the predetermined paths one is expected to follow? In discussing the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, Samina Najmi writes about the aesthetics of smallness. Nye focuses on the particular small details of individuals, their lives and the physical landscape—in contradistinction to the aesthetics of the sublime or grandiose (typically that of mechanized war waged on a grand scale) that masks and obfuscates the concreteness of the living human being and his/her unique life of joy and pain and beauty. Nye's technique, argues Najmi, draws us to the miniature details of a life lived and experienced. She seeks, through her poetry, to connect us to another person, another breathing and living soul—whether human or animal or natural (151–152). Najmi's examination of Nye's aesthetics of the small is not dissimilar to this essay's attempt to consider a related aesthetic of the everyday and the

ordinary. How does one depict the gradual snuffing out of hope and ambition resulting from the diminished contours of everyday life? How to create empathy and a concomitant outrage for the seemingly trivial everyday obstructions, truncations of ambition, and acts and words of indignity that erase an individual's or group's sense of worth? What are the literary techniques that one can employ in this area, and how can one arouse the reader to an appropriate response?

One strategy is that used by Mitsuye Yamada in her poem "Desert Run" (1988) in which she recalls a painful time in her life and that of thousands of Japanese Americans (of all ages) when they were interned for four years between 1942–1945 in concentration camps in the US on suspicion of being potentially disloyal. Yamada was 19 years old when she and her family were evacuated and moved from California to the concentration camp in Minidoka, Idaho, one of ten locations in which 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent were confined from 1942 through the duration of World War II. On a visit to the camp long after the internment, she writes that forty years ago she "watched the most beautiful sunsets" here but "saw nothing"; she "spent 547 sulking days here/in my own dreams" but there was nothing for her to "marvel at" except miles and miles of "sagebrush and lifeless sand" (2). It is the tension in the contradictions—the beautiful sunsets that she watched but did not see; the dreams that she sulkingly had; the marvels that were nothing more than lifeless sand. The one side of the articulation promises hope, the future, wonder; but the other facet of the utterance shadows it with numbness, despair, stasis. She "died here," she writes, and her carcass is buried in the hot sands that she now returns to forty years later. It is in this retrospective view of the bleakness and harshness of the landscape that Yamada is finally able to voice what she had endured during the internment—a snuffing out of her joy and enthusiasm, a gradual slow death occurring in silence of her youthful spirit and buoyancy. The older and wiser Yamada has learned to use the power of contrast, the language of opposites and sharp antithetical

juxtapositions to recreate the loss she suffered during the internment and its devastating psychological consequences.

Yamada's first-hand experience of the camps allows her to mine the crevices of memory to excavate her feelings and present them to readers decades later. Her day-to-day life in the camps with its routine and rhythms acts as an enervating force; the watchtower surveillance of the camp, the barbed wire fence around it, the empty and barren land surrounding the camps—these particulars and the affect they evoke accumulate weight and gradually impress themselves indelibly upon her spirit. Through the technique of contrast, she reveals the slow death of her dreams.

A similar restrained articulation emerges in Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor was Divine* (2003), that also deals with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Otsuka's mother was a young 11-year-old internee (Kawano), and Otsuka herself has grown up in the post-Civil Rights and ethnic consciousness movements of 1960s' United States. The Japanese American internment is, among those who study Asian American history, considered to be the most egregious 20th-century violation by the United States of the country's constitution. Otsuka observes in her interview with Random House's Kelley Kawano that her mother spoke very little about the experience. So Otsuka did a great deal of research for the book. Otsuka keeps her characters unnamed, perhaps to make them represent all Japanese Americans, and to prevent us from forming too close an attachment to their individual and specific condition. She wants us to know that this family is unique but also not unique. Her focus is on the mother, boy, and girl; the father has been taken away to an unknown location, and while she limns their predicament with understated yet poignant detail for us to contemplate, she also withholds their names so as to allow us to multiply their experience manifold and to imagine the replication of the violation of their rights across thousands of families.

At 11 years of age, the girl is on the threshold of adolescence; she has an artist's eye, and she is observant, noticing small details and

wondering at their significance. She looks out of the train in which she and hundreds of other families of Japanese descent are being taken away to distant locations and she sees "Three young girls in white dresses […] beneath matching white parasols" (26), a woman and man riding bicycles "across a bridge" (26), the woman in "dark sunglasses and short yellow pants that showed her ankles" (27). While she absorbs these passing images of lives being lived in seemingly uninterrupted tranquility, she undoubtedly is making some kind of comparison with her current predicament on the train, traveling with her family and hundreds of other families to a destination that she has never seen. The soldier patrolling the train walks down the aisle and says in his "deep, melodic bass" (27–28): "shades down, shades down" (27), and so the girl and the rest of the passengers are cut off from the world outside. The girl speaks to a man standing in line behind her as she waits to go to the bathroom. He strikes up a conversation with her, asking her about her mother. We learn, along with him, that the woman has been pampered, well cared for and loved. The family has had a full life. But now they are on a train, going to a destination unknown. The father is missing; he has been taken away. These are people hanging on to their dignity as their lives are becoming unraveled. We are being invited to view closely, to attend to small shifts in sentiment, to see the minute progression of emotion, to become sensitized to almost undetectable tremors of lives being disrupted and fragmented. Otsuka is teaching us a new vocabulary of loss and equipping us to regard with a finely tuned empathetic sensibility that what we are witnessing here is the destruction of a community, of a people's carefully constructed life of simple pleasures and steadily accumulated accomplishments. This is not the scene of a guard's bayonet piercing the flesh of an innocent and helpless passenger; what we hear, in fact, is the polite request by the soldier on the train that the girl pull down the shade and not look outside. The train hurtles through the landscape, the drawn shades hiding from view the transport of a people away from the national eye. A violation can occur amidst the seemingly ordinary rhythms and civilized discourse of please and thank you.

Through her quiet prose, Otsuka depicts one family's gradual unraveling. The horses that the boy yearns to see as they ride the train to their internment location; the man by the diner in the distance that the girl, looking out the train before the shades are drawn, observes tipping his hat; the perfectly pruned bushes in the town they pass through, the bicyclists going over the bridge—though these are desires and scenes of the ordinary everyday, of uninterrupted life, yet, amidst the apparent regularity of rhythm, a group of people is being led into the unknown, into the uncertainty of their destiny.

Hisaye Yamamoto's short story "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1950) is a particularly compelling example of a representation that on the surface is preoccupied with the trivialities of everyday desire and gossip among young Japanese American internees, while the outrage of their evacuation, relocation, and imprisonment in internment camps is only gestured at or suggested obliquely. The two protagonists are the 20-year-old narrator, her friend Elsie, and the title character of the story, Miss Sasagawara. They are all in the internment camp in Arizona. The narrator and her friend are typical young women, seemingly carrying on with their lives despite the absolute outrage of their current situation—dislocated from their homes, their pre-war communities and lives entirely disrupted. The narrator observes, "our mission in life, pushing twenty as we were, was first to finish college somewhere when and if the war ever ended and we were free again, and then to find good jobs and two nice, clean young men, preferably handsome, preferably rich, who would cherish us forever and a day" (21). Against the normality of their desires and the efforts they make to carry on a typical youthful life within the constraints of the camp, Mari Sasagawara's gradually intensifying irrational and awkward behavior seems perverse and disruptive. But it is her refusal to carry on as though their current situation is nothing other than a minor irritation that is, one could argue, the sane and normal reaction to the violation of their dignity as human beings and the outrage of their confinement in these camps. Yoon Sun Lee observes, "Miss Sasagawara becomes the story's means of revealing the everyday uncanniness persistently denied by others"

(77). Her "arrival, her presence, and odd behavior reveal the frightening within the familiar" (78). The other young internees are resolute in their determination to constitute a "community devoted to maintaining the banality of the everyday" (78), primarily because such behavior allows them to avoid having to acknowledge the deep violation of their lives or to confront the implications of it.

Hisaye Yamamoto was herself an internee. Like Yamada, she is able to draw on her own memories of the daily accommodations she and the other internees made to get through the uncertain years of a regulated life. The internee generation did not speak of their experience after their release. But during the politicized Civil Rights and ethnic movements' (including the Asian American movement) era of the 1960s, former internees and younger activists, who drew their inspiration from the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the decolonization movements in Africa and Asia, recognized the monumental human rights violation of the Japanese American internment and were determined to resurrect it for the country to acknowledge as a failure of national ethics. Their questions ignited the redress and reparations movement, which led, in 1989, more than 50 years after the internment, to an official apology by the United States government to the Japanese American community and an acknowledgement of the racism at the core of the internment. The historical and political consciousness forged during the Asian American movement is precisely the kind of thick cognition that brings to view the deep violations intrinsic to seemingly innocuous routines and patterns of control that might appear to be only minor and manageable irritants in an otherwise acceptable life.

While organizations such as Human Rights Watch perform a crucial function in bringing to the attention of the world community and to policy makers and other individuals in power the gross mistreatments that one set of human beings can inflict upon another, they cannot address the basic issue of how we treat one another with respect. The egregious violations of human rights that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings of South Africa and the "As If I Am Not Human"

report reveal are invaluable, but they also eclipse the seemingly "lesser" violations, the transgressions against human dignity that individuals and governments enact. Sensationalist narratives of human rights abuse are distracting in that they draw our attention away from a deep contemplation of what constitutes a life of dignity, and how each of us through inaction or indifference is complicit in the persistence of abuse. We are not typically direct perpetrators, but many of us are bystanders or beneficiaries (Borer 1107, 1112). Quiet narratives of bare life function as an essential warning: it is far too easy to view these everyday violations as minor assaults. They are not, however; they are, rather, evidence of deep structures of oppression that must be challenged and overturned. Moreover, they serve as invitations to engage in a meaningful examination of what constitutes a life of dignity and how at the individual, community, national, and global levels such a life may be fostered.

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