

On the Arrest of a Black Lives Matter Protester

by [Shai Afsai](#) (July 2021)



Ian Watching Television, David Hockney, 1987

Among the many sad videos I saw in 2020
was one of a young white man,
his sneakered-heels scraping the pavement,
being dragged away backwards
by half a dozen policemen
at a Black Lives Matter protest.
Shocked at what's transpiring,
the man calls out his own name

to the protesters around him—
or perhaps to legal observers documenting the event—
and states that he's non-violent,
innocent of any wrongdoing,
and being arrested without cause.
As if in reiteration of his guiltlessness,
he says he's a teacher
and mentions the middle school where he works
and the subject he teaches

The miserable fool.

Such pleas may gain sympathy
in those pockets of America
where good people are still shocked
by the notion that a man devoting himself
to the education of children
can be casually hauled off in public
and thrown into a holding cell
with drunk-drivers, date-rapists, and mail-frauders
simply for being at an anti-racism rally—
but he's not getting any consideration from
the police.

More likely they put the cuffs on him
a little tighter than necessary
to numb the wrists
and on the way to the station
beat him a bit in places
where the bruises wouldn't show easily,
to make sure he got the message:
We don't care.

And far from being disturbed
by any of this,
half the country would rejoice
at the opportunity to see this man put away a while—
for the sin of having summers off,
for the crime of enjoying employer-provided health insurance,

and for the vice of non-law enforcement union membership.

No summers off and union membership

*when you're making license plates in the state penitentiary
and getting violated by your muscled cellmate!*

But in these anarchic times

socialist educators are instead let free to roam our great
land

fomenting race riots!

So if one of them has his wrists go numb

and gets a beating,

well, all the better.

An empty jail cell does no correcting.

Until a few weeks ago,

a man lived in my residential neighborhood who,

carrying an aluminum baseball bat—

in order to fend off coyotes, he said—

would take his small dog on evening walks.

I go for walks at night specifically to avoid people,

but because of his proximity to my home

it was inevitable

I'd encounter this man

several times a week.

I don't want to come across

as entirely dismissive of his precautions,

nor to prejudice you against this man.

True, during my hundreds of hours of nighttime walking

I've seen only two coyotes

in my neighborhood

over the past ten years.

He probably had as much a chance

of being surrounded, attacked, and mauled

by a gaze of aluminum-impervious raccoons

as of running into a coyote,

but such a thing *could* happen beneath the heavens,

and I don't want to belittle his concerns.

Who am I to say they were wholly unwarranted?

On my nighttime walks
this man would stop me and—
one hand holding his dog's leash
and the other the aluminum bat—
set loose upon me his exhaustive ideas on government and
society.

An immigrant himself,
he railed against foreigners.

A tenured professor,
he complained about teacher unions.

A man inclined towards spirituality,
he defended the unfettered avariciousness of our age.

Talking to him,

I felt like a trapped animal.

I came to understand how a desperate beast
could resort to gnawing off its own limb
in an effort to escape captivity.

Eventually, after many such evening encounters,
I realized that all *I* could gnaw off
was my own dignity.

At first, I tried ending these conversations
by saying I needed to go home to take a piss,
but this apparently didn't convey sufficient urgency
and he'd go on talking anyway.

Following this realization,

whenever I next saw him,

I'd instead start clutching my stomach
after five or ten minutes of listening to him fulminate.

If I was able to,

I'd less loose one or two loud bursts of flatulence,
but depending on what I'd had for dinner
this wasn't always possible.

Either way, I'd next—

turning in the general direction of my house—

blurt out, "I'm sorry...I have to move my bowels,"
and then rush away.

I had to repeat this more or less gassy,

degrading show each time I saw him,
but it beat the alternative.
Fortunately, he's moved to another state for a few months.

My point is,
I imagine what satisfaction
the arrest of that teacher at the Black Lives Matter protest
would give to the bat-wielding tenured university professor.
And the world is full of these individuals.
America certainly is.

And look—
apart from the fact that people
with his viewpoints tend to be conspiracy-theorists
and the kind of delusional, ultra-selfish bastards
who don't want to increase taxes on the superrich
because they imagine they too might somehow become multi-
millionaires one day —
bachelor great-uncles they've been sending Christmas cards to
and calling once a year on birthdays
might bequeath them a stock portfolio and tract of land;
the housing market might soar in their neighborhood,
making the home they haven't updated in a quarter of a century
suddenly quadruple in value;
or they might win the lottery.
And they don't want the government getting its no-good hands
on their inheritance,
or the hard-earned money they've made
buying a two-dollar ticket and picking six correct numbers,
just so the underprivileged can have subsidized housing, soup
kitchens, or health care.
— aside from all *that*,
I see their point.

And I can't pretend to objectivity, either.
I'm a school teacher, too,
after all.

This certainly must be one reason why that teacher's arrest

impacted me more than other recordings I've seen
of Black Lives Matter protests—
including those documenting the arrest of black people.

At the beginning of every school year
my fellow teachers file their misshapen bodies
back to work.

What a melancholy collection they are to behold
gathered together in one place—
the school auditorium, library, or cafeteria—
for orientation day.

Most look as though they've spent
the greater part of the past eight weeks
reclining on their couches
eating pretzels, cookies, potato chips, and chocolate bars,
scooping ice cream straight from the carton and down their
gullets,

binge watching Netflix and masturbating.

It's evident they haven't been indoors the entire summer,
though, because they're almost all shockingly sunburnt.

Even the teachers of color are sunburnt.

The younger, lighter-complexioned ones
have acquired a tomato-like redness
indicative of future skin cancer.

Many of the more veteran teachers are leather-skinned,
like Gila monsters of the sun-soaked Sonora Desert.

Guts sag over shorts and jeans.

Bellies bulge through dresses.

Scuffed and unpolished shoes on the men.

Women with the ugliest feet you've ever seen.

(It may be time to consider various bans
on open-toed footwear,
at least in the Northeast.)

And we're the ones entrusted with the future minds of this
country.

I'm not judging.

As I said,
I'm one of this dejected caste.
And every year for the past two decades,
sometime around December—
after I've been back in school for a few months
and the weather has turned cold—
I catch a hurried, reluctant view
of my naked self
in the well-lit bathroom mirror
as I enter or exit the shower.
I recoil, thinking:
*Heavens! How could I have let things go so far?
This is not what the body
of a human male in his forties
(or thirties or twenties)
is supposed to look like.
Join a gym, man!
Start jogging.
Eat a salad.
Do something!
This is not acceptable!*
But instead, I take more care when passing
unclothed by mirrors in my home,
particularly if any lights are on.
And it's been like this, as I said,
for twenty years.
It may be unacceptable,
but I've accepted it,
consoling myself by comparing my forlorn physique
with those of my coworkers,
pouring yet another domestic beer,
thinking tired thoughts,
and making an effort to suck in my gut
when I happen to pass an attractive woman on the street
or in the aisles of the supermarket—
which, when you've let yourself go so completely,
are the sole remaining places to chance upon attractive women.

This wide-ranging
and decrepit physical condition
of education professionals at the pre-college level
reflects an inner state
that is far more broken and troubled.
Even with summers off
and a fair share of four-day work weeks,
most teachers—
or at least the many I know—
are barely getting by.
They require mental health days,
half-days,
stress leave,
leaves of absence,
maternity and paternity leave,
short and long-term disability,
and Sabbaticals
to somehow hold it together.
But in this,
teachers aren't unique.
Almost all of us are only maintaining now:
a mass of adults who can't go about without a security blanket
or stuffed animal,
propped up by
sleeping pills,
caffeine pills,
nicotine gum,
social workers,
speech therapists,
physical therapists,
art therapists,
drama therapists,
hypnotherapists,
massage therapists,
occupational therapists,
trauma therapists,
psychologists,

psychiatrists,
acupuncturists,
reflexologists,
life coaches,
family counselors,
substance abuse counselors,
improv classes,
writing groups,
yoga,
hot yoga,
mari kondo,
TED Talks,
aisles upon aisles of self-help books,
and the solace of emotional support dogs
and companion cats.

Now even the dogs need therapists,
are put on Prozac
and sedated with trazodone.

Our cats and dogs overeat,
growing heavy, lethargic, and restless
like the humans
whose homes
and anxieties and depressions
and agitated sleep
and unsustainable diets
they share.

Whatever else we lack in the US,
most have calories to spare.

The pets, too,
embark on food regimens.
We've more names for diets
than Eskimos have words for snow—
Mediterranean, flexitarian,
pescatarian, vegetarian, vegan,
high fat, low fat,

high carb, low carb,
low sodium, low sugar.
lactose free, gluten free,
keto, paleo, Atkins,
Dukan, the DASH...

And all this amelioration and care
and nurturing and support and supplementation and
regimentation
isn't even to produce an elite super human,
an overman or overwoman,
an exceptional or enhanced
athlete, craftsman, warrior, scientist, philosopher,
musician, or scholar.

It's for survival.

It's simply to get ordinary people
through the day
and pass them through another night,
and maybe have a semblance of the nuclear or extended family
remain viable.

How did people get by two-hundred years ago,
when none of this was available?

Did alcohol and laudanum answer all?

Now we've meth and coke

to snort and smoke

and weed so strong you only need one toke.

And what will that arrested teacher now need

just to pick up and keep going

since his abuse at a 2020 Black Lives Matter protest?

How much therapy? How many drugs? What new diet?

What self-care?

Especially when he realizes that rather than sympathizing with
him,

There're plenty of people who'd rejoice at his arrest?

And why my need to make

a hero of the arrested teacher in that video?
This country is so starved for heroes,
it's even made one of Thoreau.
Spending a couple of years camping in Emerson's backyard
and a single night in jail before being bailed out—
together with writing some unread books
that endure as aphorisms—
has sufficed to elevate him to sainthood.
I've made the pilgrimage to Walden Pond myself
more than once,
peering inside the replica of his small log cabin
in search of hidden truths.
The teacher arrested at the Black Lives Matter protest
has probably also done some backyard camping in his day.
Maybe he lives in a tiny apartment.
He might make for an interesting hero.
I could write a play about the night *he* spent in jail.
But I haven't been able to again find the video of his arrest.
can't recall where I came across it,
don't know in which city the protest took place,
and don't remember his name.

I'll finish this poem,
pour myself a beer,
and move on.

There must be something good
on Netflix.
Maybe I have some ice cream
left in the fridge.

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Shai Afsai's articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, and photographs have been published in *Anthropology Today*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *New English Review*, *The Providence Journal*, *Reading Religion*, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, and *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. See more [here](#).

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