

Mussolini in Borderland

or We Don't Defeat Fascism, We Outbuild It

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I've been feeling down a lot lately.

I have so much to be happy for, and these things are not lost on me. It's been a difficult year. I haven't told you the half of it. I know you've had a difficult year, too.

We don't need to compare scars, *I believe you*.

Goddamn I have so much to be happy for, and for these things, I'm truly grateful, deeply as can be. These things sustain me. Newly blossomed friendships and the rekindling of old, more precious than ever before. The return of my written voice. My own self-actualization. The lifetime-awaited healing of my corporeal form. The love that surrounds me and permeates my existence.

Still.

It's been a difficult year.

Hasn't it?

There are a multitude of difficulties I've faced in this time, but by and large they can be summed up in a single word.

Fascism.

Death and beauty

Do you know how Mussolini died? He was shot. His body was hanged upside down at a gas station for people to throw rocks and spit on his corpse. Something about this image sticks with me. There's a picture if you want to search it out, but no need to place it here. Your mental image can conjure it up just fine, I'm sure. I don't delight in death or violence. At least, I think I don't. Although, I've been rewatching all of [*Alice in Borderland*] lately.

There's something beautiful about this image to me, and it bothers me that I find beauty in it, and it also bothers me that it bothers me, and so on.

When I watch *Alice in Borderland*, I don't think it's the death and violence, but the puzzles and the way that the protagonists overcome the challenges in front of them *despite the overall crushing weight of despair* that I enjoy. And I also have a baffling crush on Chishiya. He's cute, but it's not just that, he's just so, what's the word?

There is something about that image of Mussolini that isn't about violence, or even revenge, and forget about *justice*. I hate the word *justice*. It's worse than meaningless, on par with *peace*. These concepts are built on the internal logic of language, a beautiful but flawed system of communication, but it's all we have for this. These words are semantics. I can describe *injustice*, but I can't describe *justice* beyond whatever existed before *injustice* occurred. *Healed* is not the same as *unharmed*. You can't create *justice*, you can only heal *injustice*, and there are almost always scars.

There's something about this image of Mussolini that is so *normal*? No, of course not. We couldn't possibly *normalize* death to fascist dictators in this manner, could we? Perhaps *mundane*? Or *unceremonious*?

And yet, the petrol station is so *fitting*. Fascism commodifies our existence in pursuit of power. We are commodities less valuable than the petrol at the gas station where he hangs upside down. And as commodities, our value continues to drop as so-called efficiencies improve— *improve*, if you can call it that.

Efficiency. Fascists love *efficiency*. What is so grand about being *efficient* when what you are efficient at is creating harm and destruction? A blaze is *efficient* at destroying the forest.

Upside down, though. How often do we see something like that? And at a petrol station.

This guy— and let us not forget that he was *just some guy* and that, gender aside, all fascists are *just some guy*— this guy wielded so much power, and used it to deal so much death and destruction. People followed him. People believed in him. People killed for him. And there he hangs where anyone could just come over and spit on his corpse. Anyone. At the fucking gas station. Where people buy scratchers and beef jerky and stop to go to the bathroom. I mean, I don't know anything about that particular gas station or time or place, but those are the images my mind conjures. It was Italy. Scratchers and microwave spaghetti bolognese? Italians, feel free to come at me for that.

It's interesting to me that I think USians first think of spaghetti bolognese when they think of Italian food, which I have no doubt is like when getting "American Pizza" in Japan, which is topped with hot dogs, french fries, and ketchup. And pasta originally comes from noodles in China, and the tomatoes for bolognese come from the Americas. And no one knows where turkeys come from. And why is it not spelled *turkies*?

When were microwaves invented, by the way? I haven't owned one in two decades. Microwaved food is gross. I rarely make that type of value statement. I stand by it.

And yet, fascism was not defeated on that day, nor in that year, nor ever at all. It took on a different form than Mussolini envisioned and permeated into a global system, continuing to cause harm.

And here we sit today.

Fascism didn't begin the cycle of harm, but it's simply the structure within we find ourselves. Hierarchy. It's a structure of hierarchy. There is no hierarchy that will not be wielded for harm. Hierarchy itself is harm. Hierarchy is supremacy. They are one and the same.

We watch what is happening, feeling powerless to change the descent into our own dystopias, often forgetting the dystopias that so many have been living under all this time while we lived in relative comfort, shackled as we may all have been, though in more comfortable prisons than others. *None of us are free until all of us are free*, after all.

It's been a difficult year.

Death and apathy

Apathy perhaps plays the worst part. Not as a complaint about the apathy of others, though this brings its own pain, but speaking to our own individual apathy. We're not built to handle the constant feelings of fear, crisis, worry, and concern for ourselves and others. The apathy helps us cope, but it hardens us, makes us colder. It allows us to numb ourselves to the effects of fascism surrounding us.

Apathy is similar to a form of dissociation, something I'm all too familiar with. It's a powerful tool. It numbs us to the pain of empathy and fear. It's lidocaine. I used to be able to use lidocaine, but not anymore. I have developed a deadly adverse reaction. Now it could kill me. I get dental fillings without lidocaine now. I've had a surgeon cut into my shoulder without any painkillers at all. I've had multiple surgeries and hospitalizations and so many hours of hair removal, all without lidocaine. Honestly, I tolerate the pain now better than ever before. I'm alive. I feel. I will endure.

Likewise, I dissociated for a lifetime. It's a powerful tool and numbed me from the pain of the existence I was forced to perform. That almost killed me, too.

Apathy is the same. It can get us through, moment by moment, but it will lead to our downfall.

Death is inevitable in *Alice in Borderland*, and it's constantly hovering. Players in these death games become apathetic to it and they are constantly dehumanizing each other in order to survive, putting themselves first, betraying each other for their own survival. It's always after they have been overwhelmed with pain, suffering, and crisis that inevitably the apathy takes over and they betray each other to their collective deaths. They lose empathy and the thought for beauty and connection. They only think about their own survival.

It's only by remembering beauty and human connection that it becomes worth it to try to survive, and necessary to preserve empathy, but also to try to survive collectively, as much as can be done. It becomes *worth it* to survive.

Death and fiction

I've always been a fan of science fiction and fantasy. If you've consumed much of it, one thing becomes very clear. Most of these stories are dystopian. Every story needs conflict, but there is something different about sci-fi and fantasy in this regard— not out of necessity, but out of habit, perhaps.

There always seems to be a dark lord or an intergalactic empire and the hero needs to set things right. *The chosen one*. Someone's destiny. Someone with the right gender and skin color, *naturally*. Even Tolkien demonizes an entire race of beings for their existence and makes another supreme and pure above all. Gross.

It's a problem throughout the genre. It's been known since before I was around. Tolkien knew it was a problem in his own work later on.

We often cling to stories like these, looking for our saviors among those who were born with the supreme amount of midi-chlorians that enable them to bullseye womp rats in their T-16s, not much bigger than 2 meters.

When we do this, we fall into the same fascist trap of supremacies and hierarchies that we are attempting to escape.

Tolkien called himself a philosophical anarchist but was, in practice, a monarchist, and I think it's dubious that he thoroughly grasped the concept of anarchism beyond the idea that the existence of a state is unjustified. He believed in the myth of the *good* king. It's a lie we tell ourselves again and again through our stories and our religions. If only we could have voted in the other candidate, at least people like me wouldn't have it so bad (even if the suffering of more marginalized would carry on). At least the other candidate would have saved *people like me*.

We are *trapped in the cycle*, never seeking to build the worlds we wish to inhabit, only to perpetuate our shackled existence so that we get the comfortable prisons.

Sometimes our stories become our religions. Sometimes our stories and our religions and our oppressions are all created from the same substance as our supremacies.

Is this simply the nature of *samsara*?

We want to believe. It's easier. Either we can abrogate our own responsibilities to the *chosen ones*, or we can believe *we ourselves* are the elite heroes of the stories, endowed with the supremacy to destroy evil.

But there is no such thing as evil. It's not that simple. There are simply the choices we make and the actions we take. There are no ends, only means.

There is no hero and there is no king. We must collectively do the work. *We make us safe*, a refrain you must have heard by now. If not, take yourself to a protest if you can. It's time you got out on the streets. A cherished late mentor of mine used to say that everyone should get gassed and maced at least once in their lives. Thanks, Doc.

A notable exception to these stories, though far from the only exception, are the stories of Ursula K. Le Guin. You know I hold her in high regard, but she would also agree that she is also human and deserves no higher pedestal than you or me, but her works present an interesting alternative to dystopia. She's often described as a utopian science fiction and fantasy author, the word *utopian* is especially used for her book *The Dispossessed*, a beautiful book that describes and contrasts sister planets, one a stark anarchist society with few resources, but in which all is shared and in theory, all are equal. The other planet is flourishing and capitalist. There are so many *things* and resources to improve quality of life, and yet, the starkness of the anarchist society was in its lack of resources, few but enough, whereas the capitalist society was stark in its lack of humanity.

I don't think describing her work as *utopian* is accurate, though. Her words are antithetical to dystopia, but utopia is not quite right, either. Her worlds and her characters are flawed, just as we all are. Perhaps flawed is not the right term. Conflicted?

What sets works like hers apart is that unlike most other authors in the genre, she doesn't simply describe the difficulty of our collective dystopias with simplistic *hero ex machina* resolutions, but she creates worlds of possibility, with conflict that is borne out with compassion and a sense of collective responsibility tied to our own individual needs and responsibilities.

In dystopian fiction, we are presented with the idea that all hope is lost, and out of desperation, a hero emerges. In the work of authors like Le Guin, hope is never truly lost, and we always have the capacity for change, both individually and collectively, painful as the process may be.

Death and the city

Upon my first trip to New York, I believe I was 18. It was January. I was a theatre student as a sophomore undergrad. Going to the city was what I felt would be the heart of it all. *Rent* was ever present on my mind at that time and close to my heart. Starving artists, friendship, angst, and I couldn't yet directly look at its *queerness*, but it shown a light on my own, dim, but enough to know that I was not alone in the darkness. And *Moulin Rouge*, and *The Laramie Project* still felt fresh and like it was working within me, though it had been over a year since I'd been in that performance. It was a uni trip and despite having been pre-booked solid with Broadway shows, my now-spouse and I spent our last remaining money in line at the TKTS booth to get tickets for *Sweeney Todd*.

The streets were filled. People were performing on the streets, all kinds of theatre, performance art, music, and protest. People peddling their homemade CDs. Art everywhere and the spirit of hopeful broke artists gusting through the streets with enough force to fly a kite. We were constantly solicited to attend different off-broadway shows and stand-ups. We went to some. We bought drinks. It wasn't legal, but they sold to me, anyway, with a wink that they would pretend it was actually being sold to my older friends.

I've been to New York pretty frequently lately. I was just there a few weeks ago, in fact. I see almost none of this anymore, even in Times Square.

In September, it was announced that the anarchist bookstore in Greenwich Village would close. I was there a few days later, too late to get to the store. I found other radical bookstores, but despite this, all I could find were old books, which was all fine and good because I was looking for them, but I couldn't find radical zines anywhere in the city. I would ask the radical shops and when I did, it was like a fog was lifting from their eyes, moments of lucidity, remembering what it was like when people made art like this.

People still make zines, I certainly do, and these words will likely be reformatted into a zine later on, but it's not the same as it once was, and this city was devoid of all of that hopeful spirit of broke artists that once made it beautiful to a younger version of me.

Things never stay the same. You can never stand in the same river twice. This is a beautiful aspect of the world and our cosmic existence. I don't mean to decry change and call for the return to old times. That's a reactionary response, and I'll be damned the day I become a reactionary.

Now, the city is still filled with art. The kind of art that's backed by money and corporate profits. Graphic design. The museums are still there bringing in ticket money. Broadway is still there, bringing in ticket money. The studios are still there, bringing in money from their sponsors. Money for art is not inherently the problem, though I hate the concept of money. Artists need to eat. Artists deserve to get paid within the system we find ourselves. The problem is fascism. The problem is hierarchy. The problem is supremacy.

Some people still do standup, I assume hoping to one day have their own Netflix special, and I assume there absolutely must be off-broadway performances, though I didn't see a hint of their presence. I feel ghosts of what once was.

Maybe it was covid that caused this. Pushed people out of the streets and it just never returned. I don't think so, though. I was there before covid, too, and while I didn't notice it, looking back, the signs were there. Maybe it was just the eyes of a young version of me who couldn't get enough. In other words, maybe it's simply me that has changed. It's certainly obvious I've changed. I don't think that's it, though. Maybe it's just the internet. Still, I don't think so. Of course these things have all contributed, but it's not really that.

It's something else.

Death and art

Let me ask you, when was the last time that you consumed any art or creative endeavor, of any kind, that was not first curated and filtered by a social media algorithm or part of a corporate media collection like Netflix (which has their own algorithms, as well), or some other corporate interest?

I expect that you'll think of some. You're reading this right now, and I doubt you'll find it was curated before you stumble along it. Still. Are you struggling to think of many examples?

Do you remember a time when it was different? Any different at all?

When you listen to music on your streaming service, do you remember that there was a time before CDs or records, a time when recorded audio didn't exist, a time when the only way to hear a song was from the vocal chords of a human person in your presence or the vibration of instruments being played? A time when it was much more common for most people to sing in the

presence of others because music was a communal experience, something to be done with family and friends and strangers, and not a solitary one wherein we put on our headphones and isolate ourselves from each other? A time in which songs were not polished for the sake of capitalist profit, but were shared for the sake of human interaction and for the tandem vibration of our beings, so that we might vibrate in harmony with those around us?

In my mind, Mussolini is still hanging there, upside down. A petrol station. It's so surreal.

I found *Alice in Borderland* through an algorithm, by the way. It wasn't recommended to me by a person, but by an algorithm on a streaming media service. Which is not to say that it's not art, because it most definitely is. It was made by people. It's also not perfect, no art is. And speaking of imperfect, as someone who speaks a fair amount of Japanese (also imperfectly), I am often perplexed by the translation choices in the subtitles. They work, but I'm often just wondering why these choices were made.

I'm always wondering why people make the choices they do. It's all we have, our choices and our actions. There are no ends, only means.

One of the things I'm considering, however, is how isolated we are, with our headphones on, drowning out the people on the seat next to us, no longer seeking to vibrate in harmony with each other. I'm thinking about how not even the art, the music, the movies, but even the little *micro-posts* on social media we consume are sorted through filters created by the very entities causing our global destruction, how even the art that reaches our notice has been placed in front of us by the fascist systems that we seek to escape.

We allow our oppressors to filter our words to others and to filter the words that reach us. I think about how in the *Mistborn* series by Brandon Sanderson (spoiler), even a person's thoughts could be exposed to the oppressor, and the utterance of speech and the written word could be obfuscated or changed so that a person could not receive the message unless it was written on steel, where it couldn't be seen or changed by the oppressor.

I think about the words we share through our phones, and through these filters. I think then about human contact and connection, and I think about paper zines in radical bookstores.

We have billions of dollars in dystopian fiction at our fingertips and in our pockets at all times. We even have anti-capitalist critique— we can watch *Squid Games* and be fully conscious that it describes the hellish and fascist world we create in our waking lives, that we collectively wish to destroy, which would in turn destroy the very companies that fund and present us these stories in the first place. They allow us to be aware and witness our own destruction despite having the capacity to filter these stories out.

Do you ever wonder why they would allow us to consume these stories? Have you ever noticed that it seems the anti-capitalist critique you view through these filters is only dystopian, it is only ever too late in the story to make real change, and if change can come about, it only ever rebuilds the same hierarchies as before, though, of course, replacing the dark lord with a benevolent king (or what have you)?

These stories usually only describe the worst, and offer us only solutions that keep the system within the same cycle of power. They do not offer us escape.

Tolkien alone has stories that have been franchised into billions of dollars, offering us the same cycle of hierarchy and supremacy. And to be clear, I've spent time in my life loving the Lord of the Rings, but it is deeply broken, and as the years pass, it becomes darker and darker, not the light I once felt it was.

How many authors like Le Guin have you seen promoted and franchised through the corporate media system, and to what extent? To also be clear, I'm not asking for this to happen. I'm pointing out that there are reasons that some types of stories are filtered and some are not— whether they are filtered by an algorithm or capital investment. I'm not even saying it's intended. In many cases, it's simply because those who invest in franchises simply don't understand these stories. They're capitalists, or as Le Guin put it, *propertarians*. Their interests are simply unaligned.

Most parts of our systems of oppression are often invisible to the very people who carry out the oppression, or who are otherwise at the top of any given hierarchy (obviously many are still malicious). It's simply that their interests are unaligned and they are either ignorant or apathetic, or both. That doesn't change the fact that they oppress, nor does it change their position within the system of supremacy. It's not about intention.

But what these corporate structures and filters don't allow us to do is to *see each other*. They don't allow us to fully see the beauty in this world and in each other. I'm not telling you to put the phone down and take your headphones off.

Death and the worlds we wish to inhabit

I'm saying that you're trapped. We all are.

But I'm also saying that there is an escape, and this escape is not going to present itself for us. We have to find it, we have to create it, and we have to create it together.

I enjoy these dystopian adventures as much as the next person, but we are saturated. We don't even need more stories of hope. The dystopian stories sell us enough false hope. We don't need more supremacy.

What we need is beauty. We need connection. We need reminders of what is worth fighting for, but more than that. It's so much more than that.

We need *each other*.

We must build the worlds that we wish to inhabit. Worlds others wish to inhabit with us.

I've said many times before that the most revolutionary act is the refusal to be complicit. But it's not the only work we must do.

We must work harder to build words of beauty than we work to uphold fascism. Our system forces us to dig our own grave and build our own torture nexus. Refuse to the extent you possibly can. More than that, though, you must build the alternative.

I've written about sabotage and fighting back, and I will again, but not today.

Today I'm telling you to create something beautiful in this world. And when I say beautiful, I don't mean perfect. I mean flawed and conflicted and full of humanity and love and connection. It can be art. But it can just as easily be an email to an old friend who you miss. It can be a smile to the cashier. It can be a donation to a struggling writer or an organization doing work you wish to support. It can be giving mutual aid, it can be receiving it, it can be organizing it. It can be cooking something good for yourself, even if you're alone, because you deserve beauty, too.

We must build the worlds that we wish to inhabit. We must do it every day. We must build on the work of others and we must allow others to build upon our work. We must share. We must hold each other, arm in arm.

We must build the worlds that we wish to inhabit.

We must do it every goddamned day.

You must keep remembering that this struggle is not overcome through salvation, it's endured through love and beauty and joy. It's overcome by sharing in the humanity of others and through finding your own light in the worlds you find yourself.

We can't wait out the dystopia, it's here, and we can't go around it, we can only go through it, and if we're going to make this journey together, we have every reason to bring with us the things that make any of this worth it. And if we've brought it along anyway, let's experience it now instead of waiting. There are no ends, only means.

Again, you know what Emma Goldman would say, "*If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.*"

And as Fred Hampton said, "*You don't fight fire with fire. You fight fire with water.*"

We don't build worlds of beauty by destroying what is ugly. We build worlds of beauty *by building.*

We must build the worlds that we wish to inhabit.

We must do it *every goddamned day.*

no ends, only means

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