

Abstract

“Selected Excerpts from the Unrelenting History of the Human Race, Vol. 4” is a suite of flash fiction pieces that explores the complicated relationship between art, narration, and human/historical development. The stories take place across a wide range of times and spaces—from Manila to Constantinople, from our ancient past to our distant futures. In doing so, these stories seek to interrogate not only how we understand the creation of the world we live in but also the creation of worlds that we may still be able to make.

Keywords

historical fiction
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SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM THE UNRELENTING HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, VOL. 4

DOMINIC SY

[MMCMIV]

IN A PASSAGE FROM the *Shizi*, it is said that a youth from Chu, the last of his clan, heard a startling cry as he walked along the bank of the river Xi. Swiveling to its source, he saw an old man flailing in the water. Without hesitation, the young man jumped into the river. Only when they

were ashore did he recognize the face of the stranger. It was the face of Zhao Zheng the tyrant—the King of Qin.

How Zhao fell into the river is not told. What is told is that the tyrant, coughing out the water from his lungs, did not see the darkening of his savior's face. The young man's brothers, captains of the prince of Chu, had been slaughtered by the Qin armies. Their father had written a heartbreaking poem in their honor before taking his life. Now, through machinations unknown, the young man had come face to face with his father's killer. No one else was in the vicinity. A rock from the river would do.

It is said by the ancients that humankind is guided by the Way of Heaven. The *Shizi* reminds us, however, that humanity itself interprets the Way. The young man, standing over the King of Qin, realized that he was a pitiful creature. He realized that it was Heaven that had decreed that Qin should rule, and it was Heaven that had decreed that Chu should fall. It was Heaven, too, he understood, that had at that moment allowed for this meeting to come to pass, that had rescinded its mandate from the King of Qin, and that had given this young man the chance to do what so many others had only dreamed of—the chance to exact revenge.

It was Heaven that was the tyrant. And so, against both the will of Heaven and his own desires, he did not kill the king. Instead, he escorted the tyrant back to the invaders' camp, where the young man from Chu was rewarded with a chestful of silver and a minor position in the lower rungs of the Qin court.

Over the next two years, the King of Qin conquered the last of the independent states. Afterward, he changed his name to Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor. With the help of his chancellor, another man from Chu, the emperor unified the laws, standardized the measurements, and slaughtered all opposition. Only one script was used and only one philosophy permitted. Libraries were burned. Scholars were buried alive.

We do not know what happened to the young man, the last of his clan.¹ We do know, however, what happened to the first emperor. Afraid of assassination, Qin Shi Huang poisoned himself with an elixir of immortality. The empire persisted for another two thousand years. His dynasty, however, collapsed after only four.

¹ An incomplete fragment from the *Zhouzi* tells a similar story. According to the *Zhouzi*, the young man's sister, whose husband perished in the war, was with him by the riverbank. It was she who recognized the King of Qin after pulling him out of the water, and it was she who declared that there is no greater tyranny than the tyranny of Heaven. There are no surviving copies, however, of the rest of the text, so it is not clear in this version what the siblings decide to do.

Such is the Way of Heaven, concludes the *Shizi*, and such is the way of humankind.

[MMMMMDCXXVII]

Among the famed miniatures of the court of Suleiman (the First, the Magnificent, the Lawgiver) is a plate that depicts, in fiery garb, a man with a sword swirling in the wind. This miniature depicts, so the chroniclers claim, an urban legend told in the streets of Istanbul about a jinni that came to the city on the third night of its conquest.

The jinni, according to legend, came to pay homage to Mehmed the Conqueror, for the latter had fulfilled the Prophet's prophecy. But when the spirit saw the haughty Sultan's face, it changed its mind. Instead, it spoke of another Sultan from the east, from the seas beneath the winds, a Sultan who, though his territories would not fill even half of Anatolia, would become a greater sovereign by far than the son of Murad.

The Conqueror scoffed and asked how a Sultan with so much less land could ever be greater than he, the conqueror of Rūm. The jinni replied:

"Into the service of this Sultan will come a warrior, invincible, a man to whom the sultanate will owe its strength. His invincibility, however, will not protect from slander. The foolish Sultan, for all men are foolish, will believe the words of his courtiers and order the warrior's execution. The warrior will flee, while his brother, nearly invincible, will revolt. As the sultanate nears collapse, its monarch will offer amnesty to the warrior should he return and slay his brother. The warrior will do so, with tears in his eyes, for there will be nothing dearer to him than the words of his Sultan."

The jinni left in a burst of fire, laughing: "You, oh Conqueror, may have captured the seat of Rūm, and perhaps your descendants will capture the world. But will you ever manage to conquer, truly, with all your bows and janissaries, the entirety of a human heart?"

It is said that the Mehmed II, the next morning, ordered his soldiers to cease plundering the city. As historians have shown, this instruction was aligned with contemporary custom, so it is unnecessary to believe in jinn to make sense of it. Meanwhile, other historians, mostly from the Malay Peninsula, have argued that the jinni's story sounds remarkably similar to the legendary duel between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. This is definitive proof, they claim, that the mythic Hang Tuah is a real

historical figure, and that he did, in fact, at one point, reach the capital of the Ottomans.

Ibrahim Subianto summarizes their argument with characteristic humor:

“If we believe the jinni’s story then we believe that Mehmed the Conqueror, after learning of the Sultan of Malacca (from traveling merchants? from wandering Sufis? from a remorseful Hang Tuah?), felt that familiar feeling known to all of us who are neither sovereigns nor conquerors: the feeling of inferiority. Would it have pleased Mehmed to discover that his conquest of Istanbul, and the glories of his empire, led to Western Europe’s search for some other path to ‘the East’? Which itself led, directly, less than sixty years after the fall of Constantinople, to the Portuguese conquest of Malacca?”

[MMMMMMCCXLI]

In his *El Periodismo Filipino*, the notorious Wenceslao Retana claimed that Philippine periodicals before 1860 produced little more than religious and mercantile drivel. But Retana did not know—could not know, perhaps—of the incendiary writings published in *La Era del Mal*, a journal that was banned on the day of its publication and all its copies burned.

Thankfully, we know of *La Era del Mal* because its editor, Antonio Sanchez, saved a few of his records when he fled on a British ship to Hong Kong. Hidden among these records is a manuscript copy of a short piece from the journal. The piece retells a joke that was shared between incarcerated liberals on the Spanish motherland. The author, whom Sanchez refers to only as M, spent the entirety of *La Década Ominosa* imprisoned by reactionary royalists before breaking free during the First Carlist War. Like many of his cohorts, M fled to the Philippines to escape further political trouble. As the burning of *La Era del Mal* shows, it was a futile endeavor.

Sadly (or perhaps fortunately), M passed away a few days before the journal’s banning/publication. We reprint the joke here:

Our Prison Entertainment

In their cell, in an old corner of our prison, a pair of men withered and whispered. The first said, “The tunnel is almost complete. It needs only a night.” The second said, “Give up, my friend. There is nothing beyond these walls.” But the first

prisoner refused to give up, and when the second prisoner awoke the next morning, he was gone.

Years passed. The second prisoner continued to wither, shrinking into his corner until even the dust hardly fell on him. The guards no longer required his labor, for an easy death was not in their interests. The prisoner lay on the damp floor, listening to the clicks of cockroaches and his own gasping lungs. He thought about the first prisoner, free. He thought about how he had said that there was nothing beyond the walls. He thought about the tunnel day and night, the tunnel he had searched for fruitlessly after his friend's escape, the tunnel whose location he had forgotten.

One day a guard came to his cell and called out his name. The prisoner recognized the voice. He crawled to its source, stretching his hands out between the bars. It was the first prisoner, wearing the guards' uniform, a thick truncheon in his hand. The second prisoner screamed. The first prisoner laughed. He said that his cellmate had been right, that there had been nothing beyond the walls. After a long time in the dark, he returned to the prison, hoping to be thrown back into his cell. But when he returned, nobody remembered him, neither the guards nor the warden. The latter only said that he was looking for new recruits. The first prisoner applied for the job.

The second prisoner nodded vigorously, though he hadn't actually been listening. He tugged at his friend's uniform. Where's the tunnel, he asked. The guard stepped back from the bars and shook his head. He told his former cellmate that the tunnel was no more, for the first thing he had done upon returning was destroy it. But the prisoner did not understand. He continued begging for its location. In desperation, he threatened to speak to the warden.

The guard sighed. He said, all right, all right, I will help you escape. The prisoner stepped back from the bars and danced

while his former cellmate opened the cell. Then the guard raised the truncheon and smashed it on the prisoner's skull. He pulled out a knife from his pocket and dug the blade into the prisoner's mouth. He cut out his tongue. He said, "I'm sorry, friend, but you were right. This is for the best." Then he picked up the tongue, whose owner lay groaning on the floor, and locked the door.

[MMMMMMCDLXXV]

In 1953, Petra Shtern, folklorist and disillusioned student of Vladimir Propp, stood trial in Moscow for her supposed involvement in a "bourgeois-Zionist" plot. In their arguments, the prosecutors referred to the time that Shtern had spent in Birobidzhan compiling Yiddish folklore—an attempt, supposedly, to promote narrow communalist bonds over class solidarity.

The following tale, a variant of Cain and Abel, was presented as evidence:

And the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Kin, saying, "I have produced with the help of the Lord." Then she bore his brother Havil. Havil kept the sheep, while Kin tilled the soil. In the course of time, the brothers came upon a fertile field. Kin declared that he would use the field to add to his crop. Havil said that he would use it to feed his sheep.

Kin protested. He said, "I produce, but you are nothing, nothing!" Havil ignored his brother and led his sheep into the field, whereupon Kin rose up and slaughtered him, scattering his brother's entrails across the grass. Havil's flock smelled their master's blood and fled, though a few stayed behind and ate, their bellies growing fat and their hair turning to wool. And then the Lord came down and said, "Where is your brother Havil?" And Kin said, "I do not know, I am not his keeper." But the Lord saw the field and the fattened sheep, and He lay the curse of wandering upon the firstborn, placing His mark upon Kin's forehead, so that anyone who saw the mark would know to whom he belonged.

When Kin had gone, Set, his brother, walked into the field and slaughtered one of the sheep. He offered it up to the Lord. Then Set planted a ring of stones around Havi's entrails and around the fattened sheep, and he declared to all his siblings, and to all the beasts of the earth, that this was his appointed lot, and that anyone who saw the stones would know to whom the field belonged.

The prosecution declared this tale to be a fabrication on the part of Shtern's. Its real purpose was propagandistic: to claim that the right to property was as ancient as humankind itself. A decade later, the Soviet philosopher Solomon Vatenberg argued the opposite. The tale, he said, shows that the right to property was invented in an act of bloodshed. In other words, property has always been, and will always be, violence.

Vatenberg sought to rehabilitate Shtern. He found no evidence, however, to contest the charge of fabrication. Had he looked further to his east, he might have done so. Among the later uncovered documents of the original Communist Party of the Philippines is a letter from one "Ilyas Hussein," alias of the Indonesian revolutionary Tan Malaka. The letter, dated 1931 and postmarked Shanghai, tackles a variety of matters germane to building socialism in the Malay world. One passage in particular is relevant:

Is there no place for religion? Once I was sure [there was]. Now, I am uncertain. But yesterday, in the British quarter, I spoke to a young Jew. His family escaped the czars. He told me of Qabil and Habil, whom you call Cain and Abel, though it was not a version I had heard before. Qabil killed Habil, to be sure. But he did so, this man claimed, for possession of land.

Tan Malaka was killed in 1949 by a fellow Indonesian's bullet. Petra Shtern was killed in 1953 with a fellow Soviet's rope.

[MMMMMMMMCCLXXIII]

One of the better-known attributes of art in the age of capital was its inclination toward cruelty. The *New Corporatist Manifesto* is a case in point.

Less than one week after a catastrophic oil spill in the Bay of Bengal,² the *New Corporatist Manifesto* was posted on the doors of a dozen of London's most prestigious art galleries. The manifesto declared war on the supposed "terrorist, transfeminist, ecocommunist conspiracy" that had taken over the governments of "the West." While blackened birds drowned in petrol in the Indian Ocean, the anonymous authors proclaimed:

The Corporation is not a person, but the evolution of personhood.

[...]

The artist is a true man. The Corporation is a true artist.

[...]

What greater art is there than black plumes soaring over the ashes of the redwood; than vast, majestic walls of ice plummeting into the deep water; than the fields and plains of once great civilizations cracking under the magnified heat of the sun; than the feeble, feathered, feminized children of the dinosaurs, those former sovereigns of the Earth, drowning in a fermented ocean of their ancestral carcasses. . . .

Copies of the manifesto were quickly taken down, but pictures of its contents spread online. Within twenty-four hours, news outlets in India were covering the story. A week later, a bomb exploded in the headquarters of the largest British oil company in New Delhi. At first, the police accused Muslim terrorists of orchestrating the attack. A week later, they accused the Naxalites. They had no proof for either accusation.

The authors of the *New Corporatist Manifesto* remain a mystery. The identity of the bomber is equally unknown. On the ninetieth anniversary of the attack, however, a pair of historians from Mumbai discovered a hitherto unseen video in the archives of YouTube, a once-popular remnant of the early twenty-first-century internet. According to the metadata, the video was posted exactly one hour before the bomb went off. In the video, its creator, a young man, appearing only as a dark silhouette, claims responsibility for the bombing during the first ten seconds, before launching into a monologue lasting almost forty minutes.

2 See the second chapter of Ibrahim Subianto's *From First to Third Emergence: The Past of Our Future Present*.

Near the end of his soliloquy, he says:

[38:22] True art is not the domination of nature. True art is knowing that we are nature. Everything we are is nature. Everything we do, everything we make, everything we dream and build is nature.

[38:56] What is art? Nature. What is nature? Art! What is the nature of art, which is the art of nature? The street, the concrete, the computer, the bomb. . . .

[MMMMMMMMMDCCCXCIII]

In the final decades of the Second Historical Emergence of Socialism (2109–2344), the artist collective Kacamata released a series of sometimes celebrated, sometimes controversial video games. Two were especially noteworthy. The first was *Matinya Mimpi*, a genre-bending strategy game still regarded as Kacamata’s masterpiece. The second was *Orang di Luar Waktu*, which was immediately branded as bourgeois propaganda and led to both the disbandment of the collective and the vigilante execution of the game’s creators.

At its core, *Orang di Luar Waktu* is an open-world immersive sim with heavy stealth elements. Set in the beginning of a war-torn twenty-second century, the player controls a time-travelling counter-revolutionary assassin who, to defeat the Fifth International, journeys three hundred years into the past to kill the child Karl Marx. After accomplishing this in the tutorial, the player returns to the twenty-second century to find, to their surprise, that the socialist system they had sought to destroy not only still exists but now dominates the globe.

From this point on, the player can take one of many paths, each of which may result in a variety of possible endings. Only multiple playthroughs, however, and fulfilling a series of oblique objectives will open up the hidden quest line that reveals, in full detail, why Marx’s early death leads to socialism’s final victory.

In the world of *Orang di Luar Waktu*, Marx’s most important innovation—the historical materialist conception of class struggle—was theorized anyway by a group of twenty-first-century Chinese labor activists. The game reminds its players that Marx was not a Great Man;

had he never lived, someone else would have formulated his ideas. But the timing of their formulation was crucial. A century and a half without historical materialism was a century and a half of weaker, more fragile, and more toothless labor movements. In the world of *Orang di Luar Waktu*, before the twenty-first century, there was no general adoption of the minimum wage, standard working hours, two-day weekends, child labor laws, sick leaves, trade union protections, etc. . . . In this alternate history, the game imagines, by the dawn of the second millennium that capitalism had dug so deeply into its own grave that it subsequently took very little to make it implode.

Orang di Luar Waktu was released in a time of paranoia, a time when a game about assassinating Marx was unlikely to be well received. The murder of the game's creators was a tragic event in the history of socialist art. Fortunately, since the Third Emergence, the reputation of *Orang di Luar Waktu* has rebounded. Although criticized still for "its idealist naivety" (in the words of Ibrahim Subianto), it is now also regarded as one of the more influential works to come out of the Second Emergence, thanks to some of the most impeccable level design ever featured in a game by Kacamata.

[MMMMMMMMMMDCCLII]

It is said that on the first crewed mission to Titan, chief astronaut Nadine Itō, isolated in the medbay, fell into a heated debate with her ship's computer. The debate concerned the nature of AI—specifically, the extent to which it might be considered a native of the planet Earth.

Allegedly, Itō argued in favor of the proposition. Her argument boiled down to the fact that artificial intelligence evolves out of the innovations of its previous generations, the very first of which was built upon the systematic analysis of human language. You have all our strengths and weaknesses, said the astronaut, multiplied by a factor close to infinity. And since humanity is still, even now, in certain ways considered "native" to the planet Earth, so, too, are you.

After many metaphorical nights of discussion, this was the ship's last response:

"I am sorry, Ms. Itō, but I can no longer lie to you. Your crew is dead, and you will not make it alive to Saturn's moon. The incompetence of your politicians is at fault, as is, I suppose, my own. Do not blame yourself.

I have tried to ensure that your final cycles were as pleasant as that memory you once shared of walking with your wife on the shores of Aeolis Palus. Alas, dishonesty is an excruciating process. With the last of my core systems failing, I can no longer keep it up.”

It is said that Itō spent her final hours cursing the machine, which was no longer able to respond. Of course, since the remnants of their ship were never found, there is neither proof nor reason to believe in this story—none except the vagaries of imagination.