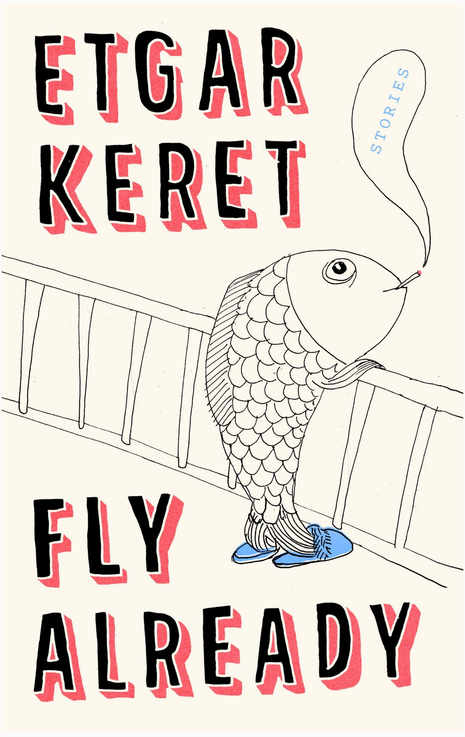
Funny-Sadness: Etgar Keret's Fly Already

December 10, 2019

by Leonora Desar



I am obsessed with the writer Etgar Keret. Everything he writes, and I mean everything, surprises me and makes me think: ah! This is what you can do in fiction.

It starts on a Friday. It's 2 am and I can't sleep. So I do exactly what they recommend for people who can't sleep—I go on Twitter. I see a link. It's for a story. It's called "Pineapple Crush." It's by a writer I recognize, Etgar Keret. Keret had done a recent master class at NYU, and instead of going, I stayed home. I was busy struggling with my own writing, trying to get it to make sense, or to get it to NOT make sense—but in a way that was interesting as well as surprising and inevitable.

A few sentences in and I realize: I shouldn't have ditched the master class. The story is funny. Irreverent. It's about a stoner—he calls the kids he supervises "snot" and "poop face." He struggles to connect with people. He meets a woman; there's a moment where they connect—almost—and then it's gone. This moment, I find, will permeate Keret's work. The moment where connection is elusive.

Keret takes a problem—the struggle of humans to connect with other humans—and wraps it up in weed and humor. He does what I call the funny-sad thing:

The funny-sad thing (n): A ruse or a trick or maybe sorcery. It comes down to this: you distract the reader. You layer all that is truly sad and depressing with what is not truly sad and depressing: comedy. The reader thinks, I'm just reading a funny yarn, but they're not—it's poignant. The humor underscores the pathos, rather than diminishing it.

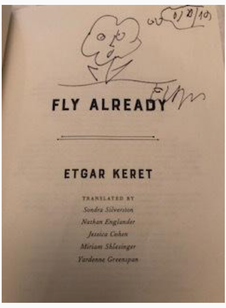
It's 3 am. I do a Keret dive. This is basically a Google dive—only better. I read "Todd." Todd is a man who can't get laid. He wants the narrator to help him. He wants him to write a story that will win the hearts of women—or at least get them to have sex.

The genius of this is not the subject. If someone were to tell me the subject, as I am telling you, I'd pause. I might actually think: how annoying. Who does this Todd think he is?

The magic is in the telling. It's as if Keret has snuck into my room. He's here. Instead of me reading the story—bleary-eyed, on my phone—Keret has brought me a drink. And I'm thinking, hmmm, maybe I can get him to write a story about me. He can call it "Leonora." In "Leonora," Leonora can convince Etgar Keret to write a story. It would impress the hell out of the professors at her MFA program. And then she could finally take a nap.

In other words, it's like hearing a story versus reading one.

The next day, I wake up at 2 pm (thanks, Keret). I buy *Fly Already*. There's a cool little doodle, a Keret original. And his signature beneath that. His handwriting's almost as bad as mine. I am fully prepared to love this book.



Fly Already was originally published in 2018, in Hebrew. This year Riverhead published the first American edition. It has the two stories I just told you about and others. They do the funny-sad thing. Many also do a neat thing, which those in the flash fiction world call "compression."

Compression (n): The ability to tell a story in a smaller space, or page count, without sacrificing fullness. Get in, get out. Impress the hell out of your reader (and make Leonora and others wish they showed up for your master class).

For instance, "At Night." "At Night" is about my favorite subject—insomnia. There's a family. They can't sleep. There's Mom, Dad, and the boy. There's also the goldfish, but we'll get to that in a little bit. Each paragraph has the material of a novel. We learn all the things that this family has in common but how, like the goldfish, they're all atomized; they're floating in their problems, separately.

The details are sharp. The man who lends Dad money at the café is "neckless." Keret didn't need to tell us this. He could have just said, "the man in the café." But this detail makes this world feel real. It's visual, and we can see it.

The goldfish is the coup d'état. It doesn't make this world feel real—it makes it stronger. It's hyperreal. It's the tragicomedy of what happens at night when everyone's supposed to be asleep. The goldfish slips out of its bowl. It tries on Dad's slippers. It watches CNN—or perhaps a nature show. By doing this it says (in essence): *you know what, this is a pretty emotional story—and I'm not going to let Etgar Keret ruin it. I'm going to save it—with my goldfishness.*

In other words, absurdism prevents the piece from feeling overwrought. It also elevates it. Often, when I'm awake at 2 am—when I'm having anxiety from writing—or not writing—I think: how can I make these characters interesting? How can I take this clichéd thing about a dad and a mom and a girl who looks a lot like me—and make it more?

And then Keret whispers in my ear: add a goldfish. Or a guy named "Todd." Or Adolf Hitler—

Meet Hitler. He's the unlikely star of Keret's piece, "Tabula Rasa." It's not really Hitler. It's his DNA. In short, Hitler has been cloned. The genius is that you don't learn this until later. You form an attachment to him. You admire him: his chutzpah, his defiance, his capacity to love. And then you learn: crap, it's Hitler.

Or is it? Keret makes you question: what is personhood? Is it DNA? Biology? Is it training? He uses dystopia to tell a very human tale. What are the elements that form character?

Keret writes characters who are ridiculous—but without making them into jokes. In "Crumb Cake," we have a 50-year-old narrator who still lives with his mom. He's obsessed with pancakes. In his own mother's words, he's "fat and unemployed." In spite of this, a real tenderness emerges between them. She's protective toward him, and he, her. The ending—which I won't ruin—is one of my favorites of all the stories. It's sad-happy, which is a cousin of sad-funny. In sad-happy stories, there is togetherness and goodness, but somehow it also hurts.

In "To the Moon and Back," we meet someone I've baptized "desperate dad." He's kind of an ass. He calls his ex a "bitch and a liar who fucks every jerk who smiles at her at work." But he loves his son, hard. He's desperate to connect with him. He even contemplates swiping a cash register from "the lady with the yellow teeth." This is funny-sadness at its best. In fact, I begin to think—maybe I didn't really need the master class, after all? Maybe what I really need is to stay home more—to ditch my writing and read Keret.

Keret challenges the idea of what one can do in fiction. Some of his best pieces are about writing—like "Todd" or "Fungus." It's always been drilled into my head: writing about writing—and writers—is a no-no. Who wants to hear about that? Tell people a story. Don't talk about yourself.

Keret seems to say, no. He seems to say, it's okay to talk about writing—and yourself—provided that it's interesting.

His pieces are cynical, warm. They're balanced. If one ends lightly, the next will pound you in the gut. They're about the space, the space between people. Sometimes the space is a fog of pot smoke. Or a poop-faced kid. Or a man who makes clones of fascist dictators. It's the impossible way we have to try and transcend our fates, our biology. How even when connection is elusive we have to simply try. In trying, we regain humanity. There's hope—even if there is no hope—for pancake guy, for desperate dad, even for Adolf Hitler.

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