Etgar Keret's Literature and the Ethos of Coping with Holocaust Remembrance

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By

Yael Seliger

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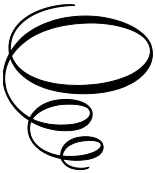

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This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6313-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6313-1

In memory of my grandparents:

Gottfried Hollander, Lottie (Guttmann) Hollander, Max Seliger,
and Paula (Frank) Seliger.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been in the making for a lifetime. It began with a family history. Over the years, the personal became political. Following a gratifying career as a senior educator, I embarked on a PhD program in the humanities at York University, Toronto, Canada. Throughout the course of my PhD studies, I gravitated towards subjects that offered a blend of research into individual and collective memory, postmodern critical theory, and literature. It was at that time that Etgar Keret's writings permeated my thoughts and captured my imagination. I knew where I was heading, but I needed the guidance and mentorship of someone who was knowledgeable, understood where I was coming from and the direction I wished to go, and could provide me with the best possible guidance. As my good fortune would have it, and for which I am eternally grateful, Sara R. Horowitz, a distinguished, leading scholar, was more than willing to take me under her supervisory and collegial wings.

Along the way, whether we met in Jerusalem or Toronto, I could also count on my dear friend, Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, professor emeriti, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, to ask me questions that made me think deeply about my academic interests. I am also honored to have had Priscila Uppal, poet, novelist, and scholar, as an enthusiastic supporter. It is heart-wrenching to imagine that in the midst of battling the spread of cancerous tumors, a battle she sadly lost, Priscilla continued to extend to me invaluable advice.

Given the book's intricate representation of multifaceted topics and subtopics, my work required careful structural and copy editing. My daughter, Neta Gordon, a gifted scholar in her own right, referred me to Lee Cadwallader who graciously undertook the role of lead editor of the manuscript. A senior content writer, teacher, and researcher, Lee is exceptionally gifted in promoting consistency, clarity, and accuracy of language. For all that, and more, I am forever indebted to Lee. I also wish to extend my grateful acknowledgment to Peretz Rodman, an American-Israeli rabbi, teacher, and translator, who read an early version of the book, and enriched me with excellent, thoughtful, and helpful comments. I also wish to thank Emily Franzo for her illuminating appraisal of the manuscript in terms of its overall flow and readability.

As is evident from my book, I think very highly of Etgar Keret as a postmodern author. I also admire him as a public persona who exudes affinity with those in need of social, economic, and political empathy. Keret is known far and wide in Israel and the world. Over the years of writing the book, I had the distinct privilege of conversing with him on several occasions. Whenever I asked him to clarify an issue, his response was always immediate and extremely helpful. In so many ways, it is thanks to Etgar Keret's storytelling that I have evolved from defining my identity as a granddaughter whose ancestors were murdered during the Holocaust, to a writer of a book that casts light on matters that transcend victimization.

To my dearest friends, you know who you are and what your friendship means to me. I cannot imagine bringing this project into fruition without you cheering me on. There were days when I had the sense that my friends—Silvia Eilath, Anne Glickman, Sharon Kirsh, Nilufar Motaref, Dafna Ross, Paul Ross, Martin Sable, Ahouva Shulman, and Lesley Simpson—had more confidence in me than I had in myself. Thanks also to Carrie Betel, my star student.

I am beholden to Cambridge Scholars Publishing. First, thank you Adam Rummens, Senior Commissioning Editor, for your invaluable and friendly guidance. Thank you also to Amanda Millar, Typesetting Manager, for your wisdom and assistance. I am also grateful to Courtney Dixon for designing the book's cover. Finally, I may not know you by name, but my sincere gratitude to everyone involved in the formidable task of transforming a manuscript into a "real" book!

To my parents, Chava (Eva Hollander) Seliger and Martin Seliger, and to my stepmother, Ruth Seliger, you will always be in my heart of hearts. To my one and only sister, Daniela Gordon; it was from you that I learned the meaning of unconditional love. I simply do not know what would have become of me had it not been for you. To my three, extraordinary children: Neta Gordon, Amir Gordon, and Shira (Brym) Friedland, you know best that this book is the book Ima always wanted to write. My life has been anything but an easy, straightforward ride. If, however, there is one thing I know with complete certitude, it is that my love for you has always been, and always will be without limitation. To me, you represent a fulfillment of the best of all blessings, not the least for the most formidable gift you and your partners—Martin Gough, Janice Robson, and Ben Friedland—have bestowed upon me: five, perfect granddaughters! Mina Gough, Sasha Gough, Sophie Friedland, Molly Friedland, and Emily Gordon-Robson, for me, your Savta-Mom, you embody the promise of a bright, hopeful future.

PREFACE

And Who Will Remember the Rememberers?
Forgotten, remembered, forgotten.
Open, closed, open.
Yehuda Amichai[1]

The guiding premise of this book is that only those who lived through the Holocaust can *remember* the Holocaust. No one can possibly remember things they did not experience. Thus, with the exception of Holocaust survivors, when we speak of Holocaust memory, we are actually referring to acts of remembrance.[2]

The idea of memory has a long history; thinking in terms of acts of remembrance is newer. The Torah commands the Israelites to remember the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-10) and the Exodus (Deuteronomy 16:1). Aristotle speaks of the preservation of "memory of something by constant reminding" (De Memoria), Plato visualizes memory as a wax imprint (Theaetetus), and St. Augustine theorizes about "images of the things perceived by the senses" (Confessions) as part of memory. Over time, memory came to be associated with cultivating mental capacities. The Age of Enlightenment and modernity bolstered greatly the stature of memory by linking memory with identity formation. Marx applies memory to social theory, Nietzsche is contemptuous of humans' obsession with accumulating memories, Freud explains the human psyche as predisposed to repressing disturbing memories, and modern nationalist movements elevate collective memory to a superlative pedestal. In the aftermath of twentieth-century fascism, Jay Winter construes remembrance in his seminal work, *Remembering War: the Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century,* as constituting a process in which "history and memory are braided together in the public domain, jointly informing our shifting and contested understandings of the past."[3] Neither

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[1] Yehuda Amichai, "And Who Will Remember the Rememberers?" *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), 177.

[2] Jay Winter, *Remembering War: the Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006).

[3] Winter (2006), 6.

history nor memory per se, "but the overlaps and creative space between the two,"[4] inform us. I imagine post-1945 Western civilization fixedly gawking at its wretched reflection, as in Edvard Munch's 1893 painting "The Scream."

With Germany's unconditional surrender to Allied armies in the west on May 7 and in the east on May 9, 1945, the fallout of what happened during World War II in twentieth-century Europe was yet to be fully grasped. With millions of displaced civilians—many with no home or family to go back to—plodding their way through shattered European cities and dismantled landscapes, the discernment of the outcomes of fascism was temporarily relegated to a cognitive back seat. When facts began to percolate as to the unimaginable magnitude of catastrophic acts of genocide against the Jewish people, aside from the pragmatic urgency to bring to fruition the Zionist blueprint of a national home for the Jewish nation, it was initially impossible to comprehend the cataclysmic profundity of the Holocaust. Emerging out of the ashes, survivors often locked recollections of the horrors into guarded silence.

Aharon Erwin Appelfeld's literature emblematizes a self-imposed muzzle. Of the Jewish children who survived the war, most hid in convents, orphanages, caves, attics, and sewers. Appelfeld found refuge in the woods. Born in 1932 in Zhadova (Jadova), a small town near the city of Czernowitz, Bukovina, Appelfeld grew up in a family steeped in German culture. His happiest childhood memories are associated with his mother. Nazi soldiers murdered her in front of the family home in 1941. Aharon and his father were deported to a labor camp in Transnistria. The boy managed to escape to the woods where he hid until 1944. He was twelve years old when he emerged from hiding and joined the Soviets who had recaptured Ukraine. In 1946, Appelfeld made his way to Israel, then Palestine, where he lived and became a distinguished writer until his death in 2018. Throughout his wanderings, Appelfeld stumbled upon places, railway stations, remote villages, and rivers. They all had names, but he recalled none. Relayed in his autobiography, *The Story of a Life*,[5] Appelfeld speaks of memories that are felt in a physical sense, engraved into his body as opposed to his memory. A sudden noise would make him tense and feel the need to "retreat to the outer edges of the forest, running and ducking,"[6] his body acting as if the war was still on.

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[4] Winter (2006), 288.

[5] Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, trans. Aloma Halter (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

[6] Appelfeld (2004), 90.

Primo Levi too equated memory with physical sensations. He entwined the physicality of memory with the limitations of language. Nearing the end of his life—whether by suicide or accident—what gnaws at Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*[7] is the inadequacy of words to express the fact that by mere chance he survived while "the best all died."[8]

Charlotte Delbo was a member of the *Résistance* during World War II. She and her husband, Georges Dudach, were arrested in 1942. He was executed, and Delbo was interned in Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Ravensbrück. As Delbo explains in *Auschwitz and After*,[9] when trying to put into words the inexplicable, it feels as if "you've forgotten all the words."[10] Aharon Megged equates silence in *Foiglman*[11] with the Zionist Hebrew-Speaking Jew who censors Diaspora Jews holding onto the Yiddish language—the *mameloshn* (mother tongue) of millions of Holocaust victims. Neighborhood children know that Rachely's oddness in Yitzhak Laor's "Rachely's Father Who Was an Actor" [12] has to do with her father never speaking about Auschwitz during the day, although at night his screams can be heard coming through his bedroom windows.

Saul Friedländer's hush is of a different kind. Born in 1932, Friedländer's parents could not save themselves but saved their son by hiding him in a Catholic boarding school. By all accounts, Friedländer had the *right* to consider himself close enough to the Holocaust. Still, having lived during the years of the Holocaust in the guise of a Roman Catholic boy, he found it difficult to put himself in the category of Holocaust victims. Instead, as articulated in his memoir, *When Memory Comes*,[13]

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[7] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989).
[8] Levi (1989), 82.
[9] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (*Auschwitz, et après*), trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985). *Auschwitz and After* is a trilogy of works, comprised of *None of Us Will Return* (*Aucun de nous ne reviendra*), *Useless Knowledge* (*La connaissance inutile*), and *The Measure of Our Days* (*Mesure de nos jours*).
[10] Delbo (1985), 236.
[11] Aharon Megged, *Foiglman*, trans. Marganit Weinberger-Rotman (London, UK: Toby Press, 2003).
[12] Yitzhak Laor, "Rachel's Father Who Was an Actor," trans. Sheila Jellen, in *50 Stories from Israel: an Anthology*, eds. Zisi Stavi and Chaya Galai (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth and Hemed Books, 2007), 397-408.
[13] Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

Friedländer remarks that having lived on the edges of the catastrophe, "I remained in my own eyes, not so much a victim as—a spectator."[14]

Sara Horowitz expounds in *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*[15] on how muteness became preferable to "value-laden words whose simple meaning can no longer be trusted."[16] According to Horowitz, language *per se* was damaged by Nazi atrocities. Noting Elie Wiesel's taxonomy of silence that draws upon traditional Jewish mysticism and modern absurdist literature, Horowitz points to mute protagonists in Wiesel's fiction who "consciously refrain from speech, as though muteness were their vocation."[17]

The constraints of silence were partially undone in 1961 when agents of the Israeli Mossad captured Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and brought him to stand trial in Israel. With the maturation of children of Holocaust survivors, the walls of silence continued to break down and "after the Holocaust" terminology came into being. Defined by Marianne Hirsch, one such key term is "postmemory." Conceptualized by Hirsch in "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," "Mourning and Postmemory," and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*,[18] postmemory seeks connections with what it can neither recover nor recall. Despite being fully cognizant of the fact that only the Holocaust generation can actually *remember* the Holocaust, the "generation after" is saddled with the weight of a terrible trauma.

A painful visit to pre-World War II homeland and landscape is often woven into literature written by members of the second generation. David Grossman, Nava Semel, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Joseph Skibell—to name but a few writers of the second generation—are cognizant of the ethical dilemma embedded in the "return motif." Grossman was born in 1954. Did he have the right to envision himself in his 1989 groundbreaking

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[14] Friedländer (1979), 155.

[15] Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[16] Horowitz (1997), 113.

[17] Horowitz (1997), 119.

[18] Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" in *Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glance*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 418-446; "Mourning and Postmemory," in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings,* eds. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 416-422; *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

novel, *See Under: Love*,[19] as a prisoner in a concentration camp? Sue Vice debates this literary-ethical predicament in *Holocaust Fiction*[20] with respect to *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels.[21] Vice considers Michaels's 1996 novel formidable Holocaust literature. She does, however, find an instance in which Michaels laments pregnant Jewish women delivering lifeless fetuses, as they die a horrible death in the gas chambers, troubling. Presumably anticipating readers' objection to imagining the unimaginable, Michaels's narrator asks for forgiveness for "this blasphemy of choosing philosophy over the brutalism of fact."[22] Still, Vice takes exception to Michaels instilling herself in a place she could not possibly envisage. As Vice contends, Michaels does not have the ethical prerogative to "bring aesthetic and meaningful comfort from an event which offers no redemption of any kind."[23]

Throughout my study I confine myself almost exclusively to what transpired *after* the Holocaust, beginning with the second generation. I tend to situate survivors' recollections beyond the realm of discernment or penetration. I view testimonies by survivors as ethical wills that nobody has the right to tamper with. The way I see things, only a victim like Jean Améry can rightfully claim—as Améry did in *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz*[24]—that an Auschwitz insignia tattooed onto his left forearm reads "more briefly than the Pentateuch or the Talmud and yet provides more thorough information."[25] Thus, thoughts put forth in this book on Holocaust remembrance do not pertain to memories of those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand.

That being said, Jewish children and grandchildren of the Holocaust generation are beset by what I mean by coping with remembrance of the Holocaust. I never knew a day of suffering in a ghetto or a concentration camp, but the murderous amputation of my family's ancestral tree justifies my preoccupation with the Holocaust. I was born and raised in Israel and now live in Canada where winters are cold and snowy. Implausible as this may sound, invariably, when venturing outdoors, shielded by a winter

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[19] David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1989).
[20] Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000).
[21] Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996).
[22] Michaels (1996), 168.
[23] Vice, (2000), 9.
[24] Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
[25] Améry (1980), 24.

coat, scarf, and boots, I instinctively imagine my grandparents and other relatives imprisoned in a concentration camp, wearing nothing but ragged striped pajamas, a tattered jacket, and wooden clogs in freezing temperatures. The involuntary indignation that envelops me when listening to Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* ought to be perfectly understandable. Appropriately noted by Alex Ross in a 2012 write-up, "The Case for Wagner in Israel,"[26] clearly there is more to Wagner as a composer than being Hitler's favorite musician. No one, however, except Wagner himself is to blame for what Ross calls the prevalence of a "reductionist image" of the German composer.[27]

In offering a shift in conceptualization I am maintaining that acts of Holocaust remembrance—commemorative ceremonies, annual days of remembrance, museums, tours of places where mass killings occurred, and artistic endeavors of literature, music, painting, sculpture, and film—constitute means of *coping with traumatic acts of remembrance*. Holocaust museums, the display of visual, contextual, and literary narratives about the Holocaust are all about our capacity—individual and collective—to discern traumatic acts of remembrance. Having read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*,[28] how do readers of Frank's legendary diary, particularly young readers, *cope* with the gaping discrepancy between idealistic Anne, "Yet in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart"—the most quoted entry in Anne's diary dated July 14, 1944—and the abysmal reality of Anne dying a horrible death several months later at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp?[29]

This book posits the writings of the Israeli author Etgar Keret as a postmodern embodiment of the notion of coping with Holocaust

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[26] Alex Ross, "The Case for Wagner in Israel," *The New Yorker*, September 25, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/culture-desk/the-case-for-wagner-in-israel.

[27] According to Ross, the issue is further complicated by the fact that Wagner was, contrary to Nazism, more of an anarchist who despised militarism. Furthermore, as told by Leah Garrett in *A Knight at the Opera: Heine, Wagner, Herzl, Peretz and the Legacy of Der Tannhäuser"* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), in addition to leading lights such as Baudelaire, Proust, Mann, Joyce, Kandinsky, and Isadora Duncan who were Wagner devotees, ironically, the founder of political Zionism, Theodore Herzl, was mesmerized by Wagner's operatic rendition of the medieval legend of Tannhäuser—the poetic knight, infatuated with the goddess Venus—and imagined it applicable to a mythical, redemptive call of the Jewish people.

[28] Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. Susan Massotty, eds. Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Presder (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

[29] March 31, 1945 was determined by Dutch authorities as Anne Frank's official date of death.

remembrance through storytelling. The heart of the book is an exploration of Keret's writing in relation to coping with Holocaust remembrance in our postmodern era. The postmodern theoretical scaffolding of my analysis of Keret's literature is grounded mostly in Jacques Derrida's postmodern philosophy. Relevant theoretical suppositions and academic inferences are included in the book insofar as they illuminate Keret's stories as a paradigmatic exemplar of coping with Holocaust remembrance. I visualize the flow of the book comparable to an accordion whereby different pitches and registers are created by pressing keys and driving air into pleated layers through movements of expansion and contraction, spreading out when theorizing and speaking of coping with Holocaust remembrance in general, and tightening the scope when converging on Etgar Keret's literature. In keeping with my main objective of advancing a comprehensive theoretical argument in relation to coping with Holocaust remembrance as reflected in Keret's literature, with some exceptions, I provide summaries of stories written by Keret. While my inquiry includes delving into qualitative issues pertaining to Keret as a writer of literature, my focus is on the manner in which Keret's stories engage with and reflect upon political and cultural topics, questions, and dilemmas related to Holocaust remembrance. Keret's literature is integral to postmodern, post Holocaust zeitgeist. In the main, the theoretical and thematic framework of the book is cultural and not contingent upon construction of specific, organized timelines.

Specific to Keret's literature, I align referenced stories, collections of stories, interviews, conversations, and reviews with specific thematic topics as opposed to a timeline of publications. In part, this nonlinear characterization flows from Keret's rejection of one-dimensionality of philosophical and political reasoning. Always on the prowl to uncover and expose alarming threats of totalizing and absolutism, Keret is never blasé about rendering in terse and non-apologetic, undiplomatic language a riposte to prejudiced convictions.

Keret's affection and closeness to the Hebrew language, particularly in its domesticated and informal format is a major theme in the book. While a few critics are bothered by the commonality of Keret's jargon and deem him a writer who beggars language, I am among those who think otherwise. I believe Keret has a superior grasp of the inventiveness and idiosyncrasy of a language that encompasses the cadence of an ancient, biblical prose and its modulation from centuries of being an unspoken language to becoming an animated, bountiful, visionary, and multifarious vernacular.

Keret's tendency to employ unnamed, first-person narrative does create a language-related issue. Given the lack of equivocation as to the identity of the first-person narrator, all too often readers confuse the author with the narrator. As discussed in the book, Keret prefers to leave the degree to which his stories are autobiographical or pure fiction an open-ended, unresolved issue.

Structurally, the book opens with notes on the difference between acts of remembrance and memory. I provide a critique of what I consider immobile modes of remembrance as opposed to personalized and more fluid approaches to Holocaust remembrance. I then shed light on the vital role assumed by literature—novels, short stories, and poetry—with regard to acts of remembrance in the aftermath of the Holocaust. With philosophy and history struggling to explain their failure to anticipate twentieth-century cataclysmic carnage, literature emerged as better qualified to put into words the terrible blight thrust upon Western civilization by modern totalitarianism.

I continue by examining Etgar Keret's work inside and outside of an explicitly Zionist-Israeli cultural milieu. I go on to delve into Keret's Weltanschauung illuminating his literature as both specifically Israeli and universally applicable. On the one hand, Keret's romance with the Hebrew language and his umbilical connection to Tel Aviv's spatial environment are integral to Keret as an Israeli writer. On the other, Keret's contemplation of moral quandaries, religion versus secularism, empathy, wars and violence, death by suicide and the afterlife, love, friendship, and parenthood speaks to a universal circle of readers. I also contend that Keret's eccentricity and defiance is unique, but it is not a stand-alone phenomenon. Rather, it is one of several developments in the history of Hebrew literature. Free-spirited, avant-garde Etgar Keret affirms a well-established mode in Israeli literature whereby writers of Hebrew literature do not shy away from denouncing what they deem politically and morally wrong, even in times of war and calls for unity. Throughout my analysis of Keret as a writer, I elaborate upon his mastery of the short story genre and distinct penchant for the grotesque and the humorous.

In my discussion, I draw upon selections from Keret's compiled books of short stories. Two of his books are discussed in greater detail. The first is Keret's 2015 memoir, *The Seven Good Years, A Memo*ir,[30] and the second is his 2019—to date, his most recent—collection of short stories:

[30] Etgar Keret, *The Seven Good Years: A Memoir*, trans. Sondra Silverston, Miriam Shlesinger, Jessica Cohen, and Anthony Berris (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

Fly Already.[31] The memoir was written at a critical time in Keret's life, between the birth of his son and passing of his father. Naturally, it is most revealing. As for *Fly Already*, while allusions to Holocaust remembrance crop up everywhere in Keret's oeuvre, *Fly Already* is unique in the way it is unified by Holocaust remembrance. Thus, it reaffirms my theoretical premise regarding coping with Holocaust remembrance as a thematic string laced throughout Keret's literature.

The bibliographic list of books, articles, reviews, and interviews includes more than cited works and sources directly related to the content of the book. I have also listed readings that I recommend to readers interested in pursuing a study of Etgar Keret's literature, and/or the subject of traumatic remembrance, and Holocaust remembrance.

Keret writes in Hebrew. Stories translated into English appear in several collections, periodicals, and literary outlets. Given Keret's popularity, it is not unusual for him to be interviewed multiple times by the same newspaper reporter, magazine writer, or social media journalist. To lessen the confusion, I indicate the specific publication I used for citations.[32] Quotes from scholarly works, novels, and collections of stories are page numbered. For the most part, citations from magazines, interviews, reviews, newspapers, or social media sites are not. Where a relevant text is available only in Hebrew, I provide the translation into English.

Lastly, yet importantly, this book was finalized prior to the events of October 2023, when massacres and kidnapping of civilians in the south of Israel were carried out by Hamas terrorists from Gaza. The magnitude of the attacks against innocent civilians led Israel to engage in an outright war against Hamas. The number of casualties on both sides is staggering and will undoubtedly continue to escalate. At this stage of the mayhem, it is clear that the sorrowful Israeli-Palestinian conflict has undergone a dramatic change. My prayer for a two-state solution notwithstanding, for now, while the situation is still extremely volatile, it is too early to come up with a comprehensive analysis of what tomorrow will bring. However, the moral urgency evoked in this book through a multifaceted discussion of coping with traumatic remembrance continues to be relevant and deeply necessary. Likewise, the literature of Etgar Keret, with its gravitas and nuanced humanistic conscience, means more today than it did before.

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[31] Etgar Keret, *Fly Already*, trans. Sondra Silverston, Nathan Englander, Jessica Cohen, Miriam Shlesinger, and Yardenne Greenspan (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019).

[32] For example, the story "Breaking the Pig" appears in *Missing Kissinger*, as well as in *The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God & Other Stories.* As I indicate, the version I used for citations appears in *Missing Kissinger.*

INTRODUCTION:
ETGAR KERET'S LITERATURE

> I've passed forty.
> Were I in Auschwitz
> they would not have sent me to work,
> but gassed me straightaways.
> It binds.
> Yehuda Amichai[33]

And the Rat Laughed is an extraordinary, five-part novel by Nava Semel.[34] Born in 1954, Semel was the daughter of Holocaust survivors.[35] *And the Rat Laughed* commences in 1999 with a conversation between a grandmother and granddaughter at a Tel Aviv apartment. As part of a school assignment on the Holocaust, the granddaughter interviews her Holocaust survivor grandmother. The grandmother prefers to hold back and keep silent about her past but finds it difficult to refuse her granddaughter:

> I had a mother. I had a father. Won't you make do with that? I loved and I lost. That's the end of the story.[36]

The granddaughter is dissatisfied. She needs more details. Somewhat annoyed, the grandmother reluctantly adds that at the time, "being a Jewish little girl was the worst thing in the world."[37] Desperately wanting to save their child, her parents left her at the mercy of Christian peasants. Dumped into a backyard pit, starved, and raped by the peasants' teenage son, the only solace the little girl knew was the company of a rat.

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[33] Yehuda Amichai, "All the Generations Before Me," *Poems of Jerusalem and Love Poems* (Bilingual Edition), trans Assia Gutmann, Harold Schimmel, Chana Bloch, and Stephen Mitchell (New York: *The* Sheep Meadow Press, 1981), 3.
[34] Nava Semel, *And the Rat Laughed* (Tzhok Shel Achbarosh), trans. Miriam Shlesinger (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008).
[35] Semel passed away in 2017 at the age of sixty-three.
[36] Semel (2008), 5.
[37] Semel (2008), 15.

The granddaughter is disappointed. As a school project, her grandmother's story will not do. Textbooks, teachings, and commemorations of the Holocaust are all about ghettos and concentration camps, and not about a girl hiding in some hole in the ground:

> Even though my grandmother really was in the Holocaust, I'm not sure it counts, because she was a little girl and she didn't go through any of the big, horrifying things we learn about in history or read about or see in the movies.[38]

From present-day Tel Aviv to the Holocaust, from the Holocaust to the future and then back to the Holocaust, Semel's haunting narrative oscillates between poetry, a memoir, and the genres of realistic novel and science fiction. At some point, the grandmother's story morphs into the myth of "Girl & Rat." The written text of the myth is lost in 2025 in the ashes of an ecological disaster, but the myth itself remains afloat through academic research and virtual games. It resurfaces in 2099 when archeological excavations uncover ruins of "Madonna of the Rat Church in a geographical place once called Poland."[39] Back in the days of the Holocaust, a Polish priest named Father Stanislaw rescued a Jewish girl from being murdered by local peasants. The priest kept a diary in which he tells of harrowing events that took place from September 1943 until February 1945. Kneeling, Father Stanislaw beseeches God:

> My Father, did You not see what was happening underneath the soil, or did You turn your back? Even Your Son was not a little child when He was made to suffer, and even then, on His final journey, He was not alone.[40]

In part, I cite Semel's novel because it illuminates multidimensional facets of Holocaust remembrance. As expounded upon by Alan L. Berger in his review of *And the Rat Laughed*,[41] Semel navigates through a thematic entanglement of individual versus national/collective commemoration, Jewish and Christian remembering/forgetting, Holocaust remembrance and the State of Israel, technological advancement and environmental disasters in relation to remembrance of the Holocaust, futuristic ravages of

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[38] Semel (2008), 54.
[39] Semel (2008), 118.
[40] Semel (2008), 170-171.
[41] Alan L. Berger, "The Holocaust Novel from Israel that Americans Can't Handle," review of *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel, *The Forward*, October 26, 2009, https//:forward.com/culture/117704/the-holocaust-novel-from-israel-that-america-can't-handle.

Zionism and Judaism, and an indictment of the God of Monotheism. Berger also wonders whether Diaspora Jews are up to embracing Semel's Holocaust novel in the way Israelis do. Either way, in and of itself, the distinction suggested by Berger between Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews in relation to Holocaust literature is a component in an all-encompassing configuration of *coping* with Holocaust remembrance.

As aforementioned, generally speaking, members of Keret's generation are viewed as constituting the second generation. In due course, scholars began to include under the umbrella of the second-generation children born to Holocaust survivors, and children of Jews who lived through that era without experiencing the Holocaust firsthand. The list of reputable scholars who defined the boundaries and characteristics of second-generation Holocaust phenomenology is extensive. Several such key scholars are discussed in this book. Beyond the first and to an extent, the second generation, a foundational premise guiding this book is that with the coming of the third, fourth, and future generations, the generational perspective in analyzing remembrance of the Holocaust lost much of its pertinence. Furthermore, thinking in terms of *coping with Holocaust remembrance* frees us from generational constants.

I also contend that the constitution and temperament of being defined by coping with remembrance of the Holocaust allows for adaptability to changeable times and amenability to varying political and cultural realities. Hirsch's formalistic and stationary nature of postmemory (preface p. xv) was, perhaps, applicable to children born to Holocaust survivors. Beyond the second generation, inflexible forms of remembrance of the Holocaust obstructs and inhibits an ability to advance modifiable capacities to cope, and not "just" cope, but cope responsibly with traumatic remembrance.

To be sure, the unprecedented savagery of twentieth-century fascism and the horrors of the Holocaust make it difficult to think in terms of fluidity in modes of coping with traumatic remembrance. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests in *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*[42] that unlike in the immediate aftermath of World War I, and the Pollyanna-like hope to end all wars, the tenor of post-World War II was lingering latency that offers no assurances if and how we will reach a time to come, futurity. Much like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, post-Auschwitz humanity is "moving the whole time without making any progress."[43]

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[42] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).
[43] Gumbrecht (2013), 28.

Nowadays, the issue of post-Holocaust humanity is debated as part of a discourse on modernism versus postmodernism. Seyla Benhabib suggests in "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard"[44] that postmodern Western civilization finds it too difficult to give up the Enlightenment's delusion "of an infinitely malleable world serving as mere receptacle of the desire of an infinitely striving self."[45] Too much of the Western humanistic tradition is invested in reason and progress; giving up on the Enlightenment's promise means conceding to humans' high propensity for committing unspeakable crimes.

Whereas the exactness of what differentiates modernism from postmodernism remains debatable, the contention put forth in my study is that Etgar Keret is an archetypal postmodern writer who exemplifies the theoretical modality of coping with Holocaust remembrance. To take an example, while not always associated with melancholic woe, postmodern existential aloneness is a salient feature in Keret's fiction. In many ways, the manner in which Keret coats postmodern aloneness with an overlay of idiosyncratic equanimity stems from Keret's familiarity with being a child of Holocaust survivors. A story titled "The Girl on the Fridge"[46] is about aloneness in our postmodern era. A protagonist named Nahum tells a friend by the name of Ogette that he once had a girlfriend who liked to be alone and that it most likely had to do with her upbringing. Personally, Nahum does not see it as a big deal; he thinks about the subject of childhood in the same way he thinks about the hollowness of a cavity in a tooth. Ogette persists, entreating Nahum to tell her more about his former girlfriend's childhood and predilection for being alone. Nahum finds Ogette's probing annoying. He nonetheless goes on to reveal that his former girlfriend spent much of her childhood on top of a refrigerator while her parents were away at work. She was perfectly content with her situation and spent the hours singing and drawing little pictures in layers of dust on top of the fridge. "The view from up there was very beautiful, and her bottom was nice and warm. Now that she was older, she missed that time, that alone time, very much."[47]

"The Girl on the Fridge" suggests that in Keret's world, it is often necessary to augment realism with magic, and vice versa, magic is

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[44] Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: a Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard," *New German Critique*, No. 33, Fall 1984.
[45] Benhabib (1984), 103.
[46] Etgar Keret, "The Girl on the Fridge," in *The Girl On The Fridge*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger and Sondra Silverston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 41-44.
[47] Keret, "The Girl on the Fridge" (2008), 43.

possible by its connection to the harshness of postmodern realism. Keret's magic realism is not the kind which, when sprinkled with shiny pixie dust, can turn reality into fairytale bliss. Magic realism in Keret's stories is grayish and mundane, albeit, not totally lacking in optimism. "A No-Magician Birthday"[48] is about harsh realism embellished with a whiff of magic. The narrator of the story lives alone. He has a hard time dealing with what he believes is the coldest winter of his life. His ex-girlfriend is going around telling everyone that he is gay and impotent. Recently, he learned that the raise in salary he was anticipating is not forthcoming. He works as a reporter for a newspaper and his immediate assignment is to travel to the Hadera observatory and "bring back a thousand words about a meteor belt that traveled past us only every hundred years." The meteor phenomenon is of no interest to him; he would much rather cover a story about an Israeli living in Hebron "who'd been hit in the head and turned into a vegetable."[49] He is unsuccessful in pushing for the Hebron story. Frustrated, but with nothing else he can do, he makes his way to the observatory. The photographer accompanying him doesn't think much of the meteor belt phenomenon either. "People on the West Bank are slaughtering each other, and here I am shooting a bunch of short-sighted dorks in parkas jerking off on a telescope."[50] Bored and unhappy, the reporter imagines his mother preparing for his upcoming birthday. As a gift, she will most likely present him with a mini-cassette recorder for his work. She will undoubtedly bake his favorite carrot cake and cook the spaghetti dish he loves. His brother will drive in especially from the town of Raanana, and his father will tell him how proud he is of him. He recalls his tenth birthday party. His parents hired a magician. Now, at this weary point in his life, he wishes he had the power to cause the meteors to ignite and burn everything down. That would make him very happy, like when the magician performed his tricks, and when his mother "floated on air like a ballerina on the moon" and his father "just smiled and said nothing."[51]

Eventually, the reporter witnesses the meteors come and go as they do every hundred years. In the words of the petulant photographer, "it looked like shit and would look even shittier in the paper."[52]

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[48] Etgar Keret, A No-Magician Birthday," in *The Girl On The Fridge* (2008), 61-64.
[49] Keret, "A No-Magician Birthday" (2008), 62.
[50] Keret, "A No-Magician Birthday" (2008). 63.
[51] Keret, "A No-Magician Birthday" (2008), 64.
[52] Keret, "A No-Magician Birthday" (2008), 63-64.

When there is no magic to offset realism in a postmodern, post-Holocaust world, life becomes unbearable. Such is Shlomo's predicament in "Slimy Shlomo is a Homo."[53] After classmates start saying "Slimy Shlomo is a Homo," a substitute teacher encourages Shlomo to ignore his tormentors. In spite of that, when Shlomo asks her why all the kids hate him, she shrugs her shoulders and mutters, "How should I know? I'm just a sub."[54]

Now and again, Keret's magic realism can offset misery. In "The Real Winner of the Preliminary Games,"[55] a protagonist named Eitan is hopelessly depressed. His mind instructs him to aim a cocked gun to his chin and shoot, but in an involuntary reflexive motion his finger stops halfway. It is not as if this helped Eitan acquire a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of life, and yet, "He wanted to live, he really did."[56]

Magic realism and empathy are inextricably linked in Keret's literature. Furthermore, as I maintain, Keret's *empatheia*—in tune with the ancient Greek notion of pathos, suffering—is faithfully in accordance with his parents being Holocaust survivors. "The Flying Santinis"[57] is about a boy named Ariel Fledermaus who has only one wish. He wants to join the circus and become one of the Flying Santinis. Unlike parents of other children who also dream of joining a circus, Ariel's mother and father support their son's aspiration. His mother packs Ariel's clothes in a suitcase, and his father drives him to the circus to meet with Papa Luigi. As in Johann Strauss's operetta, *Die Fledermaus*, everyone is in on the joke, everyone except for the credulous "bat," Ariel Fledermaus.

It is up to Papa Luigi to determine Ariel's future; does or does he not have what it takes to become a Flying Santini. Luigi explains that many children want to join the circus but fail to appreciate the agility entailed in becoming a Flying Santini. Ariel's willpower is boundless and he passes several challenging tests. Only one flexibility test remains, "You have to touch your shoes without bending your knees."[58] The boy bends over and reaches down. Only four millimeters between the tips of his fingers and his shoes separate him from realizing his dream. He tries as hard as he can

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[53] Etgar Keret, "Slimy Shlomo is a Homo," in *The Girl On The Fridge* (2008), 99-100.
[54] Keret, "Slimy Shlomo is a Homo" (2008), 100.
[55] Etgar Keret, "The Real Winner of the Preliminary Games," in *The Girl On The Fridge* (2008), 53-57.
[56] Keret, "The Real Winner of the Preliminary Games" (2008), 57.
[57] Etgar Keret, "The Flying Santinis," in *Missing Kissinger,* trans. Miriam Shlesinger and Sondra Silverston (London, UK: Vintage Books, 2008), 155-158.
[58] Keret, "The Flying Santinis" (2008), 157.

to extend his stretch when suddenly a deafening sound perforates the air "like wood and glass breaking together."[59] Ariel remains stuck in a bending position. Papa Luigi picks him up and rushes him to the nearest hospital where X-rays administrated show a herniated disc. Wiping the boy's tearful eyes, Papa Luigi whispers to him softly, "You could have bent your knees … you could have bent them a little. I wouldn't have said anything."[60]

In "Terminal,"[61] an aging Holocaust survivor named Hans and a younger protagonist-narrator named Zvi have nothing in common except brain cancer: "He was a shriveled-up old guy who spoke broken Hebrew, and I'm a fat, overgrown Sabra still on this side of forty."[62] Sharing a hospital room, a special bond develops between the two. Hans suggests in his fractured Hebrew that it is because they are "terminal sick."[63] The words "terminal" and "sick" evoke in Zvi's imagination a picture of him boarding a flight which would take him somewhere wonderful. Hans tells Zvi that years ago, before Hitler, he was a chess champion at Mainz University. The Nazis murdered his wife and two children. He was left with nothing but "*mein Schatten*, how you say, aah ... shadow."[64] He raises his arm, creating a large shadow on the wall. It brings a smile to his face. To him, it is magic—"*Zauber*." Whenever Zvi gets angry with Asher, the orderly, for being late in emptying the urine bags, Hans tells him to go easy on Asher, who is merely a "*junger Mensch*" trying to do his job. Humanistic empathy is Hans' magic which, much like his shadow, not even the Nazis could destroy.

When Hans dies, Zvi faces reality at its worst. He raises his right hand high, hoping to create a shadow on the wall. Alas, he cannot even do that. It is as if his own shadow rebels against him. Then, as if touched by a magic wand, Zvi is comforted by whispering "*Zauber*." Empowering a Holocaust survivor with the magic of empathy through a play on words—terminal and shadow—is a linguistic artifice typical of Keret's storytelling. Zvi deriving comfort out of a word acquired from a German-speaking Holocaust survivor defies realism. It is also Keret's way of injecting new meaning into the German language: a language debased by Nazism.

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[59] Keret, "The Flying Santinis" (2008), 157.
[60] Keret, "The Flying Santinis" (2008), 158.
[61] Etgar Keret, "Terminal," in *The Girl On The Fridge* (2008), 101-104.
[62] Keret, "Terminal" (2008), 101.
[63] Keret, "Terminal" (2008), 102.
[64] Keret, "Terminal" (2008), 102-103.

Whether the setting is a hospital room as in "Terminal" or a soccer game in "Shoes," or a high school assembly in "Siren,"[65] Keret often fictionalizes the integration of Holocaust remembrance into the humdrum of daily life, a trait shared with other Israeli authors—Savyon Liebrecht, Nava Semel, Lizzie Doron, and Amir Gutfreund among them—born to Holocaust survivors. Keret, however, objects to being pegged by second-generation typology. As a guest lecturer at Syracuse University, Keret explained that his objection stems from the fact that this type of classification views children of Holocaust survivors as children who were raised by parents "committed to the articulation of silenced memories." He deems such categorization as "a reduction" of his family and his close relationship with his parents.[66]

Keret attempts to invalidate a blanket inference made by Iris Milner in "A Testimony to 'The War After': Remembrance and its Discontent in Second Generation Literature."[67] Among the Holocaust writers (Israeli) considered by Milner are Itamar Levi, David Grossman, Amir Gutfreund, Lizzie Doron, Michal Govrin, Savyon Liebrecht, Nava Semel, Gabriela Avigur-Rotem, and Lily Perry-Amitai. Milner's study calls attention to "how ashamed they were of their parents, particularly their mothers, because of their looks, their clothing, their language, and accent (bad Hebrew, or, what was even worse, Yiddish) … in short, because of their complete otherness."[68] Some may say that the portrayal of Holocaust survivors by their children is not that much different from how children tend to view immigrant parents in general. Despite that, in the case of children of immigrant Holocaust survivors; a coating of past horrors superimposes itself on the "otherness" of the parents. As conveyed by Nava Semel to Ronit Lentin in *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah: Reoccupying the Territories of Silence*,[69] children—like herself—raised in homes of Holocaust survivors grew up deciphering "transmission of non-verbal information" as in "body language and through crises and

[65] Keret's stories "Shoes" and "Siren" are discussed in later chapters.

[66] Proceedings of the event, together with four stories by Keret, a preface by Ken Frieden, and an introduction by George Saunders were later assembled into a booklet titled *Four Stories, B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

[67] Iris Milner, "A Testimony to 'The War After': Remembrance and its Discontent in Second Generation Literature," *Israel Studies*, Indiana University Press, 8, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 194-213.

[68] Milner (2003), 198-199.

[69] Ronit Lentin, *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah: Reoccupying the Territories of Silence* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).

catastrophes." The word "Auschwitz" was associated by Semel with "sleeping pills at night, with black clothes, with terror, and with something very terrifying, which I didn't want to know exactly."[70]

This type of memory is not at all how Keret remembers his childhood home. Keret always speaks of a happy home environment. His life is not free of personal struggles but he does not correlate personal problems with "complete otherness" of his Holocaust surviving parents.

In more than one way, the rarity and marvel of Etgar Keret are embedded in the innateness in which he exudes and transmits elemental and intuitive empathy towards "complete otherness." Noted by Dekel Shay Schory in "Etgar Keret on Lying: Three Examples,"[71] there is something "gentle" and "therapeutic" in which protagonists in Keret's stories distort and falsify factual truths. Schory goes on to say that Keret's enormous appeal emanates from readers realizing that despite all the violence and grotesqueness in Keret's stories, Keret's writings and public persona are all about *empatheia*, the "humanly better" that elevates the Other out of anonymity.

An archetypal example of the phenomenon of Keret is a story titled: "What, of this Goldfish, Would You Wish?"[72] A protagonist named Yonatan sets out to create a documentary on the pursuit of happiness. The idea was for him—just him, no camera crew—to knock on doors and discover what would people wish for if they encountered a goldfish that could grant them three wishes. Yoni would then edit and make clips of the responses. Invariably, people ask for health and material comfort, that is, with one, notable exception. A Holocaust survivor "with a number on his arm" wonders whether, "if this fish didn't mind, would it be possible for all the Nazis left living in the world to be held accountable for their crimes?"[73]

From a wide-ranging perspective, Christopher Merril asserts in "Parallel Universe: The World of Etgar Keret" that Keret "has caught something essential about the general despair of our time."[74] According to Merril,

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[70] Nava Semel cited by Lentin (2000), 34.

[71] Dekel Shay Schory, "Etgar Keret on Lying: Three Examples," *BGU Review, Heksherim Research Institute for Jewish & Israeli Literature & Culture* (Winter 2018).

[72] Etgar Keret, "What, of this Goldfish, Would You Wish?" in *Suddenly, A Knock On The Door*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger, Sondra Silverston, and Nathan Englander (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 117-123.

[73] Keret, "What, of this Goldfish, Would You Wish?" (2010), 118.

[74] Merril's write-up introduces a 2018 edition of *BGU Review Heksherim Research Institute for Jewish & Israeli Literature & Culture*, dedicated to Etgar Keret's

Keret is "deeply human, wise, and funny" with "an unerring eye for the absurd." Steering a storyline from a creator of a documentary about the pursuit of happiness to Holocaust remembrance evinces Keret "a literary genius." The underlying thesis of my argument is that coping with Holocaust remembrance is the pivotal link upon which discerning the phenomenon of Etgar Keret hinges. Even when seemingly absent or difficult to detect, coping with Holocaust remembrance is the leitmotif in Keret's storytelling.

Michal Peles Almagor is intrigued in "Here is a Different Place: 'Lieland,' Speech and Hebrew Literary Space"[75] by the manner in which Keret interlaces the narrative with falsehoods as a way of probing the moral compass of Zionism. Almagor regards "Lieland"[76] as an exemplar of Keret's employment of "the materiality of language to engender *place* that is neither a Zionist utopia nor a dystopia." Oscillating between two parallel worlds, a protagonist named Robbie, has been telling lies since he was seven years old. As he matures into adulthood, he becomes increasingly aware of the consequences of telling lies. In contrast, in "The Greatest Liar in the World,"[77] Keret's protagonist takes an inverse approach. Honest as a child, as an adult, he begins to tell lies to strangers, then to people he loves, and finally to himself:

> Lying to yourself is the best. It only takes a minute for the dingy puddle of reality that gets your socks to turn into something warm and velvety. Just one line and failure turns into voluntary submission, loneliness into choice and even the death that keeps closing in on you can change into a one-way ticket to heaven.

According to Almagor, Keret's "Lieland" propounds "a familiar paradigm" by which the Jewish people pray for a return to Zion, the Promised Land, but in actuality resist "the notion of arrival, either as a purpose or as a failed experience"—in other words, lying to themselves about longing to return to Zion. Almagor views "Lieland" as centering on creating a place through language and attributes to Keret extraordinary prowess in destabilizing "the

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literature. The *BGU Review* publication was a follow-up to a conference sponsored by the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Chicago: "Keret's Happy Campers; Etgar Keret and the Fate of Israeli Culture in the World Today."

[75] Michal Peles Almagor, "Here is a Different Place: 'Lieland,' Speech and Hebrew Literary Space," *BGU Review* (Winter 2018).

[76] Etgar Keret, "Lieland," in *Suddenly, A Knock On The Door* (2010), 9-19.

[77] Etgar Keret, "The Greatest Liar in the World," trans. Jessica Cohen, *Literary Hub*, September 6, 2019, https://www.lithub.com/a-newly-translated-story-by-etgar-keret.