

# On the Arrest of a Black Lives Matter Protester

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



*Ian Watching Television, David Hockney, 1987*

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

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

The miserable fool.

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

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

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

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

*No summers off and union membership*

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

But in these anarchic times

socialist educators are instead let free to roam our great  
land

fomenting race riots!

So if one of them has his wrists go numb

and gets a beating,

well, all the better.

An empty jail cell does no correcting.

Until a few weeks ago,

a man lived in my residential neighborhood who,

carrying an aluminum baseball bat—

in order to fend off coyotes, he said—

would take his small dog on evening walks.

I go for walks at night specifically to avoid people,

but because of his proximity to my home

it was inevitable

I'd encounter this man

several times a week.

I don't want to come across

as entirely dismissive of his precautions,

nor to prejudice you against this man.

True, during my hundreds of hours of nighttime walking

I've seen only two coyotes

in my neighborhood

over the past ten years.

He probably had as much a chance

of being surrounded, attacked, and mauled

by a gaze of aluminum-impervious raccoons

as of running into a coyote,

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

and I don't want to belittle his concerns.

Who am I to say they were wholly unwarranted?

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

An immigrant himself,  
he railed against foreigners.

A tenured professor,  
he complained about teacher unions.

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

Talking to him,

I felt like a trapped animal.

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

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

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

Following this realization,

whenever I next saw him,

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

If I was able to,

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

Either way, I'd next—

turning in the general direction of my house—

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

I had to repeat this more or less gassy,

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

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

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

And I can't pretend to objectivity, either.  
I'm a school teacher, too,  
after all.  
This certainly must be one reason why that teacher's arrest

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Guts sag over shorts and jeans.

Bellies bulge through dresses.

Scuffed and unpolished shoes on the men.

Women with the ugliest feet you've ever seen.

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

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

I'm not judging.

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

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



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

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

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

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

The pets, too,  
embark on food regimens.

We've more names for diets  
than Eskimos have words for snow—  
Mediterranean, flexitarian,  
pescatarian, vegetarian, vegan,  
high fat, low fat,

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

And all this amelioration and care  
and nurturing and support and supplementation and  
regimentation  
isn't even to produce an elite super human,  
an overman or overwoman,  
an exceptional or enhanced  
athlete, craftsman, warrior, scientist, philosopher,  
musician, or scholar.  
It's for survival.  
It's simply to get ordinary people  
through the day  
and pass them through another night,  
and maybe have a semblance of the nuclear or extended family  
remain viable.

How did people get by two-hundred years ago,  
when none of this was available?  
Did alcohol and laudanum answer all?  
Now we've meth and coke  
to snort and smoke  
and weed so strong you only need one toké.

And what will that arrested teacher now need  
just to pick up and keep going  
since his abuse at a 2020 Black Lives Matter protest?  
How much therapy? How many drugs? What new diet?  
What self-care?  
Especially when he realizes that rather than sympathizing with  
him,  
There're plenty of people who'd rejoice at his arrest?  
  
And why my need to make

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

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

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

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

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