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So Many Braves New Worlds—Utopia on the Verge of Dystopia

Dystopias are an effective tool for encouraging us to think about the near future, and even more importantly, the present. Put simply, dystopia is a version of a world gone awry. A spoiled reality. At the same time it holds up a mirror to our fantasies—a world we think is ideal, or once believed to be ideal in the past. We can't have the idea of dystopia without the idea of utopia underlying it—that is to say, an isolated place with perfect people and rules; a golden age that we once longed for (if such a time ever existed); a community in which we belonged, before being cast out.

And yet, the relationship between utopia and dystopia cannot be reduced to such binaries. The very seeds of dystopia, in fact, are imbedded in each utopia, and grow and thrive there. Utopias often focus on the future, but I'd like to turn our attention briefly in the direction of the past: to 1611, England, when William Shakespeare wrote what many consider to be his final play, *The Tempest*.

The Tempest presents the story of Prospero, former duke of Milan, and his daughter Miranda, stranded on an uncharted isle. Miranda's entire experience of mankind has been limited to her father and the deformed slave Caliban, the island's only native, who Prospero exploits with his power.

In one of the play's more memorable scenes—after Prospero conjures a storm to bring his usurpers to the deserted island—lonely Miranda meets other humans for the first time, and marvels at their presence. “O brave new world,” she famously cries with joy, “That has such people in't!”

Aldous Huxley borrows these lines in his dystopian *Brave New World* (1932), but uses them ironically. Here, they serve to illustrate the breach between an ideal vision of the world and its underlying horrific reality. The bright, optimistic lines of Miranda are charged with a brutal darkness.

But perhaps this irony exists in *The Tempest* too, especially when we think of Caliban, who Prospero often refers to as “this thing of darkness.” The island may appear to be a paradise. But when we look at the context of Caliban's life—an individual banished from his home, sold into slavery, and mocked—it is a dystopia. And his tragedy perhaps augurs colonialism's future victims.¹

Indeed, utopia and dystopia are inseparable. This is a sensitive subject for me. I grew up in an Israeli kibbutz, a collectivist agricultural community once equated with utopianism. As a girl I was often withdrawn from the children's house—where we studied, ate, slept, and played—to pose for the cameras of international tourists. They were inspired by our ‘advanced’ community, and by us, lovely children who did everything together. Actually, for some of us it was a nightmare.

Maybe this is why, in my own writing, I'm drawn to writing about dystopias—such as in my novel *Aquarium*, where a father's junkyard paradise becomes his daughters' hell, or my novella *The Years of Milk*

¹ “Caliban” is an anagram of the word cannibal, derived from “carib,” and associated with the myth of the flesh eating savages. It also connotes the color black. According to Virginia Mason and Alden T. Vaughan: “*Caliban stands for countless victims of European imperialism and colonization. Like Caliban (so the argument goes), colonized peoples were disinherited, exploited, and subjugated. Like him, they learned a conqueror's language and perhaps that conqueror's values. Like him, they endured enslavement and contempt by European usurpers and eventually rebelled. Like him, they were torn between their indigenous culture and the culture superimposed on it by their conquerors*” (*Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*, 145).

(2013), a post-apocalyptic version of the “Pied Piper of Hamelin,” where the children vanish, and the women are left in a rat infested city, rich in luxury but lacking basic supplies.

In one of the major scenes in the novella, the heroine visits a zoo, where most of the animals have been vacated. The heroine takes comfort in the normalcy of the donkeys, until they utter grunts like car alarms. Their guide explains the zebras were painted into donkeys, as most donkeys are gone.

Utopia is a false vision—zebras dressed as donkeys, power dressed as kindness or the common good. They are structures of power, masked by the appeal of nostalgia or simplicity. When you misconstrue one thing for another, announcing the absurd pleasures of utopia while ignoring the suffering of others, then it has repercussions. There are victims. There are always victims. And the victims won’t be utopia’s architects—those who discovered empty land or deserted isles. In my novella, the victims are children. Maybe we can think of them as Caliban’s offspring, this “thing of darkness.” After all, it’s our darkness too: a dystopia that we must claim responsibility for.