

Segue

online literary journal

ERIC MARONEY



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Managing Editor: Michelle Lawrence

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Not My City, Not My People

Haifa, 1948

Abu Abdullah sat on his arm chair until his family told him it was time to leave. The chair's wooden back bore an engraving of an emblazoned sun, its rays stretching forth in a multitude of slender arms, either rising or setting, the old man could never decide. The chair was important only as one star in a constellation of other furniture in the spacious rooms of the Abdullaha's town house. An end table crafted in Damascus. A rug woven in Baghdad. A bureau hewn from a solid slab of Cedar of Lebanon. In his youth Abu Abdullah had traveled abroad on business: Tripoli, Beirut, Istanbul, sometimes even Paris, and he had a certain acquisitional fondness for well-made furniture, and continued to ship such objects home until he retired. Now at ninety, he sat completely blind, nearly deaf, his lawyer grandson yelling in his ear that it was time to go, the war had come to Haifa, that there was no time to pack anything but clothes, that they would come back when the shooting stopped, when the Arabs retook the city from the Jews. And then for the first time in a decade, the chair was empty.

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Lieutenant Gad Shapiro considered shooting over their heads. But his Captain, a man named Kleingrosser, who had a mop of flaming red hair perched atop his head like a brilliant flare, told him to put his pistol down.

"You fool, Shapiro, what goes up must come down. You'll kill some innocent Jew."

"But how do we stop the looting, Captain?"

"Looting?" Captain Kleingrosser answered, squinting into the afternoon haze. Haifa lay before them, unguarded, like a giant who had fallen to the ground and was being eaten alive by a colony of ants. "Where you see looting I see expropriation."

"But this order..." Lieutenant Gad Shapiro held out a regimental order typed on a piece of faded paper. Captain Kleingrosser waved it away like a gnat.

"HQ can't keep up, Gad. You know what the established custom is, which they are now accepting? If you put a bed in a flat and spend the night, the flat is yours..."

"And what of the flat's possessions?"

"We are supposed to inventory them..." the Captain explained as he waved his finger about the street, counting, "...one table, two chairs, a chest of drawers...as you can see, we don't have the manpower to do this."

So the Captain and his Lieutenant watched as the contents of Arab Haifa's homes and flats were removed. Right before them floated a rug woven in Baghdad, a bureau hewn from a Cedar of Lebanon. It all evaporated into the haze floating in from Haifa harbor, was loaded onto drays and trucks, carried on shoulders and carts, and was taken to other parts of Haifa, to Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, Rishon-le-Zion, perhaps as far as Jerusalem. Only a chair remained on the sidewalk where the Lieutenant and the Captain stood. The heat was remarkable. A piper cub flew low overhead, taking

pictures of enemy positions to the south. Lieutenant Gad Shapiro began to sway unsteadily in the heat.

“Sit down before you fall down, Shapiro,” the Captain said, as he gently pushed the chair forward. Shapiro barely had time to look at the sun on its back, either rising or setting he could not tell. He sat for a moment and then fell to the ground. A leg, no doubt wobbly to begin with, had broken. The Captain laughed as he offered Shapiro his hand.

“Well, at least we have discriminating looters.”

Haifa, 1949

Meyer Hoffmann cobbled together a living any way he could. Buying here, selling there, squeezing out a meager profit from objects moving through his bony hands. He had arrived in Palestine in 1947 from a British internment camp in Cyprus, as thin as a reed from dysentery, and had been immediately sent up to the army.

He knew Hebrew from a Zionist youth group, so he worked as a quartermaster’s assistant for a brigade in the Negev, helping to squeeze the Egyptian army into an ever narrowing pocket, like a hoard of jackals killing its prey by slowly taking nips at its heels.

When he was discharged after the war he was even sicker than he had been in Cyprus. The Government Custodian of Abandoned Property in Haifa assigned him a small flat with a storefront facing the street, since he repaired furniture in Prague before the war. But men came in twos and threes and demanded to inspect the flat and the storefront, asking brusquely to see the lease, claiming they were Jewish Agency officials. He quickly realized that these people were imposters trying to bully him out of his legal property.

Hoffmann went to the police, but they were too understaffed to investigate. One night a rock was thrown through Hoffman’s store window. The next day he took a board and sawed it in two pieces. With one half he covered the broken window, and with the other he wrote in careful, large Hebrew letters: MEYER HOFFMAN FURNITURE REPAIR, and then beneath it, in smaller letters, he wrote the same in German, in deference to the many German Jews in the neighborhood.

That afternoon a man came into the store and told Hoffmann that it was a disgrace to have a sign with *that* language after what *that* nation had done to *our* people. The man had no doubt that Hoffmann would suffer grave consequences if he continued to so brazenly display *that* language, the tongue of murderers.

So Meyer Hoffmann took down the sign made from the board which he had sawed in two, and sawed off the German portion. He took the long scrap of wood and broke it against his lean knee, then silently propped it up against the stove in the corner for kindling.

Later that day, his first customer entered. He left four pieces of furniture: a small chest of drawers badly chipped on one side and missing a board on the other, an ottoman with its upholstery ripped and its stuffing hanging out, a desk with holes he imagined were from bullets, and a chair standing on only three legs, with a sun, either rising or setting he could not discern, emblazoned on its back, and the broken leg sitting on its seat.

Hoffmann supposed the furniture was looted from some Arab’s house. His suspicions were confirmed when he opened a drawer of the desk and found a bundle of papers written in Arabic. A deed? A lease? The stamp of the British Mandate Government adorned each sheet of paper, and a

page in English had been attached to the back. Hoffman did not know either language, so he put the papers near the German sign, thinking, now I have paper to light my kindling when the cool breeze blows in from the harbor at night.

The chair was the simplest repair, so Meyer Hoffman picked it up in his thin arms. He examined it through the veil of cigarette smoke rising from his lips, then felt dizzy at the exertion of holding the chair aloft, and had the terrible urge to retch. He was not a well man, but he had to make a living.

Haifa, 1950

Ben-Eli, Tzabar. Date of Immigration: born in Jerusalem. Country of origin: Palestine. Number of Persons: Two. Squatted on 12-3-49 in Block # 140, Section # 304. Number of rooms: two. Date of recommendation: 1-25-50. Maghrebi, Yoni. Date of Immigration: 3-1-49. Country of Origin: Egypt. Numbers of persons: 8. Squatted on 23-7-49 in Block # 162, Section #13. Number of rooms: three. Date of recommendation: 2-10-50... Grunweil, Immanuel...

Tzabar Ben-Eli, formerly surnamed Eliovich, carried everything he could to the flat, spent the night on an army cot, and then told his wife to come in a week. Later that week, men from the Jewish Agency came and asked for a lease. Ben-Eli would not be fooled. He told them to go away, that any jackass could say he was with the Jewish Agency, that he was a veteran who would not suffer fools lightly. The men showed Ben-Eli a lease on Jewish Agency letterhead. The flat was reserved for a couple from Poland.

Ben-Eli waved his discharge papers at the men and showed them his field medals, non-stop talking all the while. After much wrangling, the men agreed to lease the apartment to him retroactively. His name was added to a long list of such after-the-fact occupancies, and the men departed.

All the furniture Ben-Eli had brought to the flat had been damaged. When he was stationed in Haifa, he had taken it all from empty Arab flats, one of them quite grand, and hid it out in the countryside.

He could not bring his new wife to this flat, with its broken furniture and nauseating smell of disinfectant. So he spent all his discharge money on items for the apartment and the repair of the furniture. He took the furniture to the Hoffmann fellow down the street who only charged a pittance for his services. Ben-Eli almost felt sorry for him when he handed the man his meager payment. But Hoffmann was a greenhorn, and they all had to learn about life in Israel the hard way. The furniture gleamed. The sick man was truly a craftsman.

Ben-Eli placed the chair with the sun, either rising or setting, he never had time to really ponder it, by the only window with ventilation. After his wife had their daughter, she would nurse the child on the chair. The infant would feverishly suck and suck until she was forced to take a few breaths, and then do it again, until she fell into black slumber.

Nazareth, 1952

Elias Abdullah was a lawyer of excellent repute. In the Mandate days he had represented British, Jewish, and Arab clients in the courts. Now, from his cramped office within the “Green Line,” or the area set as Israel’s border at the conclusion of the 1948 war, he filed a flood of petitions with the Israeli courts to gain possession of his family’s properties. These included an orchard and vineyard on the north slope of Mount Carmel, a town house in Haifa where his grandfather had lived until the city was emptied of Arabs, and even some plots of land in west, and hence Jewish, Jerusalem.

Elias Abdullah believed he had an excellent case for the return of most of his lands, even though he knew they were already in use by the Jews. He was forbidden to enter Haifa, but he was informed from some former Jewish colleagues that his grandfather’s house in Haifa had been looted—every pin carried away to the four winds—and divided into flats. The agricultural land on Mount Carmel had been annexed by an adjacent kibbutz. The plots in Jerusalem were close to the No-Man’s-Land between Israel and Jordan, and therefore garrisoned by the Israeli army. Although nearly all of his family had fled abroad to Cairo or Beirut, he had remained. They were officially “absentees” under the new laws, so their property was considered forfeited and state-controlled. But Elias had never left and even had Israeli citizenship, so he had hope of getting back at least some of his family property.

At first, his case seemed to be moving at a brisk pace and he had no doubt he would get a favorable conclusion by late 1952 or perhaps early 1953. Then he began to encounter roadblocks. His friends in various government agencies began to loosen their associations with him in a direct proportion to how hard he pushed to get the family land back. Then some were juggled around in a shakeup of the various departments of the Land and Property Bureau. His hold on matters was slipping. Sometimes the phone in his dingy office would ring and no one would immediately respond despite his repeated *hello, who is this*, in Arabic, English, and Hebrew.

After three years of motions, Elias Abdullah was finally given an official status. He was a ‘present absentee.’ He had fled his home and properties, even though he had remained in Israel. Despite the fact that he was an Israeli citizen, he had no right to the family land. He had become both ‘present’ and ‘absent’—a paradoxical, even dangerous legal situation, that practically meant he could not redeem a single olive from the family land.

All along while struggling to get back his own land, he had taken on similar cases. One particularly thorny issue was the seizure of properties overseen by the Waqf, or the Muslim religious authority which maintained religious sites, shrines and land. If Waqf lands had been abandoned during the fighting, they became Israeli Government property. Under Islamic law, all Waqf land belongs to God, so in open court Elias Abdullah asked “So has God now become a ‘present absentee?’”

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Tzabar Ben-Eli was called up to active duty. The duty officer who arrived said it would be a short assignment. He tied his boots on the chair with the rising or setting sun, picked up his rifle where it leaned on the window sill, and reported to the garrison. His squad was met by an Army

intelligence officer. They woke up an Arab man in the middle of the night and allowed him to pack a bag of clothes, but did not let him change out of his pajamas. The truck drove east until they reached a bridge over the river. They watched the man until he had crossed over into the Kingdom of Jordan. And in this way was Elias Abdullah deported from the State of Israel.

Haifa, 1956

When the period of mourning was over she removed the black cloth from the mirrors, took a nice cold shower, packed some bags, and dressed her little girl. She would no longer live in this flat.

“But what of the furniture? Your things?” her mother pleaded.

“I’m having them all sold. I don’t care. I’m sad Tzabar was killed, but you and I both know this was not a happy marriage.”

“Shhh,” the mother leaned forward. “The child. Your husband’s blood is still fresh in the sands of the Sinai, and you say such things. He is a hero of Israel.”

“He was hit by a jeep, mother. An Israeli jeep. Mother, you must close the door. The agent will sell this shit.”

The agent kept reminding the small crowd of buyers that the man who had lived in the flat had died in the Sinai Campaign, that he was a hero, and that the widow was so desperate she was selling her prized possessions to keep clothes on her little girl and buy bread for her empty tummy. But this did not help at all. The agent walked away from the auction with money much below his expectations. The commission had hardly been worth his time.

Ramallah, 1967

“Goddamn it! Shit! Amit, get the hell in here!” The police chief howled, and a young man poked his head in the door. His blue police shirt was stained purple from sweat at the armpits.

“Yes, chief?”

“This is it, huh? The new chair?”

“Yes sir,” Amit replied. “Better than the old one, no?”

“Absolutely not. What the fuck. A sitting room chair? I feel like I’m in an iron maiden -- or on a bed of nails. And it stinks. The top smells like borsht and the bottom like onions. Where did you get it?”

“It was shipped from Haifa, I think, along with some desks and tables,” Amit replied.

“I want it out of here by day’s end. I want an office chair. A proper office chair that swivels, with wheels, so I don’t feel like a mummy in a tomb. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Amit answered as the chief began to squirm.

“Actually, get this piece of shit out of here now. I mean right now.”

“But we don’t have any more chairs...”

“Amit, you are a real basket case, you know that? Do you understand Hebrew? We are an occupying force. This is the West Bank. Go to the mayor’s office and requisition one.”

“Just like that? OK, boss. It’s not my city, not my people...”

“Damn it, man,” the chief got up and roughly dragged the chair across the floor. The legs screeched against the pine boards of the Quonset hut. He cursed a myriad of curses and hauled the chair, puffing and sweating, out to the road which led to Nablus. He threw the chair, and somehow it landed on its legs. In the bright sunshine, the chief noticed a crack in one of the legs: an old repair which was beginning to fall apart. He lit a cigarette and picked the chair up. His father had been a carpenter in Fez, and the chief had spent much of his youth surrounded by wood, covered in sawdust. Now that he did not have to sit on the blasted thing he noticed that the workmanship was fine. Under the patina of age and misuse, the bones were strong. Even the repair was old but sound. All that was required were five minutes with the correct tools and glue.

The chief placed the chair carefully on the ground. He wouldn't sit on it in the office. Sending the thing here was an affront. Police work required proper equipment, including chairs. He pushed the chair out at arm's length, careful not to put pressure on the cracked leg, and squinted at the carved sun through a veil of cigarette smoke. Amit walked by, limping slightly, as if he had a pebble in his boot.

“Amit, get the hell over here,” the chief called without looking at the boy. “What do you think, is that a rising or a setting sun?”

On hearing this, the boy grew nervous, fearing that in the flip of the coin that was his answer, he would call the wrong side and bring down the chief's wrath.

“Setting?”

“Jackass! It is rising!” the chief spat. “You are a ‘half-empty glass’ man, Amit, and you'd better cut that shit out now. If you have a glass that is only half-filled with lemonade, you still get to enjoy it, even on a foul, hot day, in a place like this, the armpit of hell. So it is half-full, you dimwit. You don't even drink the empty part, it doesn't exist. Therefore if you have a chair like this, a fine piece of craftsmanship, and this beautiful carving of a sun upon it, which must have taken someone weeks of patient labor with a skilled hand, why would it be setting? A sun as beautiful as this has just risen, and it has a full day of beauty before it...”

“So you want to keep the chair, chief?”

“Damn your bones, Amit! No! Stop dawdling and get me another chair.”

As Amit limped away, the chief sat heavily on the chair. In front of him the road was clogged with civilian traffic, in cars, trucks, drays, on foot, streaming back to Nablus after the fighting. The hot sun broiled the chief's bald head, so he returned to his office. He worked for five minutes standing up, shifting from foot to foot, until he bellowed for Amit.

“Did you stow that chair away, under lock and key?” the chief asked.

“What chair, chief?” the boy asked.

“*By the road.* Damn you!”

Amit stiffly stood aside while the chief stepped around him and outside. The chair was gone. The chain of Arabs continued to spool up the road to Nablus, with no end or beginning in sight.

“Amit, you imbecile. I told you. If you don’t nail it down, these Arabs will steal it. Even if you nail it down they will try to steal it. I lived with them in Fez for most of my life, so I know. Even if it’s nailed down, they’ll try to pry it off. A beautiful piece of work, and some peasant will use it to roost his chickens. A pitiful waste. Now get me another chair!” and the chief pushed Amit toward a row of parked jeeps.

The chief worked standing up for ten minutes until his legs cramped. Then threw down his pen and marched away. Standing there wasn’t worth the effort at all.

Author Notes

Eric Maroney published Religious Syncretism (SCM-Canterbury, 2006), which is a full length book about comparative religion, and The Other Zions: The Lost History of Jewish Nations (Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming, late 2009), which is a book about Jewish history. He has written two articles on the topics of “syncretism” and “secular” for the Encyclopedia of Identity (Sage Publications, forthcoming 2010), and his fiction has appeared in Our Stories, The MacGuffin and Arch. Maroney has written an unpublished novel called the The Malady, and is currently writing another novel called The People of the Land.

About the Work

“Not My City, Not My People” began as a problem: how can the complex political and religious dimensions of the Arab-Israeli dispute be represented in a work of very short fiction?

My solution was to make the main character an inanimate object: a chair. By discarding a person as the main character I gave myself a certain freedom to focus on the chair as a small, mobile current that could witness many sides of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The chair would act as the hinge around which the action develops, and would be placed in areas where ethnic conflict plays out. The chair, as a prized antique, exists well before the story begins, and continues to exist long after the story ends. So the story was able to develop as a series snapshots of a dispute which is ongoing, not solved, open-ended, and uncertain in its outcome. I shaped the chair as the repository of all of this, and used it as an accessible and conventional device that gives access to an unconventional time, place, and series of events.

After I decided on the chair as the main character, the rest of the elements more or less fell into place. All that was left was to bring the nuts and bolts of fiction writing into practice. For me, fiction has a simple mandate: the writer takes the reader on a journey. If the journey is good, the reader continues along, word by word, from the beginning to the end. The job of the fiction writer is to keep things moving forward to get to the finish. But along the way, the writer must suggest other directions, detours, and passages to the reader. Even in a very short story like this one, the intimation of more routes than the one presented is crucial to the success of a story. There must be the sense that more is happening than we can ever know, and that the world is bigger than us or our fiction.

All these elements came together in the writing of “Not My City, Not My People.” A profound human problem was distilled into a specific instance, the formal elements were created to put this problem into a place, and hints were here and there suggested that there is more in this story than explicitly stated. If any of these elements were missing or undeveloped, the story would have failed.

Eric Maroney on the Web

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www.ourstories.us/Spring%202008/Story_EricMaroney.html

www.artsci.wustl.edu/~archword/fiction/maroney/bio.htm

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