

# New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: Pleasantries

The gauze bandage had come off in his sleep, and he touched a bare patch of warm skin and the tight line of ten stitches with the tips of his fingers. He was conscious of the wound, its need for protection. His naked scalp beneath the gauze, its exposure now with the gauze off. Healing will take time, the doctor had told him.

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# New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: "An Arrangement"



Houston Skyline from Midtown

I escaped to America after my fiancé, Farhid, died. He was an officer in the Afghan National Army in Bagarm when he was killed by a roadside bomb. His friend Abdul called and told me the news. He and Farhid had attended school together and had joined the army at the same time. Abdul used to visit us, but I hadn't seen him in years. When I got off the phone, I felt like still air on a clear day. Nothing stirred. No sound and no one around me. An emptiness engulfed me that was not altogether unpleasant. I was adrift but not grieving. I had never wanted to marry him; it was my father's wish that I do so. Farhid was my cousin.

His father, my Uncle Gülay, was my father's brother. Gülay died in a car accident before I was born, and my father took Farhid and his mother into our family. I saw Farhid as an

older brother—someone I played hide and seek with as a child—and not as a husband, but my father said he wanted to have grandchildren, especially a grandson. He also thought our marriage would honor Gülay, and he made it clear I didn't have a choice. I don't like Farhid, I told my father, not in that way. Oh, you are a big shame, he scolded me. I didn't ask for your opinion. I decide. I ran to my room. My mother followed and sat beside me as I wept into my pillow. Your father has decided as my father decided for me when I was your age, she said. It will be fine. Your family wouldn't make a bad decision. Farhid is a good boy. Open your heart and you will see him as your father sees him and learn to love him.

After Farhid died, I mourned the boy I knew but not the man I hadn't wanted for a husband. I remembered when he stood with me on the second floor of our home in Jalalabad when the Taliban left Afghanistan after the Americans invaded. We watched them drive away, their faces grim, angry. After that, my father allowed me to leave the house without a burqa. Farhid and I would walk to the downtown bazaar, and he'd hold my left hand as he guided us through the crowds. He liked to make puppets, and some mornings I'd wake up and find him crouched at the foot of my bed with socks on his hands imitating sheep and goats. Get up, baaa! Get up, Samira, baaa, he'd say and I'd duck under the sheets giggling as he pinched my toes. These memories made me sad. Farhid—my cousin, my brother—was gone, but I felt a certain lightness too because now I'd never have to marry him. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and saw hill-shaped shadows rise out of the dark and spread across the ceiling and loom over me and I knew it was the spirit of Uncle Gülay, enraged that Farhid's death had denied him the honor of our marriage.

My father hung a photograph of Farhid in his army uniform in the entrance of our house. I hadn't seen this picture before. He looked older than I remembered. He had a sharp chin, a firm mouth, and a stern look that gave the impression of someone

gazing into their future. He wasn't the boy with the puppets. Perhaps I could have loved him, I thought, and for the first time I felt despair but it was a distant kind of grief toward someone I had never really known.

After his funeral, my life resumed as if he had never died. I woke up early and attended classes at Jalalabad State University from seven to one. After school, I took a computer course and studied English so that one day I could get a good job with a Western NGO. One of my favorite memories: accessing the internet for the first time and establishing a Yahoo email account.

Those leisurely days didn't last. Eight weeks after Farhid's funeral, I began receiving death threats from Taliban supporters. Some of them sent text messages: *We know your fiancé fought against the army of Allah. He is dead and you'll be next.* Some mornings, my father would find notes tacked to our front door: *Whore! You have betrayed Islam by becoming engaged to an infidel. We will eliminate you and all infidels who betray Allah.* Whoever wrote these notes, I believe, set off bombs near our house, too many to count, and sticky bombs on cars belonging to our neighbors. It became normal to hear an explosion and the panicked screams that followed. I became afraid to leave the house and stopped attending school.

My father was a physician. One day he went out with the Afghan National Army to treat sick soldiers when a bomb exploded and shrapnel tore into his left arm and both legs. A neighbor heard the news but didn't want to alarm my family. He asked for some clothes to take to the hospital treating my father. Why do you need his clothes? my mother asked; but instead of answering her, he rushed off without explanation. Then my cousin Reshaf called from Kabul and asked my mother about the bombing. He had read about it on the internet. It killed ten government soldiers, he said. My mother tried to reach my father but he didn't answer his phone. Finally, someone from

the hospital called and said he had been injured. We rushed to the hospital and wandered halls where injured soldiers lay on gurneys and stared at us with dazed, hollow eyes. My father lay in a bed in a small room with peeling green paint that overlooked a courtyard. Families sat under trees. Roaming dogs snapped at men who chased them away. A white sheet covered my father up to his chin. His blood-stained legs were raised in slings, and his injured arm was wrapped in gauze soaked by iodine. Dozens of cuts ruined his face. He tried to speak but his voice caught in his throat and I looked away as tears rolled down his face.

He recovered but he couldn't walk without help and often used a wheelchair. Nerve damage in his left hand prevented him from using medical instruments. He spent his days in his small clinic sitting at his desk and offering advice to colleagues. He watched them work, and when he grew bored he scrolled through his computer until he grew tired and rested his chin on his chest and slept.

The threats against my life continued. That summer my father began making inquiries, and through a friend in the Ministry of Interior he secured a visa for me to emigrate to the United States that was given to families who had either fought or worked with Western forces. Her husband was an Afghan soldier, my father told his friend. She can't stay here. That night while I was in my room preparing to go to bed he called for me. I followed his voice out to our garden where he stood in the light of a full moon. Cats yowled and the distant barking of dogs rose above the noise of car horns and of voices in the shopping centers of Shar-e-Naw. My parents' bedroom window opened onto the garden and I could hear my mother crying. Without looking at me, my father said I'd fly to the United States in the morning. Arrangements had been made through an NGO to take me to Houston, Texas, where an American aid organization would help me. You will leave us to start a new life, inshallah, my father said.

I ran from the garden to my mother's room but she had shut the door and wouldn't let me in. There is nothing I can do for you, she called out to me. I slid to the floor and wept. In my bed that night, I wondered where Texas was in the United States. I thought of Farhid and the resolute look on his face in the photograph above our front door. I decided to have that same kind of determination, and I embraced his image, ignored my fear, and withheld my tears until something inside me retreated to a far corner.

My father and mother took me to Kabul International Airport. I held my mother for a long time, our wet faces touching. A plane carried me to Qatar and then to Washington, D.C. That evening, I flew to El Paso and stayed in a tent in a U.S. Army camp near Fort Bliss. I couldn't count the number of tents and the number of people filling them. Like a gathering of nomads stretching without end across a white desert. The suffocating summer heat, I thought, was worse than Jalalabad. Sand and dust swirled endlessly. There wasn't a single second I didn't hear babies crying, heavy trucks driving past, and announcements over loudspeakers. One morning a soldier took me to a room in a square, concrete building where a man sat alone at a table. He said he was from the Department of Homeland Security. He asked me about Farhid. I told him how we used to play as children. I know nothing about his life as a soldier, I said. But he was your fiancé, the man insisted. My father arranged our marriage, I explained. He asked about my parents and if they had ever traveled outside of Afghanistan. No, I told him, they hadn't. He thanked me and the soldier returned me to my tent.

I lost my appetite and would sit on the floor of my tent and spend hours rocking back and forth as I had as a child when I was scared. A nurse told me I suffered from panic attacks, and she gave me medication that put me to sleep. I had dreams of bomb blasts. In one dream, I told my father, Let's go away from here. You're in America, he said, don't worry. Another

time, I dreamed my father was in great pain. When I called them, my mother said, Your father's legs were hurting him. That's why you had the dream.

Two months later I flew to Houston, where I was met by a man named Yasin from the Texas Institute for Refugee Services. Welcome to Houston, he said, and then he led me out of the airport and into a parking lot. The hot, humid air wrapped around me so tightly that my arms felt stuck to my body. My clothes clung to me like wet paper.

Yasin told me he was my caseworker. What is that? I asked. It means you are my responsibility, he said. He had dark hair and brown eyes and he wore a white shirt with a thin tie and a gray suit. He said he was from the Afghan city of Herat and had worked for an American NGO until he came under threat from the Taliban. He got a U.S. visa like mine and had flown to Houston three years ago. I told him about Farhid. I'm sorry for you, he said. When I think of Afghanistan and everyone I left behind, I shake with fear. His sad look touched me.

He led me to his car, a hybrid, he told me proudly. Turning a knob, he switched on the air conditioning and a chill ran through me as the cold air struck my sweat-dampened clothes. He gave me a bottle of water and told me I could remove my hijab; in America, he explained, women don't have to cover their heads. I told him I felt more comfortable keeping it on. I wore your shoes once, as the Americans like to say, he said, but don't be scared. After a while the U.S. won't feel so strange and you will take off your hijab. He smiled and showed all of his teeth.

We drove to a Social Security office where I signed up for refugee benefits and Medicaid. He said these programs would provide a little bit of money to pay for housing, food, and health care. He took me to a small apartment in a five-story building owned by the institute. A swing hung motionless in an empty playground and large black birds hopped on the ground,

and the noise they made flapping their heavy wings reminded me of Jalalabad merchants when they snapped carpets in the air to shake off dust. We took an elevator to a second-floor apartment. It had a sofa and a table with two chairs. A small bed with sheets and a blanket took up most of the bedroom. Blue towels hung from a rack in the bathroom. This will be your new home, Yasin said. I looked out the living room window and saw nothing but the doors of apartments across the way. Through my kitchen window I noticed people sitting on steps leading to the floors above me. Shadows converged over them and I became depressed, and I thought of Farhid's spirit rising toward paradise—a dark journey toward light—and I decided this was my dark journey and eventually, inshallah, I'd find light and happiness in this my new home.

In the following days, Yasin took me to a job preparation class. The instructor was impressed I knew so much English and I explained I had studied it in Jalalabad. That is a good start, but you don't know everything, he said. He told me that when I met someone, I should shake their hand and look them in their eyes and say, How do you do? Nice to meet you. I told him in Afghanistan this wouldn't be possible; a woman would never shake a man's hand or look at them unless they were their husband or family. You aren't in Afghanistan, he reminded me. After class, Yasin would always walk ahead of me and when we came to a door he would stop and open it for me. I told him he didn't have to do this, but he insisted. He was very kind. Slow, slowly, in the evenings in my apartment, I began to think that I might like America. I thought I could love Yasin.

After four weeks, Yasin told me he could no longer see me. Catholic Charities worked with refugees for only one month. He was very matter-of-fact. He told me to stop at a flower shop near his office. It was owned by a friend of his, Shivay. He had spoken to him and Shivay had agreed to hire me. You are fully oriented to the city, he told me, and now you will have

a job. You're set. Go and live your life. He smiled his toothy grin and stuck out his hand to shake mine. I don't understand, I said. What don't you understand? he asked. That stillness I felt when Abdul called me about Farhid returned, but this time it was Yasin's absence I began to feel and I didn't want him to go. He looked at me without understanding. I resisted the tears I felt brimming in my eyes and took his hand. Thank you, I said, looking at him. It was nice to meet you.

The next morning, I met Shivay. He told me he was born in Houston but his parents are Afghan. They came to the United States after the Russian invasion. I tried to speak to him in Dari as I sometimes had with Yasin, but he shook his head. My parents always spoke English around me, he said. They wanted me to be an American. That is what you should want to be too, Samira. He provided me with a table and a calculator to ring up sales. I inhaled the fragrance of red roses that filled buckets on the shelves by the door as I waited for customers, prompting memories of my childhood in Jalalabad. In those days, Farhid and I helped vendors put roses in pails of water outside their stalls on narrow streets hazy with dust. Orange trees bloomed in the summer and after the fruit had set, Farhid climbed them and dropped oranges down to me. The Kabul River passed behind the bazaar and we dangled our bare feet in its clear water. The frigid winter weather made us shake with cold and we stayed inside under blankets, eager for the comforts of spring. The sun blistered the sky in summer making the days impossibly hot, but no matter the heat we'd be back in the bazaars helping the vendors with their roses, deep red and cool in their buckets.

The flower shop took up a corner lot in a quiet neighborhood near a park where people gathered in the afternoon. I'd see men walk up to women and hug them and after a brief conversation they'd walk away. In Afghanistan, a woman would never hug a man outside of her family. Who were these men, I asked myself? The women wore slim dresses that revealed too

much of their bodies, and I wondered how they felt, almost naked in public pressing their bodies against a man, some of whom didn't wear shirts, and I saw the men's bare chests and my heart beat fast and I blushed when I caught Shivay watching me. He laughed. Here, there are many men and women who aren't Muslim, he said. In America, it isn't shameful to look.

One morning Shivay surprised me with a cup of green tea. My parents always drink green tea, he said. They say it's an Afghan custom. Is it? I told him it was and from then on he made green tea for me every morning.

At midday, Shivay would buy us lunch and after work he'd walk me to the nearby bus stop, and he'd wait with me until the bus arrived. I told him he didn't have to do this but he insisted. You are a pretty girl and shouldn't go out alone at night. When the bus arrived, I'd get on and watch him walk away. I felt warm all over. I thought I could love this man.

Two months later, however, Shivay told me he no longer needed me. He had hired me as a favor to Yasin, he said. That night when he walked me to the bus, he suggested I apply at a nearby Wal-Mart. He promised to give me a good recommendation and then he handed me a half empty box of green tea. I don't drink it, he said.

Wal-Mart didn't have any job openings. I applied at other stores, but no one called me. I called Yasin. He said he'd try to help me, but I was no longer his client. I stayed in my apartment and when I grew bored I drew henna tattoos on my hands and feet, and at night I took the pills that helped me sleep. Then one afternoon, my father called. He said Farhid's friend Abdul had received a U.S. visa and would be arriving in Houston soon. He has visited your mother and me many times since Farhid died so that we'd know he honors Farhid's memory, my father told me. He is a nice boy. I have spoken to his family, and we are in agreement that he'd make a good husband for you in Texas.

I didn't know what to say. After a moment, I hurried outside and took the elevator down to the playground and sat in a swing, gripping my phone in my left hand, and rocked back and forth, thrusting my legs out to gain momentum and stared at the sky through the sparse trees. Motionless clouds blocked the sun. Lean shadows cut across the sidewalk. I rose higher and higher, lulled by the rhythmic creaking of the swing. Hello, Samira, are you there? I heard my father shout. No other sound but his voice disturbed the resigned stillness until I was ready to emerge from its quiet consolation. I ceased pumping my legs, let my toes drag against the ground. I slowed to a stop. Yes, Father, I'm here, I said into my phone. I asked him to text me a photograph of Abdul. Seconds later, a young man with a smooth face stared out at me from my phone. He had a distant, moody look that conveyed a seriousness of purpose, of someone who believed he was performing his duty. As would I. Over time, I was sure I could love this man.

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## **New Fiction by Jesse Rowell: "Second Skin"**



Opuntia sp. (prickly pear cactus) (Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas)

Alpert Nelsen had lost a toe. He just didn't know it yet. Not a big toe. One of the smaller ones. It got infected when he kicked a roll of fencing after his cameraman deleted the interview footage.

"Can't you disinfect it?" he asked his doctor, a bearded and bespectacled man working out of a family clinic in the Bronx.

“You know. Cut it off. Clean it off. Then reattach it?”

His doctor looked at him for a beat. “Sepsis,” he said flatly. “Tell me, Mr. Nelsen, how did you injure your toe?” He wiped Alpert’s arm with an alcohol swab, pinched the skin, and plunged a syringe needle into his muscle for tetanus.

He winced at the sting. As the doctor covered the spot with a bandage, Alpert told him about the desert along the northern Texas border and his interviews with the sheriff. Spools of wire sat scattered across the cracked earth, random and misplaced like aeration plugs on a drought-stricken lawn. Glug glug, the sheriff had joked as he watered a long line of planter boxes under the eaves of the waystation, the sharp tips of yucca leaves spearing the soft bodies of jade. Empty water bottles blew across the road into a ditch, a reservoir of plastic.

“So, you’re telling me you kicked a roll of fencing on the Texas border?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah.”

“You will need to be more careful next time.”

“Yeah, but what about one of those fancy new prosthetics? You know, put that in place of my toe.”

“No,” the doctor said. “If your foot was missing, sure. Or your hand. Or a limb. You could opt for a nerve-spliced prosthetic with synthetic skin, indistinguishable from the real thing. But a missing toe? No, that is just something you will have to get used to.”

“Huh.”

“Not to worry, though. You will get used to it. A slight limp for a few months, regain your balance, and then you’ll be right as rain.”

“Might as well chop off my entire foot. Better to have a prosthetic.”

“Might have to do that if you don’t get started on antibiotics right away. And we need to schedule intake at our sister clinic to have that toe removed,” he said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert’s face, he assured him, “It’s a simple procedure, really. They’ll numb the area, no pain, and then snip it off at the joint. You won’t feel a thing. You cannot leave that toe unattended, Mr. Nelsen.”

Mr. Nelsen attended to his apartment instead, limping as he looked for an old Two-Way camera. A Two-Way won’t have a crisis of conscience, he thought as he picked through oil-stained boxes at his workstation. A Two-Way won’t look away. The automated flying recorder would feed his servers footage that he edited into digestible narratives for his followers to share and patronize. Still, his subscriber count had begun to dip.

People quit on him. His cameraman. His girlfriend. Sinkholes appeared in his life without warning, leaving him to scramble around the openings and shovel dirt to bring the ground back to level. Oriana Knowles had left him to help refugees fleeing Texas after other countries airlifted their citizens to safety, or so she had claimed. He remembered her face, a tear-streaked mask of resentment framed by hair the color of sunlight, a Renaissance painting if there ever was one. He held the Two-Way to a pendant light and fiddled with its gyroscope.

A battery pack fell out, tumbled against the workstation, and landed on his bad toe. He shrieked in pain and clutched his foot. Goddamn me, he admonished himself. I shouldn’t have started thinking about her. But he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Her absence. It wasn’t fair that Oriana had cared more about others, cared more about some strangers in some far-off land that could have been ignored just by going about

their lives. Eating penne alla vodka at Guiseppe's. Strolling through Central Park. Gelatos under the Statue of Liberty. He missed those quiet moments when a pocket of time opened up just for them.

His toe throbbed on the flight back to the Texas border and hurt even more as he baked under the New Mexico sun. The sovereign territory of Texas disappeared over the horizon, flat and dry. Dead earth not worth fighting for. They thought they were free, but the collapse had brought cartels into their cities, and detention camps spread throughout the Texas deserts like cacti bloom after rain.

A man with a cowboy hat, the sheriff, walked toward the waystation, heat mirages and dust distorting him in the distance. The man showed no urgency to join him under the shade, taking his time to adjust his boots or shift something he carried. As he got closer, Alpert recognized the object as a plastic jug, like the water jugs on pallets inside the entrance. Water. He swallowed and felt thirst scrape at his throat. He had forgotten how quickly dehydration came here in the desert, even when standing in the shade.

He eyed the jugs on the pallets. Some were half-empty, bubbles resting in the water, but each had an individual and somewhat peculiar stamp. A blue trident, its lateral prongs curving comically off to the side, or a cartoon devil, its horns making the same exaggerated curve, or an abstract bird with curved wings. He bent down and rubbed his thumb over one of the trident stamps. The ink didn't smudge as the water jostled inside.

"Traffickers stamp them," the sheriff said, coming up behind him. "Their way of identifying their stash. I find them and confiscate them." He placed the jug he had been carrying next to the others.

"Can I have some?" Alpert asked hopefully.

The sheriff nodded. "Knock yourself out."

Alpert fumbled with the cap on a trident jug and drank, drops splattering against his collared shirt. The water calmed his thirst, for a moment, but he knew it wouldn't be enough to last for long. He handed the empty jug back to the sheriff.

The sheriff watched him with detached interest. His eyes hid behind wrap-around sunglasses, skin peeling at the edges of his sunburned nose and cheeks, ears pushed down under the brim of his white cowboy hat. The faded insignia of border security rested above the hatband. It showed an old map of the southern states before Texas had seceded, blobs of territory shifting throughout history.

Texas independence, if it could be called that, had come through the judiciary a decade ago, granted by the Chief Justice himself in a 5-to-4 ruling. Texas's right-wing militias took over most of the territory in the years that followed, like warlords from some distant land, and interstate commerce collapsed. New maps of America showed a cavernous hole where Texas had once proudly stood, cordoned off by fencing and surveillance, an emptiness that felt like a phantom limb.

"What happened to your cameraman?" the sheriff asked.

"Fired him." They both knew he hadn't fired his cameraman, Pierre Teeter from Nova Scotia. Pierre had stormed off in a huff after the sheriff had mocked him for the umpteenth time, testing his discomfort. Having a good cameraman was preferable to self-shooting. More accurate reaction shots, whereas the Two-Way pivoted in the air between sounds. "We'll use my floater to finish our interview and get aerial shots. That work for you?"

"Knock yourself out."

Alpert considered the sheriff's repeated phrase of self-harm

as he set the camera aloft and decided it was easier to believe that he hadn't meant it as an expression of violence. Either way, it would be captured on his remote servers to be edited, memed, and shared. A self-described independent journalist, he had attracted a fanbase of anti-refugees after multiple interviews with Texas militia leaders, but really they were just ranchers armed with weapons of war. Most had knocked themselves out with assassinations on rival militias and mass shootings, creating the recent influx of Texas refugees seeking asylum.

After confirming his profile in the viewfinder, Alpert adopted the practiced pose of pensive curiosity as he squinted at the camera. "Sheriff Ward Baptiste is a humble man decorated for years of service protecting our southern border. We are here today to learn about the technology deployed at his border station, an unassuming rambler hidden somewhere secret, a location that even I cannot disclose."

The sheriff chuckled. "Sure, Alpert. Very secret, very hidden. Illegal aliens are scooped up by our surveillance-detention system and brought back to Texas Detention Centers, or TDCs. Simple as that. We keep it clean-clean as a jellybean. On this side of the border, at least. Can't speak for the other side."

Finally, Alpert exclaimed, some good soundbites. Ward Baptiste, sheriff Glug Glug himself, must have been practicing. Absent were his previous one-word answers tinged with distrust. Perhaps he watched some of my other interviews, he thought. "Tell me about the illegal aliens. Who are they, and why do they come here?"

"Well," the sheriff drawled, seeming to stare off into the distance behind his impenetrable sunglasses.

Alpert feared he had returned to his adversarial persona, like the whiplash of interviewing a politician who delights in switching between faux compliments and verbal abuse. Alpert

tightened his jaw as he prepared to prompt him again.

“Well.” Ward pointed toward a distant object in the desert that wavered behind a heat mirage. “Why don’t you ask one yourself?”

It looked like nothing, and it looked like it could be anything. A specter among the many wavering things sitting at the edge of the horizon. Alpert glanced at the footage captured on the Two-Way on his phone, but he couldn’t determine its location near the border station as the camera circled overhead. He pulled at his collar to get air moving over the sweat on his chest, this unexpected and unseen thing ratcheting up his frustration.

“How can you tell?”

“Been around the desert long enough to know when something is out of place. It’s a second skin. Same reflection every day. Any change out there is a mole or a freckle that needs to be looked at. C’mon, boyo, let’s start walking.”

Looking back at the utility vehicle sitting in the shade of the waystation, Alpert hobbled after Ward. Sun blasted him from above as he came out from under the eaves.

“Can’t we take the four-wheeler out there? Looks like a long walk.”

“Naa, I could use your help destroying supply caches. Easier to find them on foot.”

Alpert felt like Ward was torturing him on purpose as he took his time around the rolls of fencing, looking back at Alpert to make sure he was keeping up. The sheriff exercised excruciating exactness overturning rocks and opening bluffs woven out of dried mud and sticks. He unwrapped food hidden in underground stashes, scattered it across the earth, and told Alpert how coyotes and red-tailed hawks gnawed at it and shat

it out. "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain," he quoted and laughed. Upon finding a cache of energy bars in yellow packaging, he unwrapped one and dropped the wrapper. Alpert watched it flutter away like a butterfly in the wind.

"See that shape drawn on the ground over there?" Ward smacked his lips as he talked, his tongue navigating nougat. "Go brush off the dirt and rocks and lift up the panel. Water's hidden underneath."

Alpert stared at the ground for evidence of a shape. He looked back at the sheriff's inscrutable face under the shadow of his cowboy hat. He felt frustration rising again with the heat, sweat dripping down his chest. His inflamed toe pulsed with pain. A mingling of misery that made him impatient and made him long to be back in his climate-controlled apartment. He squatted down, tilted his head, and looked for the thing, anything, hoping to see it from a different angle. No shape appeared.

"What are you seeing?" He shook his head in defeat.

"Right there in front of you. El Cartel del Mar. They mark their stashes with a trident. You gotta look for the curve in the dirt they make with pebbles and rocks. Ya see it now?"

Alpert saw it, finally, couldn't believe he hadn't seen it to begin with. Like learning to see an optical illusion, the shape was obvious to him now. Looking around the ground, he saw other distinctive curvatures marking hidden stashes. "There are so many of them," he said in astonishment. He shook his head. Not having Pierre here to capture footage of the markings on the ground, a graveyard of contraband, lessened the impact. The Two-Way hovered lazily nearby, focusing only on him and the sheriff as they spoke.

"Wait." Alpert knitted his brow above his practiced pensive look. "I can't believe that the cartels are helping Texas refugees, I mean, illegal aliens. What do the cartels get out

of hiding food and water near the border?"

Ward looked at him for a beat, which made him feel like he was back in the doctor's office asking stupid questions about reattaching toes and prosthetics. No, these are all perfectly reasonable questions, he thought, but conceded that he should have considered his doctor's advice before rushing back to the border, his toe pulsing with unbearable heat.

"Money," Ward said flatly. "Moving commodities is a lucrative business, whether it be drugs or aliens."

The panel pulled up like the top of a trapdoor spider's hidey-hole, and Alpert lifted out a water jug, thankful no spiders jumped out with it. Only a quarter of water sloshed at the jug's base. He drank greedily at the spout, water running down his neck and chest. Water. Sweet, delicious water in the heat, even if it left a plastic aftertaste. He placed the empty jug back in the hole and hobbled after the dirt clouds stirred up by the sheriff's boots.

They walked toward the object that had piqued the sheriff's interest, still about a hundred yards out or more. Alpert couldn't determine distances here. In a baseball stadium, sure, he could say they were as close as the 15th row to the pitcher's mound. Goddamn me, he thought, to be at a Yankees game right about now would be fucking fantastic. He imagined resting his aching foot on the cup holder mounted to the front row seats. The quiet before the crack of the bat against the ball, the roar of the crowd as the ball sailed into the stands. The hitter lazily rounding the bases toward home, crossing himself and gesturing to the sky, sanctified. Oriana sitting beside him, a bright smile every time he turned to tell her he was the luckiest man alive and kiss her soft cheek. Laughter as her hair, hair the color of sunlight, blew across his face, the sweet smells of her shampoo and perfume.

But she had to go all social justice on me. Better to just

accept the new reality, or what had she called it? The Balkanization of America. The mirror had been shattered, our national identity strewn across the southern states like broken glass where we couldn't recognize each other as Americans anymore, even as former US citizens begged for reunification. The Supreme Court had killed that hope, she had complained bitterly. Precedent, originalism, and the constitution be damned, amorphous terms that had never protected civil rights.

Alpert pushed her out of his mind and focused on the thing ahead. He hadn't noticed that Ward had been talking the entire time about immigration policy and Texas bounty hunters assigned to detention centers. "They nab the aliens before they get close to our borders," he said. "Collect their reward from a TDC, and we clean up the rest."

No matter, he thought, the heat making him listless. The Two-Way would have recorded anything important he had missed, and he could edit out any of the parts that didn't appeal to his fans. The sins of journalistic malpractice—omission, hyperbole, and outrage—didn't apply to the profession of professional vlogger. Only establishing a narrative that helped his patrons feel better about their own lives. They would certainly feel happy about not having to walk through this godforsaken desert, he thought.

The heat rose off the ground and enveloped him like a blanket. He felt thirst clawing at his throat. He scanned the ground and located the faint outline of a symbol marking a stash. El Cartel del Mar. How good of them to hide life-saving supplies here in the desert, but no, wait. They're the bad guys. They're the invaders who traffic humans and guns and drugs. But how very good of them, how very nice of them to leave me water. His mind reeled as he reached for the trapdoor.

Ward pulled him back, a firm hand on his shoulder. "No, boyo, not that one. Don't touch that." He studied the ground and

pointed toward another trident symbol about a stone's throw away. "I'll unearth some water there. You stay put."

Alpert limped toward the thing instead, a second skin the sheriff had called it, or a boll weevil, or... he couldn't remember through the pain of his toe. The Two-Way spun off from filming him as it picked up muffled moans coming from the thing, close enough now that he could see it was a human, or a human-shaped thing, trapped inside a net. The net scrunched closer and closer the more it struggled, mesh pressed against the skin. Bending down, he saw that it was a woman, and he recoiled from the smell of urine.

"Hey there, dearie." Ward joined Alpert to stand over the cocooned body. "You look a little parched. Glug glug." A crystalline column of water poured out of the jug, beads of water splintering against her body. "Strands keep them alive for a few hours under the sun, needles injecting saline and a mild sedative. Makes it painful on the hands where all the nerve endings are, but they can't feel it on the rest of their body, for the most part. By the time I get to them, the saline has run dry. They need a splash before heatstroke sets in."

Alpert looked for a drone or a machine crawling along the ground that could have deployed the net. "How does the surveillance-detention system work? I don't see where the net came from."

The sheriff nodded as he deactivated the net with a key fob. "You're not supposed to see where it came from. This isn't some penal colony where you get to see all the secrets behind our technology." The net slackened and flopped open on the ground. The woman rolled off and tried lifting herself on her hands and knees before collapsing. Her chest heaved as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

The net looked like a spider web. Its silk lines rustled in the wind, breathing in and out. It glittered with beads of

water. He watched, mesmerized, and by looking at the net instead of the woman, he didn't have to acknowledge her existence.

He began to run his hand over the edge of the net before jerking back and cursing. The pressure-sensitive surface jumped up to grab at his hand like some living thing, and it stung like nettles, that ugly plant growing between sidewalk cracks in the Bronx, and god help those who happened to brush a bare calf or ankle against one. Spines barbed to the skin, uneven patches of inflammation, and scratching at the invisible thing ended with no relief.

"Discourages second attempts, doesn't it," Ward said as he grinned in satisfaction. "No repeat offenders. Once they've gotten tangled up in our nets, big fish, little fish, never coming back."

"Goddamn me," he spat at Ward. "That hurt. How is this contraption considered okay, you know, with human rights? It seems unnecessarily cruel." He stopped, realizing he would lose more of his fans and most of his patrons mentioning human rights. I'll have to edit this out, he thought, but his frustration rose like nettle rash.

"Illegal aliens don't get human rights," the sheriff said confidently. Then, upon seeing Alpert's face, he assured him, "It's simple, really. Title 8 and the sovereign territory of Texas authorizes the capture, detainment, and transfer of aliens as soon as they step on American soil."

Alpert looked at her, finally. Hair the color of sunlight. She didn't look like an alien. She looked like she belonged in America. Oriana had referred to refugees as future Americans just to tease him. Maybe she had been right.

"Look here." Ward pointed at the woman's blistered neck. "That's a cartel stamp. She's been trafficked. And look here." He wrenched the woman's wrist around to show Alpert her

forearm, ignoring her yelp of pain. "That's a detention center tattoo. That symbol means that she was detained for the murder of an unborn baby, and she has since been sterilized. She's the property of Texas."

The woman looked up at them, blue eyes darting between their faces. Her chapped lips sputtered, white spittle crusted on the corners, but no words came out. A Renaissance painting that reminded him of Oriana. The day she had left him came flooding back, a gut punch as he remembered her face. Disappointment. She had cried that day, tears running down her soft cheeks that he had tried to wipe away, but she had swatted at his hand and insisted that he didn't understand the damage Texas had inflicted on America, the inhumanity of a theocratic wasteland that imprisoned and killed women.

The woman on the ground uttered a word, her first, and Alpert squatted down to hear her, pain shooting up his leg from his toe.

"Water."

Alpert saw the outline of dried tears over the dirt on her face. He was a fool to not have admitted it earlier. Her absence hurt. He wanted her back. He wanted her safe from wherever she had disappeared to inside Texas, wipe away all those tears, and tell her she was right.

"Ya want water?" Ward asked the woman. "Ha! How does the old saying go? 'You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her drink,' or something like that."

What happened next felt like a memory, like he was watching it happen without control over his body and its actions. The sheriff fell backward, his hat flying off into the wind. The net leapt up to meet him, grab him, and crumple him into a ball. He tried stretching out toward Alpert and yelled invective until the net cinched over his mouth, the sound of sunglasses crunching against his face. He looked like a

burrito baking in the sun.

“It’s okay.” Alpert turned to offer the woman his hand. “I’m going to help you.”

She swatted at his hand and scooted back in a panic as the Two-Way pivoted behind him.

“Oh, that? Don’t be scared, that’s just my camera. I’m a journalist. I’m filming a story about the Texas border. Really, you can trust me. I’m going to help you.” It felt good to repeat the words, like the act of saying them out loud absolved his actions. He hadn’t been able to wipe away her tears, but he would wipe away the guilt of letting her disappear.

She looked at him suspiciously before pointing. “Water. I need water.” Her finger pointed at a symbol marked on the ground.

The trident, El Cartel del Mar. He felt sandpaper in his throat as he tried to swallow. Yes, water. How very good of them. How very nice of them.

He limped toward the symbol. “Don’t you worry,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m going to help you.” He brushed off the trident and opened the ground. A net exploded out of the hole like a trapdoor spider capturing its prey. The pain was instantaneous as the net’s needles sank into his skin. He struggled to escape, but the net tightened around his body, hugging him like a second skin.

The woman stood over Alpert and watched. She made no effort to free him. After he stopped moving, she found the sheriff’s plastic jug and drank deeply of what remained. Her neck muscles worked as she dipped her head back, hair moving across her shoulders. She dropped the empty jug between Alpert and the sheriff, and started walking toward the waystation. Toward America. The Two-Way sparkled in the sun above them for a moment until it spun off to record the sound of wind scraping

across the border.

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# **Are We Still Charlie Hebdo?: The Growing Dissonance between Extremism and Free Speech**

I started preparing this essay a month or two ago to collect my thoughts about the after effects of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and how the limits of free speech are being tested as extremism and intolerance increase in Europe and America. Now, the latest attacks in Paris on November 13th have made me reevaluate my original thoughts and given them new urgency, but have not substantially changed my views. The key issues I will discuss are the nature of Daesh, the refugee crisis, climate change, media hypocrisy, right-wing extremism, and free speech. These are complicated issues, obviously, with many interwoven factors at play, and I will do my best to make sense of the situation as I see it.

Let's begin with a brief look at what Daesh is (one thing I have learned from philosophy is that linguistic terminology matters; I don't like the term ISIS because it was chosen by them and it disparages the ancient Egyptian goddess and Roman cult figure Isis; the term used by the French government and Secretary of State John Kerry is "Daesh", which is more useful because it delegitimizes the group and they hate it). From what I can gather, the purpose of this self-declared Islamic Caliphate is to gain and hold as much territory as possible in

order to establish a haven for what they consider pure Islam, all while making incessant war against neighbors and non-Muslims until their awaited apocalypse. For brevity's sake, an apocalyptic death cult that happens to follow the words of the Koran literally. [This long article](#) in *The Atlantic* by Graeme Wood does a good job explaining the rationale behind the erstwhile Caliphate. One of the conclusions is that, despite how it looks from Western eyes, Daesh is a very reasonable and consistent group of people; it just happens that their reasons and consistency spring from a bloody and black-and-white ideology deriving from 7th century Arabia. Up to now, Daesh has seemed content to wage war only in its own neighborhood of Syria and Iraq. Unlike al-Qaeda (which was responsible for the Charlie Hebdo attack), Daesh is not primarily a terrorist organization but an actual government, however illegitimate and doomed to failure. (It is also highly relevant that the two groups have [long been feuding](#) for the soul of Islamic jihad, and are in no way allied). The attacks in Paris could have two possible interpretations: Daesh is branching out to international terrorism for the first time, either out of desperation after recent setbacks or to further their apocalyptic aims; or, the attacks were claimed by Daesh only after the fact, and were actually carried out by desperate European-based sympathizers who were unable to reach Syria themselves. As far as its origins, it is not too hard to trace the rise of extremism wherever violence and instability holds sway. Four years of a bloody civil war in Syria, combined with over a decade of bloody war in Iraq, created the perfect conditions for an organization such as Daesh to thrive. One of the lessons of history is that, in spite of some rare exceptions, periods of violence and revolution do not suddenly end in peaceful and stable governments.

If we are to attach blame to the creation of Daesh, it must be said that the US and its allies bear no small part of it. First and foremost for the illegal and disastrously managed war in Iraq, but more indirectly from the decades of

unquestioned alliance and support for Saudi Arabia, a country which has almost single-handedly allowed the extreme Wahhabi sect to spread and produce jihad across the Middle East and the World (the US has an extremely long history of supporting authoritarian regimes in the name of business; Saudi Arabia is different from many of the historical examples in that the support continues today with virtually zero public backlash). There is enough blame to go around, however; do not think that I absolve the dictators and mullahs and imams who have themselves actually done the most killing (it is almost too obvious, but I don't want to come under the familiar charge of being anti-American just because I point out the facts). The Saudi royal family, the Iranian Ayatollah and Revolutionary Guards, Israel and its increasingly hardline and rightward skew, the Palestinians who resort to violence and terrorism, Russia, and Britain and France and the greedy and racist colony legacy they created all play a part in brewing up the toxic sludge that represents the modern Middle East.

One group that does not bear any responsibility whatsoever for the Paris attacks or the existence of Daesh are refugees. Syria had a population of around 22 million before the war, and nearly half of these have been dislocated by force or desperation. At least four million have found shelter abroad, mostly in refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. There are another three million refugees from Iraq trying to escape Daesh (figures [here](#)). The refugees seeking shelter from wanton violence and destruction of homes are not themselves terrorists trying to kill Westerners. As we will see, the big political winners from terrorism, besides the terrorists themselves, are the far-right political parties that wallow in and cater to extremism and xenophobia of any kind. This includes the French National Front, which will probably see yet another surge of support for its anti-immigration and Islamophobic platform. Every country in Europe and the Americas has a political party of this sort, which have generally grown both [more popular and](#)

[mainstream](#) as the wars and subsequent refugee crisis have grown in inverse proportion to economic stability: UKIP in the UK, Lega Nord in Italy, the Republicans in the US, Dutch Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Pegida in Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece, True Finns in Finland, Jobbik in Hungary (which has been instrumental in physically stopping the largest numbers of refugees into the EU), and several others all follow the same rancorous script. Though these parties are comparatively small in some cases, they have an outsized voice and influence on the public and political discourse, which they help to poison. They must be denounced loudly and immediately as soon as they use hatred fear, and intolerance of other races and religions to further their selfish political and economic ends. It is encouraging to see, now almost a week after the latest Paris attacks, that there has in fact been such a large pushback against extremism. It must continue unabated, however.

On a deep level, if Europe and America want to ameliorate both the immediate and long-term situation in the Middle East, one of the two best things they can do is to accept many more refugees (as in, all of them). Countries like Germany and Sweden are acting responsibly and charitably in the refugee crisis. Every other country leaves something to be desired after setting extremely low thresholds for asylum applications and doing as much as possible to discourage refugees (and immigrants in general). It is not only the only moral and humanist solution to such a tragedy, but the best way to economic and political security. After all, no country benefits by having a failed state and terrorist breeding ground on its doorstep. In addition, Europe and the US should do much more to provide assistance to internally displaced refugees in Syria and Iraq, and create safe zones. Whatever is being done is not even remotely enough. It goes without saying that if the Middle East is ever to emerge from its miasma of retributive violence into something vaguely resembling the more modern liberal democracies that most of you (readers)

enjoy, it will need a strong and educated middle-class. Not only does this generally not exist now, but every month of war, destruction, and privation over a huge swathe of this territory is preventing entire future generations from the possibility of ever attaining a peaceful and prosperous life. This is very important and typically gets lost in the fog of war and apathy.

Digression on Climate Change: It is well-known that there will be a crucial international conference on climate change in Paris next month in which virtually every nation in the world will attempt to come to an agreement on how to combat the warming of the planet. The stakes were already high enough, considering the consequences of continued indifference in the face of climatic upheaval, but the terrorist attacks in Paris occurring less than a month before the conference raises the pressure even more. It has long been well-known and documented by scientists and historians that environmental issues like deforestation, drought, overpopulation, and resource scarcity heavily contribute to human conflict. Before the outbreak of a genocidal killing spree in Rwanda in 1992, for example, the population carrying capacity was at the absolute limit, meaning that way too many people were competing for not enough resources (Jared Diamond discusses this and related issues convincingly in his book *Collapse*, which I reviewed [here](#)). In Syria, it should be noted that there were four years of [extreme drought](#) which ruined farmers and forced more people into overcrowded cities, all prior to the peaceful uprising by restive Syrian citizens against a repressive and indifferent government. It was only after months of peaceful protests and brutal government suppression that the real civil war started, and we know well that peaceful moderates do not long survive in bloody civil wars. Thus, the conditions were ripe for the formation of a group like Daesh. Though climate change's very existence is denied by Republicans in America, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders [recently spoke](#) for the growing number of people who not only accept the reality of the crisis, but

see the direct link climate change has on political and military conflicts. Lest you still see this as just a liberal fantasy despite overwhelming evidence, the Pentagon and military leaders in America and NATO see [climate change as an immediate risk](#) to national security as well.

Voltaire said, or is supposed to have said, something along the lines of "Though I hate what you say, I will defend to the death your right to say it." This can be seen as an early defense of the right of Freedom of Speech, later adopted in the new country of America as the First Amendment to the Constitution. Although it would appear to be an unlimited right, it has been challenged over the years and its limits have often been tested. Nowhere are the limits pushed and tested as much as in the face of intolerance and violence, or the mere threat of violence.

Let's now take a trip back in time and revisit the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris of January 2015. Besides the murders themselves, an act of outrageous maliciousness, I was troubled by the reaction to the event by the media and the world at large. It need not be said that violence and murder are inexcusable under any circumstances; I say this anyway because it has been discussed around the edges of the event that because Charlie Hebdo mocked Islam and drew pictures of Mohammed, such a tragic outcome was somehow expected or even preordained. The mindset that produces such thought is one lacking in critical thinking skills, perspective, empathy, and intelligence. I can understand the series of causes and effects that can produce mass murderers, religiously motivated or otherwise. The killers were Muslim outsiders in a secular society that limited their economic possibilities, and often expressed prejudice against them, even by the government. They were also of Algerian descent, like a majority of France's Muslims, which can only remind us of the lingering effects of the [long and brutal Algerian war](#) which ended only two generations ago. To understand broader context is not to

excuse or even sympathize with violence of any kind. Most of the world's peaceful Muslims will agree. Though they are often just as disenfranchised or economically limited as the killers, yet they do not curse the world and go on murderous sprees.

Another troubling thing about the media coverage and public outcry of the Charlie Hebdo murders is the total saturation of the news coverage itself and the unprecedented knee-jerk support for Charlie Hebdo by politicians who would condemn the magazine in their own country, and support for France by many of the same politicians who would never come close to supporting France's culture of free speech. Thinking back to the worst massacres that we have witnessed in the last few years, there are several that stand out in my mind as even more appalling than Charlie Hebdo. One is the [2011 Norway massacre](#) where a white right-wing Christian terrorist single-handedly killed 77 people and injured hundreds more in two separate attacks on the same day. Most of the victims were children and teens at a summer camp. Though this prompted an outpouring of sympathy and condemnation from around the world, there was not nearly as much as there was after the Charlie Hebdo killings, nor was there a show of solidarity in Oslo by world leaders and a viral slogan. Even more disturbing and tragic are the continued massacres and atrocities by the Nigerian jihad group Boko Haram (by far [the deadliest terrorist group](#) in the world), and specifically an attack [only four days before](#) the one on Charlie Hebdo in which thousands of people were reportedly murdered, with subsequent information saying that perhaps it was "only" a few hundred people instead (though no reporting has ever been able to confirm). This was an event mentioned in the world news, but quickly forgotten by most people even more quickly than they forget about the [weekly school shootings](#) in towns across America. A third incident which happened only three weeks before Charlie Hebdo was the [massacre at a school in Peshawar](#), Pakistan, by the Taliban which killed 145 people, 132 of which

were young children. There are two possible reasons why Charlie Hebdo was a much bigger deal for people around the world, much more well-known and publicized in the media, and attracted much more sympathy than the other three massacres I mentioned which were all much more violent: Charlie Hebdo's victims were white Europeans who were killed in the name of free speech by French-Algerian Muslims, which means that white and non-white people from all across the political spectrum had reason to be shocked and angered. In the Norway massacre the victims were also white Europeans, but the perpetrator was counter-intuitively (according to the narrative we are used to hearing from the media) a white European male as well, thus diminishing the duration and strength of the shock and public outcry, while the Boko Haram attack four days before Charlie Hebdo was already out of the news cycle by the time of the Paris attack, most obviously because even though the terrorists were also African jihadists, the victims were black Africans, thus diminishing the sympathy and interest by a large segment of the western media and population that now openly condemns racism but still engages in it; likewise with the Peshawar attack perpetrated by the infamous Taliban on schoolchildren. This troubling comparison tells me that to much of the media and large parts of western society black and brown lives matter less, and that white terrorists are written off as exceptions while Muslim terrorists are seen as a representation of the entire world population of Muslims. The way these type of events are shown in the media is both a cause and an effect of these biased opinions.

One more bit of hypocrisy is the fact that the Charlie Hebdo attack was clearly and unambiguously an act of terrorism in which 12 people were killed in Paris, but many more people are killed every week by the US government in drone strikes, which must feel like terrorism to the people who live in fear. We know that missiles are rained down on supposedly high-value targets in uninteresting and out-of-the-way places like Pakistan and Yemen without any due process or guarantee that

innocent men, women, and children will not be killed (they may be a majority of the victims for all we know, though all males are officially classified as “military-aged males” and assumed to be guilty). A [detailed report](#) by The Guardian has concluded that US drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen killed a total of 1147 people in hundreds of failed attempts to kill just 41 men. When a missile blows up houses and cars full of people and kills at least as many as the Charlie Hebdo attack, that seems like terrorism to me. And such violence is likely to create many more terrorists than were possibly killed in the original attacks ([a fact conceded](#) by former Air Force drone operators themselves), thus increasing the probability of more strikes such as the one on Charlie Hebdo in the future (and just as such attacks are likely to make more and more westerners see all Muslims as enemies or terrorists).

The Charlie Hebdo attack prompted the trendy show of solidarity “Je suis Charlie” by millions around the world, which is not a bad thing in itself, but I am afraid that much of the solidarity was a superficial and knee-jerk response to the tragedy, not one which examined the sources and possible solutions to the set of circumstances that led to this attack and could lead to more in the future. From my personal point of view as a long-time resident in Europe, people across Europe as a whole are somewhat more thoughtful about such tragedies than the American people as a whole were after 9-11, but the fact that we have witnessed wars and terrorism in the past 14 years since then has created for many people a perspective either more empathetic or more cynical. At the same time Europe is still in the midst of economic troubles which have helped fuel the rise of a slew of right-wing xenophobic and anti-Islamic parties in every country, a large number of Europeans are also seeing that the absolute protection of free speech and tolerance is the only way to peacefully maintain an increasingly multicultural and globalized society. The question of tolerance is one that has not always been correctly understood or handled by either

political leaders or citizens. There are limits to both tolerance and free speech, though it is admittedly difficult to tease out these limits, especially when faced with real-world tragedies that prompt unthinking reactions.

Just as there was a media double standard during the Charlie Hebdo massacre, likewise for the November 13th Paris attacks. The scale is much greater in the latter case, with at least 136 deaths and hundreds more injured. But the reaction was similar in that Daesh itself conducted other attacks on civilians in other countries within 24 hours of the Paris attacks, but with little reporting by the media and little interest by the public. 26 people were killed in two [suicide bombings](#) perpetrated by Daesh in Baghdad, while 43 people were killed and hundreds wounded in two [suicide bombings](#) perpetrated by Daesh in Beirut. Neither of those have the high death toll of Paris, but does it matter? After all, as I have shown, "only" eight people were killed in Charlie Hebdo attack but that was a bigger news story by ten or hundredfold than greater massacres of the same time in other countries. Some of this is cultural, and the fact that Paris is a central city in Western civilization, and one that many Western people have visited and feel a connection to. But still, does that matter? I love Paris as much as anyone, as well as free speech, and I hate terrorism and any kind of violence, but that does not make me feel more rage and frustration in either the case of Charlie Hebdo or the November 13th attacks as the ones in Beirut, Peshawar, Nigeria, Baghdad, Oslo, or the [weekly school shootings](#) in America. My rage and frustration is the same, and comes from the same source, directed at the same cause. I do not think Islam is the root of the problem, nor do I think that closing borders and blocking asylum and aid for refugees is the solution. These are just two of the ways I have complete and fundamental difference of opinion with the intolerant bigots in our own countries (such as my very own Congressional Representative in South Carolina, a Republican named Jeff Duncan, who [blamed refugees and Muslims](#) for the

attacks before the blood had even congealed on the streets of Paris, or [every single Republican](#) presidential candidate and [most of the Republican state governors](#)).

Let's look at some more case studies in tolerance and intolerance. Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel [once declared](#) the idea of multiculturalism in Germany to have failed. I do not know if she was just trying to appeal to her conservative voters, but such a statement is irresponsible and untrue. This idea that immigrants cannot be integrated into a society only feeds the xenophobic bigots who have now become quite vocal and strong in most European countries. The fact that the rise of these groups has coincided with economic recession and unemployment is in fact no coincidence. Blaming outsiders is an appealing message to certain types of people who feel economic strain and see a threat to their traditional way of life. That does not mean that it is the fault of the immigrants, who are almost always under much more economic strain than their detractors, but of the political and economic elite who create the conditions that the people will either succeed or fail in. Whatever she meant by citing the failure of multiculturalism, Merkel has at least proven to be a courageous leader in leading the way for European countries accepting refugees. It is still not enough.

On the other hand, the right-wing nationalist and xenophobic parties have been spreading hate and intolerance. They grow stronger when people become fearful of violence and terrorism. It is well-known that toxic public discourse and intolerant speech by political leaders directly leads to violence by their troubled followers. It happens [time](#) and [time again](#) that some misguided soul takes out murderous aggression on an innocent party that had been vilified by some right-wing hate-monger. This point cannot be stressed enough. One clear limit to free speech exists at the first instance of violence, the threat of violence, or even the mere hint of violence. This goes not just for physical violence but for anything that

qualifies as unnecessarily extreme aggression, intimidation, emotional bullying, etc. There is a paradox of tolerance, which is that one must be intolerant of intolerance in order to maintain a civil and open society (I have previously discussed this paradox at greater length [here](#)).

Let me indulge in a thought experiment, and let us imagine a growing fringe political party that doubles as a hate group. One of their key beliefs is that beards are evil and unwelcome in their country. While this is a ridiculous position to hold, it is merely an opinion that happens to be small-minded and wrong (my sense of morality tells me that opinions can sometimes be wrong just as facts can). An invisible line is crossed, however, when the anti-beard group's legitimately free speech turns to calls for violence, retribution, or even economic and social sanctions for people with beards. This is intolerance that cannot be tolerated in an open society, since it operates outside the bounds of civility and freedom from fear and violence that are the foundation a free society is built upon. In other words, though I hate what the anti-beard group says, I will defend their right to say, but only insofar as it is exercised as one particular opinion and way of life but not as a call for violence and intolerance against others who do not hold that opinion or other varying attribute (such as religion, sex, sexuality, skin color, or facial hirsuteness).

I would further argue that a fully democratic nation whose voting citizens are composed almost wholly of illiterate idiots is always preferable to a nation ruled by the most benevolent dictator but where freedom of speech is limited. The limits of democracy are seen insofar as its *demos*, or people, take active and informed interest in the decisions of the nation. So in the former case, though the ignorance or indifference of a sufficiently high percentage of voting citizens in a democracy could easily lead down the road to fascist dictatorship, the fact that it was firstly and

presently still democratic weighs conclusively in its favor. This shows the promise and the limitations of democracy: nothing is guaranteed except what the citizens enable; everything is possible; but it can still be corrupted by propaganda and the preying on of the basest human emotions of hate, greed, and intolerance.

In the years after 9-11 in America, the people made the mistake of allowing fear and the illusion of security eclipse their freedoms. There is still much work to do to dismantle the security and surveillance state that was erected during those years of democracy in its lowest ebb. Similarly in Europe, leaders feel pressure from the right-wing parties that scream for closed borders and a stop to immigration, and for added security measures that will sacrifice hard-won freedoms for an illusion of safety. It must not be. Just as free speech must be protected at all costs, Western countries must not give in to the fear that terrorists aim to create. As Franklin Roosevelt famously said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." That is still true in that our society remains fundamental strong, free, and open, and there is nothing that terrorists can do to change that other than make us fear them so much that we remake our society in their image, and waging more endless wars of their choosing.

Wise men are able to say things that echo long after they are gone, and it's the same once again with Voltaire, one of my favorite Parisians, who said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities." It was hard to miss the fact that one of the six Paris attacks was on a theatre on Voltaire Boulevard. Though this could be coincidental, it is not hard to imagine the attack planners targeting such a symbol of everything they hate: music and drama, philosophy, satire, reason, and enlightenment. The quote applies quite easily to the insanity that is Daesh, but let's not hesitate to look at our own recent past. European civilization is easily the bloodiest in history, and that is

why it is crucial for us to remember our own past in order to forge a new future.

Let me close with the words of another wise humanist and antiwar activist, Bertrand Russell, whose message to the future (which is the present for us) was the following: "The moral thing I should wish to say to them is very simple: I should say, love is wise, hatred is foolish. In this world which is getting more and more closely interconnected, we have to learn to tolerate each other, we have to learn to put up with the fact that some people say things that we don't like. We can only live together in that way – and if we are to live together and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance, which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet."