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ELECTRIC LIT

GREWAL-KÖK, Rav, "8 Books on the Evils of Unchecked State Power," *Electric Lit*, April 18, 2025.

8 Books on the Evils of Unchecked State Power

In the midst of brutal times, these books remind us that the opposite of force isn't weakness, but beauty

Photo by Ryan Kosmides on Unsplash

You don't write books for a single reason, or out of any one feeling. I wrote a novel because I wanted to record images and experiences of a brown man's American life. I wanted to reflect, in my own version of the language,

on love, fatherhood, sex, music, money, fate. But I also wanted to write about how ambition could lead a twenty-first century quiet American to do great evil. This last impulse came out of my anger at a specific period of American lawlessness: the imperial wars and covert operations that George W. Bush launched in the wake of Al Qaeda's 2001 attacks on the United States, and that Barack Obama, to the sorrow of many of his onetime admirers, continued or, in some aspects, expanded.

The book I wrote, *The Snares*, has a spy as its protagonist. Though he's a D.C. bureaucrat, rather than a clandestine officer, he nonetheless wields life-and-death power. He passes his days and nights reading reports at his desk and searching insanely detailed databases in service of his function: to select suspected terrorists for extrajudicial assassination.

My choice of protagonist raised an immediate problem. I've never worked in the intelligence services, held a security clearance, or tried to convince a president to conduct a drone strike. So how could I imagine myself into the mind of an executioner (even one who kills at a distance, in an off-the-rack suit, with government pay and a retirement plan)? And what of his victims, along with their families and neighbors (the "collateral damage" that surrounds them), who have no opportunity to challenge a bureaucrat's decision to place them on a kill list? They, like the real-life casualties of American campaigns in South and Central Asia and across the greater Middle East, are subject to arbitrary and absolute power—missile strikes, arrest, torture, and detention without end.

I looked within, of course, but I also turned to other writers. Below are eight books, some of which I read before or while I wrote my novel, and some after, that address the depredations of the state. While their subject matter can be grim, these books—to me at least—offer consolation. They show that the bad times aren't ours alone. Bullies, in uniform and out, have always been with us, as have the sycophants who argue that torture has its uses, that governments can conduct wars without also committing crimes, and that brutality preserves public order. The writer who bears witness to these evils demands a reader who will reject them. On the other side lies solidarity, art, laughter, freedom—the splendors, in short, of ordinary human life. At the onset of what looks to

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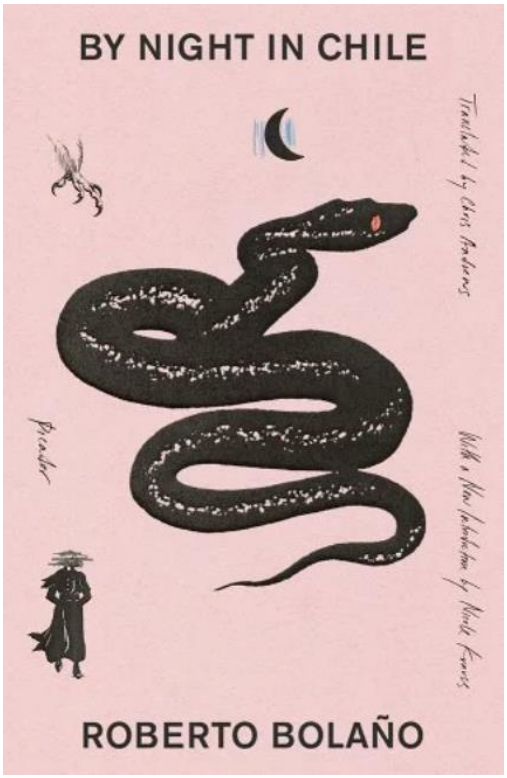
be a new and distinct age of official thuggery, these books might help us remember that the opposite of force isn't weakness, but beauty.



By Night in Chile **by Roberto Bolaño**
Augusto Pinochet's 1973 U.S.-backed coup d'état cost Bolaño his Chilean homeland, and almost his life. Bolaño's vast corpus of novels, stories, essays, and poems is, among many other things, a response to that catastrophe—and never more directly than in the novellas Distant Star and By Night in Chile. The latter is the deathbed confession of a reactionary priest and conservative literary critic with close ties to the dictatorship. The priest gives private lectures on political theory to Pinochet and his generals. He attends a literary salon at the mansion of an elegant Chilean writer. Meanwhile, in the mansion's basement, the writer's American husband tortures left-wing dissidents. The priest enjoys poetry, wine, and good food. But when he looks back at the end of his life he sees only a nightmare. Complicity has poisoned his soul.

A final note: though Bolaño writes, as he often reminds us, from the edge of the abyss, he's never ponderous or self-serious. Even at its bleakest moments, this is a very funny book.

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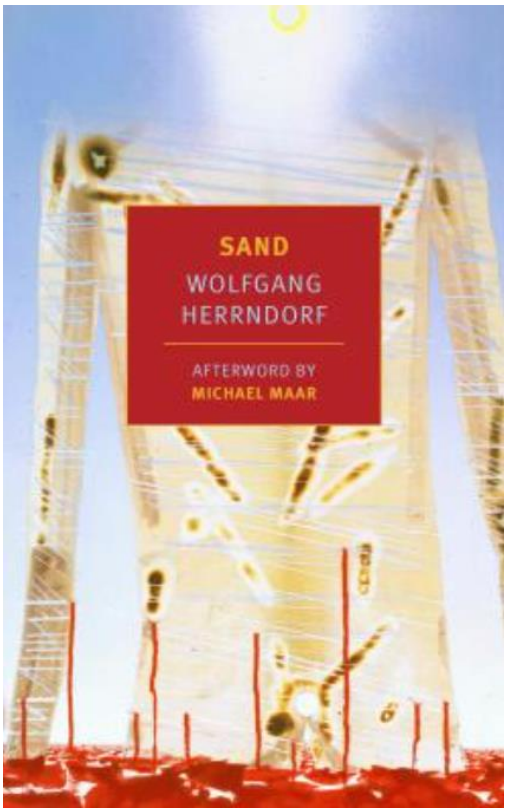

***Sand* by Wolfgang Herrndorf**
Herrndorf's novel captures the murderousness of Cold War-era decolonization. It's set in 1972 in an unnamed North African country, where four Westerners (post-hippies, back-to-the-landers) have been killed in their agrarian commune. The local police are hapless and corrupt. Meanwhile, foreign intelligence officers (from the CIA, KGB, Stasi, and Mossad, along with various Arab factions) swarm the land, kidnapping and torturing at will. They leave a trail of corpses; the police hold no one to account. Bigger things than commonplace life or death—like nuclear secrets, state security, and international spheres of influence—are at stake. The protagonist, when he arrives several chapters in, is an amnesiac whose blankness resists his most gleefully sadistic interrogators. Sand is a big novel, with a brutal and maddeningly complex plot, but it's never forbidding. Herrndorf, like Bolaño, loves to make us laugh.

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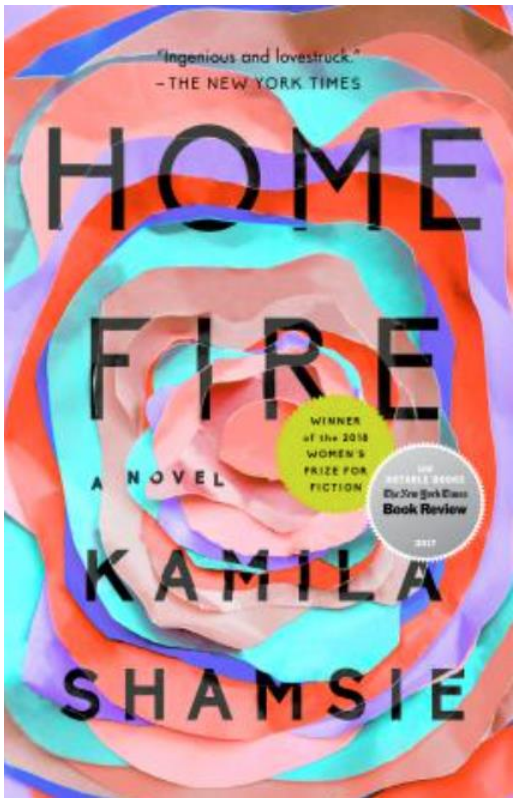

***Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie**

A free retelling of Sophocles' Antigone, Home Fire is the rare mainstream literary novel to treat the Muslim victims of the West's "War on Terror" as fully human. Parvaiz Pasha, a young British man of Pakistani descent, leaves for Syria. He hopes to meet the militants who fought alongside his father, a jihadi who died after American interrogators tortured him at Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan. Parvaiz never finds his father's compatriots. Instead, ISIS operatives coerce Parvaiz into working for that organization's propaganda arm. When he tries to flee, they kill him. The novel's central drama turns on the attempt by Parvaiz's twin sister, Aneeka, to return his body to England for burial. But the Home Secretary, Karramat Lone, another British man of Pakistani origin, publicly revoked Parvaiz's citizenship when he joined ISIS. Out of political expediency and his own monstrous ambition, Lone refuses Aneeka's request. Lone's pitilessness will have devastating consequences, for his own family and for the Pashas. I read the final fifty pages of this novel with an exquisite sense of dread. Shamsie's narrative design is impeccable.

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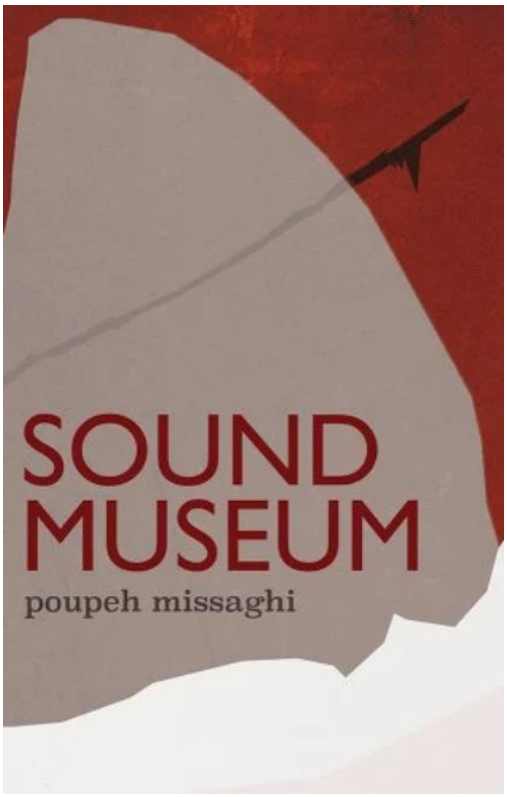

***Sound Museum* by poupeh missaghi**
A woman rises through the ranks of an important government bureaucracy. She lives in a theocratic state that resists powerful adversaries near and far. Though she is conservative in temperament, she fashions for herself a feminist narrative of success in a system designed to thwart ambitious women—she sounds, at times, like Hilary Clinton or Sheryl Sandberg. But here the country is the Islamic State of Iran, and the protagonist has found her calling in its internal security apparatus.

The novella takes the form of a speech the protagonist delivers at the apex of her career: the opening of a monument to state torture, a museum that exhibits sound recordings of anguished prisoners in their isolation cells and the interrogation chair. missaghi calls her book a "theory fiction," perhaps on account of the breadth of writing on torture and complicity (by Darius Rejali, Hannah Arendt, and many others) with which her narrator engages. But the novella is also a dramatic monologue, steeped in irony, in the tradition of Browning's "My Last Duchess" or Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." The narrator is both subject and vessel of the ideology of a totalitarian state. For all the pride she takes in her grotesque achievement, she is forever blind to its human implications. I hope missaghi writes a song of the drone pilot next.

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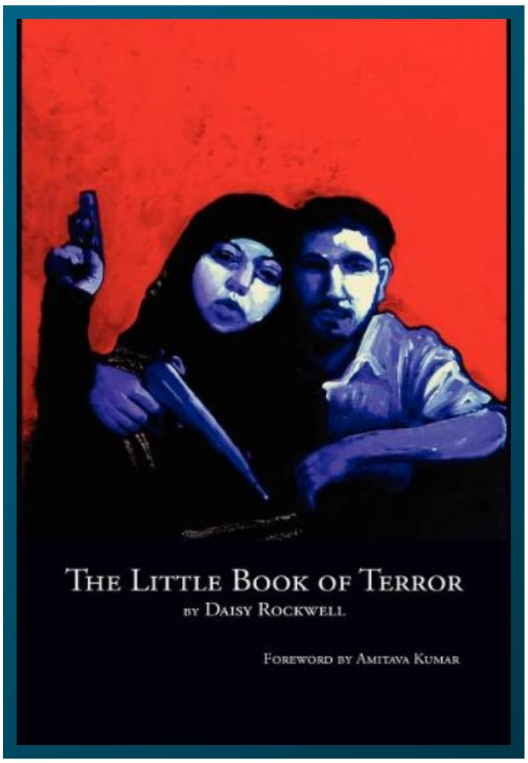

***The Little Book* of Terror by Daisy Rockwell**
Rockwell's brief and beautiful exploration of the limits of empathy juxtaposes her paintings of subjects from the first decade of the War on Terror with essays and personal reminiscences. Rockwell is a renowned translator from the Hindi (including of Gitanjali Shree's International Booker Prize-winning novel Tomb of Sand), as well as an accomplished visual artist. Though she is Norman Rockwell's granddaughter, she seems to paint, as Amitava Kumar notes in his introduction, more in the tradition of lurid, decades-old Bollywood film posters. Here she depicts a stylized, pink-skinned Osama bin Laden in his death mask, blood or flame obscuring his face; Saddam Hussein after his capture, enfeebled and wrapped in a shroud; and many lesser villains (and innocent victims) of that era. But she also paints the Abu Ghraib torturers Charles Granier and Lynndie England in a smiling, tender moment, as well as her own friends and colleagues, and images of the little green men her father became obsessed with in his old age. Throughout she challenges us to recognize the humanity of the other—including the most alien or despised among those Dick Cheney called "the worst of the worst." She offers an alternative to the totalizing narrative of the state at war, and warns us to resist its colonization of the self. "Why do they hate us, indeed," she writes. "And who are they? And who are we?"

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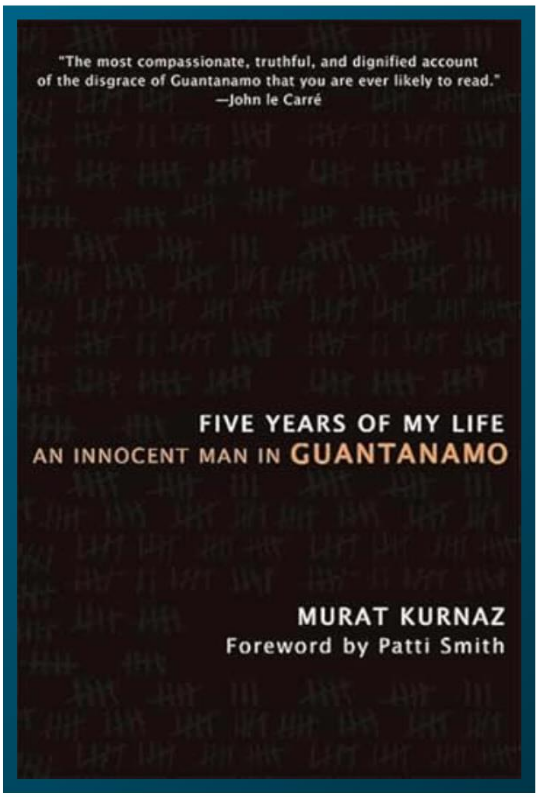

Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo **by Murat Kurnaz, translated by Jefferson Chase**

In the winter of 2001, at the age of nineteen, Kurnaz traveled to Peshawar, Pakistan, to study the Koran and prepare himself for marriage. Local police arrested him on the day he was to return home to Germany, though he'd done nothing wrong, and sold him to American operatives for a bounty. Five Years of My Life is Kurnaz's memoir of his imprisonment in Afghanistan and Guantanamo. His American captors subjected him to beatings, electrocution, and waterboarding. For hours on end, they hung him by his handcuffs from a hook in the ceiling. Within a few months, the U.S. government had determined that Kurnaz was innocent. Yet guards and interrogators continued to abuse him for years. Eventually, the government repatriated Kurnaz to Germany, never having charged him with a crime. Kurnaz's memoir is a testament to this nation's moral collapse under conditions of mass hysteria. It records a young man's dignified resistance to a machine designed to break his body and mind.

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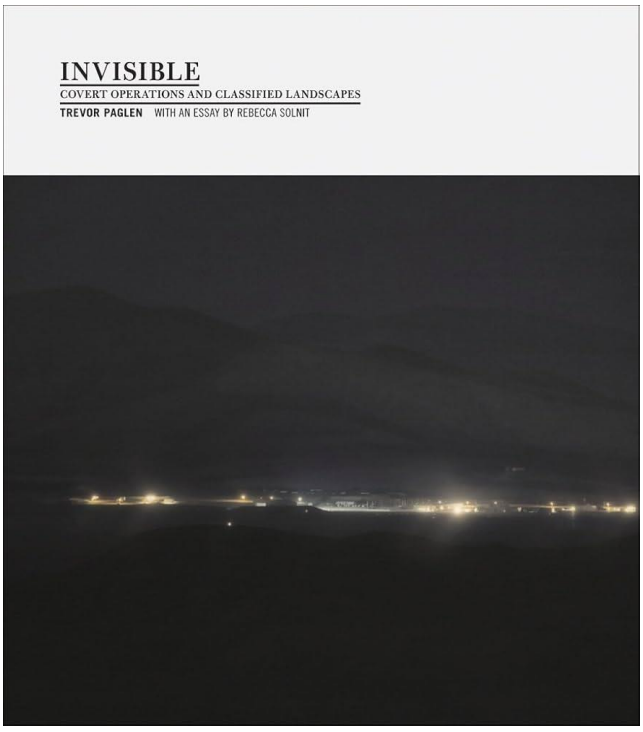

Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes **by Trevor Paglen**
What is the secret state? Where are the spies, drone bases, satellites, weapons labs, and surveillance sites? Paglen ventures into the blank spaces on the map, trawls archives and databases, and searches the night sky for traces of that enormous apparatus from which the hundreds of millions of Americans without a security clearance are forever barred. He hikes through public land in Nevada to the boundary of an air force base that occupies—as Rebecca Solnit notes in her introductory essay—an area the size of Belgium. He repurposes astrophotography equipment to capture images of mysterious aircraft, hangers, towers, and chemical and biological weapons "proving grounds" at enormous distances—on occasion, from more than forty miles away. He records the passage of spy satellites in high-earth orbit, photographs government officers and contractors boarding planes linked to the CIA's "rendition" (i.e., kidnapping and disappearance) of suspected terrorists, and discovers the location of a black site—a secret prison—in Afghanistan. He reproduces the blurred images of CIA officers wanted for crimes in foreign countries.

Many of Paglen's photographs, particularly of government installations in remote regions of Utah and Nevada, are stunningly composed, even sublime. You feel, as you turn the pages, that Paglen has glimpsed an alien civilization—until you remember that he's instead had the courage to show us hidden aspects of our own. This is art as witness, and resistance to unimaginable power.

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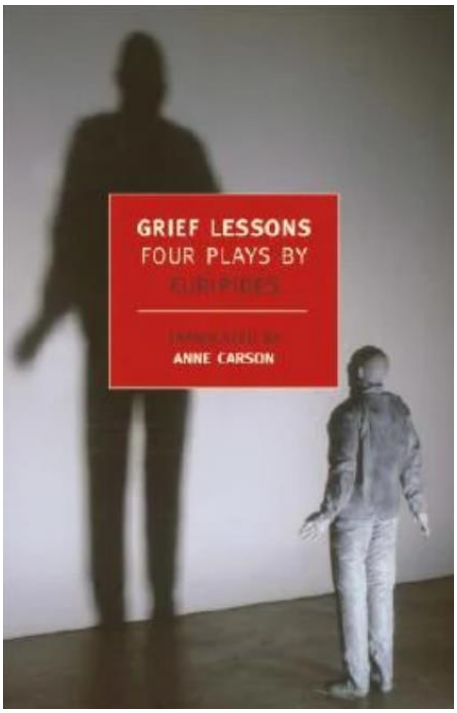

***Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, translated by Anne Carson**
The books I've listed above all appeared in recent years. But writers have grappled with the problem of power from the beginning. For as long as there have been states, there have been outsiders to whom the state declines to offer justice, protection, or basic dignity. While dictators and technocrats darken our own era, the ancients feared gods and kings. But the human dilemma hasn't changed. Grief Lessons is a collection of four of Euripides' minor tragedies, in haunting translations by Anne Carson. A goddess tricks a hero into slaughtering his own family; a king condemns his wife to death to propitiate a god; a queen descends to savagery to fulfill a vendetta; a father banishes his son out of sexual jealousy. The plays are brief, each fewer than 1500 lines, but they encompass the fates of families and nations. Grief begets retribution begets more grief; the pages are drenched in blood. You emerge from the book with a renewed horror of arbitrary authority, beneath which every human life hangs by a thread.

About the Author
Rav Grewal-Kök's stories have appeared in The Atlantic, Ploughshares, New England Review, Missouri Review, Gulf Coast, and elsewhere. He has won an NEA fellowship in prose and is a fiction editor at Fence. He grew up in Hong Kong and on Vancouver Island and now lives in Los Angeles. *The Snares* is his first novel.