

*A Pale View of Hills*, Kasuo Ishiguro’s (**kaa-zoo-ow i-shee-goo-row**) first novel, is set in Nagasaki, Japan, a few years after the end of WW II. Trying to discover things to look forward to rather than looking back is a theme of the novel.

Ogata, a retired professor of education, reads a review of his work in a professional journal. He is stunned to discover how he, and the work of his colleagues, is perceived by the younger generation. The writer of the review is also a professor of education who grew up playing with Ogata’s son. Ogata has known Shigeo all his life.

Ogata confronts Shigeo over the review. “Tell me honestly, do you believe a word of what you wrote? Explain to me what made you write such things.” “Many things have changed over the last few years,” Shigeo said. “Well, of course they have,” responded Ogata, “what kind of an answer is that?”

Shigeo paused and looked down at the ground. He scratched his ear. “You see, you must understand. In your day, children in Japan were taught terrible things. They were taught lies of the most damaging kind. Worst of all, they were taught not to see, not to question. And that’s why our country was plunged into the most evil disaster in history.”

“We may have lost the war,” Ogata interrupts, “but that’s no reason to ape the ways of our country. We cared deeply for the country and worked hard to ensure the correct values were preserved and handed on.”

“I don’t doubt you were sincere and hard working,” Shigeo responded. “I’ve never questioned that for a moment. But it just happens your energies were spent in a misguided direction, an evil direction. You weren’t to know this, but I’m afraid it’s true.”

Speaking the truth in love is, I suspect, seldom experienced as loving by the hearer. Paul, unlike Shigeo, doesn’t believe his opponents are sincere but misguided. Paul calls his opponents tricksters, cunning, and deceitful; he impugns their motives. Paul begs the Ephesians to grow up, not to be feckless fools deceived by the latest rumors on Facebook.

The earth is on fire and flooding at the same time. *The Guardian’s* new series of articles (July 2021) on fossil fuel companies’ culpability for the climate crises is entitled “Climate Crimes.” Oil executives, in a string of recent videos, argue they have worked within the legal system, fulfilling their fiduciary duty to maximize shareholder value. They were just doing their jobs. Remind you of anything?

Adam Sobel, professor at Columbia University, counters that their jobs do not require them to systematically, cynically misrepresent and suppress the facts. But they did, and in such a way as

to hide the fact that they were doing it; sponsoring outside groups to spread doubt and confusion, and even supporting bogus research to create the appearance of dissent among scientist.

A global pandemic threatens the health and safety of us all. Since the early months of this pandemic, Greg Locke, the pastor of a Nashville-area church, has repeatedly called covid a hoax, undermined emergency mandates and refused to comply with guidance from public health officials.

This past Sunday he warned his congregation that anyone wearing a mask in church would be asked to leave. "I am not playing these Democrat games up in this church," he said. He also denied the existence of the delta variant.

Tennessee has one of the lowest rates of vaccination in the USA. The state recently reported that 98 percent of people who died of covid and 97 percent of covid hospitalizations are among the unvaccinated.

Hospitals in hot zones are overwhelmed, again, this time with children as well as with adults. In four days this week, Children's Hospital in New Orleans went from four to nineteen children infected with the delta variant, four of them in ICU.

To the climate crisis and the pandemic, add democracy. This country faces a greater challenge from within than it has faced from without in our lifetimes. When baseless claims are used to suppress voting rights, when police testifying before congress are called crisis actors, their suffering mocked by media personalities and death threats left on their phones, when we are told not to believe our eyes but the lies of cunning politicians, when scientists and doctors trying to save lives fear for the safety of their families, democracy is in peril.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Grushenka tells the following story. Once upon a time there was a peasant woman, a very wicked woman she was. She died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. Her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God.

"She once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman." God answered: "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is."

The angel flew to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," said he, "catch hold, and I'll pull you out." He began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her.

But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. “I’m to be pulled out, not you. It’s my onion, not yours.” As soon as she said this, the onion broke. The woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.

Whether we are talking about climate change, the pandemic, or democracy, our lives are bound together in this bundle of life. Our lives depend on the courage, the industry, the honesty, and the integrity of our fellow human beings.

The cynical misrepresentation and suppression of the facts is the first (ur) pandemic. The deceitful distortion and cunning denial of reality, creates the conditions for the flourishing of all other pandemics. The onion, the lifeline strong enough to save us all, but not strong enough to save only one, is the truth.