# APPELFELD THE IMMORTAL

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In the novels of Aharon Appelfeld, as they have become available to us in translation, there are usually two types of silence at work, giving shape and urgency to what is not, and what cannot be, said. One silence is that of self-deception, of betrayal, of abdication. His characters are usually in its grip, either because of cowardice or foolishness, or through sheer force of circumstance. And they emerge from it too late, only to find the world invaded by the brutal and overwhelming noise of Nazi reality. The second, related, silence is that which seems to echo in the words with which Appelfeld writes, which gives his voice its characteristic tone, and has raised his writing to the highest ranks in contemporary fiction. This may perhaps be called the silence of the writer's "tact" or "reticence".

Appelfeld's reticence is engendered by his belief that the events of the Holocaust defy accounting—that they *must* not be explained, indeed, or wrapped up in narrative, since (as he has said in an interview with Philip Roth) they go beyond the realms of History and of Tragedy. Appelfeld attempts to achieve the sort of quiet telling—at once both direct and elliptical—that he says characterizes biblical narrative, which eschews explanation of the inexplicable. And he attempts this, most characteristically, by withdrawing from the centre-stage of his novels, keeping authorial comments and judgements to a minimum.

The first sort of silence—the one masking the truth—is certainly present in Appelfeld's recent novel, *The Immortal Bartfuss*. But the second silence—the one tentatively unveiling the truth, or compelling us to participate imaginatively in *creating* the truth—this silence is less audible. What has changed to make this novel somehow less ironic, less poignantly eloquent, than the earlier work? A single explanation immediately offers itself, and while it may be rather simple, it does go some way towards answering the question. Whereas Appelfeld's previous novels have largely dealt with the period *before* the outbreak of war in 1939, this novel deals with the period *after*. *The Immortal Bartfuss*, set in contemporary Israel, is the story of one survivor's awkward attempt, first to deny all connection with the past, and subsequently to rediscover a continuity with it.

Suddenly we are made to see more clearly why the earlier novels are so powerful: our knowledge of the impending wave of destruction which is set to break upon the characters (and about which the narrator makes no direct comment) lends an urgency and pathos to their most insignificant actions, as to the merest inflection of light or shade. For here, by contrast, such a restrained sense of drama is largely absent. Bartfuss's life-story is certainly one of passivity and denial– denial of language and communication especially—and in this sense is very close to that of Appelfeld's other characters. But it is not offset by any knowledge or insight the reader may have, and which might fill in the lacunae caused by the narrator's reticence about Bartfuss and his history. Since the events are no longer in the future but in the past, Bartfuss does not know *less* of them than the reader but *more*, even if he is repressing this knowledge.

Whereas in the earlier novels Appelfeld's tact, his refusal to judge, lends the work a powerful irony, here the narrator and the protagonist are perilously proximate, their reticences almost compounded. The reader is liable to be troubled, but also slightly mystified by the many elisions and uncertainties in Bartfuss's life that emerge as gaps in the narrative. Bartfuss's life is told in a puzzling, at times tantalizing, series of episodes: a life led half-way between the need to repress and the need to resurrect the past, between the lure of "somnolence" and the enticement of expiatory speech.

Appelfeld's translated novels have tended to explore the human capacity to accommodate calamity, the way in which European Jews failed to face the darkness which in the 1930s was already starting to engulf them. Many different palliatives are found by his characters, many excuses, distractions and hopes for self-improvement that for a short while seem to keep the wolves at bay. And nowhere are these more

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prolific than in what may be Appelfeld's best-known novel, *Badenheim 1939*, in which drinking and eating serve to deaden the senses, where the orchestra plays the old, reassuring melodies, and where the maestro violinist shuts himself in his room to strive for technical perfection. In *Badenheim 1939* language itself seems to collude with the inhabitants of the Austrian holiday town that is progressively being cut off from the rest of the world. Euphemisms abound here, most notably that of the "Sanitation Department", under whose sign the Nazi authorities do their work of gathering and registering. The promised trip to Poland is canvassed and accepted as a return to the "Motherland". Austrian officials are "efficient", "following orders"; the Jews are to be "transferred". The old codes and systems of protection decay, and the new, unfathomable Law is imposed. This Law is a massive lie, promulgated by the oppressors, who by the end of the novel have encircled and "quarantined" the town. But it is enthusiastically adopted by the Jewish holidaymakers who are trapped there.

What happens to truth in this repressive environment? What becomes of art in this luxurious ghetto? Truth is revealed in a character's moment of illumination that is perceived by others as madness and swiftly suppressed; it is perceived by the dogs, which are shot trying to flee the town, or by the tropical fish, which devour each other. Art is trivialized into entertainment, a means of allaying anxiety and beguiling time by turning fear into fiction, into fairy tale. The inhabitants of the town sustain themselves on crippled dreams and delusions. Most unforgettable of them is Dr Pappenheim, the impresario, who endeavours to keep all spirits up, using every means at his disposal to drown out the truth. It is no coincidence that it is from his mouth that emerge the horrifying final words of the novel: "If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go."

Irony—and *Badenheim 1939* is agonizingly ironic—always depends on a certain ignorance (real or feigned), or on something remaining unsaid. By the conclusion of the novel the ignorance of the characters may appear almost wilful. The undeclared forthcoming horror builds up an unbearable pressure which makes the reader want to shout out in warning to the characters. For the narrator never writes from a perspective of knowledge of the future, but writes rather with a sort of lightness or childlike naïveté. In the interview with Philip Roth Appelfeld talks about naïveté, and I believe that it is in this context that his words should be understood. "Can there be a naïve modern art?" he asks. "It seemed to me that without the naïveté still found among children and old people and, to some extent, in ourselves, the work of art would be flawed. I tried to correct that flaw."

At such moments we may be made to think of another writer who came from Appelfeld's home-town, Czernovitz: another survivor, the poet Paul Celan, who often seems to be striving, despite the density and darkness of his poetry, for a similar naïveté. In an early essay (entitled "Edgar Jené and the Dream about the Dream") Celan writes:

> Now I am a person who likes simple words. It is true, I had realized long before this journey that there was much evil and injustice in the world I had now left, but I had believed I could shake the foundations if I called things by their proper names. I knew such an enterprise meant returning to absolute *naïveté*. This *naïveté* I considered as a primal vision purified of the slag of centuries of hoary lies about the world.

To achieve such "naïveté", to call "things by their proper names", Celan has to twist and distort language, invent words, destroy words, take his verse to the outer limits of what is comprehensible. For, as he intimates above, simplicity in our cruel age can never again be simple.

Appelfeld's naïveté, equally, is not that of innocence or ignorance, but an attitude which has shed the need to explain or judge, which faces events with a child's sense of openness. By calling on the corresponding part in ourselves, and at the same time calling through irony on our understanding of history, Appelfeld has us participate both as children and as adults. He has us imaginatively share the experience from inside and outside: he shows how we too might have listened to Dr Pappenheim, while revealing the inexcusability of Dr Pappenheim's panaceas. *Badenheim 1939* requires the reader to experience the approaching horror as the town's inhabitants do, as a winnowing away of petit-bourgeois luxuries. At the same time it requires the reader to fill in the gaps and recognize the euphemisms. Its final silence demands that one try to think through that final journey in the freight trucks, the journey which Primo Levi (in *The Drowned and the Saved*) says is "almost always, at the beginning of the memory sequence . . . not only for chronological reasons but also for the gratuitous cruelty with which those (otherwise innocuous) convoys of ordinary freight cars were employed for an extraordinary purpose".

Through what might, therefore, be termed a "complex naïveté" Appelfeld gives his answer to critics such as Theodor Adorno and George Steiner, who have questioned the status of literature after the Holocaust. Yes, Appelfeld seems to say, there can be literature. But it will be a literature which requires the reader to bear the strain between naïveté and knowledge; to be not a spectator of a drama but a participant in the drama of writing itself.

Nor is Appelfeld's requirement an altogether new one. In "Little Gidding" T. S. Eliot may be pointing towards something similar when he

speaks of "A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)"—a condition that must be met if the "experience" and its "meaning" are to be faithful to one another. Only here the "condition" has been rendered still more exacting, has been given a further and irretractible turn of the screw by the knowledge of the crimes which were being perpetrated at the very time Eliot was writing his *Four Quartets*. Appelfeld is aware of the risks that such conditions and requirements lead to. Speaking of the writing of *Badenheim 1939*, he says: "That is a very narrow bridge, without a railing, and it's very easy to fall off." And these rigorous conditions and requirements are most forcefully expressed in a haunting poem by Paul Celan, in which the poet seems to exhort himself to speech. This poem, which might stand as an epigraph to Appelfeld's fiction, is entitled "Speak, You Also" ("Sprich Auch Du"), and its opening stanzas, in Michael Hamburger's translation, run:

> Speak, you also,
> speak as the last,
> have your say.
>
> Speak—
> But keep yes and no unsplit.
> And give your say this meaning:
> give it the shade.
>
> Give it shade enough,
> give it as much
> as you know has been dealt out between
> midnight and midday and midnight.
>
> Look around:
> Look how it all leaps alive—
> where death is! Alive!
> He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

Building up in Appelfeld's novels there is, then, a tension between different forms of silence, between what the characters cannot face and what the novelist declines to articulate. In his refusal to turn the Holocaust into assimilable narrative for entertainment or edification Appelfeld is at the opposite end of the spectrum from a novelist such as D. M. Thomas (author of *The White Hotel*). Appelfeld is an infinitely more subtle and more provocative artist, precisely because he is so wary of his own facility as a storyteller, because he is constantly on the lookout against the words that might turn the impossible into the palatable. Yet Appelfeld is an artist who works with words none the less, and one who recognizes that it is with words that continuities are necessarily established, recognitions achieved, the past and the present linked, however ungraspable the break between them.

Nor are all of Appelfeld's characters consigned to ignorance by self-deception or complacency. In what I consider to be his other masterpiece, *The Age of Wonders*, the protagonist is a child whose developing awareness allows him only gradually to sense the corruption and collapse around him. Book One of the novel is narrated in the first person by Bruno, who discovers his family is in the process of decaying: his mother preoccupied with small acts of charity and his father lost in his obsession with his ailing literary reputation. Even the Jews are compulsively divided against themselves, ever ready to blame each other: the intellectuals blame the petit-bourgeois merchants, who blame the "decadent" intellectuals in turn. Again, as in *Badenheim 1939*, the truth seems to be the prerogative of the simple or the insane. Bruno's aunt finds faith, but then declines into mysticism, madness and death. His grandmother is blind, but hears that the birds are singing new and sinister songs. The sculptor Stark, a gentile, decides to convert to Judaism, and, despite Bruno's father's protests, has himself circumcised. But his gesture contains a tragic irony of which he is not aware: in his attempt to purify himself symbolically, he has joined the ranks of those through whose literal and wholesale extirpation the fascist state will try to "purify" itself. And meanwhile the Jews, in their "strange black and striped garments", are being herded on to trains "in droves".

Bruno grows, unprotected, towards manhood and enlightenment. But at the moment the light of consciousness shines, the darkness swallows it up. As he sets about actively taking a place in the world, this world disappears, and he is summoned to the temple prior to deportation. Book One ends: "By the next day we were on the cattle train hurtling south." And as Bruno is dispossessed of his future, he is also dispossessed of his narrative. For Book Two of *The Age of Wonders* is told not in the first person but by an outside narrator (and in fact it is only here that we learn that the "I" of Book One has the name "Bruno"). What Appelfeld seems to be intimating is that with the death of a culture goes the death of a form of writing epitomized by what is often called the "novel of formation". For this is a form (the *Bildungsroman*) which flourished throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the very era which fostered the forces that are unleashed in the destruction which consumes Bruno's culture.

The Bruno of Book Two of *The Age of Wonders* is an ageing and disillusioned man returning from Jerusalem to the Austrian village of his youth. He seems to be in search of his past, and a connection with the father he feels betrayed him. Yet at the same time he is trying to keep the past at bay, to remain within the cocoon of forgetfulness that has partially protected him during the post-war years.

What Bruno finds is a village both utterly familiar and utterly strange (the paradigm of what Freud calls the "uncanny" or *unheimlich*).

He both recognizes and fails to recognize the people and places, for they are the same, though their significance has changed. Echoing Paul Celan's words, "look how it all leaps alive—/ where death is", Bruno reflects: "Strange, they don't look like murderers." Or again, a little later: "Strange, he reflected, objects survive longer; they are passive. Otherwise how could they withstand such changes? Could it be said, perhaps, that they lacked sensitivity?" Slowly, haltingly, Bruno learns to see, to separate out the past from the present. The "ready-made words", of which his head has been full, are replaced by words both old and new: "Words he had not used for years rose to the tip of his tongue and he was glad to have them back again."

Bruno recognizes an old acquaintance, Brum, a man who betrayed his faith during the pre-war years to gain safety from the Nazi threat. Bruno confronts him, but Brum shows no sign of repentance, has indeed sustained his fiercely anti-semitic views into old age. Brum is a tired and broken man, a lunatic perhaps, hardly an important representative of Nazism or of those who collaborated with it. Bruno realizes this, yet he accosts Brum none the less. He says: "Anti-semitism from you is something I won't permit. From you I expect a little remorse." By the final chapter of the novel Brum will still not repent, and so Bruno strikes him to the ground. The gesture is a small, perhaps futile one; but it seems to release Bruno from the spectre of the past and from the curse of his father's passivity. When Bruno leaves the village he hears the words "It's all over" in his head. They are not his own words, admittedly, but they do seem both to signify some sort of break—the possibility of a fresh beginning based on a sense of connection to the past—and to signal a new acceptance of his father, the memory of whose catastrophic errors has been "the wound that never healed".

*The Age of Wonders* is a novel, therefore, which spans the *before* and the *after*. It stages the break between past and present, and its most eloquent moment is the blank page which follows on Bruno's deportation. The novel implicitly spells the ruin of a whole novelistic tradition; but while it does this, it also demonstrates the need for connection with that tradition. Book Two of *The Age of Wonders* is jagged, fragmentary, full of ellipses and uncertainties, as if the "naïve" style for which Appelfeld searches when writing of events before the Holocaust were now inappropriate in face of the experience Bruno carries within him. The ironic gap between naïveté and knowledge being nearly closed, within the person of the survivor, it is as if language itself were now the repository of the tension between what cannot be and is not said. As in the verse of Paul Celan, the attempt to "speak the shade" is made in "simple words"—words which, notwithstanding their "simplicity", seem to fly apart from each other, in awkward, urgent, compulsive snatches of utterance and unsettled, unsettling prose. The author's silence, being no longer about the future, seems to have buried itself deep within the narrative which maps Bruno so closely. The novel is founded, ultimately, on the contrast between the style of *before* and the style of *after*: on the sense that this contrast yields of all that has been lost, and the little that can be rebuilt on the foundations of that loss.

Appelfeld's more recent novel, *The Immortal Bartfuss*, seems almost to take up where *The Age of Wonders* leaves off. In an aside in the earlier work we learn that Bruno has had an unsuccessful marriage in Israel which has left him feeling worthless and sterile. And Bartfuss, though he has two children, is in a similar position. For he is estranged from his children, and lives in a state of chronic isolation and alienation. Bartfuss has survived the horror of the camps and the brief heady glory of the immediate post-war years in Italy—but *for what*? This will be his question when he starts to allow himself to formulate questions. But for much of the book, instead of wondering anything, Bartfuss maintains a state of "numbness" from which emotion and language have been practically banished.

Here we are firmly in the world of *after*—Israel indeed. Bartfuss is a survivor who is seeking to suppress his past and lead a life turned completely away from his inner self: an animal-like, exteriorized existence taken up with sunlight, petty chores and blank thoughtlessness (almost as if Bruno's intense subjectivity in Book One of *The Age of Wonders* had been turned inside-out). He is a trader—or smuggler—living in Jaffa, plying his trade with a minimum of difficulty and a maximum of intuitive skill. His days are a routine of strolls on the beach, hours spent hoarding and counting his money, visits to the café, cigarettes and cups of coffee. His days are based, more than anything, on avoidance: avoidance of his horrific past, from which he has earned his reputation of being "immortal"; and avoidance of the figures who incarnate this past—his old acquaintances from the camps and from Italy, his wife and two daughters, who have turned against him (and who are now interested only in how much money they can extract from him).

Bartfuss lives immured in a waking dream: "For years he had lived in passivity and somnolence, ignoring everything." He has almost renounced speech and has entered "a language with no words, a language that was all eavesdropping, alert senses, and impressions". And even this language has finally been almost silenced: "Even then he learned to mute every sensation. But more than that, he stopped thinking."

In Appelfeld's earlier novel *Tzili*, it is after the liberation that the suicides happen. What Bartfuss has achieved is a sort of moral suicide; after the euphoria of Italy and the ensuing disappointment and monotony of a life without heroism, all that is left of him is a hardened core protected by a shroud of denial and repression. Words are "thorns" or "stones" which might penetrate the shroud. Bartfuss's silence, therefore, bears certain similarities to that which afflicts the characters of Appelfeld's earlier novels—with the difference that where they could not bear to face the way the present was becoming the future, he cannot face the way the present runs out of and back into the past.

Yet something happens. Something stirs Bartfuss—perhaps the minor heart-attack he suffers—and the old life and its words start to filter back:

> Without being aware of it, and without wanting to, he started thinking. He had invested a lot of energy into blocking up the openings through which thoughts could push out. In recent years he had managed to seal them off almost completely. Now he felt he didn't have the power to stop them anymore.

What the book charts is the fitful and tentative reawakening of Bartfuss, who feels required to seek some connection to those around him and to his own legendary "immortality"—his own history. Whether in the end he finds what he is seeking, the words with which to situate himself, is difficult to say (and the reader's uncertainty may be fuelled by the occasional unevenness and falterings of Jeffrey Green's translation; when tone is so crucial, one is apt to miss the masterly hand of Appelfeld's former translator, Dalya Bilu). He engages in several conversations with other survivors, in which he reminds them of the past and elicits their memories; but the conversations remain one-sided, as the survivors are caught, as he himself has been, in the need to forget. He determines to be more "generous", to labour for "the public good", "the general welfare"; but the Holocaust Memorial office for which he starts to work fails to pay its rent and is closed down. He takes a mistress, Sylvia, but she dies, and without his having offered her the coffee service she had so coveted. Again Bartfuss is confronted with his own meanness of spirit, his need to count every penny. "What have we Holocaust survivors done?" he asks. "I expect generosity of them."

As the ice over Bartfuss's life starts to melt, he feels a wave of sympathy for his simpleton daughter, Bridget. But their reunion, after years of estrangement, happens too late and neither of them can find the words that would bring release from a fumbling, almost incestuous attempt at reconciliation. A meeting with an old friend from the camps promises to be equally fruitless, yet it does in the end help Bartfuss to focus on the issue that is troubling him most. This friend, Schmugler, is a pedant who weighs each syllable, a man for whom words still matter intensely. For Schmugler the words "mercy" and "generosity"—the old words—no longer have any meaning. Bartfuss seems set to prove Schmugler wrong, though the manner in which he goes about this is so confused as to be almost self-defeating. When Bartfuss meets his old friend at a later date and Schmugler refuses to answer one of his questions, Bartfuss strikes him in the face. Perhaps some sort of mutual recognition is thus achieved, for when they next meet Schmugler, who is usually so parsimonious with his words, starts to tell Bartfuss his life-story. Communication is still halting, not fully reciprocal. Yet some sort of link has been re-established, some "mercy" and some "generosity" have perhaps been shown.

Bartfuss walks along the beach in the novel's final chapter. He meets another old acquaintance, from his days in Italy: a simple woman who has gone to seed and who, after a life of prostitution, has taken to begging. The woman fails to remember Bartfuss, though he reminds her that he was among the few who once gave her gifts and expected nothing in return. Again, this failure to recognize him and his past infuriates Bartfuss. And when he learns that she has been accepting gifts from the local grocer, he becomes still more enraged. He shouts: "'You won't take things for free from the grocery store any more. In the grocery store you have to pay. Never take things for free.'" Bartfuss-the-miser thrusts money into the woman's hand and, when she runs from him, chases after her till she stumbles and falls. He thrusts a wad of notes into her pocket.

Mercy? Generosity? Of a fraught and contradictory sort, perhaps. Even more than when Bruno strikes Brum at the end of ***The Age of Wonders***, the gesture made here is in many respects trivial and sordid. Yet the release it brings is none the less intensely felt: "As in the past, in the great days of Italy, when everything was wide open and people dealt powerfully with each other, he crossed the road. As though he had loot in his hand. He felt no weakness or remorse."

Bartfuss returns home and finds the rest which has been eluding him for years. The sleep he is about to enter may be some sort of deliverance or it may be death—we cannot be sure. All we know is that before sleep takes hold, Bartfuss, like Bruno before he leaves his old village, hears new words in his head, new words that are also old words and that seem to signal an opening towards both the past and the future. The novel ends: "He managed to take off his shoes and socks, to put his shirt on the chair, to look about the naked room, and to say a sentence to himself that he had heard by chance: 'From now on I shall remove all worry from my heart and sleep.'"

If the parallel with Bruno is obvious, then the contrast is also striking, and it illuminates what I feel to be a problem at the centre of this novel. The most obvious contrast is that between the clarity of *The Age of Wonders* and the relative obscurity of *The Immortal Bartfuss*. Whereas in Book Two of the earlier novel, the past for which Bruno is searching is one to which we have access (through Book One), here Bartfuss's past is largely opaque to us. All we know is that he has survived and that he has been dubbed with the name "Immortal". Yet his past is *potentially* available, and in this sense is rather different also from the fate which hangs over the inhabitants of the holiday town in *Badenheim 1939* (the fate which is sealed by Dr Pappenheim's words about the dirty train carriages). Since the narrative holds so close to its protagonist, few clues are—or indeed can be—given to the inner workings of Bartfuss, who has turned his world inside-out. In this novel there is a somewhat new relation between the two silences of which I have spoken, the silence of the characters and that of the narrator. And the result seems to be that the narrative itself has (rather as in Book Two of *The Age of Wonders*) become almost taciturn, as if in sympathy with Bartfuss.

In *Badenheim 1939*, I suggested, the play between the characters' self-deception and the apparently innocent, childlike clarity of the prose brings our own knowledge into play, obliges us to fill out the euphemisms and silences with our sense of history and of tragedy. The gap between the two silences is one across which the reader must continually commute. In *The Age of Wonders* the protagonist's innocence and naïveté, products of his youth, allow him the sort of heightened sensitivity that draws us deep into his life. When the innocence is shed and the blank page ensues, we feel the weight of what has been destroyed. In both novels we are drawn in by the way in which Appelfeld takes us to the limit of what his characters can see and say, drawn in by his narrative, which makes so much clear yet allows us to feel the utter darkness of the areas it cannot illuminate.

In contrast, this reader at least feels a little excluded by the weight of the darkness and the unsaid in *The Immortal Bartfuss*. It is true that Bartfuss is facing his own doom, in the heart-attack he fears, but this has none of the force of the fate awaiting the characters in the novels which tell of *before*. As this is a narrative of *after*, the silence of the protagonist, when overlaid with that of the narrator, does not open an ironic gap which the reader feels compelled to occupy. This is, therefore, the least ironic of Appelfeld's novels and, though short, it is surprisingly difficult to read. Only if we have sensed the importance of the author's rejection of narrative ease and the old novelistic traditions, and faced the complexity that follows on from his search for "naïveté"—only then we are certain to recognize that the difficulty the book offers has a place in the trajectory of Appelfeld's work, work which is striving to scan our era—past, present and future; before *and* after—around the unutterable caesura of the Holocaust.

In his puzzled, pained and obscure manner, Bartfuss struggles against the legend of his "immortality". Yet in the end, we sense, he perhaps accepts it. This legend too has its place, as an articulation of the need to survive and bear witness. It is one of the marvels of Appelfeld's fiction that only when we finish it, and step back, do we realize that another sort of timelessness is also in question: the timelessness of this stammering, broken testament—won, as we must feel, from the teeth of denial and despair. From deep within a shroud of silence Appelfeld's work speaks to us: for, in the words of his compatriot Paul Celan, "He speaks truly who speaks the shade."

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## WARM JUICE OF THE POMEGRANATE

Galit Hasan-Rokem

A woman unwinds her guts
and wraps them around you

she adorns
herself with precious stones and feathers

by night,
facing the moon

she washes in honey
she bathes in resin

she purifies her lips
with the warm

juice of the pomegranate
what do you do

with the hate
you build a house for her

you bring her dogs and cats
and watch her suffering

*Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Rudolf and the author*

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