

# Growing Old



Elisha Porat

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# Growing Old

**Elisha Porat**

Also by Elisha Porat:

*THE MESSIAH OF LAGUARDIA*, a collection of short stories from the modern life in Israel. Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks, Mosaic Press, 1997.

*SCAR OF PRIDE*, eBook, a collection of short stories, new writing from Israel. Translated from the Hebrew by several translators. SynergEbooks

# ***GROWING OLD***

## *Poems New and Selected*

Many of these poems have appeared in magazines, earlier Hebrew collections, and anthologies. The poems were translated from the Hebrew by several translators.

# *Foreword*

by Ward Kelley

1.  
Elisha Porat.

What has he learned from war? What has he learned from the unique peace of the kibbutz? Who is this man who with a single phrase can describe a generation of turmoil?

The soldiers, the ghosts, the respect we owe our fallen comrades, the obligations we, as human beings, must fulfill to live in this land of lamentation—Elisha's words carry this weight like invisible parables. After they pass into your conscious, these words, after they journey through the lens of your eye, these words, you come to understand they bear shrouded messages far beyond the script of language. For they speak of ancient yearnings here in the midst of modern wars, they hint of aged strife burrowed under our urbanity.

These words tell us nothing has changed here in this desert for thousands of years. We are still men and women; this is still sand. The words of these poems take us further into the centuries, and we begin to suspect that, indeed, we all live in desert, regardless of our country of residence, and we all must contend with the grains of our own actions.

And still the words of his poems lure us deeper into time, to where at last we stand, alone but oddly secure, within the circle of time Elisha has created, a place where we can learn what this soldier, what this man of peace, means to tell us.

A poet who has accrued the wisdom of six decades, a man of peace but a soldier—do we not really talk of a powerful dichotomy, of a patriarch? This word has never been far from my conscious ever since I became familiar with his work, but is it a word Elisha would not ascribe to himself? All the more reason it is fitting.

And what then does he mean to tell us? The message, I claim, is downright patriarchal. It is a message of hope. It is a message of enchantment with this life of ours, enthrallment with the words of language. Elisha wants us to know that any creature who can walk the

earth and create such words, such language, is truly the darling of the universe. And this a heritage in which we all share. What hope!

2.

A helicopter is juxtaposed against a flock of birds . . . salamanders bear marks of fear and mortal hints . . . a mother shelters her baby on an armored bus in war zone . . . mounds of dead soldiers grow from white snow. These images are little different than those created by the human beings in this land three thousands years ago, only today we use slightly enhanced machines. Still the yearning is identical. The desires have not evolved or changed. We have not refined the human spirit an ounce since David; we have not discovered a superior soul. We still love; we still make war. Again we sense the dichotomy of the patriarch—love of all the masses framed against the wars of mankind.

Here is a soldier of the mind, one who sternly defends the peace he created by the words of a poem; here is the settler in an experimental community, only this particular community has grown international in scope from his surprisingly—no doubt mostly a surprise to himself—adept handling of Internet creativity; and here is the patriarch of the poem, a man comfortable with the wisdom of a lifetime, at ease enough to remit this wisdom with gentle words, at times invisible words... for the greatest act of poetry occurs between the lines.

3.

I dream of a wise man, alone in a small white room deep within his dear kibbutz; he sits within shouting distance of a plot where his pioneer parents first erected their tent to help their community settle this place. Nearby is the kibbutz cemetery where the voices of the loved dead ones occasionally lure the man to come for discourse.

A few times, he has left the kibbutz—to study in Jerusalem; to fight in three wars—but now he is back for good. In this room, in front of the studious man, is a PC; and this then has become his scroll of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the device that has brought the words of his poems from a small room in Israel to every continent of the world, and at last to this e-book before you.

So, I commend this wonderful book to you, dear reader, assured that after a reading you too will speak the name of the poet with a certain graceful awe . . . Elisha Porat.

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The Fragrance of Mignonette



*ONE:*

*JERUSALEM POEMS*

## *Growing Old*

I who was a buck in Jerusalem  
a young and fine-muscled buck in Jerusalem  
lustily bounding on the terraces of Jerusalem,  
now calculate each pace and step  
on the ascent to the lost lairs of love.  
Clumsily I slide on the inclines  
tumbling with the stones of Jerusalem,  
Clinging like a desperate survivor to an early memory:  
a forgotten classroom lesson  
about a cruel and precise law  
concerning inclined planes.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Riva Rubin*

## *BUILDING PARTNER*

I also want to be a partner  
in the building of Jerusalem. With you  
sing hymns to her with a great voice  
in the assemblage of her mutes;  
with you encompass her wall  
in a glory-march among her lame celebrants.  
I have the right to be a partner,  
after all I spilled the fury of my youth on her:  
fights with zealots and night patrols  
in the shadow of fences, sniping from her lattices.  
Wait, don't finish without me, I've  
bought rough sandals and white linen  
to flourish with you on her towers,  
before I smash myself on the squares  
and am pounded by her stones like you, powdered fine  
coveting the dust of her saints.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Riva Rubin*

# *RETIREMENT*

Poets do not retire  
On reaching their time to be silent,  
Praising the beauty of Jerusalem  
They are pushed slowly eastward  
Thrust aside forgotten to the desert.  
And there, suddenly, in absolute secrecy  
Drop mutely from the cliff,  
And the bone of their poetry, drying  
Bleaching and gathering dust  
Descends to the cave opening.  
Sinks slowly, gathered  
In the dust cloud of the scrolls.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Aura Hammer*

## *LESSON IN GEOLOGY*

“The anomaly of Jerusalem is not simple to perceive,  
at a glance, transparent: Mountain platform and  
chalkstone, an elevated Holy Site.”

He tapped with his stonemason’s hammer,  
chipping crimson flakes off a stone taken from a wall.

“The Flawless red stone of Jerusalem testifies  
that there in the subterranean depth of the city  
all is broken burst and smashed.

Like a gigantic inverted funnel—  
a cistern for Jewish blood pumping,  
draining into it from all worlds.”

I remember his lesson as if it was yesterday:  
the city afloat, the street suddenly swaying,  
the veins of rust and dim and deep beneath me,  
the rustle and seethe of a primeval river.

*Translated by Riva Rubin*

## *EXILE*

In the quiet nursing home in Jerusalem,  
in the old neighborhood of "Beit Yosef"  
my good readers wait for me:  
old men weaned of joy  
shuffle their feet on tiled floors,  
and the women, parched and withered,  
resemble the rusty pails  
once used to draw water from wells.  
Once a week they come out  
to the terrace to observe my weakness,  
as I totter on the pavement below:  
"Come join us,"  
they call with compassion,  
"We've been long exiled from our lives,  
but you, where are you rushing to?"

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *A SHORT FAREWELL LETTER*

To my Hebrew, my own sundered, grated Hebrew:  
There, in my forgotten, distant childhood  
You were placed inside my ear, imprinted  
In my finger, poured upon my neck.  
Now, goodbye: I am sinking, forgotten  
You go on, not turning your head.  
Fare you well, my bell-wether.  
Now lock on, my distant one, to  
The neck of a tender boy, weigh heavily  
On the heart of my successor.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*

## *A Cracked Statuette*

In the summer of seventy-nine,  
Sheltered in the shade, on a step in Market  
Street, in the shop of a Christian Arab,  
While my hand was stroking the halo of hair  
Of a graven statuette—  
A startling voice suddenly broke out,  
A young announcer begging, pleading: hurry, whoever is able,  
Whoever is near, run to the tower  
Of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher—  
Through the lattice you may know her:  
Wrapped all in black but her hair is fair,  
And her car still pulses below her.  
And when I arrived—I was late—  
With those who were called to her aid,  
The helpers, the radio was screaming,  
And all the city was frozen, holding its breath—

Already she lay there, stretched out in the square:  
Innocent, beautiful, and wrapped all about in the shining  
Radiance of a cracked statuette.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*



*TWO:*

*MEMORY POEMS*

## *STRANGE SNOW*

Strange soft snow descends  
on the slopes of Jebel-El-Kabir,  
chill and silent it falls  
on dugouts and vehicles  
armoured on the screens of memory.  
Astray in me in the damp haze  
forgotten comrades call  
whose lives once touched my life  
now grown distant beyond the roads  
the roadblocks the rolling hardware.  
Once, among them, I saw  
such a pure white suddenly crushed;  
minced and ploughed under and rearing up  
and then subsiding silently absorbing  
rent veins and a reddening stain.

*Translated by Riva Rubin*

## *Stone Snowy Mounds*

Mounds of dead soldiers  
Grow from the white snow,  
From Yanta and Amiq, Meducha and Baruk.  
Wintry freezing water assaults the streams  
By the villages of Ein Zechalta and Ein Tzophar.

Among the blackened cedar palms,  
The bulldozers raise rocks  
Above the dead who lie under the snow.

The spring grass, the memory,  
Suspends this siege on the mounds,  
and tries to see who once lived but now  
Lies under these melting waves of stones.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *THREE COLORS*

On Memorial Day, I make my way up  
to the small military cemetery.  
In the northwestern corner  
we've placed a gray basalt rock  
and facing the southern corner—  
a blanching chunk chalk.  
And between under the loose sand  
our red loam  
spreads itself all round.

And when the loudspeaker booms out  
the memorial prayer,  
I close my eyes  
and see those three colors  
descend before me and disappear  
into the encroaching shadow of the stones.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Seymour Mayne*

# *MIGRATING BIRDS*

Over the lighthouse of Stella Maris—  
two hundred pelicans in flight.  
Heavy air today. Slowly they flap  
over the greying sea, over  
the greening mountain rocks,  
an arrowhead pointed North.  
Head to tail to head they lock  
in the pattern, secure  
in this structure. Suddenly  
feathers are scattered, the line  
is broken from fear of the whirling  
chopper descending roof-high,  
desperate to find the bright  
square, the tightened center,  
the landing platform  
of Rambam, on sea.

\*Rambam: a big hospital in Haifa where army in the North are treated

*Translated from the Hebrew by Elaine Magarrel*

## *MIGRATING BIRDS (for Shaul, my son)*

Above the Stella Maris lighthouse  
two hundred pelicans in flight.  
The air is heavy today, and their flapping sluggish  
across the graying sea,  
above the green mountain cliffs.  
Like an arrowhead pitched north  
they join head to tail  
forging a blocked secure formation.  
All at once their line breaks,  
their feathers scatter  
from the threat of the spinning chopper  
descending toward roofs,  
urgently, despairingly, seeking  
the center of the bright square:  
the landing tract of “Ramba’m Hospital” on sea.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

# ARAMAIC

On a night's drive in an open Jeep  
you go past signs on corrugated tin:  
Rashaya, Hatzbaya, Kafraya.  
As if I sail and travel  
beyond times, in a living Aramaic land.  
Only the field radio keeps me posted:  
an escort, wounded, a chopper landing.  
And someone, agitated, beset by horrors,  
hurts both my ears:  
shrilly, with a trembling sputter,  
buckles the Hebrew.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *FERRIS WHEEL*

In the Casino, under Hatzbaya,  
spring water rumbles,  
imprisoned in coves of concrete,  
bolting racing spinning to press out  
powerfully driving a rusty Ferris wheel,  
a remnant of forgotten fairs.  
On the torn lattice seat,  
I notice a Druze kid  
flying, letting out a shout:  
an unforgettable landscape  
is suddenly revealed to him.  
In the dense grasses all around  
the blackened corpses of tanks,  
an ashen mound, helmets, abandoned gear  
roll about, swept south down the river  
toward a blinding horizon  
toward places that even from the top of the  
wheel,  
one can only guess at the distance.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*



## *ON THE WAY TO NABATIYA*

On the way to Nabatiya  
the rocks along the curves  
seem to resemble the stone columns  
of the bay in San Francisco  
or the collapsed fences  
in a Hasidic community in Jerusalem.  
As I tie the belt of the helmet to my chin  
tightly fasten the prickly velcro of my vest  
adjust the goggles on my forehead  
all at once my eyes grow blurry  
and for a moment I can't tell  
which is farther away:  
The United States or Me'ah She'arim.

lebanon, 1984.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *ON THE WAY TO NABATIYA*

The path to Nabatiya is truly unpleasant,  
even for veteran soldiers such as myself  
who, as you know, “are not killed,  
but simply vaporize . . . .”

I try to bring a quick smile to the lips  
of my escort rangers crew, “What do  
we really have to lose?” I ask them.

“We’ll go back home, and what good things  
are waiting there for us—boring work,  
heart attacks, accidents? But here,  
you’ll be gone in a minute, all at once,  
and you won’t even know where the bullet  
comes from, the one that rids you of all  
your troubles . . . .

Then you’ll be granted a charity,  
because you’ll finish your life  
in ‘dignity’ as a brave soldier;  
soon you’ll be posted in the newspapers,  
even the weakest of you who never would  
have been absolved—not for a single word—  
in your entire life.

And the principal charity?  
You’ll remain young forever,  
for generations upon generations,  
for eternity, and no one can take  
this from you.”

Then suddenly, unheedingly,  
the joke transforms into an unexpected  
seriousness . . . the curvature  
of the narrow path becomes sharp;  
dark, little bridges appear from nowhere,  
as the rocks aside the road draw near  
with a frightening closeness,  
and the dark, green wood  
appears suspicious.

*Translated by Ward Kelley with the author*

## *To Die at the Springs of El-Hamma*

Down into the ficus boulevards at the springs of El-Hamma  
Come the starlings, trembling, then landing.  
The water is hot at the springs of El-Hamma,  
Yet night is more hostile than day.  
Layers of sand on those who landed before:  
Layers of sand cover their faces,  
The water is dead at the springs of El-Hamma.  
From great distances come the starlings  
Beating to these death-ponds: always they come.  
Who sends these birds to end  
In the booby-trapped springs of El-Hamma?  
They fly so urgently, with no chance or time,  
No time for life and no chance to learn  
If someone expects their return.  
The starlings are flying in to die in the seducer  
Springs of El-Hamma, poisoned by the salt.  
Fowl can't stop the soldiers, for their faces  
Are pointed into the earth. Oh, how easy it is  
To finish as a starling and not as a soldier.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *Far From Saida*

Far from Saida your face  
sinks into a memory sea:  
Blue in the waters, wet and salted,  
I carry it as a crib, reverently, without shaking.  
Your face abruptly is thrown to shore  
as my sea swells with deep longings.  
I kneel in the soft sand to lift my food  
From the Army duffle bag, the one  
your velvet hands packed last night;  
The murmur of plastic wrapping,  
The sour smell of condensation, both rise  
From the sausage and cheese sandwiches.  
Then I bend, lower than the horizon,  
And I lean, whispering, to almost realize . . .  
I take out a sandwich, chewing,  
smelling, then the memory . . .  
Suddenly I roll over  
into the warm sand  
to kiss your fingerprints.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *The Crows Shout*

The crows now shout in  
The cold winter, gliding and black  
As the young soldiers' ghosts  
Whose dear faces now climb  
Up to the treetops, then stop, suspended in  
The branches . . . the crows shout,  
Haunted, abruptly quarreling  
Because they feel the boys' vapor breath;  
They leap in the evening's soft air,  
Then drop at last, with drooped wings  
And empty throats, resting as if betrayed  
By silences or lack of protests.  
Tomorrow they'll take flight and vanish,  
ending far from here, without stopping once.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

*THREE:*

*ON MEMORIAL DAY*

## *On Memorial Day*

On Memorial Day, I run off from the groves.  
I'm upset again, as every year.  
Through the picnic smoke I watch while  
The lamenting land, mournful, slumps its shoulders.  
And when the ghosts are all assembled before me,  
From the rocks, from the caves, from the earth,  
I give a command: you are all free to memories.  
I turn my face away, then whisper to us living:  
That's it, gentlemen, they are trapped.  
They can't escape. They left behind  
Their last will and testament, here in our hands.

Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley

## *ON MEMORIAL DAY*

On Memorial Day, I take off to the woods.

Again I'm moved.

Through the smoke I observe

the earth veiling its shoulders.

As they gather before me from the rocks

I command: You're all released to memories.

I turn aside and to you I whisper:

This is it, folks, they're trapped.

They can't escape. Their will and testament

They've left with us.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*



## *Lily Bulbs*

On Memorial Day I knelt  
To plant lily bulbs in flowerpots,  
And put them in the concrete holders  
By the small military corner at our cemetery.  
When they sprout, to shout at me,  
I'll hide them again inside the soil.  
Sitting on the stone-bench, I watch every day,  
How green and fresh they rise,  
How the flowering white candles  
Are so shiny in autumn.  
How their blossoms become yellow,  
Only to wither, fade, and I remain unconsoled.  
And a year later, in the spring, I will kneel  
Again to the lily flowerpots, to see  
How they cracked the dirt, and  
How the clay pottery collapsed,  
Broken, never to be mended.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *Salamanders on the North Border Road*

Two salamanders are crossing the North  
Border Road. Sluggish and indifferent, they  
Creep under the borderline barbed wire. I stop  
The patrol. Above the ravines and fields,  
Silence suddenly drops for a moment: we watch  
Their orange backs, a poison color, their tails  
Striped black, and their evil aura darkens  
The morning light. I feel the danger,  
And give an order, but even helmets and  
Bullet-proof vests can't help when your terrain  
Abruptly explodes: in the orange glow  
I can see the creatures: evasive, lazy, innocent,  
As if they don't carry on their backs  
Marks of fear and mortal hints.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *Salamanders on the Northern Road*

Salamanders cross the northern  
road. Slow and indifferent they  
crawl towards the fence. I brake  
suddenly, stop the patrol. In the valleys  
and in the fields everything suddenly falls silent:  
a poisonous orange color, black tail  
stripes, but their radiance darkens  
the morning light. On guard, helmets,  
I order. But neither flak jackets  
nor chin armour are any use  
any more: in the bright orange that suddenly  
explodes, I see them, withdrawing lazily, innocent,  
oh, so innocent, as if they didn't bear  
on their backs intimations of their warning.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*

## *Illusion*

Inside the crying, inside the lament,  
I sometimes feel the buds of recovery  
Might burst into life. As if here—  
At the bottom of my deepest hole—  
I only need to climb, simply climb.

And when I'm lying there, immersed,  
With salty water flowing from my eyes,  
Streaming from matted eyelashes,  
I delude myself that I'm redeemed:

In the cost of skin, of finger, of nail,  
In their memories that are sunk in streams  
Of salted rain, in all those ghosts who try  
To make sprouts in my soul, a greenhouse  
Who instead shelters my flawed seeds of grief  
And sorrow, without a chance of consolation.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *The Young Students*

“The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night when the clock counts.”

—Archibald MacLeish

On the morning of Memorial Day I walk into the class.

“The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard . . . . “

I read to my young students;

My voice echoes in the silent space of the class.

Their eyes are fastened to my lips,

Fear beats upon my face:

I'm the one who knows,

I'm the one who remembers;

I bite my lip, and begin to cry.

Abruptly I flee from the classroom,

As the eyes of my young students

Drill into the silent space in my brain.

Speak to me, dear children,

How I truly need to hear

Your voices now.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *Among Their Pictures*

In my memory, I'm the one who always wanders  
Within their pictures: the stretched black  
Strips around the gravestone photograph,  
The standing twisted flowers,  
The burning candles under their icons.  
From inside the scene: suddenly, on  
The white margins, I see their fingerprints  
Which now appear along with their laughing voices;  
Their stifled whispers are breaking me.  
Oh, how different it should all be  
With them, they should be running  
With their warm breath panting,  
And not inanimate and flaccid  
Like they are now, without their lives.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *AND SOMETIMES*

And sometimes I crouch to the floor  
looking for red Benny, strong-legged,  
and for stocky Eddy, so spectacularly  
packed in his uniform.

My hands wander across the cold tiles,  
crumbling memories of image-as-dreams,  
and, in my head, lines upon lines  
dig and burrow, words that in vain  
I strain to recapture.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *PAPER SHROUDS*

Twenty years have passed  
since that ambush night  
which wouldn't drop into oblivion.  
On the front slope of the hill  
a deadly fog descended  
which gradually faded with first light.

They got off the armored track for just a moment:  
to pee  
to open a can of army ration.  
True, a mistake, but  
they had been fighting for too many hours,  
their feet welded to the steel floor.

Twenty years later  
I bend over them  
wrap them with the pages  
I pull and tear out  
from the classified Agranat Report.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*



## *A LONGING*

On Memorial Day I surrender  
to a longing for my dead.  
The wail of the siren shrieking  
above the eucalyptus tops  
is sounded from afar as if  
it were a private whistle-code  
between me and them. As if,  
presently, they'll rise  
shake off the dust,  
lean their bikes against the fence  
and whistle back to me.  
As if time gathers again  
into the funnel of the electric siren:  
it goes down through iron and grounds  
the awful wailing  
deep in the earth.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *The Lost Son*

He came back, but he came like a stranger  
He came back, looked about and did not  
Recall, for to him, all appeared estranged:  
The house, the yard, the narrow lane.  
Their memory sliced through his heart,  
Cut, and he who survived and was favoured  
Came back; and he who had sworn back there  
That nothing would he forget, estranged though it be:  
A dirt path, and the barren field and the ditch  
At the edge, and the lemon tree with its bitter fruit.  
He felt that his absence was almost ordained:  
To come back at last, to come like a stranger  
With a shadowy memory that was not estranged,  
And an unraveled thread of burning desire  
That will never more be made whole.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*

## *MIA . . . His Coming Back*

And they waited for his coming back  
From this war that never ends:  
The unkempt lawn, the untended tree,  
The faded plastic chairs,  
The narrow rusty gate  
And its crying hinges.  
His mother, his brother, father, and sister,  
All frozen inside time: withered  
In winter, bowed from days of grief.

His family is certain there will be a day  
When he suddenly comes; then everything  
In this place will start to move: the grass will grow,  
The tree will carry its fruit, the plastic  
Chairs become polished, and the narrow  
Gate will start to turn, will open,  
And never close again.

If only he would come back, only just appear:  
The bubble of time will burst,  
Their scarred hearts will beat smoothly,  
They will drop to their knees, slowly,  
And lift their eyes to him,  
Weeping their thanksgiving prayer.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

*FOUR:*

*An Aging Poet*

## *In the Military Mobile Hospital*

Who was born, like me, in 1938,  
Who looked for partners in his trip through life;  
What other baby was conveyed home on the floor  
Of an armored bus, while his young mother  
Knelt over him, sheltering;  
Or who else became a tourist  
crossing over alien lands  
his whole life but leaving  
behind his shuddering  
heart, flapping back there,  
still in the military mobile hospital?

Always I remind myself:  
We were only one year old when  
The fate of our world was molded and altered  
by a bloodbath, and our first words—  
Compressed words, bad words—became  
Precisely the ancient amulet.

*Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ward Kelley*

## *As Things Stand*

Nice of you to phone, it was good to hear  
Your voice. And how are you? Well done, you've  
Come on. I saw what you'd had published in the  
Magazine. Too true, quite a few years have passed since then:  
And they've had their way, a few grandchildren,  
I won't say how many. You're really not supposed  
To count. And what about me? The same walls  
And forty-two square meters. The ground  
Shifts, and round about everything is cracked, and at night  
I tremble: sudden fractures, the plaster  
Flakes, and on the roof bats puke out bursts of  
Fruit squishy with vomit and seeds. And if  
I tune my ear to the silence that comes  
From your telephone, I can clearly hear:  
Droves of yearnings galloping away to the distant hills.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*

## *GUARDIAN ANGEL*

In the 40s, in the Valley of Jezreel,  
while visiting relatives in “Zeronia,”  
my mother took me along  
into the women’s section of the public showers.  
The six-year-old in me was compelled  
to watch how above, between the ivory  
columns of muscular thighs, the thick forest  
of womanhood wildly grows.  
And then, like in the movies: a split second  
before he desecrated the open robes  
of some stray mom—I slipped on a wet floor  
suffused with the good odors of soap,  
and the angel who blankets the eyes of the newborn  
instantly blanketed me with a hard blow,  
a torn eyebrow, and a bleeding cut.  
But there are nights when I must return  
to that same arena, go back once more  
to the old crime, and without a watchful angel  
I turn back, peek at the forbidden:  
without his hand obscuring my memory,  
and without the blessed miracle of his vigilance.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *Fall 1999*

Now in the fall the curlews assemble  
In the orchards, and the grey conies  
Are already changing their colours while I,  
Too, rub on my heart the cream  
That protects from summer heart, to keep it  
Safe on wintry days as well.  
And in my room which darkens in the cloudy light  
I go up to the wall: I tear off papers,  
Pictures and reminders of the last two thousand years.  
I stand in front of the empty rack  
And once more take a pledge:  
No bungling now, you treacherous body,  
You have to bear me still  
All of me, into the next thousand.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*



## *Proud Heartworm*

Hush now, proud  
heartworm, stop your gnawing,  
leave off chomping. I've suffered enough  
because of you. Down girl,  
down. Stick to the bottom  
of the pit; and quiet there, you arrogant thing.  
Maybe if you shut up in time,  
it will hurry, pass over us  
too, like it did then, and again  
nab, grab and take down with it  
those who aren't careful.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden*

## *The Fragrance of Mignonette*

“Until I smelled the fragrance  
of the cut grass, I didn't believe  
I was home again.” said the young soldier,  
back, stricken from the battle on the Canal.  
And I, who was stricken after him, fifteen years  
after him, did not believe I had risen  
from my bed: drunk as then climbing  
to the clay hilltop, flattening myself  
on its grass. And reviving in its  
good warmth: like a child coming back  
wrapped in the sweet fragrance of Mignonette.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden*

## *A PINCH (for Nurit Guvrin)*

Everyone needs his Brenner.

I, too, need my Brenner  
who will sell me his suspenders  
and will print my meager notebook.

I, too, need my Brenner  
who will remove his crown of spiked thorns  
and shove them in my behind:  
let my stuffy air blow out  
and my bad odors spread around me,  
let the end come to my living vapid flesh  
still standing between my diminishing bones  
and my taut, gleaming skin.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *A HAUNTED POET (to the memory of Abba Kovner)*

Years he smoked, burned, inhaled  
filthy butts that wrecked his lungs  
with tuberculosis:

mucus, cough, and pain.

He didn't cry he didn't shout,  
he only groaned in private,  
and in whispers dictated notes  
to those bending over his bed.

The sound of chimes and bells  
interrupted the silence of his last nights  
always alerting his heart's flight:

He didn't save from the fires  
a loving mother chasing  
after him, clinging as he walks,  
as if he were a baby again,  
holding her ashes  
on his last day.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *ON THE BEACH*

Saturday noon, on the beach,  
the tan grandson burrows into  
a dug-up basin padded with sand.  
I observe him from the height of my age,  
again see my body draw a circle,  
warm and sticky of a boy pissing in the sand.  
Time flows between us, a golden froth,  
and stings my lips with salt.  
From the sunken mold of the sand mask  
the boy that I was comes back to me,  
sprawled, foaming and wallowing, coddled by the sun.  
A passing cloud suddenly darkens the light,  
my face takes on the hardness of graying plaster:  
the short-lived joy, a forgotten image from childhood,  
all is swept back, dripping between the fingers  
in the rhythmic beat of retreating waves.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

# *MEMORY OF MY YOUTH*

*(for Sima and Ephy Eya)*

Poetry is a sudden process  
of verbal compression.  
I remember well one such illumination:  
her father was a famous artist  
who used to load his brush  
with one bullet many—  
to explode on the canvas with first touch.  
He drew the beautiful head of his daughter  
and shook his head with pity at my sweaty pages:  
I feel for the two of you,  
she doesn't know yet  
that a poet is a continuous process  
of the pain of existence.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keler*

## *WITHOUT A EULOGY*

What he wanted was  
to hide among the simple  
or among the small  
whose greatness  
he had always craved.  
To be at rest with friends  
cloaked in the pride of the meek without words,  
and without even a eulogy.  
And after that, only this:  
To lie below tender shoots  
sheltered in the shade of thorns  
and to hear nothing  
but blackbirds singing.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks*

## *I SAW A MAN*

I saw a man stooped and  
drinking brackish water  
lying with his woman  
drawing from his ribs  
with tender dream hands  
a glinting splinter dulled  
by the dust of the fire smell  
eating his bread with brimstone  
waving his legs in farewell  
to all who remembered him:  
not shouting but  
smiling at his punishment  
that comes unsurprising, dreamily,  
if foreseen.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Riva Rubin*



## *Koalas in Hadera Woods*

Golden koalas dance there  
In the heights of the treetops, leaping in front of me  
And offering me their honey in flower-bowls:  
The sweetness of eucalyptus, delicate and smoky,  
And rosin that gives off the sharp scent of myrtle.  
They salute me in their slothful idleness,  
Hanging like memories in the thick wood  
That darkens before me, sundered out of my years.  
As if they know that I am hurrying now  
To the town railway station, to  
The renovated platform, to part from my dear ones:  
My beloved, my life, at the edge of the wood, opposite  
The dunes of Hadera West station.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris*

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# *THE POET:*

*The Source of the Poem—An Interview with Elisha Porat by Ward Kelley*

## *Introduction*

Greetings:

I believe we have done something important here, yet it grew out of great happenstance. About two years ago, I published some pieces on the Israeli ezine, *Ariga*, and was soon contacted by Elisha who said he liked my poems.

This began as an email correspondence and I quickly came to see this celebrated poet of Hebrew, so adept at his own language, had only a limited command of English. No doubt this explains his attraction to my poor poetry, in that he surely fills in the blanks with his own Hebrew genius. At one point in our correspondence, Elisha mentioned that two writers were coming to his kibbutz to interview him for the Israeli newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*. He said he prayed the interview went well since he didn't consider himself a favorite of the media, but instead usually appeared as an "old skeptic."

A few weeks later, he wrote to say he was excited by how well the interview had turned out in print, to which I replied it was unfortunate the English-speaking world wouldn't have a chance to see it, for how many Hebrew interviews are translated into English? I would have gladly put in the time but, alas, I can't read Hebrew at all, not a single "kamatz." This deficiency led to the idea of me interviewing Elisha, with him responding in his irregular English via email. I then edited the answer into acceptable English and emailed it back for his approval.

In this manner, we completed sixteen questions. As the emails zapped back and forth, I realized a powerful personality unfolded in the answers: an opinionated gentleman, a fiery poet, a Hebrew scholar, a reluctant soldier. As much as possible, I left his paragraph breaks in place, and where I edited much of what he said from a spelling and grammatical sense, I tried always to be faithful to the flavor of his Hebrew pacing and diction. Whenever I thought I had the answer right, I emailed it back to see what Elisha thought of it.

Ward Kelley

## *THE INTERVIEW*

**Ward Kelley:** At what age did you first start writing poetry?

**Elisha Porat:** I published my first chapbook of poems in 1976. It was titled *Hushniya the Minaret*. I was then thirty-eight years old. I had started to write the poems two years before the book appeared. These were bad and sad times in Israel, the years after the hard Yom Kippur War of October 1973.

I began to write what I call memory poems; these first poems involved the memories of my best friends who had gone off to the hard war, and the memory of my land, Israel, as she was before this terrible war.

Before 1974, I had only written fiction. My first book of fiction, a collection of short stories, called *Desolate Land*, was published two months before the war, in the summer of 1973. It was an unlucky first book since both the book and its author were quickly forgotten in the tragic events of Yom Kippur 1973.

So after the war I decided I must start everything from the beginning with my writing, as though I were a new writer. This was really hard.

**WK:** When you went back to the beginning, you found poetry there?

**EP:** I, myself, had not thought for a moment that I was going to write poetry. All of my previous writing attempts involved strictly prose; there was no poetry at all. If someone back then had told me that in the next

twenty years I would publish four books of poetry, I would have laughed out loud. Poetry was so far away from my true self; poetry was inconceivable for me.

Then my life abruptly changed. My father died suddenly from a heart attack. He was only sixty years old.

The sorrow I felt about my father, and his sudden death, did not come out in my prose. It was too hard for me to make prose about his absence in my life, about my severe longings for him. I remember that my first attempts to deal with his memory unconsciously turned out to be a few short poems. For a long time I didn't know what to do with a literary experience such as this. I continued to publish prose and fiction, but I kept these early, immature, imperfect poems to myself, something like a secret.

Then exploded the bloody war of October 1973. I spent nearly half a year in the army—until the spring of 1974—in what would be one of the hardest periods of my life. I was not what you could call a young soldier: I had a family and many commitments in my life, and the war seemed as if it would never finish. Yet it was from the heavy pressure of the war that were born my first perfect poems.

I suddenly found myself compelled to write poetry constantly—I wrote on every piece of paper I could find at the front. I wrote on a cigar box, on ammunition packing, on military dispatches and copies; anything that could be written on, I wrote on it. Some of these poems I sent home to my wife, on soldier cards [editor's note: postcards issued by the government to soldiers at the front], asking her to keep them for me until

I returned on leave. When I finally got home—some leaves were for twenty-four hours, others forty-eight—I discovered that the poems that were there waiting for me now demanded that I sit down and finish them. This was very hard, because I had so little time for such things, but I did it finally.

In that period I couldn't stop writing poetry. I wrote about my private sorrows, and my yearning for my lost father. I wrote about losing my Israel, the one that we all had before the war, and I wrote about my friends who had been killed in that hard war. The poems came by themselves to me; I didn't want them, I didn't call to them, but they came and came and never left me alone.

So suddenly, there in the last days of 1974, I found myself with a book of poems in my hand. My first book of poetry was almost finished.

**WK:** Much of your work involves war and the plight of the common soldier; what is the poetry of war? What is demanded of the poet who witnesses a war?

**EP:** My generation is the second generation of the founders of the state of Israel, and we needed to fight almost our whole lives. I was proud to be part of my generation, and also realized I had been given the character of the poet—that special ability to be part of real life, daily life, the life of your times, while at the same time being able to view it all from the outside. The poet can fight, yet also yearn for other times, other places.

In modern Hebrew poetry, we have a great heritage of war poems. After the war of 1948, the war of independence, our poets began writing a great

Hebrew war poetry. This modern Hebrew war poetry has become a model for all subsequent Israeli poets. Every poet who is compelled to write war poetry must consider the 1948 model. Back then the identification of oneself with the war policy was absolute—the world of national aspirations was completely integrated into the world of the solitary poet.

Yet in the times when I began to write my own poetry—as a result of the wars I witnessed—it was a far different world. War, as a single solution, was no longer accepted by all; instead, the awareness of the sanctity of a single life was now the conventional outlook. The death of our young soldiers became the main element, and a trend of elegy poems began to take the place of war poetry.

My own war poetry is completely elegy poetry—elegies of the deaths of young soldiers, elegies of their lives, of all nature and the physical landscape surrounding their deaths. The main targets or subjects of war poetry have changed to illustrations of the sorrow and grief over the premature deaths of our young soldiers.

I remember one night, in the middle of the 1973 war, I decided to write my war poems as witness poems. I swore I would be as accurate a witness as I could be—no political lies, no lies of the generals, no empty nationalistic slogans. Nothing from these abominable matters would I bring to my poems. Instead I wanted the little things, the little situations, the common life of the common soldiers whom I knew so well, since I was that common soldier.



And I wrote my elegy poems, my war poems, without hate and without fury or anger. There were no big promises of revenge. I wrote sorrowful poems, exactly as I saw the real war, from the lowly point of view of the common soldier—the point of view of the human, at his most basic level.

My poems witnessed the reality of this hard war. They were testaments of the unique events I lived through in the war. I wanted to capture what was fast forgotten. And another thing I came to understand after a long time—my poems had helped me, maybe, in my struggle against shellshock.

**WK:** Some readers would say your poems are anti-war. Would you agree?

**EP:** I was never a proclaimed anti-militarist. And I was never an active pacifist. No, the anti-militarism of my poetry is a later by-product of my writing. I always wrote my poems without any underlying intentions. The only reason I wrote was to answer the primary writing impulse.

The possible anti-war or anti-militarism meanings to my poems all came to light later on. I didn't consciously write anti-war poetry. Yet it has become clear to me after the years, from the critics and the views of readers, that there is indeed an anti-war message within these poems.

The human aspect of the battle, of the war, is the aspect of which I wrote. And the human aspect can be the only aspect of the common soldier. So I strive to keep my poems clean of nationality arguments, clean of military arguments, and clean of political arguments. I write only of the common soldier's world in the war, the human aspects of this world.

**WK:** Are there only Hebrew poets in your own heritage of war poets?

**EP:** Absolutely not. Let me tell you a little story. In the middle of that dark period of World War II, in 1943, a unique anthology of poetry was published here in Israel—poems translated into Hebrew from the poetry of the world. This anthology concerned war poems: memorial poems and memory poems. Among the many poems from many languages were a few translated from English, and one or two from American-English.

I read this anthology ten years later, in the middle of the 1950's, and I can remember these feelings so vividly. I was very impressed with the perfect poem of Archibald MacLeish. It was called "The Young Dead Soldiers," which he wrote in Flanders during the first World War.

This poem received a perfect translation into Hebrew by one of the greatest Hebrew poets, Avraham Schlonsky. The young people all over small Palestine-Eretz Yisrael, all the Jewish guys and girls, read this poem in their meetings. It was quoted in radio broadcasts, in newspapers, and in bulletins everywhere. It was surprising how many in this young Jewish generation knew the poem by heart.

Many, many years later, I found myself in the middle of the war in Lebanon, there in the summer of 1982. One night, as I rested—after a few nights without sleep—somewhere in a field off the road to the Beirut-Damesek highway, I took out a newspaper that was two or three days old. It was a Hebrew newspaper, and in it was a short article about the death of Archibald MacLeish. He had died a few days before this, at the age of 90 . . . . God help me! . . . . that night I was not attacked by Syrian tanks; I was not attacked by Lebanese troops; no, dear Ward, that night I was

attacked by my memories, and the beautiful words and unforgettable lines of his poem now felt like bullets:

“The young dead soldiers do not speak / they have a silence that speaks for them . . . .”

I have never forgotten this marvelous memorial poem. A few years after that night in the field where I read of his death—I think it was 1984 or 1985—I wrote my own Hebrew poem, “The Young Soldier Who Died,” and sent it to the literary supplement of one of our big newspapers. It was published immediately. Days later I changed the name to “The Young Students . . . .” and with this name the poem was published in my second book of poems, *Shir Zikaron* (Poem, Memory) in 1986.

**WK:** What do you tell the younger generations about war?

**EP:** A month and a half before the war in Lebanon broke out, I was invited to a classroom to discuss with the young students the meaning of National Memorial Day 1982. I decided to read them the touching poem, “The Young Dead Soldiers” by Archibald MacLeish:

“The young dead soldiers do not speak.  
Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not  
heard them?  
They have a silence that speaks for them at night when the  
clock counts.”

The young students sat quietly under my eyes as I stood at the front of the class; my loud voice echoed throughout the room. Their eyes were glued

to my lips. It seemed as though they could sense my old fears, my hard memories swarming back to me from those far away years. I felt as if I were the only man who remembers, the only man who truly knows. And I had a duty, a bloody duty, to remember and to remind others. From far away, from another war—the one of 1973—I could hear soldiers call to me, the voices of the young soldiers who were lying in the makeshift morgues, I could hear them call, “You will remember us; you will not forget us. You must tell the others, the many people who never knew us, they must see us lying dead in this place, and they must hear how we expected help . . . help that never came. And then you will describe the look of betrayal in our dying eyes.”

The young students watched this great emotion attack me. I pulled out some other papers, more war poems that I had planned to use to illustrate the special meaning of National Memorial Day, but I couldn’t continue my lesson. The faces of my students had suddenly changed into the faces of the soldiers from the MacLeish poem. I stopped in the middle of a sentence, and couldn’t proceed. I begged their forgiveness in a quiet voice, then escaped the classroom.

“They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.”

.....

This is an example of one of Elisha's soldier cards:

**On the Way to Nabbatiya**

**by Elisha Porat**

The path to Nabbatiya is truly unpleasant,  
even for veteran soldiers such as myself  
who, as you know, “are not killed,  
but simply vaporize . . . .”

I try to bring a quick smile to the lips  
of my escort rangers crew, “What do  
we really have to lose?” I ask them.

“We’ll go back home, and what good things  
are waiting there for us—boring work,  
heart attacks, accidents? But here,  
you’ll be gone in a minute, all at once,  
and you won’t even know where the bullet  
comes from, the one that rids you of all  
your troubles . . .

then you’ll be granted a charity,  
because you’ll finish your life  
in ‘dignity’ as a brave soldier;  
soon you’ll be posted in the newspapers,  
even the weakest of you who never would  
have been absolved—not for a single word—  
in your entire life.

And the principal charity?  
You'll remain young forever,  
for generations upon generations,  
for eternity, and no one can take  
this from you.”

Then suddenly, unheedingly,  
the joke transforms into an unexpected  
seriousness . . . the curvature  
of the narrow path becomes sharp;  
dark, little bridges appear from nowhere,  
as the rocks aside the road draw near  
with a frightening closeness,  
and the dark, green wood  
appears suspicious.

.....

**WK:** In a poem concerning Jerusalem, Yehuda Amichai writes, “... already the demons of the past are meeting with the demons of the future....” What do your poems tell us about Jerusalem?

**EP:** Right from my first visit to Jerusalem, I was very impressed by the demons past, the many kinds of spiritual characters: the tragic prophets, the founders of the Jewish religion, the rebels against the Roman Empire, the Jewish poets. All of them comprise the gallery of deceased eccentrics who inhabit this city. I was a young boy then, several years after the war of 1948. Jerusalem was the life-symbol of the hard war of independence. There, so many heroes from ancient history joined the latest heroes: those

who broke the blockade of the city, the young fighters from the Palmach battalions, the defenders of the old city, and the loyal civilians who never abandoned the hungry and thirsty city.

From my first meeting with the city, from my first visit, I had the feeling—a strong, strange feeling—that there was much more than just history and memories in Jerusalem. There is something in her atmosphere that is very difficult to define. You could call it demons, you could call it the “Jerusalem Syndrome,” or you could call it holy fever. There is something there that brings men and women to the completion of their religious dreams . . . sometimes a tragic end of their religious dreams. And not only Jews, but the religious and faithful from all religions.

When I, myself, later reached Jerusalem for my first long stay, it was when I was doing my service in the IDF. [editor’s note: Israeli Defense Army. In Hebrew the army is called *Zahal*.] The year was 1957. I had only been there a short while before I met the messianic demon elements of Jerusalem. One of my first tasks as a young soldier in the city was to persuade another young recruit to come down from one of the city’s high towers. He had fortified himself at the top and threatened to open fire on the citizens. Well, dear Ward, I don’t know if you remember similar cases that happened in the USA after the Korean War, but this case was exactly the same. When the military police finally took him down from the tower, he spewed out a very strange monologue concerning the messiah and the apocalypse; the way he spoke disturbed me. Many years later I wrote a series of short stories about the messianic, tragic elements of the city.

But back in 1957, Jerusalem was a small, neglected town on the edge of the Israeli-Jordanian border. We called the city “The Appendix” because there was no way from it to any other place. For a young Israeli soldier, like myself, it was the real end of the world. This was when I met, for the first time, the many faces of Jerusalem: the desert face; the stony, rocky face (in this period the city had been built only from stones and limestone rocks, and there was no green, no parks or boulevards); and the drying face, the one full of religious tension. I remember her faces deep in my heart. I couldn’t have known back then that someday I would write so much fiction and poetry about my youthful visions of the city.

I also remember several suicide attempts and several actual suicides where students killed themselves by jumping from the high towers to the stony squares. As a precaution, the authorities decided to close the towers. Around this time, my girlfriend visited me in the city, and for some reason she had a great desire to go to the top of one of the towers. I wanted to show her all of my Jerusalem, so we attempted to enter a tower, but we were immediately stopped by a guard. Since I was in uniform, he at last decided to allow us entry, but in his own cynical way, he tried to protect our souls against the compulsions to leap. He confiscated our identity papers, saying, “It will be much more convenient to identify your bodies after you jump.” I knew what he was doing—it was his rough way of telling us that life is good, and how we, a nice young couple, should know that love is a great thing.

**WK:** It appears Jerusalem extracts a payment from all she nurtures. With you, did it go beyond a debt of blood—all the way to a debt of poetry?



**EP:** For many years I was a captive, a total captive, of Jerusalem. I was fascinated by the spiritual tensions of the city. I was a lover of her, and as much an active lover as any other type of love. I loved all of her faces: the topographical face, the geological face, and her spiritual face.

Her spiritual face shows us the religious tensions in her air. And once you view her this way, you come to understand she returns your attention by creating spiritual inspirations in your own heart. In my early prose, I wrote about my complicated ties to her. These stories were later collected in my first book of fiction, *Desolate Land* in 1973. In particular I considered these complexities in my story “Kamatz Alef.”

After the war of 1967, I began to be rehabilitated from my mystical attraction to this cruel city. I started to pass through a process of painful sobering. The spiritual influence, the spiritual magic that pressed on me and my work, began to change into memories. I understood this magic could not be reality but only a great yearning for a spiritual city, a yearning that began in me as a young soldier. A few years later, my close relations with her were almost concluded. We took a pause from each other—I took a pause from Jerusalem, and she took a pause from me.

I felt my love for her dissipate in the wind. It evaporated with my youth, gone with my memories. It was a hard disappointment for me. I can still find some pieces of my old Jerusalem, the divided city, in the far suburbs or I sometimes come upon them suddenly in forgotten yards off the main streets. Then I remember some of her passion. But there is little left of the spiritual town that I knew.

**WK:** Where did she go?

**EP:** In the painful period that came to Israel after the terrible war of 1973, I returned to Jerusalem. I spent two full seasons in the Hebrew University, the Department of Jewish Thought. I was surprised to meet a completely strange city. Now it was the real capitol of the state, not an aspiring center but the real center of Israel.

In this period, the political situation was complicated, and the resulting influence was decisive for every field of the national life. The struggles between the left wing and the right wing of the political map grew very hard. I was there to see the birthing pains of two new political movements—Gush Emunim of the right, and Shalom Achshav of the left.

I remember my young, brilliant, empathetic Rabbi who during his Torah lessons told us, his students, that every Saturday evening he goes into the naked fields of Judea and Samaria. He was an enthusiastic *Mitnachel*, a settler, and he was a great believer that the day of the messiah was upon us. So on Saturday nights he and his friends would find an unoccupied hill and start to build a *Hitnachalut*, a new settlement. Of course this was illegal—to take a hill from the Palestinians. So every Sunday the police or the army would appear and remove these settlements. He was a mystery to me, and I felt bewildered when I considered how this same, nice man, my Rabbi—who gave me such pleasure when I heard him discuss the holy studies—became a colonialist during the weekend nights.

When I, myself, drew the duty of night patrols along the borderline, walking between our positions and those of the Jordanian legion army, I would meet another Jerusalem during those summer nights. I observed

the orthodoxes, the Zealots, playing cards on their small balconies. In a way, this shocked me and left a great impression on me, a young, innocent boy from a small kibbutz. Here were the same religious men who had, only an hour before, instructed me to leave my rifle outside the synagogue if I wanted to enter; then here they were, engrossed in their little card games! For many years, in the puritanical society of Israel, it was a sin, an ugly thing, to play cards. And here the Zealots sat! I was shocked. How could these same men, who had been praying so enthusiastically only an hour before, be sitting here playing cards?

**WK:** So if I were making my own poem about your Jerusalem experience I would start with these ideas: Where did she go? Her religious passions have always, throughout the ages, been subjugated by her politics and her secular temptations. Perhaps this is always her tragic fate. And perhaps this is why you love her so. But you once wrote that you learned to read Hebrew by reading tombstones. What did you mean?

**EP:** All of my old Hebrew, all of my knowledge of the language and my insights—this was all converted by the cruel and sad wars. In the world of my childhood, in my blessed innocence, I learned a certain Hebrew. But this was before the wars, before my best friends fell in battle, and before Jerusalem changed into its present incarnation. So you see, all of these events “unalphabetized” my old language and injected a foreign sadness into my Hebrew. There were far too many tombstones now for me to retain my original Hebrew.

I learned my mother tongue as a child; now with all of these new Hebrew graves, I forced myself to go back to the child—approach it innocently—to learn the meaning of this great sadness.

**WK:** Recently I viewed a documentary on Northern Ireland, and in it, a resident makes the remark that it's possible for both sides to come together, for a few moments, by singing the song "Danny Boy." I thought the point was made how their love for this song was so great that both sides would willingly suspend their hatred. It led me to wonder if there was anything in the Mid East so greatly loved by all parties as to momentarily suspend the bitterness? Is there such a song or poem for Jerusalem?

**EP:** I think this question about the power of poetry to improve relations between the two sides—the Palestinians and the Israelis—is a bit too optimistic and too unrealistic.

There are fundamental differences between the two sides. First, the two religions: We are Jews, from the ancient, Jewish faith, and they are Moslems, as are most of the Arab nations. In Northern Ireland, both sides have the same basic religion—Christianity. I think the theological difference between Jews and Moslems is many times deeper than the difference between two trends of Christianity. So, it is much too wide a chasm to bridge quickly.

Second, there is the language. We have the Hebrew language, and the Palestinians have the Arab language. Even though these two languages are Semitic and have a common origin, the difference between them is enormous. The Arab language is a living language that hasn't stopped developing, not for a single day, since the medieval period. Hebrew was, for many, many years, only a writing and reading language. It wasn't a daily, living language. So you can see for yourself how much they are different. Both sides in Northern Ireland have a common language, and

this completely changes the conditions. A common language is a giant, potential bridge for co-existence.

Third, consider our feelings concerning nationality—they make up an important feature of our modern poetry. Both sides, Jews and Arabs, have magnificent traditions behind their poetry. And as you know, dear Ward, our Hebrew poetry reached one of her high points during the Arab occupation of Spain in the Middle Ages. This perfected Arab/Spanish poetry is a period in our poetic history that we call “The Golden Age.” Perhaps this was our best chance for a commonality. But modern Hebrew poetry has a large component of national fervor. And the Hebrew national movement began a long time before the nationality movement of the Palestinian people. Our feelings of nationality, our yearnings for independence—these were the main undercurrents of Hebrew poetry from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>. After this, nationality gave way to a real, personalized lyric poetry. Taking a look at Palestinian/Arab poetry, you don’t find the nationality vein until recent times. So I would have to say there’s too big a difference between the two systems of poetry to allow poetry to become a bridge. In our case, it’s too hard, as opposed to the poetry or songs of Northern Ireland.

All in all, our political and cultural situation here in the Mid East is absolutely different from that of Northern Ireland. Here, in Israel, we will talk together as much as it takes concerning non-violent coexistence, but our generation can go no farther. We will incessantly pursue trying to live side by side, but our generation cannot live together. And we will have everlasting hopes for a permanent agreement, but we will not be

able to share the creation of a common poetry as part of a common culture.

Modern Hebrew poetry is very much influenced by western poetry: modern English poetry, by American and the UK, French, German, and so on. But we're not influenced from Arabic poetry, not from eastern poetry. I know that what I am saying is not a happy thing, not a glad tidings, but I believe it's better to see the real, painful situation. For now there are very few points of common ground between the two cultures. Perhaps time will repair this.

**WK:** If one could say the Golden Age period was the best chance at commonality, how close did Jews and Arabs come?

**EP:** There were two great movements of poetry during the Golden Age—the Spanish/Arab poetry and the Jewish/Hebrew/Spanish poetry. I would say the Arab poetry was the best, the leader. The historical name of the Arabs in Spain is *Maoris*. The Jewish poets in Spain, who lived under Moslem rule, envied and admired the perfection of the Arab poem. These Jewish poets tried to prove to both the Arab sultans and the Arab poets that the old Hebrew language didn't die, that their national language was still alive. All in all, the influence of Arab culture on Jewish culture, in that period, was unlimited.

Even the language was influenced: the Arab poets wrote their great poetry in the Arab language, of course, and in Arab script. But the great Jewish poets of the time wrote their poems in two ways. First in the Hebrew language, in the Hebrew script, and this is what we call the peaks of the Golden Age; then second, they wrote an Arab secular poetry—with

Arab words written in Hebrew script! Yes, dear Ward, it's very interesting, for here we have a Jewish poetry written in what we call the Jewish/Arab language. This hybrid, unique language became extinct after the Christians re-conquered the Iberian Peninsula and all the Moslems were expelled. Still it had flourished, at least in poetry, for almost three hundred years.

**WK:** You're a member of the first Israeli generation to be raised completely on a kibbutz; and even now, in your sixties, you continue living there. Has your life in the kibbutz made you a more powerful poet?

**EP:** The Kibbutzim movement is a unique social creation; not only for the Jewish people, and not only for the Zionist movement and the state of Israel, but the movement is unique to the whole world. The Kibbutz revolution is one of insight, a revolution in the relations between an individual and the community. Truly it is one of the most important innovations of our times.

The movement had a definite commitment to the modern, secular trends of the new Jewish/Israeli culture. I can remember how the best modern poets, writers, playwrights, actors, etc., would all look forward to visiting the kibbutzim in order to bring the fruits of their work before what they considered to be their best audiences. I can remember my father and mother hosting many of these guest-artists, bringing them home and talking late into the night. Many of those nights produced burning arguments concerning the right way to build the modern Hebrew culture. I was only a child, but I will never forget this magical, dream-laden, optimistic period.

The regular kibbutz members, the common *Halutzim*, were equal partners with the famous names of that period—mainly artists from Tel Aviv, the new capital—in creating the new spirit of modernism. I wrote an early short story, “Scar of Pride,” (included in my Hebrew fiction collection, *Private Providence*) which describes a painful childhood memory. The story is set in Tel Aviv where a meeting occurs between my father—the kibbutznik who is a great admirer of poetry—and a famous poet from the city. Emotions run very high at the meeting, resulting in an accidental injury to myself, but I mention this story to point out how a member of a kibbutz could meet a great poet and be on equal footing.

In the Zionist revolution, and in an ideological, zealot movement like the Kibbutzim, there was a heavy emphasis placed on the verbal world. I remember very well Abba Kovner, the Hebrew poet from my own kibbutz, who went on to become one of modern Hebrew’s greatest poets. I was a little child when he arrived with his group from the burnt remains of Europe. They came from the ghetto in Vilna, Lithuania where Abba had been a partisan, fighting the Nazi troops. To hear him read his poetry! To listen to him speak about poetry! This fundamentally changed my life and the lives of my friends. We were all impacted—this first generation of children who were born in a kibbutz.

Abba published his poems in all the national literary publications, but he also placed his poems in the small, weekly bulletin of our kibbutz. And we avidly read them all, we, the small children, and I can tell you they were a great influence on us. So you can understand why so many of this first generation grew up accustomed to dealing with words, comfortable with the verbal world. From our small kibbutz were to come five



prominent poets, among the many poets we produced—women poets mostly, but there were also a few of us men.

The community interest in new publications of Hebrew poetry was great. In our small library you could find all of the important Hebrew poets and writers. The adults of our kibbutz would always talk about well-known poets, and quote their lines, poets from “bohemia” and poets from Tel Aviv. So I was raised with a clear idea that poetry is a very important element in a person’s life, and poets are very important people. Even as a child I knew that poetry was a very honorable part of the world.

Today I think there are several kinds of poets. There are bohemian poets, who need an urban environment and can’t write poetry unless they’re living inside the rushed and crowded metropolitan world. There are vagabond poets who permanently need the life of the nomad—instability in their lives is an important ingredient for their creativity. I think traveling from place to place throughout their whole lives is a creative process, with the travel turned fruitful by their poetry.

But I’m a poet of another kind entirely. I belong to those solitary poets whose whole life passes within a four-hundred-meter quadrant. My little patch, the little patch God has given me, includes the old tent and old shack of my parents who were among the founders of my kibbutz. Included, too, are the babies’ house and the children’s house where I grew up and where I spent my happy childhood. Then there’s my elementary school, and my little high school where I spent my complicated teenage years. Also here are my own home—my family’s home—and not to be forgotten, our little cherished cemetery which at times winks at me and invites me to come enjoy the company. All

around the buildings of my life are the open fields and dark orchards where I worked and spilled my sweat.

Now I don't mean to say it's all idyllic. I spend some very hard hours here. There are hours where I feel an enormous emotional load. I find myself living in two or even three worlds at the same time: the world of my childhood, the world of my memories, and the real world my body occupies. You see, it's a permanent confrontation with the past—it lives all around me—and such a large part of me belongs to those I remember and to those I can never forget.

Mostly though, this is a special situation, an inspiring situation. So you could say I live in permanent inspiration. This is very important for my creativity, and thus for my poetry. After I became an adult, I discovered the backgrounds of a few excellent American poets who spent their entire lives in the villages of their births. It was not very difficult for me to imagine their circumstances—their entire lives encompassed the whole of what it meant to be them, their poetry, their dreams, hopes, creativity, fears, families, and life.

Who knows? I might be one of the last kibbutz members in the country who is prepared to confess clearly and openly that my little kibbutz is a unique way of existence, and one that created who I am and the poetry I write. My physical existence has been unified with my spiritual existence.

**WK:** You once said each character in your book, *The Messiah of LaGuardia*, contained a messianic base in that the dark world surrounding them arouses in these characters a desire to redeem and

improve. Later, in the same interview, you say there is no salvage of things predestined. Could this, then, be a source of your poetry? The contradiction between messianic base and predestination?

**EP:** Yes, I think that the basic tension between the unlimited boundaries of the human soul and the very limited capabilities of the physical body, and of life itself, is one of the main sources for my literary creations. In two of my fiction collections, *The Messiah of LaGuardia* and *Absolutions*, I tried to examine this tension in a few extreme cases. In these collections, all my protagonists—and even in my other works we find a few great souls—have a tremendous impulse to be messianic persons. They seem to dedicate their lives to the salvation of humanity. Every one of them, in his own way, tries to find salvation for both themselves and for others. They have a great faith in the goodness of people, perhaps a naïve belief in the goodness of our world. Yet belief alone does not save them, for they all fail.

My protagonists fight against harsh reality, and they all lose the battle, then end up exiting the world in various cruel ways. I think now, after many years pondering this, that there cannot be a co-existence between the faith in goodness that I held in my youth and the power of evil that surrounds our adult lives. We all must live in the reality of the world, and this is also true for the characters of my books. So time after time, I am forced to ask myself, and to ask my characters, why is it inescapable that we are eternal losers? Why do our lives, everyone's life, open with so many hopes that are coupled with a belief in goodness, yet end up overcome with such evil, lies and suffering?

Then later in life when I began to write poetry, I adopted another position. Privately, I called it—for myself and several close friends—the position of witness. I changed my basic reference point to the world and to the eternal struggle of the people in it. No more the dichotomy of bad and good; no more messianic hopes to change the world; instead, I adopted the humble position of witness. I decided I would write only about my immediate world, only about my own point of view of the world, the one I witnessed, only about my own immediate sense of life.

Back to the contradiction you mentioned, I think it also depends on the biological cycle of the poet—what is the period of the writer’s life? When you are a young poet, one not yet satiated with the world, you assimilate this stance into your poetry. You are always ready to fight for your own point of view. But when you become older, you come to understand your own narrow corner of the world. In fact, you actually develop your own, safe, little corner. And from this shelter, this literary shelter, this defensible shelter, you send your poetry out into the unruly world.

Maybe it spouts from this whale of disappointment: our world is really not the right place for dreaming messiahs. And could one say that literature—both poetry and fiction—are not really the best tools to fashion a better world? Or maybe it spouts from the realization that all artists, and all of their muses, have only a very brief time to improve the world. Then again, maybe it spouts from my own life’s experience that leads me to see that life is one great struggle against the oblivion.

So then, I think the basic tension between what we call “the messianic base outlook” and predestination can be fertile ground for the beginning

poet or writer. And this same tension, this same contradiction, might bring an elder poet and writer to be more modest in his relationship with the world. And maybe this is the birth of wisdom, where one comes to see humility as the proper stance for the poet in the extremely complicated relationship between art and the world.

**WK:** We have seen many sources of your poetry: your parents, your country, your kibbutz, your Jerusalem, your fallen comrades, your loves. But there is another ingredient, too, is there not? Can you name it?

**EP:** Yes, I think there is indeed another ingredient behind my writing. I would call it “passion for the Hebrew words.” I have an unlimited passion for the Hebrew language. From the earliest days of my childhood, my parents identified in me a great interest for words, first speaking words, then playing word games, and as I grew up, they saw a passion for reading and writing. Words! Words are the basic building block for literature, for art, and the poet or the writer has a blessed gift. And that gift is one of passion—a passion for words, for paragraphs and the lines that form them, for the language. For a poet and a writer such as myself, the universe and the world I live in, can be exposed by the medium of words, and made legible.

As a little child living in my parents’ austere tent, I had no toys. I can recall times when I fell ill, and I had to stay in the tent, alone with my mind. We were extremely poor in the first years of our kibbutz. It was very hard work, with few benefits. So I had to find substitutes; and the best substitutes for toys, in my estimation, were words. And when the limited language of a small child wasn’t enough for my games, I invented new words. I came up with new Hebrew names for my loving world; I

was quite innovative, a little neologist, creating new words for my immediate needs.

So then, from these games, it's not such a very long way, you know, to my early attempts at writing, to my first tales, or to my first attempts at rhythms.

After many years, when I was now an "old" poet and writer, I found myself often reading Hebrew dictionaries. Heavy reading, perhaps, but not for someone with a passion for words. I often laughed out loud, finding great fun in these dancing words. Yes, dear Ward, still today I can simply sit for hours and read Hebrew dictionaries. Is this not a continuation of my boyhood games? I can draw great pleasure from scrutinizing workbooks, as much pleasure as one can draw from a masterpiece in music or art.

I think artists are born with a different framework for their soul . . . perhaps some flaw . . . as alluring beauty sometimes comes by deviating from the norm . . . for artists grow up different from their friends and their peer groups. In so intimate a society as a child's groupings, as was my own group of friends, it was really painful to be "strange," to be different from the others. Children who refuse to consent to certain peer characteristics—power, domination, control or even sports addiction—as a necessity become different. The real question for this boy is how long can he feel "estranged" or "another kind of child?" How long does he go on struggling to be "normal?" Or when does he simply give up this childish struggle and accept his "uniqueness?"

So I can say until I was the age of sixteen, I tried with all my heart and senses and conscience to be the same as everyone else, one of the crowd, a normal boy. But after sixteen, I realized I really had no choice, I must form my own, distinct, personality. And believe me, my dear Ward, this was a very painful step because the young men of our kibbutz knew that absolute priority is given to community needs. So how does one proclaim a difference?

**WK:** I suspect most poets, looking back on their childhood, would now say the framework of their souls came first; it preceded their difference. But where did this framework come from that has both afflicted and blessed the poet?

**EP:** I think the true artist is born with it. Many artists don't know they were born as artists. Others don't want to be artists, perhaps because society doesn't encourage the development of artists. Those artists who don't know they were born as artists are probably the happiest; they are surely happier than those who know they were born as an artist. Because to be an artist is—among all the other attributes—to live knowing the imperfection of the world. Artists have the ability to recognize the world's imperfection, the imperfection of mankind, and ultimately their own, the imperfection of the self.

To declare to the world that you are an artist, that you are a real poet, essentially is forbidden. It's similar to an unwanted pregnancy, because it is opposite of the way of the rest of the world. This is not the right way to happiness, and certainly not the right way to a stable life. So, I think, many artists deep within their souls are frightened to make their art the main trend of their life. In our own times, in the mores of society, to be

an artist is to take a severe risk. And how many people like this do you really meet in life?

I think if you devote your life to art, it's a dangerous step in that it can influence your whole life. It's a very untraditional step. Most of us, as readers and writers of poetry, prefer to sit well inside our safe lives, to make a little art every now and then, but to always be able to peer out and watch the real poets as they kill themselves for their art. Within our safe shelters of some secure profession, we sit and watch how others, the real poets, the lost poets, give all of their lives to poetry.

Some of us prefer to hide behind the safe walls of universities; some of us prefer to hide within respectable jobs; others prefer to simply use the cliché, "I wish I had the guts to dedicate my entire life to poetry . . . like those damn poets . . . ." But nearly all of us don't make that silly mistake. We keep our regular lives, and from time to time long for this other, impossible life.

Sometimes I think that those people who don't know they're artists are truly the happiest of all. The heartworms of pride, of strange selection, never nibble at their hearts. And they never suffer for their difference from the rest of their society.

Yet, from the other hand, I see there are a few moments in an artist's life that might compensate, moments of supreme happiness. Very rare moments, very expensive moments, but there are times when the poet steps where no one else has ever dared. I mean those moments when you have taken one more small but vital step toward the completion of your



vision, your poetic vision, your dream of the perfect poem, the one you have been seeking your entire life.

Well, dear Ward, I don't know if this is the right answer to your question, but it's the right answer to my own question, and now we must finish. I hope all is well with you.

## Elisha

Elisha Porat

Kibbutz Ein Hahoresht

Israel

## About the Author

Elisha Porat was born in 1938 to a “pioneer” family in Palestine-Eretz Yisrael (pre-Israel). His parents were among the founders of *kibbutz Ein Hahores*, a *kibbutz* on the Sharon plain, near the city of Hadera. Today Porat, devoted to the community ideal, still makes his home near the original tent erected by his parents back in the early 30s.



In 1956, he was drafted into the IDF (the Israeli army) and fought in three wars: the *Six Day War* in 1967, the *Yom Kippur War* in 1973, and the *War of South Lebanon* in 1982.

Porat has worked many years as a farmer as well as a writer. His labors in the *kibbutz* fruit orchard, perhaps contrasting his military tours of duty, have always influenced his art.

Besides writing, his current endeavors include editorial duties for several literary journals. He is married with four grown children—three daughters and a son. In 1998, Porat journeyed out into the Internet, and his growing volume of works can be readily found in many literary ezines. His translated stories and poems have for years found their way into print, most recently *The Boston Review*.

He was the 1996 winner of Israel’s *Prime Minister’s Prize for Literature*, has published 17 volumes of fiction and poetry in Hebrew since 1973.

His works have appeared in translation in Israel, the United States, Canada, and England. The English translation of his short story collection, *The Messiah of La Guardia*, was released in 1997. His latest book of Hebrew poetry, *The Dinosaurs of the Language*, was recently published in Israel.

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