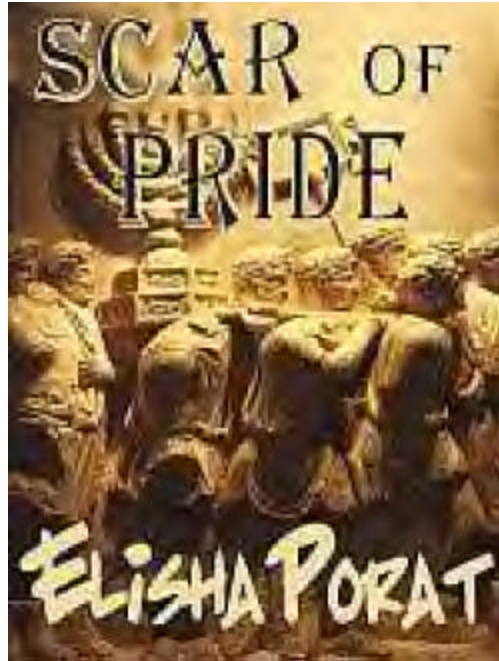


Scar of Pride

by Elisha Porat



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A BULLET FIRED

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

When I was sent home after my long hospital stay, my limbs had no strength. My hands had lost their flexibility and the slightest effort hurt. My legs also were very weak. After walking a few steps in my room or on the veranda, I had to lie down again. Even raising my body onto the bed was difficult for me. I would sit on the mattress and move my leaden limbs, one at a time, towards me and onto the bed. I needed both hands to lift my legs and both legs to bring in my hands. A friend who saw me in my weakened state said, "Don't give up. You should start strengthening exercises right away so your body won't atrophy."

I was very worried. Several weeks had already passed since my heart attack and I wouldn't regain some of my strength for several more. Later, through all these days, I wouldn't move my body or build my muscles. I could only stretch out utterly helpless on the bed, unable to rise from it. I realized again what a poor guide fear makes. Without properly considering the matter or even asking my doctor, I rashly started doing the vigorous exercises I had done when I was well. But I couldn't raise my body. I couldn't fool it this time. The excruciating pain that immediately resulted cut me down to size.

My hands hurt so much I couldn't even change the station on the little radio by my bed. My legs ached to the point that every trip to the bathroom and the shower became a journey of affliction. I didn't know which way to turn my back. It hurt all over, from my neck to my buttocks. My muscles became tight and defiant, constantly sending sharp jolts of pain through me. Each time I lowered my legs from the bed and tried to put on my slippers, I fell back, exhausted on the verge of tears. I lay awake at night. My back ached and I couldn't fall asleep. If I say that I secretly cried in the faint glow of the bedroom nightlight, I wouldn't be exaggerating. Piteous, pathetic crying spells, anxiety, unanswerable questions. I shifted from the bed to the armchair. I heaped up pillows and built a rampart of blankets on the sides of the bed. Nothing helped. I couldn't find a position in which my body could sink into sweet sleep. And if I did find such a position for several minutes, fresh new aches, unlike any before, would immediately assail me. These new messengers of pain bedeviled me ad nauseam until I broke into sudden, dry, body-wracking sobs, swallowing shameless tears while cursing the modern medicines and my incurable, ancient body. Eventually, I would return to my restless, spasmodic nights.

How long will I suffer like this? I asked myself. How long will I remain this shell of a man too weak to control his limbs? And who had assured me that things would change for the better? It seemed to me during my hours of agony that my condition actually was worsening. How will I be

in another month? Next year? Will this torment and humiliation go on forever?

Then I remembered the small revolver hidden in the secret dresser drawer. A beautiful piece, an Italian 22-caliber long-barrel model. I don't know why I thought of the gun during my tortured nights. Sure, I'd had perverse thoughts unclear even to me. I have a fear, which I hesitate to commit to print, that my time as a healthy man in full control of his body had not only passed but also brought to mind the hidden revolver. In several open but disjointed talks with my wife, I wondered whether the little gun had been moved. These questions obviously worried my wife who immediately warned me against wayward thoughts and rash actions. But she didn't touch the gun. Was it different for her, too, to accept the changes in my body? Had she still failed to notice the lost use of my limbs? Had she never considered, as I had, the great significance and danger of the small gun in the dresser? Did she suddenly have the same inkling I had of new depths that had never crossed her mind before? Had she finally realized, just as I had, the need to put this threatening toy out of the sick man's reach?

The gun, however, was in its place. No one had touched it. It lay swathed in the same old shirt of soft fraying cloth where it had been since the day I'd returned from the hospital. Since the gun was wrapped in cloth, I couldn't work the holster zipper. The clips were strewn nearby. I'd forgotten only the location of the box of bullets, but the ammunition didn't interest me during my first days home from the hospital. I was as happy with the small gun as a boy with a prize toy. I drew the pistol from its wrapping, wiped away the fine layer of grease, and discovered anew a gun fancier's pleasure in weapons. The Italian workmanship was splendid, the staining flawless and the ease of grip excellent. With few parts, no gun was simpler to take apart and assemble. Cleaning the gun, disassembling it, and examining the trigger and sights distracted me from my pain.

I suddenly brimmed with so much renewed strength, I was able to lie down on the edge of the bed across from the large mirror in the bedroom wardrobe. Relieved of my suffering, I simply indulged myself in a childish love of my revolver. I gripped it in my hand, waved it, spun it around my extended finger. Where had all my pains gone? I behaved like a teenager. Behind the shelter of my locked door, I carefully aimed the gun in my small room at the image of myself reflected in the mirror. I closed one eye, opened it again, and then squeezed the trigger ever so slowly. After that, I inhaled deeply into my chest and then vigorously blew the air out of my mouth just as I had seen in the movies, when you don't know whether to be awed by the wanted man's bold heroics or to laugh at his infantile terror.

Finally, I pulled the trigger. A bullet suddenly discharged and my reflection in the wardrobe mirror splintered. The bullet pierced the thin wooden door, rustling my wife's dresses hanging inside the cabinet. From the bedroom wall came a muffled thud. Did this actually occur during my recuperation or might I here be confusing this with an embarrassing event that occurred some years earlier? Inside the wardrobe swirled a small cloud

of dust. In panic, I imagined smoke also rising from the barrel of the revolver in my hand. But my eyes deceived me. The acrid smell of gunpowder permeated the room with the aroma of scorched cloth.

Did I really turn pale when my wife wrenched the smoking gun from my hand? Were my hands really shaking? Did I grind my clenched teeth on one another? Was I laboring to breathe? Has my small pistol been absent from the room since that unfortunate discharge?

It seems to me that all these things and more are nothing but memories. Long ago, in the peak of health, I once really did sit opposite the large mirror in the wardrobe, cleaning my gun after an enjoyable time hunting rabbits in the groves. I was careless for some reason, loaded the gun, and aimed it entirely in jest without any sinister intentions at my forehead reflected in the mirror. I forgot loading the gun, drawing a bead, and firing. Or perhaps that didn't happen. So many years have passed and my memory often misleads me. And there are no marks in either the room or the wardrobe. It's impossible to recognize anything since the renovation. Maybe I only wanted to clean the barrel. Maybe I put a round in the chamber and forgot that I was at home, not in the groves nearby horsing with a friend. And maybe it was a case of plain criminal negligence. You can call it unintentional recklessness. I just don't remember anymore.

But my wife's best dresses, in fact, were damaged. Luckily for us, the concrete back wall blocked the bullet. Oh, I diligently searched for it that day, but I didn't find it. I remember removing all the dresses and shirts and emptying the wardrobe. Bored in the wall was a small hole spewing a puff of plaster. I should have given the wardrobe a good cleaning to wipe it from view and erase the conspicuous traces left by the mysterious shooting.

Several weeks later, I happened to find the flattened lead slug. I was sitting down, excited as usual by the sight of my wife's body while she dressed in front of the pierced mirror. As she shook her blouse, the bullet dropped to the floor. I pounced on it at once, thrust it before my wife's astonished eyes, and said, "You see, we've rounded up the last witness to the crime." I kept it for a long time in my drawer among the odds and ends I've saved from critical periods of my life. The holy lira note of a Hasidic Rebbe given to me at the crossing to Lebanon by young Habadnic members vociferously evading their army service, a checked card with letters I couldn't read that I received in the Galilee as an amulet from a righteous beggar at Honi's Cave in Hatzor, an old jackknife that I swore I wouldn't pull out of my pocket until the war ended, and other such things. When I started to arrange my drawer some time ago, however, I couldn't find the squashed bullet. Had it known that I would need it so much during my painful months of recuperation, it might have done me a favor and not disappeared somewhere between the cracks.

In my mind, I can't decide whether I harbored a secret demented notion to perform that quaint act of negligence. Nor do I know whether my sudden need for my small revolver signaled that I was about to do something wicked. I'm not brave enough for that. But my wife clearly remembered the

shattered mirror and the burning hole in her dress. My flimsy explanation—that I had planned to start hunting rabbits in the groves again to aid my recovery—didn't satisfy her.

Several days after handling my gun, I wanted to withdraw it again from its niche and play with it awhile to distract me during a relapse. The hidden drawer in the dresser, however, was empty. The unzipped holster, made of coarse stiff canvas, was nowhere to be found. When I asked my wife what had become of my small gun, and whether she could imagine how hurt I was when I discovered it missing, she only said, "Don't worry, it's not lost. It's here. But we've taken it away until you get better. It's all right. You'll find it when you're stronger. We've just moved it to a safe place. So you won't be tempted again, God forbid, to blast your reflection in the mirror."

A CRACKED ICON
Translated from the Hebrew by Eddie Levenston

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

In the summer of '79, I went to Jerusalem for a few weeks to complete a piece of literary research. I had started the work, a bibliographical study of the life and writings of some forgotten Central European Jewish poet, about three years earlier. I tried. I toiled. I wanted very much to finish the work, but I didn't succeed. Lack of concentration, the first signs of fatigue, symptoms of the serious illness that was lurking in my body though I knew nothing about it, undermined my health and prevented me from finishing the work I so much wanted to see finished. Or rather, I wanted to be rid of the man, this wonderful Jewish poet who died so suddenly in the prime of life, as they say. Actually, I checked and discovered that he was exactly fifty years and three days old when he collapsed and fell on the steps of the national theater in the heart of the capital city of his central European homeland.

His personality and the vicissitudes of his life gradually took over my own life and work, leading me to neglect my religious studies and the many

pleasures it promised me in my free classes at the University where several well-known book-lovers awaited me and the interesting discussion groups that took place in various forums on the chilly Jerusalem evenings.

I thought I would go back for a few weeks to the same cramped student lodgings where I had spent my University years. But as soon as I entered the building office, I realized it wouldn't do. The chief secretary, an old acquaintance of mine, always amazed me with her marvelous memory and her offhand recital of my identity card number and date of birth. She had been replaced. The pleasant maintenance engineer seemed to have been discharged and there were unfamiliar smells coming from the locked kitchen. No one in the dormitory remembered me. The entire building had been renovated and was all steel and glass. When I went up to the second floor to take a quick look at the small synagogue, I couldn't find the carved wooden table where I used to sit with the others who arrived late for prayers. So I went into town and found myself a long narrow little room, a kind of cell with standing room only. I put down the few belongings I had brought with me and the old woman, a member of the family from whom I had rented the room at a considerable discount, was very happy to see me. She remembered and reminded me of the good days many years ago when I had been a rash young soldier who had very much alarmed her and her late husband. The ideas I had then, and the dangerous tricks I would get up to in the divided city! I sat with her for a while, sharing a supper of cheese and toast, and hurried off to the National Library, straight to the reading room, to continue where I had left off three long years ago.

On my way to the library, I saw other people in a hurry. It was Friday morning, everybody was rushing somewhere, and I didn't pay any attention to the excitement of some who passed me by. On a counter in the entrance lobby there was a display of English books for sale and for browsing and I was reminded of the short trip to Europe that my wife and I had decided to make. I was having a lot of trouble with the preparations for the trip and had made a lot of arrangements in order to reach the Italian coast on a cheap ferry. But I had left her to take care of all the details and asked her not to bother me in Jerusalem. I promised that as soon as I had finished, which would be long before the New Year holidays in the autumn, I would come home and help her complete the arrangements for the journey. I stopped by the counter and stretched out a hand to one of the English books, but the crowd gathering in the entrance lobby caught my eye. There was a party of teachers clustered together and a group of panicky young girls all shouting at one another. "Has anyone seen Hagar? Has anyone seen Hagar?"

Even I, who happened entirely by chance to be in the Humanities building on my way to the reading room in the library, and was not a student in any department, not even a Jerusalemite, was asked several times, "Have you seen Hagar? Was Hagar here?"

I didn't answer about the questions and continued on my way up the path. No, I don't know any Hagar, and who on earth is looking for this lost Hagar, on a bright summer's day, on a Friday morning with the Sabbath already

threatening to close the library, stopping the traffic in the streets and shutting down the whole town? Out of the corner of my ear, I heard snatches of conversation between the frightened girls and the people on the paths. "Why should I have seen Hagar? What did she lose at my place? Has something happened to her?" And again the girls replied fearfully, "It's several days since anyone heard from her."

Okay, so no one's heard from her, what could happen to a nice young girl like the bunch getting in my way? She must be sequestered with some keen, impassioned young lover, who won't let her go and join the Sabbath tour she had arranged with her friends. After all, I was a young man once myself and I, too, once enjoyed the taste of a close encounter with a young woman who wouldn't let me go, and I couldn't just get up and leave her. When we relaxed for a moment and glanced at the clock above the bed, we saw that the Sabbath was over, as though it were just one brief moment of love.

As I walked along, I remembered one of my friends who used to retire from the world with his girl friends for days on end. When his anxious mother failed to make contact with him by telephone, because he was deep inside his beloved and couldn't be bothered to answer the telephone, even though he knew, most certainly knew, that it was his worried mother on the line, he would make fun of her in the passionate ears of the girl on fire beneath him, "Really, she knows no limits, now she's going to call my brother and later, if there is still no reply, she'll ring the department office," and when he was in the mood he would imitate for us, just as he imitated his mother for his girl friend, the reply of his brother, who was a little slow of speech and took his time about replying. "What do you want of him, Mother? Let him have a good time. He's probably holed up somewhere with a girl. No, Mother, I'm not going to be the one to interfere and spoil his shabbat...."

Walking quickly, I got away from the noisy crowd of panicky students and the teachers from their department who were running around, restless and anxious, among them. Obviously, they had planned to go on a trip together on the Sabbath, or had been asked to go and hold an intensive seminar on symbolism in the Kabbala in one of the new young settlements thirsty for arcane Jewish mysticism. And, as usual, the bus was full, the driver was getting irritable, the teachers were impatient, and of course she was the one, Hagar, according to what I had heard when walking past them, there must be something about her that I hadn't managed to catch in my rapid progress, she was the one who was late. Notorious for being late, a congenital laggard, just the same in the youth movement, or maybe just a student with no self-discipline always the last to arrive at the parking lot.

As usual, my imagination continued to play, she's a very attractive girl, something very special, as they say about such girls, who are on the go day and night, "ethereal types," not searching for obscure manuscripts on the Kabbala and its symbols, but making plans for their own "idiosyncrasies." Whatever will distinguish them, at first glance, from the rack of noisy students here in the capital from their backwater on the coastal plain and who

form the majority in the Faculty of Humanities, especially in those departments that teach Jewish Thought and Mysticism.

I entered the library, skirting the permanent exhibitions and the current temporary exhibits in the lobby, glancing into the cafeteria to see if the guardian angels of the Sabbath, always in such a hurry to close down the coffee machines, had gotten there before me, and went up the wide staircase to the reading room and my own desk under the new pair of fluorescent lights that had recently been installed. Everyone was busy in town with final preparations for the Sabbath and it was only lunatics like me, enslaved by unfinished literary research, who put off welcoming the Sabbath until the very last moment. The books I had asked for from the nice librarian, who always blushed whenever I went up to her to ask for a book, whose face was full of tiny pimples that she tried so pitifully to conceal under a layer of cosmetics, were already waiting for me on the edge of the shelf, stacked one on top of the other to make it easy for me to carry them to my desk. She gave me a shy smile through her blushes. "Why are you fixated on such an obscure poet?" I could see in her eyes the question that she didn't ask, "And why do you bother me, always when I am on duty, with hunting for references to him?"

I turned towards her but didn't bring my mouth too close to hers, lest she be repelled by the smell of garlic I had brought with me from the coastal plain. I lowered my voice, as though sharing a secret with her, as if to say "Never mind, make an effort, I'm not a selfish monster like some that you know. I won't forget you, my dear librarian. I shall praise your assistance in my forthcoming article on the rediscovery of this obscure poet. And not just in a footnote, like the more famous professional writers who sit with you here in the reading room. No, I shall cite your name in my short introduction. I shall add a word or two, a warm expression of gratitude, and you will know I have not forgotten you."

I sat at my desk and arranged in front of me everything I would need in my work for the next few hours and also the tiny radio that my wife had bought for me before my last spell of reserve service, so that "I could hear the sounds of the approaching peace" and the detailed account of Saadat's visit to Jerusalem. I had a terrible habit that I couldn't get rid of even when in the reading room, switching on the radio every hour or so in order to hear the news, even when I knew that nothing new could have happened and the news readers would just go on repeating the same old stuff. Actually it was the jingle that preceded the news that I could never get used to hearing without a quickening of the pulse, a dangerous increase in blood pressure every time it stole into my awareness. During the war years and afterwards, I abstained totally from the radio and all its chitchat. I simply boycotted it, as my wife put it, out of a childish rage I was unable to control. It was the same damn radio that called on me to report for duty with my unit that Saturday night, the sixth of October, a Sabbath I shall never forget.

But the books engaged my attention, the time flew by, and my own life became entangled with the life of this forgotten Jewish poet whom I had

rescued, together with his few poems, from the pit of oblivion into which he had sunk. I learned too late what every apprentice biographer learns in his first year. I found the experience pleasant, the occasional loss of our own painful, familiar identity that we carry around with us all the time and immersion in the life and personality of someone else. Even though the pattern of his life is a fabrication and his troubles are not real and his pain is not mine. But I also knew that reawakening to my own life was guaranteed and the wonderful workings of the soul are aware, as though pre-programmed, when the time has come to awake. And when the contagious magical life of this forgotten poet, this other importunate, invasive creature, threatens to stifle the soul of the supportive biographer. In other words, my soul. And if I were to remember to go over all this with the librarian, she would surely express an amiable surprise, when exactly should one bring this sweet illusion to an end, this sense of merging both life and destiny? But before I could raise my eyes to her and ponder her response, my tiny radio gave a sudden squeak and the familiar six preliminary signals before the news severed me from my work. I looked at her and listened.

Suddenly the voice of a young newscaster, seemingly a novice, a voice I didn't recognize, burst forth from the tiny radio and with dreadful excitement—even my tiny radio was scared—urged listeners to hurry, hurry, anyone who could, anyone close, anyone who knew the alleys of the Old City. For a moment I thought this was some wild radio stunt, trying to ape a rescue with the help of a radio alarm. I had heard of all kinds of staged leg-pulls and stunts broadcast without warning that had wreaked enormous havoc. It was hard for me to detach myself from the endearing coils of my poet, and I almost turned off the radio. But the voice of the young newscaster, trembling with emotion, would not let his listeners go. He was no longer urging, he was imploring, almost sobbing. "Hurry! Hurry! Anyone who can, anyone close by. Anyone who knows the high tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, to rescue....."

"Hey," I said to myself, "this is serious, a genuine alarm call, not just a stunt, a staged leg-pull."

And the newscaster didn't stop. He tells me, she has climbed up to the tower, you can easily see from below. You can identify her through the credentials. She is wearing a black jacket light, summer material, long trousers with a flapping top. And most important, she has long bright fair hair tied together with a shiny black ribbon. You can't miss her. And her car, a small German car, a yellow Beetle or whatever it is, is parked below. She can also be identified by means of her German car. How did she squeeze it in there, in that maze of narrow alleys in the Christian Quarter? Goodness knows, the voice of the announcer trembles as he calls repeatedly to his listeners to hurry to her rescue. To this blonde beauty in black, before she throws herself off the tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher down on to the stone square below.

I listened tensely to the newscaster, I had already decided to gather up my books and pack them for my pimply librarian. I am, after all, fully conversant

with the maze of alleys in the Old City. It's not just that I've walked around there a lot, conducted tours for visitors, strolled there a thousand times. About a year ago, I took part in a special course arranged for enthusiasts who are expert in the mysteries of the Christian Quarter. And if this novice newscaster—I can visualize his trembling hands, his wide eyes and his knees knocking nervously against the hard studio table—if he is calling for speedy assistance, it's me he has in mind! If he expects good citizens of Jerusalem to rise and hurry to rescue the young woman, he means me! Even though I'm not a Jerusalemite. If he is begging, through his quivering microphone, for a safety net to be stretched out below the dread tower, he means me! Why am I hanging around here with my pile of books, embroiled in the life and works of some forgotten poet, when soon a blonde flower of beauty will be writhing there below, her hair bound in a shiny black ribbon? Why am I loitering in this peaceful reading room, when in the next moment a black trouser-suit top of light summery material may be flapping in the wind above the trousers and the shapely ankles?

I rose from my place and broke all the rules of silence in the reading room. I ran to the blushing librarian, dragged the trolley, and loaded all my books on it, shouting at the few readers in the room, "Are you all deaf? Can't you hear the alarm call on the radio?" And when they rose in surprise and asked "What alarm? We can't hear any siren," I continued on my way to the exit. "Never mind that it's Friday. Shabbat can wait. It won't begin yet. Don't be afraid, come with me, they are calling for you. Lend a hand in the rescue of the young woman." As though the Sabbath would wait for the rescue of some suicide or I had the authority to delay its entry. I left in a hurry, avoiding the slow-moving elevator, dashing down the stairs towards the exit. "Come and help," I shouted to everyone in my way. "Lend a hand! The safety net has to be really taut." And they gazed at me as if I were a lunatic, wandering at large around the paths of the campus, at noon on a Friday in the summer, the summer of '79, almost six years after that accursed shabbat, the sixth of October, that I can never forget.

I cannot remember how I reached the Old City, how I passed all the flowers and the traffic-lights, how I suddenly arrived, with the tiny radio in my breast pocket, ceaselessly broadcasting the appeals of the newscaster, whom I had begun to like. I cannot remember how I suddenly found myself leaning against a wall in the shadow, next to a steep step in the heart of the market area, in the souvenir shop of a Christian Arab who lived in the Quarter. I remember only how my hands reached out for the carved icon of a saint that was lying there, I don't remember his name, with long blonde hair circling round his head like a radiant halo. I remember holding the icon in my hands, fingering the shape and feeling the halo of hair painted in crude colors. I remember touching every irregularity in this piece of carved wood. And the young announcer urging me constantly to leave the shelter of cool shade and emerge into the hot summer sun. To leave the concealment of the stairway and run to the square below the church tower, the square of the Holy Sepulcher. I do not remember whether I had any anxious dialog with the

newscaster in my bosom or whether it only seemed to me that I was breathing heavily after an exhausting rush up the stone steps, surrounded by other puffing runners. All the would-be rescuers summoned by the radio alarm.

I remember that on the way I passed a small German car, its engine running. I even forgot at that moment that this might be Hagar's small car. Who on earth is Hagar? What Hagar are you talking about? I came to a halt in the middle of my run, a little way past the car, and struck myself sharply on my sweaty forehead. Hagar, you idiot, is a name you have heard before this morning. You just didn't take it in. It just passed you by. Hagar, of course, I remembered now, that was the student who was late for the rendezvous. And I thought it was just a normal lateness of a habitual late-comer, and laughed at the group of students clustered in the entrance to the Humanities building. Yes, and now the newscaster was annoying me, what did he mean, a Beetle? This could mislead the rescuers. Just now I ran past a car, I'm sure it was simply an old Golf. Like a know-it-all, I admonished the newscaster in my breast pocket. As if this could help in the rescue. What difference could it make to the tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or to Hagar, intending right now to plunge to her death? What kind of car is waiting for her there below? What difference it make?

But, I repeated to myself, as though this was a sentence I had to learn by heart, every sound and syllable exactly right, it was a Golf, an old Golf. A German car, certainly, a small one for sure, but you have to be accurate when people are running with intent to take part in a rescue. As though I were to make a mistake and call the taut safety net a safety mattress. How could you rescue anybody with a little old safety mattress? The square of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is so large! And then, after some delay as became clear later, a rescue squad was properly organized. The out-of-breath volunteers who, like me, had come running from all corners of the city lent a hand and stretched out a safety net. The whole town, preparing for a summer Shabbat, held its breath. The alarm calls from the radio ceased, the noise of commerce died down. No siren was heard and in the blue sky above the church tower not a bird was to be seen. I couldn't even hear the sound of the engine of her small car. What a wonderful moment of stillness and compassion reigned in the city. Perhaps, if it had lasted a little longer, she might have been saved. Perhaps she would have lent an ear to the frozen stillness that had seized the city. Perhaps she would have paid attention to the hundreds of thousands of people around her holding their breath. And perhaps she would have reversed the order of that fatal sequence of events, first tucking in the ends of her flapping upper garment and tightening her wide trousers. Then firmly tying up her flowing golden hair with the black ribbon. Then, passing her pale tired hands across her face, she would light the long cigarette inserted in the cigarette holder she loved to smoke. And finally, coming slowly down the slippery stone steps of the church tower, with the crowd of people who had responded to the alarm call giving a tremendous sigh of relief from below the holy grave. Then going straight to the Golf, that old car, whose engine all the time had not stopped running for her. And I and all the volunteer rescuers and

the goodhearted newscaster who had been so touched by her fate even though, like me, he had not actually known her, would have placed the safety net around her shoulders and wrapped her in it. Just as we wrapped blankets round the burning soldiers who survived the flames in the days that followed that accursed Sabbath when the October War began.

And once again, I don't remember exactly what happened. I remember only that I was late arriving in the square, like the rest of the rescuers. For some reason I was clasping the carved icon in my hand. Had I brought it all the way from the souvenir shop? How is it that the shop owner hadn't taken the statuette from me? I could already guess what would happen in the end. I had seen too many similar endings during that October, nearly six years ago. I tightened my grip on the carved wooden statuette. There was nothing to do. She already lay spread-eagled in the square of the Holy Sepulcher. How beautiful she looked lying there, how innocent in the black shroud she had wrapped about herself, her black costume of light, summery material. She was swathed in a bubble of radiance that rose above her. That bright glow halted the rescuers for a few moments before they fell upon her and began the attempt at resuscitation. The glow that arises from statuettes, from carved icons of saints, from enlargements of the pictures of frozen beauties.

I moved away slowly from the circle of rescuers. I was redundant here, there was no longer anything useful I could do. When I turned round I could see a huge crowd closing in on the remains of Hagar Reichenstein. The rescue teams and the curious had come together and surrounded her in a tight circle in the center of which she disappeared from sight. Some photographers even arrived, eager tourists and police photographers. But I had seen everything I needed to see. No doubt the charming announcer on the radio in my breast pocket had seen it all with me because he had fallen completely silent and once again you could hear the roar of the city and the crowds swamping the bubble of quiet in the church square. The sound of sirens was deafening, the engines of the rescue vehicles thundered and the police loudspeakers blared at a peak of intensity. I came slowly down the stairs, past the pools of shade towards the souvenir shop of the Christian Arab who lived in the Quarter. No one noticed me as I returned the cracked icon to its place.

The following Sunday some funeral notices were published in the morning newspapers and I, who until the previous Friday had never heard of Hagar Reichenstein, began with the help of the newspapers to follow her on her last journey. Already by noon on Friday, the news had spread that Hagar had jumped to her death from the high tower in the Old City. A further item of news was published, that during the Thursday night she had made contact, without giving her name, with the psychological counseling service of the Municipality. There wasn't much written about her last conversation with the consultant on duty, but it seems the Jerusalem branch was really struck by her distress. They even sent a mobile emergency unit to her, with two volunteers who had a prolonged conversation with her to calm her down. What did they talk about with her for so long? What did Hagar tell them? The newspapers

also reported that things were in a mess in the local branch, consultations were not recorded or listed and it was difficult to know what was the real nature of her distress. In the local Jerusalem newspaper, which at that time was just beginning to appear regularly, a young journalist wrote that everything was against her. The consultants on duty did not realize that she remained set in her decision to jump from the tower even after their long conversation with her. The emotional appeals of friends, on the radio, by telephone and face to face, including my novice announcer, were of no help. And members of her family, whom the journalists were quick to berate, said what they found most distressing was that even though Hagar was in such anguish, she had not turned to them.

I returned to my books and my unfinished research at the library. As I approached the desk, my blushful librarian beckoned to me, drew me aside a few paces and said how awfully sorry she was about what had happened on Friday morning. "Who could have known?" she said. "I'm sorry we behaved with such lack of feeling towards you. If we had known..."

I thanked her for what she had said and said that I, too, was sorry, I myself had not known how much I would be moved by the fate of the young student. And when she had once again loaded the trolley with the books I had ordered, I added that ever since the war I had not always been responsible for my actions. Sometimes surprising things happened to me, like the startling shortcut that had brought me into the Christian Quarter. And strange meeting on city steps, weird visions I had had since the War, not only by night but sometimes even in broad daylight by the huge windows of the national library. She blushed again as she leaned over the books and told me that already on Friday morning, when she heard the news bulletin, she had realized where I was rushing off to in such unseemly haste. She even thought, judging from the brief and imprecise details supplied by the radio, that she had known poor Hagar. She must have seen her more than once at the Lending Desk of the reading room.

After the sad funeral held in the village of Hagar's birth in the south of Israel, rumors about her life and work began to find their way into the daily newspapers and weekly supplements. And I developed the habit of clipping from the newspapers any items dealing with her life and death, collecting them in a special file that I kept together with my large file of bibliographical research. I asked my wife to help me collect the clippings, but she was not enthusiastic and asked me quietly whether this was my latest crazy fad. Like many of the inhabitants of our small settlement, she was acquainted with a gifted young scholar who had become so totally enslaved by his collection of newspaper clippings that he made life hell for the whole family. But I knew this could not become a chronic obsession. How long could the local press go on writing about the death of a beautiful young woman? So I mollified my wife, saying, "Never mind, it will pass." I meant both my own craze of collecting clippings and the distasteful rummaging in the life of Hagar Reichenstein, which the press, primarily the weeklies, was pursuing with such unhealthy delight.

There seemed no end to the things published about her after her death. That she was an absolute prodigy among the students of kabalistic symbolism and in the privacy of her modest apartment had written an outstanding book on the secrets of Jewish mysticism. The likes of the book hadn't been written or conceived since the great days of Professor Gershon Sholem. On those enlightened nights that she lived through one after the other—to quote the woman journalist in the local Jerusalem newspaper I had so much difficulty in obtaining—it was snapped up so quickly. There had been revealed to the late, lamented Hagar awesome secrets and the most amazing arcane explanations, of a kind that no one previously, neither the teachers nor the students of the department, nor any independent scholar had imagined and certainly not committed to writing. Furthermore, the journalist reported, her doctoral dissertation, which she would concentrate on from time to time and leave in the hands of one secretary or another in order to devote herself to one of those wonderful whims that I have no space to enlarge upon here, was worth its weight in gold. And here was this one distressing matter, the exact nature and convoluted development of which neither the eager journalist nor her innocent readers succeeded in fully understanding, a sad question that led to the loss of a doctoral dissertation of rare quality and there is grave doubt whether it will ever be recovered. It is also doubtful whether readers can be found with enough sense to gain enlightenment from a careful reading, or who will remember the brilliant student of such amazing yet mysterious beauty. She who made discoveries that seem not to have been in accord with her power of understanding and drove her to throw herself to death from the tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, no less, in the center of the Christian Quarter, in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem.

I went up to the lending desk and showed my librarian what was written in the newspaper. As usual she blushed a little, then bent down and took a bunch of newspaper clippings from a hidden drawer, laid them down in front of me and said: "Take them, they're yours, I collected them for you." And when out of the blue I invited her to come with me to the cafeteria and talk at leisure about the life and death of Hagar Reichenstein, who day by day was taking up more and more space in more and more newspapers, she agreed, handed over responsibility for the shift to her colleague and accompanied me down the wide staircase to the cafeteria. Once again we passed the permanent exhibition of the library, the temporary exhibition, and she said that but for her untimely death, Hagar Reichenstein might also have seen her brilliant studies exhibited in the glass cases. I said how very sad I was not to have known her during her lifetime, but only for a moment or two after her terrible death. For what I had heard about her since her death had become public knowledge and made me very curious. The librarian giggled, or maybe it only seemed that way to me, and said she had heard that quite a few men had fallen in love with her. And some, according to current gossip in the University, had come away from the encounter wounded and dismayed.

We sat down at a small table in the cafeteria and I remarked that there was one person very much felt to be missing from our table. She asked who I had in mind. I told her about the fine young newscaster on the radio who had been so gripped by anxiety. The one who had broadcast a non-stop alarm call from his station, from the moment the studio had known about her disappearance. It was his words that had jolted me out of the pages of my research on the previous Friday morning. Were it not for the quiver in his voice, his insistent message and the tone of grief it is doubtful whether I would have abandoned my forgotten Jewish poet. Immersion in the details of his life and work had driven from my mind the sorrow I had carried with me since that accursed war. Since that Shabbat, the sixth of October, six years ago. And she said I reminded her of someone, Yosef Goren by name, who since the war had been publishing agonized poetry in the weekly literary supplements of the newspapers. "Yosef Goren?" I said, "Are you sure his name is Yosef Goren?" and she said, "Of course, I remember his poems very well. His name is Yosef Goren. Why? Do you know him?" I hastened to change the subject of our pleasant conversation back to Hagar Reichenstein and her "ethereal" character, avoiding the question that had had startled and embarrassed me, not even letting her know that yes indeed, I really might know who he is. Maybe I do know this agonized poet she had mentioned, Yosef Goren.

We drank the wretched cafeteria coffee and I asked her whether she too had a small German car. And she said, "Yes, now I remember, the newspapers mentioned her yellow Beetle, that was waiting for her with its engine running." And I said, "Listen, Miss Librarian, you have to be accurate. It wasn't a VW. It was a rotten Golf." "Yellow?" she asked. I don't remember, I surprised myself, "really, I no longer remember."

I asked her if she could sit with me a little longer and she said yes and I told her about the two marvels that had happened to me on that day. The first was my flight across town, straight from the reading room to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, no small distance, if you measured it exactly you would find it was several kilometers. But it was the second marvel that vexed me more and I told the attentive librarian about that too. The carved wooden icon, the statuette of the Christian saint with the crown of golden hair, that remained in my hand after I had left the Arab shop in the alley. And afterwards, I have no idea how it happened to me, I suddenly found myself with a cracked icon in my hands. Standing over Hagar Reichenstein, already prostrate on the ground of the Church square; for the volunteer rescue team, ready to hold out the taut safety blanket beneath her, never arrived on time.

"Late," I suddenly said aloud, and people turned and looked at us. "Late, they always arrive too late to rescue anybody."

"Don't get so upset," said the librarian, "I can see how upset you are."

"Yes, I said," after all the things I saw during the war, when I see anything comparable, I get upset again." Our inability to save lives; our terrible impotence has haunted me for almost six years.

She said nothing and I had nothing to add. With difficulty I managed to control the sudden shivering that had started again. We drained our lousy coffee to the dregs. I knew she was about to rise and apologize, she was sorry but we were already late, she must run back to the reading room. Her colleague must be getting anxious already, waiting for her. I nodded. I had known that this was exactly how she would behave. Unheard, I thanked her for the good moments she had granted me. Moments of consolation that I so much needed after that Friday morning. I stood up after she left and my gaze fell on a young man hurrying briskly across the entrance hall. And I thought that that was exactly what the young newscaster must look like whose voice had so shaken me.

At the end of the summer, just before the religious holidays, I completed my unfinished research project. The bibliographical inquiry into the life and work of the poet with whom I had become so involved, for so many weeks of study, did not yield the results I had hoped for. I also had unexpected difficulty translating his Central European use of language, the heavy, turgid style, so remote from Hebrew. I marveled at the way this foreign Jew had succeeded in translating modern Hebrew poetry into his own language whilst I, a Hebrew-speaking Jew, had difficulty in understanding the off-putting jargon he called his mother tongue. I was also disappointed in the archival resources of the National Library. I wore myself out and made enormous demands on the staff, and spent several hours ransacking the cellars, which I was allowed to enter in defiance of the strict rules of library administration. All in vain. I could not find his book of translations from modern Hebrew poetry. I had to make do with several surviving long-winded articles and some scraps of text laboriously gleaned from obscure journals. But the more disappointed I became with what I discovered of his work, the more I was impressed by the ups and downs of his life. I found out about his contacts with well-known poets of the period, his abortive attempts to take his place in the center of literary activity in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Above all, I uncovered his devious relationships with the women in his life.

I parted from the old lady, the member of my family, from whom I had rented the “cell with standing room only,” and packed my belongings. My stack of cartons filled with books stood waiting for the van and I sat in the small kitchen chatting with her, exchanging pleasant memories of the far off days when I was a brave young soldier in the disputed town. She recalled stories of my night patrols carried out beyond the ultra-orthodox neighborhoods. And I reminded her of a forgotten incident, which at the time had very much upset her. We ate the toast she had prepared for me, with loquat jam she had made herself and tea brewed from herbs she grew in the garden. I told her how I had become involved in the life and work of the forgotten Jewish poet and how I had wasted precious weeks on him during the past summer. She consoled me saying I might be wrong. The character of the man might yet come across in my work. “Apart from that,” she added, “there are always surprises. You may go home and find the lost book waiting for you on the table....”

The van arrived. I loaded my belongings and exchanged parting kisses with my old kinswoman. I was touched by what she had said; I felt she had tried to ease my disappointment. "I hope you are right," I said before going down the stairs, "I hope the little book really is waiting for me on the table."

I visited the reading room of the National Library for the last time to say goodbye to the young librarian who had been so helpful to me in my work. As I crossed the lobby with its exhibitions, I remembered the question she had asked me about the melancholy poet Yosef Goren. For a moment, I thought perhaps she had mixed him up with an unimportant, uninteresting literary critic with a similar name, whose fatuous criticism had filled the pages of the literary supplements. But she had not meant the critic. I knew quite well which Yosef Goren she had in mind. His excellent poems of memory, recently published, had captured the attention of the cognoscenti. Fine poems, sparse and lucid, there was hardly anything comparable to be seen in the literary journals. I could see that she was not only a devoted, conscientious librarian but also a keen reader of the modern poetry of suffering that had appeared since the war. I thought it might be nice on my part if I praised her for her taste in poets. But I refrained, after the frank discussion we had unexpectedly had in the cafeteria, I couldn't say anything to her that was artificial and insincere.

Although she had been the first to get up and had rushed out of the cafeteria in order to relieve her colleague on duty at the lending desk of the reading room, I knew that her feelings had been sharp and exactly the same as mine, after my embarrassing uprush of emotion, the war memories that suddenly returned at inappropriate moments, the trembling of my hands that threatened to recur, the final picture of Hagar Reichenstein, spread eagled in the street. I approached her desk to say goodbye. She stood up when she saw me and went to the nearby wall, a few short steps, so as not to disturb the studious peace and quiet of the readers. I asked her to cancel all the documents that had been issued in my name, the regular and the temporary readers ticket, and to settle all my debts to the library and to destroy all records of my transactions in the library during the weeks that I had been in town. "I love rubbing out and destroying papers," I told her. She said she was glad to know me and the reading room was waiting for me whenever I continued my research.

I was almost ready to publish a preliminary article, the first of a short series I was planning about the forgotten poet I had rediscovered, which would appear quite soon in one of the journals. She asked me not to forget to send her a Xeroxed copy of the article, even though the Periodicals Room was just outside the door, opposite the elevator. I promised not to forget and if possible—and I hoped it would be, because she certainly deserved it—I would dedicate a few words to her, specially written on the Xeroxed copy of the article. She suddenly smiled at me and the tiny spots on her face vanished completely when she smiled. She said she too would not forget me, "the obsessive newspaper clipper," and would collect for me any newspaper items the subject of which was Hagar Reichenstein and her terrible death.

I did not dare to exchange kisses with her, as I did with my relative, though she was certainly kissable. We shook hands, and I walked backwards, my eyes fixed on hers just like in the films, until I stumbled against the automatic door at the entrance to the reading room.

I went back home to the coastal plain and worked on editing the few works of the poet that I had found in Jerusalem and almost managed to free myself from the story of beautiful Hagar Reichenstein's death. But the charming librarian was as good as her word and sent me envelopes stuffed with clippings from newspapers that never stopped telling the sad story of the promising student of Kabala. One journalist – I can no longer remember her name or that of her newspaper - revealed that the late Hagar Reichenstein had been one of the lovers of the visionary poet, the ascetic from Jerusalem whose poems were then so much admired by young readers of poetry.

I don't remember any more the exact details of the story but it contained some intriguing, riveting sentences, such as "No, it was not a story of passionate love but, it seems, just an affair of the spirit..." Here the woman journalist's intention was to devalue the conquests of the visionary poet, to ridicule him and his love affairs, which aroused understandable envy among her readers.

Or another sentence from her article, which was no more than a misquotation from an interview with him that he had given to another well-known newspaper after the sudden death of Hagar Reichenstein: "Most of his lovers were beautiful golden girls, dressed with youthful simplicity and wearing sandals. There was about them and their simple clothes a smell of Hashomer Hatsa'ir kibbutzim and the pioneer youth movement... They made an effort to conceal their beauty until they had climbed up to his attic in a Jerusalem side street. They then underwent an astonishing transformation. They had gone up to a physical attic and lain down at his feet in devotion, by virtue of which he had gained entry to an ethereal, feminine attic, climbing into it with their aid, right on to the shapely limbs of his neglected objects of desire, these graduates of youth movements and army service. And so on and so forth." But how could one know, reading such a trivial load of rubbish from newspaper clippings stuffed into envelopes and sent to my home on the coastal plain, how could one know what really happened?

And in one of the clippings she sent me I found more weird nonsense: "These beautiful girls, such 'ethereal' creatures, plucked from the department of mystical Kabalistic symbolism, paradoxically it was not enthusiasm and longing for matters of Jewish tradition and its extensive literature that had them hooked on arcane philosophy. Actually, it was the delights of research and the charm of rummaging among such occult subjects. And the delicate thrills of meandering through the intriguing life stories of the creators of Kabalistic symbolism. Above all, what they found most endearing was their great teacher, Professor Gershom Scholem, who introduced them to an amazing world of whose existence they had been quite unaware. It was he who captivated them, enthralled them with the power of his intellect, fixed them in the mold of refined "ethereal" creatures among those marvelous

figures he expounded in his classes and in the special seminars he devoted to them and held at home.” And similar stuff and nonsense and downright lies. Even I, who lived near the coast, far away from the atmosphere of the Department of Kabbalah, could see how many malicious misrepresentations had been planted in the report. I could not endure the gush of rubbish that flowed from these newspaper clippings, I just stopped reading them. But I took pains to thank the librarian who had not forgotten “the obsessive newspaper clipper,” both by telephoning her and in polite letters that I sent to the library.

And yet I was plagued with doubt. Several unanswered questions continued to worry me, even after I was no longer working on the legacy of the subject of my research. I wondered whether the attractive Hagar Reichenstein had also been one of those “ethereal” girls who smoked a pipe with a long, carved mouthpiece, puffing smoke rings up into the air and stamping their feet with impatience in the area outside the Jewish Studies building. Had she too, in the early hours of the evening, panting, climbed the steps to the spiritual attic of the visionary poet? The one the journalists who handled the story had labeled the “all-seeing seer?” Had she too insisted on wearing her lugubrious all-black outfit because she was a member of some secret association? One that the journalists referred to only in hints and which, so they said, occasionally held wild orgies, in the spirit of some notorious false messiahs?

Could I possibly be the fool who had risen from his desk in the reading room and rushed madly off to the heart of the Christian Quarter in the Old City, just in order to join the rest of the team summoned to the rescue of the beautiful young prodigy? Was I the innocent who had run to help the young research student of so much promise, tottering like a drunkard on the pointed tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher? Wouldn't I have preferred, in retrospect, without even admitting it to myself, to keep company with the blushing librarian and join the holders of secret orgies?

How else can I explain to myself the small miracle that happened there, when I rushed to join the holders of the safety net and found myself grasping a carved icon I had stolen from the souvenir shop? And when my hand relaxed and opened, and I saw Hagar Reichenstein lying spread out, lifeless, in the small square, totally innocent of all the filth attributed to her by the newspapers, lovely and glowing with the same frozen, dead radiance as the golden halo of the icon in my hand, was I not envious of the visionary poet? When I held the statuette in front of my eyes, I could see the crack in the skull. Narrow and clean. Without a single drop of blood. A crack you could have mended with a finger's touch, perhaps even restored to life.

Family Language

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I had a vision one night of my grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Yoselevitch, my father's father who died in Poland before the war. He lay in his house by the window while outside, hundreds of Jews wrapped in black fur hats and dark coats gathered in the small planked yard awash in mud left by the melting snow. With a bright face, he smiled and beckoned me closer. "Please, don't be afraid, my grandson-whom-I-did-not-deserve. Come to me, come to grandfather." The windows were open, it was cold, and dozens of grieving Jews thrust their heads into the room. "Pay no attention to them," grandfather said. "And don't be afraid. Come to me."

Wait a minute. What language did he speak to me? Yes, I have this bad habit. I bring myself to a stop in the middle of reliving the dream. I have to know: What language did they actually speak in the dream?

For some reason, the language spoken in my dreams is very important to me. Even after waking up delirious, I make it a point to know what language I spoke. Did my grandfather speak Sephardic Hebrew, for him a language for the future that he never knew? Or did he speak to me in Yiddish, which for me even then was a useless language of the past? Or was it a picture language peculiar to dreams that were not Hebrew, Ashkenazic German, or Yiddish? I don't know. I just don't remember. Sometimes, something from my dreams finally comes to me weeks later. It's usually a trivial thing, of no importance. Yet that is what is stamped indelibly into my memory of dreams. I once read some book about the interpretation of dreams. The author claimed that it was precisely these small, seemingly meaningless details that must be grasped because they hold the key to explaining the dream. But I didn't ask any questions. And the questions I ask now have no connection to the dream. And so, what language did I speak with my grandfather, my father's father?

During the trip to Europe some years ago, I met my uncle, my mother's brother, for the first and last time. My uncle was already old and ill. His legs were nearly paralyzed and he moved about, with difficulty, with a walker. It is interesting that on the way from the hotel to his house, I wasn't concerned with which language we would speak. It all seemed so simple. The old uncle and his nephew from Israel were meeting. Was it conceivable that they would be unable to speak to one another? And in fact, the instant we met--after a few awkward moments--the flow of talk never ran dry. He asked questions, which I answered, and then he tried to answer my questions. We sat in the house with his family, his sickly wife and watchful son-in-law as his daughter fussed around us. My wife, who had come with me from the hotel, also sat with us. It's my feeling that we spoke the family language. I've saved it all inside me: the names, the dates, the family history that has come down to us. The siege, the rescue, the flight - everything. I even knew that he

had grown tired of Judaism and was leading an assimilated life. But in his soul, he yearned to live a different kind of Jewish life.

On our ride back to the hotel that night, I asked my wife what language my uncle and I had spoken. I felt excited and quite confused. My question astonished her. Why, it was the family language, of course, the language revived from the past. "True, but what is the family language based on?" I persisted. My wife had noticed bits of Hebrew, fragments of French, whole sentences spoken in Yiddish, and a lot of English. I was amazed that night at how all those languages had melded inside me. They had been hiding, waiting for the right moment, and when they burst forth, had emerged a coherent, whole language. The family language.

And now we return to my paternal grandfather, to his last night in a small city in northeastern Poland on the Lithuanian border. The windows are open to the chilly, early spring evening. He signals me, calling me to him. I now know that he called me in the family language; indeed, we did not speak any common language. Actually, I still hadn't said anything. To tell the truth, that night, a night in the Hebrew month of Shevat in the year 1935, I still hadn't been born.

But that doesn't change the dream at all. My father, a young, zealous pioneer, had already been in the land of Israel for some years. But I distinctly remember that he was with us there, at the rabbi's bed. And when I probe my memory, I also recall the dear faces of the founders of our Kibbutz standing along the walls. Some of them are still shod in the high rubber boots they wore during our wet winters. Their boots are sopping with our reddish mud, the loam of the land of Israel, not the dark Polish forest mud whose exact color even I don't know.

Through the open window comes the piercing cry of wailing. Some women mourning in the distant throng can no longer control themselves. Are the women allowed to enter the dying man's room? I don't know. I'm not an expert in religious law. All I know is what they let me see in my dream. Women were there, definitely: relatives, neighbors who dearly loved the brilliant rabbi, tender young girls of the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist movement bound for Israel, all encircling the house. I heard some of them already bursting into tears. The men still restrained themselves. Actually, they had lost control and were praying in pained, tormented voices, "May the rabbi live, amen. May the rabbi live, amen. Maytherabbiliveamen. Amenamenamen."

What prayer did they raise there below the open windows? I dove to the bottom of the dream to make sure I didn't fail. Only someone who has tried diving into a raging sea can begin to imagine what I went through. There is no firm bottom to a dream. Everything is mixed together, swept around, and I was close to drowning, so close that I had already given up on my new watch and the American sunglasses that I'd left behind on the beach.

On my grandfather Rabbi Yosef Yoselevitch's last night, he appeared to me, the baby, his grandson not yet born. He smiles and invited me to play on his knees. But I could already detect beneath his yellow skin something

that the jostling crowd on the wooden streets outside hadn't seen. Large white candles glowed in the room beside his head and someone put a damp towel on his brow. The murmur of prayer outside grew louder. Now you could hear the recurring words of the prayers like a solemn oath. "With the strength of your right hand's greatness, we beg thee. We beg thee, use your power. With the strength of your right hand's greatness."

If the language of my grandfather's terms of endearment had been hard for me, the language of the prayers was seven times harder. I couldn't tell at first if they were real words or just sounds that repeated themselves like the booms of distant drums: "We beg thee with the strength, we beg thee with the strength." People were now weeping loudly in the little garden trampled beneath the street's leafless trees. Everyone was now stooping, bowing his head and wailing, the women in high, shrill voices, the men in dull ones. The language of the prayers outside was carried inside the room and surrounded the beloved rabbi on his deathbed. "With the strength of your right hand's greatness, we beg thee. Preserve the life within him, let him sit again among the living. By your right hand so great and mighty, can you not return our dead to life?"

What did I know then of the world of yeshivas? What did I know then on the Lithuanian school? What did I know then of the geniuses of the Musar movement? Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't guess that I would return someday to the schools in Jerusalem and read the heart-rending lamentations that the great rabbis of Israel and Diaspora had written over my grandfather.

Once, giving in to a pique of curiosity, I even went to see the world of the Lithuanian Yeshivas in Jerusalem. I met teachers and headmasters, some of whom remembered my grandfather and even gave me a measure of respect, or perhaps it only seemed to me that they did, because I was the grandson of the Lubitch. I chatted with them about the great achievements of those who had restored the world of the Lithuanian Yeshivas, the giants of ethics, Abramsky and Grodzensky, the Meltzer rebbe and the Blazer rebbe. But inside, I felt that this was a lost world. I sat in their narrow, cramped offices up in the Romema quarter. I drank from their cups and ate a little from their tables. They exchanged words among themselves in an indecipherable language; all I understood was that they were intrigued to see what had become of the secular grandson of the master of Lubitsch.

"Pay no attention to them." My grandfather, the Lubtsher, draws me to his bed ringed with candles. He chirps at me and showers me with sweet words of affection, hoping that I'll come out of the wall and take the form of a baby in the room, that I'll climb on his knees on this, his last night. Yes, it seemed to me in the dream that I remember how he swung me up on his frail knees and hummed in my hair some forgotten melody that I, too, sometimes recall during the dream. Then I was snatched off his knees because the rabbi was very weak. He had to be put to bed at once and prepared for death. So many Jews crowded around his bed. The dark coats were steaming and I recoiled from the acrid stench of their boots. "Pay no attention to them."

My grandfather, my father's father, draws me to his ever paler face on the pillows. Outside, the women's wails are now rending the night air and the men are tearing their clothes. At night, in my hospital bed across from the nurses' station, I grasp for my memory. Tenaciously, by sheer force, I struggle to remember every word of the prayer-oath. "We beg you, with your strength." If the Jews clustered by the dying rabbi's window had such unshakable faith in the words' magic powers, why shouldn't I believe in it, too? Why shouldn't its powers heal me, too? In every corner, they murmured, "May the rabbi live, may the rabbi live," even though his soul was already fluttering around the candles' flickering flames.

What is the power of this prayer? In the combination of its letters, in the charm of its syllables, in its ancient sources? I, too, join those in the crowd, whispering and hoping. I too put letters together, compose abbreviations, and memorize obscure acronyms. Let it have an ancient source. Let it have a mystical source. Let it even come from the imaginary world of the Kabala. Just now, I don't care at all what the source of the prayer is. Just that it will work. That the secret combination will do the job. That the threat hanging over me in the hospital ward will be removed and shattered.

I know in my heart that my request hasn't been granted. The brilliant rabbi, the man of morals beloved by his people, was called to the Yeshiva of High and has not come back. Only in my cryptic dreams is he lying on his deathbed, propped up on his pillows. A sweet smile, a smile unlike any I have ever seen before, spreads over his face, its pallor calling to me.

Translator's note: 1. A Kabalistic prayer of 42 words, the initials of which form the secret 42-letter Name of God.

2. According the Kabalists, the prayer should be divided into phrases of two words each.

3. A movement aimed toward concentrated study of ethical practices according to Jewish tradition, especially in many Torah academies of Lithuania, starting in the 19th century.

Curly-Headed Pussycat translated from the Hebrew by Eddie Levenston

In the winter of 1976, a few weeks after the publication of my first book of poems, I received a telephone call from the radio station of the Israeli Army. A pleasant young voice courteously invited me to come and be interviewed for their weekly literature program. I felt excited and confused. I was a complete novice about advertising poetry and didn't know how to react to such encouraging invitations. I asked the girl if it was she herself who intended to interview me. She merely laughed and said they had a well-known poet at the station who interviewed poets whose new books had just been published. She was surprised I had never heard of him and his program and assured me that he was "an excellent interviewer whose programs were gripping, interesting and very helpful for listeners to get to know the poetry." I told her I would be very happy to give my first book of poems an encouraging start, even on the Army radio station, and asked her for the name of the poet-interviewer. She gave me his name and address and telephone number and added that he also published reviews of poetry in the press and if he liked me. I got the point.

"You're a novice right?" she asked me before hanging up, "Listen, don't get upset. They're saying here that you've written a moving book of poems."

And a few days later, he did get in touch with me. At that time, I was living in a hot, crowded students' dormitory in Jerusalem. He rang me in the afternoon, to the public telephone in the dorms. I was embarrassed again, my throat dried up, I paled and spluttered, and my hand holding the receiver began to sweat. I remember some very unliterary haggling over where to hold the interview. I suggested the small apartment of mine on the kibbutz, surrounded by green lawns and happy shouting children. A place detached, as it were, from the worries and pressures of time. But he insisted that the interview take place in Tel Aviv, the big city. He suggested a modest cafeteria near the radio station in Jaffa. But I refused, telling him it was difficult for me to find my way from the kibbutz to Jerusalem via Jaffa. And anyway, why Jaffa of all places? I remember asking him how Jaffa was better than my small room on the kibbutz. He thought for a moment and suggested that we meet at a small cafe in the square near the Town Hall, close to his apartment. I pondered and hesitated and finally he decided we should meet in his apartment.

"Don't forget," he said, "on the second floor, it's an old building, in one of the small streets turning off Ibn Gvirol, and the door," he concluded, "is always open."

It was one day during the week—I think it must have been in the middle of February 1976—one of those bright warm days that take you by surprise in the depths of a cold winter. I reached his apartment, the door was brightly painted, the decorations around it overlapped the lintel. You could

see at once that this was an apartment of artists, young free spirits who knew what was in. The door was open. I paused a moment on the landing to recover my breath. I was gasping. The second floor, he had said on the telephone, but actually it was the third, he had not counted the height of the pillars from the entrance level.

I opened the door and went inside. In order to avoid any embarrassment, I cleared my throat, coughed aloud, and gave the chair that was standing in the entrance a kick.

“Yes, come in, it’s open.” I heard his voice coming from the kitchen, “It’s okay. I’ve been waiting for you.” He was sitting by the kitchen table, painted a dazzling blue, with the tape recorder in front of him and my first book of poems lying there among the plates and the breadcrumbs. “Sit down, sit down,” he told me, extending his arm from the shoulder, without getting out of his chair. “We can start in a minute. Would you like some coffee? Or tea? Maybe a roll?” He rummaged in the empty bread bin, apologized and said “Never mind, Rami will go down to the corner store and get some fresh rolls,” and opened another door through which I caught a glimpse of a young man, almost naked, sprawled on a colored mattress that was lying on the floor. “Rami is a good boy,” he said and came back to sit in front of the tape recorder. “A fine, handsome boy, a real pussycat.”

The interview began, he asked questions and I answered, and I was surprised by his journalistic efficiency. “You have written a moving book,” he said as he was changing the cassette, “excellent poems about memory. But don’t expect it to sell. And don’t think anyone is going to take note of it and recognize your talent. You’ll see. You’re going to be very disappointed.”

I was taken in by the style of his interview and the interest he displayed in my work; like a man high on drugs, by his dirty kitchen table, I poured forth all the pain and anger and frustration that had accumulated in me since the war. From the moment I had been discharged after a long period of military service, I had been unable to settle down. Like many of my acquaintances I had been badly shaken by the appalling trauma we had all undergone during the October War. Like a hurt child who does not know who is really responsible for his suffering, I placed the blame on everyone.

At night, when the politicians spoke to me from the television screen, I couldn’t stand their bare-faced lies, and when intellectuals serving in the army broadcast laments for the loss of our ancient, valued identity and the birth of a new one, hard and painful, conceived in blood and tears, I laughed to myself at such idiotic naivety. In those days I could easily distinguish the various kinds of shirkers. Those who were firmly attached to their café tables, in Tel Aviv and other places. And at a time when my comrades and I, and thousands of other soldiers who had survived the firing line were searching frantically for cover from surprise hostile bombardment, they were holding pitiful, garrulous debates about the existential abyss they had suddenly discovered.

He stared at me and asked, "What are you so angry about? Why are you so hostile? All I'm doing is interviewing you about a new book of poems, your first book of verse."

Handsome Rami re-entered the apartment and, with quiet grace, put fresh rolls in front of us. I gazed in wonder at his mass of curls, and I remember the signs of sleep that marked his face. He looked at me for a moment as he passed my chair and I was sure he could see the cloud of anger and frustration that enveloped me.

"A nice-looking kid, eh?" the poet said when Rami had left the kitchen. "A real curly-headed pussycat."

Anger gave rise to anger, misery brought more misery and I could no longer stand the suspense. "Don't jabber to me about good-looking kids," I suddenly rounded on him, "I saw too many young lads piled up at casualty clearing stations. I saw too many handsome soldiers strewn on the ground in the maneuvers of that damn war."

He turned off the tape immediately. There was no point in continuing with the interview. I was a bundle of nerves. What had been recorded had been recorded, he said as he rose from the table, and the rest could be done when I had calmed down.

"And what about everything I said?" I asked.

"We'll see," he replied, packing away the cable, "maybe we can do something with it. This anger of yours will eat you up. You had better be careful, in your place I would do something about it." We parted in haste, with no particular amiability, no gesture of growing intimacy, and no promises whatever. We agreed that he would inform me when and in what framework the interview would be broadcast. And I left his Bohemian apartment, hurrying along the street of the wintry city towards the nearby bus terminal.

As I sat in the bus, on the road going up to Jerusalem, I was assailed by all the poems, all the sounds, all the memories of the war. The sense of outrage that I felt, the precise origin of which I did not know, gave rise to a desire to settle accounts with the whole world. As usual I was too tense, too loud, too sure of the justice of my own stupid hatred. It had been born in the trenches during the long bitter winter I had spent in the basalt army posts on the Syrian front. I was sorry he had been so quick to turn off the tape recorder. Some day someone would have to listen to me. It certainly wasn't all my fault, I consoled myself. He's a busy man. He was hurrying to another appointment. A pity I didn't ask him to play back what he had already recorded. It was a good thing I had recited some of the poems into the microphone. "Read, read," he had encouraged me. "No one can read your poems better than you can." I got off the bus at the central bus terminal in Jerusalem and made my way quickly to my room in the students' dormitories. The air was fresh and cool, reminding me of the dry mountain air I had breathed for such long months at the top of the basalt hills. Would I never be able to forget what I had seen? That was another reason why I had written the

poems of recollection. To rid myself once and for all of troublesome memories. How long would they haunt me?

Two weeks later, I was surprised again by a telephone call to the dorms. Again it was from the army radio station. This time it was the poet-interviewer himself speaking. "How are you? Have you calmed down?" And a few more polite remarks for starters. I was completely relaxed. Jerusalem had been kind enough gradually to banish the war.

"Well, what now?" I asked. "When is the broadcast?"

"Ah, that's it, that's exactly the problem. There will be no broadcast," he told me. "I listened to the partial recording that we made and it's really good. And your reading of the poems is wonderful. However, the interview will not be broadcast. The station manager has vetoed it."

"Vetoed it?" I was dumbfounded. "What did I say? What did I say that had to be vetoed?"

"Ah," he replied. "That's just the problem. The poems you read came out really good. I'll see that you get a tape with the poems. Make sure you keep them, you may find a use for them some time. A wonderful reading, really touching poems about memories. Some of them may be the best war poems I have read recently."

"So what's the problem?" I pressed him. "Why did they veto the interview?"

"It came out a little defeatist," the interviewer told me carefully. "That's what they thought, the people at the station who heard it. This is hardly the time to be broadcasting defeatist talk on an Army radio station. Such an interview could lower the morale of the listeners, that's what they say at the station, we should keep it till better times."

His words astonished me. I had thought of everything except such a moralistic argument. Of all the objections in the world, they should veto my first interview because it was defeatist? I had no choice but to give expression to all those mute witnesses who had spent such long months with a feeling of betrayal. I had been obliged to give voice to my depression, to share with the listening public my outcry, my protest, my despair.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, after hearing all my protestations, "I'm really sorry. It's a pity your book will be forgotten. Perhaps we can meet again, after you publish your next book of verse."

But I haven't written any more poems since then. My next book of verse is taking a very long time. Unexpectedly, we did meet again, several years later, in very different circumstances. I happened to find myself one day in the flowering garden of the President's residence in Jerusalem, on the occasion of Hebrew Book Week. The garden was decorated, refreshing, everything was very colorful and eye-catching. I recognized him immediately when he crossed the lawn. I was sitting at the back as usual, in the last row of chairs. He came and sat down next to me. He hadn't changed much, only the lines on his face had deepened. He didn't recognize me, waved a hand in greeting to scattered acquaintances among the guests present and stared at the drinks table, which was standing close by. I told myself that if he didn't

recognize me, I wouldn't bother him. In any case, quite a few years had passed since the interview. I doubted whether he would remember our short but intense meeting in his Bohemian apartment near the city square. Suddenly I remembered Rami, the good-looking spoilt "pussycat" who had gone down to the corner store and brought us coffee and rolls. He had not accompanied him to the celebrations of Hebrew literature at the President's residence.

All of a sudden, to everyone's total astonishment, he leapt from his chair and started screaming and running towards the platform. The security men moved quickly, grabbed him by the arms, and pulled him away.

"This isn't a Hebrew Book Week," he screamed at the crowd and the dignitaries sitting on the platform, "it's just a commercial occasion for publishers."

The security men returned him to his chair and forcibly sat him down. All the guests turned their heads towards us and suddenly we were the focus of attention at the celebration. He assured the guards he would take it easy but they were hesitant. One of them went back to his place but the other remained standing behind the protesting poet, resting a heavy hand on his shoulder and keeping him in his place.

"Try it once more," said the security guard, "and we'll sling you out."

The poet pretended to relax and said to him "Hey, bring me something to drink."

The guard went to the drinks table and immediately the poet sprang up and started running towards the platform. "You're all crooks, this is one big racket. It's a celebration of exploitation and theft, the swindling of poets."

The security men ran after him, grabbed hold of him, lifted him up, and flung him down at the edge of the lawn. He fell on the grass, dazed, and tried to stand up and brush his clothes. But they manhandled him. "So, you promised to relax, eh?" they held him between them and dragged him off like a sack.

The master of ceremonies tried to calm the guests and the protesting poet was thrown outside the gate of the presidential residence. He held on to the bars and shouted something incomprehensible. The guards offered him a cold drink and urged him to calm down. Beyond the lawn, they couldn't harm him.

"Your anger proved too much for you, eh?" I asked him. "Anger is a very bad counselor."

He looked, suddenly recognized me, and said, "I remember you. You're the disappointed poet who came home a wreck from the war." We shook hands outside the barred gate and I asked him whether the interview we had recorded had eventually been broadcast. "No, it was erased," he said, "and you have nothing to regret."

I didn't tell him that since then I had ceased writing poems. And I didn't remind him of his promise that he would interview me again when my second book of verse was published. He stood there trembling, his shoulders aching from the rough handling by the guards.

“And what happened to the good-looking boy, Rami, who was with you at the time,” I asked.

He raised his lined face, and gazed at me, and I suddenly seemed to see in his eyes the betrayal in my own that I had left behind me in the war.

“I’ve no idea where he is now, that pretty boy, that curly-headed pussycat. You’re really dangerous, with your poet’s memory.”

I turned round to go back to my place on the lawn, but to my surprise he added, “Do you remember his magnificent curls?” I waved my hand in goodbye from a distance and suddenly felt sorry for him, and for the handsome lad, and for my next poems which perhaps, because of everything that had happened to me, were taking so long to get written.

Kafko in my Hand

translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

This morning, much to my surprise, I felt some of my strength of old return. The slight blurring of my vision, the side effect of a disorienting dizziness, eased as my medication relaxed its grip on me. Reinvigorated, I approached the bookcase, pulled out some of the tightly packed volumes and blew the dust from them. At last, exhausted, I held Kafka in my hands. Though it had been quite some time since I had turned to his works, he had often come to mind these past weeks. Now he was in my hands again, a small, hardbound edition with the Hebrew letters set in the old-fashioned type of Yeshuron Keshet and printed by Belet Gavshushi.

Just a few days earlier, I heard the famous Czech poet, the one who would visit Israel one day, pronounce Kafka's name. Kafko, he said, and then again, Kafko. Suddenly, this alien pronunciation seemed to me just right, seven times better and a thousand times more faithful. It was, indeed a significant change. I close my eyes and echo his voice for myself. Kafko or Kafka, Kafka versus Kafko. When the Czech poet intoned the name in his Slavic-accented language, it sounded like Yosefko. Really, Yosefko, Yosko, Yoshko, Yosefko.

The name was terribly familiar to me, something I had known years ago, as though it had been printed on the kibbutz work roster of giant Bristol pages that could not be folded, pages so heavy they pulled out the tiny tacks holding them to the perforated wooden board. Yosek. K. Yoshko K. How easy it was to pronounce the name. I already liked Kofko, the new editions should print it Kafkoh and no other way. That is, the final vowel had to be embedded in the last consonant, but it was important that the suffix appear Hebrew and not western Slavic. Kahfkoh, which you could read as Kafkah or hear as Kafko, however the spirit moved you. A crackling good name that worked either way, two names suddenly merging, until I make a mistake and say, Yosef Kafka, thinking of his protagonist by that strange name instead of little Franz, which has simply escaped my memory.

There I stand at my bookcase, which exudes the aroma of damp wood. Kafko in my hand, I compose in my mind a letter to father. No version of this letter will ever be published. Kofko's writing, bewildering topic-switching prose, sets my teeth on edge. It sometimes resembles the fitful flight of some insect cautiously weaving 70 circles around an open flower. A lyrical turn occasionally flashes past in fear of an impending withdrawal. This is indeed timid writing, the sort that fears the direct approach. Here and there, a quick, direct sentence plucks up its courage and escapes. I fully expect that in the wake of this breach (on a small scale, of course, for he knows nothing of all-out attacks on his pages), occupation divisions will tramp forward to exploit the breakthrough, clean out the remaining outposts and establish a bridgehead.

But no. That is not for him. He instantly retreats to the safe shelter of the previous sentence. From there, he may sally forth in secret and once more try to reach his goal. His prose is self-defeating. Sentences imprison themselves within a multitude of bonds and bounds. It comes close to what they taught me in the army years and years ago. One foot on the ground and one in the air. While the pinning force seizes the commanding high ground, the assault unit scouts the enemy to surprise him in his trenches. Perhaps even this definition is not truly accurate. But what has accuracy to do with literature? One step forward and two steps back, that is how he fashions his advance. I pace before the book shelves, Kofko's book in my hand now open to the eye. We are writing the letter to father. Sentences race ahead, terrified, stooped, seeking shelter. With inexplicable courage, bold passages suddenly surge forth and whole columns are swept forward. The whole manuscript advances, an essay of black letters striking violently across the front until my heart skips a beat with some strange fear of sinking into a black morass. But I have nothing to fear. The first step forward has already been made. Now everything has come to a halt, pausing, scanning the terrain. It is as though Kafka himself has leapt from the page, taking the lie of the land and telling himself, whoa, too fast; the assault columns must be stopped. He is already planning his next move, a double step back. Once again, I am thrown far from the open heart of the wound.

Good, after the advances, we seat ourselves, the two of us, before father. There is a certain obscurity here, but I am in no rush to clear it up. Whose father is it before whom we sit? Little, scared Franzy, who slips the letter into the post box and takes to his heels. Is it his father? Or does each of us face his own father, handing him the letter in person? I remembered his stern face when I finished my days of punishment and was allowed back into the house. I was very sorry when he passed on and mourned him for a long time. I wondered how Kofko, writing his letter, would conduct himself, whether he would need to read an original, heartfelt eulogy while his father's coffin was lowered into the grave.

Prague, the city masked in Kofko's stories, was not destroyed in the great war. The house stands where it has always stood. The river flows past. The old bridges still stand. It all suddenly becomes clear. His mysteries are solved. Young, energetic Kafka, destined to grow as old as Methuselah, was in the habit of plunging into the chilly waters of the river. According to his friends, who remembered what they saw there, he swam the river in swift strokes. In the evening, returning refreshed and bursting with vitality, he would mobilize his paper heroes for the astounding strategy he had devised. One step forward and two steps back.

Can the lead sentence deny all the sentences to follow? How is it possible that a single clause can open or bar seven gates? Where can he hide, the trembling boy seeking refuge from his father's wrath? I am reminded of a boy, a childhood friend, who once accidentally broke the key to his parents' apartment. That was in the new neighborhood. The chain fell to the floor while the broken key remained stuck in the hole. Sweating from head to toe

in fright, he tried to draw the broken part from the door. When he finally succeeded, his whole body was shaking. He laid the broken key at the base of the door, as though it had fallen of itself and shattered on the floor. Even the crack he had tried to patch with spit could not be seen. He crawled into the garden on the slope of the lawn and crouched in the dark of the bushes until his parents returned from work. Only in the black of night did he dare to come out and present himself as someone who had traveled a great distance. In his absence, the mangled corpse of the key had been found on the porch. The air was thick with suspicion.

Of course, I am no seer when I dip into my memories. There is no limit to fear of a father's wrath. Even on a little kibbutz, a boy dreads the rage of an angry father returning home after a long day of work. He kicks the broken key and upbraids his wife who, as we recall from Kofko, is the beloved mother. "Ptui, ptui, ptui," he spits out. "Why, tell me why he has abused your precious 'jewelry' again. Would it help to throw him out of the house for a few days? Maybe this time he'll learn how to behave?"

In my bed at the hospital, I drafted countless letters to father. What attracted me was the detached, remote nature of it, the opportunity to hide behind the other side of the composition, quite unlike the stories and poems I have written over the years. They are the yearnings laid bare and base desires that make a name for a piece. One can feel pain, even regret. In every important stage of my life, at every juncture, I have found myself facing him, composing my thoughts for him on a sheet of paper. On the one hand, I am glad he did not go through the terrible wars, worried sick for the safety of his children. On the other, I regret that he did not live to read my works or see his children grow up. I remember his final illness and my last visit to the hospital. It all comes back to me unexpectedly, the acrid odors, the hushed fears, and panic-stricken voices.

"Give me another 10 years," I begged. "At least let me live as long as he did." I bargained passionately with the giver of life and death. I was not ashamed to mix in some tears. I remembered his pedant face when my punishment days were finished, and I was allowed to come back to my parents' room. I was very sorry when he died, and mourned after him for long time. And I wondered how Kafko was habit, he who wrote that painful letter. What he would write, if he was should to call a fresh eulogy on his father's grave, when the berries cover the hole?

Who, Kofko? In his own demented way, he would throw a wild party one evening to free the household of a tyrannical father's yoke. It may be that as he steps forward, he breaks out in a drunken monologue of which the principal subject is the purpose of going forth in liberty. But little Franz instantly comes to and loses his nerve. With two steps back, he flings himself, wracked with longing, on the memory of the dearly departed, on the happy days of his childhood with his father and the simple, quiet pleasure of their home warm against the cold and rain of a European winter.

In the end, in that twisted way of his, he would spit, "ptui, ptui, ptui," berating his mother and sister so these slow-witted women, these stupid loved

ones, would grasp at last just who it was they were bound to serve from then to the end of their days.

The Resurrected

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I.

Once, while I was waiting at the central bus station in Jerusalem, a woman of about 60 came up, said hello, and wished me well. I returned the greeting but wondered how she knew me. She drew closer and said that for all the years that had passed, she remembered me as if we had parted only yesterday. “When was that?” I asked her. “Just who are you, and how do we know one another?”

She clapped me on the back and said that I had not changed a bit. The gray in my hair merely added to my charm and vitality. How was it that I did not remember her, Sarah, the brave Yemenite woman from the Jerusalem ETZEL battalion? After all, it was I who had crouched below her while she scaled the wall to set the explosive charges. Had I forgotten that as well? Did I not remember the mad, panicked flight from the wall when so many had been wounded? And the damned cease action order, the cause of all that grief, had I no memory of that either?

I was stunned. More than once, people had mistaken me for someone else and hailed me to say hello. Out of politeness, I had returned the salutation. Later, I would crack my head half the day trying to recall, who was that, when had we met, where do I knew him from? Of course, I cannot speak of their forgotten names and discarded noms deguerre. But a sapper in the Jerusalem ETZEL battalion? Nothing in the world could be easier to disprove, for I had never served in the Palmach or in the Hagana. I had been but a boy then, and called into the Israel Defense Forces only in the 1950s when I reached the age of induction set by the Defense Service Act of 1949. While in the army, I had served in a rear echelon unit of which I prefer not to say very much. To this day, I am somewhat ashamed of what I did in that unit while the cream of our youth spent their days in trenches on the border.

Here was another case of mistaken identity. Besides, she had aged me by a full decade. I forgave her for that. Many people wrongly think me older than I am. But where did she come up with these bizarre recollections? Breaching the walls of the old city I? A bitter rear guard action and bloody pull-back? Who me? The fallen comrades, the damned horde? Was I in all that? The slim volume of our history surely included the whole story. But what had I to do with any of this?

As often happens to me, my thoughts came too late. I wanted to answer her, but she had already vanished into the crowd of travelers waiting in the station. I edged out of the jam-packed line. Although I knew that I was wasting my time and delaying my trip to the coastal region, I had to lean against the station wall. I had to survey the passengers’ faces and gradually tame the turmoil that Sarah the courageous Yemenite had visited on my peace of mind.

I remembered a similar incident that had occurred some years earlier. I was walking on a street in Tel Aviv on some petty shopping errand when a man my own age suddenly accosted me and insisted that I was a long-lost friend. For all my protests that I was neither his friend nor the friend's cousin, indeed, I had never heard of them, the fellow beseeched me with a desperate loss of faith that I found deeply touching.

"It's not possible, it just isn't possible," he repeated. "The same thinning hair, the same stubble, the same two-day growth never touched by a razor." When I tried to convince him that similar faces can be misleading, especially if you hadn't seen them for many years, he burst out, "It isn't just the face or the body. You speak just like him. The same hissing diction, the very same hoarse voice. The same twitch on your face and exactly the same twist to your curling lips."

I had felt very uncomfortable then. With difficulty, I separated from my misguided admirer. Had we not entered a shop where I was known and one of my old friends worked, I would not have managed to shake him off. He was so dependent on me, he begged so for me to recognize him and share with him the distant years of our friendship, that it felt awful to break away and tell him again and again, "I don't know you. We've never met. I don't know what you want from me." I was truly sorry for his pain when I saw on his face how he gradually bowed to the truth and began to admit to me and to himself that a sad mistake may have been made.

In the end, we became such good friends that we exchanged addresses and telephone numbers. Smiles, slaps on the back, some words of encouragement. "It's nothing, these things happen. No one these days is immune to mistakes. This was a sad, little mistake. There are much more painful errors."

But the words of Sarah the Yemenite went straight to my heart, kindling a storm that could not quickly be calmed. A man finishes a grueling week of studies in Jerusalem, then rushes to the bus station for the trip to his house on the coastal plain to make Shabbat with his wife and his children and the oaks in the yard; how is it possible that while he is hurrying home, and his mind is already somewhere between the lawns and the red tiled roofs, a plain Jerusalem woman stops him, cloaks him in an imaginary past and wrongly takes him for an ETZEL lad who crouched below the wall to the old city and boosted to his shoulder the brave sapper who would toss an explosive charge above the barricaded gate?

Why didn't I hasten to answer her, "Sarah, you are mistaken. I am not the boy you knew back in '48. I'm not even from Jerusalem. I'm from the plain, from a village near Hadera. I'm finishing my required subjects, that's all. Don't turn my world upside down. Let me go in peace to my little house among the orchards." It seemed to me that I saw the shadowy image of the Jerusalem woman slipping away like a furtive gust of wind through the bustling station's teeming platforms.

II.

One night, I was invited to a party at the home of a well-known Jerusalem editor. She greeted me warmly and served exotic dishes she had learned to prepare during her years abroad. While we enjoyed the food and drink, she introduced a young woman, no beauty yet quite bewitching, whom she praised as the best rewriter on her editorial staff interested in more than just the pages she recast. Like the editor, she had kind words for a story of mine the paper was going to publish. Why, she had fallen in love with entire passages in it and was eager to discuss its innovative structure with me face to face. In this way, our hostess politely but firmly maneuvered us together, cheek to jowl at the little table in the corner of her cramped salon where we might whisper oblivious to the buzz and hum of the guests around us.

The rewriter asked my name and inquired into my age and line of work. She was amazed that a man like me would forsake an established life in the plain to dart between Jerusalem's yeshivas and seminaries in search of balm for the wounds festering in my soul. Still, the story I had submitted was very fine and she believed I ought to continue writing despite the demands yeshiva society made on my time. She found in my story something protean yet powerful. "Now that we meet in person," she said, "I see in you the same contrasting qualities of putty and steel. Your appearance bears an astonishing resemblance to the language of the story." For my part, I was more than a little surprised by the familiar tone she adopted. Dumb with confusion, I sat across from her and felt the first twinges of a powerful and mutual attraction.

After a long conversation battered by the surrounding din, we left for the bus stop below the house. She was going to her home on the edge of Jerusalem while I had to return to my little dormitory room. The volume I was studying lay open on my desk, beside it the notebook in which I scribbled thoughts my reading provoked and observations drawn outside the confines of the volume's densely printed pages. We boarded the late-night bus and sat side by side. As if by chance, her shoulder brushed me, then she half swung her body to me and her thighs pressed hard against my own. I don't know where I found the courage, but I took the plunge and wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

It was clear at once that we were headed to her small apartment on the city's outskirts. The volume open on my desk and the notebook at its side would await my return, perhaps that night, perhaps at dawn, perhaps not until the following day if things went well between us.

We got off at the last stop and, locked in passionate embrace, made our way to her door. How astounded I was by her request to make love in deathly silence. How I marveled at the efforts she made to choke back her moans. How sweet were the fingers she placed on my lips so I, too, would not cry out when the final ecstasy possessed me. Afterwards, we rose and dressed and returned to the building doorway, where the hot-blooded copy editor showed me a little hutch of white rabbits the tenants permitted her to keep. She drew me behind the building, to the small inner yard where some

flowerbeds she tended gave the Jerusalem night a sharp scent and a few vegetables, mangled by the neighborhood children, were eventually fed to the rabbits.

I asked her to explain the silence on which she insisted in bed. She had a roommate, she said, a fine young woman studying social work at the university who was about to marry her sweetheart and leave for a job in one of the development towns in the south. Out of a deep sense of pity, she would not sully for this splendid young woman whatever life in the big city had not yet spoiled. For some reason, I remarked that I understood all the nonsense if that was the case. Her explanation justified the strange precautions she had taken to assure our silence, even if we had been forced to make love like mice. But I never imagined that she would ask me to slink out of the building without a sound. Nor did I know that she would beg me to postpone the shower I craved till a later hour or, better yet, until returning to my cubbyhole in the dorms.

Her final words enraged me, just as her efforts to preserve the hush of her bed had roused in me a secret fury. I rose from the bed, dressed hastily, and told her, very loudly, that one could hear the same thing in the other tiny apartments in that crowded building. I was no longer a boy. It was years since I had indulged in one-night stands. I had long since wearied of ridiculous affairs like these. Her behavior reminded me of an incident buried in my youth.

Rising to her feet, the copy editor seized me and implored me to lower my voice. But I was drunk with anger you might say and loose with my words.

“Listen,” I persisted like a stubborn child. “I once went for a walk with my girlfriend in the hills of Jerusalem. As darkness fell, we arrived at a small, forgotten kibbutz called ‘Ma’aleh HaHamisha.’ It was almost off the map, so it seemed to me. The houses gripped a cliff to avoid sliding down the steep slope. Encountering the kibbutz chairman, we requested a room for the night. ‘By all means,’ he replied. ‘We have a guest cabin. Here is the key, here the water pitcher, there the kerosene lamp in case the electricity is off.’ He led us to the cabin and opened the door to the middle room. Then he wished us good night and went on his way. The two of us, hungering for love the same as you and I, did not even wait for the echoes of his footsteps to die on the pavement. We fell on each other at once, sank to the ratty mattress spread on the floor beneath us and rolled around to the sound of our cries of passion. We utterly forgot where in the world we were.”

The rewrite editor watched me with darkening eyes. Had I not been so big and strong, she would simply have taken hold of me and sent me flying through the window. I already heard the voice of the pure social worker calling, “Who’s there? What’s all that noise? Ilana, is that you? Do you need help?”

“Just a moment,” I shouted across the door to the unseen mob that no doubt had gathered outside to hear my tale. “One moment, let me go on with the story. Suspicious rustlings stirred on the other side of the cabin’s walls.

My beloved thought we should peek outside, perhaps mice were nibbling on the thin wooden slats. But I was brave lad in those days and said, 'Give me the lamp, I'm going outside to look.' I grabbed the lamp and flung open the doors to the rooms on either side of us. None of you will believe what my eyes beheld."

"Ilana, is that you? Ilana, has something happened? Do you need anything?" the roommate called to us. The copyeditor answered, "No, no, everything's okay. You can go back to your room."

I raised my voice like a street corner preacher, turned to the window, opened it wide and shouted. You won't believe what my eyes beheld. The two other rooms were full of drunken kibbutz workers sprawled naked and sweating, all of them squinting through cracks and holes in the splintered partition. They were panting with desire at my girlfriend lying nude on the tattered mattress. "You damn perverts, what stinking corpses you are," I waved the lamp at them. "You dirty Peeping Toms, you vermin, you filthy swine." I choked on the fury lodged in my throat. I kicked their sweating bodies and threatened the surprised workmen in a voice not my own, "I'll burn this cabin down on you!"

Suddenly, I was baffled by my boisterous behavior. I burst half-dressed out of Ilana the rewrite editor's apartment. To her stunned look, I streaked past the fine young roommate and down the stairs. The chilly air outside lashed at my chest. I stopped in my tracks, sniffing the scents of a wadi and the resin aroma of a copse of pines close by. The block was pitch black, swathed in wisps of mist and low, sodden clouds, and the night breeze carried distant sounds. I completely lost my way. I didn't know how to get out, which direction led to the city and which to the road. Cursing the absurdity of my situation, I began to walk briskly along an unfinished street until a gap suddenly yawned beneath my feet. I saw that the road and the street had come to an end, with the city nowhere in sight. I craned my head heavenward in search of help, but the low wisps of cloud obscured the stars. I was forlorn. I had no idea where in the world I was.

Then I saw lights in a window nearby. I gave up, knocked, and asked for help. The door opened and Miss Sarah, the courageous Yemenite, appeared at the threshold in some sort of nightgown. She recognized me at once and said, "A Palmachnik like you lost in the night? What about those scouting courses you took years ago? What about those those long nights you spent on orientation hikes? We didn't go astray like this back in '48."

I told her my strange account. "It's nothing, Palmachnik," she laughed. "Everything will be just fine." She took me back to the street and directed me in the clipped manner of those early years. "Turn right here, left here, then go straight and you're back on the main road into town. You can get a taxi there."

I thanked her and vowed, "Miss Sarah, we will meet again. Meanwhile, many thanks. But I was not with you there, in the Jerusalem ETZEL battalion. It was not I who kneeled down so you could throw the explosive packs."

She laughed again. "It's nothing. Each of us must hide from someone. And each of us must mold his past anew with his own hands. I wish you good night." Then she vanished into the blanket of fog.

III.

Our final encounter was the most surprising. Taking a break from important matters, I was plodding through the stalls of Hadera's little market. As I walked, I glanced at the heaps of fruit and flopping fish already beginning to stink. Suddenly, I saw two women, their faces aglow with delight, flapping their arms at me. Very properly dressed and made-up they were, and carrying handsome purses. Just as I was, in rough sandals and shorts, I came closer and greeted them, wondering all the while who they were.

"Hello, Palmachnik," one of them approached me. "Have you already forgotten? I'm Sarah, from Jerusalem."

I rushed to her in joy. "Hello, Miss Sarah," I said, "what brings you down from the lofty mountains of Jerusalem to the low plains of Hadera?" Sarah explained that she and her sister were attending a family wedding in the Nahali'el quarter of town.

In all her years in Israel, however, she had never been to our hamlet and was especially glad to run into me as they had just lost their way in the streets. From many kind people, they had learned how far the Nahali'el section was and feared, much to their sorrow and shame that the moment of the ceremony had nearly passed.

I gave them a hand, slowly leading them through Hadera's narrow streets north to the Nahali'el quarter. "You and your sister have nothing to worry about," I told Sarah. "Heaven was smiling on you when you found me. It is my pleasure to guide you on my free hour right to the hupa." The two overdressed Yemenite ladies from Jerusalem trailed behind me like a pair of infants toddling to the playground. Sarah extolled the virtues of Jerusalem in disparagement of the villages of the plain, which were not only a journey of many hours from home but also as alike as twins. From Nahariya to Kiryat Gat, the same avenues, the same shops, the same bus stations. Suppose you close your eyes, surrender yourself to the swaying of the bus and catch a short nap; if you wake up and find yourself riding on the main street of town, you simply cannot tell whether you are in Gadera or Hadera.

I laughed in agreement, then I reminded her of old memories, of that night when I had wandered bewildered and lost in her neighborhood floating within an oasis of clouds.

She nudged her sister and asked, "Do you remember? Do you remember how I told you about the strange young man I met one night?"

“Is that him?” asked the sister. “The one you said seemed risen from the grave to bring back to life the days of the siege and the battle for the city?”

“What’s this, Miss Sarah?” I jumped in. “Are you so quick to kill off your acquaintances?”

Sarah went pale and stopped. “Some things were not to be repeated before strangers,” she instructed, “just as there were matters better left unsaid even between sisters. “

Her sister, humiliated by the indiscretion that had slipped through her lips, tried to make up for her blunder. Unmoved, Sarah begged my pardon. Anyway, what was my name?

Here we had chatted politely all this time and they had yet to hear my name. Soon we would arrive at the wedding and she still would not know who I was before I disappeared again.

“Abshalom,” I said. “My friends call me Avsha for short.”

The two sisters gasped in surprise. Clinging to one another, they stared at me in fear. “Abshalom? Are you sure? How can this be, Abshalom?” Sarah demanded. “Tell the truth, what do you know? Tell me the truth!” she suddenly raised her voice. “Enough of this strange game you’re playing with us. Who are you really? Were you or were you not in ETZEL’s Jerusalem battalion? Did you or did you not stand below me the night we broke into the old city? Is that you, Avsha, from the battalion’s sapper platoon? Tell the truth, are you Abshalom who was killed later in that battle on the hill near Bet Shemesh? Are you Abshalom the living or Avsha the dead playing tricks on us?”

“But Miss Sarah,” I squeezed her hand hard. “I am Abshalom, but most certainly not the one you and your sister believe I am. I’ve already told you I was a boy during the War of Independence. I was drafted into the army only after the Sinai campaign in 1956. I can show you photos and documents. What is it with you two ladies? Have you stuffed your heads with superstitions? Whoever heard of the dead rising from their graves to stroll at liberty through the Hadera market? Look at me, ladies, come a little closer. Do I really have the face of the resurrected? Now let’s go a bit faster, or you’ll miss the wedding in Nahali’el.”

They huddled still more closely, clasped one another by the hand, lowered their gaze, and followed me like docile sheep. From time to time, they threw me a suspicious glance, evading my face but studying me from my balding head to my sagging belly. I could not restrain myself and asked myself aloud, “How is it possible to make such a mistake? How can someone, right in the middle of the street, suddenly take another for a young fellow who died so many years before? Had he aged exactly like me? Tell me your opinion, ladies, did his hair turn white like mine? Was he losing his hair like me? Were his muscles going slack like mine? Look, he was a fearless sapper in the first wave of attackers, not a goldbrick like me wasting his time in the army behind stands of waffles and soft drinks. Had anyone ever heard such a crazy story? And the similarity of our names? There are a thousand

ways to account for that, and another thousand to explain the resemblance of our nicknames. So what if every Abshalom in the country is called Avsha by his buddies?"

We passed between the little houses of Hadera and soon heard sounds of rejoicing rising from a yard in Nahali'el. I directed the wayward sisters to the garden gate but refused their invitation to enter and join in their relatives' celebration.

"This is it for me," I said. All in all, it was I who should feel indebted to Miss Sarah, for rescuing me from a tough spot that night.

Sarah pressed my hand and said, "Enough, Abshalom. Don't mention Jerusalem. Say nothing of that night. Every word you speak only makes me more confused. And my sister is of no help in clearing up the mystery. You see before you a foolish woman. On those nights when the ETZEL battalion went into action, she clung to our parents' legs, may they rest in peace. Every shell exploding in the city scared her out of her wits."

I bade them farewell. I saw how Sarah urged her sister to hurry along so they could inform the celebrants of their arrival. But her sister, not to be rushed, halted at the latch to the gate. Then she glanced back at me to see if I was still striding to the sidewalk or would suddenly spread secret, dormant wings and soar to the foot of Jerusalem's walls, beneath the old city's barricaded gate.

Projecting a United Will

Translated from the Hebrew by Hanna Lesh

In my youth, the old-timers told me that people who sought solitude in the woods near the kibbutz were unique. Too highly educated to take part in the exhausting work, too sensitive for the daily hustle and bustle, too snobbish to participate in the daily affairs of the settlement, they set out for the tall Eucalyptus trees on the outskirts of the kibbutz to hide in the shade of their thick branches and build a tree house that could only be reached by a makeshift ladder.

And that is why people would tell all kinds of controversial tales about them; fascinating tales about a life of freedom up here, in the shaded domes, completely isolated from the warm, pulsating life beneath them. These men raised their hot heads upward, toward a different sky, one that could not be observed by the pedestrians on the soft sandy path down below. Some were dropped from the collective kibbutz memory soon after having arrived. Others lived to a bright old age and eventually joined their comrades down below. They merely blush a little on being jokingly reminded of their former escapades in the treetops. Several of them have actually become mythical. But the tales serve to remind them of their first days in the country, their first steps on kibbutz. Most of all, they recall the unique smells.

As a lad, I chose to ignore the decaying tree houses in which crows nested. I tried to disregard the large rusty nails that were forever stuck in the large trunks and served as an annoying reminder. Walking aimlessly beneath them, I would kick at some forgotten cigarette package and spit at the surprisingly fresh condoms that had somehow turned up under the tree houses. In my wandering, I merely intend to discover some concrete evidence of legendary existence.

And then, on one of my walks at twilight, as my power of judgment seemed to be somewhat impaired, I came across that legendary figure from the old-timer's tales. He looked just like one of us, in his dark blue clothing and heavy rubber boots.

"Come on up!" he called, encouraging me to climb those precariously loose steps. "From up here the entire world looks different." Overcoming fears that had been nurtured throughout sleepless nights, I followed him up the tree.

"This way! This way!" He pulled me into his lofty outpost, which overlooked tower tops and power lines. "Sit down! Why are you breathing so hard, why are you so pale? They must have scared you with their stories down below! After all, this is merely a simple tree house, not a dragon's nest.

"Do you remember Rabbi Haim Vital's stories? Do you recall one about the Holy Ari and his failure?" Instantly he had removed all barriers. I was no longer a young dreamer, but his spiritual equal. I was no longer a moonstruck lad, seeking temptation and sin in the woods, but a pupil sitting in front of his teacher. I was extremely flattered to have been chosen from

among my buddies who had remained behind, down there in the teeming kibbutz yard.

“If at one and the same time all the Jews of Saffad had worn white clothing.... If they had all left town together and marched toward Jerusalem.... Can you imagine that? Every individual wish would have disappeared: one foot, one pace, a single united step by people in white. Their heads held high and led by the Ari, they formed a united society.

“Follow me! We are about to deliver Jerusalem! We are going to change the world!” Can you imagine it? Do you realize what a chance was missed in those days in Saffad? It is simply mind-boggling!”

The floor boards creaked; the huge trees groaned in the wind; a shower of fragrant Eucalyptus cups fell onto the sand below. calmly taking off his boots as though sitting on his porch, he comforted me, “Don’t be afraid. Worse storms have not managed to destroy my lofty eerie! Now, will you please listen to me! Imaging everyone on our kibbutz—men, women, children, and old-timers—standing in front of their huts and tents. Everyone dressed in their Sabbath clothes. Holding hands, they sing quietly. And not just members from our kibbutz, but from all neighboring kibbutzim, from the entire country! An enormous force of kibbutz members who all project their will in a single direction. Can you imagine what might happen? What might happen here and throughout the entire universe?”

Bending low over the wooden boards of the tree house, he covered his head as though trying to prevent it from bursting. “Such a unified will, one that encompasses millions, may cause a real revolution. Not just our country would be changed, but the entire globe; our miserable earth would move in a completely different orbit, one that was intend from the beginning. Do you see where the Ari erred? How could he have expected people to be ready in a couple of hours! What a crazy schedule he tried to enforce! Who can be expected to get ready at such short notice? Do you see the sorry chain of events that eventually led to a missed opportunity? What a pity! One could simply burst with frustration!”

Taking hold of my boyish hands, he folded them together and said, “No power in the world can withstand a united people’s will. You must always remember this. Naturally, it would be nice if matters were accomplished tidily in suitable clothing and accompanied by the right tune. But most of all, it is imperative to prevent the disintegration of this united will into thousands of individual ones. Look down at the kibbutz. What do you see? Everyone is going wild and pulling in a different direction. That is not the way to achieve salvation! It simply makes me cry!”

I strained my neck to look downward and see what he meant. I tried hard to imagine what such an enormous will, one that united the entire kibbutz, might actually achieve. But aside from sudden tears caused by the effort and an obscure but penetrating pain, I felt nothing at all.

BABBLES IN THE NIGHT

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I keep having the same strange dream. The small loamy lawn squeezed between the water tower and the old dining hall, filled with Legionnaires in crisp uniforms and silver helmets sparkling in the eerie, dreamy light. The points of their helmets cut through the bright sky far above. The rough Khaki neck flaps dangling behind their heads flutter in the breeze.

I can't say just when I first saw this fantastic vision, which always appears precisely between 1:30 and 2:15 a.m. Some nights, the nightmare and its after-images are so disturbing that I wake up drenched in sweat, my heart pounding, and blood roaring in my ears. This dream springs, I know, from my early childhood, when I saw Arab Legionnaires, resplendent in their uniforms and gleaming helmets, sauntering past the leopard cages in Tel Aviv little zoo. I saw them again later passing in an open military vehicle on the old Hadera-Tul Karem road. They strode through the kibbutz like conquerors, I'm sure of that now. And they bore themselves with the air of rulers. I'm not mistaken about that now either, for I always watch from below, a young, frightened boy passed so close to the dear red earth in his hideaway that no error or exaggeration is possible.

I'm not alone in my dream. My mother usually is with me, she, too, strolling at some distance through the zoo, lost in engrossing conversation with her aunt from Tel Aviv. The minute details of some unsavory family incident, which crops up during their talk with the names of family members and forgotten relatives, excites my adolescent fancy. As she walks off with her aunt, my mother never notices the swarms of Legionnaires rapidly filling the zoo.

Or perhaps that is my absent-minded father with me, in a gray casquette that he often wore into the city. He is talking quietly yet warmly with a boyhood friend who left for the city after several good but unpromising years on the small kibbutz. He too is behaving customarily in every way and also has no sense of the threat beginning to brew within the boundaries of the zoo. What's going on, am I the only who feels war looming? Is only this little boy able to sense the danger invading the zoo through the holes in the fence? Or is my imagination multiplying fantasies ad infinitum, enough for many years of dreams?

Some nights, my dreams repeat themselves with minor changes. One dream switches places with the next. The dream sometimes appears in a different guise. The scene is similar. Now we stand on a reddish field packed hard by barefoot children, close by the tent camp that existed on our small kibbutz in its early years. The tents form a while semicircle behind which, as in a slow-motion movie, the wooden scaffolding of the first multistory structure, later called the security building, slowly rises. Am I only imaging it or do I in fact recognize among the identical tents that special one in which my mother and father live?

The silver-helmeted Legionnaires are wandering among the tents. What the hell are they doing there? Seeking souvenirs? Looking for pictures? Prying into albums? And then they lead the kibbutz members, their hands bound with rough cords, from the bundles of hay, toward the gate to the groves. They're going into some remote field, the locus of secret fears. Do I stand there alone watching this drama or with other youngsters my age just as I? Dressed only in thin undershirts, we hide in the dense stand of eucalyptus trees watching, utterly helpless, as the lordly Legionnaires drive the members into the small tent camp. Weeping won't help now and you can't yell in a dream because the image immediately will dissolve, the hypnotic theater of memories will dim and I'll awake in my bed, covered in sweat, my pulse racing and the time on the clock glowing above my bed as usual between 1:30 and 2:15 a.m.

I'm certain that events of my early childhood blend into the dream. The fear of searches carried out by British troops. The terrifying siege of our neighboring kibbutz, Givat-Hayim, which ended in bloodshed and death and panic. A children's trip to the Tel Aviv zoo. A boy lost in the crowd and tumult. A boy whose mother's hands slipped from his grasp, separated from him by the rough jostling of foreign soldiers with khaki flaps fluttering behind their necks. But how are all these elements, each in their own exquisite logic leading inexorably to the next, fused in such a fantastic manner? How do they coalesce into a general picture of Kibbutz Ein Hahoreh, a small village on the fringe of Samaria conquered and occupied by the Arab Legion?

I return in my dreams to all-too-familiar features of the landscape. The old kibbutz pickup truck sunk in the sand somewhere east of the collective; deep paths of sand leading into the hills towards the feared village of Kakun; a group of tardy travelers stuck en route past curfew; darkness, packs of jackals, roving gangs, and worst of all, a treacherous engine that died in the most dangerous of places. Here I always stop and tarry. There are strange alleys flooded by images streaming from long-forgotten childhood dreams. The eye lingers over the soft, slowly darkening horizon where the dense orchards end and a view suddenly opens onto fields and gardens and caravans of camels bearing the melons of Kakun. Sweet watermelon juice trickles down the camels. In the fabulous chaos of the dream, I often see the juice transformed into blood right before my child's eyes. The blood drips from the camels' humps into the rich, black earth famous for its fertility. From the spot where the dripping blood seeps into the ground sprout castor oil plants, thousands of which once flourished in the groves. Some of them have remained hidden in neglected corners from the teeth of modern farming. A group of men is sprinting from the idled pickup. Stray words are softly spoken. It's hardly a stone's throw to the kibbutz fence, yet there is a feeling of total abandonment and bloodshed. The bawling boy must be dragged along so he won't hold up the others. I hear the effort required by this trek. I feel the moisture in the sweat-stained clothes, I tremble all over from the chill of the dew and fear and excitement.

The small band stops to rest and breathe beside the plum tree that once was hit by lightning. This is a familiar spot in my dreams. The east gate of the kibbutz isn't far from here. You can even trade shouts with the guards on the eastern side. The tree is completely charred, its scorched limbs frozen against the night sky. I'm terribly jealous of the children who saw flames shoot forth, followed by a billowing pillar of smoke, when the bolt struck the giant tree. I remember only its blackened skeleton. Occasionally, I ruefully regret having been born only after the fire. The blasted plum tree makes an arresting intersection in my whimsical dreamscapes. East of that point, terror reigns. Nearby lurk the Arab shepherds and packs of jackals run rampant. Then someone takes me by the hand and I'm in the cool sand on which I've landed. With a final effort, walking hard and fast, we must reach the kibbutz. We're wary of the deep shadows in the banana fields and steer clear of anything suspicious, avoiding all sudden movement and noise. Finally, we arrive, sweating but safe and sound, at the eastern gate.

At this point in the dream, I always crack under the tension building within me. I break into childish tears, uttering cries unintelligible even to me. Mercifully, once again I'm gently borne, comforted and caressed and muttering in that cryptic nocturnal language until I fall asleep. Although the language in my nightmares certainly has its own linguistic logic, its meaning is so elusive that I despair of ever comprehending it. To me, this is so much babbling in the night.

In that period between 1:30 and 2:15 a.m., there sometimes appears before me a nightmarish vision of the Ein-Hahoresht I knew as a boy. The past thrusts itself into the present. From the member's quarters groans erupt, babies cry and wail far off in the infant's house. I hear strange shrieks carried on the balmy night wind. However much I strain my ears, I can't fathom the nighttime howling from the hills. What is the source of this potent, macabre energy? What is it that causes the residents of this happy community such pain? In what language do dreamers of nightmares call out? Who do they summon in their agony?

In my nightly dreams, which follow laws over which I have no control, a distant vision often appears: the soft, white limestone path leading to Givat-Hayim. Barbed wire fences coil around the village. All the ground outside is pocked like a field of molehills after a rainstorm. Armed British soldiers fill out the picture. I lie at the edge of the woods where the sewage gardens end. Deep fissures rend the trunks of the huge eucalyptus trees abutting the kibbutz fence. The resin drips, the aroma is good, the bark is rough to the touch. What more do I need to complete the memory? Am I lying there alone or are some of my little friends with me? Had the firing already begun when we crawled to our vantage point or was it the first volleys that had aroused our juvenile spirits, moving us to hug the ground and crawl through the craters in the sewage gardens to the fringe of the thicket? By the concrete post at the gate nearby some people are crouching. There are cries and shouts. Someone screams during lulls in the shooting while other run. Shivers score my back, etched forever like scars deep into my memory

and impressed into the dramas of my dream. One of my young friends suddenly shouts to me that the man at the gate, the one wildly screaming, is my father.

I look towards the gate and see my father, Elkeh Yosselevitch, the great, noble Elkeh, stricken with rage and bitterness. Is he the one so startlingly cursing the British soldiers? Is that really his mouth? Is that his tongue? Never in my life had I seen him so savage. The children warn me to be careful because the English are shooting. I'm torn in my dream. I yearn to run to him and warn him, to end his cursing, to be swallowed in his arms. But I cannot move from my place. Bound by the tight unbreakable bonds of my dream, I can only twitch and imagine myself calling, "Dad, Elk, watch out, bullets are flying everywhere. Take shelter. Hide in the shaft of shade behind the bunker!" And from now on, in my nightmares of the English siege, which beset me whichever way I turn, the soft, white limestone path to Givat-Hayim knifes through it. Deaf to my cries, my father faces the gunfire, my tongue disobeys me, and the heavy words emerge in that incomprehensible night language. At times, when I awake feeling agitated and utterly helpless, I contemplate myself in the silence of the night. Am I unwittingly also mingling my hoarse voice with the nightmare chorus on our little kibbutz? On the floodlit sidewalk outside, are my cries to my father too far away for me to reach him heard by late passersby in that same nocturnal babble?

I've vowed to myself many, many times that I won't be lazy when I get up during the night, that I'll sit at my desk and turn on the lamp, that I'll open the drawer and take out a pencil and begin writing in my notebook in an uninterrupted rush while the images I've just seen are still fresh in my mind while I still bear the odors that enveloped me and my ears still ring with the roar of gunfire and the cries for help. My hands are damp and slippery from the sweat of my dreams. My heart throbs and a persistent, inexplicable tension racks my sleep-deprived body.

Later, glancing at the shadowy letters darting across my note pad, what I see in the hastily scribbled pages on my desk is not an imaginary Ein-Hahoresch or even the real, familiar one. What lies before me is a likeness of the strange nightmare version of Ein-Hahoresch beckoning me from the pages in that unintelligible language. I look wearily at my watch but the time is always the same: between 1:30 and 2:15 a.m.

A Dozen Baskets of Sand

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

The summer after the Yom Kippur War, I was one of those called up to perform the immense task of transferring war dead from their temporary graves for final burial. At headquarters, I was issued a new uniform with shiny unit patches and gleaming stripes. I even received a beret the likes of which I hadn't worn since my discharge from regular service. Our commanding officer gave me and the other five reservists in my emergency detail a short briefing emphasizing the importance of success in our grim mission. Then, instead of taking military transportation, we boarded a vehicle from one of the units and set out for a large army camp in the center of the country from which the coffins of the fallen would make their final, melancholy journey to military internment.

We didn't hurry this time since there was no reason to rush. Those who had waited an entire miserable year in their temporary graves wouldn't begrudge us a few hours of delay, nor would those who had waited for them as though they might suddenly return. We didn't know the sergeant we were to accompany. He was a young fellow in the regular army, a tank commander I believe, who fell during the breakthrough. His armored battalion had been attached to our brigade during the fighting, and who'd had time then to get acquainted? When his unit had returned to its original formation once the fighting ended, none of us had remembered either the faces or the names of those young soldiers.

As we sat at the gas station just outside Haifa, the wind, blowing from the west, mingled the pungent scent of the sea with the aroma of cooking from the little restaurant there and the acrid odor of spilled fuel.

At the big army camp in the center of the country that served as a transfer depot for the coffins, some reserve officers, busy men with serious, stern expressions on their faces met us. They already knew we were coming, who we were, and who we were to escort. We followed the officer in charge to a huge hangar where we sat in the shade under nets rigged up at the start of the operation. The hundreds of subdued escorts who crowded into the hangars spoke in hushed voices. Later, during the long hours of lectures, briefings and drills, I realized no one had bothered to tell us anything about the young sergeant, this tender, unknown youth whom we had been summoned to accompany on his final journey.

We set out the next afternoon. Our little convoy headed for the military section of a cemetery in one of the coastal towns. The drivers turned on their lights while we six reservist escorts spread out on both sides of the casket. The drive, which began in low gear among the whitewashed lanes of the army base, gradually gained speed until we pulled into traffic on the main road. The entire highway paid us its respects. The flow of traffic parted before us. Some drivers not only pulled over but came out their low doors, stood straight as they watched us and joined the ceremony. Some, for

whatever reason, even saluted our little convoy. Aside from the rhythmic purr of the command car's engine, not a sound was heard. The road, too, suddenly fell silent, and I felt a shiver ripple across my skin beneath my new uniform.

Just as we had been instructed, we stopped at the entrance to the cemetery for a breather. The thirsty drank while those who needed to went behind the bushes. The drivers got out to give their lights and gleaming metal fixtures one last polishing. The little honor guard smoothed the wrinkles in the flag draped over the coffin. The army chaplain and the local soldiers' welfare officer, who were charge of the burial, came foreword to make sure we'd brought the right coffin. I passed a few quick words with them. They were exhausted, their eyes red and their voices hoarse as though they'd spoken too much the past three days. The welfare officer, who knew the sergeant's family quite well, told the chaplain the family's address and the father's occupation. He was a broken man the welfare officer assured me and the chaplain. This rock of a man, now a shadow of what he'd been, was crushed.

With special ropes, we lowered the casket into the ground. Beside the pit, I heard one of the escorts whispering, yet all of us could hear him: "Don't get in my way, I'll cover it. Just move aside." Someone had told me before the interment that he did burial work as his Moshav. Apparently, he didn't care for how the army went about it. "Did you hear me? Get out of the way."

Slowly, we lowered the coffin, then pulled up the ropes, and moved back so none of the many mourners would notice that our comrade was doing all the work. We left the grave to the army chaplain, the welfare officer, and our burly companion who had volunteered to heap earth on the coffin by himself.

The military section was nothing but concrete and gravel, almost without earth. Beside the grave, however, lay a dozen baskets filled with sand. Old black rubber Public Works Department baskets, stacked up in two or three piles. Our Moshav man worked with consummate skill. His hands lifted the stacked of the baskets as though they contained fluffy insulation, not heavy sand. In a few silent moments of effort, he filled in the hole. There was exactly the right volume of fill. The grave was stuffed with sand, with enough left over to make a small mound at the edge. He suddenly broke into a sweat. Damp streaks ran down the back of his army shirt. I felt uneasy at that moment. The other escorts also seemed to be roused from their torpor. We rushed to the empty baskets to help to him if only by lining them up so they wouldn't be left strewn about the grave.

The bereaved family knelt before the small marker planted by the welfare officer. On it had been etched the sergeant's name, his unit, and its number, his last assignment and his tender age. He hadn't reached the age of 20. I recalled the words of a grieving father whom I'd heard on the radio before we'd started out that day. His son had been 21 and half when he fell. He'd mentioned this perhaps seven times during his brief, halting statement. The program's host hadn't dared interrupt him. And so his words had been heard as a kind of prose poem with a heartbreaking, recurring stanza: a 21

and half year-old boy when he died, 21 and a half years old, 21 and a half. The sergeant we brought from the temporary cemetery for final burial hadn't been even 20.

In silence, we moved away from the grieving family and the crowd of mourners. Now that our job was done, we gathered around our command car, slurping cold water from a jerry can. As always, we wrung our hands while murmuring the usual phrases to avert the agony of death and ward off the evil eye. Someone complimented the fine professional work of our Moshavnik. Just don't start telling your grave digging stories, I secretly prayed. Resist the urge to regale us with eerie funeral tales from the Moshav. He exhaled deeply, but, observing the decencies, said nothing. Yet under his breath, he muttered, "Such baskets of sand. Such DPW baskets of sand. I haven't seen those in ages. I didn't even know they still used those things."

Later, we climbed heavily into the command car and again sat three across on the benches. But now we had neither the coffin nor the flag draped over it. On the metal floor, only dusty furrows marked where we had dragged the box. We sat now free of the tension and gravity we had felt driving there. I glanced at the military section as the people left and at the flocks of swallows flitting through the tree tops. This, I thought, is the entire story: a dozen tattered, rubber DPW baskets of sand. Twelve heavy baskets filled with sand. And the vague, violent arbitrariness of war. And this somber assemblage: six reservists, the lad from the tank battalion, the Moshavnik who threw himself on the grave to erase his grief, and I, imprinting this image into my memory.

I saw too many dead in that damn war, far too many. At the collection stations, at battalion aid posts and at makeshift field hospitals; on the sooty hills, beneath the melting snow; at the parking lots of the temporary cemeteries. I didn't know this young sergeant. I'd never seen him anywhere. Just before we left, I cast a final glance at the fresh mound and the wooden marker, at the flowers and the black ribbons covering everything. And one last time to see the 12 DPW baskets of sand still standing behind us like a dozen silent witnesses forever fixed to the spot.

Two Jews, Three Immigrants

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

In a small grubby room at a cheap Parisian hotel, not far from the French capital's river, three seated men are chatting. Two of them are Jews, but all three are immigrants. It is early February, 1957. The day is cold and cloudy. The ancient heating system in the room doesn't work most of the day. Junk, the chambermaid calls towards the river. Long, flat barges traverse the river from one bridge to the other. The old, dark bridge bounds one's view to the right while the new span, whose steel beams glint even on a winter day like this one, frames the view to the left.

Leopold Spitzer, a 39-year-old movie director, is the divorced father of a young son. He left behind a small family when he immigrated from Israel, abandoning the infant state after seven years. His last film, "A Stone on Every Mile," was an abject failure trumpeted in every newspaper in the country. Rotten luck befell the film at its first and, sad to say, only showing. The day of its premier, a heavy, suffocating Hamsin, the desert wind, descended on the May Cinema in Haifa's Hadar Hacarmel quarter. How long ago was that? It's difficult to remember exactly, but it was approximately three years ago, perhaps a little less. Offended film critics were infuriated, shamefully lashing out at both him and the movie. "This has been the most torrid May that Haifa has ever known." The spools of film were slow arriving from the studios in Herzliya, the taxi was held up on the road, and the heat in the theater was unbearable.

Beside the small table, on which stands a bottle half-full of cheap wine, several cups, an ash tray, packs of cigarettes and matches, sits the young Brazilian David Perloff. A true cinematic visionary who grew up in the Zionist youth movement, he has decided to make a short visit to Paris on his way to Israel from Brazil. He speaks Portuguese, Yiddish, and a little French. From the Jewish press and conversations with friends, envoys and artists, he knows almost everything about the early days of Israel's Hebrew cinema. He even knows of the "Czech" Spitzer, as he is known, and his work. Some in Israel, he has heard, consider him an incorrigible poseur ambitiously seeking success, what they call a "Hochshtapler" in Yiddish. They're convinced that the charlatan inevitably will meet his downfall. But even they never imagined that "A Stone on Every Mile" whose appearance on the big screen was so eagerly awaited in theaters around the country, would crash and shatter beyond repair at its very first showing.

Perloff took no pleasure in Spitzer's misfortune. The flop of a new Israeli film didn't please him, and although no expert on the particulars, he felt a sense of closeness to the aspiring director. He'd heard that some people called him "the man of a thousand talents" while others held a different opinion of this wonderkind. He'd heard, too, that Spitzer spoke several languages, that he was a poet and writer, an esteemed scriptwriter and an indefatigable skirt-chaser. And he'd heard that Spitzer was a delightful

raconteur. The chance meeting with Spitzer greatly excited him. Since discovering two or three days earlier that Spitzer also was lodging at the hotel, he had stayed close by, soaking up his comments and hypnotizing conversation, his charming gestures and winning manners. He skipped excursions around the city to spend long hours in Spitzer's room.

Across from them, leaning against the wall, in his hand a glass still containing wine sits an ageless man. A thick lock of hair dangles over his forehead. Dressed like the good-looking American in the cigarette advertisements, he ceaselessly hums strains from a popular French tune played endlessly on the hotel radio. This is Marek Helasko, an expatriate Polish writer sojourning in Paris en route from Poland to the west, whether it be London or New York or the loveliest city in the world, the Red Sea coast town Eilat. Pictures of his well-known face often appear in the leading newspapers. Relishing his role as a free intellectual who rejects the horrors of the communist regime, he loves to be photographed and interviewed by famous reporters. He has written and published several short stories which, translated into various European languages, have gained him the reputation of a man of great promise in Poland, Germany, and elsewhere. But he is addicted when they call him "the Polish Hemingway."

He is an inveterate drunkard. Scenes of his intoxication add much to his growing fame. He speaks Polish and a handful of words in English and German. Although he doesn't care for the Jews, he admires the Israelis. On hearing that a pair of Israeli film men were in the hotel, he sought them out at once. He failed to find Spitzer's room and knew nothing of young David Perloff. And so, entirely by accident, as happens in cheap hotels in vast cities, he encountered them at the door to the old elevator. He hasn't left them since and sits with them now, between the young dreamer, who soon will leave for Israel seeking to realize his cinematic hopes, and the fledgling producer who not long ago returned from Israel dejected, embittered and frustrated.

How do they conduct their discussion? In what language do they speak? At a remove, it would seem that they cannot possibly converse. They are separated by age and place of origin and, even more, by their destinations. Nearer, however, as in a large close-up shot, everything is different and all is possible. Spitzer, of course, is the center of conversation. With Perloff, he chatters in colloquial German while David replies in his household Yiddish. Each rejoices whenever a stray word of Hebrew crops up, as though they suddenly have found the key to a secret, intimate language.

With Helasko, he speaks in his native Slovak, which is very similar to Polish. Flustered, Helasko answers in "new" Polish. A word of German occasionally chances to enter their conversation, and each rejoices at this as though they loathe the Slavic tongues they must speak. Perloff apologizes that he doesn't yet know Hebrew and is utterly inept in French. Helasko complains that his English is simply awful. He was quite a dolt as a child, he laments. Instead of studying English seriously, he preferred to chase foxes in the forest near his home. Spitzer joins in their tipsy commiseration, griping

about his failure to learn Arabic during his years in Israel. As a boy, he'd fallen in love with Arabic on a dreary trip to Algeria.

In all this *mélange* of languages—which Perloff will soon discover if he goes through with his foolish decision to move to Israel, the wretched state of the Jews--what he will miss the most, says Spitzer, is Arabic. A peculiar atmosphere momentarily settles over the small room. Three artists drinking together: two movie directors, a pair of writers, two Jews, one gentile, three immigrants, and seven languages.

Helasko breaks out into a Polish folk song that was popular with the right-wing underground in Poland after the war. He is still in shock, he explains to Spitzer, from the brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the terrible slaughter the Russians carried out in Budapest. Tomorrow, he feels certain, this will occur in Warsaw as well. A ghastly carnage broadcast live before the television cameras of western European stations, he rages. Let the idiots die, he says, for he won't be there when a river of blood again flows through Warsaw. Now he must decide only where to roam. He asks if Spitzer watched as French television broadcast the message in Hungary live. No, Spitzer didn't see the innocent dead littering the burning streets of Budapest. He had still been in the Middle East, packing up his life for a new migration. There, too, war had occurred, and he hadn't wanted to abandon his young son before it ended. He reminds the youthful Perloff and the ageless Helasko that he has a young son in Tel Aviv. If he had momentarily hesitated to leave the country, it was only because of his boy, for one simply doesn't forsake children alone in time of war. Perloff wants to ask still another question but holds back. A bottle in his hand, Helasko nods his head in agreement. "True, very true. One cannot leave young children alone in time of war." He eventually will find the right moment and place to tell them, his two Jewish companions, what it means to abandon children in time of war.

Perloff announces that he regrets having been a young boy during the war of Independence. He's sorry he couldn't volunteer to aid the kibbutz settlements under siege in the Negev. He does know several older boys from his youth movement branch in Brazil who went to Israel during the fighting. He intends to visit them, they'll be among the first he will see. Perhaps, if he is lucky enough, he'll make a major picture, a movie unlike any made before in the country, about the desperate struggle waged by a small group of Jews in the Negev against so many Arabs.

The conversation drags a bit, and its natural rhythm is constantly interrupted, because Spitzer must translate everything. From German into Yiddish, as well as from Polish into Slovak, the rendering is plain and simple. But he also must translate in the other direction and back again, and that is becoming ever more a strain. The talk becomes disjointed, murky, and, most of all, wearing. And he has felt very tired lately, too. Although not yet forty years old, he sometimes feels like fifty, or even more. At times he feels he'll never reach the age of fifty. Life is exhausting, the frequent travel wears on him, the women he must forever cast aside also tire him. If his friend the poet, the one killed in the partisan revolt, were to ask him now in the unique,

personal language of their own making, he would answer in an honest, quavering statement, “Jerzy, please listen. I don’t think I’ll make it to fifty.”

He glances at Perloff’s young, clever head. And there is Helasko with his fine face and thick curls. Later on, he peeks at the windowpane, which shines his advancing baldness back at him. This reflected self-portrait, a hostile image in glass, doesn’t upset him. He carries within himself at all times a picture of himself. Once, at a director’s convention, he had marked that every director and filmmaker should keep such a picture of himself, a self-image update daily that burns as an eternal flame within one’s soul. That had been a long time ago, when he still believed he possessed a rare talent for direction. He confidently had expected to make a provocative film, perhaps even one or two more. And then the great, rotund director Otto Preminger would see them and immediately summon him to California. These fine words, evidently spoken aloud to unexpected applause, he had declared in flawed, halting Hebrew in his heavy Slovak accent. They have no idea what is in my heart, he thought on hearing his colleagues, enraptured by his comments, praise his work. No one could fathom what was in his heart because no one had been there with him at the Novaki forced labor camp late that accursed summer of 1942. No one knew that he by chance had escaped incineration with his mother and brother. His heart since then had been an empty vessel.

Helasko suddenly rises from his chair, ceases humming the hit French tune, walks to the window and blocks their view of the river. The room, already dim, becomes even darker. On the gray river long, black barges slip untouched beneath the bridges. Waving his hands, Helasko says that he yearns for the sun and light of the Middle East. Sometimes, he even loves the Jews, too. He mocks Spitzer, who left the sun and warmth of the east to return, beaten and wounded, to the gray cold of Europe.

“You’re not even fifty. Have you already given up?” he vehemently questions Spitzer without awaiting an answer. He turns to Perloff, takes his hand (Elisha—is this right?) and vows never to leave him. Wait, he’ll finish his business at the Parisian hotel and leave with Perloff for Israel. “You Jews have a wonderful country,” he tells them. “Too bad I’m such a Pole. If only I’d been a Jew.”

“You’re not even hearing what you’re saying,” says Spitzer with a dismissive wave of his hands. “You don’t understand what nonsense you’re spouting. You’re just drunk.”

Turning to Perloff, he says in Yiddish, “He’s a decent guy, and talented, too, but a drunk. A dear Goy and a drunk. “Perloff stands up and politely helps the famous Polish writer sink back into his seat and lean against the wall. He takes the glass and the bottle and puts them on the table. This for him is just a brief stop on his way to Israel. As a boy, he dreamed of Paris as he did of Lisbon and Madrid and he is a great admirer of the French film directors. The mere mention of the great artists’ names sends a shiver through him. The day before, friends had introduced him to a group of respected writers sitting at a cafe on the boulevard. He had written himself a

few words about the meeting. Anyone who wants to make an honest movie must constantly document his life; every day; every hour, even every second. The truth of life is so elusive it can escape even that strict a record.

He occasionally encountered what he craved, a film that so meticulously Documented and captured the ephemeral moment that he became as excited as a maiden watching a romance. He suddenly starts to sweat, becomes restless, changes seats, taps his feet on the floor of the theater, and unwittingly kicks the bottles of beer rolling beneath the seats. He even grunts as he breathes. The right images in the precise flow, the truth projected on the screen--it all goes past his mind like inspired flashes. And what maddens him is that he cannot at that moment make an accurate record of the powerful emotions seizing him during the film.

Spitzer returns to his gloomy thoughts and the oppressive ache in his heart. He won't reach fifty, he is certain of that. Besides, what does he care? Why is it so important to live to fifty? He has already seen more than enough in his short life. The tense decades of his youth provide plenty of material for full-length films. And he hasn't even begun to make them. The painful adventure in Israel has cost him seven years. Seven precious years of his life. Irreplaceable years. Seven full years gone for nothing. The insult and humiliation he endured in his final years there hurt so much, he thought his heart would fill again. His "empty heart" from which everything had suddenly drained that bitter moment on the train platform at the Slovak forced labor camp. For that was when his friends told him that the Nazis had sent his mother to the crematory several hours earlier.

My First Story

That summer, a few days after I was demobbed, I had a very strange experience. One afternoon I had a sudden urge to take an old school exercise book and a large yellow pencil out of one of the boxes in which I kept my few belongings.

I didn't yet have a permanent room in the kibbutz, and I was constantly moved from one old hut to another. Once I was condemned to a room that was narrow and dirty, and once I found myself in a room where the floor tiles were sparkling but the walls were cracked and there were no windows. Another time I awoke in a strange room filled with a stinking pile of mattresses among the decaying huts of the Nachal unit.

I used to get up for work in the sheepfold while it was still night. The sand paths were still damp, and the snail tracks clearly marked. I would spend the day working hard in the humid heat, burrowing away in the manure and absorbing deep into my skin the sharp smell of sheep that never wore off. In the afternoon, I would wake up from a steaming sleep, soaked in sweat, lying between the sheets and thinking of my young life. Between one duty and the next and between one awakening and the next, there is always a time when the soul flutters here and there searching for its future. But I was so eager to know what my life held in store and at the same time so caught up in the pressing details of the present that I never even managed to plan one step ahead. Everything that happened took me by surprise and nothing was done out of choice, and yet everything was so expected and so natural that I couldn't even imagine that beyond the steaming horizon there might be a different life, close enough to touch.

After stretching out this sweet interlude as long as I could, slowly waking up out of a fantasy dream full of memories of my recent army service and full of strange visions of the future, I got up and left the hut. Beyond the hut encampment, just behind the walls, there was an abandoned plantation of subtropical fruit trees, guavas that had ceased to bear fruit, worm-ridden pomegranates and a few loquat trees whose leaves had withered. I spent many hours in that forsaken garden when I felt weak and drained, examining the veins of the leaves and the peeling trunks, looking at the clusters of white snails packed together in the upper branches. In the silence that reigned after the overpowering bleating of the sheep, I imagined hearing voices calling me and directing me to my new path. My whole body was taut. I strained my ears to their utmost. I climbed up to the tops of the trees to shorten the distance to those uppermost regions. But I heard nothing, and I had to come down and beat a path through the dry thorns out of the plantation and search for what I so much needed somewhere else.

There was nobody waiting for me in the whole, wide world. I had done my duty. I had completed my stint and felt free to wander half the night. On the other side of the hill, the kibbutz hummed with life. Mothers called their children with long-drawn-out cries whose echoes could be heard all over

the green fields. Those days I had already begun to ask myself those same questions that trouble me today. Does my young life have any meaning? Why do I drift aimlessly from hut to hut? Who is it that directs my life in such a way that I wake up to the stinking breath of sheep? Is this a test that I have to go through? And what comes after, after I have passed through each of its difficult stages?

This habit of asking myself questions about my life while I wander along the paths and by the hedges hasn't left me until today. And eventually, as usual, I find myself in the small, leaf-covered plot of the cemetery. I have already written elsewhere that our cemetery is outside reality. It is outside space, for its surroundings are neither dwellings nor garage, but a beaten down piece of ground that preserves the place as it used to be years ago. I have also written elsewhere that our cemetery is outside time, for what meaning can there be here to the passage of the hours?

What does it matter if it is now late afternoon? And what if the wind that rustles through the branches soon dies down and gives way to the waves of croaking that rise from the swamp, from the thousands of frogs that will soon come out to hunt mosquitoes?

I sat down on a mound of sand. The cool sand penetrated my clothes and touched my skin. If there is one memory that I cherish, it is the touch of sand on my bare skin. When I move my leg about in the tunnels of the ant-eating insects, the grains of sand slide out of the holes and along my muscles, get caught up for a moment between the hairs and continue to slide as far as the delicate folds.

I was beginning to consider letting myself fall a prey to that kind of self-pity I enjoyed so much. I would fix my eyes on the sun sinking into the not-so-distant sea and abandon myself wholly to daydreams, an almost unchanging series of yearnings, each one leading to another. A parade of longings would arrange itself in my head and step out on its tireless march.

But all at once, something slipped. A figure stole into the shadows of the cemetery trees. I heard footsteps and then the farm sounds of water rushing through pipes and the short tap-tap of the prongs of a rake on gravel. And suddenly time stood still and it was as if my whole being burst out of the sand and out of the earth itself like some shining balloon. I began to hover between the slowly darkening sky and the lengthening shadows on earth. Everything came to a halt. The yearnings disappeared and I had the strange feeling that I might be vouchsafed a rare glimpse into my future life. Deep inside me, I felt a thrill of excitement. It was as if someone had promised me that a small window would now be thrown open, and through it my life would run as if on a screen. In my ears, there were voices that I imagined were telling me the longed-for story of my life. It was as if someone were measuring out the years of my labor, distinguishing between one job and another, permitting and forbidding and offering advice. All I had to do was give myself over to the sweet sounds and not even allow myself to think that I agreed to it all. Nor in fact was I terribly surprised since I had long hoped for some such illumination. When I was still walking along the thorny path

between the withered guava trees, I guessed that I was approaching a joyous revelation such as this. I was already on my feet, shaking the sand from my trousers, and hurrying barefoot towards my suffocating hut, to the old exercise book and the thick pencil. I remember. On the unmade bed, in the cloud of sour stench, dripping sweat on to the exercise book and dampening its pages, I began to write with the stupid feeling that I had to record for posterity the wonderful vision I had just seen. I was in such a hurry not to forget anything and not to mix up the details that the pencil tore the pages, but I took no notice. I turned the pages without stopping, panting with passion as I wrote down everything about the strange incident that had happened to me, the figure that had stolen into the cemetery, the hands that had carried out the holy task, watering the plants and raking the leaves and cleaning up around the tombstone. And there was a kind of insubstantiality about the whole incident, as if the figure had no name and as if I did not know her, and as if I didn't exactly know who she was or what she was doing here now at this disconnected moment.

I threw myself into the writing until darkness filled the room and I had to stop. When I got up to put on the light, it seemed as if I had written all there was to write. I felt how I was slowly being drained of the extreme tension that had held me. Afterwards I took the exercise book in my hands and wondered at how I could have written so fast and what actually was lying there between the pages. I was sweating terribly and went outside to get some fresh air. One of my friends was already getting ready to go to the dining room for supper. While I was writing I had been so detached from time that I did not realize how late it was getting. Whistles and shouts began to echo between the rotting huts, while a wonderful feeling of liberation came over me, a great lightness of my whole body. I threw the exercise book on to the bed and flung the pencil at the wall. I joined my friends and hopping on one leg I went with them to the dining room.

In the same way, I sent the story to the editor of the literary quarterly. I found the quarterly, which was then a new publication, in the magazine reading room on the top story of the Cultural Centre of the kibbutz. After the exhausting night milking, I used to go into the empty room, turn on the lights, sit by the window, and lose myself completely in reading the magazine. Fellows of my age, who had just been released from military service, used to publish poems and marvelous maiden stories. Their way was already laid out before them. Somebody pushed them and somebody else pulled them, and they wouldn't have to wait like me until they couldn't deny their writing. They wouldn't spend ten years in silence, eating themselves up, maddeningly distancing themselves from what they really had to do. I don't remember any more whether I copied out the story once or twice. Be that as it may, it was that same old exercise book and clumsy engraving pencil that I used. I gave the pages to our post office clerk and together we arranged the rebellious leaves in a brown envelope.

"Are you sure this is the correct address?" she asked me. Are you sure there is an address like this in Tel Aviv?"

“Yes, yes,” I answered hastily. I turned pale and began to sweat and my pulse raced. The whole business was not very pleasant. It didn’t suit people whose destiny was to work until they dropped. What a strange occupation, out of the ordinary! And just you wait, I said to myself, wait until it gets around in the kibbutz. I quickly forgot the whole thing and put my writing out of my mind. I immersed myself in hard work and in the details of the daily routine.

With whom could I share my distress? My co-workers with the flock were occupied with the sheep, and on their free evenings they would roast lambs meat, drink beer and make pigs of themselves. The other youngsters in the kibbutz were immersed in their jobs, their girl friends and the modern machinery. I, on the other hand, felt wonderful music around me and wonders that were about to take place, while the world looked new from moment to moment. I sensed from afar that there was a different world which was destined for me as I was destined for it, but in the meantime I was a prisoner in the rat race. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t unhappy with the situation. Somebody would have to appear from nowhere and drag me by my coattails until I realized that my time was getting short. If it didn’t happen soon, I would never be able to join the chorus whose fresh voices I heard as I excitedly leafed through the pages of the literary quarterly.

Only our experienced librarian seemed to suspect me of something. Although he was always grumbling and complaining, he had a particular soft spot for me. After I had overcome the hurdles he used to place in the way of the readers, I could feel a kind of unspoken invitation. Not everyone can be a reader, a genuine reader, as if he was trying to hint, “You have to exert yourself in order to ascend the ladder of reading.” He used to hum old tunes to himself while bent over his files and shoot annoying questions at the tormented readers. “Why do you need to read, anyway? Isn’t the newspaper enough? Anyway, who said that there was such an author whose books you insist on reading? In any case, it’s much more interesting outside. They’re building the kibbutz, fighting wars. Why do you have to squeeze yourself into this miserable library where you can’t even find a decent catalogue?”

But I couldn’t suddenly open up, blushing with sudden shyness, and tell him of my attempts at writing. He would have asked me, “Why do you have to write yourself? Have you read everything that others have written? Who told you that what you have written hasn’t already been written by better writers than you? And anyway, there’s more than just a little bit of audacity in what you’re doing. Who are you altogether? Here are all the works of Y. H. Brenner, have you read them? Have you seen the stories of A. N. Gnossin? Have you spared a glance at the volume of new poems by Avraham Shlonsky yet?”

But I knew that there was no way I could reveal my deepest thoughts to him. For even if he knew more than others, and even though he loved books to distraction, he would not be able to understand my little melody. In this way, three weeks went by. Actually, I didn’t even expect an answer. The sudden fit of writing passed and I returned almost to routine. What I had

experienced at the time of writing had already quieted down, and if annoying afterthoughts arose, I silenced them. I didn't go by the cemetery again, and I tried not to remember that unique picture of the small figure stealing in to look after the tombstone. I also made an effort not to resurrect the moment of illumination that had impelled me with a power that was completely new to me. I had learned my lesson and taken the hint. But I had no power to change the rest. I didn't even dare to imagine that there might be groups of budding poets in the big city, and that I, if I only wanted, might be able to join them, and that everywhere, young men, beginning writers, were pressed against bookshelves. The post office clerk met me in the burning hot dining room at midday, between one milking and the next.

"You've got an answer from Tel Aviv," she said, and since it was a big envelope, I was invited to the post office to collect it myself. Puzzled, I followed her. What was the meaning of the large envelope? Anyway, who had expected an answer from the editor of the quarterly? In fact, what did I have to do with all that remote and forgotten business?

We went into the post office and she handed me the envelope. After she closed the door behind her, she asked, "Have you told your father yet?"

"What about?" I asked her. "What do I have to tell him about?"

"About this envelope," the post office clerk said. "And about your first stories."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and went off. I looked for a hidden corner where I could be alone with the editor's answer. I ran down the hill to my little, isolated hut, closed the door firmly behind me, and opened the envelope.

Pages of my old exercise book fluttered out of it. I recognized my hasty handwriting immediately and my wild pressure on the pencil. Then, when I shook the envelope, a piece of office paper with the name of the quarterly printed on it fell out as well. My young heart began to beat and I sat down on my pallet and began to read.

It wasn't the editor himself who had answered but his assistant, the secretary of the editorial board. "Since the editor is busy and cannot read all the material that arrives," and then, "It is obvious that this is your first story. There is a great deal of your soul's outpouring and many important sentences. I am sorry to say, however, that this is not enough. You have much to say but you do not yet have your own poetic language, etc. etc." After that she continued, "Why don't we wait a bit, we, the editors, and you at your table, say another year or two, until you produce a more satisfactory piece of literature? What do you think?" And finally, "You should know that we have done you a personal favor by taking the trouble to read your jumbled handwriting and in pencil, too! Something we haven't come across in our literary tower for years! In future, if you want anybody to take the trouble to look at your manuscript, please be so good as to type it out on a typewriter as they all do! Now we are sending you your manuscript back even though you didn't enclose a stamped, addressed envelope as required. Yours faithfully, Signature, Secretary to the Editorial Board."

Stunned, I began to search around me, in the boxes and the crates, for a box of matches. I threw things aside and dropped all kinds of articles on the floor but I couldn't find any matches. I grabbed the packet of papers and ran to the guava thicket. There, above the main sewage pump of the kibbutz, I bent down over the wire grating and tore the pages into little pieces and furiously threw them, together with the letter from the assistant editor, into the powerful, swirling current of the sewage water. I stayed there, bent over the grating, till the very last piece of paper disappeared, and then I sat down panting on the concrete wall, so upset that I didn't even notice the horrible stench.

When I went to my parents' room in the evening, my father was sitting at his large desk, as was his practice these last few years. The desk was piled high with dictionaries and lexicons, and other books, which he was translating, lying open. He was leafing through a Russian booklet and said, "Sit down and make yourself a cup of tea. Mom isn't back yet but I'll gladly join you."

While I was busy at the sink making the tea, Dad said from his desk, "So you've started to write, eh? Why all the secrecy? Why the mystery? The post office clerk told me something. What did you write, a poem or a story?"

"Something not fully worked out," I said casually, not wanting to continue the conversation that had suddenly become too revealing. Sometimes, when my father opened up because he was excited, he used to tell me about new words he had found in the course of his translation work. He would marvel at an excellent story he had come across by chance in a foreign language journal. He would praise a young author nobody had yet heard about.

"Writing is a serious business," Dad said, "and it can't be done just like that, at the drop of a hat, between the night milking and taking the sheep out to pasture."

The post office clerk really annoyed me. Who asked her to report on every letter that went out? What's it got to do with her if this was my first attempt? And anyway, who gave her permission to report to my father and scrutinize everything I did? I poured out the tea, set the cups on saucers, and didn't answer.

"Where shall I put your tea?" I asked, coming to the desk. There was a thick volume of Mishpat Ha Urim lying there and I spilt a few drops of boiling tea on Isaiah Steinberg.

"Never mind," Dad said, "You have to know how to pour out tea, as well. And for some reason or other I thought you, too, wanted to be a volleyball player."

My brother played volleyball on the kibbutz team. He was an outstanding player, and when Dad could get away from his desk, he took a lot of pride in his son.

"If not a player then in charge of the sheep, or work quota organizer, or even farm manager. Why not? These are also important things for a lad of your age."

We sat and drank tea. Dad put down the Russian booklet, took off his glasses, and gave me a strange look, as if we were meeting again after a long absence.

“Have you brought the manuscript with you? Give it to me and we’ll have a look.”

I said. “It was a ridiculous effort and it’s not worth talking about. Anyway, I got rid of it myself.”

“You threw it away?” Dad cried out in amazement. “Didn’t you leave yourself a copy?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t need a copy.”

“But maybe I need a copy,” Dad burst out. “Don’t get into bad habits. It’s about time you began to cultivate correct working habits.”

I looked at the Midrashim that were always to be found on Dad’s desk and the books of commentaries with papers stuck in between the pages and his dog-eared black Bible. Even though I had made one small, abortive effort, that doesn’t make me a writer, and even though I had caught a glimpse of distant places, the night milking still waited. And even though the time would come for me to choose between different worlds, that time was still a long way off, hidden away in the folds of the long years that were still to come. Why should I bother with it now? The time that waited for me in the pastures, or chained to be little milking stool or in the dust of the feed that rose from the milking stalls seemed long, infinite, and immeasurable.

Dad tried to approach me in a different, gentle way. He might succeed by placating me instead of rubbing me up the wrong way by being too straightforward. “Why don’t you try to write out the story again? You must surely remember most of it. Words are not so easily forgotten. Do it for me. I only want to glance at it. In any case, it’s better to make a number of versions. There’s always room for further polishing.”

I thought I might have left the first draft in the hut. I had impetuously torn the pages out of the exercise book so maybe they were still there if they hadn’t been blown away by the afternoon breeze that swept up between the rotten floorboards. Suddenly we were closer, almost against my will. The cup of tea, his gentle manner, my surprising story. All right, not all the sons of immigrants will be volleyball players. They may be stronger and taller than their parents but, who knows, some of them may be drawn to the world of books.

“Have you read Chekhov’s ‘The Woman with the Puppy?’” Dad asked. “When I was a boy I used to devour well-known authors according to the rows of their books in the library. How many volumes did Dostoevsky write? I took them all in one lot and read them one after the other. How many of Thomas Mann’s books had been translated? I swallowed them all. And so on, according to time and place and the recommendations of my girl friends who were great readers.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve read a bit of Chekhov.”

“Excellent,” said Dad. “In that case you will understand what I want to say. Do you remember the frivolous officer and the bored lady? Do you

remember the amusing game they played as if it were just to pass the time and enjoy a chance meeting? Then suddenly, in a flash, almost without them realizing it, everything turned upside down. She fell deeply in love with him and he knew he couldn't live without her. You see, that's the genuine Chekhov. He leads you, as it were, up the garden path. He tells you a slight tale about a small platform at a station in a summer resort, a most enjoyable cruise on a river boat during a southern summer, and suddenly you know, almost at the same time as the characters themselves, that the lives of both of them have become dependent on that small adventure. I call that, Chekhov's point of reversal, and you can follow it in every single tale that that wonderful story-teller."

I listened to my Dad. It was a long time since we had had such an intimate conversation. But inside I thought, "What have I got to do with Chekhov? What are his behatted ladies to me? What have I got to do with his painful point of reversal? All I wanted to recall was one moment of illumination in the cemetery wood after a fantasy dream, and to respond to a secret invitation that was sent to me. I didn't want to waste time but to write everything I had felt inside and everything I had seen outside. What kind of literature would sprout from that? I had certainly exaggerated in my description of the trees, the leaves, the ground. I had gone overboard in picturing the rake, the hosepipe, the hand that was stretched out to tidy up. But they had been no less important to me at that moment than the nameless but familiar figure that in total concentration and disregard had been so absorbed in some kind of ritual that riveted my attention.

Meanwhile, Dad continued on his own track, "And here, in this excellent Russian booklet, some scholar has published a wonderful article on Chekhov. Never mind the point of reversal, that's an old discovery. Just listen to this original quote. And he began to translate straight from the text.

"Chekhov the story-teller has a wonderful quality, the quality of surprise. You never know where his sentence is going to lead. You never know how his characters will behave. Will they sink into despair, will they quickly board the showboat, will they disappear in the accelerating railway carriage?"

Dad put the booklet down. He could have gone on reading to me for a long time, but he noticed that inside I was moving further and further away. "This world," he said, "the world of writing is full and mighty, and if you want to enter, at least know what you are letting yourself in for."

My visiting hour was nearly over. I stood up and began to get ready to go. I gathered the cups and saucers and put the spoons in the sink.

"I would very much like to read the story," Dad said before I left.

"Okay. I'll check in the hut and see if maybe some of the pages are left." When I left my parents' room, the old questions tortured me. Is this really what my life is going to be like? Piles of books and bits of paper stuck in the pages to mark the place? Booklets thrown about in every cranny with tea stains printed on them? Translated paper chases after Chekhov's surprised characters? What kind of a paralyzed life is this? It's a barren life. Where are

all the promises of the colorful lives of writers? Where is all the pleasure, the power, the wisdom? Is this really what my life will be like if I join the vibrant chorus of the journals?

On the way to my bed in the rotting hut, at the edge of the abandoned guava plantation, I heard a host of voices out of the night. A whole world of living creatures was noisily active under cover of the darkness, and from afar, out of the jumble of sounds, I could also make out the bleating of the sheep waiting for milking time.

Today, sitting at my desk, which is covered with open books with bits of paper between the pages marking the place, I am trying to remember without getting things wrong. Many years have passed since those distant days, and when I fall into the act of remembering, it is difficult to guess where it will lead me.

Did I respond to Dad's request and bring him the rough copy of my confused story? Did I, in fact, find the pages of my first draft?

"With an ordinary pencil, just like that, straight on to the paper?" Dad exclaimed. "It's been a long time since I saw such a primitive job."

It's hard to remember. A hurried visit to my parents' room. As I come in, Dad puts his glasses up on his high forehead. "Well, did you find it? Give it to me. We'll read it."

I hastily drop the handful of papers on his desk, cutting the affair as short as possible, hardening my heart, trying to make the whole thing seem completely trivial. "It's not important. I'm in a terrible hurry. You can put the pages in order yourself, and if one or two are missing, it doesn't really matter. You can make it up. The most important thing is that I'm in an awful hurry. Tomorrow we're taking the sheep to the beach for their annual wash. I'm sure I won't sleep at night and we'll come back all burnt. See you!"

Did my Dad hear these last few sentences that I threw him, or was he already immersed in reading, bent over the pages, holding them to the light and gripping them as if they were some tool? Did he answer me, or was it his usual humming, telling me that he was already far away? For even if he had heard my question, and even if he had had more than one answer, he was already well on his way to another place. Did he say "Bye, bye!" and add a mild threat, "Wait a minute till I finish reading and then we'll talk." Or perhaps he asked whether it was true that they had returned my manuscript, and wasn't that just like them. Was it so immature that it set the teeth on edge, or had the editors just been too idle to read the untidy pages, scratched with a hard pencil and permeated with the smell of sour milk and yard manure?

That Saturday, at the table for the afternoon snack, when all the family was gathered on the veranda of my parents room, Dad took the pages out of an envelope, put them in front of him and said, "Your awful Hebrew, and where did you dredge up such incorrect sentences, and why were you so hasty in your descriptions? Where are you running, man?"

With that, he turned the family meal into a whole lesson on the study of writing. As he turned over the pages, I was shocked. The whole lot was

completely covered with his corrections in red ink, literally poured into the indentations of my pencil.

“I read everything,” Dad said, “and not like the editors of the quarterly read it in Tel Aviv. Then, when I finished reading it, I read it again, and a third time. Wow, what a lot you still have to learn!”

And I sat in front of the pages and didn't recognize what I had written. Where had all the crossings-out sprouted from? Where had all the commas and question marks appeared from to stain the pages?

All I had tried to do was bring back to life an elusive sight, a shadow that stole away, a breath of wind. I had no intentions of creating literature. The only reason I had rushed and pushed to send it away to the journal was because I also wanted to be among the intrepid of my generation, who had only just taken off their uniforms and were already the neophyte poets, those whose poems were recited at night by young girls, their blouses dripping with slim volumes of poetry.

“Once,” Dad said, “Faustovsky went to visit the famous writer, Maxim Gorky. He placed his first few stories in front of Gorky who read them and gave his opinion. Go away, young man, and live among people for ten years, and after that, write. Then and only then, come back to me and bring what you have written.”

Was it because of Dad's words on the veranda that evening towards the end of summer, when my story, slaughtered and bleeding, lay on the family table, that I was silent for ten years? Was he too severe in his criticism of me? Today, from the distance of years, I ask myself whether a childish desire for revenge wasn't born on that occasion. Was that the reason that I turned away from my notebooks for so many years? Was it because of the memory of that conversation and those pages that I buried myself in the dusty fleeces, the hooves of the sweating sheep and the smelly piles of animal feed?

After Dad died, Mom asked me to go through the carton of papers he had left. I pulled a bundle of papers from among the cardboard files and when I began to read, I was amazed. It was a short note of his in memory of his mother. Corrections in red ink, obviously added in a fit of fury, crisscrossed the typewritten lines. Not a word was spared, not a line had escaped unmarked. The margins were full of endless alternatives and suggestions. I put down the papers and distant scenes suddenly flooded over me. On the table, between the cups of coffee and slices of toast, lay my first story, scarred with the red lines of Dad's pen.

“You know how hard he was on himself,” Mom said, as if she had read my thoughts.

“Yes,” I said. “He was hard on me, as well.”

“Not really,” Mom said. “I remember how pleased he was when your first stories began to appear in the newspaper.”

“But what did he really think? He was never completely satisfied.”

“Silly boy,” Mom said. “You have no idea with what love he followed your career. He felt that you were writing during all those years when you hid everything from us. He guessed that you were going through a

new stage even when you denied everything. You were so closed up it was impossible to get a word out of you.”

“That’s not quite true,” I said. “You don’t remember any more. Have you forgotten how much he wanted me to be a volleyball player?”

“Ha! Don’t I just remember!” Mom said. “And I will never forget how afraid he was that you might fail. How he worried that someone would turn you off and he wouldn’t be there by your side to encourage you.”

Dad died about a year before the war, and after the war broke out, I couldn’t contain the writing inside myself. In the end, I let the stories burst out. A few years later, some editor or other suggested that I prepare a collection of stories.

“You already have some good bricks with which to start the building,” he wrote.

At first I didn’t want to listen. A book? Who needs a book? Aren’t the stories good enough on their own? Still, I listened to a voice inside me, sat down, and chose the stories for the book. Dad never saw my first book, but his photograph, which always stands on my desk, went with me while I worked. Was he with me during all those difficult hours of organizing? Did he raise his finger to warn me of the haste that mars, of faulty language, of feeble characters? Did he tell me about Chekhov’s points of reversal and his surprises, which are the soul of short stories?

Did he ask me how I had spent my ten years of silence?

“Silly boy!” I can still hear Mom’s words echoing in my ears. “You have no idea what a stubborn mule you were, or how much he tried to get close to you in his last few years. What a shame that he never lived to see your book.”

Now, when I remember that crazy moment on the sand hill at the edge of the cemetery, and how the editor’s secretary made a fool of me, and how I crouched down over the grating of the sewage pump, and how my story lay in front of me, pierced and reddened by Dad’s strict pen, I begin to realize how close I was to stumbling that summer when I wrote my first story.

The Double

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

Each year I meet a friend the night before Memorial Day. He is exactly my age with identical facial features. I call him my double. I was a boy the first time I saw him. The Workman's Hall in Kibbutz Givat-Hayim held an exhibition of photographs from over there, from the death camps in Europe. The pictures were large, as high as a boy, and as we say now, "side by side." Black and white with a lot of gray. That's how they appeared to my astonished child's eyes. To this day, I remember the huge canvasses hanging among Swedish ladders folded against the walls.

I surveyed the pictures unsure what to do. Clench my hands? A boy's fists? What good were these little hands now, how could my fists help? Tears? Tears of shock and pain? What use are tears? My tears indeed, for I proudly held them to a trickle. Swear revenge? Oaths sworn and vows made as I walked the hall? What good had swearing revenge been when it was so desperately needed?

I remember suddenly shedding my indecision. I stood before a photograph of a Jewish family being moved from one train car to another at some small station whose name didn't appear on the work. The subjects' frightened faces are turned as though hypnotized towards a German soldier. Only one boy, my age and very similar to me in appearance, faces the camera. His pensive expression is forever captured for the observer.

Behind his bewildered parents, his younger brothers stumble in glance, for a brief moment spared himself the fate awaiting his family. Standing before the picture, I couldn't shift my gaze from the boy's eyes. Exactly my age and so much like me, if I were to exchange my shorts and sandals for his heavy clothing.

I've been attached to that boy ever since. I think of him as my double. It's only by chance that I wasn't photographer back there, that my parents poured their sweat into Palestine instead of hurrying behind the German soldier. Only a mischievous trick of Jewish history decreed that my double would be transported to the camp in my place and that I would stand here inspecting the final picture. He could have stood barefoot and excited in Givat-Hayim's Workman's Hall in the early 1940s, looking at the flip side of Jewish experience.

I've carried on a constant dialogue with him since then. My double and I are already familiar with one another. He says nothing and I must always guess how his face would age. But I can do this, by peering at the mirror or with photographs of myself showing the passage of time.

I impose my life on his. Like me, he went off to war and came back. Like me, he started a family, with Jewish sons and daughters who never knew a German soldier's rebuke. Like me, he wondered where everything has come from and where it's all going. And like me, he carries on a constant conversation with his double in the land of Israel. For contrary to the laws of

nature, it may well be that he, for his part, saw an excited boy standing before his picture at that very moment and understood, as I do, that our converse lives would be entwined.

I once naively told some friends the story of my alter ego. To my surprise, one of them sighed and said, “You can’t even imagine how many of these doubles we have in Israel.” I suddenly realized that I wasn’t the only boy who had acquired a double. Many Israelis go about with the sense that they’ve been fortunate because a double bore the misfortune meant for them. They’ve succeeded wholly by chance while their doubles suffered. The doubles who went in their place never returned.

By now he is a mature, cynical man, just as I am. He too is beginning to ask questions about the “other side” of his life. Just like me, he no longer is impressed by images of the body. Once or twice each year, as on the night before Memorial Day, he peeks into my memory, directly into that old photo.

How wise he was in his unbridled curiosity to escape his life by glancing into the camera lens, to soar above the flames of Europe, fly over the Mediterranean Sea and land in the fragrant groves of the Heffer Valley. So astute was his glance that I sometimes struggle with the question, did he mislead me? Was he no wiser than I? And which of us made the other his double?

The Silent Lieutenant

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

As the Yom Kippur war entered its third week, our platoon deployed along the old border through which the Syrian divisions had burst in their surprise attack. Our mission was to block the Syrian armored groups which, despite losing their tanks, were continuing their attempts to slip into Syrian-controlled territory. We set out towards evening. It was already late October and shadows were falling early. The days were warm and clear, the winds dry and the nights chilly. The fleeing Syrians were making their way all across the sector held by our battalion. Although well-armed and supplied, they were utterly exhausted from the long days of keeping out of sight. Yet hungry and thirsty as they were, for some reason they wouldn't lay down their arms. In disarray, they broke all the rules of moving safely at night and maintaining battle order.

Our orders from battalion HQ were particularly strict; to cut off every avenue of retreat and prevent any of them from getting back across the breached border. We understood that we were to wipe them out and avoid capturing them. Now that the front had widened, we had no use for their information. We'd also heard reports that the rear echelon units were swamped with prisoners. Reinforced with troops from battalion HQ, our platoon wove a network of ambushes so dense that it posed a threat even to its creators. An officer commanded each trap, and since our unit didn't have enough officers, several young ones were assigned to us from those who had joined the battalion early in the war. They were fine young fellows, excellent officers who had escaped reserve duty at some rear-line training base. In their own car, they had driven to Ein Gev, then headed for the highway intent on joining one of the battalions climbing the Golan Heights to block the surprise Syrian offensive.

For Nir, our CO, I forget his last name, this was his first real war. He was younger than our veterans by at least a decade, and I was troubled by the thought that generation after generation of such splendid boys had been compelled to undergo fire as though all our previous battles had served no purpose, as though all our earlier wars and all our long months of reserve duty had been for naught.

He said a few words to us to introduce himself, inspected the unit and arranged an ambush site facing west, towards the blasted, smoking Golan settlements that had begun rebuilding from their ruins. In all the years in which I had lain in ambush, the position had always faced east. East, towards the Jordan River and its dark surrounding thickets. East, towards deep Nahal Rukad and sheer cliffs beyond. Always east, towards the small towns hidden among the scattered mounds of basalt; towards the army camps and frightful enemy formations beyond our forward outposts.

Adding a few words to the firm orders from battalion HQ, Nir called out the guard shifts. But his comments made little impression on the weary,

jaded men. "It'll be alright, Lieutenant. Don't worry. And if you're tired or edgy, you can lie down and rest."

Their voices trailed off and now the waiting, that maddening period of anticipation that fills most of your time in ambush, began. We lay slightly west of the army road plowed up by the tanks. Behind us lay the defense fence, shattered and crushed during the fighting by rampaging tanks. The Syrian army behind us was beaten, licking its wounds and digging into its bunkers. Its troops were denied all movement. We'd never had this strange feeling before, a feeling of safety behind us, from the Syrian border, while gazing in fearful expectation towards our own towns.

In the distance, Israeli cities gaily glowed again after nights of blackout. Safad shone far off in the hills while the upper neighborhoods of Tiberias twinkled in the translucent night. None of us had been on leave in the three weeks since that ill-fated Yom Kippur. Some men in unit nearby had received their first, brief passes, and although on returning they had warned others to stay at the front, so oppressive was the gloom in Israel, still every heart trembled for our families back home. We sank into that slumber of waiting, a necessary skill for passing endless nights of ambush. Reality and imagination together paraded before our tired eyes and eerie sounds pierced our straining ears.

And then, suddenly, we heard heavy steps close by. Someone stumbled, basalt stones tumbled out of the ditch, and guns rattled on belts. Nir opened fire first, followed by all the men in the ambush and then those farther back. For several long minutes, nothing could be seen or heard but the ceaseless roar of gunfire on every side and the streaks of the tracer rounds. In the starting silence following the shooting, Nir sent out a scouting party. His hoarse voice quivered with excitement.

The Syrian squad had been wiped out. All four men lay on the rocks poised for battle. Even before battalion HQ was notified, the results of the ambush were clear enough. The men congratulated Nir as they collected the dead Syrian's guns, as did the officers who arrived in jeeps from battalion HQ. While Nir huddled with the battalion officers, a radio message directed the unit to clean up the ambush. Then the ambush troops boarded a vehicle and drove to the hill nearby where the battalion had made camp. Amidst the sleeping bags strewn near a small bunker, a small campfire blazed in our platoon's parking zone. A kettle of soup simmered, the drowsy platoon troops gathered around the fire. Perhaps now, the men hoped, they would receive the first round of passes. The hungry sipped soup while the weary yawned. There was a sense that we were invincible. Then the men crawled into their sleeping bags.

Nir seemed all worn out when he returned from battalion HQ. Someone offered him a mug of soup but he refused it. He pulled off his harness, threw down his gun and opened his sleeping bag, but he was much too wound up to close his eyes that night.

An officer approached him. "How did the debriefing go?"

"Fine," answered Nir. "Just fine."

“Complete success, eh?” the officer continued. “You wiped them all out?”

Nir lay uncovered on his sleeping bag, having neither changed his clothes nor yanked off his boots. Moments later, he turned aside and threw up on the basalt gravel. The officer beside him got up, opened his canteen, and silently offered him the water.

“This’ll pass,” Nir gasped between retches. “Soon.”

“First time you killed someone?” the officer inquired.

“Yeah,” said Nir, and went to vomiting for a few minutes.

“It’s always like this the first time,” said the officer.

“Sure,” replied Nir. “But not everyone throws up.” Then he lay down again. He didn’t even bother to unzip the sleeping bag.

A courier from battalion HQ arrived at dawn. He picked his way through the sleeping men. “Which one of you is Nir the officer?” he shouted.

“Over here,” Nir called back. “What is it?”

The runner sat down beside him. Even though he lowered his voice, I could hear every word.

“We’ve just received a telegram from you soldier’s welfare officer,” he announced. “You need to get home this morning. It’s urgent.”

“What’s happened?” asked Nir, as though he hadn’t heard what the courier was saying.

“I don’t know, the telegram doesn’t exactly say,” said the messenger. “But we have orders to release you and send you home right away. You can leave right after the morning patrol. And you can bring along anyone from your platoon who’s going on leave.”

“But you need confirmation and replacement for me,” protested Nir.

“You’re leaving,” the runner replied. “That’s an order from battalion HQ.” He stood up. “It’s crazy,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep a wink last night. Your ambush made a racket all across the sector. They’re proud of you at battalion HQ. How can you keep going without sleep?”

I drove with Nir on the first issued leave. I’d been fantastically lucky in drawing the pass. It was sweet revenge for the thousands of times I’d been the last to go. We went down with the morning patrol as far as the gate to kibbutz Ein Gev.

“Have fun, guys. For us, too. And don’t forget to come back.” The war is still on and the patrol half-tracks were moving back and forth along the dusty basalt road. Nir’s car awaited us at Ein Gev’s parking lot, just as he had left it the night he went up to the Golan. All four tires had been punctured and it now sagged on its wheels. Several shells, one of which had exploded not far from the parking lot, had landed on Ein Gev. It was pure luck that the car hadn’t been hit. I helped Nir change the tires. Workmen from Ein Gev’s garage lent a hand and brought out new tires when they saw us. Everything was fixed in jiffy. “Come on, tell us, what’s going on up there?” they badgered us. “Is the war really over? Is it true, the Syrians have been pushed back?”

“Not yet,” Nir told them. “We’re still laying ambushes at night and shooting it out. People are still being killed there during the nights.”

We headed south in Nir’s car. The harvest had already begun in the grapefruit orchards along the road. Shapely girls who had volunteered to help out on the kibbutz settlements mounted short ladders. For a moment, their bare legs flashed before us. “Nothing’s changed here,” said Nir, his hands gripping the steering wheel. “You’d think we weren’t fighting that damned war up there.” At the junction for Dovrat, we stopped at the road stand and went up to the counter to order sandwiches and coffee. Nir hadn’t eaten anything since throwing up. The food stand was jammed with soldiers and tourists who come off luxury buses parked outside. Nir told me he needed to make a quick call home. Meanwhile, I’d make sure the noisy tourists didn’t push ahead of us in line.

I was both tired and thrilled to be on my first leave since the fighting began. Some of the tourists who noticed me tried to be friendly and start a conversation. But I wouldn’t have any of that. I scowled at them and ignored their questions. Although their concern for me was genuine and they meant well in trying to befriend me, I had come down only that morning from another world, from a place in which no one would understand me unless he’d been there. And I just didn’t have the strength that morning to try to explain to them what it really was like up there.

Nir returned from the telephone looking pale.

“What’s up at home?” I asked.

“Shit,” he said. “Dad seems to have had a heart attack. The welfare officer has brought our neighborhood too many reports of dead boys recently. He couldn’t stand it and had an attack.”

“Go back, he’ll calm down, everything will be alright,” I said. But Nir wasn’t listening. A pretty girl from Dovrat, in tight shorts revealing a great pair of legs, stood across the counter. She poured coffee into cups and hurriedly made sandwiches while bantering with the tourists. Nir couldn’t take his eyes off her. He leaned on the counter, his hands clenched into fists.

“What’s with you, Lieutenant?” the girl smiled brightly at Nir. “Haven’t you seen a girl for three weeks?” She moved towards us. As I reminded her that we had ordered coffee, I told her that the lieutenant had fallen for her, head over heels. She looked at us, “What? Can’t he speak? Can’t your handsome lieutenant speak for himself?”

Nir’s face turned even paler. He thrust his palms through the counter’s smooth wooden slats. His knuckles stiffened and I could see his fingertips digging into the hard wood.

Heedless of the pestering tourists, the girl moved even closer to Nir and looked straight into his eyes. As still as stone, he returned her gaze. “What’s wrong, Lieutenant? Have you come back from the war? Was it so bad?” Smoothing her shorts and tugging at the edges, she put the damp rag she was holding on Nir’s rigid fingers. Nir said nothing, unable to speak. He couldn’t utter even a word. But his eyes spoke to her. The sudden attraction

between them electrified me. I was riveted to the spot, my eyes drinking in the sight.

The tourists clamoring behind us were drinking coffee and gobbling sandwiches. Their drivers were already urging them back onto the buses. They couldn't see what I saw. Suddenly, everything was forgotten: the ambush, the first man he'd killed, the guilt-racked retching, his father's heart attack, everything. Only she stood before him, in tight shorts showing glorious legs, gently flicking the rag across his knuckles. The image was etched into my memory. The Dovrat cafe as the war wound down late in October, my first leave, the invigorating aroma of coffee and the young lieutenant mute before the girl's gaze.

"Get your silent lieutenant out of here," she suddenly laughed at me, "and bring him back when he's able to talk." Then she turned around, tore her eyes from Nir and went back to serving the last of the tourists waiting for their orders. In utter silence, we drank our coffee and ate the sandwiches. Nir remained silent even when I helped him up from the chair and guided him to the car parked outside. He even drove silently. I was afraid for a moment that his mind wasn't on driving. But he kept control of the wheel and the car responded beautifully. Passing through Afula, we saw a large crowd outside the hospital. We went on to Hadera, where we turned off for my kibbutz. Nir insisted on dropping me at the entrance. Unfortunately, he couldn't drive me back to the platoon parking lot on the Golan Heights. Unsure of the situation at home, he didn't want to make any promises.

"That's okay," I assured him, "Just so long as your father is alright. You don't have to worry about me. I'm an old soldier. I'll survive this war, too." We shook hands. "Go on, Nir, get going," I yelled as I crossed the intersection. "They're waiting for you at home."

I never saw him again after he drove away. He didn't return to our platoon or the battalion. I don't know what became of him after he visited his parents. The platoon office had information that his father had suffered a severe heart attack but lived. Nir stayed with him at the hospital until he recovered. After that, he had no contact with the battalion. Anyway, he'd been a volunteer for the war, one of those young officers who had hopped onto the battalion half-tracks on their way up to the Golan. He wasn't assigned to the battalion and I doubt whether anyone in the personnel branch made a detailed record for his few days with us during those first three weeks. I happened to be at the Dovrat food stand several times later on. I think the pretty girl in the enticing shorts still works there. But I'm not sure. Winter eventually came and she must have put on warmer clothes. I even went up to the counter once or twice and stared at the thin wooden slats beneath the coffee cups searing for Lieutenant Nir's fingerprints in the stained wood grain. But the wood hadn't preserved any marks, and when I looked into the girl's eyes, they evaded me like strangers. Nor did she ask me as she had then, "Where have you left the silent Lieutenant?" She didn't even ask why we hadn't come back when my lieutenant regained his speech.

Kamatz Alef
Translated from the Hebrew by Dalia Bilu

I.

In my first year at school, when I was six or seven, I learned to read Hebrew. I learned very fast. Within a few days, I was putting letters together. After a week or two, I could pronounce syllables. And at the end of the first month, I could already read whole words. At the beginning, I would say them out loud, a little broken and separated into syllables. Later I would read them silently, with my lips. And in the end in a whisper, with my tongue, without moving my lips. Today I know how to read to myself, in my head, or some say, in my heart. With the eyes seeing and the heart reading. For myself, I don't know. Not everything I read today enters my heart. Today there are many words which I read by accident, without meaning to, just because my eyes run over them. Like smells penetrating your nose without your wanting them to. Like irritating noises impinging on your ears just because there's nothing to shut them out.

The first books I read were children's books. With vowel points and illustrations, in big black letters. The books had a special smell. To this day I don't know what it was about their smell that fascinated me. Was it the smell of glue, or the cardboard covers, or the smell of the print? And today too, whenever I pickup a new book, the first thing I do is to lift it to my nose and breathe its special smell deep into my lungs. The smell of new book fresh from the printers is one of the smells I love most, one which never stales and of which I never tire, like the smell of hot rolls in the morning, or the smell of the earth in Summer soaking up the first rain.

After the books, I began to read notice-boards, candy wrappers, signposts and newspapers. Everything, every surface bearing the square letters of whose charms and secret I had so recently become aware. With the instincts of a sleuth, indefatigable, I deciphered every notice, every word, every scribble. After a few months, I read very fast. I gobbled up all the books in the kindergarten. Over and over again. The kindergarten teacher began bringing me books from the school library. At first, easy, vocalized books, and then gradually harder books too, without vowel signs. Thicker, more serious books, most of which I did not understand.

Reading became a hunger, an insatiable thirst, a passion of the soul. Once I asked the kindergarten teacher for a book, and she said, "Enough. You read too much."

"But I have to read." I said.

"It's wrong to read books you don't understand." She said.

"But I want to terribly. I'm crazy to read." I said stubbornly.

"So read the newspaper."

Years later, when I was an adolescent, I read books with a voracious passion. My teacher disapproved of the speed with which I read. She thought

I wasn't digesting what I read properly. The books for young people which my friends read began to bore me. I felt that I was emerging from one world and moving into another. In this new world there were new books. Dark, cruel books, very hard to understand.

My teacher disapproved. "Those books aren't for you," she said. "Those are destructive books, and you're too young for them. Wait a few years, until you're more mature, and then you can read them. For the time being you must beware of them, you must keep your distance. Why don't you read Romain Rolland? And what's wrong with Tolstoy?"

But I refused to give up. The forbidden books drew me like a magnet. What did they contain these terrible books, to make my teacher so afraid of their destructiveness?

The librarian would not allow me to take the books I wanted, "That's not for you, little boy. You're too young for that." At night, I would steal into the library in the grip of a strange excitement and pull the forbidden books down from the shelves. Sometimes I was so eager to begin that I would open the books in the little wood and start reading them there and then, in the light of the moon. I would hide them in my bed, between the sheets, underneath the mattress.

My friends would hide pictures of nudes and sex manuals under their mattresses. I would hide Kafka and Camus, and the thrilling books of Dostoyevsky. In class my teacher discussed "The Engineers of the Soul", while I thought about "Amerika". My teacher read aloud from "Reach for the Skies," while I concentrated passionately on Sinous' Movement of Grushenka. In the evenings, the girls spoke ardently of the pure love of Pierre and Natasha, but I was haunted by the strange, provocative behavior of the brothers Karamazov.

And a few years later, on the eve of my army call-up, I was shocked and upset by an unpleasant incident involving one of my friends. He had problems with property. Property that didn't belong to him. In my innocence, I believed that words had the power to change people. All night long I preached to him. He sat there without saying a word. And I grew angrier and angrier. In the end, seething with rage, I rose and took a copy of "Crime and Punishment" from the table. I threw the three volumes at him, one after the other. "Read it!" I yelled furiously, "And start acting like a human being!"

His reaction was extreme and astonishing. He grabbed a kitchen knife from the shelf and rushed towards me. A short but stormy chase ensued. Alarmed by the racket, our friends came running and separated us by force. After that, I stopped reading Dostoyevsky. I lost my faith in him. Fact, he had failed to reform my friend.

II.

At about the same time I fell in love with a girl. A wonderful virgin love. We saw each other infrequently, but we wrote volumes. Love letters and billets doux. Would-be sophisticated comments in the margins of books,

and personal interpretations of the love-poems we read. It was while writing one of these letters that I found myself one day in the throes of composing a kind of essay. I no longer remember what it was about, but I remember how one seemed to flow out other, how word followed word, and every thought seemed to grow out of one before it.

From the moment I began to write, my eyes misted over and there was a kind of buzzing in my ears. I sweated freely and panted for breath. I was in the grip of a strange excitement. And when I had finished, I felt a strange emptiness. A kind of ease, a release from tension and effort. I stretched my legs out in front of me and breathed deeply. Gradually I was filled with a kind of lightness. I began whistling a gay tune, popular at the time, to myself. And suddenly I stood up, went outside and started walking, almost running down the garden paths in the night. And as I walked, I loudly sang to myself. For some reason, I was holding my little essay in my hand.

The love letters I wrote then have disappeared. And nobody reads the love poems in whose margins I scribbled so many notes. And the many little billets doux have blown away in the wind, and my first love, the tender love of my youth, lies buried beneath the gray rubble of the years.

Once, by chance, I met a young poet. We got into conversation, and became friends for a while. He showed me his poems, and I showed him my little essay. "Yes, interesting," he said reflectively. "Give it to me, I'll read it again." The next day we met again. We spoke about poetry, about books, about girls, and suddenly he asked me, "Tell me, have you read Gnessin? Uri Nissan Gnessin?"

"No," I said. "Who's he when he's at home?"

Thus I made the acquaintance of Gnessin. The tormented Uri Nissan. After I had discovered him, I drowned myself in him with a passionate, voracious greed. I read his letters, his translations, his first stories. And in the end, his extraordinary later stories too. They bowled me over. I felt as if the words he had written were breaking out of me. I remember that for a time I even copied his strange, beautiful signature. He would sign his letters, From me, Urinissanthine. And I almost fainted with the sweetness of it. And, shamelessly, I began signing my letters to my girl, "With love from me, Elishathine."

On dewy nights, we would stroll down the roads between the orange groves together, her hand in mine, with delicious scents wafting from her hair. My heart would contract within me under the pressure of lust and youth. And my lips would mumble, "and the flesh, ah the flesh, it gives no peace...." Just as Gnessin had said. And sometimes I would clutch my heart with my left hand, and feel such pangs of pain. Love made me sleepless, and my heart skipped to a strange beat. I was sure that, like Gnessin, I, too, was infected with a fatal disease. For some reason, I decided that it was a heart disease. On restless summer nights, I would toss and turn on my bed, unable to fall asleep. And I seemed to hear my beloved whispering behind the wall, "And when he comes home from his wanderings, back to me, I shall be at peace...."

Afterwards, years later, I wondered how Gnessin had come to write these classically feminine lines. And someone told me that the lines were not Gnessin's, but a translation he had made from some Yiddish poetess. This sounds reasonable, even if it isn't true. He may have been a sick man, but he wasn't a woman.

Gnessin's early death was like a prophecy of my own doom. An apocalyptic foreboding. I was sure that I was not long for this world. I thought about it so much that I began to really believe it. I would sit with my beloved, look into her eyes and ask, "If I die, will you remember me?" She would laugh tolerantly. My eccentricities only increased my charms in her eyes. And I asked again, "Tell me the truth, will you remember me?"

"How could I possibly forget you?" she would reply.

OH! the sweetness of her tender words, her gentle spirit. In exchange, I wrote her wonderful love letters, in long sentences unpunctuated but for emphatic exclamation marks, in order to make her sense my love more keenly. Thus, for example, "...love of my life all I want is to love you for ever and ever until we grow old and even after that..." Then I would go over what I had written and pepper it with exclamation marks, like this, "...love of my life! All I want is to love you!! Forever and ever until we grow old!!! And even after that!..."

Today the volumes of Gnessin are covered with cobwebs on my shelf. I hardly ever touch them. Perhaps I am suspicious of their excessive beauty. Of being crushed by the weight of longings they contain. Today other anxieties gnaw at my heart. And Gnessin's irresistible yearning seem very remote to me.

Not so long ago one of my friends came into my room. We spoke about books, and life, about Josef Haim Brenner who had suddenly come to light again as if resurrected from the dead. "It's a strange thing," he said to me. "Brenner wrote enough to fill a whole bookcase. And all of Gnessin is contained in three slim volumes. And still, if you weigh them in the balance, the scales will come down on the side of Gnessin."

I laughed a resigned kind of laugh. Today I blush to remember how fanatical I was in the love of my youth. The other day I threw a bundle of old notebooks into the fire. As they caught fire, before they burned, I managed to read one blackening page, "...from the tortured Uri Nissan to the fear-crazed Josef Haim. One is the thorny path between my people's vineyards..." In the impertinence of my love, I was guilty of falsifying the written word. For it was not Uri Nissan to whom the poet was referring, but Uri Kovner. And the word he used wasn't "tortured" but "reviled." But what of it? Love does not see with an objective eye and discipleship blurs the memory. And thus I would walk then, chanting to myself, to the rhythm of an ancient melody, "From the tortured Uri Nissan to the fear-crazed Josef Haim..." And my heart, oh my heart, would contract within me the sweetness of it all.

III.

I started reading newspapers when I was still a small child, drawn by my passion for the printed word to this new and inexhaustible source of words and letters. The combinations of letters in the newspapers took my breath away. Long, difficult, sonorous words. Strange, foreign words in outlandish Hebrew, transliterations, exotic names of faraway places, of unknown men and women, a world and the fullness thereof. In short, politics. Wherever I went, people were holding forth about politics, at the tables in the dining room, in the evenings on the lawns, and in my parent's room. On Saturdays, my parents would have visitors, and a constant stream of politics would flow out of their lips, from early evening until after midnight.

Today I know that those were really terrible times. A mighty whirlwind was engulfing the world, and grinding the Jewish people to dust. And I too, a small child who had learned to read, was a witness to these world events. We had an old couple living among us in rather peculiar circumstances. They had an only son who had emigrated to Eretz Israel, and for this sake they had left their home, sold all they possessed and arrived among us empty handed, to be with him. When the war broke out, the son had joined the British army and the old couple was left alone. They hardly knew any Hebrew, nothing but a few simple words. Their sources of Yiddish were blocked by war, and the only newspapers that came their way were in Hebrew.

The old lady made a big, beautiful garden in front of their room. In it she grew fine flowers and a lot of pumpkins. She would hang the dried pumpkin shells from the roof, and when the wind blew, they rattled like ancient bells. She would dry the pumpkin seeds in the sun on the lawn. Then she would roast them and divide them up into little bags. And when the children unwitting, passed her door, she would call them in. In exchange for a bit of weeding and hoeing, scattering fertilizer, or carrying a couple of buckets of water from the tap to the garden, she would shower her gifts upon them. The roasted pumpkin seeds she distributed in their little packets were dry, salty, and delicious. She would stand and watch me cracking the seeds and swallowing them. "Good mein kind, good eh?" And then she would sigh, long and low, and add, "Oy, oy, kinderlach, when will this war be over?"

Once the old man called me. I went into their hut with an apprehensive heart. There was a huge bed in it, taking up the whole wall. You had to climb up steps to get into it, and it was covered with an assortment of strange pillows and quilts and fancy embroidered coverlets. I was overcome with astonishment. It was so different from the flat Spartan beds which were the only kind I had ever known. There were a great many pictures on the walls. Not painted pictures, but photographs of people. Bearded Jewesses with their necks encased in high collars stared at me with stern expressions. There were candles in the bronze candlesticks and milky waterfalls dripped from onto the table.

The old man, in tattered slippers, asked, "You know to read, child?"

“A little,” I stammered, “only a little.”

“Never mind,” said the old man and held out the newspaper. “Nu, let’s hear you read.” I was shy and I refused. “Read, nu,” urged the old man. He drew me to his enormous bed and up the steps, and sank into it opposite me. Slowly I began to read. It was a hard newspaper, without vowels, and there were lots of words I did not understand. The old man said, “Never mind, never mind, go on reading.” When I finished, I received a reward, a little bag of sweets and a packet of pumpkin seeds.

After that, I got into the habit of dropping in on the old couple from time to time. The old man would seat me on the vast bed, stick the newspaper into my hands, put a funny pair of spectacles on his nose and settled down to listen. Sometimes he would call the old woman in from the outside to come and listen too. She would chatter in her Yiddish, wash her hands and dry them on her apron, and join us on the bed. The old couple was the most wonderful audience anyone could wish to have. They would hang onto my every word with baited breath, their eyes following my lips, my finger, my little Adam’s apple. Sometimes they would sigh deeply. The old man would remove his spectacles and wipe the misty lenses. And the old lady would wrap up some sweets for me in a piece of paper.

Once, when I already knew how to read writing, they asked me to read them a letter from their son. I tried, but I didn’t get far. The writing was still too hard for me, too complicated. The letters were joined together so that I could not tell them apart. “Nu, never mind,” said the old man, and he tore the beautiful stamps off the envelope and gave them to me. Sometimes he would stop me in the middle of reading the newspaper, sigh, and say to the old lady, “Nu, what did I tell you? Kamatz Alef - aa...” And the old lady would begin to sing a little song to herself in Yiddish. Rocking herself backwards and forwards in time to the slow rhythm of the song. Closing her eyes and allowing her tears to fall unimpeded into her shawl. I no longer remember what was written in the newspapers I read then. Except for the last day. The old man was very exciting and urged me to hurry up and read. Not on the big bed, as usual, but standing up, the moment I came in at the door. And this time the old lady was there, too, waiting for me begin.

I read aloud, “War over. Hitler dead.” The banner headlines were in huge black letters. They took up half the page.

I didn’t have to read any more. The two old people seized each other in a trembling embrace and burst into tears. They did not see me putting the newspaper down softly on the threshold and slipping quietly from the room.

Outside on the lawn, my friends were playing with a ball. Their wild cries rose to the sky.

IV.

Reading brought me a friend, too. Years later in the army, I was lying and reading in my tent. It was the rare soldier who succeeded in reading a

book in the army in those days, newspapers, and light magazines were as much as most people could manage.

My favorite poet at that time was Avraham Ben Ytzhak. In the one slim volume containing all his poems, I found a hidden treasure of beauty. I would shut myself off from abrasive surroundings and contemplate his poems. Between one poem and the next, I would look wonderingly about me and soar on the wings of my thoughts far from the army camp that so oppressed my spirits. Once I was reading "The Hills joined together around my town," when a soldier pushed past my bed. He stopped and bent down to see what I was reading that so absorbed my attention. When he saw the book, his eyes widened. His eyes softened and he sat down on my bed. We introduced ourselves. Something stronger than we were drew us to each other, and we became friends. True, bosom friends.

He had the body of farmer and the soul of a poet. From our posts in Jerusalem we would phone each other on the border line, like a pair of lovers. "Listen, I want to read you something, something great," he would tempt me.

"I'm listening, I'm listening."

And over the telephone on the local line, he would read me wonderful pages from Yizhar's "Tziklag days," until the switchboard operator would interrupt us with typical military narrow-mindedness, "What's all this then? Official business?"

"Yes!" my friend would yell, "very important business." I pressed the receiver to my ear. I couldn't get enough of S. Yizhar's beautiful words. Nobody had ever read Yizhar to me like this before. Later, years later, when I read the book myself something strange happened to me. The eyes skimming the printed pages were mine, but the voice which I heard reading the words in my ears was his. I laid the book down and closed my eyes tightly. The autumn wind of Jerusalem blew through the leaves on the fig trees and the flowers on the caper bushes shone like little torches.

On our nocturnal walks, he would show me the distant stars, the silhouettes of towers, and all the hills encircling Jerusalem. "Even on the darkest night," he would boast, "I identify every dome, every valley, every mountain range." It was as if he had been born in Jerusalem, as if he had never seen another town in his life. I would remind him of the beginning of our friendship. Of the hills joined together around our town. And he would smile wordlessly. We would open our leaves together, wandering about the town. Walking and talking.

It was clear to him that we had some special destiny to fulfill. He was sure that he had something important to say, and that people would have to listen to him. He loved Eretz Israel with a burning passion. He would laugh at the various experts who knew the country by its flora and fauna, its geological formations, its history. "With me, it's in my blood," he laughed. "You can put me down anywhere in the country and I'll know where I am by sticking out my tongue and sniffing the air."

Once we were walking in an orthodox quarter on a Friday evening. The facades of the houses were already steeped in a Sabbath peace, but on the

back verandahs facing the border, men set playing cards with an absorption that looked as if it would last all night long. The sight of these men sitting in their undershirts and playing cards made him furious. "Is that what we came to this country for? Is that what we joined the army for? Is that worth playing the price for?"

That night something cracked in him. He would tell me things about himself that he had never dared to speak of before. He was very agitated, and his voice shook strangely. He told me about a letter he had written to his girl. About the words he had written her in reply certain fears she had confessed to him. "The debt of blood, you understand? The debt of blood, that's what I believe in!" He seized my hand, my shirt. He came very close to me. "Don't you see, it's impossible to live in this country without some huge debt. A terrible debt we have to pay so that we can go on living here...."

How strange his voice sounded in that orthodox quarter in Jerusalem on the Sabbath eve. If I had compared him then to some prophet, it would have been ridiculous. But his words tore something apart in my soul. From that night on, I saw him differently. You could even say that I was a little jealous of him. I thought that he had outstripped the rest of us in some mysterious way. That perhaps he had already begun to grasp things which were deeper, truer, that were perhaps the beginnings of a dimension which I, too, was seeking then. And seeking with all my soul.

I probed his words to find something which would make sense of the things we had done, some justification—you might almost say, some opening to a new, different faith. "And you," he asked me, "Do you feel that you owe a debt?"

"Perhaps," I said, "I don't know." And afterwards I had a bad feeling, as if I had missed an opportunity which might never return to me again. I could never speak about my private beliefs to anyone else. It seemed to me like something crude, revolting, almost indecent. As if we had come as close as possible to each other without risking collision. And then continued moving apart. Each one on his own course, moving inevitably, endlessly further away.

Years later, in an army camp we had conquered from the Arab Legion, East of Nablus, I remembered him again. In the newspapers coming out after the week of war, the names of the fallen began to appear. I read his name slowly, stammering, joining the syllables together one by one, as if I was beginning to read my first words all over again. I was sorry then that I had ever learned to read. In that orthodox quarter of Jerusalem, under those same balconies, he had fallen. For a moment, I seemed to hear his voice at my side, to feel his trembling hand clutching my shirt. "Is that we came to this country for? Is that worth playing price for?" In the hills which had joined together around this town, something had been orphaned. And I seemed to grow a few years older at once.

Sometimes, although I know it's cheating, I continue my conversation with him. From the point at which I had been afraid of exposing myself then.

“Yes,” I answer him from the distance of the years. “Yes, I feel that I owe a debt.”

“The debt of blood we spoke of then?”

“Any debt you like,” I shout at him from my groaning heart. Happy are they who sow and do not reap, happy are they who set forth and do not return.

In the first year after the war, when I was approaching the middle of my life, I learned to read Hebrew on tombstones. I learned fast. Within the space of a few days I could read the names, the dates. After a week or two, I could draw a map of gravestones. And after a month, I had already covered the whole country in monuments to the fallen. At first I would read the names aloud, in a slightly hesitant voice, syllable by syllable. Afterwards, I pronounced them silently, only my lips moving. And today I already know how to read them to myself, in my head, or as some say, in my heart. I myself don't know. In the attic above my room I keep yellowing newspapers from the war. Albums, souvenirs, photographs.

Sometimes, when I hear a voice calling inside me, I pick up the newspaper with the banner headlines taking up half the page. “And do you still know how to read?” the old man asks.

“A little,” I stammer.

“Nu, nevermind,” says the old man. “Read, read.”

And I read, “The war is over. Over forever.”

And then he interrupts me in the middle of my reading, sighs, and says to the old lady, “Nu, what did I tell you? Kametz Alef--aa...”

Translator's note: *Kamatz Alef, Alef, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and Kamatz, a vowel sign pronounced “a.” The old man is drawing the old lady's attention to the fact that in Hebrew the pronunciation of this combination is “a”, whereas in Yiddish it is “o.”

IN VAIN PURSUIT

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

A. On the coast at Atlit

I saw him first standing over the sea. On a trip to the shore I made before the holidays, I arrived at the coast near Atlit. From a distance, even before I drew near the cove, I noticed the form of a man perched on a rock overlooking the water. His pose seemed a bit awkward, and I chuckled for a moment at the fisherman apparently frozen in the singular motion of casting a high arcing line. But he did not move. His arms remained stretched towards the sea and no tense line was visible amidst the waves.

I parked the car on a strip of rough ground away from the soft, sinking sand and walked to the ledge. I needed to find a nice, quiet cove for our company of friends. A number of families joined us each year for the holidays to pitch tents on the beach between Caeseria and Atlit. Now I had a clear view of the man. He was very thin, which made him look tall, and had brown skin. The tight black pants he wore came down to his ankles. Though I could not see his eyes facing the sea, I sensed even from behind that they were fine and dark.

He heard my steps and slowly turned around. With a smile on his swarthy face, he gave me a friendly greeting. "Don't mind me," I said. "I'm just looking for a nice, little cove where my friends and I can spend the holidays."

"Welcome," he answered, "to you and your friends. The Bay of Atlit is a great place to pass the end-of-summer holidays."

"Yes," I agreed. "We camp every year on this stretch of coast down to Caeseria. We try to find a quiet, out-of-the-way cove the hordes of other vacationers haven't yet discovered."

"Here on the coast of Atlit, and nearby, too, you can hear wonderful singing of all kinds in the quiet hours," he said. He looked back to the sea and continued, "Do you hear it? Even now, you can hear the exquisite sounds of the psalms." He suddenly shifted on his ledge and his body began to dance as if of itself while he kept time with a tune so faint I could not make out the words. "Do you hear?" he asked over his shoulder. "Do you hear? The whole coast is singing, all the bay and all the sea are singing with us."

If he stays here on the rock, I thought to myself, the amusement he provides the children will make them turn up their noses at swimming. If we're really lucky, he'll surely show us some of his glories. I could already imagine the children laughing in scorn, hurling handfuls of sand at him, taunting him cruelly.

"I thought you were a fisherman," I said aloud. "From a distance, it looked like you were casting a line into the water."

"Me'ir," he said. "My name is Me'ir."

“Nice to meet you. If you’re still here on the beach during the holidays, we’ll invite you to our vacation tent.”

“My pleasure,” Me’ir replied. “I can see that you’re good people. Yes, there still are some good souls in this country.” He turned to me and gave me a great, guileless smile. “There are many good people with me here. They never cease entreating me, ‘Come to us, lift up your voice with ours in song. Come sing with us.’ I ache to be with them. I stretch out on the rock, spread my arms like wings to them, and tremble before them from head to toe. Perhaps a small miracle will occur, and I’ll fly off to the bay and the deep blue waters in the shadow of the fortress walls.”

“We also have children in our group,” I told him, “and they aren’t very patient. I hope they won’t pester you. It’s hard to control children these days.”

“Don’t worry,” said Me’ir. “By the way, where are you good people from? From the kibbutz? Are you abandoning the fruit and chickens to grab a few days at the beach? Well, I know how to get along with kids, you have nothing to worry about. In children, too, the good must be brought out.”

“What about the noise of our cars and the commotion from our camp? Won’t they prevent you from hearing the sounds that come to you from the sea?”

“What can you do?” he said. “The shore does not belong to me, the sea is not mine alone, the Bay of Atlit is not my sole possession.” He spread his thin wing-like arms above his body as if to embrace the sea, as though he wanted to soar above the gentle murmur of the bay. “You’re no problem, you’ll rest a few days here and then go home. But the army does maneuvers here day and night. The sound of shooting pierces the air, and I cannot hear the sweet strains of song. The soldiers leave the beach black and filthy. Weeks pass before I can sit again on my little rock and listen to my siren calls.”

His description made me laugh. “You mean they’re frightened by machine gun fire and exploding shells?”

“Don’t laugh,” said Me’ir, “and don’t think I’m ignorant of the military. I served in the navy.”

I suddenly remembered an accident that had nearly ended in tragedy a year earlier in one of the hidden coves. I was dozing in my tent, deep in a sweet afternoon nap, when the children burst inside in a panic and woke me up.

“Come quickly,” they shouted breathlessly. “Hurry, two people are drowning down in the cove! They don’t know how to swim. Quick, they’re already going under!”

Still damp with the sweat of sleep, I rushed from the tent and followed the children down the limestone steps. From the top, I caught sight of a young woman deep in the inlet slowly being swept out to sea. A young man, writhing on the opposite shore, shouted to her frantically. I sent the others to fetch a rope and some inner tubes, then dived into the water. There was some undertow, nothing serious. I swam to the girl with quick, powerful

strokes, grasped her below the arms, and slowly propelled her back to shore. Around us, whirlpools swirled and the sea hissed, but the woman's response to my motions made the rescue easier.

When we reached the beach, I delivered her into the young man's arms. "Danger lurks even in this hidden cove," I told him through the gasps wracking my body. "One must be on guard everywhere against the evil power of the sea, which penetrates every crack."

I spurned his thanks and herded the children up the stairs. "She's still in a mild state of shock," I told them. "She needs rest. Let's go back to the tent." I went up after them, dripping on the stone-hewn steps. I cast another glance at the cove from high up. It sparkled in the light like a jewel. The wind spun eddies chasing one another across the surface until they vanished among the limestone fissures. I checked my watch. It was already late, and I had not performed my task. What was I doing, standing and chatting with Me'ir about swimming mishaps? I had to locate a cove, find a short, easy route on which the cars would not sink into the sand and attend to still other necessary details. "Well, Me'ir," I said, "so long and be well. I have to run now."

"Yes, yes," Me'ir assented. "Run, run. Don't get sidetracked. I must be going, too, for the voices of the sea are calling me again." He twirled on one foot and gyrated about the rock as though powered by a wind-up spring. All of a sudden, he spread his arms and his ankles flashed white below the straining black pants. He seemed to me to be going through a pre-flight routine. But a moment more and he would fly off to disappear from sight in the brilliant azure waters of the Bay of Atlit.

B. At the town square, in Ein-Hod

The second time I saw Me'ir was at the little town square in the artist's village of Ein Hod. I happened to be there with some friends, including guests from abroad. We strolled among the stone walls, cut through the thick foliage of the fig trees and peeped into the galleries. The artists, sitting in the shade of their walled gardens, sold their works and chatted with the visitors. A bit weary, we sat down at some small wooden tables on the veranda of a cafe fronting the square. Huge bulldozers and tractors rumbled nearby on the construction site of the new museum.

While our friends lounged at their tables, and the foreign guests studied their surroundings, I left to wander in the vicinity of the cafe. I chanced on the wall to a room, very close by but sheltered from view, plastered with an old notice. Out of curiosity, I stopped to read it. In its torn and ruined state, the poster inspired me to reconstruct it: An old exhibit, which had closed years before, dedicated to the memory of the late artist Me'ir. His woodworks, and other pieces impossible to identify on the weather beaten notice, would be displayed at the exhibit. Anyone desiring to visit after hours was invited to contact a well-known artist, one of the founders of the colony, for a private viewing. Other unimportant details followed.

I was about to turn back to my friends and the din of the clanking tractors on the construction site when, at the bottom of the notice, on a shred of ripped paper, I saw photographs of statuary by the late Me'ir. The face of the man standing over the sea on the coast of Atlit suddenly came back to mind. The same dark eyes, the same arms spreading like wings at his sides, the same thin, taut limbs. It was as if I had returned to see his hands clapping high above his head, the movement that had misled me into thinking that he was a pleasure angler casting a line over his head into the sea below. The memory of that magic hour at the shore brought back to me our odd conversation and the questions he asked, the delightful tune he hummed and his dance steps on the stage made by the rock.

With an unsettled feeling, I told myself this was a new, fascinating angle that had to be pursued. I returned to my friends and roused them from their seats for a visit to the artist whose name was printed on the old poster. By good fortune, I told them, we could watch a family of artists at work in her home while our foreign guests might even find something they'd like to buy.

We skirted the excavations on the museum site and turned down a quiet lane to the village office, where the staff provided directions to the studio in which she gave lessons to young art students. They even offered to phone her so she would stay at home to await us. It wasn't every day that a group of shoppers like us came around, and she simply could not miss us.

The artist was, indeed, waiting at the gate to the yard, and very pleased to see us. While the others scattered among the paintings and metal works mounted in every corner of the yard and the house and even along the gravel paths in the little garden, I told her I would be grateful for any answers she could provide to some questions I had.

"Please, go right ahead," she said, never imagining that I wanted to inquire about the late Me'ir.

We went out to the yard and sat by a table inlaid with beautiful mosaics of her own creation. I asked her to tell me about the young sculptor Me'ir who, so far as I could glean from the remnants of the old notice pasted to the council hall, had passed away some years ago. She was surprised. Was I a reporter or an art critic for one of the papers? Perhaps an author at work on a biography? She was even more startled by my reply that I was neither the one nor the other. My only interest in Me'ir was to know who he was and what had befallen him, for we had met in such strange circumstances on his rock on the coast of Atlit. Something deep inside told me that that meeting was only our first; someday, we would meet again.

Me'ir's life had not been full. On the contrary, it had been broken, cut short before his time; yet, for all that, if a skilled writer could be found, a full biography would be worth the time he devoted to it. A distinguished reporter, or a reputable art critic who could try to write about his life and works, would find him a worthy

subject. Meanwhile, I could not better spend my time than by proceeding to the council hall and entering the memorial room or, more accurately, what remained of that room after the terrible break-in.

Once there, she would tell me, slowly and patiently, the whole story of that remarkable man. I was thankful for her cordial answers to my questions but felt obliged to consult my companions. Our time was short and we still wanted to take in the famous workshops on the edge of the village. We had also promised our guests from abroad a stop at the picturesque Druse market in Daliyat-el-Carmel and an opportunity to observe the Druse carpet weavers. It was her suggestion in that case that we get together on a day when I was free. She insisted only that I tell her I was coming because she also very busy, with artist workshops and classes in Haifa, Tel Aviv and neighboring kibbutz settlements. I agreed to find a time when we could talk about him at our leisure, said I would call, and wrote down some names and telephone numbers she supplied. Before parting, she remembered that there was something else I could see if I searched the newspaper archives of the time. She was thinking in particular of a literary journal that had been defunct for years. Yes, many years had already passed since then. She wondered again how I had come upon Me'ir's name and what had provoked me to learn the story of his life and work. I could not explain to her that Me'ir simply intrigued me. Nor did I know why. When the memory of our encounter on the coast had pricked me again, I felt as if his absent image had posed me a riddle. I knew somewhere within me that the solution was important, both to me and my life. I had to find it.

As we said goodbye, she remarked with a sigh that he would now be one of the great sculptors in the country had he lived. He had more talent than his soul could contain. Perhaps that was the cause of what had happened. Surely I knew the gist of it: the treacherous cove, a sudden whirlpool, an inescapable current. But she would enlarge on all this when we met. I mustn't forget to call ahead. And there were some documents, just a handful, no need to photocopy them as most were handwritten and didn't fill even a page of note paper. Copying by hand would do fine. Meanwhile, she would dig through the office at the old council hall to see if she could turn up additional evidence. Then we ended the conversation and she led me back to my friends.

C. In the memorial room of the old council hall

The artist was waiting for me at the village office. She immediately handed me an envelope of photographs and newspaper clippings. "That's what I found," she said, "and I'm sure there's more. You just need to poke around, but I'm not as strong as I used to be."

I followed her to the memorial room inside the old council hall. The museum construction site hummed with workmen and machinery. "We're finally going to do justice here and show respect to art," she said, "so we won't forget those who have fallen."

The council hall stood empty, and even the walls seemed destined for removal. “Everything is in a state of flux at the moment,” said the artist. “When the museum is finished, we’ll have new township facilities, too. It’s a joke to call this a council hall. No one has met here for years. There is no council anymore, nor any memory of the early days of the village.”

The narrow memorial room contained an old desk, chairs, and some dusty albums. “Years ago,” she said, “we used to hold exhibitions of local artists here. People would come from all over the country. This room served as an incubation chamber for the village’s artistic life. But it’s been years since anyone has looked after the building. You can see how it’s been left completely neglected.”

We sat down at the desk. While she leafed through an album, I drew the copied pages from the envelope she had given me. The literary journal that had printed these articles had ceased publication years before and the artist who had written a glowing review of Me’ir’s early works had died long ago. Me’ir’s poems, printed in capitals lettered by hand, were written in a highly detached style. Strange poems, about the mysterious devotion of a lost lover or an elusive God, and antiquated verses of longing such as no one writes today. There were also some portraits he had drawn and photographs of his woodcarvings. In the margin of the column appeared a photo of Me’ir himself in a dark dancing outfit, sweeping his wing-arms sideways just as I had observed on the coast at Atlit.

The second column of the page dedicated to his memory featured three poems by a young poet who since had made a name by her weirdness. In those long-gone times, however, she was still a novice, a beginner under the spell cast by the giants of that generation in their glory, still like a student preparing for an impressive solo recital. Her poems were utterly charming, enjoyable even now after the passage of 25 years, in the nature of silent hymns to one who had not prevailed though he had possessed everything necessary to succeed. But there was another privilege he had not conceded, the right to decide whether or not to go on, and he had decided. He made a cruel, malignant decision that left all those close to him mute with grief. The young poet refused to accept that he was no more and called on him in her lines to come back, to reveal himself in the deep sands of oblivion in which he had sunk, to return, dancing his fluttering steps as wooden figurines and finely wrought etchings cascaded from his bosom.

At the bottom of the page was a dry chronology of his brief life. When he was born, into what family, what happened when his father died while he was still a young child. Next came an abbreviated list of the educational institutions he had attended until drafted into the Navy, then the bare minimum concerning secret missions during his years aboard a ship in the coast guard, his art studies and the period of his apprenticeship that later would bear such ripe fruit.

The artist, watching me as I examined the page, commented that she could see how excited I was by the articles. “You can take the papers home with you. Here is another folder, but it isn’t cheery.” She flipped open a sheaf

of reports and transcribed affidavits relating the sad story of the pillage of the memorial room in which Me'ir's works had been destroyed. According to the recorded testimony of the village guards, the break-in occurred in the wee hours one rainy winter night. No light was seen, and the guards, drinking to keep warm as they sat around a heater, suspected nothing. What alerted them was the unexpected bleating of goats coming from the old council hall. On arriving at the scene, they were shocked to discover what had been done to the hall, where the goats were trampling everything underfoot. Their description of the floor littered with droppings and straw was genuinely literary. I took out the notebook I had brought and copied it word for word. Had the goats devoured his etchings? If not, where were they? Had the starving animals gobbled down his woodcarvings and the brooding portrayals of the crucifixion? If not, where was everything hidden? Aside from fragments of his heavy stone pieces, no trace of his lost creations was found. Was it possible that the artist's village harbored a secret admirer of his work who, in crazed fanaticism, had wreaked such terrible havoc on the exhibit housed in the memorial room?

She read my mind and assured me that the Haifa police had not detected anything of the sort during their investigation. Here were the reports and copies of the letters the detective squad had delivered to the village council. A most unfortunate series of events, an unintentional entry by a local shepherd. They even raised the absurd possibility that the flock of goats alone had desecrated everything. Untended by a shepherd, the goats had broken through the rotten doors that winter night and innocently laid waste to the holdings as they frolicked in the building. The realization that they were imprisoned within the walls had set the goats bleating in abject panic. That was when the village guards, responding to the noise, had discovered what remained of the exhibition in honor of Me'ir of blessed memory.

The document fascinated me. I liked the brusque official language, the written accounts of the officers and shepherds who had been questioned as witnesses, all filtered through the nimble fingers of the police stenographer. We the undersigned hereby attest that no incriminating evidence was found, the suspects were released, and no arrests were made. So the police put it. I copied this into my notebook and thought to myself that I might return to it someday.

The artist told me that not everything had been lost, not all the legacy had been consumed by the flock. It was lucky that he lavished gifts on his friends. From the time he was discharged from the Navy to his final trip to Paris, it had been his custom to liquidate each artistic phase by giving away his works. He would tell his friends each time that the real period of inspiration was just beginning and everything he had done until then was as nothing. And the dances? I asked. Did anything remain of those unique improvisations?

"There are photographs, of course," she said, "but nothing to be found here."

I collected everything in my briefcase. She was sorry that she could not give me any more. It was too bad that none of the young reporters or art critics had taken an interest in Me'ir's character. What an important service some talented writer could perform by making the effort to produce a short biography of him. "I would offer him every possible assistance. So few people still remember him."

Even of his relatives, it seemed that but a few were still alive. She looked at me with imploring eyes. I evaded her gaze and stood up to follow her out of what had been the memorial room of the old council hall. Again we were assailed by the earnest activity on the museum construction site. She returned the keys to the village office and quietly voiced her hope that the new museum would find a small room for Me'ir.

After we parted, I walked to the town square and then slowly made my way along a road that wound through an adjacent copse. In the distance, I saw the Bay of Atlit gleaming with blue light. The dark wall of the fortress cast a deep shadow over the water. On the scattered limestone boulders could be seen the forms of weekend fishermen arching their lines high overhead. For just a moment, they were frozen in place like carved images of the crucifixion.

D. The fish table on the esplanade, Tiberias

The last time I saw Me'ir was from my seat at the fish table in a restaurant on the water's edge. How did I come to a restaurant on the esplanade in Tiberias? I went there to get to the bottom of some other ancient affair. I had arranged a meeting in the new center with an old friend who had taken part in the incident many years earlier. He readily agreed to my suggestion and even invited me to his house located on the slope of the mountain, but everything after that went wrong. He didn't show up or even send word and the meeting never took place. I searched for him in the new business center, at his house and even in the grocery store near his home. I sought help from neighbors and went looking for his wife. I glanced at my watch again to make sure I had not mistaken the date of our meeting, then stood nonplussed before his house. A young woman passing by asked me who I was looking for. When I told her the name of my old acquaintance, she curtly answered, "Stay away from him. No good can come from business with him. All kinds of rumors are going around about him and what he's done. Don't fall into some trap he's setting for you."

What exactly did she mean? Had he been hauled away for investigation by the Tiberias police? Was he suspected of criminal activity? He had been such a decent, honest fellow in years past.

So I went down to the city esplanade along the Sea of Galilee. Never mind the meeting that didn't work out. Forget the old story whose full details I would not be able to extract as I had anticipated from my long-time friend. To hell with questions that would forever remain unresolved. What counted

was a glorious winter day in Tiberias for me to enjoy, an intoxicating, sun-drenched day resplendent with light, a day whose warmth drugged the body and infused every bright sight with a dreamy glow.

Along the way, I stopped at the table of a restaurant facing the new dock from which tourist boats set sail for the eastern shore of the sea. From my seat, I gazed in wonder at the bustle emanating from the pier. Boats arrived and departed. Groups of sightseers came ashore and went aboard. The Galilee glittered behind them in the wintry sun. Sea gulls cruised the waterfront and families loaded chests, fueled motors, and rolled nets to put their boats in order for a night of fishing.

I was reminded of the Sea of Galilee as I saw it after the grim days of the Yom Kippur War. The management of the Tiberias hot baths had invited our weary battalion to wash away some of the cares of war. We arrived good and filthy, but a dip in the warm waters restored to us a taste of other times. The bath attendants pampered us. They saw to our every need and draped our bodies with old towels when we stepped from the pools into the cold outside. We gave ourselves to the sun that heals every wound. Seated on the shore, at the foot of broad eucalyptus trees opposite the baths, we contemplated the mountains on the eastern rim where smoke rose from the high ridges of the Golan. Every outpost could be seen, every road and every settlement on the Heights. Casting dry twigs into the water, we pondered the terrible war just ended and what would come in its wake.

A strange vision suddenly took hold of me. I imagined that I saw a tall, thin man with a dark face. His arms are spreading from his sides and black dancer's pants stretch to his ankles. He dashes and glides over the water, not in a straight line but in a zig-zag course, making a sort of twisting leap through the expanse of illuminated water. Now he is running towards the east before veering off and heading to the far southern shore. Now he is turning sharply, spinning around towards me, his face angled to the side under a veil of shade. I felt a moment of mild dizziness and had to turn my head towards my comrades wrapped in towels in their seats under the trees. "Do you see a man out there, fluttering over the water?"

"No," they answered, they did not, and they were sick of my lingering shell-shock that took a new form each time. Again they tossed dry twigs into the water lapping the shore and quietly resumed their conversation, always the same questions: Whose fault was the war? Who had to pay for it? How would our stricken country change, and for whom were we giving our lives?

It all passed in an instant. The strange delusion vanished. Across the mirror of water, only drab ducks paddled and king fishers screeched. A speed boat buzzed in the distance. Still tingling with memories, I watched from my seat at the fish table as one of the sightseeing boats took on some buoyant tourists. Did I recognize the man greeting them at the gangway? Didn't I once know that face a long time ago? Wasn't that Me'ir, skipper of a navy patrol boat? I had lived through a number of tense, frightful nights ages ago under his command. Can a man be seen in two worlds at one time? Could

Me'ir appear simultaneously in two eras? After his discharge from the Navy, had Me'ir from the boat become Me'ir the artist who came to Ein Hod?

That was what his friends wrote after he was taken. Where had I seen those

tributes? In my copies of the literary journal given me by the artist who preserved his memory? Or had I read them in the commemoration album issued by the navy? I no longer quite remember, but the similarity of their faces so stunned me that I rose from my seat at the fish table and approached the gangway. The sunny expression on his face dazzled me. The same eyes, the same dark skin, the same cryptic smile, the same delicate, fragile wrists. Me'ir? Was it really Me'ir?

"Excuse me," I trembled before him, my breath suddenly short. "Excuse me, is your name Me'ir?"

The man turned from the tourists with a smile and looked me over. "No," what's this about Me'ir? Might be a Me'ir on the next boat. She'll dock in just a few minutes. Ask over there."

I looked him in the eyes. "Wasn't there a Me'ir here who had served in the navy?" I asked.

"I don't know him," answered the man. "You're all mixed up. No such person here, and I don't have the time to help you look."

What had suddenly come over me? I got a grip on myself and slowly settled into my seat beside the restaurant table. How could I bother people because of an old demon who took possession of me years before? Even to me, his origin was by means clear. For what had I gone to Tiberias and Ein Hod and the Bay of Atlit? What was this Me'ir, who relentlessly hounded my dreams, as though I, and I alone, owed him and others a debt to redeem his memory from oblivion? If I met a strange young man who crossed his arms over the back of a bench on the town square in Ein Hod, what of it? Did it follow that he was in fact a herald whose revelation of good tidings only I was bound to proclaim? And if, sometime in the dawn of my youth, I bumped into an eccentric chief petty officer on a little patrol boat off the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, directly below the guns of the Syrian coastal batteries, was I obliged to pursue glimmers of his image all my life?

Indeed, life is but a series of such peculiar encounters, especially in the beginning, in our enchanted childhood. For example, take that nameless tractor operator clearing rocks from Givat Ram in Jerusalem. When I stood before him with a friend, dressed in uniform with the unit patch shining on my shoulder, he stopped the giant tractor, jumped down, flung a chunk of stone at my feet and said, "Out for a hike, eh? Decided to escape from the northern border, eh? Had enough of those pitch-black ambushes, eh? No more strength for crawling exhausted through jungles of reeds, eh?"

Before we could collect our thoughts, before we could get a fix on what he was saying to us, even before we could see his face shielded by a broad cloth hat over a layer of sticky dust, he hopped back onto the giant tractor and pulled the levers. The tractor growled and dug its great blade into the heap of rocks.

Did he know more about us than we ourselves did? Did he see himself as a secret partner in our fate? Why have I not sought after him? His name, too, is not important to me, nor the history of his family nor its fortunes in Israel. For many years, I have nursed within me an idle curiosity as to the identity of that man and the reason for his remarks. Still, unlike the matter of Me'ir and his brief life, I left him alone as he did me.

I sat at the fish table, I ate and drank, and then I desired to quit the city. What would I do with this man who pursued me everywhere? On my way to the Tiberias bus station, I remembered that the artist had spoken sparingly of his death and I had not asked further, as though we were of one mind from the start to say nothing of that sorry chapter. Besides, anyone who had merely heard of the incident knew exactly what it involved. But it is impossible in thinking of him to regard that final act as the definitive event of his life. For some reason, Me'ir's artistic side had not drawn me. Instead, other facets of him, opening doors in a host of directions, had riveted me, though they would not make a biography even were I to write about them.

And if I sat down and wove a tale from events that would shed light on his life, and my life, and the hidden paths that we must take, why would I seize on his sad story? The esplanade in Tiberias and the new ship dock are full of groups of merry tourists, each of whom has a story more entertaining, and less mournful, than Me'ir's.

It is only the bronzed face of the man at the gangway guiding passengers on board the excursion boat that leaves me without peace. Did he really say his name wasn't Me'ir?

A SPIT IN THE FACE

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I first learned the story of Leopold Spitzer's escape from the Nazis and their Slovak collaborators in three closely spaced pages sent me by a friend from the Czech immigrants' association. An unadorned account, concise and touching, written in an artless, even deliberately simplistic style. A boyhood friend of Spitzer from up in the Zionist youth movement before choosing a different path that eventually led to a high position in the Communist Party. His comments, initially recited as a eulogy at Spitzer's funeral, afterwards were published in an influential Bratislavan journal in the winter of 1968, shortly after Spitzer's death.

Yom Kippur, September 1942.

Sector C's turn at the labor camp came just as dusk was falling. We recognized the commandant's private automobile leading the small convoy through the field. He had just returned from Bratislava and now fell on his aides, screaming, "Why isn't the list of transfers ready?"

Terrified by his ranting, the clerks immediately drew up the list. The criteria for inclusion on the list for transport were simple: advanced age, illness, families with large children, and low productivity. Only the strong, the healthy young slaves, could hope to remain in the labor camp.

Behind the commandant's auto crawled covered trucks, followed on foot by a large troop of Guardists, the Slovak Nazis. Their black uniforms portend evil tidings. In the solemn, still twilight that Yom Kippur night, the sight of them was terrifying. It was the holy day of judgment, a day that should have been one of profound conciliation between God and man. The Guardists spread out around the camp gate, deployed along the fence, and then broke into several barracks. There was no need to announce muster. The people themselves slowly began to leave the barracks, then stood on the parade ground before the camp's sector office.

I felt sure my name wouldn't appear on the list of transfers. Even if it did, I could flee into the nearby forests at any time. I was young and in good health; I feared nothing. Yet, at that time, I had no thought of fleeing. The truth is, the idea simply hadn't occurred to me. I felt bound by invisible fetters to the events on the parade ground. Running off would have required Herculean strength, not only because of the danger of being caught and shot but also because of a sense of shame. Flee? Before all those large families, whose burden of children left them no choice but to submit? No, in that situation, I lacked the strength to flee.

They took Blanca, the young daughter of a poor Jewish tailor. Blanca, with her blue eyes and dark tresses, whom I often had borne on my shoulders. I'd even carved wooden toys and played the guitar for her. Now I saw her led

off with a small, clinging group. Mute, I edged away from the tailor and his wife.

“You’ll follow us, right?” beseeched little Blanca. Her blue eyes cast a limpid glance at me.

I don’t ask anyone to pity me. I have no need for pity today. That was a long time ago, way back in 1942. All that is now cold and forgotten. New misfortunes and tragedies have pushed aside the memory of that Yom Kippur. But at the time, I fled to an obscure corner of the camp, lay face down and wept. Instead of searching for a gap in the fence, a path to the forest, I beat the evil earth with my fists. The image of little Blanca tormented me.

By the events occurring on the parade ground outside the camp’s headquarters, one could easily grasp what value life would hold in the death camps of Poland. Here on the clearing was the corridor leading to the camps. Here people lost their names for the first time. Their names, which they had borne all their lives, ceased to be a means of identification. They remained only as distinctive marks. Each person became merely one number among many, a part of the mass, a speck in the multitude. And the mass lost its character. Divided into barracks and train cars, I carried the first 50 names. Later, those names passed to the next 50 to arrive and then to those who came after them. After that, names became entirely superfluous and a person was just a number.

I returned to observe how those marked for transport took their leave. Arik Pulitzer’s mother walked with them. So did his blind father, who had taught school in Trenchin before losing his sight. He saw nothing but heard everything. And that was enough for him to imagine what was happening in the barracks and beyond, on the melancholy plaza. With them walked Arik, a boy of 17 whom the barracks residents had hidden until then. Arik was ill with a heart condition. Before bed each night, he would serenade his bunkmates, playing his harmonica and, at times, the violin. Fearing that his music would land him on a transport, his mother had asked him to stop playing. A boy who only made music and never worked? She was afraid they would seize him because he didn’t work, just played his instruments. But he stayed in the camp to the end, even after his parents were taken. He was killed later on, during the partisan revolt.

Literally by force, I managed to prevent Spitzer from leaping unwittingly to his death. Spitzer’s literary name later would be associated with the war, the subject of human degradation and the quest for fundamental answers to the terrible questions of life. Using a nom de plume, he gained fame writing of the peaks and depth of human acts. Some of that, perhaps most, he saw then, at the Novaki labor camp. Those memories later served in his work as the raw material for his artistic impulses. He continued to mine them until his death.

I first met him long before that, in his beloved Bratislava back in 1939. I was then a poor Jewish student wholly without means, working as a porter at the Schindler and Yadlin flourmill. Those were the best days of my

life. The sacks were damn heavy but they paid us well. We unloaded grain from the river barges, then at the mill loaded blends of flour for the Third Reich.

Leopold's mother was a delicate woman. His older brother, who was taking voice lessons, later made a career singing in the opera. His younger brother, whose vision was so poor that he had to drop out of school, seemed somewhat dull and backward to me. I would pass entire evenings with dear Leopold in his room on Wolonska Street. Surrounded by his books, we sat in the loft while he played Spanish, Italian, and French songs, as well as Jewish and Serbian tunes, on his mandolin. He had learned the Hebrew melodies as I had, in the local Zionist youth branch. He drew, he wrote poetry and he knew how to combine his stories and artwork into fascinating tales. I couldn't help loving such a talented lad. Leopold was my first Jewish friend. He was very well educated, knew far more than I and already had traveled extensively. He had seen France, and, with his bohemian friend, the poet Yaroslav Teshko, had even visited Algiers. I admired him very much at the time.

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, he was already a Communist sympathizer. Drafted into the Slovak army, he set to verse Moscow's stand against the Germans, to the effect that the city, which had given life to the Soviet people and now asked that the nation give its life for her, would never fall even if Germany destroyed her. Like one of those leaflets dropped from the air, his poem clandestinely passed among the Serbian troops. To this day, I remember its gripping lines. Leopold's mother and younger brother unexpectedly arrived at the camp when sector C opened. They raised rabbits at the camp for food, and only Leopold's mother could spin the angora pelts. A skilled artisan, she knew how to turn the spindle and make rabbit fur into strands of wool.

In the summer of 1942, Leopold sent me a letter that I still cherish. He was hiding from the roundups and the first transports in the mountains of eastern Slovakia. On learning that his mother and brother had been interned at the Novaki camp, he decided to become a camp resident with them. One had to pay a fee at the time for the right to become a prisoner at the Novaki camp. The price was paid in either cash or equipment. Leopold had nothing. Even so, I managed to smuggle him into Sector C. No one carefully checked the inventory or the list of prisoners. Leopold worked in the projects development office, drawing, painting signs, writing poems, and strumming his mandolin. Although lacking his older brother's talent, he sang for the camp inmates, and very nicely. He also received permission to show his sketches in the camp dining hall and give lectures on his trips to Europe and Algeria.

Leopold was born in Urba, a small town in eastern Slovakia, but chose to live in Bratislava. As much as he loved the city, he never missed an opportunity to visit his birthplace. Whenever he went back, he would see his old school friend Jan Mordoch, the famous artist. According to Leopold, Mordoch drew only flow petals, apples, and pitchers. Unlike many other artists, he never sold his soul to the fascist Slovak regime. When I met

Mordoch years later, he was very surprised that I knew so much about him. He knew a great many artists, poets, and authors whose names I had seen only in journals and the monthly magazines. Not all of them were Nazi collaborators, we realized that, but it was difficult to determine who had sold out and who hadn't. The anti-Semites knew how to disguise themselves when it suited their purposes.

Art and poetry, and the bond among poets who hadn't engaged in betrayal, fortified us in those dark, hard times. How fervently we identified with these lines written by one well-known poet:

"If all we have loved should die
Like the darling we've just buried,
An unknown void with a first name,
Sorrow will spread its over us..."

That indeed was our sad reality.

The transport list included Leopold's younger brother, who had been working at a dismantled camp in another sector. He labored hard, endlessly dragging heavy planks and iron railway ties. A malevolent guard, spotting him nod off from exhaustion, added his name to the transport list. Since his mother also was in the camp, her name, too, went on the list. He skipped over Leopold, whose name didn't appear on the master roster. I shuddered when I saw their names on the list. It was the only time I asked a favor of the commandant. I sought nothing for myself. I pleaded on behalf of Spitzer, his mother, and his younger brother. Spitzer was a gifted artist and a poetic genius, I told the commandant, a talented musician who must not be sent to Poland on the transport. I begged him to spare Leopold and his family.

The commandant, half-drunk, fixed me with a hollow look. "Yes, of course," he said. "And why don't you take all the Jews? I don't need them. I'll give them all to you. Take them." He suddenly started raging at me, threatening to add my name to the transport list with all the others. "Why? God? Why have you punished me with the Jews?" When he'd finished ranting and cursing me, he sank into gloom. Then he sprang up. In an entirely business-like tone, he told me that Spitzer could stay in the camp.

But Leopold wouldn't hear of it. Was he to stay while his mother and brother left? He would join them at once. I implored him. He would be of no use going with them. They would be separated in any event, and he would then be of no help to his mother. This was an unfair argument; true, but unfair. We knew the Germans ignored family ties at the death camps. They divided men from women and tore children from their mothers' arms. If he accompanied his mother on her final journey, I told him, he would have to watch her die in a cattle car packed with hopeless people. And he would have no chance to help her. I remembered my parents, who had been killed with a pang of conscience. It was a comfort to me that I, compelled to stay alive, hadn't been with them in their last, awful moments. Leopold, however, ignored me and still wanted to join his family. It was only by chance that the

convoy guards foiled his plan. I knew some of them. They were from my home province; some had gone to school with me. In secret, I asked them to keep Leopold off the transport, and they barred his way. The next day, after the transport had left, we met in the camp. Furious, he spat at me. Then, without a word, he turned on his heels and strode into his barrack.

Early in the morning, Novaki's deputy railway director rang up with an urgent call. The number of transfers on the transport was incomplete. Dozens of Jews were needed to fill the quota. The dreaded Guardists again stalked the barracks. Again, they drove out the wretched tenants, assembled them on that terrible plaza, and culled the required numbers. All the while, they beat the Jews, cursing, threatening, shoving. Yet the commandant, upon departure of the transport, lied in his cable regarding completion of the operation. During the final transports of late September 1942, he saved close to 200 Jews. Instead of 400 Jews, only slightly more than 200 left Novaki for annihilation on September 22. Leopold's family, though, wasn't among those saved. For many years, I felt on my face the spray of his silent, wrathful spit.

SCAR OF PRIDE

Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris

1.

Once, in the summer of 1946, I accompanied my father on a visit to Tel Aviv. Before the trip, Father, a proud, reserved man, was beside himself. Yehuda, his best friend, had arranged a meeting with Natan, the wonderful Tel Aviv poet, and the prospect gave my father no peace. He was tense and irritable and quick to lose his temper. When he passed his hand over my smooth boy's cheek, he wasn't aware of what he was touching, and when he stroked my unruly curls, he didn't notice what he was stroking.

In the Tel Aviv street, Yehuda was already waiting for us. Father put his arm round Yehuda's shoulder and Yehuda pulled Father close to him and they were as happy as if they hadn't met for a long time. Father sat me down at the table, and in childish contentment, I leaned my elbows on the sticky oilcloth. Flies circled sluggishly above puddles of spilt coffee and in the remains of sweet lemonade. Father and Yehuda found plenty to drowned talk about so I began to look around. A rain of overripe berries dropped out of the deep shade of the ficus trees, bursting on the table and under it, and spattering stains of inky juice all around.

The numbing summer heat engulfed me. The cars racing along the street at my back, the cries of hawkers, the bustle of passersby, the clatter of hooves as horses passed pulling their carts of kerosene or ice, all these assailed my ears like the clacking of castanets. And within the shimmering bubble of heat, the drone of the sultry street mingled with the staccato conversation of my father and Yehuda.

Of all the people who surrounded my father in the days of my childhood, Yehuda was the only one whom my father truly loved. Looking through the eyes of my childhood, misted over with the dried tears of memory, I can still see my father mellowing and changing whenever Yehuda entered our house. Despite the years I still recall how the familiar layers would fall away one by one, and how a different man would emerge from the sloughed-off skin, a man I didn't know at all. Father's hands, cracked and furrowed from work in the fields, work from which he allowed himself no respite, became as soft as a gentleman's. His tanned face paled like of those wild creatures, which change color according to their one surroundings. His abrupt, peremptory way of talking became gentle, uncertain. Suddenly he would turn from giving orders to asking questions. When Yehuda was around, Father would lose his decisiveness. To this day, I am still amazed, still waiting to get over my wonder.

Father greeted Yehuda who had quickly stood up as we arrived. I had the impression that he saw our approach, slow and ponderous, as that of country yokels. He waited until we came right up to the table diffident before embarking on the formalities of welcome. He signaled something to the waiter and immediately a number of large glasses were set on the table along

with a jug of cold water which tinkled like a bell. Father asked Yehuda for some soda water as well and Yehuda turned to the waiter in his gentle manner, "We ordered soda water too, didn't we?"

The wonderful way in which Yehuda half-acknowledged, half-ignored my presence filled me with astonishment even in those days of innocence. It was as if with one eye he saw all of me, my whole being with all its childish elements, while the other, half closed, saw nothing but my soul, in the fullness of time, would blossom into the essential me. He would blink and stare in my direction as if he were weighing up what he saw. What that one eye surely saw was nothing but a child, not really grown up enough to sit with the adults. On the other hand, no doubt, the other eye seemed to guess at a young man who would often search his memory in an attempt to recapture the long-lost years.

So Yehuda hopped around me, yet also hovered somewhere else nearby. When he shook my hand, it was as if it wasn't a real hand of flesh and blood that he held loosely, and when he patted me on the shoulder or tweaked my nose, it was as if he were tweaking a paper doll and not the real me. Then, embarrassed, I cringed from his caress, flinched from his touch, and retreated to the other end of the table. Deep inside me, some tune or other sang to itself in harmony, "The kids say that your father is strong and he can knock this little Yehuda down easily." When terrifically I had finally shrunk back into the furthest chair at the edge of the pavement, that childish song of vengeance was still singing in my heart, and my contempt for this milksop was clothing itself in clearer words and music. At that very moment this same Yehuda, with the absent, louder mindedness that goes with insight, turned to my father and warned him loudly, "That boy of yours had better be careful! He's too close to the street and the traffic is crazy."

But father merely waved his gentleman's hands and let them fall on the rough wooden table onto the stained oilcloth cover.

2 .

Yehuda, a small likeable chap with a genuine ability to bring kindred together, tries to make the waiting pass pleasantly. He regales my spirit father with the name of each passerby, and the vague image I recall with difficulty from my confused memory is of him dancing about, wiping the from his Khaki shirt, moving swiftly from chair to chair, shutting sweat there and back around Father and throwing backward glances towards the table as if he were being scolded. Father remains haughtily, almost aggressively silent and refuses to be. What has he got in common with these intellectuals, skipping mollified about in their open sandals? What are these actresses to him, prancing along the street in their skimpy dresses? What, for that matter, is Yehuda who knows each passerby by name and eagerly holds forth on the wonderful talents of them all? Father remains silent and waits in stubborn awe for this Tel Aviv poet to whom Yehuda has promised to introduce him.

None of Yehuda's offerings is acceptable, neither the brilliant notions that one nor the incisive opinions of the other; neither the astonishing of new book that left Yehuda amazed by the power of its language ("The language, do you hear?") nor the obscene gestures of the British occupying troops, nor even the gut-wrenching article that pits ("Pits you, the lofty moral principles of the workers' movement, against understand?") the fossilized, vacillating morality of the petite bourgeoisie. And what else can I say that I haven't yet say?

But Father refuses to soften. Haughty and silent, he sits there at the table, haughty enough, as Yehuda told me years later, to destroy himself, and he tightens his hand round the heavy water glass leaving Yehuda not the smallest crack to creep through.

Later on, when memories break free from the bounds of time, I try to disentangle scenes, words and sounds from the jumble, but I find it difficult to arrange the events in any sort of sequence. If only I could at least grasp the main points. If only I could be sure that the outlines had not blurred, but even of that I am not always certain. Natan suddenly appears, actually materializing out of the street, with a buoyant, lifting step. Father stands up immediately, tipping his chair in doing so. It tilts sideways and almost falls. The water glass slides along the tabletop. Father stands quite still and turns pale, paler than I ever remember. He foreword a little to shake hands, but Natan's left hand avoids Father's moves grasp. It is shaking uncontrollably as if his arm were not joined to his shoulder, as if he had a life of its own, as if its trembling could not be stilled. Natan is wearing Khaki trousers with a Khaki shirt worn outside to give the impression of suit. His eyes take us in at a glance, pass over the three of us, and move on to rake the street. It is almost as if he has been invited to meet someone else who hasn't turned up so he is forced to wait and sit with us for a while. Really, only for a minute; and if he has consented, it only out of respect for that fine fellow, Yehuda. These yokels from a distant Kibbutzim, an all-pervasive smell of brimstone clinging to them, are as excited as children in his presence. They actually force into the hand that doesn't tremble pieces of paper, extracts from earnest articles, and formless, so damp with excited sweat they're nearly colorless illegible. An, how tiresome is their love.

Yehuda capers around him. "Sit down, Natan. What would you like, Natan? Natan, I'd like you to meet my friend from the Kibbutz. My kindred soul, my twin spirit who works himself to death in the hot and steamy realm of manual And this little boy is his son who has accompanied his father to the labor city. They have taken the trouble to come all this way to meet you because I promised that you would find a moment for them. They admire you poetry and wanted to meet you so much; just a short meeting, nothing like 'the man who came to dinner'!"

A pause. The flow of memories is dammed for a second. Then, the flood gates open once again and the tide surges through. The tension breaks. We all laugh. People who have crowded round the table for a moment laugh with us. Suddenly I feel Natan's roving look rest on my face. I show my

young even teeth in a smile, trying to ingratiate myself with this strange man in whose presence Father has become so pale. Over the reaches of time, from the depth of that elusive image, I seem to remember that after that the conversation went more easily. There were even smiles. Natan constantly exchanged greetings with passerby. Some approached our table, snatched a few words, put in a quick plea, shook hands, smiled at Yehuda, waved a friendly finger in the direction of Natan's gleaming forehead or shot inquiring glance at Father's heavy form.

Yehuda now would not allow the conversation to flag. He tended it with words and revived it when it suddenly languished. From time to time he darted as severe look at Father as if urging him, "Come out of your shell, man. Don't be a bumpkin. You wanted to meet this fellow, didn't you? Wasn't it because of him that you bothered to come all the way from your distant Kibbutz with the boy, who only cramps your style anyway. Don't be boring, that 'holier-than-thou' face, as if someone had forced you to descend with your Olympian heights to consort with untouchables." Well, that's how Natan was.

The sleeves forever frayed at the elbows, the pullover unraveling, the compulsive untidiness. How thin he is close up. What fire flashes again and again from the depth of his eyes. Even in the white light of summer noon in Tel Aviv, his forehead shines, while from his wizened throat comes the cry of a whole people. Father sits drawn into as if remembering the words he wrote in our Kibbutz broad sheet not himself, long before, when Natan's new poems had first appeared. Father had been like possessed, stalking in his room like a caged tiger. He was unable to sleep because of what he called "an inner quaking." The poems had gripped constricted his heart. Or maybe that's not exactly how it was. Maybe I am and getting mixed up between my memories and what Father really wrote. The beautiful girl who used to recite in law, thrilling voice read Father's article together with the poems at one of our Friday evening meetings. Sitting there in the large brightly lit dining room, I felt a childish pride swelling within me. Such a proud reserved man; I felt that I was one with him, come what may. I would stand by him, and the two of us, shoulder to shoulder, would move forward together against the whole world.

Suddenly slightly hoarse voice breaks in, "Take care, boy! Don't lean so far back. You're going to fall right into the path of the traffic."

But Father was sunk deep in a vision he saw in his water glass and didn't hear what Natan had just said. He didn't notice the danger so close behind me and didn't even raise his head to look in my direction.

3.

Drunk or not, Natan was now in full spate. He supported his trembling left hand with his right. His glance darted from Yehuda to Father and back to the street, where it followed the young Jewish soldiers passing by, again and then returned to us. The man might have had two faces. All the

while, a dwarf by comparison, was trying in awed revenge to get a word in Yehuda, edgeways. Of course, it wasn't long before the subject of morality was forcibly dragged in, where it became confused with the state of the worker's movement. And the things Natan said when he was drunk! Even the "God of the elephants" was invoked to buttress his arguments. Truncated sentences trembled from his lips like the trembling of his hand. He would type his outpourings with his right hand while his treacheries left would poetic and shake until at last it would be cast to aside like some unless twitch object discarded on a rubbish heap.

In this business of poetry, Father was a fervent but taciturn admirer. Moreover, he respected Natan as he respected no other man. But when it came a question of the labor movement or the murder of the Jewish writers in to Russia or morality in general or the issue known as "The music of the mortars," Father had pronounced and trenchant opinions of his own. So while pallor heightened, signs began to appear of that anger, that tempestuous his fury that both Yehuda and I feared. Father's rage was finally ignited over nothing. He was on his feet, pacing up and down, head down as if about to butt, his tongue dry with anger. Yehuda was in such a state that he began to call upon the god of elephants to arise and take pity on them.

Had Mother been with us, she would probably have thrown herself at his feet, clung to the legs of the table and cried to them from the floor, "I'm moving until you two make it up." But Mother wasn't there and Yehuda, not squeezed between the two of them, didn't know which way to turn.

"OH! Mountain strikes mountain, peak clashes against peak." There was Yehuda, dancing around them, pulling at their sleeves, trying to calm them down. The table shook. Chairs went flying. Curious passerby began to gather and Yehuda suddenly stopped hopping about, folded his arms and, grinning in embarrassment, said to me, "Two toreros tearing at each other. Two bulls taking each other on. Ah, well, there's a time and place for everything. Toreador and bull butting each other!"

When Natan was drunk, he could say some very cruel things. "You had better go on, you lot, all of you, go straight to the youngsters. I call on our unspoiled youth, the ones you haven't yet managed to ruin. Let them turn their backs on you, I say. Or go appeal to the children, not yet stained by sin, as someone once did, long ago and far away. What do you mean by 'the music of the mortars', eh? What you know of the pen that was smashed in Moscow? Words you aren't capable of understanding! All you can do is chew around and then spew them out to defile the well you drink from!"

Father was in a ferment. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I understood the smallest movement of his face, the merest clenching of his fists. He was with fury. Never in all my life had I seen him so agitated. The table wrecked got in his way and he pushed it aside with a violent gesture. Roughly he kicked the chair backwards. The glass slide along the table and Yehuda was almost crushed under Father's great hand. Suddenly the two of them advanced towards me, boxing me in at the end of the table. In the heat of the argument, the shouted exchanges, the faces grimacing in sweaty rage, I sat

there at the apex of a converging triangle. I could smell their clothes. I could see the sweat seeping through their Khaki shirts. Then, without realizing it, I felt an overwhelming urge to press myself to my father's I leaned backwards slowly, unshackled by earthly laws of weight and shoulder. Gravity.

The Tel Aviv poet in his drunken anger hurled at Father the accusation that the worst of them all, the absolute bottom of the barrel, the amateur journalists in remote Kibbutzim whose writings reeked of were brimstone and who did more harm with their narrow-mindedness than fools did with their simplemindedness. Father was stunned. A furrow of pain appeared on his forehead and he began to writhe like a wounded animal. Yehuda, charming little Yehuda. That whole encounter was collapsing in chaos. Suddenly time stopped and froze. In a drunken haze, Natan cried out "The boy! He's going over! Look out! Oh, right under the cars!"

As if caught in a globe of light, within a bubble of time held still for a short moment, I see Yehuda running round the table and crying to Father, "Oh, the boy! Oh, my God! He's fallen."

The noise of a car swamped over me and I was engulfed by a great darkness. An overwhelming sense of distress that I hadn't risen to stand by my father, shoulder to shoulder, clutched at my heart. Afterwards an enveloping silence fell and I saw hurrying flecks of white, specks of brightness, flowing blood, for I had fallen backwards right under the wheels of a car.

4.

Two crossed stitches, clearly visible on my cheek today, are the only ones left. If you look closely though, you will see faint signs of the others. If you were to draw a line joining all the stitches, you would trace a diagonal scar running the length of my right cheek from the chin to a light path between temple and eye. Whenever I am carried away by a fit of temper, the scar takes on its original redness. If I run my finger along it to try and soothe the smarting, I can see once more three heads bending over. And yet I find it hard to remember. Who exactly was leaning over me? Who was talking? How did the quarrel end? And who was it who whispered above my bandaged face, "This red scar had such a cruel birth."

Then there were the who teased in the Kibbutz children's house, "Scarface! Scarface!" And that reserved man, my father, standing by me when I came to. And the flickering memories of the hospital.

Whenever I make a serious effort to piece together the shards of memory, I am confronted by a jumbled mass of veiled moments, time snatched away, never to return. What happened when I fell? Was I run over and was that how I acquired this scar of pride? And then, after I had been extricated from between the cars and carried off in my father's arms, and after Yehuda had summoned help, and after Natan had stood alone in the confusion wondering why he had argued so wickedly in the presence of a child and the very edge of a menacing street, after all this and everything else

that followed, I had to undergo the ordeal of facing my mother's searching gaze, still answering all her questions and trying to restore some kind of order to my memory of the muddled events.

Lying there convalescing in my white bed, I had go to over and over the whole affair from very beginning. How could I have deserted my father in the cruel argument with Natan? What had happened to those vows about "Shoulder to shoulder?" and "Father and me against the whole world" and "We shall never be defeated if we stand together"? How is it that they came to nothing and I kept none of them? What about that nasty habit my mother was always scolding me for, of tilting my chair backwards till you could hear the crack of rusty screw and split wood?

How could I have left Father complaining alone between Yehuda prancing about and Natan looking way beyond him? Why I jump to the front of the table, mountain clashing with mountain, didn't toreador butting against bull? Then when I feel the inner compulsion to pour out my words, I sit up straight in bed, the white bedclothes slide off me and the scar that cuts diagonally across my face leaps out. Against my pure father I set that drunken poet. I have no weapon to attack him with. Only my beating heart, words that will stay with me all my life, memories that will never fade. The sight of my father standing downcast in the face of the gross drunken attacks of the Tel Aviv poet fills me with a depressing sense of helplessness at not being able to do anything for him, and leaves a weight my heart over the long years. The pain slices through my cheek and on catches my heart because I did not do what I should have done such as biting through his Khaki trousers like a puppy gone berserk. Don't little ones have their own ways of fighting? Teeth, weak fingernails, childish screams, something? Sitting there in bed I read again those simple artless words that Father had written in our modest Kibbutz paper. I pored over them for a long time. They contained a kind of sad beauty that was not easy to understand. Was it really so strange that Natan, hasty, haunted by drink, did not have the eye to perceive nor the heart to care for them?

Through the shimmering bubbles of time, I go over the few lines again. "The throat of a whole people; the cut throat of a whole people bleeds from the throat of the poet. Drops of anguish and blood." "Mountain against mountain!" Yehuda's voice roars in my ears. A sea of sparks flies up; the smell of scorching. The memory of one of those three sitting round a cafe table in that Tel Aviv street in the summer of the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-six, in the shade of those dark ficus tree, is branded into me for all the days of my life, and his memory goes with me as I am gathered up from between the screaming brakes and burning tires, from the melting asphalt of the steaming midday street.

So when father, as always, unconsciously passes his large hand over my healed up scar of pride, and I, as always, take countless oaths of loyalty, time stands still in its cycle and I kook within, deep within its secret depth that have long since faded away, and through my childhood eyes I see how this reserved man who may not even have wanted to meet that wonderful

poet Natan, turns pale with pride. On the table between them pride lies dishonored, while the heart of a child bleeds. Then at the far end of the table, at the menacing edge of the street, the little boy defies the laws of physics. Leaning back on the chair until the bolts snap, he does the only remaining thing and throws himself into the path of the traffic.

The Memory of Helicopters **Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks**

One morning late in 1984, I drove around Mt. Carmel through lower Haifa to meet a convoy for a long tour of reserve duty in South Lebanon. The sky was blue, the sea green, and the mountain crags gray. The houses of Haifa gleamed in their whiteness while the late summer flowers made borders of intense colors along the roads. It was impossible to believe a war was going on somewhere. A small cruel war raging not far from the fragrant Carmel. Close by, across the gorgeous Bay of Acre, below the Sulam-Tyre ridge shimmering on the horizon.

Like a band of messengers bearing fateful news, a flock of pelicans flew past the lighthouse at Stella Maris. The flapping of their wings was slow and heavy in the still, thick air. Led northward by their trailblazer, the birds flew tirelessly in V-formation towards their destination. As I drove beneath the flock of pelicans, I felt myself one of them. I, too, was the bearer of evil news. Perhaps I, too, was a pelican, forced by injured wings to race on the roads below in hope of keeping up with them. Although the roof of my car sometimes hid the pelicans from me, I knew that I was flying with them, soaring as they did in a bubble of warm air. I am both the bearer and receiver of tidings. Like them, I look down on anything approaching. In an instant, I can even see my own fate, just as the poet succinctly put it:

“Two hundred pelicans fly
Over the Stella Maris lighthouse,
Slowly beating their wings in the day’s thick air.”

Suddenly, a streaking, shrieking helicopter roared down out of the deep blue summer sky. Cruelly, savagely, heedless of anything, it tore through the flock of pelicans. The helicopter came from the north, its metal belly loaded with casualties from Lebanon, wounded men facing imminent death, none of them sure he would live another hour or survive the operating table.

Just as in those distant verses, poems that linger like refugees from other, faraway wars. Poems of lamentation borne within us since we heard them as children many years before. Melancholy poems whose lines long ago sealed a young soldier’s fate. This is the poem’s hero and its *raison d’être*. The poet already knows the bitter news. The musicians who play the song also know it. Those who hear it by campfire around the country know it, too. All of them know what he still does not: that his fate has been determined. Only he alone still stands in the poem, a living, innocent, unblemished lad who knows nothing of what the far-seeing observe and proclaim. Nor can he guess what the bearers of ill news see, the soaring flock of pelicans above, or what the anonymous poet already suspects at the end of the poem:

“Suddenly, their line is broken.
The terrifying, whirling helicopter
Scatters their feathers to the winds.”

On my way to the bus parking lot bustling with reserve troops at the battalion departure point, with the helicopter still in view and the swirling pelican feathers slowly floating earthward around me, I recalled something a friend had told me some years earlier. He was studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem at the time, during the War of Attrition of 1968-1970. His small apartment on the fringe of Givat-Ram student dormitories seemed to be an indispensable landmark for helicopters ferrying casualties from the Jordan Valley. They would burst across the Jordan, the barrier between us, and the search operations in the hostile Samarian desert. Day and night, during and after classes, the helicopters zoomed over his apartment, rattling windows and jolting the ever-compassionate hearts of those souls rushing to the emergency landing pads at the huge Hadassah Hospital in Ein-Kerem.

The thunder of helicopters passing over the Givat-Ram campus greatly disturbed him. Some days, he resolved to quit his studies in Jerusalem and go back down to the coastal plain where no such frightful racket agitated normal life. There, one could live totally oblivious to the brutal War of Attrition being fought on the borders. One could pray there without needing to look up at a helicopter or to wonder, heart in moth, whether a dear friend lay among the airborne casualties.

“In fear of the whirling helicopter, desperately, frantically, seeking the bright center of the square, the compact landing zone at “Rambam” Hospital on the sea...”

I had served in Lebanon. I'd seen the things that soldiers see in and after war. I'd escorted endless convoys around the clock across the wicked roads of southern Lebanon. I'd certainly had the same feelings felt by every previous convoy escort. And yet, I couldn't shake off the memory of those disparate helicopters picking a path like terrified blind men, groping in panic for a route to the tightly-drawn landing zone outside Rambam Hospital, where low summer waves serenely rolled in over the deep blue sea. The memory of those helicopters suddenly smashing into the exquisitely shaped arrowhead of the roaming pelicans, over the Stella Maris lighthouse and the green Carmel ridge, just won't leave me. It doesn't want to be forgotten.

Like my friend the student in Jerusalem, I have days when I consider where I can flee to hide from that terrible sound, the clatter of helicopters, dogging me wherever I go. It's as though the pilots on those casualty-laden helicopters need every house in the country as a landmark, as though everyone in Israel must skip a heart beat as they pass overhead like rumbling birds in flight scattering feathers of terror in every direction.

I remember them now, this long and glorious spring of 1986. I feel again the pain that beset me back then, during the War of Attrition. Just as in the heartfelt lines I suddenly heard late in 1984 as I drove beneath the dense

flock of pelicans while hurrying to the departure point for my reserve duty in Lebanon.

It's unbelievable, simply unbelievable—such a short time ago. Right here, under the glowing, orange wind gauge fluttering on the shore to mark the center of the bright square, the compact helicopter landing pad. It suddenly seems to me that all my life has been squeezed into this landing zone. All my experiences are folded in it between one war and another. There, on the emergency landing zone across from the special doors quickly opening, among the stretcher bearers running like madmen for the ER entrance. Yes, right here: the major medical center of the north known as Rambam, below the Carmel ridge at the water's edge. Haifa, Israel, and never-ending war. Unbelievable, I say to myself, as though I were a gliding pelican, a big, roving bird passing over agonizing sights en route to its destination.

Translator's note: Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, named after Rabbi Moses Ben Maimonides, a medieval scholar known as the "Rambam," receives army casualties in the north of Israel.

Jewish Thought

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

A.

I met Tzila Biran, a young woman from one of the large northern kibbutz, at one of Professor Rosenfeld's lectures. I was late because the lecture was not in its usual place. Professor Rosenfeld drew such a large crowd of young people that the small classrooms in the liberal arts building could not hold them all, so the professor moved from one large, vacant hall to another. Though it was impossible to know where his talks would be given, his audience loyally followed. When I arrived, the students were pilfering chairs from the next rooms. The audience overflowed out the door into the corridor. I pulled up a chair and joined those at the front to catch a few of the professor's pearls of wisdom. Tzila came in and sat beside me. I saw at once that she was an attentive and very diligent student.

The professor spoke of the teachings of Rabbi Soleveitchik who, from his home across the sea in New York, was carrying on, in a manner of speaking, the tradition of his Lithuanian forefathers. Even as he offered a nod of respect to the free thinkers, he intended his remarks as well for his followers living in Zion. Her book open before her, Tzila closely followed his discourse. Each time he quoted a passage from his own copy, she moved her lips in unison. I noticed that she had a heavy, soiled cloth book bag and wondered if she came to Jerusalem for a day or two as students from remote kibbutz settlements often did. Her hands were those of a laboring woman, and I detected the hint of a fine, light mustache above her lip. She was seated so near me that I heard her every movement and observed her every motion, however slight. When I allowed myself this small liberty, I could also draw into my lungs the scents of her body and her clothes, and even of the bag set on the floor by her feet.

At the end of each lecture, I would meet some friends in the building's little cafeteria. Over cups of coffee and dry crackers, we mercilessly dissected the presentation, Rabbi Soleveitchik and his students. We held in high esteem only Professor Rosenfeld and the lovely, charming girls squeezing their bodies between the cafeteria's closely spaced tables. By the time I slipped my volume into my black book bag and straightened up to see who and what was around me, Tzila was almost out the far exit. Her movements were so quiet, and her gait so stealthy, that I never heard her gather up her papers, move her chair and sling the heavy cloth bag over her back. From behind, her walk seemed somewhat clumsy and her blouse, which fell a bit short, flapped loose at her sides. A sudden and inexplicable wave of affection for her swelled within me.

Long after she disappeared up the stairs, I saw her lips echoing the book open before her. I learned my lesson and, the week after that, arrived early at the liberal arts building. I then had plenty of time both to ascertain

exactly where Professor Rosenfeld's lecture would be held and to plan how I would meet Tzila as she descended the maze of stairs. I already knew her name, which was stitched in violet thread on her bag, and even the northern kibbutz where she lived, whose delivery stamp I had glimpsed when I peeked at her open book. All that, however, merely whetted my curiosity. I saw before me a young woman who had long since outgrown her youth. She surely was a teacher of Jewish thought pursuing advanced studies on sabbatical, taking the trouble to recharge batteries drained by hostile, apathetic classes who shuddered at the very term "Jewish thought."

Again the hour grew late, but still Tzila had not arrived. The professor began his lecture and the usual spectacle unfolded before us. From rooms close by, some of his young, faithful students dragged chairs into the corridor so that, god forbid, torah-lovers coming from afar would not lack a seat. I had already made a number of trips to the water cooler and poked my nose into the filthy men's room again and again, read with boredom each plate on the doors up and down the hall and even stood at the cluttered notice board to discover how nerve-racking and stressful life was for young students. Every inch of the board was plastered with notes seeking or offering tiny rooms in old apartments, notices of mental health self-help courses and countless invitations to parties, tennis matches and special religious services.

She arrived at last. From a distance, I recognized her awkward limp caused by the weight of her bag. I tarried just long enough for her to grab a chair and join the river of students overflowing its banks. Then I too went forward, took a chair and pressed behind her so close that I could stick out my tongue and lick the hair on the nape of her neck. My eye lingered as she set out her books, drew forth the wide sheet of paper on which she liked to scribble and ran her tongue over the spot on her upper lip where the faint line of fuzz sprouted. I saw next how she gave her undivided attention to the professor's remarks. She bobbed her head in agreement at the proper times and silently mouthed every question he permitted. When he asked for volunteers to read aloud selections from Rabbi Soleveitchik's works, I saw her legs tense to rise, but others in the hall were faster. The professor could not see how ready she was, how responsive to his every whim.

At the end of the lecture, I was quick to follow her. I carefully climbed the stairs after her and out of the liberal arts building into the darkness falling on the campus. I trailed her slowly, matching my pace to hers, until she passed through the university's gate and walked up the busy street to the central bus station. Unbelievable, I said to myself, she's not staying in the city. I sensed in her a stubborn determination. She went ahead resolutely and without stopping. Someone is waiting for her on the kibbutz way up north. Someone there needs her very much. I stood by the ticket windows until I saw her pick up her book bag and get on the last bus to Haifa.

B.

Tzila Biran spotted me another time as I walked arm in arm with a friend through the rented booths of the book fair. “Your wife is a very beautiful woman,” she said, lowering her voice, after one of the lectures. I laughed so hard that she drew back her chair.”

“That wasn’t not my wife,” I said. “She’s a friend who works as an editor at one of the publishing houses.”

“It’s not important,” she replied. “Please forgive my mistake.”

From what she had said that, I gleaned that if I had any romantic intentions towards her, I had better keep them to myself. I suddenly remembered seeing a young woman who resembled her at the book fair. She had sat by one of the displays studying a catalogue and never looked up at the stream of passersby. My friend had asked me about a book and I had been distracted from Tzila’s stooping figure.

Only later did I recall the hair on her nape so familiar to me and the prim collar of her blouse. I had come to know them very well from my observations during the weekly lectures. Had my inattention offended her?

I invited her that night to relax with our little circle of barbed wits after the professor finished his lesson. She shouldered her heavy cloth bag and, without saying either yes or no, started in her camel-like gait towards the stairs. I did not allow her to escape. I sprang forward, blocked her way on the stairs and said, “Come on, Tzila, have coffee with us in the cafeteria. You won’t be sorry.” She shook her head no, but I had the feeling that she did not want me to let her go and dragged her down to the next floor, where the group had already taken seats at our little table. They pulled up extra chairs when we arrived and made room for us.

“Sit down, sit down. After the distilled wisdom of Professor Rosenfeld, everyone needs to unwind. Don’t be like all those kibbutzniks always hurrying for the last bus with a glance at their watches and apologizing that they haven’t the time to stay.”

Tongues wagged around the table about Rabbi Soleveitchik and his eclectic rabbinical language. On the other hand, some commended him for distinguishing the essential from the trivial. For some reason, the group believed that if he were in Jerusalem, he would lead the ultra-Orthodox camp against the hotheads of “Gush Emunim.”

Tzila suddenly spoke up. Flushing all over, she gave us a disjointed account of the time she had seen sleeping bags rolled up at one a yeshiva she had visited. In all innocence, she asked the rabbi’s wife, “What are all the sleeping bags for?”

“What, don’t you know?” the rebbetzin scolded her. “We leave each Friday night to sleep at a new settlement.”

My ever-rowdy companions remained silent and let her finish the story without interruption. “This dark fanaticism,” said someone in the stillness that prevailed around the table, “will someday lead us to tragedy and

drown us in rivers and rivers of blood. The sleeping bags are only new symbols for an old world of sanctified greed.”

I fixed my gaze on her. She suddenly appeared so warm that my hand, as if of its own, nearly reached out to cradle her neck. Her eyes seemed out of focus and she did not know which way to turn her fevered face. One could see that she had been careless in choosing her clothes, which were in disarray. She bent to sip her coffee as though unaware of the others around her and the reviving noise. Our sharp tongues ranged over every subject within reach, lazy teachers, and dull students and Professor Rosenfeld’s blind admirers. Some other day, I would gladly have made myself a part of the wicked festivity raging around the table, but Tzila Biran’s mute threw a damper over me. I could not forget that it was I who had persuaded her to break her settled routine, to deviate just once from her wild dash to the bus station.

When she stood up, so did I, and when she turned towards the broad stairs leading to the spacious grounds above, I turned after her. Where was it she was in such a hurry to go after the lectures? “Why haven’t you taken a room in the dormitories or near the university?” I asked her, and added, “Perhaps I can help you in some way.”

“No thank you,” Tzila answered. “I don’t need any help. And please don’t go to any trouble. Anyway, I can’t stay in the city.”

“Are you going back to your kibbutz in the north? What time do you get home? And how do you travel at night? Alone all the way every week? Now that’s really crazy.”

“I haven’t any choice,” Tzila replied. “I have a little girl who waits up for me at home every night.”

“But you have a husband and parents and friends,” I said. “You can make arrangements. I know kibbutz life.”

She blushed in the dark, and I could feel the color jetting to the base of her neck. After a brief silence, she said, “No, that is impossible. I live alone with my child, and I have to get back.”

I accompanied her, saying nothing, to the central station. I began to suspect that she was concealing something in her life from me. I suddenly felt sorry for the young woman beside me. I wanted to switch book bags, so that I would carry her heavy bag while she took mine, but she refused. If I could have thought of some idea that would relieve her depressing silence or ease her camel-like gait, I would generously have offered it, but nothing that would lift her spirits ever came to mind.

The same old story, I thought to myself. Callow youths rashly married, pregnant too soon, the baby practically a surprise and then the father ups and leaves. That’s not how he saw his life, perishing among heaps of notebooks and the gripes of a weary teacher. And then again, maybe not.

Perhaps hers was one of the heart-wrenching legacies of the war. A wonderful marriage, a brief, glorious summer full of promise and happiness, then her young man called down that autumn to the Suez Canal, never to return. You could read sad stories like that ad nauseam in the pages of the

weekly supplements. But I did not permit myself to ask her any personal questions.

Before she boarded the bus, I did ask how she had liked our little coffee klatch in the cafeteria. She smiled at me and tucked in the wayward tails of her blouse. "If you did, make it a habit with us. It's a weekly meeting. We'll start with coffee with the gang and see how it goes." She smiled again and propped up her cloth bag so she could lean against it during the long ride.

I told her I had a small room among the dormitories in Jerusalem. If she preferred that to the table in the cafeteria, we could drop by my lodgings. "Just ring twice."

Beads of perspiration began to glisten through the fine, light strands of youthful peach fuzz on her upper lip. As the bus pulled way, I slowly left the station, my heart heavy with the words I had failed to speak.

C.

One day, Professor Rosenfeld assembled the faithful after the completion of his lecture and invited them to his home. I turned to Tzila and asked if she would go with me.

"What for?" she asked. "What's so special about his house?"

"It's some family celebration, I'm sure," I answered. "But the highlight comes later when the professor offers personal comments, straight from the heart, to his favorite students. Come on, we'll tag along with them one time. You'll see, it'll be interesting."

She hemmed and hawed but I insisted. "And if it gets late and you can't make it home tonight, I'll take care of you," I said. "I'd be happy to share my room in the dormitories with you." She still hesitated. Her hands fiddled with the notebooks and texts in the bag at her feet. Finally, she looked at me and the lecture hall growing empty.

"Why don't we leave our book bags at the coat racks," I suggested, "to take a load off our feet?" But Tzila would not part from her bag and slung it over her shoulder. I had to clutch my black book bag and hurry after her for fear that she would lose her nerve somewhere on the stairs and resume her usual route to the bus station.

She did not change her mind. We walked side-by-side down the steep short-cut to the eastern gate and sailed through a dense thicket fragrant with the fresh smell of pine needles. The white rock came into view occasionally. Tzila nearly tripped over it and when I caught her fall, she willingly held on. We slowly descended to the exit in the wadi. She suddenly was moved to tell me of a sweet gesture made by her students, who knew of the long hours she spent traveling south on the suffocating bus to Jerusalem and back. Some days before, two girls had risen at the end of a routine lesson, stammered something about the need to renew one's zeal and drive, and presented her a huge thermos. She had been touched. It was a gift from the whole class, the girls said, when she tried to thank them, even those students who could barely tolerate Jewish thought.

“It was as though they knew how every penny I save goes to building a basic library in Judaism, and how thirsty I get on these insane bus rides.”

Many guests had already gathered at the professor’s house. The party was in full swing. He had put on a wholly different face and appeared before his faithful as a genial family man, befriending strangers and introducing outsiders into the infectious good cheer of his home. After announcing the family celebration and raising his glass for a brief toast, he turned to the real business at hand.

“The time has come,” the professor began, “for us to start sharing some of the riches we have stored up over the school year. There are others less fortunate than we, even some who know none of the joy of Judaism and the crowning glories of Israel. He who is wealthy,” like the professor and his faithful students, “must know that the essence of all learning is simply this: give of yourself to others.”

He had already consulted a select inner circle of confidants to whom he had presented a plan we would surely approve. There was no better time to reveal its main points, that we might begin our sacred task at last.

Tzila and I sat by the door somewhat apart from the crowd at the professor’s feet. Most of them were excitable youths. Though they crouched on the floor under his desk, not much was required to inflame their passion. At once, they began drafting “working papers” and formulating proposals. The professor turned the reigns of the meeting over to one of his students while he mingled with his darlings. The enthusiastic young students talked about soldiers they had met stationed at outposts in the Jordan Valley, withered not by the heat of the sun but by a void in their hearts. How those people yearned, openly or not, for a sweet drop of welcoming the Jewish Sabbath, for the warmth and beauty bestowed by the forgotten customs of our fathers. It was not only soldiers who hungered for our message. There were also youths in the thousands, in the towns springing up around Jerusalem, who were just waiting for the good tidings about to gush from this room. We should all know that this nation had a great thirst for Judaism. Here we were, shut up in lecture halls, wasting our nights on pointless paperwork in libraries, while outside real life hummed, fates were fixed and events decreed. Where were we? What was our contribution? Would we squander this historic golden moment?

I saw where his remarks were leading and whispered to Tzila that we were no longer needed here. We could not plunge into the valley to canvass the outposts or depart for the youth recreation centers in the villages nearby to prepare the boys for their bar mitzvah ceremonies. We two, who had come a long way to draw some warmth from Professor Rosenfeld’s light, were exempt from the holy crusade on which his students were embarking.

We rose unobtrusively, slipped through the youths who packed the doorway and even sat on the stoop outside, and retreated to the peace of the street. I invited Tzila to my room in the dormitories. So my offer would seem honorable and upright, I added that the dorm had a well-stocked library on

the second floor, a small self-service snack bar, and even a humble synagogue where the students themselves conducted services.

Tzila was quite hungry, so we took seats at the snack bar. The time had long since come and gone for her usual trip home, but I did not dare to ask any questions. I was afraid she would rise and leave, and this opportune moment, which had unexpectedly presented itself to me, would pass in vain. While I ordered whatever she wanted, I told her that she could ask me a little about myself. I was trying to strike up a conversation, dispel some of our uneasiness. She inquired about my family, my wife, and children, and I noticed that she was listening intently to my perfunctory replies. Out of the blue, she asked where I had been during the last war. I warned her that that was a dangerous question. I had so much to say, my remarks would be more numerous than the sands of the sea and seven nights would not suffice to hear even a small portion of them. Still, since she had asked, I told her something of the interminable months I had lived through and gave her the merest taste of my innermost thoughts about the war.

She listened, absorbed, to my account. Suddenly, she blushed from her throat to the V-neck of her blouse. She turned red so quickly that I wanted to lay my open hand over the blotch, as if I had been exposed to the forbidden sight of her flesh stripped naked before me. Averting her eyes, she asked if I had returned whole from the war, mentally sound, that is. Had I not abhorred my wife when I came back? Had I not detested my children? Had not our room on the kibbutz felt like a cage? And the grounds of the commune, the soil and the lawns, had they not repulsed me each time I trod them?

D.

I hoisted her heavy book bag for the ascent to my room on the second floor. "Here's the public phone, do you see it? And here to the right is the synagogue. At the top of the stairs is the roof, a huge, cracked spread of tar and plaster and pigeon droppings. Although the girls complain that it's unpleasant to sunbathe up there in the mess, it does afford a wonderful view of the mountains south of the city, Mt. Gila, the monastery below it and Bethlehem in the distance. No, wait a minute," I told Tzila. "Take a seat in this old armchair and I'll put some tea on to boil. You see, the room may be small but it has everything, a sink, a toilet, and an electric kettle. I don't have to run for the bus at night like a madman. Now sit down and tell me everything, how he went off to war and what happened to him before he came back. I'm beginning to understand some things for myself, like your Jewish studies and why you have to travel while your daughter stays home alone."

As I poured the tea, I had the urge to place my rough palm on her crimson throat and bosom, but she looked at me with those shortsighted eyes of hers and licked drops of sweat off her lip. She seemed so dependent on me that I knew I could not so much as lay a finger on her. She choked on her

words and it was unclear to me whether she really wanted to tell me of her life or the comforting conditions I had forced on her had put her in the mood. Professor Rosenfeld's name had come to her attention at just the right time, when the routine of her life was broken. In the beginning, there were only the trips with her husband to the hospital in Haifa for extended treatment following his return from the war. There had been consultations, discussions and sleepless nights, after which the kibbutz advised her to leave and go her own way so she might rebuild what the war had destroyed. But life is not so simple.

I sat beside her, sipping tea and urging her to drink with me. I sensed things that she had not spoken. He had returned from the war crippled in spirit. Long days and nights of semi-consciousness and then, when he came to, the refusal to recognize Tzila as his wife. He fell on her and asked, what she was doing in his room, what had she to do with him and the little girl? It was interesting that he had known the girl at once and embraced her without reservation. He had even told Tzila that she was not needed, he could take care of the child by himself. In the weeks after that, however, he went into decline, sinking into a deep sleep in which he forgot all his obligations and from which he had no desire to wake. Then came more trips and doctors' visits. Finally, he abandoned their room hoping to settle himself into the home of his attending physician. With difficulty, the doctor convinced him to leave her house, but he would not return home to his ruined family.

Sometimes, in a rare period of sanity, he suggested that they amicably separate and even encouraged her to make a new life for herself.

She wept as she spoke. Her tears mingled with the tea in her cup. There was nothing I could do to stem the flow but put some paper towlettes near her. Beyond the room's thin walls, young students working off excess energy raised a ruckus in the dorm. Loud music blared through the cracks and the sound of cushions thrown at the furniture thudded from their rooms. Soon they would begin to jump around and race like the devil through the hall shrieking with abandon. I was all too familiar with my neighbors' habits. I had once made the naïve mistake of going out to calm them down. I had lost my breath instead as a captive impressed into their hallway sprints.

One incident more than anything else had cut her to the quick and inflicted an unhealable wound. Others had seen him wandering one night across the lawn, lugging bedding to the room of a good friend of hers. That insult had finally made up her mind. Never mind that he left for war hale and hearty and came home from the Suez Canal a broken shell of a man. Never mind that a doctor had tended him day and night, and that he had made promises and sworn to their daughter oaths he never kept. But to pick himself up after all that and slink into that woman's room, on the other side of a patch every damn inch of which was observed by a thousand eyes, that was more than she could bear. It was then, when she went to pieces and even was neglecting her beloved students, that she proposed continuing her education.

She would have been required to do so anyway and, if not for the war, which delayed her schedule, certainly would already have begun her leave.

Friends recommended the professor in Jerusalem who offered balm for afflicted souls and she resolved to go despite all the hardships, the rushing and the fatigue, and the uncomprehending looks of her students.

So, I told myself, it is not Rabbi Soleveitchik's commentary in progress, or age-old Jewish values miraculously transplanted to modern society, or the light burning unseen within us, or the wisdom of our fathers slumbering deep in our souls, or even the tireless efforts of Professor Rosenfeld to kindle the sparks dormant in us all.

It was a only matter of a small, frail woman, a stricken daughter and a man who, though sound of body when he returned from the Suez Canal, brought tragedy down on the three of them. I was no great sage. What had I done for her? Occasionally whispered jokes in her ear during the lectures? Dragged her to my circle of friends in the basement cafeteria? Mysteriously trailed her in the dark of the stairs to see what course she was taking and whether there was any chance I could deflect her to my room in the dorms? And if I had done one thing or another for her, I also, most unfairly, had demanded much more from her in exchange.

It was purely by chance that matters had turned out one way and not another. It was luck that she was a woman driven by doubts and I too hesitant to take risks. Had we been different people, I would long since have insinuated myself into her mixed-up life, immediately after our encounter at the book fair or perhaps even earlier than that.

I looked at Tzila seated in my room and saw before my eyes another woman blooming through the image of neglect I knew. Who cared about the flapping tails of her blouse and her pants unstitching at the seams, or the uncombed hair on her neck and her perpetually disheveled collar, or the soft, blond down above her lips?

How deceptive one's eyes are. Nor can one rely too much on the murmurs of the heart. I had pushed my chair against hers so I might lean close and sniff the scent of her body, I had blocked her path on the stairs and forced her to descend with me to the cafeteria, and yet I had failed to see from the start what I had to see. If she had not blushed so startlingly that my hand had sought to reach forward and clothe the flushing nakedness suddenly exposed, perhaps I would never have noticed her. And she would have been invisible among the crowd of students devoted to the professor who taught Jewish thought in Jerusalem.

The Night of the Scorpions

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

Some months ago, an oppressive Hamsin—a desert wind—swept over the country. The heat suffocated chickens in their coops, trees withered and dropped their ripe fruits in the orchards. In the heat trapped in the house, I had trouble falling asleep at night. Mosquitoes swarmed around the bed; strange insects rustled on the floor. It seemed as if even the jays couldn't fall into that peculiar slumber that birds sleep.

I grabbed a damp towel, went out to the porch, and lay down in the rope hammock that my neighbor had strung between the cypress trees. The grass glowed and thick warm air wafted from deep within the bowels of the gardens. At the edge of my field of vision, just before it was blocked by the right wall of the porch, the sloping roofs were swallowed up in the wind's clear skies. Was there a full moon, or only a faint silvery crescent shining through the shimmering haze? What were those lights flickering in the gloom? And what was that dull rumbling sound growling from the shrouded orange groves?

I rocked slowly in the hammock. From far off in the dark rose the woeful lowing of penned cattle. I fled the agonies of insomnia and gave myself entirely to the hammock's sway, yielding myself so completely that I forgot where I was. The Hamsin wrapped me in its fever and I was borne aloft on the wings of misty memories to another parched night that I had endured long ago.

I could hardly believe how the hammock had transported me through the cracks of time. But I was suddenly free of the stifling Hamsin. Memory came back, sharp and clear, and I saw again the Night of the Scorpions as though it had happened under the hammock the night before.

On one such Hamsin night between the holidays of Passover and Shavu'ot, the earth's vermin rose up against a tired company of soldiers on the bright stone slopes of the mountains of Samaria. They rebelled with such fury that they nearly conquered the troops. A nice beginning, I thought, sinking into the rhythms of memory, and continuing to wrestle with the legacy of that Hamsin night.

In the blazing hot morning, when the exhausted men refused to go down to the range, I came out of the isolated command officer's tent and slowly went to the small compound facing the camp kitchen. A commotion had drawn me. The company commander, who had gone to brigade headquarters to get final orders for the last drill, was absent. His likable but bumbling deputy had no control over the agitated company. The dangerous drill was driving all the men crazy. The Minister of Defense himself was coming to observe the men who had volunteered to put on their gear and fire a new model machine gun. For days, a tractor had ceaselessly churned up dust and gyrated below the slopes strewn with scorched rocks. The landing pad for the helicopter carrying the VIPs and top officers was meticulously

straightened and leveled. The entire company groaned with an eerie fear even though every raw recruit knows that the Minister of Defense can't do anything to him.

Wan, ashen-faced, and drenched in sweat, his clothes gray and coated with dust, the Minister of Defense emerged dazed from the chopper's door. The unit's proud young officers carried him in their strong hands straight to the firing range to observe the last firing exercise, for which the company had worked non-stop for more than two weeks. His ears were deafened by the sudden blazing bursts of the new machine gun, his eyes blinded by the glint of flashing map cases. He watched in astonishment as the thrown hand grenades blossomed into mushrooms of smoke. A touch of nausea gripped him and a young officer was dispatched to bring him a bottle of cola. How was it that he had ended up in this burning desert? Why hadn't he managed to send one of his adjutants? And why had he allowed the Prime Minister, who was always occupied with urgent affairs, to force this unnecessary trip on him?

Far to the southeast in the broiling sun's hazy halo, I could see bewitching oases quivering in the incandescent air: lofty palm trees; gushing, refreshing streams; and deep shade beneath falling water. Jordan-Jericho on the border of the eastern sector. You couldn't shoot to the east of that, where camps of black tents were scattered on the seared slopes and tethered livestock bleated and moored at night.

The unexpected confusion flustered our good-natured deputy CO. He wasn't used to such important guests. He cursed the stinking day and the CO's drawn-out trip and the terrible Hamsin, which had not consulted the commander's office up in the hills but instead had fallen with all its wrath on this lonely company. As if this weren't enough, he now realized that the company physician was also missing. How had he overlooked that during the chaos of the night's troubles? He had gone off two days before with men injured in an accident, as though no one else could have accompanied them to the distant hospital. Why was he tarrying there? Why hadn't he come back when he was so badly needed here? The three orderlies, conscientious men but inept and bewildered, hadn't slept the whole night. Actually, apart from me, I thought on my way to the grounds, who had slept that night?

The cries of the soldiers attacked by thousands of scorpions kept the breathless orderlies dashing among the tents. I hoped that the final live-fire exercise would be called off. Without our CO, the sympathetic and beloved instructor, and the good doctor, the men wouldn't dare open fire. I hoped that up there, at brigade HQ, they wouldn't approve the drill. No company in the world could give an exhibition exercise, before the Minister of Defense and his nit-picking staff, after a nightmarish Hamsin night such as we had just gone through.

I had never seen such an astounding spectacle in my life. All the desert's scorpions, thousands upon thousands-you couldn't tell in the sweltering dark whether they were yellow, black, or brown-had gathered at our unfortunate company's gritty camp. As if it weren't enough that men had

been hurt in an accident or that soldiers had shriveled from thirst the week before. The men ran around panic-stricken in their combat boots and skimpy underwear; the heat of the Hamsin wouldn't let anyone stretch out on his mattress. Even the bravest of the company's soldiers, the proud volunteers who took pride in shooting the new machine-guns, shouted for help. The tormented drivers jumped into their seats, someone shouted an order and their headlights went on. The vehicles began to plow through the camp, crushing thousands of stinger-drawn scorpions. But beneath the ground, pulp sprouted new scorpions erupting from the sand. Column after column formed up in the furrows left by the drivers' wheels. From the eastern sector, from the general direction of the refreshing Jordan-Jericho, rose a strange vapor.

Was a full moon shining over the company? Did it illuminate each dark segment on the tails of the hordes of scorpions? Did I hear the insects screaming? Could I hear the cry of these small creatures? Or had I too lost my mind, just like the raving soldiers of our abandoned company? But the dark tent's flickering lights calmed me down. The tranquil lowing of the cattle skipped on the breeze, and the placid bleating of goats betrayed no sign of fright or discontent. The poor deputy CO summoned the platoon commanders and the incompetent orderlies, mess hall tables were turned into improvised cots, and mattresses were hung between tent poles like large hammocks. The terrified soldiers climbed into them as if they were sent to their rescue. On the tables, the scorpions strode across the rifle butts.

That pleasant, acrid odor given off by the tingling acid of ants spread over the encampment. Was it this cloud of gas, of evaporating ant gas, that had called all the desert's scorpions here? Layer upon layer of the insects were stomped and trampled, but below them, inside the fissures of the earth, welled up fresh new battalions of swift, fearsome scorpions, their tails unfurled and their stingers raised. Woe to him who made the mistake of flicking on his flashlight for a moment or striking a match. Woe to him who drew masses of scorpions streaming towards the source of light. And woe and more woe to him who hadn't fled from the campfires, into which the insects crawled endlessly and unwaveringly and then split open in the flames.

It was only the officers' tent, off by itself, that none of the scorpions entered. I, who had been left alone in the tent, was besieged. I couldn't go out into the sea of scorpions rolling and seething below me. In the tent, seized by madness, orders were given in savage, throat-wrenching shrieks. The dryness of the air, the burn of the east wind, and the relentless heat radiating from the ground scrambled the company compound, turning it into a thick stew of lights, screams, dust, and the stench of these repulsive vermin. Heaps of their dead were piled up everywhere. Could it be that I alone had been spared all this pandemonium? Was it possible that only I had lain on my army mattress, propped my head in my hands and wondered how it all could end?

Through the rolled-up tent flap, I saw the warm lights of the shepherds' tents and heard the tranquil sounds of gurgling around the dust-ridden company camp. During the day, when I sweated on the range and followed the shooters and cursed the careless, I didn't notice these sounds.

The roar of gunfire and the range marshals' orders blotted them out, but now on my bed, cut off from everything, I imagined that I would even be able to hear the roosters crowing just before sunrise.

I didn't dare get off the mattress for a minute. The canteens I had filled and put beside me grew heavy against my rolled-up shirt. To defend myself against the invaders, I also heaped up crinkling sheets of newspaper around me and wedged thick board under the mattress, a barrier against scorpions that also worked against back pain. I tied my shoes above me in the lashing and ignored the cries of the soldiers, the rumble of angry engines, and the screeches of the abandoned company's radio receiver. I drifted to the cool falls of Jordan-Jericho, to the brooks and the dripping ferns and the secluded river's shaded recesses, all the way to the boundary of our eastern sector, beyond which it is absolutely forbidden to shoot. Anyone who dared shoot there during the final live-fire exercise, in the presence of Minister of Defense and his trailing entourage, would be hauled before the CO for summary judgment.

My rope hammock suddenly creaked beneath me and the trunks of the cypresses trembled. From the closest houses came a child's sudden cry. Had I momentarily awakened from my nightmares? Had all the creatures of the desert risen up against us that night? Bats woozy from the heat beat on the roof of the porch. I swathed myself in the damp towel, which had already grown warm on my feverish brow. If I hadn't been sleepy and lazy, I'd have gotten up and soaked it again. The night of the scorpions appeared before me like a dream that had never happened. Had a torrent of sweat drenched me then too? Had the throbbing of my heart suddenly pounded so dreadfully in my ears?

Toward morning, the desert's vermin mercifully abated their attack on our wounded company. Their throats parched, the men of our broken troop began to shout the good news from tent to tent. The company CO heard of the surprise assault made by the desert scorpions. He was already on his way back, returning from brigade HQ with a small convoy carrying everything we needed. From below, from the desert road, the radio picked up the doctor's concerned voice as he hurried back with an ambulance driver. They would be at the camp in just a few more minutes. And the tidings we had all hoped for also went around: the final exercise had been canceled because of the brutal Hamsin. The Minister of Defense personally expressed his desire to visit the battered company another time. One of his top adjutants was already seeing to the arrangements.

One platoon leader, a member of the nature society, suddenly got an order and announced in an authoritative voice that he really needed heroes now. He would painstakingly classify each type of scorpion that had attacked us in the night. Not one would be overlooked. Whoever had any strength left, any fighting spirit, was invited to sift through the piles of corpses, aided by the field guides he pulled out of his knapsack.

Through the open flap, I heard the roosters crowing in the distance. I saw the lights going out in the shepherds' lodges. And I heard the flocks

going out to pasture, to the glowing slopes of the eastern mountains of Samaria. Had there been any injured? Wounded, stung? No, I don't remember; I think not a single soldier was stung. Such strange incidents occur in nature. In the crazy desert, you always expect surprises. So what had all this been? A horrible Hamsin dream or a true vision of terror?

That Hamsin night between the end of Passover and the holiday of Shavu'ot, on the ivory limestone slopes of Samaria's mountains, I saw how the desert's insects had risen against a far-flung company of soldiers, laying siege to the camp, blocking all routes to the water tanks and the ammunition depot. They streamed over the cracked earth and overran the mounds of gear meant for the final live-fire exercise. It was as though they had a well-prepared plan for foiling the drill. Some of them even were caught in the chair intended for the Minister of Defense.

Their stingers held high and reeking of acidic vapors, these daring insects had confounded all insecticides, all swatters and sprayers. Not far off was the moment when they would drive the company's stunned men off into the desert, a humiliating flight that would rout soldiers wearing only skimpy underwear and heavy combat boots.

I sat by the edge of the tent, draped in a mosquito net. If it was good against gnats, it should be good against scorpions. Loud, heart-rending ballads came from the shepherds' tents. I was struck by a desert yearning that has no name. Had someone called me? Had someone tried to talk to me that night? Had the scorpions been sent to me? And who was I, a frail man, that I could read the writing of insects?

I rose with the rising sun. I put on the rolled netting like a transparent dress. Jordan-Jericho savagely drew me. Who would come to our aid? What could we grab to keep us from slipping among the swaying tails? Who would protect us and prevent us from falling under the upraised stingers?

The jays struggled awake in the dense boughs above my porch. The brief Hamsin night had come to an end. The wet towel that I had wrapped around me had long since dried out. The rope hammock had pressed red creases deep into my flesh. I was all mixed up by what I had seen and remembered. Before I escaped to my bed, I remembered, with difficulty, where to find the switch to the air conditioner.

Triple Jump

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I'm annoyed by the saying attributed to rabbi Nachman from Bratslav, "The entire world is a very narrow bridge." The words that follow, "What is important is to have no fear" strike me as even falser. It seems that Rabbi Nachman, who was chronically ill, never grew very old. I can't accept that this is how he painted his life, and I especially can't accept that this is how he portrayed his old age: as a deep, narrow abyss veering between two wondrous banks, the first a happy childhood awash in colors and the other, the life beyond life, life after death or the eternal life prophesied in a land of the resurrected dead. My idea of the bridge is completely the opposite of what he said. In my mind's eye, the narrow bridge of his saying is actually a delicate link between two chasms, the void that he has left and the void to which he is coming. Only a trace of our brief life in the physical world of suffering forms a link between these two yearned-for voids. We know that rabbi Nachman's life was short and grief-stricken. We know also that he yearned all his days for another life, free of suffering. That's why I believe that he understood neither the bleakness of old age nor the sorrow of slowly taking leave of life.

I don't agree with the pious rabbi's words, if they're really his. First of all, I don't believe in the world to come or in the next life. Nor do I believe that we inherit good and happiness in the next world. Would believing that I'm on my way to the next world make it easier for me to go through my illness? Even if I were to recite to myself, lying in bed every tormented night, that the point of life is to have no fear, would I be able to master my terrifying fears? And if that is the point of life, where do we get our gnawing hunger for what comes after life?

No one has ever come back from that curtained world. Even the suffering pious man had no informants who returned after fulfilling their mission there. How could he be absolutely positive that fearing nothing is the right guide for life, that it would lead him and his followers to a world where all is good? And how would they be brought there? By the shortest, fastest route or, rather, by long, twisting journey racked with grief and pain, at least as prolonged in the hidden world as in the known?

For myself, I was summoned for just one quick peek at the realms beyond life. It was so fleeting that I don't feel qualified to report what I saw. I can only wonder at the courage of those who decide to bear witness. On the other hand, the doctors tell me that I was lucky that my peek didn't last too long. If you don't come back from there right away, you aren't likely to come back at all. "How long is that?" I asked the doctors. "One hour? Half an hour? Less than that?" "Something less," said the doctors before hurrying on to the patient in the next bed. "Better yet, don't peek there at all. It's a greedy, grasping place; anyone sneaking a look is bound to get hurt."

For weeks, I was tormented by the thought that I had caught something during my brief glance. Had I really come back 100 percent? I lay

in my bed and tried to read in the faces of friends and relatives whether they had noticed anything that I couldn't see. Were they trying to hide something from me? My wife said there was one thing that I hadn't lost during my trip there and back, my sick man's suspicious mind, she said. That was because I hadn't felt that I was going over a very narrow bridge that I was crossing from one void to another brought yet a third. I hadn't seen the bank I stood on, or made out the opposite side, or found the pylons of a bridge close by. Was I destined to meet someone on the narrow bridge? Was I called to an important rendezvous on the span? Had I missed my mission?

Here is still another fallacy in the proverb ascribed to the holy man, an irritating flaw that teach more about what his followers said than about his words themselves. If he really did say that the whole world is nothing but a narrow bridge, and that the important thing is not fear crossing to the other side, just what did he mean? That there is something on the other, longed-for side worth the struggle to tame our fear, worth staggering over the narrow bridge, going over the deep chasm dizzy and faint from fear but not stopping, staying the course, continuing towards the other side of life. It's a shame he didn't say whether there are other routes connecting one void to the other. Are there other narrow bridges within our reach? Might there be a bridge, one not so narrow or frightful, that can be crossed in safety? Or is it the one only passage in all the world what soldiers here call a "necessary crossing?"

If there are other ways, I would be the first to pick one of them. I would reserve the pious rebbe's bridge crossing for people better and more faithful than I, just as I would leave the conquest of fear to those who are braver. I would even go further and ask, who really? If the adage attributed to the holy man is correct, there is no one who can answer my question. There isn't anyone on the bridge or walking on the banks on either side of the void. One can only go crazy from this cold, surrounding isolation. But let's suppose that there had been a wise old man sitting on the opposite bank, smack in the middle of the route leading from the suspension bridge, and that I had talked with him, exchanging a few words. I would have asked him straight off, "Of all the billions now living on the earth, why me?"

When I try to answer the questions that I myself have raised, I quickly tire. What little strength I have desert me. Minute after minute, I reconsider the issue, turning over the possibilities. One can take Rabbi Nachman's saying as a prayer meant to relieve the soul's anguish. One can find in these words a call to quite faith and trust in him. but this requires that I concede certain prior assumptions that result in a destination that I find distasteful and therefore must immediately reject. On the other hand, one can see the bank up close, free and happy, easy to approach and oh so attractive. And there is a deep realm that precludes compromise. This is a realm of the same type that haunts me even in my dreams at night. If I flee from it, it pursues me. There is no escape. I must confront it at night. So why don't I pluck up the bit of courage still left me in the hospital, lengthen my stride and simply march across the rough planks of the bridge? For if I continue the argument with myself as I have till now, I'll wake up gasping for air one morning. And then,

even if I should want to, even if I beg and convince the doctors to help me, I won't find the strength to cross the narrow bridge. Do I really yearn for that bank?

If I don't accept the maxim attributed to the holy man, that isn't to say that I don't cherish the melody to which it's sung. Why, just the opposite. The pretty tune has a captivating charm. It's a cool drink that refreshes the afflicted heart and the downcast soul. Sometimes, when the cleaning lady walks me in the little room from the bed to the armchair and then back from the armchair to the bed, the transistor radio on her cleaning cart chirping the whole time, I can't help hearing the pleasant tune. But I'm unable to free myself suddenly from the agonizing bonds of illness and join in the words pouring from the radio in a soothing stream, for I no longer have the strength to sing.

Yes, it definitely would be easy to accept these sweet lies. No one among the healthy, who go about their business unaware of the unseen illness lurking for them, rejoices in singing that the world actually is nothing but a very narrow bridge. And if that sad expression weren't enough, there would still be some hope for man, the frantic rush to the gloomy entrance. True, the world before us is nothing but a very narrow bridge, but waiting for us beyond the bridge are realms of everlasting radiance, sweetness and joy, health and absolute freedom from sickness. And what do you think? You need to make some effort, to gird yourself a little and take a deep breath. If I were a boy, I would now take my mother's ephemeral hand, clamp my eyes shut, hold my nose, shut my mouth, and jump across the abyss. One. Two. Three. Just as I used to leap across the little swamp on the slope of the wintry path leading to the Kibbutz children's house.

And on opening my eyes, I'd already be planted on the coveted bank on the other side. It would be the best and longest triple jump in the world. Just three steps, the faltering steps of a sick man. But what a vast distance I've covered. What a gaping abyss I've crossed. What's important, though, is that I have obeyed the mandate attributed to the pious rabbi. I had no fear. I tore from my heart all fright and terror. Maybe I'll return and again leave that huge building, the regional hospital, which imprisons me in its great concrete walls. Just grab my mother's slippery hand, plug me nostrils and, just as when I was a boy, cheer myself on. Hoop-la, one two, now we're across. Sprawled in my sick bed, I have the satisfying feeling that, at this moment, I've taken the first small steps to getting well.

When the young doctor, always hurrying, came to draw blood from me, I met him with a weak smile. As in some long-past children's show, I heard him humming to himself the pleasant melody played earlier on the cleaning lady's miniature radio. The entire world, the entire world, is a very narrow bridge, a very narrow bridge, verynarrowbridgggge.

He wraps the rubber tourniquet around my arm. The important thing is tohavenofearrr. "Why so happy, doctor?" I asked him. "What's made you so happy this morning?" He doesn't even bother to answer me. He unwraps my forearm and bends it. Then he affectionately slaps me on the back and,

although I can't bend over and look, I'm ready to bet that he's wearing the latest sneakers. I feel sure that his greenish backpack, not a woeful doctor's bag, hangs in the physician's room.

And when he moves towards the nurse's station, a syringe of my blood in his hand, I imagine hearing him dancing joyfully. "What's important, what's important, istohavenofearr."

A DIAGONAL VIEW

Translated from the Hebrew by Judi Levi

1.

I position the camera on the roof of the old outpost. I've been looking for the perfect observation point ever since yesterday. What I need is a clear, infinite field of vision. A stretch of road, of course, not too short; long enough for Captain Bar-Oz, on entering the Kibbutz, to be seen on all sides.

It would be better to set the range of visibility slightly further back. Perhaps I'll begin at the junction of the main road. Captain Bar-Oz is to arrive in a fast car from the direction of Tel Aviv. But he may, in fact come by way of Hadera. Hadera is a smaller town and will rouse greater confidence in the audience. Before screening the junction, together with the road sign, of course, to help the average viewer find his bearings, one could flash on a few shots of Hadera to the side of the water tower and the darkness of the old orange groves, piling up cubes one top of the other, the violet morning-glory hedges climbing through the tops of the cypress trees, struggling up to the sky, long, cracked cement water-ditches. That will do.

Now the camera concentrates on the car which dropping Captain Bar-Oz off the junction. The pace can be accelerated a little: Captain Bar-Oz appears to be ejected from the car door, his knapsack thrown out after him to the side of the road by an invisible hand. His face cannot be seen as yet but his movements are strange. He is in such a hurry that he forgets to thank the driver. Here one should stop for a moment to consider whether he shouldn't be placed in a ceremonious convoy of cars. Kibbutz cars, yes, cheerfully decorated; tubes of musical instruments stick out the windows and the riders' faces express endless rejoicing. No, here real cruelty is called for. There will be no convoy of joy. No ringing of carriages of delight. He must arrive alone, accompanied only by his meager knapsack. Something in his clothes must indicate that he has been away a long while.

At this point, the camera must be carefully aimed to capture the discrepant sense of estrangement between Captain Bar-Oz and the stones of the road, and the shady avenue of carobs, and the fields and orange groves which he sees through the gaps in the trees. But it is a queer, imposed estrangement as it is obvious that he is familiar with the entire scene from childhood.

The camera should follow him slowly, surrounding him on all sides and giving the audience the feel of the covering of foreignness enveloping him; that unfelt, transparent covering, moving one small step ahead of him like the pillar of fire in the desert.

Now I have doubts. The best thing would be to take a consecutive series of aerial views, at a low altitude, over his head, let us say from a helicopter quietly lingering in the air, making no sound. A helicopter hovering above. But without all the damage the engine can cause: strong air

waves and the fear of decapitation by the shining blades. Incidentally, that's a good idea. An accidental beheading, short and brilliant, accompanied by the jet's clamor pouring in a torrent through the tailpipe. I must think about that. Perhaps I'll leave it to the end. If there is no other, more convenient solution; and if Captain Bar-Oz finds himself in irrevocable complications so that I can't get him back to the beginning; and if the viewers, bent tensely forward say that the end is no end, then I'll surprise them. I'll think up a beautiful end. A jet end. Perhaps I could attach a small, even minute, camera to the propeller blades. A camera which would activate itself at the precise moment, not a second too soon, a jet decapitation camera. Ingenious ideas, perhaps I'll use them later. I bring the camera back to Captain Bar-Oz. What defeatist thinking. To foresee such calamities for him from the very moment of his ejection on to the inner road. When the entire world is here, at the end of the road, waiting for him, longing for him, yearning for him terribly!

Well, I must accept my limitations. I don't have a helicopter. I have only a portable camera, positioned on the roof of the old cement outpost. Now I can descend, go up to Captain Bar-Oz, kiss him, shake hands with him, break through the aura of alienation which is surrounding him. I can get even closer. I can forget my job as photographer, give the camera to one of the children who have been swarming about here for hours, and exchange tears with him. The rare but very real tears of man. Of course one mustn't weep for a soldier returning from the front, or a prisoner from captivity or a shadow from land of shadows. The tears won't show up on film. There's nothing to worry about. I'll see to it. But who wouldn't contribute a few seconds of weeping in honor of Bar-Oz, of his return. And while I'm preparing the camera for a quick descent down the iron ladder crumbling with rust, I change my mind, that is to say, the angle of filming.

I'll simply sprawl on the road, a few steps in front of Bar-Oz and film him from below upwards. His uniform, faded from so many washings, his ranks hanging on his shoulders in a strange voluntary abandonment, his eyes fixed on a distant point in space; and over his head the dark tops of the carob trees, the wild and meaningless darting to and fro of small, gray songbirds. The carobs are in flower now; their blossoms give off a horrible odor, the stench of a floocloth or of the vapor rising from an obstructed sewer. But the camera does not capture smells. Only shapes. And the fetid carob flower, if you look at it closely, is of interest. As always, the wondrous complexity of nature, its usual mocking ways, in the flowers, the songbirds crowding together, in the prisoner returning from the land of shadows. Now will come a slow, lingering but enlarged shot of the meeting of his shoes with the earth that he loved so much.

I'll press the camera tightly to the asphalt, lean on it with all my weight until a precise picture emerges, with no movement distortion. The sole's crashing tread, the strangeness crackling between sole and heel, the alienation trampled on almost as an afterthought. Then a flash up to his face.

To the bite of his lips. To a kind of secret blinking of his eyes. To a bead of sweat staring down his pale face. And for a poetical touch, I could

light up the curls under his hat, and linger over the few gray threads, which have begun to threaten his hair.

I have a proposal, which I'm looking into now. The problem is the reception. That is, the reception for the lost Captain. And if I divide it for filming purposes into points, this would be the order: the origin of the message, receiving of the message, the couriers, the message bringers and the obsessive distribution which takes hold from the moment the message arrives.

Here I have a brilliant thought. I must organize, via the film, a concentric distribution. That is to say, the circle of those who know of Captain Bar-Oz's sudden return, makes a strange skip over a dark center. The message, on its path of distribution, plays strange tricks on the eye, passing over small pockets of people, especially over one central pocket. His closest family stand there. Or to be more exact, his parents aren't there. Neither are his brothers. His friends aren't there. They are dispersed on all sides of the circles of distribution. At the center of the dark space one woman stands alone. His wife. Oh, if only it were possible to move the camera at the speed of thought. From world to world, and under the world and over the world. And perhaps to all kinds of worlds. There is only one professional question: will the camera really film what can be guessed at in mind? Or perhaps not, perhaps such figures do not leave their mark on celluloid.

When I finish organizing the distribution, I will begin activating a great movement in all the circles. A movement towards a meeting. A sudden flow, new circles kiss the old, a hidden commotion like in burrows. Here one should stand a large camera with as wide an angle as possible and hang it, like the sun, over the Kibbutz. A few hours of hard lightning and then a quick interpretation. In such cases the developing makes me really excited. My heart beats faster, streams of perspiration crawl on my palms and a sort of quick but monotonous tune buzzes in my left ear. The fingers involuntarily tap out a strange beat on the table. No, I reject that idea. It's too general, encompassing too much. I'll lose Captain Bar-Oz so, whether under the thick tops of the old ficuses by the Culture Hall, or among the women's colorful kerchiefs. Strange how the kerchiefs suddenly appear on festivals or on days of mourning. Masses of them. It's a pity, with my black and white, however sophisticated, the kerchiefs are a great loss. Their colorfulness is really frightening. And the way they are worn is so expressive. How they gather and crowd, all at once, like a herd of frisky lambs, round the dark patch; the woman stands there: his wife. That's where he should be standing too. Pushed by hundreds of aiding hands, flowing with good will. But we'll come to that later. The dark patch will not let go of us. I'm preparing a special roll for it.

2.

I urgently need the children now. I gather them around me. I give them short, simple instructions. Take cameras, I tell them, many small, and put them into all of surrounding rooms. Put them also in the tree trunk and on

the old benches. And even into the sprinklers. To the children's question of "and in the woodpeckers' hollows?" I answer, yes, in the woodpeckers' hollows, too.

They are of special interest. The children disperse like lightning, raiding the rooms, the lawns, and the pavements. Thousands of small cameras begin to click. Captain Bar-Oz is now being filmed from every possible angle. Thousands of minute eyes are following him. Every step he takes, every hair doled out, every twitch of a muscle. The children hide in the bushes, behind the wall closets, beyond the balcony screens, like little foxes. Their eyes are the eyes of foxes in ambush.

A queer scene: from beyond the gate a strange troop enters the Kibbutz I am at its head, that is, with my back to front, the helpless camera fastened to my shoulder, my stomach, my hands latched on to it in a kind of fear and anxiety. Behind me, that is in front of me, since I am walking backwards (like a stumbling reluctant crab, scrambling and halting, probably falling into potholes) walks Captain Bar-Oz. The distance between us remains unchanged, as if set by someone other than ourselves. Not large, but strictly maintained. I try to regulate my paces to his. And he, although he is not looking in front of him at all, knows with a wonderful sense of degree, not to shorten the range between us. Not to shorten it beyond the seemingly agreed upon, beyond this dryness. And round us, unseen, hidden in the transparent air, all the children of the Kibbutz are ready and alert, like springs yearning to uncoil.

Prisoners of my command, dispersed like tiny spy cameras, all their mechanisms clicking. Trembling, a dryness in their mouths, and a great shout balled up in their throats. They lie in ambush and see his wretched knapsack on his shoulder, his clothes almost disintegrating from washings and the lump of estrangement dancing before him like a gay troupe of monkeys tied to its master by a hidden collar chain. An immense curiosity seizes my mind: will the cloud of estrangement leave tracks on the film? Or does that too leave its mark only on my cornea, unable to penetrate the barriers of the indifferent lenses?

But I don't have time now to stop and answer myself. The lost Captain's dogged, harsh movement makes me run in front of him. And I am already skipping backwards in a bad posture, so uncomfortable. My whole body aches.

This is where I should break away from him. I am thinking of taking off to a better, a higher, filming position. But now it is impossible. He continued to walk. He has even increased his pace somewhat and the field is completely deep shadow. I put my trust in the children whom I shook off in all directions. Profiles, half-length, diagonal shots which could be wonderful, right from the insides of the woodpeckers' hollows. I feel as if I'm a prisoner in the pace of his advance. Because he still hasn't bestowed a single glance on me and we haven't exchanged half a word, and despite all the manly embracing and kissing, not one tear has fallen. He dictates a fast pace of filming and skipping backwards. And so we move for a while, film and skip,

skip and film. Now, just before my fall, I halt the film, raise the question, and put it on the cutting table. The tension is great. Children hiding in the gardens. The square in front of the dining hall is about to burst with anticipation.

Masses of the men who have put on their sunglasses and women, who have donned their colored kerchiefs, are locked in their rooms. Just behind the doors. Waiting for the hidden signal to pour outside and be swept into colorful streams gushing to the large square. The heavy rag smell of the carob blossoms stands in the air and the burdensome sound of the bees swooping down to the nectar drowns almost every other noise. There are no screeches of planes in the air, no call signals from the radio sets. There are no tidings heard anywhere.

The calm is so suspect that my heartbeats, even here by the cutting table, suddenly jump. One moment, I'll just take advantage of this tension-ridden pause before the decisive event, so flash on a few background stills for relief: here is the lost Captain as Amos, a smiling baby whose fat, creased limbs are entwined between the wooden poles of his cot of hastily cut together boards. And then the boy, Amossi, in a white, sweet smelling shirt, with a stiff, over starched collar.

Now the camera moves. The picture of the boy will come closer and closer until it fills the entire frame. Of course there are difficulties. The downy moustache suddenly appears, before its time. Unseen wrinkles show up. And badly healed scars of childhood are especially, exaggeratedly exposed. But these are the usual ills of enormous enlargement. There is no getting around them. The quick flashes on the screen light up the faces of the viewers. The faces assume a strange pallor. As if they already know the end of the boy with the downy upper lip who is now crossing the lawn with his meager satchel swinging from his shoulder. The material of his clothes is so worn, and what has he left?

I mustn't linger so long at the cutting table. I must run and take shots in the field. And I can already hear voices buzzing and shouting, where is that photographer who was just here, where has he disappeared to? I hurry. I have a very short way to go. At this point Captain Bar-Oz is already crossing the lawn. The paved dining hall square is no longer far away. I attach myself to him as before, a crablike attachment, embarrassing. Here I'll have to put something in. I feel that there is a gap in the series of takes. The Captain has been abandoned and somebody must fill in all those dark spaces. Amazing close-ups of his face. The pallor of his skin will compete with that of the screen. The backwards walking was dangerous from start. It's miracle that I've reached to the edge of the lawn. I should thank God that I haven't failed thus far. But now it's coming. A small hole, an unimportant bump, and I'm still attached to the Captain's walk, the camera pressed hard to my chest. The heel slips, the foot searches for firm ground, turns, and I go after it.

Thrown forward on my back, struck backwards, stunned, momentarily dizzy, and then I see, with my eye in the camera protruding out of me, that Captain Bar-Oz does not stop walking.

He continues straight over me. His shoes throw a shadow over the lens. The airbrush of his trousers blows over me like a breath of wind. Wonderful shot. From the bottom of hell. From the lowest possible place. His heel slips on the straps. I am dust under your heels, photographer dust. I forgot, there's no soundtrack. There's no reason to shout. I pull myself up to overtake him.

Someone must warn him. Not about the pits on the way, those are unimportant. But the dark patches outside the circles. I fear a serious development. I do a quick change of film under pressure. Faster than the change of magazines under fire. This is the special roll. I've kept it for this moment. It's just as well that I fell and the filming stopped for a moment. I am ground under your heels that do not turn back. I am crushed beneath you. Oh, would I were in your place.

3.

The earth splits open with an immense roar, a river of people breaks through and flows and streams to the square. Colorful singing, moving, and dancing. The air explodes from the howls of the children who are set free in a split second. They break out of their hiding places with wild jumps, as if my fall was a signal to them. A benevolent human river surrounds Captain Bar-Oz and he is carried and pushed on the waves of hundred of well-wishing arms. His clothes disintegrate on him from the patting, the embracing, and affectionate caressing of those around him. His knapsack is removed, passed from hand to hand, goes round the whole circle. Its old strap is torn and throw somewhere outside the dancing circle. I scurry around the crowd like a madman. I'm looking for an observation point. I'm dying to position the camera so that it will have a free, infinite field of vision. I need clear, long shots: the square empty, before everything; the square half full, something beginning to happen, and the last precise shot, the square seething with the crowd. But there is no vantage point round the celebration anywhere. The roofs are far, the carob foliage is heavy and obstructive. I've no choice. I must apologize, send the entire crowd back to its burrows, the children back to their dens.

And while the square is empty, stand a painter's ladder on it, or a blacksmith's iron tower. I climb to the top of the tower, slipping in haste, give a hidden signal with my finger, and the earth splits open around me again.

Oh, if only I had a small helicopter now. A jet copter with tiny cameras welded to its blades. From its jet tailpipe a yellowish cloud of the carob odor would be ejected. The heavy smell mists over and envelops the whole crowd and as though anaesthetizes it with its doglike aroma. There is his closest family. She stands here: the woman, his wife. It is to her he makes his way constantly, indefatigably. For her he sheds his disintegrating clothes. For her he discards his wretched knapsack. Now I'm filming him from right above his head in a long, continuous series of wonderful aerial views.

His covering of alienation melts. I can see it with my eyes. The people touch and touch him again. Touch his torn clothes, shoes, hands, and flesh. There is no barrier stretched between the crowd and his heart. Someone wants to tear out his heart and embrace it. But to him these are all obstacles that have to be set aside.

He is drawn towards her alone. Now the last circle breaks open and he penetrates the dark path. My special film works frantically. I pray for it to last. I put the brakes on the blades of the helicopter, slow down. Now everything is shot in slow motion. He falls into her arms, she into his. Some sort of turbid vapor disturbs the functioning of the camera.

The penetration of lights is somehow impeded. Wait, she actually falls out of his arms. I curse the obstructing vapor. What is he doing to her with such force? Embracing her? Strangling her? The dark patch turns quite black. The crowd presses on to them and a whirlpool of screams, bodies aloft, cries and frantic runs covers the square.

I jump into the whirlpool with my jet decapitation blades. It's too late. There's no need. They're ahead of me. She is already being carried outside the circle. What a pity, none of my schemes worked out. The crowding interfered again. Now I leave everything and run to my dark room. A strange excitement is bubbling in me. I identify the perverse lust for interpretation. When I enter I rush to the window. I must close it tight. The yellowish cloud of the thick carob smell is threatening to choke me.

SHELL SHOCK

Translated from Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I.

Was I truly surprised to learn that Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov, the long-haired kibbutznik, had found religion?

Perhaps the news caught me a little by surprise, particularly when I first learned it. But as the hours passed that day, I convinced myself that Be'eri, tall and lean with a jittery, nervous air about him, had long been destined for a dramatic change in his life.

During our last tour of reserve duty, we had talked at length, and I had the impression that the young fellow across from me was searching for meaning in his life. He had grown weary of the kibbutz on which he had been born and raised. He was fed up with his friends, the way of life, even his family. I detected an undercurrent of pain in his remarks. At first, it was but a trickle; as the weeks went by, however, I understood that it was truly a flood. He told me that he had taken his troubles to friends whom he had known and respected from childhood. They had always had an answer for every question, but now, to his distress, they had disappointed him. Some put him off on flimsy pretexts. Others tired of listening to still another mixed-up youth whine about life on the kibbutz. Still others outright told him that he had a screw loose in his head: what he needed was not a heart-to-heart talk but immediate medical treatment.

Only one person gladly welcomed him and heard him out. The man served on the kibbutz secretariat after completing a long career in the regular army. After listening to Be'eri one time, he invited Be'eri for a second conversation and then a third. For some weeks, his door was open to Be'eri until the early morning hours. But his words, it seems, were not enough. Be'eri eventually understood that these long discussions would not bring him salvation. He needed a drastic change in his life. His soul needed to plunge to the bottom of a deep well. His body needed a life of ritual and sacrifices that would restore to him some of the meaning in his life he had discovered in the army. To his core, he yearned for new experiences to light up the darkness of the confining life he led from his narrow bed to his hard labor in the fishponds.

When Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov joined our veterans' platoon, his appearance instantly caused a stir. His hair was extremely long and he kept a small transistor radio plugged into his ear all hours of the day. Instead of answering, he returned a bright smile. He was the first to get into bed. Had he shirked his duties right from the start? Had he begun skipping his assignments as soon as he arrived? I can no longer remember, but the men's condemnation of him was undoubtedly exaggerated. The scorn mounted after we learned that he had taken up religion. He would wrap himself in blankets

on his bed, cover his head, and commune with the little radio pouring out a stream of tunes.

He did not like encounters with the other men. He shrank from the close quarters around the fire. He hated the old stories the veterans, looking for a chance to talk, liked to recall at any moment. "These men," he told me once, "fill their days with nothing. Listen to what they say, see how they behave. How vulgar they are inside, how empty. It is as though nothing really noble exists in this world."

"For example, like what?" I asked.

"Like music," he immediately shot back excited. He told me then how many melodies coursed through him begging to be composed. If only he had just a little more time to spare, just a little more money, he would long ago have bought himself a decent tape recorder, cast aside all his affairs, climbed out of the stinking fish ponds and passed all his days composing music.

The men, who had watched with suspicion as we grew closer, were scornful of him. "This Be'eri of yours will end up someplace very far away. Don't you realize what a queer bird you have found? See how he searches out every tiny crack to jump inside and disappear. This is a soldier? Where did he serve before? Is there a unit in which anyone agreed to serve with him?" The most extreme among them were moved to register a complaint with our officers about the goldbrick who had come to us by mistake and would drag others down with him when he went over the edge. "We should get rid of him as quickly as possible, before he does something terrible."

The officers listened and said, "Okay, we'll take care of it." The army's manpower branch, however, moves at a maddeningly slow pace. And so Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov continued to serve in the unit for a year and then another until the war broke out.

From the moment the war began, Be'eri became another person. The old Be'eri was simply erased. He withdrew into himself and little remained of his tall, lean figure. My memory of him through all the months of the war is that of a short, bent man forever seeking the safety of the earth's embrace. If he spoke little before the war, he became totally mute the instant the battles began. Indeed, when I search my memory to pinpoint the time when I next heard him raise his voice, I believe it was only after the shooting stopped and after the shellings came to an end. That was shortly before he went to see a psychiatrist down in Haifa.

In fact, I heard him only after the dispute began over the private kitchen he had rigged up for himself. Had he trimmed his hair and changed his clothing? Had he appeared before the surprise call-up wearing a gleaming skullcap? All this has long since fled my memory. But the sight of him crawling in the bunker, his sleeping nook in the niche closest to the exit, the terrified way he wrapped himself in the tent flap, I will never forget.

The men no longer made him the butt of their jeers. Instead, they said that shell shock made him behave as he did. It was Be'eri's good luck that he had a mild case. He ought to be transferred to a camp for religious soldiers in Jerusalem rather than to some place worse. But there were also those who

contended that every instance of his behavior during the war was fraudulent, well planned in advance. It was all a lie. In fact, he did play deceptive mental games, both for us and for his doctors, in the theater he invented for himself. For how was it possible to understand his bizarre behavior? On the one hand, he lay on the floor of the bunker day and night. He fed himself from a single package of halva and one canteen. He made not a sound but only shriveled a little more as each shell landed. On the other hand, just when everyone had given up on him, and told him to take the car and go to Haifa, he roared out of his lair like a lion, suddenly straightening up to his full pre-war height. He ran to the car with the stride of a gifted athlete. His driving was flawless, and he returned the car without a scratch.

Once, when he returned from one such trip, I came upon him at the entrance to the bunker. He had a cheerful smile on his face, but his eyes were those of the troubled kibbutz boy. A moment more, I thought, and he will pounce on me as he did in the old days. He will call me by the pet name he had coined and haul me off to the slope below the bunker. There, he will roll down a round basalt stone and goad me into running after it. "Smile, old timer, smile, let them see that you once had a wild streak."

But when I stopped to ask him, "Be'eri, what's been happening with you lately? We've all been called up like you," he signaled me with a frail motion of his finger. In an instant, he became a dwarf right before my eyes. He shrank and shrank until he once again assumed the twisted shape precisely matching the folded flap he pulled back at the exit from the bunker. I knew that I would not coax a word from his mouth, nothing but a faint murmur that could be interpreted in a thousand ways.

But it was the little private kitchen he had built himself, and the meals he ate alone, that sent the men flying off the handle. His foul habits so angered them once that they nearly gave him a beating. He avoided the men, meal times and his duties, and did not lend a hand with the cleanup. And at night...at night, he burrowed like a mouse behind the camp kitchen, nibbling the stale leftovers and crumbs of halva he scavenged from the heap of discarded boxes. He scrabbled about, opening this, removing that, leaving behind him the trail of a frightened rodent. All this he did silently and secretly in the dark, in his stocking feet without shoes or a flashlight. The weary guards, wondering at the rustlings coming from the kitchen, caught him as he rummaged. They pummeled him to teach him a lesson, so he would know how soldiers eat in wartime, how they stick together through good and bad. With a shriek of panic, he slipped out of their hands, went tumbling down the slope, and hid among the rocks until morning.

Was he not ashamed after the war of what he had done? Did he not regret his withdrawal from society? Was he not shaken by the hatred he aroused in his comrades? Or perhaps this truly was a case of shell shock, of an unknown type, that released its grip on him only many months later?

Is it possible that because I called back to mind those hard times, and Beer Ben-Ya'akov curled up like a helpless worm at the bunker's entry, I was not astonished to hear that he had turned religious?

II.

What a conscientious kashrut inspector he made for the Metulla police force while he served in the battalion. That was very hard to believe. It was as though he had changed his spots overnight. He volunteered to work in the kitchen, not because he wanted to evade the bone chilling night patrols but because he believed that only as a simple kitchen worker performing the vilest cleaning tasks could he keep a close eye on the unspoiled kashrut. He passed most of his time, from morning to the wee hours of the night, in the kitchen and the adjoining mess hall. On one of the utensil cabinets, he set a small stack of the Holy Scriptures. During the breaks between meals, he did not lock the doors as the assigned cooks did. On the contrary, he left them open, so any thirsty soldier could come and see him studying a book at his seat. Their conversation would go from one thing to another and, along with the white cup, he would place in the soldier's hand a photocopy of Rabbi Kook's essay, "Lights of Repentance."

He would return late at night to his little room at the end of the corridor and, as though he had not labored all the day washing pots, put on the warm slippers he had brought from home, sit on his bed, and strum Hasidic nigunim on the guitar. When some nigun caught his fancy and sent a shiver running the length of his back, he would play it again, recording it on his little tape machine. The words to the nigunim came of themselves, from the sources, as he like to put it in a crude generalization. From prayer books and the prayers in his heart, and particularly from an unknown source that opened to him at the time. When he could no longer hold back the nigun, no longer chant it only to himself, he burst into the sleepy operations room. His face glowing, he sat beside me and said, "You must hear this divine melody that came to me."

I pleaded with him, "Be'eri, not now. It's too late. Besides, I'm in no state to hear it. Be'eri, I'm begging you, tomorrow morning, after duty hours. I promise I'll come to you."

But he would not let go of me. "Now, right now. The wonderful bond between the words and the tune is particularly important just after its creation. That's when the action of the world is especially strong. It's a sin to miss it."

And I, interrupted during a hot, erotic conversation with the duty operator in Safed, was forced to give in. I convinced the girl in heat at the other end that this was just a momentary disturbance; she shouldn't dare strand me on the line. "I'll get back to you in just a minute, stronger than before." Even before I put down the telephone, Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov was sitting beside me so close that the aromas he bore from the kitchen assailed my nostrils, winking at me as if to say, enough of these petty affairs.

After playing and singing with such passion for quite a few minutes that sweat drenched his forehead and the hair around his skull cap, he suddenly calmed down and made an effort to make up for the tense listening session he had forced on me. "So, how was it?" he asked, but did not really

wait for my answer. He said that he had ways of discerning when the melody was genuine and when it was counterfeit. The signs went beyond the shiver down his back. There were other clues. "Something is signaling me from here," and he thumped his chest above the heart. "And something is signaling me from here," and he slapped his perspired forehead. He put his guitar aside and said that the operations room was as filthy as the barns on a moshava. And there is no time like a quiet night to give it the cleaning it needs.

While I returned to my obscene whispering with the duty operator, Be'eri washed down the operations room. He cleaned the desks, the radios, everything within his reach. I marveled at the happy look on his face radiating a strange spirituality. It was as though he were performing not a degrading job but some supreme, spiritual ritual. He frequently drew from his pocket an essay by one of his rabbis and inserted it among the papers on the desks.

"Someone surely will find them; someone surely will read them. It is unthinkable that these shining words of wisdom should perish in vain in the operations room. He who is destined to find and read them will find and read them. Perhaps he will leave here stronger than when he entered." Another soldier captured for his music, another reader to study the luminous reflections of the ga'on.

The Saturday filming incident occurred after that. Overnight, Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov grew into a bold warrior for the sanctity of the Sabbath. He turned from an unknown kashrut inspector almost into a saint. His name won renown throughout Northern Command and even reached the office of the army's Chief Rabbi. He was not deterred by threats or bewitched by the famous names of the director and his actors, or budged from his opinion by a brash reporter. He even refused to carry out orders direct from his commanding officer. The film company left their location disappointed. Serious complaints were lodged against him for interfering with their work, making threats, resorting to violence and the devil knows what else.

He sat across from me in the middle of the night, his eyes gleaming, his hands spanning the operations desk. His body tingled. "But understand," he said to me, "I enjoy movies as much as everyone else. And the actors really were terrific fellows. But why on Saturday of all times? After all, you can film any day, especially if you send people from Tel Aviv. You can coordinate everything; it's not a matter of life and death, just convenience. They want to spend the weekend in the Metulla hotels. For that you don't desecrate the Sabbath." I said that this time he had gone too far and would take the medicine he deserved. He could look forward to trial and a heavy sentence. What was he, all in all? An eccentric penitent. A miserable kashrut inspector for the Metulla police. Would anyone heed his words? Were I in his place, I would have shut my eyes and restrained myself. Or I would have spent all of Saturday in the little synagogue on the moshava and made sure I knew nothing.

Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov sprang from his seat screaming at me. "Have you gone crazy? Give in to those beasts? Perhaps you can explain to me how the

officers' hatred for the Sabbath can be justified? Put up with the abominations they arrange on the moshava just for the Sabbath?" It was not for nothing that he had volunteered to be a kashrut inspector. He knew where sins spread from. He rose from his place enraged and began to dance on the floor of the operations room. "Abomination, Sabbath, movies, desecration's, what spite, oh, what spite!"

Slowly, slowly, the curses began to pour from his mouth in a singsong rhythm in which one could make out fixed refrains he repeated again and again. His own nigun, too, one of thousands of Hasidic nigunim he had composed for himself, started to gush forth. Without realizing it, he transformed the flow of curses into a song of longing and soon began to clap along with his music. He called to me, "Wait, don't move, I'm getting up to bring the guitar. I feel an earthquake of a shiver going down my back. This is a real nigun. You mustn't miss it."

This spectacle suddenly struck me as pathetic and ridiculous. Even the burning murmurs of the operator in Safed regarding the size of her bra and the color of her favorite panties did not dispel my gloom. When Be'eri returned, his slender hands clutching the guitar, I thought a few tears might need to be shed. I quickly broke off with the operator, sighing deeply into the receiver so she would get some idea of the passion her shameless come-ons had instilled in me. I promised to call her again soon.

An unnatural fire leapt from him. He gave no answer at all to my calming words. He circled the room, singing and playing. From time to time, he stopped and, after a brief pause, continued his barbed tirade against the desecrators of the Sabbath. He railed against lascivious Bohemianism, hardened his position against the spineless officers of the battalion. Eventually, he determined to win them with kindness. It was his plan to approach them with long, convoluted quotations from the rabbis' essays. He went very pale and became so weak that I rose from the operations desk to hold him up. I led him to his cramped pariah's room and made his bed, clearing it of his penitent's books. I put him to bed and took care that he would not smash the guitar in his rage. I covered him with his blankets and, to make sure that he didn't feel the cold, threw his jacket over them. I turned off the light and calmed him down. Then I saw him off to sleep like a frightened child.

III.

In the center of town, on the square outside the local youth center, exactly on the spot where I got out of the car, I saw Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov. I thought at first that I was mistaken. How many years had passed since we last met? Where were his black clothes? Where were the side locks and the gleaming skull cap he used to wear? He recognized me, too, immediately smiled and rose to meet me.

We shook hands and he said, "Don't be surprised by any of this. And don't bury me with questions. A lot has happened of which you know

nothing. It's not all clear even to me. I'll explain everything to you by and by." He wore a blue sports outfit and just a trace remained of his long beard. There was a moment of confusion between us. I was suddenly flooded with questions I wanted to ask him. Was it long since he had given up his newfound religion? Did he still remember how he had gone down to Haifa in the middle of the war to enter the psychiatric ward of the hospital? Could he explain to me how he was able to drive those decrepit roads without an accident? How he returned the car without so much as a nick? And what had become of him in the years since the war? How did he turn up in this forsaken town?

Suddenly, I laughed and reached towards the pocket of his sports shirt. Were his pockets, I asked, still stuffed with the articles of Rabbi Kook? Was it still his way to treat those he spoke with as though he were giving candy to a child? No, not for a long time, he parried my question. He had abandoned those offensive practices as soon as he began seriously studying in Jerusalem. So far as he was concerned, every one was entitled to his own beliefs. He would no longer pry into another's soul. The sad experience of his past, the years when he did not know his own soul and wandered from yeshiva to yeshiva, was enough for him. He was unfit for saving souls. That time left him bad memories. But everything was fine now. I could see that he was his old self in every way. He was like a man who had fully regained his health after an illness of which nothing remained except some lingering marks. He felt himself completely healthy, just as he had been in his time in the fishponds on the kibbutz.

We went down to the basketball court below the rec center and Be'eri Ben-Ya'akov told me how he had come back to the passion of his childhood— basketball. People had suggested that he coach the city's youth teams. He eagerly accepted. What could be nicer for a bachelor like him? It was half an hour from Jerusalem and his studies. His life was not hard at all. The practices were easy for him, not exhausting like other jobs. Talking with his charges invigorated him. He felt he could help them to escape the yawning depths into which he had fallen and floundered a good many years until he had found his way out. It sometimes seemed to him that there was no pitfall on his life's path into which he had not stumbled. No one had stood by him. No one had extended a hand to get him back on his feet. Even his pious comrades who had so rejoiced over him in the beginning had despaired of him as time passed, for he remained unstable, with ceaseless questions, and doubts that continued to torment him, and a soul that found no peace.

We went on the court and he demonstrated some of his drills. "It's a pity the kids aren't here," he said. "With them, I could put on an exhibition game in your honor." I saw how much better he looked and how the glow in his face, which I last had seen before he fell victim to the disillusion of the repentant sinner, finally had returned. "Basketball and a guitar," I said. "Yes," he said, "let's talk some more about sport and music. Those are the true foundations of my life. Sport for the body and of the body, the splendid product of the material world. And music for the soul, the composer's soul

that dwells within each of us.” For a moment, I thought his words would sweep him away, he would forget everything and call to me, “hear how beautifully the words fit the melody.” I thought he would break out into a Hasidic nigun he had just composed and smother me with feverish ecstasy, as he had years before until I could bear it no longer and swore at him.

Dullness, accompanied by an inexplicable anger, had settled over me then, followed by regret and the awful feeling that I had over-reacted. When I cooled off, I had asked his forgiveness although I had not done anything wrong. “Where do the words come from, Be’eri? Where do you get the words now for the nigunim?”

“No problem,” he replied. “They simply come of themselves, from the town, the group of kids I coach, the daily trips to Jerusalem. You are awash in words everywhere. You just need to choose and gather them for the nigunim.”

We sat on the court’s fence and I reminded him of a forgotten chapter of his life before the change. How he had been glued to the little transistor day and night. How he had enraged the men with those night forays. The time when he had refused to shut off the radio. How he had loved the army troupe songs. An addiction like his I had never seen before. He would fall asleep at night with the music fused to his ears. Be’eri suddenly became angry. “Don’t remind me of that time. And please do not remind me of those men. Savage beasts. Like everywhere else, like on the kibbutz, like everywhere in the world. Petty thieves and grubby bandits.” In his anger, I heard a bit of what he had yearned to tell them during the dark days of the war. At the time, he had imposed certain restrictions on himself and would not be induced to react, even once, to their provocations. That lasted until, by order of the battalion physician, he went down to the psychiatric ward in Haifa, both to have his case diagnosed there and to relieve the battalion of his dead weight.

We returned to the rec center and he apologized for not inviting me to his small apartment. “There is nothing at all there and you would be amazed at how much it resembles the little room I left on the kibbutz.” But I was not amazed, for I remembered how little he looked after himself even when we were closer, especially in those searing days when he first fell under the spell of repentance. He had filled his days with endless efforts to convert the soldiers of the battalion to his faith.

Be’eri told me about his studies in Jerusalem, his dazzling encounter with the teaching of the Rambam. He had not understood until the end that the path of moderation was the correct way, the only way for his life. Yes, he could put himself in my place and mock his previous life as I had. I should not think that he was blind to the absurd side of it. No, he saw his life as it was. On the contrary, today, with the breadth of viewpoints he had gained, he could analyze exactly where he had erred in life. But that was not the main thing. What was important was that he had overcome his mistakes, and by his own strength. No one stood at his side, telling him whether he had gone right. Not his father, not his mother, no one from the kibbutz. He himself had grasped the essentials of the Rambam’s teaching. The curiosity kindled in

him was more powerful than the holy thoughts of Rabbi Kook and his followers. He had discovered Rambam's teaching for himself. He questioned his companions only about sentences he did not understand or words he found difficult to comprehend. They warned him not to pursue this course, but he was not intimidated. On his own, he came to realize that he was better off away from the cloistered fellowship of the yeshiva. On his own, he registered for classes at the university. And on his own, he found a master in the Rambam's secrets and rose early for lectures to which he gave his all.

This was his life of late. Alone, he acted by and for himself, slowly but surely. When some months had passed, he found himself changing his dress. He returned to his old clothing and his former habits. Then he fell into financial difficulties. The yeshiva suspended his meager stipend and evicted him from his room. Still, he steeled himself, mind and body. He felt his strength of old reviving ever so slowly. Even his athletic abilities came back, nearly to the level of his wild days on the kibbutz when he had pounded the basketball court from morning to night.

Eventually, he worked up the courage to sever all his ties with them. He left them for a new path of his own. It was precisely then that a friend told him that the town was looking for a youth league basketball coach. He presented himself in the town and was enthusiastically received. I could see for myself how he was rebuilding his life. He bore no grief for what he had lost, only for the precious time squandered on the court at the yeshiva in Jerusalem. Weary from the penetrating, light-filled words of Rabbi Kook, he had gone to a court so strewn with stones that he could not even execute the steps of the game.

We climbed up to the parking lot. Before we parted, I thought of the consequences of his shell shock, and of the operator cooing hot lust and desire into my ears while Be'eri sat beside me, singing and playing holy Hasidic nigunim. I was afraid he would suddenly jostle me on the shoulder, call me by the pet name he had thought up years before, thrust a round stone beneath my feet and shout in my ears, "Smile, old timer, smile. I've seen bigger slobbs than you. Let them see that you once had a wild streak."

About the Author



Elisha Porat, the 1996 winner of Israel's Prime Minister's Prize for Literature, a Hebrew poet and writer, 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 LaGuardia," was released in 1997. His latest work, a book of Hebrew poetry, "The Dinosaurs of the Language," was recently published in Israel. His new poetry eBook, "Growing Old," is now available on the web.

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 Hahosh, a Kibbutz on the Sharon plain near the city of Hadera. Today Porat, devoted to the communal ideal, still makes his home near the original tent erected by his parents back in the early '30s. In 1956, Porat was drafted into the IDF (the Israeli Defence Forces) 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.

As a lifelong member of his Kibbutz, Porat has worked many years as a farmer as well as a writer. His labors in the Kibbutz fruit orchard, perhaps contrasting with his military tours of duty, have always influenced his art. Besides writing, his current endeavors include editorial duties for several literary journals. His translated stories and poems have for years found their way into print, including such publications as *Midstream*, *Tikkun*, *Ariel*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Rattle*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Boston Review*, and others.