

## In Search of Time Gained: The Poetry of Yaara Ben-David

Edith Covensky, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

This essay's title is a contrasting variation of Marcel Proust's monumental work, entitled *In Search of Time Lost*. In both cases, namely, in this essay and in Proust's work, time is retrieved by the power of the pen, by the act of writing, by art itself as a redemptive force. The poems selected for this essay, illustrate this lofty function of the word by which the artist is able to regain collapsed or lost time.

Yaara Ben-David, in her book of poems entitled, *Fragile Balance* [Hebrew, 2015], is pitting time against time while transmuting existence into non-existence in a collage of sights, feelings, thoughts, and sounds.

Although the book consists of sections starting with "Portrait Poems", and ending with "Revolving door," I will treat the theme of time in this collection focusing on poems from the first two sections, namely, "Portrait Poems" and "Voices from the House," concluding with several poems from "Revolving Door."

In the poem "Reaffirmation" from "Portrait Poems", the speaker reclaims her right to buy herself a plot of time while indirectly alluding to her quest to hold on to its fleeting nature. Such a Sisyphean attempt is not only bound to disappoint, but is extremely costly as the speaker confesses: "I buy myself rights/in this plot of time/in which one always pays/in blood..." The key word here is "blood," indicating the high price to be paid for such a self-proclaimed privilege. The speaker buys herself these rights, meaning that they are not given to her by anyone. She feels entitled, and a most deserving beneficiary, claiming them firmly and aggressively.

Furthermore, she attempts to reaffirm her existence by trying to mold both time and language giving the latter tremendous power in uttering her claims, and venting her yearnings while, at the same time, desiring to "draw a line" to such fallacious wishes. And here lies the contradiction: while the speaker feels empowered to claim her "plot of time," she also realizes her limitations with eyes that are "oblivious to their own longing" (thus says the speaker), and a rational that takes the upper hand by drawing its limits.

One may also reflect that by retracting her existence to a “plot of time” she is obliged to set herself boundaries, which might become her comfort zone. She thus, conveniently turns the fleeting nature of time into a plot of, supposedly, solid earth, a small piece of land to which she is ready to hold on to at any cost. In “Panta Rei,” from “Portrait Poems,” Yaara Ben-David refers to the continuous flow of time reminiscent of Heraclites’ philosophy. “Panta Rei” literally means, everything flows, alluding to everything being in a constant state of flux. This fluidity is endless, and ever changing. Thus, life’s realness is, indeed, change itself. The speaker confesses, however, that this “ancient proverb sits within me, silent”, meaning that the principle of “everything flows” becomes muted here. The flow of time, although, inherently changing, is actually turning on its axis since: “What will come is what will truly be.”

The speaker clearly adopts a deterministic viewpoint inferring, perhaps, that what will come is also what must be. In any case, the speaker’s affirmation is definite. Specifics are not indicated, but the poet projects a definite outcome in a future that will, undoubtedly, become a reality, and an undeniable truth. Presumably, this future reality will, in turn, shift in the continuum of time becoming another reality and moving towards another future. Thus, Heraclites’ notion of existence being in a constant flux lurks in the horizon even as one attempts to affirm the realization of a definite truth in a projected time sequence.

Additionally, the poem’s speaker is “busy” looking for a name (even a “fitting pseudonym,”) to define herself in the flow of time. Her stance turns humble as she wishes to “slip like a thread in the eye of a needle.” She cleverly and playfully reinforces her diminutive being, as she attempts to find time for herself, and also find herself in the hasty passage of time.

A further philosophical assertion, in this compact and significant poem, is the uncertainty of the existence of things, as the speaker confesses: “What I see from the corner of my eye/does not necessarily exist.” This existential ambivalence is classic. Assurances are as fleeting as time itself.

In “Different Time,” from “Portrait Poems,” the poet continues her obsession with time by courageously attempting to create herself another reality yearning to pass from “life to life.” In contrast, she is also trying hard to hold on to the “dimming evening” of her existence.

Again, as in “Panta Rei,” the speaker is aware of the fluidity of existence, yet tries to build her “different time” from the shimmering circles of water closing on her as if she were “Robinson’s little island” (referring to the character in Daniel Defoe’s novel, *Robinson Crusoe*.) Like in “Panta Rei,” an existential dwarfing takes place, presumably, offering the speaker some security. Similar to her fictional counterpart, Robinson Crusoe, who survives after isolating himself for twenty-eight years on a deserted island, she too wishes to survive. In her case, however, the isolation is not only a character builder, but also an existential necessity defying time itself.

Moreover, the speaker attempts to create her “Different time,” evoking “birds of Genesis,” moving closer to the primary creation of the cosmos, and beautifully describing the “short leaps” of those birds hopping from “the tree of knowledge to the tree of life,” bringing forth the beginning of time. This passage from the tree of knowledge to the tree of life may also indicate two approaches towards life, namely, for some, there can be no true appreciation of life without cognitive abilities, while for others, true living means consuming life, intuitively. In this latter scenario, man may become a veritable “noble savage”, or a self-ordained force of nature. In addition to these conjectures, the poem’s speaker seems to allude to the fact that “knowledge,” while being a source of all living, becomes effective only if it is applied to life, and living. The birds, in this poem, rightfully hop to the tree of life wishing to secure their own existence.

Ben-David opens her “Worm Poem,” from “Portrait Poems,” with a direct reference to time, connecting it to her writing activity. Both (the concept of time, and her writings), are presented in a casual manner as proclaimed by the poem’s speaker: “I write to pass/the time wandering between embodiments and objects and voices/that no longer come towards me.” Thus, her writing, and time itself cast her “wanderings” aimlessly.

The combination between “embodiments” (“Gufei Nefesh,” in Hebrew, which gives them a matter/spirit character), and tangible objects mixed with certain “voices” lost in space, bring an odd feeling to this, seemingly, wasteful writing activity done for the sole purpose of killing time. This act of writing becomes futile since the mentioned “embodiments, and objects and voices” which once fed her spiritually, no longer reach her. She feels effaced, opaque, and unable to be open to them. Has the speaker faded in time? Or have these objects and voices lost their luster and power to reach her? The reason for writing, and the elements feeding it are no longer effective, and cease to affect her.

The “worm” episode, giving the poem its title, starts in the second stanza of the poem “in unexpected moments.” This worm has color. It is white giving it a kind of peaceful appearance, but also an effaced quality of a pale creature emerging from the “dentelle,” a fine and delicate lace hanging on an “orange wooden windowsill.” This completely detailed description of place and color, accentuate the white-pale worm and its sudden appearance on the “western side between the hall and the kitchen,” a detailed quotidian description adding to the extreme close snapshots viewed in this poem.

Following this miniscule stage setting, the poem’s speaker re-addresses the reader, and exercises her power over that worm by taking charge of its ephemeral short life. The speaker firmly declares: “I let it be/to vanish through one of the cracks.” The speaker, not only preserves the worm, but also saves its life as she lets it disappear through the wall’s crevice.

Is this worm another metamorphosis bringing to mind Gregor Samsa’s transformation to an insect in Franz Kafka’s masterful novella? The causes for this transmutation are never known, nor does Ben-David’s speaker disclose the reason for the presence of a worm in her poem. Is this creature a parable to man’s insignificant and frail existence? Does the speaker wish to undergo a life-saving metamorphosis? As an antidote, however, to this existential frailty, the speaker strongly affirms that unlike a worm getting lost into the

porous concrete, “words are never lost” as they are insistently and permanently engraved on the tablet of the poem.

Although the next poem entitled, “Back to the Wall,” from “Portrait Poems,” does not specifically talk about the concept of time, it does allude to a silent period in the speaker’s life when her voice became shattered, and her “song” was put “on hold.” These lyrics begin with a semi-naïve question by a “conductor” who might be an allusion to the supreme Conductor of life, asking the poem’s speaker to keep singing. The “conductor” insists on wanting to know why she has stopped singing while all the others still sing their song. The question is, of course, rhetorical, giving the impression that the “conductor” might know the answer, but is taunting the speaker who, he suspects, has reached a moment of sobriety. She seems to awake from a time of imaginary bliss, contrary to the other singers. The cynical “conductor” asserts his superiority over her by saying that “first you must ask permission not to sing/even for reasons you keep to yourself...” The ultimate reason, however, indirectly revealed by the “conductor” himself, is the song’s wish (personified here) to take his speaker to “somewhere else.”

This mysterious and far- away place turns out to be “the land of eagles and falcons not far from Dante’s *Inferno*.” While this “somewhere else” could have been an enchanting place, here it’s turned into a place close to hell where eagles (birds of prey), and falcons (with their extraordinary vision), exist side by side.

As the reference to Dante’s *Inferno* appears at the end of the first stanza, god is mentioned at the start of the second. It is a mythological god, a “hunting enthusiast” who “takes time off” while restless birds of malice, described here as “birds of pandemics,” continue their menacing flight across the “Eye-shut skies.” This god remains indifferent to the circling of these awful birds, flying over the speaker’s “honeycomb,” with threatening gazes, aiming to destroy her “sweet” enclave. The last three verses of this dreamlike stanza bring forth the speaker. Her voice is firmly heard shrugging off her miraculous survival from this hellish nightmare, aware of, and seemingly accepting her

effaced existence while she finds herself “back to the wall”/ a face without a mirror,” sharply pointing to the inevitable loss of her identity.

In “Collage,” appearing in “Voices from the House,” the poem’s speaker exposes herself to different periods of time in succession such as the Renaissance, Baroque, and Modernity, confessing that, “After all, again I shall lay all of me and more/in the melting together of times...”, creating a collage of periods and pictures centered around the house that molded her, and from which she regrettably was “plucked away.” It seems that flashbacks of this habitat come back to haunt her, as she is transformed by her imagination, seeing the house through a transparence compared, in surrealistic terms, to a “crystal animal.” The speaker then describes the fabulous exterior of this house of red and gray bricks, sharp contours, towers, supporting columns, and a make-believe Mona Lisa “making love in the window with a pipe-sucking author.” An added persona to these characters is a head peeping into emptiness and in the background a revolving door where no one goes through like in an abstract painting evoking void and lifelessness. The disillusioned speaker asserts that “The end of all flesh as promised did not occur,” yet nothingness exists even as an “ancient man attempts to communicate with residents of the top floor.”

The speaker mixes quotidian images with highly symbolic and surrealistic visual combinations creating an obsessive uneasiness. The reader, in turn, feels haunted attempting to comprehend this odd collage of times and forms revolving around a house that is no longer a place where one wishes to cast his anchor. This transitory state of being forces the speaker to roam through times and places, ultimately, yielding an existential void.

The poem “Flakes,” from “Voice from the House,” treats the subject of a deserted home in a less surrealistic fashion. The descriptions are real and vivid introducing the narration directly, in the first person, from the very beginning. The speaker, obviously shocked by the devastations appearing in front of her, hesitates approaching the decayed house void of people. A timeframe is indicated, mainly, “a year or more,” that the house stands

barren along with other specifications both tangible and abstract as the house is “cleared of its possessions, of breaths, of whispers, of all finest perfumes.” The ghostly remains of “carnal knowledge of an intoxicated woman” later accentuate these sexual connotations. Yet the house and its inhabitants remain a mystery as the speaker confesses nostalgically: “But what really happened between its walls/no one will ever know.” At this point, it seems that the inhabitants are ghosts, spiritually present, as the poem’s speaker wraps their souls in shrouds one upon the other.

Sadly, no one claims them although they are part of this morbid and lifeless house. The structure itself is personified as it’s capable of revealing its presumed past despite its non-protective walls presently destroyed. What remains are, “seashells, sandstone, bricks, sharp as teeth,” belonging to a different time wished for in this poem.

Decay is inevitable as it is part of a cycle of life, “a natural process,” of existence. Yet, in this poem it is premature. The apparent untimely destruction of the house is lamentable while footsteps, in the speaker’s imagination, still surround it. The house appears to be inhabited. The speaker refuses to let go.

The motif of transmutation, as alluded to in the “Worm Poem,” returns in “Metamorphosis,” a poem drawn from “Revolving Door.” Here the reference to “the span of time,” is immediate, and its course, strangely, depends on the flight and gaze of birds comfortably congregating on the, “high-voltage power lines.” These migrating birds seem to return to their “lost kingdom,” the house where the poem’s speaker makes their return comfortable and welcoming.

There is an advantage to the birds’ perspective looking from their pinnacles onto a vista not seen by the human eye. The horizon expands infinitely from the birds’ viewpoint as opposed to the finite perceptions of man.

The poem’s title seems to refer to a desired metamorphosis of a person’s eye into that of a bird’s capable of marking the “span of time” during its seasonal migrations. Time can never be distorted by such abiding cycles of nature; in contrast, the human eye is capable of contracting or expanding time. It seems then, that less complex creatures of nature may

become the dependable agents who can truly measure the inevitable passage of time. Their perspective and scope in this poem become both endless and reliable, dwarfing man's limited capabilities of sight and measure.

In the poem entitled, "Knowing it isn't Possible," from "Revolving Door," the speaker sets the narration of her poem during an "afternoon nap", understood in the context of these lyrics, as an existential slumber where one finds "soft emptiness" mixed with a lingering void. The speaker, giving way to this hour of seemingly repose, cradles herself gently, unafraid of the eventual consequences of sobriety. She remains firmly aware of the impossibility of holding on to illusions, to the fantastic, and to aesthetic pleasures. The banality of life takes over as routine reins man's frail existence. Hope is curtailed as the future is mirrored in the swiftly passing present where "a cat's mewl or an infant's wail" become identical. To clearly illustrate the power and merit of this short poem, I will cite it in its entirety:

Knowing It Isn't Possible

During the afternoon nap, in the soft emptiness  
In which I cradle lightly, fearless,  
It is one and the same whether one's mouth  
Is full with a cat's mewl or an infant's wail,  
Knowing you can't bring back  
The moment that still hold on to  
Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique.

Between invisible shards of glass  
What shall be is what is  
And it too, is no longer.

The poem's speaker leaves us with a feeling of no exit, no solace, no escape where past, present and future converge into a single shattered existence seen through a broken Crystal Ball.

Lastly, Ben David's one stanza poem, "About the End" from "Revolving Door," alludes to the end of days not in the Biblical sense of an elated vision of salvation, but as an



existential collapse characterized by total void. It seems that neither the present nor the future hold promises. Beautiful and muted things become filled with “void and emptiness brimming with nothingness and disgrace.” This is an immensely harsh statement followed by a rhetorical question: “And then what”? What can one expect from such a grim and lifeless decline where “things pile-up like inside-out clothing.” No answer is given to these questions. They remain open, echoing a basic existential malaise.

At this point, the poem’s speaker turns to her counterpart and proclaims: “Time was cast between us.” This brief and definite declaration points to the passivity of these two characters having no control over the passage of time. Moreover, time is presented here as an obstacle between the two, as a barrier where “footprints go so far”, while faces turn blurry in the “stub of night.” Most of all, there is a collapse of words, but luckily and amazingly, they fall inwardly “like building blocks”, providing a base for a new creation, for building another reality, more solid, perhaps, than the one crushed by the course of time.

In conclusion, Ben-David, presents in these selected poems from *Fragile Balance*, a vulnerable existence where people, objects, expected and unexpected situations are about to shatter. Voices become muted, lights are dimming, and things get lost in a vanishing and crude reality.

Should the poet keep singing? Should the bard aspire to a more promising world? Is there a fantastic universe? Should man please the “Conductor” of life? Should one accept the premise of time being a formidable agent of destruction and decay? In turn, the purgatory process presented, here, seems to lead to a world of creativity and aesthetic gratifications where words can never go astray, where the “end of all flesh” may be the beginning of a beautiful and fictional reality. Holding on to the imagination, to the fantastic, to the existence of endless words and their infinite combinations, seems to bring solace and personal salvation. This wishful balance may be fragile, but the possibility of redemption by the written word, engraved on the page, does exist as proven by these very sobering poems densely written by a wise, daring, and cautious poet.

**Full texts of Yaara Ben-David's poems that appear in this essay, translated from Hebrew by Naama Sheffer (as numbered in the translation). These poems appear in Ben-David's new poetry collection in English translation, entitled *Blood Red Strawberries*:**

1. Reaffirmation

I buy myself rights  
in this plot of time  
in which one always pays  
in blood-red strawberries,  
to later draw the line for eyes  
oblivious to their own longing.  
The beauty is in the fruit that has ripened and slowly soured  
and is already molded in the language  
like a contradiction within itself.

2. Panta Rei

All that time I was busy  
searching for the fitting pseudonym,  
appropriate,  
through which I shall slip like a thread  
in the eye of a needle.  
I must find time for myself  
even as I must find myself  
in time. What I see from the corner of my eye  
does not necessarily exist.  
Everything flows - an ancient proverb  
sits within me, silent.  
What will come is what will truly be.

3. Different time

At this hour, when passing from life to life  
and casting nets into the fathoms of the dimming evening

I make myself a different time  
from the ripples of a stone hammering the water

and from the water closing on me in a ripple  
as if I were Robinson's little island.

Time is created from the short leap of the birds of Genesis  
from the tree of knowledge to the tree of life.

#### 4. Worm poem

I write to pass  
the time wandering between embodiments and objects and voices  
that no longer come towards me.

In unexpected moments  
a white worm emerges from the dentelle  
on the orange wooden windowsill  
on the western side between the hall and the kitchen.  
And then in the bright light  
I let her be,  
to vanish through one of the cracks.  
Words are never lost.

#### 6. Back to the wall

Why do you not sing, asks the conductor,  
what kind of singer are you that you are silent when all are singing?  
First you must ask permission not to sing  
even for reasons you keep to yourself:  
for getting lost in the notes, for the voice in you shattered,  
for your song has long been sitting "on hold", waiting  
to take you somewhere else,  
to the land of eagles and falcons  
not far from Dante's inferno.

When god - a known hunting enthusiast -  
takes time off,  
the birds of pandemics do not stop to rest.  
Eye-shut skies  
circle over my honeycomb.  
So what if I've survived the night,

my back to the wall,  
a face without a mirror?

#### 10. Collage

The transparency of the house like a crystal animal.  
Bricks red and grey sharpen the contours  
of the towers,  
the cornices, the columns supporting front and back.  
Mona Lisa making love in the window with a pipe-sucking author,  
between the pages of the shutters a head  
peeps into emptiness. A door rolls over.

The end of all flesh as promised did not occur, but  
the renaissance touched the baroque and the modern, the middle pillars,  
the ceilings, the capitals and the corridors.  
There, above a spiral staircase  
a nothingness made of lead,  
an ancient man dials touch with nerve ends  
to the residents of the top floor.

And after all, again I shall lay all of me and more  
in the melting together of times, in this house that is my mold  
from which I rose and was plucked away.

#### 11. Peeling / Flakes

I dare not approach the house  
that has been stripped of its people,  
and not because of corrosion.  
For a year or more it stands this way  
cleared of its possessions, of breaths, of whispers, of all the finest perfumes,  
of the grating of objects dragged over floors, of the taste of tongue and palate,  
of the carnal knowledge of an intoxicated woman.  
But what really happened between its walls,  
no one will ever know.

Wraps of the soul lie on each other  
no one to claim them  
they are part of the house that was built to resemble itself,  
revealing its past through a defeated wall, destroyed:

Seashells, sandstone, bricks sharp as teeth  
no space between them nor shivering knocks,  
belong to a different time.

If not for the destruction, the decay would have been a natural process.  
But now footsteps fall  
and surround the house  
and all that may still be in it.

### 35. Metamorphosis

The span of time depends on the birds  
comfortable along the high-voltage power lines.  
And with a coo-filled flap of wings they patter the roof of my house  
as if returning to a lost kingdom  
where I paint a window and leave  
empty space before it  
and empty space behind it  
to make room for them  
where perspective allows to see  
what I cannot see with the eyes of the flesh.

### 37. Knowing it isn't possible

During the afternoon nap, in the soft emptiness  
in which I cradle lightly, fearless,  
it is one and the same whether one's mouth  
is full with a cat's mewl or an infant's wail,  
knowing you can't bring back  
the moment that still holds on to  
Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Between invisible shards of glass  
what shall be is what is  
and it, too, is no longer.

### 38. About the end

In the end things pile up like an inside-out piece of clothing,  
in the end things stretch their necks, anticipating,  
in the end the truly beautiful things, the mute things,  
that now are shut of eyes and lips  
and filled with void and emptiness, brimming with nothingness and disgrace  
and then what?

Time was cast between us.  
The footprints go so far  
a face no more, only one stub of light  
and words collapsing inward like building blocks.