

To Create A Universe:

Poets from the Twelfth Annual
Poetry B-i A* & Friends Reading
Held in Jerusalem at Tmol Shilshom Bookstore & Cafe
May 19, 2014



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*The Annual Poetry B-i A Alumni Poetry Readings have been produced as an independent alumni program that is not affiliated with Bar-Ilan University. As poetry is an inclusive endeavor, premier poets and representatives from Israeli and international poetry organizations are often invited to read, as our guests, along with BIU poets. Join us on Facebook – Poetry B-iA: <http://www.facebook.com/poetry.barilan>

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~Introduction~

Introduction

Poetry was preserved in costly manuscripts, and performed in front of live audiences for thousands of years before the invention of the printing press made it possible for the general public to own and read books of poems. The Annual Poetry B-i A Alumni Poetry Readings provide a platform for Bar-Ilan University's student and alumni poets, from Bar-Ilan University's Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing, to read their poems in public.

The reading program was born in 2002 along with the first class of Bar-Ilan University's Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing in Israel. While still a master's student, I saw the need to provide a public reading platform for Bar-Ilan's student and graduate poets. This idea received the generous support and participation of fellow BIU creative writing students and faculty. Since then, the Poetry B-i A, Alumni Poetry Readings have been produced annually as an independent alumni program that is not affiliated with Bar-Ilan University.

As poetry is an inclusive endeavor, premier poets: representatives from Israeli and international poetry organizations are often invited to read, as our guests, along with BIU poets. On Monday, May 19, 2014 at Tmol-Shilshom in Jerusalem poets from IAWE, Voices, Stanza and, for the first time, the Jerusalem Poetry Workshop joined us for the 12th Annual Poetry B-i A.

The Jerusalem Poetry Workshop, which is comprised of BIU and other poets, has been meeting weekly for five years. Its poets bring finished poems or works in progress to share and critique. They also discuss various aspects of writing and poetry.

This poetry chapbook is the creation of LynleyShimat Lys from the Jerusalem Poetry Workshop. It contains poems by poets from the spring 2014 reading.

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Ira Director

July 2014

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~ Contributors ~

Contributor Bios

Michael Dickel teaches in the English Literature program at BIU. He co-edited Voices Israel 36 (2010) and was managing editor of ARC-23 (2013). His prize-winning poetry, stories, & photographs have appeared in journals, books, & online—including: ARC, Voices Israel, Sketchbook, Zeek, Poetry Midwest, Neon Beam, why vandalism?, & Poetica Magazine. His latest book of poems is Midwest / Mid-East (available on Amazon). Fragments of Michael Dickel can be found at: <http://MichaelDickel.info>

Chicago born artist and poet **Ira Director** has published in journals, as well as exhibited art where his poems appear as an integral element of the paintings. Teaching academic, business and high tech English was made possible because of his MA from Bar-Ilan University. Visit Ira and Poetry from Bar-Ilan Alumni, Poetry B-iA: <http://www.facebook.com/poetry.barilan>

Rita Mendes-Flohr is a member of the JPW, a visual artist, writer and avid trekker. Much of her writing – creative nonfiction and poetry - is inspired by her travels and hiking. After leaving her native Curaçao in the Dutch Caribbean, she studied at Brandeis University, then settled in Jerusalem in 1970. Her memoir "House without Doors" on growing up in the Sephardic Jewish community of Curaçao, was published in Hebrew translation in 2013. See her work at: www.ritamendesflohr.phanfare.com and www.Housewithoutdoors.blogspot.com

The **Jerusalem Poetry Workshop**, JPW, has been meeting weekly for five years. Its poets bring finished poems or works in progress to share and critique. They also discuss various aspects of writing and poetry. The JPW is looking to expand with serious poets interested in giving and getting critique and making a weekly commitment. Contact Rita Mendes-Flohr at: rmendes@netvision.net.il

Born in England, **Mark Joseph** has lived in Israel for nearly 14 years. He is interested in how poetry is a unique form of reflection and address. Mark works as a language editor and translator, and has one yoga student, one dog, 2 passports, one good sun hat, and many unwritten books. He earned his MA from the Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University.

LynleyShimat Lys, a member of the Jerusalem Poetry Workshop, is also a playwright, and essayist living in Jerusalem. Lynley does social media work for H_NGM_N. Recent work appears in the chapbook "Turn up the Volume: Poems about the States of Wisconsin," a project of Poets for First Amendment Protection, and in the journals Verse Wisconsin, Deep Water Literary Journal, Leaves of Ink, and Flashquake. Website: <http://lynleyshimatlyspoetry.weebly.com/>

Sheffi Raiskin is a licensed and practicing bibliotherapist trained in Somatic Experiencing. Extremely good at getting other people to write, she finally took a dose of her own medicine, and joined a poetry writing workshop in BIU. She has been a part of the JPW for the past couple of years. Her works have been printed by Lexmark (her husband's laser printer). This is the first time she's been let out of the attic.

Dafna Renbaum is a freelance writer and translator. While watching flowers grow she obsesses and writes about nature and family. Dafna is a member of the JPW, and was part of the first BIU graduating class in poetry. Her first book will be forth coming as soon as she gets the poems out of her dog's mouth. Dafna has recently begun facilitating creative writing workshops for populations in need.

Alexandra Rosen received a BA from University of Vermont in English Literature in 2010. She is living in Jerusalem, teaching English, freelancing and doing her MA in the Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University.

Mike Stone, from Stanza, was born in Columbus Ohio in 1947. He graduated from Ohio State University with a BA in Psychology. He served in the US Army and the Israeli Defense Forces. Mike has published a book of poetry and three science fiction novels. He is currently working on two new books of poetry. Mike moved to Israel in 1978 and lives in Raanana. He is married and has three sons and five grandchildren.

Yael Unterman generally tries to make money from her talents and hobbies, but so far her poetry has remained practically unsullied by the filthy lure of Mammon. And how much money can you make from poetry anyway? Yael graduated BIU in 2006, and the book of stories emerging from that, entitled "The Hidden of Things: Twelve Stories of Love and Longing," has now been published by Yotzeret.

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~Michael Dickel~

How to create a universe

If an all encompassing Deity,
 withdraw a bit to make room,
then emanate (skip next stanza)...

If a random event in Time and Space,
 explode into existence,
then expel (go to next stanza)...

Strings of dark matter,
 like tree branches,
massive cracks, or neurons;

Dark energy—an unseen light—
 circulating like spring sap,
or dripping like juice from a shattered cup,
 or leaking like psychotic neurotransmitters;

Until the tree reaches
 everywhere that wasn't,
or the cracks spread past history,
 or the neurons stretch beyond webs;

Then, along these lines,
 ignite sparks,
fireworks, and lightning

Where energy dances out to
 mass and matter
exceeds all expectations while

Spiraling glimmers, which we will call
 stars, in a dark night,
which we will call space—

When we come to call
 anything something somewhere
on our bit of blue-green dust thus dreamt—

All form like synaptic tendrils
 that fire thoughts and mix
metaphors along a tree of cracks
 on a cosmic scale

(Whether of justice or probability
 may never be revealed,
or at least not until the last

Thought), arriving at an imagined universe
 theoretically consistent
with itself.



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Suddenly

The children fly out of the synagogue

Dressed in white shirts and shorts

And dresses with petticoats

Trying to be first on the swings

And slides and teeter-totters

Their voices yelling happily

Safely cradled in their parents' certainty

That today of all days

Maybe the war won't begin

But the war always begins

It's just a matter of time.



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Ants

~*Alexandra Rosen*~

My spelt blueberry muffins
have been annexed,
overrun.

They are scaling
muffin peeks,
rushing in circles
of excited frenzy.

*This has gone
too far, I tell you.
Not my muffins! This
is the last straw.*

In numbers we are bested,
in strategy, technology.
We might as well surrender.
Summer hasn't even begun
and what a long war is coming.
*I don't have the strength
to fight, I say, and you say,
To fight a war you must hate
the other side. It makes it easier
to be brutal.*

We wikipedia *ant's sense of smell*
to study what we're up against.
We find out that ants do smell,
well, they have censors, at least.
They are more organized
than we had realized.
They send scouts out
to bring back the lay
of the land and little crumbs
to the colony to taste test targets.
Their trails, for example,
their path to our honey jar,
is marked by secreted trails
invisible to the naked human eye.

These ambitious insects
truly search everywhere.
Sometimes they are so far
from anything sweet,
wandering across a landscape
of mascara and earrings.
I almost want to bend
down and say,
*Hey little creatures,
you're way out of your way
there. Let me give you
a map of my house
so you can better*

steal my food.

Sometimes they are so close,
I just want to whisper,
Oh, oh, just a little south---
You're almost there.

Once we found them doting
on a sticky yellow wildflower,
and wherever we would move it
they would find it immediately,
and rush to it in droves,
to perform their cultish flower rites,
their ancient homage rituals
to a giant, sweet and sticky god.

There are so many holes now.
We are surrounded.
I drown and crush them daily.
This is my house, after all, isn't it?
You say, *In war the fiercest*
side wins, as you track them back
to their holes like a hunting dog.
You have become an expert.
And then you spray poison
in every nook and crack.
The ants come out
and seizure slightly,
a faint and deathly quiver,
and their little ant-legs wobble
and then they lay still.

This is how they die
in the corners of each room.
And you leave them there like that
and I don't clean them up for days.
Sometimes I don't even notice
those little black dots
subtly sprawled,
frozen in the scene of the massacre,
easily mistakable for dust
to the corner of the eye.

And then after a couple days,
or maybe even a week,
I see two ants
crawling the bath tub ring,
one ant teaching his new recruit
ant intelligence,
perhaps how to secrete
their secret trail,
or how to find the honey jar,
and I know they are just
regrouping after the killing spree.

It is then that I see
that this is endless.
We are trapped
in an eternally cycle
of domestic violence,
you, the ants, and I.



© Ira Director

Sisyphus

One hundred,
One hundred and one,
I count, for counting
Is all I have.

I tell myself,
the stone has
a different face, each time -
as I roll it up
the blighted crag,
in a rut worn down
by my scabrous feet -
a different face than last time,
last hour,
last week.

But when it rolls down,
I know it is
the same stone;
rolling down,
speeding away
from me,
like one more
rejecting lover.

One hundred and two.

- - -

I got a fax yesterday,
It said, Sisyphus, we are with you,
We are sorry for your
endless labours,
From the Johannsons, Norway.

I get emails from around the world,
Sometimes flowers and chocolates,
Once, oddly, a toy frog.
They swamp me in kind words,
Pity, sympathy.

But I know if I stopped,
dropped,
They would not bury me.
They would rush
to find another.

Someone must always push,
that heavy stone.

I don't mind anymore.
As Camus said,
A face that toils so close to stones
is stone itself.

- - -

I was a king once, I think,
in a place called Corinth, I remember marble walls.
Rich, young, I was
filled with cunning, as
a beehive with honey;
I fooled Death himself – I think.

Perhaps it was just a dream.
For my name then was Siss and Fuss,
And now my name is
Bottom-Top-Bottom-Top.

Once, someone came and
told me I could stop,
The gods were tired of my toil;
bored. Enough.
From Bottom,
I looked at him,
hair sweaty-matty in my eyes, and
with my granite muscles,
leaned forward,
put my arms around my Rock –

kissed it. And
began rolling it again towards Top.

drainage and evaporation

the rain becomes
part of the building
its many pointed
sound converts
to morose dripping

trapped, downward
movement become
a heavy residue

a mile's easy momentum
disrupted and begun again
for very little
indeed

unless perhaps
it has gained a kind of coherence

a dank hand
after that spacious
fall in light
from serial ease
to something like a gesture

sky to eave
cloud to wooden edge

a final refraction
faintest memory
of the heaving cycle



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"Dialectic"

There is the hidden of things
Mountainous stomach
facade of womb
secret place of mysticism infused into embryo
 membranes, blood, pulsing sticky liquids.

Other things not meant for sight:
 cry into fresh sheets
 sex
 reptile under stone
 vulnerability
 unsaid saidnesses

Creator

Yet for all things a season
a time to open
 open arms

 open before shrinks
 open on talk-shows
 before the nation

lay out your intestines
be proud
glisten, glow, flow, spout
everything's out
"I felt"
"You said"
"Can't you be"
describe
define
analyse
and describe again
 till a perfect you,
 is on public view

and you
are left empty as the grave



Living Together Apart

In the sweltering Middle Eastern *hamsin*

our eyes locked for the second

I drove past him.

He stood on the barren Judaean roadside

with his two wives, hoping for a ride.

I wished I could stop, as I drove the kids to the pool.

I wished I could share the feel of the cool air conditioner

on my face.

I wished I could be

human.

I could feel his sweat

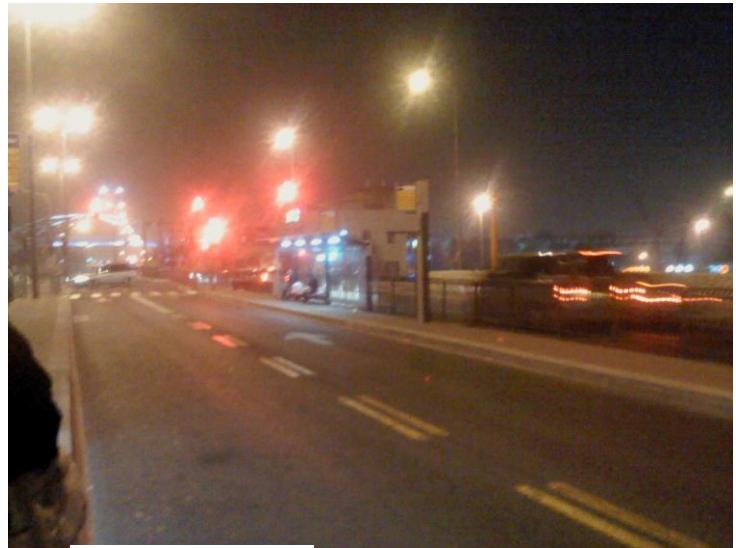
I could feel his resignation

and mine,

I drove on.

The Jerusalem Light Rail

My apartment housed deep
in the heavy spring mist.
Cats are fighting over smoked fish
on the streets. I hear them howling
downstairs. The hallway tiles are cold
as another person's bones.
My feet won't stop walking
this long hallway, this hallway
long and cold.
I went one stop too far
on the train tonight
and on this train one stop *is* too far.
The windows were misted.
I got off bewildered
into another world.
Standing on the platform
waiting for the next train
back to where I'd come from,
surrounded by Arab men
eyeing my bright orange rain coat,
I tried to cover my head with my hood,
to cover the covering,
the most obviously Jewish part,
to pretend I was just an American,
pretend I was only a stupid,
blonde American stumbled
into a neighboring ghetto.



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Memories of Strangers

Autumn crisp as crackling leaves

Slakes the thirst of summer with its rains.

Clouds portentous in their dreaming

And the tangy sweetness of green skinned clementines.

The streets and sidewalks beside the coffee houses

Are washed and the posters on the kiosks are cleansed

The bitter coffee in the smudged glass

Slows scalding the fingers and the lips.

You sit two tables away from me

Reading a dog-eared book of poetry.

You look up, I look away,

And are unaware you are in my poem.

You will remember the first day of autumn

And I'll remember you.

Storyteller Ceremony

*She had some horses she loved.
She had some horses she hated.*

These were the same horses.

—Joy Harjo, *She Had Some Horses*

Although she had once ridden a horse while wearing white
buffalo robes, but then only to entice a man who
spiraled toward an unpleasant truth, although
once *she had some horses*, and rode one
while wearing buffalo robes,
now she sits alone in this emptiness of a room,
a place like the long bar of the keyboard
in front of her—a nothing that defines the limits of
words: a space, a boundary.

Before her, the keyboard
waits in the emptiness.
For what?
Some word?
Some space?
Some (re)collection—
a seduction that almost didn't happen?
The leading astray from one story—
even if the wrong story—
into another story, the one empty,

the other full of sound?

Or not? What story?
did she leave behind
to tell this one? What story?
will she enter, only to again leave?

What could she say that would turn
the noise between spaces
into words, that mattered
as much as words or emptiness?

Or, maybe better to say when? When
could she say what she knew? When
did she know that the stories, circling
each other, were the same story:
the wrong story and the one that would
lead him, this dizzy, spiraling man Tayo,
someplace else? When do emptiness
and words become language, a story?

She shifts closer to the keyboard,
reaches her hands toward it,
stretches her fingers out into
the air above the keys.

Her fingers breathe in each letter
then slowly begin, one by one,
dancing to a running
rhythm she never
before heard.

(includes references to Leslie Marmon Silko's books *Ceremony* and *Storyteller*)



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Hansel and Gretel Revisited

What if she hears us plotting
whispering in the sleeping house
to take her deep into the forest

not to lose her, God forbid,
or even just silently hope like their father
that the children would somehow survive.

Instead this is our way
to keep her

to lead her to a trail
where she may rouse her own slumbering talents
in a life made of more than sugar.

Maybe inside the wild forest
our Gretel will find the key to her cage
push her inner witch
deep into the burning furnace
and shut it forever.

Maybe she will see the trees and not just the forest.

She might focus on the bread though, always there
in her pocket
ready to mark the way
as she searches for the path to the familiar home

not for the cruel treatment of the stepmother
but for that nook of comfort

that warm place we all yearn for
where our hand reaches knowingly to the right shelf in the cupboard

yet, she may wake up one day
to realize
yes, it is soothing

but baking your own bread
tastes
even better.

The Place Least Busy

The place that is least busy with other things so it can reflect the sky
is that smooth shelf between sand and water
that drains and never loses its sheen
but even here decadent bubbles
all on a parallel, froth, nothing
stain the window

whereas the edge that moves
doesn't perhaps register
the sun's height
though it'd be nice to think it did
the sun that stings as soon as it's warm

It's time in another sense
that manufactures this recession
a local time
built from the hill
that is this slope
a shelf, it's the rim
of the sea bowl

and I think it is not for tidal reasons
that above the shelf is a place that cannot reflect

it's itself, opaque, sand
monad, damp but no sheen
no bubbles. It doesn't do anything
it is the outer edge
of the sea bowl
but sometimes the salt
glaze encroaches
making it brief mirror

but mostly these layers are well established

shale, dry sand, do nothing, mirror

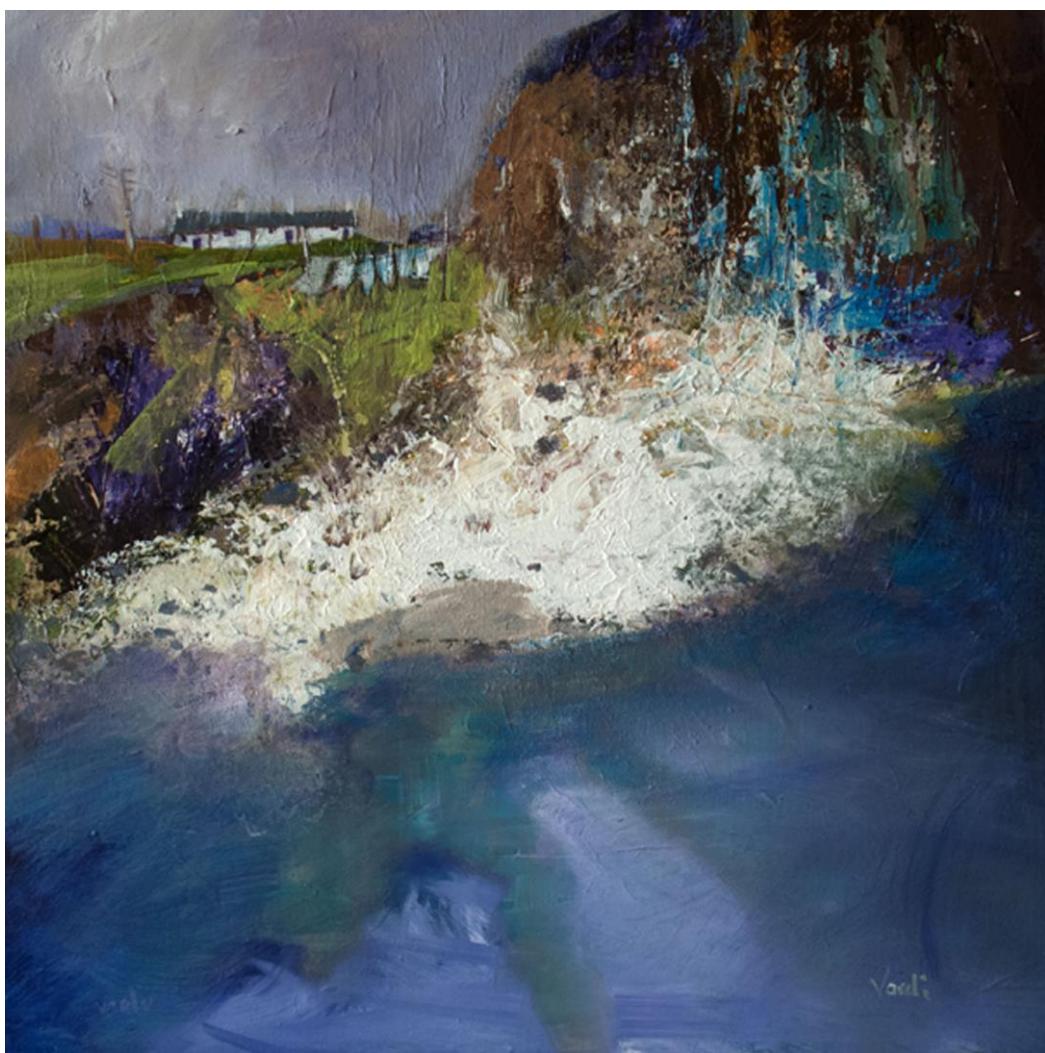
Whitewash

Whitewash
With a lush, soft brush,
Slashed even and smooth
Over bump and stains.

And we try to forget
The people we upset
The things we did
Out of weakness and pain.

Whitewash,
With a thick, harsh brush
Sloshed wishfully
over blots and marks.

See nice, fresh wall
In bedroom and hall.
But we don't forget
Under white – it's dark.



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The Dust Storm

Sign-plastered buildings
shrouded in dust.
It captures the city
like Caesar taking Rome.

Dust has unsettled
the desert again.
Is this Jerusalem
or is it the African dry lands
or is it Mars in summertime?

A day without buses
or trains, a street
with only prayers
echoing through nasal
horn-shaped speakers.

Women watch and read
psalms, rolling their carriages
back and forth. They have come
to watch a wrestling match
between two invisible giants,
grappling and stumbling
across the city, kicking up
dust in the struggle.

Streets thick with black-suits
and long-beards marching
past graveyards and falafel shops,
occupying intersections
circled by police,
bearing signs saying,
To Jail, not to the Army.

They walk by in graceful
progression, emerging
from the dust,
waving signs like first fruits,
waving signs in pious drama.
Some will call it holy,
some, insanity.
The daily news
will tell us it's
medieval and mad.
This is the Chareidi neighborhood.
The other side is silent.
This is an ancient war.
The sky darkens and it's hard to know
whether it's dust or twilight.

~ Mark Joseph ~

Reverie

Daytime illusions create all the confusion – Kenni Burke

The impulse to sit morphs the will to say anything. On a cool evening reminiscent of summer, in diaspora, walking the dog. Our faculties are as divided as the class. What we know translates, more or less – as a membrane connects us to music, fluid and solid. Theory holds meaning unsaid. So all is not lost and yet: The saying becomes distraction, a *raison d'être*, the division of finger and moon obscured. Our conception of meaning fits certain meanings, the ones that can be grasped tight. To hold on betrays lightness of certain knowledge, inwardly, on a scaffolding of thought that has no more left the orbit of feeling than a boy safe within earshot of his mother.



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Phone philosophy—the beginning of an unfinished story

Is it safe there? Are you okay? She asks every time I call her.

No, I want to say. I almost got hit by a car crossing the street in Tel Aviv. I was in the crosswalk, the light was in my favor, but the driver was in a hurry. The drivers here, I want to tell her, are the real danger. I have to watch out every time I'm on the road; driving defensively doesn't begin to cover it. It's like they aim at you. So, you start driving offensively.

It's the aggression on the roads—the constant horns, the lights flashing, drivers screaming to get out of the way when there is no place to move to and cars in front of you as far as you can see. The cars that just push into your lane, right next to you even, without signaling, not that it would matter, because you don't see the signal of a car trying to occupy the same space your car is in.

Didn't these drivers study physics? Two objects cannot occupy the same space, no way, not at the same time. Ka-boom. The universe blows up or something.

But this isn't what she means. Driving is dangerous everywhere, she would say. She worries. She means, don't you want to come back home?

And insane driving isn't what I mean. Maybe I am home, I guess, but it doesn't always feel right. I want things to be smoother, more gentle somehow, more fair. But where is everything fair? So, it could be that I'm already home. I'm just not sure, though.

So, I say I'm safe.

Easy to Say

I know it's easy to say,
Watching through the dark glass window
From the silent parking lot
Late at night
The pulsing red and violet beams
And clouds of smoke
The scantily clad young women
In slacks and shorts and skirts with slits
And young men in jeans and tee-shirts
And jackets with upturned collars,
That life is for the living
But it's not I think
Turning away into the depths of night.
To say that easy thing
Would be to say that I don't have room in my life
For my father, his last days
And putting him in the ground
Under clumps of moist soil and grass.
How could I say that easy thing
That cannot pass my lips
About any of the other ghosts I think of
When my heartbeat tries to count to some higher number
Than what will be?
And as I near the number of what will be
I think to myself that
If life is just for the living
Then maybe it's not for me.

The First Year of Mourning

The first year of mourning wobbles
with the hesitant steps
of a child
whose primal forces
push him
to get back onto
unsure feet to
reach the other
side of the room.
He falls again
and again, his small hands
reach out for something to hold onto.

The first year of mourning is to leave a home.
It is a frantic run
to find what you lost
before you move on.
It is a search for pieces
you can no longer find,
it is to search for things
you know you
have left behind
before the moving truck's heavy doors
slam shut.

The first year of mourning is the tide of oceans
pulled by the moon's
waning and waxing,
crashing tides
carrying sand and shells
angry tides that
turn things over, that uncover the buried.

There are moments though
when the ocean's lull, foams at the surface
when moments tease us
with the promise of healing.

We attempt to build a sand castle
knowing the water could come, could wash it all away.
We attempt to build something safe
but, the water takes us by expected surprise.
It sweeps our fragile offerings, the
clumsy efforts our heavy hands managed
to build.

Like crabs, we poke our heads out and skitter
cautiously across the wet sand.

Like the child, we are never quite sure
if we stand

on firm ground.
We fall
reaching out to hold onto each other.

But when the metaphors
are exhausted
and our souls drained
of the task,
all that is left is

your absence

again

every day,

and we know that
many more months
many more years
will follow

this first year
of mourning.



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Following

Crumbling bread burnt,
charred before Pesach and
pocket bread bits dumped,
washed away to
tomorrow for Rosh Hashanah.

Take me back to fields,
wheat grown and golden
waiting to be gathered in.

Take me back to loaves
raised from the earth,
shared sustenance.

Woven loaf, a path
of possibility, blessed with
tastes, salted with tears
sacrificed at the Temple
of remembrance and forgetting.

Take me back to ovens
hot in the kitchen,
the scent of hot bread.

Take me back to yeast,
rising dough in a bowl
and small hands helping.

Unraveling trails left
behind and bird-eaten during
hikes through stony hills
above the desert heat
and below sky waters
take me back to time,
swept forward and back
into revelations of you—
take me back to bread,
a beginning with an end,
a bite to eat, water to drink.

Originally appeared online in Drash Pit, May 23, 2013
(http://drashpit.com/Main/The_Text/Entries/2013/5/23_Michael_Dickel_6.html).

~Alexandra Rosen ~

On Visiting A Jewish Family in the Arab Quarter

We are climbing up stairs that gather
like an ancient woman's skirts,
spiraling the courtyard lemon tree.
The old city stones
at the heart of the building
seem haunted with secrets.

Up at the top there are guards on the roof.
We turn around, and like a flower
opening from a bitter sleep,
the Temple Mount looks up at us,
dilated and exposed, a giant eye,
with the golden dome its pupil.

When we wail at the Wailing Wall
we are nowhere near this close,
close as if we were hovering
just above her, about to land,
squinting so we can imagine,
almost see, the blurry form
of a Third Temple rising
like oil from the ground,
some kind of holographic ghost.
But, our brains cannot contain
the image for more
than a fraction
of a second,
as if the world wants
to spit out this vision.
In a world that loves buildings,
that always has room for one more,
this is one building too big
for it to stomach.

“The Arabs go up and pray there
every Friday night,” our hostess says.
Looking from above,
I see Arab children
playing football across the ruins
of the Temple courtyard,
perhaps where the copper
alter once stood.

Jerusalem swelling on all sides,
we see what we couldn't
see downstairs. The newspapers
are all wrong.
Like a fog lifting from the city,
I see things clearly.
I see the ancient widow,
the kidnapped virgin,

the loyal wife waiting for news,
being defiled under the watch
of her very own husband.
I hear her wailing back
from behind a wall of stone.



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Salat of the Sus, Carob Juice Hymn

I have been to Gaza, for a few hours
I wandered, taking in the sound of the bayya' sus,
samovar on his back, selling carob juice,
the sand creeping into the streets,
the salt air, unfinished buildings, expanding.
I have one card in a game
of memory tiles, I want to revisit
Gaza, scene of an accidental pilgrimage.
But the borders change. No way in, and no way out.

Is it the sea that calls to me, incantatory,
waves of madness? Or the salt air, the sands?
Oh siren, that city on the green Mediterranean,
water to the oil of the West Bank olive groves.
I went to Gaza once, memory is sand dunes
against the wind and the tides, waves
upon waves, refining like sand in the oyster
small stones retained in a sieve – I don't
remember. The face in the mirror
disappears as you turn away, and Gaza City
is a memory card that has no match,
a palimpsest rewritten in the grey language
of déjà vu and the ocean's sober clairvoyance.
Along the shore, the sea at Tel Aviv
and Jaffa can travel
where I cannot.

The Gaza Strip, Razza as it rolls
off my tongue, stretches
its narrow length along the water, pride
of fishermen and seafood, flat sandy coast.
If grains of sand were magic dust, Gaza is
enchanted, unfinished buildings astound the eye,
a magic sandcastle illusion.

I am not allowed back by a trick
of history, an erasure. An arbitrary
line splits the sand, it bisects
Israel and Palestine, place and time,
the land of Canaan
and the Ottoman districts,
the line slices through me,
tattoos me, and denies me
the kiss of a fish that might
unbind my feet.

Previously published in VerseWisconsin

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~*Mike Stone*~

The Father, the Son, and the Ghost

Don't look for me in the grassy graveyard,

Beside that rocky dirt path

Just because my bones are buried there.

You know you never looked for me

In my tortured aging body

While I was living out

The end of my days.

You always looked for me

In the things my soul

Pressed to its heart,

Yourself and your sister

And your mother, my wife.

You've always known

Without us saying

Where to look for me.

And when you do finally find me,

There was a time I could

Out hide you,

Outrun you,

When you do find me

We'll have a good laugh together.

I'll tell you about the cherry bomb when

I was a kid

And I'll tell you anything you want to know

Except what it's like to die.

Don't look for me in my middle aging body

And in the end of my days

Don't look for me in the sandy grave

Where my useless body will be buried.

Would that it were burnt as an offering

To the rain.

Look for me in the things

My soul has pressed to its heart,

My wife, my truest love,
Yourself and your brothers,
Your children, born and unborn,
My dogs, living and dead,
My books, written and read,
And when you do finally find me,
There was a time I could
Out hide you,
Outrun you,
When you do find me
We'll have a good laugh together.
I'll tell you about the craziness
When I was a kid
And I'll tell you anything you want to know
Except what it's like to love.

Don't look for me in churches or synagogues or mosques
Just because they pray to me there.
Don't look for me in your priests or rabbis or imams
Who forge my name in their documents.
Don't look for me on your side of the battlefield
With your swords and bombs
Soaked in the blood of your saviors.
Look for me in the things
My soul has pressed to its heart,
The thinness between nightfall and dawn,
The whisper of butterfly wings,
The time that rushes and lingers at its own pace,
The world as it was before you came
And the world as it will be after you go.
When you do finally find me,
There was a time I could
Out hide you
Outrun you,
When you do find me
We'll have a good laugh together.

I'll tell you about the time
I was god of your innocence
And I'll tell you anything you want to know
Except what it's like to be alive.



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*Watsu
in a pool overlooking the Beit Zayit reservoir*

I lie here in water, bathed
in light,
swayed like seaweed, swung out
in an arch, hauled back
to my watsu teacher's
breast

and for a moment I become a baby
once more (the one who almost died
at birth)
while I fill
with relief, oh what a relief,
at not having to stand guard, to eternally
stand guard
in order to stay
alive

With no feet on the ground, I dissolve,
like that photo with my head
blurred

A winged bird, a skin diver, I hover
in outer space, as my smile ripples out
to the reservoir in the valley below

Then my teacher stops all movement
and I become a rock, my lungs are hard,
my chest is sinking

and I hear my mother cry
she's tired of being blind, of staying alive
too long

If only I could hold her in my arms
and let her dive
beneath the surface with me
to find her sleep
in this sweet, wet
silence

**watsu –or ‘water shiatsu’, is a form of body massage performed in water*

*Palestine Sunbird**

You suddenly flutter
in my hair, transforming
into a sunbird, drawn
to my hair's red hues, deeper than
the few red feathers
of a sunbird breast.
Pause here, flickering, a little
longer. Stay a moment
while the meeting
of our eyes regulates
our heartbeats in one rhythm.
Hold my gaze, I will not stir
or disturb your wings.
I will not try to catch you
in my hands, if you linger,
eye to my eye, thus.
A million invisible
movements
every second
hold you in the air.
I am a flower
while you hover there.
Until the sound
of your song
takes its place
among the *qasidas*.



© Ira Director

*The Palestine Sunbird is a small songbird, similar to a hummingbird, native to Israel, and known in Hebrew as tzufit.

~ Dafna Renbaum ~

Lavender Hills

As I turn the bend, the hills confound me.
Shades of dull
brown I know so well,
who normally sprout
prickly thorns, rocks, dry menacing shrubs,
and mandatory spring flowers

are now covered
with a net like haze.

Closer still, I see sheets upon sheets of lavender
pulled snugly over the contours
of the hillside.

Once a decade or so
hills usually barren
of bright hues

now glow
with lavender
with green, sprinkled with color.

Startled by over abundant rainfall, the slopes reclaim
a potential buried deep in
rocky soil.

Ingrained knowledge
bursts forth from
their collective subconscious.

Flamboyant in their poetic dress
the flowers delight at each other's pretty
costumes, pleased with themselves
they twirl their skirts in the soft breeze.

Wondering where else such beauty may lie dormant
I softly tap the slender shoulders of a blossom. Impatiently I ask, did you know
you could do this?

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In the week

thank you for sending me
the earth smells good early
our noses eager for outside
the sea in creases like

a woman's short jacket
stuff the ironing
this'll never be smooth

waves strong enough to bowl
you over to send its stuff
into my throat

somnulent noisy unstructured
wild, placid, reflective

earth pungent and dry
a foot draws memory
from youth a repository
waiting to inform, energize

us now, and dressing,
a critical edge of life
has returned to my movements
the dimension of simple and uncluttered gesture

Making a Living

I thought of casting nets
into the Mediterranean—
but my back never held
the strength of these young
sunned-men who strain against
tides in their colorful boats.

Then I considered cutting land
open to plant—but even with
fossil-fueled tractors my will
showed less determination
than those bent folk behind
their donkeys, scratching away.

So, I chose the weak and lazy
way of words—writing crazily
while eating fish and grains
untouched by my sweaty
hands, not served by my tired
back. "There are better ways

to make money," an old poet
scolds me. But I, too, am far along
this path. So I live by teaching
younger ones how to read and
to write their unruly thoughts—
before pragmatism tames them.

Take a picture of me
spitting. It's my tradition
to spit on Roman ruins.

Alright, whatever you want, dear,
but I think you're being
kind of ridiculous.

This is the Coliseum.



© Ira Director

They killed and mocked Jews here,
darling, not to mention,
it was built with the booty
from ransacked Jerusalem.

They killed and mocked
everyone here, not only Jews.

Well, all the more reason to spit,
but especially for the Jews.
It's my way to retroactively
defend them from the Romans,
probably their greatest enemy
of all time.

Gladiators and violence
was just Roman culture,
just the way we watch action
movies and play video games.
The only difference
is we don't actually kill.

Which is quite
the difference, actually.
Between pretending to kill

and killing for sport
is the difference between
existing and not existing.

Morals are relative. Life
was cheap then. I'm a big fan
of relative morals.

Look, the Coliseum is praised
by tourists from every country.
What an incredible relic!
A 2000-year-old stadium
still standing in most
of its glory! What masterful
architects! What a pinnacle
of human achievement!

These stones need
to be spit on, to remember
what they are. Just one tourist must
remind them: You are a disgrace
to human goodness, you
are a stolen construction, you
are a memorial to calamity,
you are the basest structure
in all of history.



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Is there a doctor here?

"About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters..." This quote is from the first two line of a poem written in 1938 by W. H. Auden in which he describes the ancient Grecian myth of the Fall of Icarus from the perspective of uninvolved bystanders. He postulates that suffering is always accompanied by bystanders who are either unaware, unconcerned or simply too preoccupied with their own lives to become involved.

The "Old Masters" include Pieter Brueghel the Elder, whose 16th century painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," is described in the second stanza of Auden's poem.

The poem's French title "Musée des Beaux Arts" or "Museums of Fine Arts" is derived from Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, the Brussels museum which houses the painting.

from Musée des Beaux Arts

by W. H. Auden

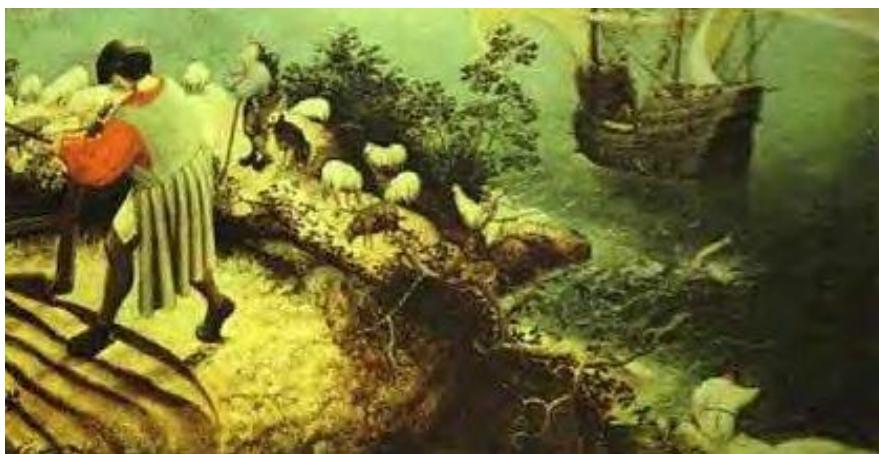
About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
...

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster;

...
the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

detail from Landscape With The Fall of Icarus by Pieter Brueghel

Icarus's legs are just barely showing. They are in the bottom half of the painting, sticking up out of the water.



Some years after Auden wrote this poem, William Carlos Williams wrote a poem titled "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" about the same painting.

from Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

by William Carlos Williams

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field

...

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

I began to wonder. What would have happened if the bystanders could not have, as in Auden's poem, "turn... away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster?" What would have happened if Icarus had fallen into someone's backyard swimming pool or perhaps into the middle of a poem?

I sometimes think about what makes people become involved in, or remain distant from other peoples' suffering. I wrote the following poem in an attempt to look more closely at this question.

Is there a doctor here?

by Ira Director

the white haired woman's pale face turned red

she slumped
dropped from the chair

the poet stopped mid poem

her husband knelt in the hot sun crying
as people moved closer

I had the good sense to move away
and get another piece of the apple cake
which I cut horizontally to get a slice
filled with apple pieces

after loading it
with homemade "tehena" I took two bites

"lucky I've already read"
embarrassed by my own thoughts
I phoned Debbie "How terrible. Have you read yet?"

I stuffed the rest in my mouth



© Ira Director

licked my drippy fingers
chewed slowly as I went back
hoping no one would notice

a doctor was administering CPR
a young teen was crying in the john
perhaps the old woman's granddaughter

"she wasn't even wearing a hat" I heard

later in the shade
as the poets began reading again

I brought her an orange
then thought
as the ambulance drove her away

staying alive is mostly luck

what if that doctor
hadn't wanted to hear
student poetry that day

that evening over coffee
I realized
I was likely
the only other person
who "knew" CPR

so the old lady
had two chances today

though the doctor probably
also saved me
from finishing this day
with a pair of dead lips
pressed to mine
as I tried desperately
to remember
the right steps
from that course
20 years ago



© Ira Director

My Garden

They say you are hardened,
when you have to cope
with pain

But I grew up in Eden,
nestled in the arms
of many mothers, shielded
from snakes
that were sure to provoke
my expulsion

It was a garden of mangos
and watermelons,
bounded by a sea
of comfort

I did not know war
and death,
like they did in Europe before
my birth
when the earth
fell open, burning millions
who had not known
they were naked

I took my garden with me
when exile
was my choice
and so, delighting in
permitted fruit,
I could not harden
to confront disaster
bound
to pounce on me
one day

my skin too thin
to save me
in my fall



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Figs In Water

Look, we cast no reflection here, we have no shadow. This is the sea of the knowledge of good and evil. Figs float on the black water of *tohu v'vohu*, the chaos before God created the world. The ripe fruit bruised purple and the young fruit bright in its yellows and greens, they cluster on the surface of the still water. Their fertility and boldness lie half embedded in blackness. The water hovers over some dark river of Lethe. I give you filtered water from a bottle. We will cover ourselves with these floating leaves. Some figs are sweet with wasps and some with fruit sugars. Let us eat from these figs and drink from the water concealing Hades or Eden. These are the figs of that tree.



Untitled © Rita Mendes-Flohr

Previously published in Deep Water Literary Journal –

<http://www.deepwaterliterary.com/#/figs-in-water/4579199640>

*Writing the Cave of Hariton**

The map I track down
on our return from the Hariton cave
is no longer a tool to find the way,
but to remember

A dotted line
to the first oblong shape where
we could breathe, at last, after endless
crawling
 - a comma -
followed by another line
of slithering into a lopsided form
 and then to clamber
 over weathered rock to a new sequence
 of dots
 ending
in a black stain, where the ground
gave way to the imperative:
 rope down!
to a deeper level
of meaning

There, a new stanza began with a string
of sentences reaching a full
 stop
in a room where bats winter, huddled
from the ceiling, their heartbeat
down to the level closest
to death

A poem is a cave
I delve into, a mythic space
where I court the risk
of getting lost, where I am dared
 to face the dead
ends, to stumble
upon my own way
out
 and let my verse
be born



© Rita Mendes-Flohr

*** *The Cave of Hariton, at the edge of the Judean Desert, is a karstic cave that is 400 meters deep with 4 km of hallways and 55 chambers on 4 different levels*