

# KADDISH FOR GAZA

by Michael Leshner

*There is a relationship between war and words; there is a relationship between love and war.*

— Yehia Jaber

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## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Thinking of Gaza from Thousands of Miles Away</b> ⇒	2
<b>Burlesque at the Barrier</b> ⇒	4
<b>Drinking It</b> ⇒	6
<b>Silent Movie</b> ⇒	7
<b>Jewish Journal and Bad Dreams</b> ⇒	8
<b>Kaddish</b> ⇒	11
<b>Oranges</b> ⇒	13
<b>Lecture</b> ⇒	15
<b>Three Words for the Dead</b> ⇒	16
<b>Clowns with Swastikas</b> ⇒	18
<b>Dead God, Dying God</b> ⇒	19
<b>An Untimely Man</b> ⇒	20
<b>Cyrano de Marianne</b> ⇒	21
<b>Drone</b> ⇒	23
<b>The Storm Scene</b> ⇒	24
<b>Crime Scene</b> ⇒	25
<b>The Survivor</b> ⇒	26
<b>The Walls</b> ⇒	28
<b>My Devil Curses Me</b> ⇒	29
<b>Delirium</b> ⇒	31
<b>Farewell</b> ⇒	33
<b>Fanatics</b> ⇒	34
<b>Pines in the Suicides' Wood</b> ⇒	36
<b>Death in Palestine</b> ⇒	37
<b>Why It Mattered</b> ⇒	38
<b>My Kaddish</b> ⇒	40
<b>Elegy for a Child</b> ⇒	42
<b>Index of First Lines</b>	43



## INTRODUCTION

## A Few Words about Writing and Resistance

1

- 1 I have written the poems that follow with tormented thoughts of Gaza. And if anyone asks why I, an American Jew, should have written so much about a place I have never been, my short answer is that I write about Gaza because I cannot write any other way. For me, to think of Gaza is to touch the drama of human resistance: not only resistance to oppression but resistance to the most insidious powers of intellectual and spiritual destruction, the lying and the sophistry that modern communication technology has honed to something almost ineffably sinister. In this respect all human beings are equally vulnerable. The dehumanizing of Gaza by way of propaganda has its counterpart in the deafening blandishments of modern media, replete with militarism and consumerism: both aim to corrupt the moral core of their hearers, and neither gives any quarter.
- 2 If language is the most distinctively human capability, it's easy to understand why the contamination of language must accompany the most inhuman actions of governments and their corporate masters. And the reverse holds true as well. With humanity under such fundamental threat, poetry, the most intense form of language, is itself an act of resistance — in fact, it is a means of human survival, the ultimate index of freedom.
- 3 How well these poems live up to such standards is for others to decide. But I don't think anyone can question the urgency of the threats we face as human beings in a world of propaganda. And it seems obvious to me that there is, and must be, an indelible bond between each individual's battle to retain his or her humanity and the battle to secure a place like Gaza from the assaults that target every aspect of its people, from its children's lives to the visibility of their faces on American television. If Israeli PR experts can get away with speaking as if nothing but "terrorists" existed in Gaza; if the Hillary Clintons of the world can get away with blaming Gaza's government for its death toll at the very moment Israeli shells are obliterating apartment buildings, mosques, schools, hospitals and U.N. shelters; if a Nobel Peace laureate like Elie Wiesel can get away with castigating Gazans for "child sacrifice" while an illegal occupying power kills hundreds of their little ones; then something irretrievable will have been lost.
- 4 What can we do to prevent it? That depends a good deal on who we are, and where we either have or can cultivate the kind of power that can bring justice. But as the great singer/songwriter and activist Phil Ochs said, during the Vietnam carnage, "in such an ugly time the true protest is beauty." And true beauty, one might add, is protest.

Michael Leshner



## THINKING OF GAZA FROM THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY

2

If I were to be born again,  
it might be as the white moth  
whose slow, flexing heartbeat  
of wings

declares its pittance  
in a vast anonymity of snow...

It might be as the spore  
borne on mimosa tendrils  
in an uncertain breeze,

10

alone in a tiny pivot of air,  
all the earth a mystery hovering below.

For I am my place, and  
I have nowhere to go,

and all hearts are my heart,  
and none knows me,  
every breath shakes my world  
though not a syllable is mine —

not a glance my glance, yet in every one  
I disappear behind its silence...

20

And where a petal drops onto the fixed eyes  
of the child whose bracts are  
already in earth,  
whose face  
is cold with death, her eyes

blue and blank  
as the flower that was —

where,  
at dawn, a boy rises from another tear  
to test the blue air

30

left behind by the bomb,

and cannot find any path  
to a door, or womb, or nightmare  
clearer than smoke  
or louder than a shroud,

≪end stanza≫



and not even the first word  
of mourning can be said —

3

I also rise;

That is me.

Because I am not dead.

Because I am not there.

Because I cannot breathe  
the air motionless forever  
in the child's breast,

and cannot touch the sky  
that is all that's left  
to the last boy's famished eyes.

Because I wander that sky unseen,  
never to touch their earth.

And because,  
whatever I touch,  
it is their faces I will feel,  
their silence my breath will trace.

40

50



## BURLESQUE AT THE BARRIER

4

† ▼ What do you write on a wall?  
 What can you smear that will fall  
 upwards of your fist, and sting  
 sharper than a tear?

What can you draw  
 that will laugh  
 away the soldier you think  
 of (if you think), whose calf  
 bears up the sky's iron dome,  
 whose finger kills for a mile  
 but whose heart's not at home —

10

what could wipe the smile  
 off that misshapen maw?

Another length, another place —  
 the damn thing's all the same.  
 Besides, you can't get close.

They've fixed the game,  
 but that doesn't stop the eye  
 from hating its way into the cracks  
 of the concrete. If there were bricks  
 to throw, you'd come up with something  
 to say.

20

Or, once you got by it,  
 you'd stand on the sand  
 and pee into the air —  
 let them do something  
 to you then, if they dared.

But the dome shifts slowly overhead  
 as always, and the prison wall is everywhere.  
 What can you piss  
 that will tell it like it is?

30

Damn it all, I've been seeing it in my dreams.  
 A little bit  
 of imagination, and there's a fetor all through me  
 that giggles, then screams...

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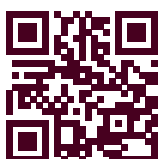
line 1: Alludes to the wall surrounding and partitioning Gaza from Israel.



Atop the wall's gray brink  
I've been longing to write  
something fiercely ugly, wordless as a smell,  
something that would gloat  
there when I'm gone  
like a slow death, with pulse  
to match, bleeding all over the light.

A stain impossible to dispel  
that would stink  
through the night...

I reach into my pants  
to see what can be done.  
But a pimply-faced guard quickly raises his gun  
and I lose my chance;  
I gather he thought I meant something else.



## DRINKING IT

(for Amira Hass)

6

†  
▼ The sea is lover to the sand,  
the sand's the refuse of a stagnant day.  
All earth's a captive of the sky.

You dip your hand into the waves  
to feel the slow, eternal surge  
that drives the water on. Unaware,

it breaks against the shore to sigh,  
caress, fall back unsatisfied  
all day between the beaches' thighs.

10

This beach is empty as the heart is wide.  
Will anyone come to taste its plight  
under a pitiless sky that pins

it here, dead or dying, as the earth  
turns brittle and every sorrow dries?  
No one will come. It's worth

their lives to try to run away;  
they stay in Gaza, helpless as the sand,  
where the sun's a sentry tower, and a gun

20

takes aim at anyone who drinks.  
No use. There's no relief in salt or tears,  
and only the sea's too slow to think

of anything but out, and in, and out  
in its dumb mockery, silent mimicry,  
a mouthing rape that makes a fool of care.

---

line 1: Amira Hass is an Israeli journalist who has reported for years on the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere in the Occupied Territories. She is the author of *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*.





## SILENT MOVIE

*Every where at the approach of the white man [the Indians] fade away.... We hear the rustling of their footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn, and they are gone for ever.* 7

— Joseph Story, U.S. Supreme Court justice

*We never really conquered Lydda.... [T]here was really no city to conquer. The whole place...was empty.*

— Amos Kenan, writing about the scene of a notorious massacre by Zionist forces in 1948

Soundless on aging acetate,  
a building was standing one moment,  
gone the next. Next to it  
were grainy human forms that disappeared  
in the wink of a wrinkling frame.  
The projector jammed; an organist  
filled the time, keeping time, suspense!  
On the screen  
the bodies hung, like dancers poised on invisible pins  
impossible to repeat, impossible to imitate.

10

When the end comes without a sound  
it looks like a miracle, it's uncaused art.  
On the news, behind a talking head  
I saw apartments crumble noiselessly like cards  
and the people fly in a flash.  
And one of those, framed at a window,  
balanced on one toe while the film stayed put  
for the anchorman to take the view;  
then, silent, we watched  
him as he pirouetted down.

20



## JEWISH JOURNAL AND BAD DREAMS

*July 22, 2014*

Summer has its clammy skin against my window.  
 Even here, at dawn you can smell death —  
 yes, smell it in the silence of  
 the casual newspaper,  
 the purring of the first neighborhood  
 car, a moving gloom  
 rabid with secrets.  
 No one is saying anything.  
 But we all know of more dead children in Gaza,  
 people walk the three blocks to synagogue  
 to nag and natter about it,  
 if not to pray for the victims. Of course  
 we cannot hear the bombs —  
 we only built them.  
 No, I'm hearing nothing new.  
 I've swallowed a stench of silence and cannot cough it up.  
 Awakening today, I could not at first remember  
 the reason of my dread. There's something maniacal  
 about an alarm that shrieks,  
 Begin, begin, begin!

10

20

*July 23*

I'm afraid to leave my room.  
 Am I thinking of the kids who risk a sniper's bullet  
 if they take a walk?  
 But this is New Jersey — above me is a vague blue wall,  
 heat without sound, no shapes, no words. That's  
 what terrifies: reality going about its business  
 while its distant products turn fatal to it.  
 Silence poisons every calm.  
 This shirt sticks to my back's hair — a penance?  
 I find myself tearing bits out of the newspaper  
 as if to patch with stalled time what demons have pierced;  
 at night the sweating sky purples with rage  
 and there is danger in the gimlet stars.

30

*July 24*

I'm lying, of course. I'm not afraid,  
 I'm only saying it to convince myself I am — because  
 it's an outrage not to be afraid.

≪stanza continues≫



What ought I to feel? Do the dead  
turn in their sleep, those ghostly child faces  
averted as they pass the word, row on silent row,

40

It's nothing, never mind?

What have I given?

† I remember now, "New Jersey" was the name  
▼ of the battleship that mauled Beirut for  
† Ronnie the Ripper and his friends...

Sixteen-inch guns!

† the newspapers kvelled, while  
▼ boys and girls choked on their guts and  
hearts zipped shut, once and for all,  
tiny dolls in a body bag. Sailors rocked  
their playthings on the swells.

50

Today I've only got myself to rock, overgrown baby.  
Mother, I'm tearing at your womb,  
I'm another Israeli, wild child,  
I will destroy where I cannot climb back in.

July 25

Heat is hate. The sun's the angry  
wizard whose redness will consume us all.  
Some wind today lifted wings of discarded  
newsprint to coast above the lawns. I strained but could not  
read the words — it was silly of me to think I might.

60

Someone I know is an Israeli soldier, part of a column piercing the Gaza border.  
I hear rabbis are calling for "solidarity" with the State.  
Nothing in me is solid; have I missed a lesson somewhere?  
Charred wings float away from me still.  
Lines distort in swimming eyes,  
sense gone, prayer nothing but hallucination  
as here and now, all words betray us:  
Hear, O Israel, the War is our God,  
† the War is Fun.  
▼

July 26

Sabbath. Forbidden to write until after dark,  
now shackled with migraine. Funny,  
I've lost touch with the use of words,

70

line 42: \_\_\_\_\_  
The USS New Jersey fired on Beirut in December 1983

line 44: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ronald Reagan

line 46: \_\_\_\_\_  
In Yiddish, *to kvell* means to glory in or to gloat over.

line 68: \_\_\_\_\_  
A play on the liturgical "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Sh'ma Yisra'el)

Stanza continues



they're insects on my skin as they scurry away, unheard,  
a mystery to me, all of them.

10

I try to say to the dead,

I have tasted your unmoving air, and retched.

Will anyone answer me?

How I wish I were really sick! It would feel better than this dull ache,

I would have an occupation of sorts.

But only children can be sick

without responsibility, tucked into bed, patted on the forehead.

The children in my mind's eye are too still for sickness,

too silent for innocence. (Hearing nothing, I watch my fingers write  
in a swim of pain.)

Whose?

*July 27*

In dawn is the sputum of defeat.

No point pretending, even trying to speak.

† Today I watched a film made in the ruins of Shuja'iya  
▼ after artillery flattened the town. I saw

the arm of a young man, trapped, bleeding to death,

extended from the rubble in helpless appeal

towards two bulky-vested rescuers

who dared not reach him because of sniper fire

from the soldiers. (There was a "ceasefire" on.)

The wounded man died slowly while the camera danced

and the two medics, stamping in the dust, roared dark harmonies

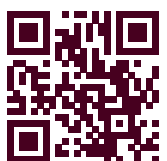
at an unpictured sun.

80

90

---

line 87: Historic Gaza City neighborhood, just outside the Old City.



## KADDISH

11

Sometimes it makes sense to think about God.  
 Look at your watch, and see death has moved an hour closer.  
 Look upwards — it's about to rain.

So what are we going to do?  
 What will we eat this evening? Next week? Next year?  
 What would happen if I forgot my address, and had to shelter under the sky?

The Law: ten men have scoured its pages, ten men owe  
 thanks to the Creator. Might as well say it, then —  
 except that we say, Magnified and hallowed may His great name be!

10

†  
▼

*Yisgadal v'yisqadash...*but  
 who are we? What name do we mean?

Through the muffled tiers that ring the stage  
 their eyes sparkle through darkness, the watchful dead,  
 training their memories on the scuffed, illuminated boards

where each of us sings for his supper, heads craning  
 toward the encircling gloom.  
 My heart's racing as if the room  
 were on fire,  
 but I know I've got to be calm, follow the rules —

20

it's nothing to be proud of, having eyes, having a voice,  
 it's nothing to stand here on two legs.  
 It's no big deal to breathe, or to grieve.  
 It's everything to aspire  
 to a place in that pantheon, beyond desire.

Well, are the dead beckoning now? Is He? How can we hear  
 anything, while we pack the room with words and fear?

Maybe, somewhere, they've already told us what they want...  
 what we all want. One must do one's best. Panic won't help,  
 but — when might I hope for another chance

30

to get this right? How much do I have to read, how much do I beg  
 for answered prayers? (I'll try again.)

Through eyes magnified  
 with dread I see a fog spread in dusk-light, descending, closing in.

line 10:

From the Mourner's Kaddish: "Exalted and sanctified be God's name ..."

≪end stanza≫



At various times I try to think about its name.  
Each instance brings me closer to the ultimate ignorance —  
but the words run on, and it's only the same  
nails against the palm,

12

the long dusty dance,  
always the end of things slowly rising towards us,  
always the same echo drying against the tide.



## ORANGES

13

Piled in slanting supermarket bins,  
 Spray-painted like tennis balls,  
 oranges lack history.

Oranges can't tell you  
 where they came from, each colored globe,  
 each sectioned world.

Did this one hang  
 over a ruin near Bethlehem, or sway alone in Jaffa?  
 Did its darkened branches feel

10 a soldier's touch, as boots  
 scuffed the sand of exile  
 and rinds, drying, hid deep in the friendless shade?

Smell the orange and forget all that,  
 forget there was a past  
 or a place,

forget everything but the sweetness  
 of possession, the aroma  
 of imperial distances.

20 Touch it: it's round and full  
 as a young life — hold it up to sunlight,  
 it glistens.

Devour it. Now youth and life  
 dissolve in you, lobe by lobe.  
 The startled scent rises, but the fruit

of victory escapes the tongue.  
 Vagrant, you are everywhere  
 and nowhere now;

30 how alone you've grown,  
 prism of horizons and dew!  
 You wipe the damp of ghostly orchards

from your white forehead  
 as the sun clears and the mind returns to Tel Aviv,  
 and you carry home one more orange

≪end stanza≫



to crush with your hand  
for the yield of the juice,  
the discarding of the pulp —

14

as the past bleeds its sweetness,  
and the earth of every beauty  
dies, forgotten and unseen.





## LECTURE

15

First, is there anything wrong with you?  
 Have you been to the doctor, married a new  
 bride? Proud of a freshly-built house,  
 or maybe you're timid as a mouse?

We've got to know.  
 Not for ourselves, you understand; it's all in the Law  
 what you must do.

We're not the ones you're killing for.  
 We're not the ones who give the orders.  
 It's God who made us, fixed the borders  
 between the strong and the profane,  
 the privileged and the plain —

that is, if you follow the rules.  
 Now let's get going.  
 You can choose your own tools,

you can have lots of things here,  
 carry armfuls of bullets  
 and a rifle like a yardarm.  
 Don't look so shocked. It's all in a day's work.

True, you still don't know how to fight.  
 Well, wrap your scrawny arms in this. Here's  
 a new skin to cover up all the tender years —  
 tough and hairy, ram-scented, brushed and oiled  
 till it's smooth; you'll hardly notice it,  
 it moves when you move, but  
 the Arabs will be fooled.

Couldn't ask for more than *that*.  
 You're anybody now, you're blessed, you're everywhere.  
 Today a steel helmet, tomorrow you'll scare  
 them all, just wait.

You wanted a football? There's a goal.  
 You looked for a quest: here's a dare,  
 and an ooze of virtue for the blood spoor in the air.  
 Get moving — don't be late.



## THREE WORDS FOR THE DEAD

I saw young men scramble from an earthen tunnel  
 bootless, unhelmeted, guns in their hands. They meant  
 to strike Israeli tanks attacking Gaza — & they were doomed  
 from the start, it was the army that had made the film  
 I watched (black & white, with white  
 cross-hairs stenciled over the middle of the frame,  
 so we'd know  
 the invaders had those brave ones in their sights) —  
 & soon, sure enough, explosions  
 buffeted them, & (when they tried  
 to retreat) destroyed their tunnel too.

But I had time for three thoughts while the picture lasted.

First: wonder at the freshness of their hearts —  
 running (not marching, thank the Lord)  
 so eagerly into battle, not to die really, but to contend  
 proudly for their homes, their mothers & their fate,  
 & to sacrifice (just as proudly) if need be, but not to mourn.  
 Too often jaded by the joyless human carnival  
 of lies, cruelty & folly, I caught my breath  
 at such hope, such carefree license with the gift of lives —  
 my heart rose at their generosity, but not, alas, for long.

Next I knew deep sadness. I saw  
 that the young were lost, & saw, what's more,  
 how such young loves were lost for nothing;  
 no child survived because of them, no prisoner escaped,  
 no one would visit their graves with thanks from the living.  
 Having hoped merely to scratch a scar or momentary  
 mark on the monster's tail, what could  
 they have done — what could any creature have done —  
 to atone for the wasting of such cherished life?  
 I chided my heart's pride in them then,  
 I scorned myself for having waved a handkerchief  
 with pointless tears to decorate a crime.

Then anger came; it elbowed grief aside &  
 stared me down. "How dare you mourn?" it said,  
 "& reproach yourself with mourning?  
 Do you scorn the spurned  
 when he rises, just to be kicked again?  
 Do you blame the face that yields to blows

≪stanza continues≫



40

only because a man won't turn his back?  
Is it for the hopeless to cast away freedom, too?  
Did their hands dig the stony channels  
that turned the current of their loves,  
either to cowardice or to death?"

17

Then I knew that I must rage, & knew  
the curse of silence, for I saw  
I could not say what I felt.  
Why must generosity run unheeded into death?  
Why a tunnel, not a grateful eye, to draw such fruits & sorrows in?  
Why this squalid power over fragile youth?  
Why such puny sunsets before  
the immensity of night?

50

The picture faded, & without a sound  
those young men, buried & unspeaking,  
left me without words, bereft of time.



## CLOWNS WITH SWASTIKAS

18

1

Ink that “bomb,” Netanyahu, play the public fool!  
But massacres germinate in a comic school.

2

With bagels, *litterateurs* wolf down the crimes  
the IDF parades in the *New York Times*.



---

line 4: \_\_\_\_\_  
Israel Defense Forces



## DEAD GOD, DYING GOD

19

This one's on a pedestal,  
all marble and glare.  
A marvelous pair of shoulders, a frown  
that could shame every brazen whisperer  
and tamp loose tongues down.

But I don't care what anybody ever felt for him,  
or for the orations he might have growled  
through those stone lips, under those raised hands —  
not even for the storm  
that slathered sea-spray at his command  
and flayed the faithless beaches  
while priests hung their heads, and Hellas howled.

10

I don't even care when the other one  
stares at me with soft, reproachful eyes  
from that splintered perch,  
and bids me honor his silence with my own.  
His blood is fantasy, his wounded flesh never  
bone of my bone,  
no matter how he suffers, no matter how I try  
to feel, to think of him as something real,  
no matter the despair, no matter the calm.

20

Let them both die.

All that matters is what starves inside.  
And that one dies every day,  
the carking infant's born in each dream, to die at dawn.  
That's the one that never survives  
and never goes away,  
doomed every tomorrow with tomorrow's bomb.



## AN UNTIMELY MAN

20

I could not die at twelve.  
They gave me drugs to swill  
and told me it was all my fault —  
myself,  
I could never really tell  
what made me halt.

I never felt at home  
with comforts that disease  
or childhood craves; too bored to hoard  
for long,  
I faintly hoped to be released  
from what I stored.

And yet I never gave  
the stroke that would have killed  
the pretense I could hardly keep,  
or salve;  
I merely waited, with enlarging guilt,  
for the last sleep.

So I've stumbled to the end —  
and now? As death draws near,  
I mourn that I can neither lose  
nor find  
a martyrdom to purge the fear  
of all I choose.



## CYRANO DE MARIANNE

*Welcome to Israel! It seems you got lost. Perhaps you meant to sail to a place not far from here — Syria. There the Assad regime slaughters his people every day with the support of the murderous Iranian regime.* 21

— Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a letter delivered to humanitarian activists when they were kidnapped by IDF sailors from their fishing boat, the Marianne, while attempting to break Israel's siege of Gaza and deliver medicine to the inhabitants (June 2015)

Ah no, sir, you are too simple! Why, you might have said — oh, a great many things! Come, let me help you...thus.

†  
▼ Didactic: "Why were you seeking Israel's occupation in Gaza? After all, we occupy the whole West Bank as well!"

Confidential: "Humanitarians don't hold office here; perhaps you didn't know that?"

Sensible: "In this country, we don't try anything with one small boat — we bomb in force and flatten everything in sight."

Dramatic: "Is this the ship that launched a change of heart and curbed the boundless tyranny of Israel? Naaah!"

Witty: "Now, isn't that just like a bunch of terrorists. Trying to take on Israel without even an AK-47."

Colloquial: "Charity, huh? Man, are you lost!"

Rhetorical: "Gaza! — Gaza, you pathetic simpletons? Why, cast your eyes northward and recall what we did to Lebanon!"

Forthright: "Since you came in peace, it's clear you came to the wrong address."

Comic: "Human rights? Did you say *human rights*? I mean, what kind of school did you graduate from? Do you know where you *are*? Have you ever, like, visited one of our prisons for Palestinians? Oh my God, *human rights*??"

Pedantic: "Does not the legal maxim *res ipsa loquitur* impute demonstration of intent to an act's own form? Then, given your demonstrable impotence against Israel's might, surely you meant to accomplish nothing here at all!"

---

line 3: "Didactic", "Confidential", etc., parodies a monologue in Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, where Cyrano plays with different ways of making fun of his nose by affecting different verbal styles ("Aggressive:", "Friendly:", etc.).



Simple: “Were you guys looking for a decent government  
and just took a wrong turn?”

30      Ironic: “Have I got this right? I’m supporting al-Qaeda in Syria,  
I’m occupying the Golan, I’m threatening Iran with nuclear bombs,  
I’m killing protesters in the West Bank, ethnically cleansing  
Jerusalem, and you fellows have to make trouble in Gaza?”

Passionate: “Never again will Jews endure  
the blight of conscience! Never again will Jews permit  
justice that our elites disdain! Never again will Jews refrain  
from lording it over their neighbors  
when the spirit moves them!”

Picturesque: “My family didn’t flee the pogroms  
of Russia for me to be lectured over enslaving  
a few million people.”

40      Candid: “About that Syria crack,  
I could have mentioned the American  
slaughter in Iraq, or the attacks on Yemen  
by U.S. client states — and you know that Obama and I  
are both killing Syrians, too. But I couldn’t  
write anything like that under the circumstances —  
you understand, don’t you?”

50      Or even — since you mention “the murderous Iranian regime” —  
“You know Iran’s navy never killed unarmed civilians  
the way ours does; why couldn’t you sail *there*  
and teach them some sort of lesson?”

All this you might have said, if you had one tenth  
the virtue of the average gangster, or at least  
some of Goebbels’ graceful prose.

†  
▼

But no,  
even propaganda stales with overuse,  
and the rotten net shreds in the wind.  
One might have known.

---

line 53: Alludes to Nazi-era German minister Joseph Goebbels’s talents for public speaking and propaganda.





## DRONE

23

We believe in what knows us,  
not in what we see.  
Each low moon or eavesdropping tree  
at dusk erodes our poses

of self-possession; God  
lives in the patient walls  
whose mirrors catch us naked, all cells  
on display. They say that's good

for something — who knows what?  
Well, what makes us is what's known,  
I guess, and all is known; except we're not.

If God were a foreign general  
he'd be puzzled, I think, by these rites  
of awe. Why should the sight  
of a hovering drone draw all

faint thoughts to it, subdue each voice?  
It's only a spy who sees us,  
and all he sees are cross-hairs — Jesus,  
that's not life, when just his choice

(thumbs down) decides one's fate!  
And yet I can't quite believe in soul,  
knowing I'm spread across some private's bombsight.



## THE STORM SCENE

*(after James Merrill)*

24

Last night I dreamed about a place called Sabbath.  
There, we had left a pile of things we were going to use,  
but never did use: lids and saucers and can openers  
whose silence beckoned towards a misty column  
that wafted from the waste, filled slowly with night.  
The smell reminded me of every other failure, every sought-for  
respite. Then the sky quickened and thickened, clouds sobbed  
and a blurred howl rose from the branches.  
Staring down from a height, I watched trembling  
as embers winked out under rain, my fingers trained  
toward five holes in the dike, one final hope masked  
as a separate peace. Nothing would suffice.  
The homeless roar that stalked the wilderness grew less human  
as it rose to its most personal pitch. Alone again,  
betrayed, where am I, was I?...and I turned back, as in its mad  
despair those vowels drenched every shard of autumn.



## CRIME SCENE

25

Item: one wreck of a car.  
Split open, like a crowbar  
had wrenched the roof.

One flame lapping at the charred chassis.  
Two medics,  
one hose.

It seems this one died alone.  
But now it's done  
it's a happening, it's a freak,  
they're all talking at once:  
the bewildered grocer, still in his apron,  
the boy on the bike.

10

Who was he? What was he doing?  
Where did the missile come from?

Well,  
this one's mum — he's sworn an oath  
and answers all chatter with the same  
impenetrable, stolid stare,  
his torso oozing, blue lips facing the earth,  
splayed out and proud.

20

Slowly, two of them lift him  
and carry him away:  
now there's one less for the crowd.

The news in Khan Yunis: a new martyr!  
In Israel, it's a terrorist "neutralized."

What's left to see?

The band of a wristwatch,  
untouched, in the middle of the road.

The shriveled driver's door prized  
from the wreck  
before they go...

30

The car's acrobatic tilt,  
one wheel still spinning free.



## THE SURVIVOR

26

After the dancing stopped, & she  
 (her cool daydreams on her cheeks)  
 could slowly drift around  
 the busy eddying of air  
 (that might have turned her bridal gown  
 to something less  
 than time had wanted it to be),  
 & setting sun from windows left motes & flecks  
 across the curtain of her hair —

10 & late came forward then, alone, to show  
 my eager eyes (that hardly seemed to know  
 her) what she was, & hid —  
 what was the veil that slid before my eyes  
 to baffle surprise  
 when the spun white gauze that made the gown  
 gave pause  
 as night looked down  
 when to me she raised her head,  
 & I, the shadow of a doubt undid?

20 Did her hair lying flat,  
 & that enigma of lips underneath  
 (that made me strain for breath)  
 know how the last act lay,  
 when death would guarantee  
 that no more deliberate play  
 of discovered things could resurrect a fact  
 to rise with clarity  
 from the tidal shadow of a woman's face?

30 A moment poised to fall —  
 & did,  
 where in the graveyard slid  
 & angled down the mouth that swallowed,  
 with its alien dream,  
 all, till down it went  
 replete & silent  
 closed up against the word  
 I forgot to ask in time  
 & never heard.

≪end stanza≫



40

Impregnable now. & nothing tames  
the brute of unperception here  
or drought  
(with always the factual meaningless air  
no matter how dark the danger  
or in despair the shout) —  
everything too complete for names  
shadows or remainder.

27

50

Was I so ignorant?  
Will it help now if I lament —  
& what else anyway  
& what exclaim for?



## THE WALLS

28

From Gaza they can't touch it,  
 but in Jerusalem I've seen the Wall.  
 Two of them, actually — two prison lines,  
 deadly, both, in what they define  
 and what they keep out.

†  
 ▼ First there's the long one,  
 the razor-tipped, the sinuous, the strong.  
 We all know what it means,  
 from our grandmothers we've learned  
 about ghettos, of walls that poison

10

each horizon, every hope. But here's  
 another one, no less cruel: the prayer wall  
 whose sullen stones say "no" to all  
 but the victors. Every fool worships  
 empire, makes monuments of his fears —

but I see here, locked away in  
 this fustian's dry, high stains,  
 a fierce negation that leaves the acolytes blind,  
 a hate they hide even from the captives  
 penned in dark rain,

20

waiting at a checkpoint  
 out of Gaza. *They're* not wishing  
 for love or even life any more; but where am I  
 going, with my curse of freedom, I  
 who've seen so much future vanishing?

---

line 7: The "two walls" refers first to the partition wall running through East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank, cutting off the areas Israel intends to annex from the rest of the Occupied Territories; and second to the Western Wall, the only part still standing of the Second Temple complex.



## MY DEVIL CURSES ME

29

Thought I was gone, did you?  
 My shrunken head still  
 hisses evil nothings  
 in your ear.  
 For all your pious will,  
 I'm not killed —

in fact, I'm never far.  
 Crush me, I'm a residue  
 on the tongue.

10

Idiot Jew!  
 You've got your own Jew now,  
 bitter but strong —  
 bottle me, there's more  
 where this one came from.

Talk of virtue,  
 I'm the catch in your voice.  
 Progress — I'm the sacrifice.

20

And now you think  
 you can fix things  
 if you screw off the top,  
 pull me out by the hair  
 to show me to your friends  
 one day a year.

Ladies and gentlemen,  
 it's confession time,  
 watch me drop a tear  
 for the stillborn child.

30

But what they see is my distorted face,  
 aborting the glow like a horrid moon  
 usurping every civilized room —  
 the audience is gone  
 from your Laocoön.

†  
▼

I tell them your Promise is misery,  
 your divine dream, my loss.

---

line 32: Greek and Roman mythological figure during the Trojan war; in mythology he is killed by snakes sent by Athena in retaliation for his suspicions toward the Trojan Horse, and his death became a popular theme for artists and sculpture depicting agony and physical struggle.



Do you like what you see?

And now they've gone,  
and now we're alone.

30

Face to face in this tiny, hollow cell,  
you and me.

40

Where's your act now?  
No one to listen,  
no one to sympathize.  
No one to admire your groans  
or your patient pleas.

Nothing to tell.  
What will you do,  
blind Jew?





## DELIRIUM

31

Where does dreaming end  
and the new day begin? The ash that rises  
in muzzy columns

towards the sky becomes the  
thundercloud that  
will threaten us all again,

that drenches the crematoria  
as the dead blur between worlds.  
They, they are gone

10

and unintelligible —  
but I?  
Where to hide from the eye

that pierces the living  
as stubborn smoke erases  
all that moves, all that divides?

A displaced tongue  
invests the vowels of sleep,  
a wind laps at dawn's gray puddles

20

and rain beads coldly on  
an open window... Alone, every word  
hurts me. I do not want to speak

or to listen. But the accuser  
demands: Where were you?  
How did you survive so long? And where?

As if to be heard  
were to be cursed, to stand unique  
were to live and to live

30

to earn the taunt  
of the ultimate ones,  
who are bold, and scabrous, and gone...

Should I awaken at all?  
It must be truer  
to sink

≪end stanza≫



below the bottom, before the fall,  
the first deadly rhyme — there to drink,  
without hope or fear,

32

†  
▼ the Lethe poured in  
between anonymous lips,  
relieved of time,  
as ignorant as they are poor.

40

---

line 37: \_\_\_\_\_  
Underworld river in Greek mythology, whose waters caused forgetfulness when consumed.



## FAREWELL

33

Each time you leave could be the last.  
Each gentle touch of sunlight on your eyes  
might prevent my every touch,  
might sketch your final image in my brain,  
impalpable, then, as a moment's glare.

I never know which detail of your body  
to hold on to. If I take the ends of your hair  
what becomes of your fingers, your knees?  
Will I remember the way your smile turned  
aside as you dissolved into twilight?

10

And then there are words — which ones are we  
to choose, before your absence closes in,  
knowing the silence may have no limit  
and the sounds I say may brush against  
mere shadows after you've gone? No,

words cannot save this moment; no touch  
will preserve the scent or shading  
of your bare skin, as it is just now,  
not for a second longer. Turn upward,  
love — look quietly into my eyes.

20

Will you? Even now you're leaving me,  
even now your beauty recedes  
from the glance that longs to take you in  
and hold you... I'm afraid to voice the final plea  
that might clutch, vaguely, the darkening scene.



## FANATICS

34

*Occupied Palestine, March 2011.* Ehud “Udi” Fogel was killed in his home in the West Bank settlement of Itamar, along with his wife and three young children, on the night of March 11, 2011.

No other Israeli Jews were killed in occupied Palestine that year.

Udi Fogel, an Orthodox rabbi, was a tank officer in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). During and after his service in Israel’s military occupation, Fogel raised his family in Gaza, in the exclusively Jewish settlement of Netzarim. Until 2005, Netzarim was part of a bloc of Israeli colonies known as Gush Katif, which occupied much of Gaza’s most valuable land and broke the 1.5 million Palestinians inhabiting Gaza into scattered enclaves.

After Netzarim was closed by Israel, Fogel’s religious convictions led him to the Jewish settlement of Itamar in the occupied West Bank. There he served as a teacher, under the supervision of a former chief rabbi of the IDF, telling students of the holy obligation of settling the West Bank.

Hakim and Amjad Awad, 17 and 18 at the time of the killings, were both convicted in Israeli military courts and sentenced to multiple life terms. Virtually the only evidence against them consisted of their confessions, though both had initially denied involvement and members of their families stated that they had been elsewhere at the time of the attack. (Those family members were not asked to testify at the trial.) It is unclear how the youths’ confessions were obtained.

Hakim told the military judges that Israelis had tied up and killed two men from his village. “This is what the state does to me every day,” he said. “When I want to leave my village I have to undergo a search which always involves beatings.” The judges told him to refrain from discussing politics.

Defense Attorney Raed Erda enraged the judges by pointing out that even Israel’s Supreme Court had ruled that murders committed inside the territories are considered acts of war. To observers’ disgust, he added, “Houses are being built on their lands, there’s no work, no education, the occupation is pushing people from all directions and a boy like the defendant goes out and does things like this without realizing their consequences.”

Jewish media expressed deep sympathy for Udi Fogel’s father, who lamented that Palestinians enjoy favorable conditions in Israeli jails.

*Jewish Week* editor Gary Rosenblatt suggested that international media had refused to treat the Fogels’ murder as their lead story because “we expect Palestinians to act in inhuman ways in expressing their hatred of Jews.” Rosenblatt also blamed Israeli newspapers for treating the Fogels as “second-class Jews” because they were “religious.”

≪end stanza≫



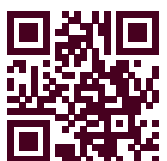
Rabbi Elyakim Levanon, a prominent clergyman among the Jewish settlers, told Udi's older brother that Udi's death was "not private, it's public," because the killing of his family would encourage Israel to build more settlements in occupied Palestine. A former Chief Rabbi of Israel eulogized the Fogels by comparing Palestinians to Nazis and promising: "We will not bend, we will not give up...and nothing will prevent our faith in the righteousness of our path."

10

The military prosecutor called on the judges to disregard the youth of the boys convicted of the killings. They "acted on a malicious and satanic ideology," he said.

Surviving members of the Fogel family, including a 12-year-old daughter, have pledged to "be strong" and to continue expanding Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

In 2014, Israel's activities in the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem resulted in the deaths of 2,314 Palestinians and 17,125 injuries, compared with 39 deaths and 3,964 injuries in 2013, according to the annual report by the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.



## PINES IN THE SUICIDES' WOOD

(see *Inferno*, Canto XIII)

36

*If there is no future, there is no hope.*  
 — Adel Hamdona, speaking of his son's suicide attack on the Jewish settlement  
 of Netzarim

†  
 ▼ Tread lightly, stoic, these needles bleed.  
 Wonder — if you must — but ask no question.  
 If the mute corpses shock, it's you that need  
 more than they can bear: not even groans  
 from them but move in fresh wounds, flow of pain —  
 their grief has no words, their night no moon  
 and souls that died with them won't rise again,  
 for death's all those who die for death can know.  
 Revenge is their root, blood their only rain.

10

Mortal, you dare not follow where they go,  
 nor they explain themselves except in pain  
 written in a language known to the few  
 who died as they did, embraced as kin  
 by strangers who killed them; forever joined  
 in loss, they break now just to break again —  
 as in death, they threw arms around  
 a hopeless love, so now it cuckolds them  
 in shame, as you in shame invade their wounds.

20

Who are you to tease out the final flame  
 of souls that burned, to thumb shut eyes  
 whose tears you've never touched? Your home  
 is with the strong, your step too coarse for dry  
 twigs, ashen bones that bear their weight  
 in moments lost, loves spurned, lies  
 like bloody tendrils where lips once met  
 to close forever, yet never to forget  
 the grieving that kills, the hopes that hate.

---

line 1: The bleeding trees in Dante's *Inferno* contain the souls of suicides. These damned souls are condemned to silence except when their branches are broken; when Dante snaps off a twig from one of the trees it begins to bleed, exactly as if wounded, and while the blood runs the dead soul is able to speak. As soon as the blood clots and the wound begins to heal, the sufferer must fall silent again.



## DEATH IN PALESTINE

37

Where blood drowns  
the memory of this stubborn ground,  
steep in its age,  
let the dead go.

Let mule-footed wind,  
pale with sacrificial rage,  
run dry as our ruined eyes  
above each sleeping stone.

Let the desert draw tears,  
if there are tears,  
from an imageless brain.

And let pain  
bury what cannot be undone.

Safe in their sorrows lie the grave's few.  
Numb to a blind sky,  
unflagging sun,  
where noon's dim coliseum  
is hushed  
and burdened as a lightless pew.

Let them go.  
Cradled in our dark tread  
they, at least, have earned the dust  
we cannot own  
except to know its end,  
and loss.

Deep in the pith  
where columns of the dead  
have marked the sand,  
they stay.

We are the exiles of the land.  
Over us, the pitch and curse of day.



## WHY IT MATTERED

*On Tuesday, August 19 [2014], the Israel Defense Forces...announced that Cpl. David Menachem Gordon...was found dead in central Israel, his weapon at his side.... We understood from the code phrase, "weapon at his side," that Gordon had committed suicide.*

— Rabbi Yehoshua Looks

*Unable to disclose his mortifying secret, the boy can only fantasize revenge on those vile men whose twisted lustful current raged through their veins.... He dreams of an escape from his Hell... As much as he tried, he could not ignore the scattered scars that sexual abuse left on his Soul.*

— David Menachem Gordon, writing of himself as an Orthodox Jewish child

If I try to understand a dead man I never knew  
from the relative safety of ignorance, it is to stress  
the contradictions I will never be able to resolve.  
First: I know I cannot share the origins  
by which a boy was born, a boy learned the alphabet  
of clothes, roles, manners, a Jew's youth,  
nor the sickening plunge of that youth's last lesson —  
that rabbis rape, that saviors turn away.

But I'm just as shy with the boy at twenty-one,  
helmeted, camouflaged, fatigued, carrying  
the scar on his heart and a six-pointed medallion  
around his neck, lying across the sand, like a lover,  
near Gaza behind a swiveled gun.

The face is young and blank in the only photo I've seen.  
Perhaps the boy dreamed of lining up  
his tormentors in that olive-drab gunsight;  
maybe he saw old lechers, not panicking women and their  
sons, when his brigade's guns were torching houses with  
"repeated shelling" as the victims fled...

maybe he believed his colonel when that maniac  
pronounced Palestinians the enemies of God.  
Or, maybe he was maddened with the mumbling myth  
of soldiers who believe themselves invincible,  
though of course he wasn't — no more than the "six men"  
his unit killed in a "summary execution" in Khuza'a  
one August day, nor the hundred or more helpless who fell  
to his brigade's artillery in Rafah.  
But how much, then, did the young sufferer see?  
Could there have been guilt, as his fire raged out in agony?

≪end stanza≫





30

Or did his binoculars reveal a frightened boy  
 who offered only terror against the ugly threat  
     (a barrel shaft upright, burning to invade  
     a child, impale his innocence)...

Did he hear his own voice in the collective cry of pain?  
 I hardly dare conceive how conscience,  
 seeping over the scene, might have enlarged the stain:  
 “You did well, for larger men than you have doomed the young —  
 though once the victim, you are among the strong.”

40

(Some who were his friends now carried suspect memories  
 and had to go.) Or, heard in a whisper, a taunt in his ear,  
 “Have no pride. What men did to you, you’ve done.”  
 (And would do again, for no slogan could shatter  
 that circle of guilt.)

Or perhaps the voice framed the eeriest, most sinister words of all:  
 “Nothing matters, all is death, and in death there is no difference  
 between the bullet and the brain, beaten and betrayer, all are one.  
 Forget good and evil, leave life, know only what is gone.”

50

I do not know. But he is gone,  
 gone beyond mourning. Self-victim now,  
 dumb to accuse, dumb to suffer, he cannot throw  
 this taint from his breast. And if I labor to peel  
 the web of violence from the wounded rest, it is to show  
 how numb is my heart, that cannot learn to feel  
 remorse enough for the brute he was, and was not;  
 for the bloody deed he suffered, and did;  
 for the innocence he ravaged and the terror he bequeathed  
 when the deluge that drowned all good and all bad  
 closed, forever, over his trailing grief.



## MY KADDISH

*Magnified and sanctified may His great name be in the world He created according to His will; and may His kingship reign, in our lives and in our days, and within the life of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon, amen! May His great name be blessed always, forever and ever!... He who makes peace in his high places — may He bestow peace upon us and upon all Israel, and let us say, Amen.*

— From the Mourner's Kaddish

Magnify his name I dare not.  
 For if great, where is his saving power?  
 Sanctify it?  
 Shall I then join the killers who murder children in that name?  
 And may he reign  
     (if anything should reign)  
 in a world he first made differently,  
 I hope,  
 from what he might have willed...  
 may a better one come soon,  
 in our lifetime, within our days! —  
     in this I join.

May the great name, Love, be blessed forever and ever!

Let it be blessed, let it be praised, raise it on high!  
 Though we have never known words to  
 praise it, let alone prize it...  
 though we lack a tongue to try  
 variations on the final, inimitable phrase.

\*\*\*

Every inward cupboard hides a space  
 for loneliness that accumulates in crooked corners,  
 filling up too awkward a place  
 for the owner readily to clean —  
 year by year, the odd thoughts make a quaint  
 and creeping heap of pain  
 until the hoarder dies, and mourners  
 dig out all the detritus from the shelves.  
 That is what it means to be “ourselves.”

I cannot cast it out, but I can rant,  
     (and ranting, raise a pure shout

≪stanza continues≫



30

heavenward),  
and I can say: life must be found somewhere apart  
from age and staleness and waste, without  
cruelty, without cant.

41

Otherwise there isn't any life, only creeping death,  
and there can be no love except love of ignorance,  
of apartness, irrelevance.

"Praise" for this? No. Doubt seasons pain  
under the slapdash shed that keeps us paused  
for a few short winters, fearful of rain,  
while desire wrings the heart, uncaused  
by virtue, unsolved by time.  
Liturgically, my struggle's all a game.

40

But if I flay the truths that tell me so  
I might survive the wounding of my own words,  
find some self-respect with which to know  
a last, terrible music in these drifting surds —

at least I can confess  
the helplessness of my blood  
to rise to the humanness in another's blood...  
the need to infuse

50

with life what cannot be real, to know  
for certain what has never been true,

to cross a horizon I have not seen,  
and to return.

There, to roll my life's own precious stone  
forward again, and forward again,

for the sake of love alone —

and let me say, Amen.



## ELEGY FOR A CHILD

(in memory of Mo'ayyad al-A'raj, aged three, killed at Khan Yunis on August 24, 2014) 42

You were the child whose life closed before your youth.  
I am the clumsy crier who cannot bring you home:  
I, the father of others, who never knew or loved you,  
the friend who spoke your enemy's tongue,  
the neighbor who had other things to do while you lived.

For you, I write a few words of grief and guilt — for it's  
all I can do; for you will hear nothing I can say;  
for I cannot pierce the bloody tangle of hates  
that strangled your youth, nor even single you out  
among the dead, there are so many, and so much unsaid.

10

When the missiles came and went, and shadows thronged  
in the ash of what remained, I drowned my shame  
in shell-shrieks screaming midnight all day long  
in the blaze of the mind's eye, hung the torpor of my  
ignorance between my heart and your unknown name.

Dumb at your death, I strained to pray, but could not.  
I looked for blue skies, but saw they mocked  
your poisoned air and breath — your city's gaping war —  
I could not speak, could not explain how I was locked  
in unable dreams, in sickness stranded old and far.

20

Dishonored in silence, do I wound your silence  
now with words unasked, unheard? Is it pride  
that pricks my hurt, makes helplessness my penitence?  
I only know each word falls farther from your side —  
thieving my grief, a dull heart's unsacred rite.



## INDEX OF FIRST LINES

(links via arrows)

If I were to be born again,	⇒	2
What do you write on a wall?	⇒	4
The sea is lover to the sand,	⇒	6
Soundless on aging acetate,	⇒	7
Summer has its clammy skin against my window.	⇒	8
Sometimes it makes sense to think about God.	⇒	11
Piled in slanting supermarket bins,	⇒	13
First, is there anything wrong with you?	⇒	15
I saw young men scramble from an earthen tunnel	⇒	16
Ink that “bomb,” Netanyahu, play the public fool!	⇒	18
This one’s on a pedestal,	⇒	19
I could not die at twelve.	⇒	20
Ah no, sir, you are too simple! Why, you might have said — oh,	⇒	21
We believe in what knows us,	⇒	23
Last night I dreamed about a place called Sabbath.	⇒	24
Item: one wreck of a car.	⇒	25
After the dancing stopped, & she	⇒	26
From Gaza they can’t touch it,	⇒	28
Thought I was gone, did you?	⇒	29
Where does dreaming end	⇒	31
Each time you leave could be the last.	⇒	33
Occupied Palestine, March 2011	⇒	34
Tread lightly, stoic, these needles bleed.	⇒	36
Where blood drowns	⇒	37
If I try to understand a dead man I never knew	⇒	38
Magnify his name I dare not.	⇒	40
You were the child whose life closed before your youth.	⇒	42



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### *Review of Accompanying Data*

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**QR Codes** QR Codes on each page can be used by readers switching between print and digital versions of this document. The QR figures encode bibliographic and page information which can orient conformant PDF software in showing the interactive PDF version of each page.

**Embedded Data** For users with conformant cross-referencing software, this page has an embedded file in NTXH (Nonconstructive Type Expression and Hypergraph Serialization Language) format. The contents of this file can also be accessed [here](#) (if your PDF viewer can read embedded files).

**Data Description** The following NTXH excerpt indicates the type interface and sample values of the embedded data.

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