

KADDISH FOR GAZA

by Michael Leshner

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

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

A Few Words about Writing and Resistance

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

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

5 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,

15 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

25 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,

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

I also rise;

That is me.

40 Because I am not dead.
 Because I am not there.

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

45 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.

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

BURLESQUE AT THE BARRIER

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

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

 what could wipe the smile
 off that misshapen maw?

15 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
20 of the concrete. If there were bricks
 to throw, you'd come up with something
 to say.

 Or, once you got by it,
 you'd stand on the sand
25 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.
30 What can you piss
 that will tell it like it is?

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

Atop the wall's gray brink
I've been longing to write
something fiercely ugly, wordless as a smell,
something that would gloat
40 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
45 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;
50 I gather he thought I meant something else.

DRINKING IT

(for Amira Hass)

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

5 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?
15 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

takes aim at anyone who drinks.
20 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.

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.

— 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
5 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
10 impossible to repeat, impossible to imitate.

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
15 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
20 him as he pirouetted down.

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,
5 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,
10 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.
15 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,
20 Begin, begin, begin!

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,
25 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?
30 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.

July 24

35 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.
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...
45 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
50 their playthings on the swells.
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

55 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,
65 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

70 Sabbath. Forbidden to write until after dark,
now shackled with migraine. Funny,
I've lost touch with the use of words,
they're insects on my skin as they scurry away, unheard,
a mystery to me, all of them.
I try to say to the dead,
75 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
80 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

85 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'ya
after artillery flattened the town. I saw
the arm of a young man, trapped, bleeding to death,
90 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
95 and the two medics, stamping in the dust, roared dark harmonies
at an unpictured sun.

KADDISH

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?
 5 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

15 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.

25 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.

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

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

ORANGES

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

5 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
15 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

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

how alone you've grown,
prism of horizons and dew!
30 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

35

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

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

LECTURE

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?

5 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.
10 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.
15 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.

20 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,
25 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
30 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
5 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
10 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)
15 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
20 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;
25 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 —
30 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 &
35 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
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?"

45 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?
50 Why this squalid power over fragile youth?
Why such puny sunsets before
the immensity of night?

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

CLOWNS WITH SWASTIKAS

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*.

DEAD GOD, DYING GOD

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.

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.

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

I could not die at twelve.
They gave me drugs to swill
and told me it was all my fault —
myself,
5 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
10 for long,
I faintly hoped to be released
from what I stored.

And yet I never gave
the stroke that would have killed
15 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 —
20 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.

— 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!"

5 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."

10 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!"

15 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."

20 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*?"

25 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!"

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

30 Irony: “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?”

35 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
45 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?”

55 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.

DRONE

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

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

10 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
15 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

20 (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)

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
5 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
10 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,
15 betrayed, where am I, was I?...and I turned back, as in its mad
despair those vowels drenched every shard of autumn.

CRIME SCENE

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

5 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,
10 they're all talking at once:
the bewildered grocer, still in his apron,
the boy on the bike.

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

15 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,
20 splayed out and proud.

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

25 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.

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

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

THE SURVIVOR

After the dancing stopped, & she
(her cool daydreams on her cheeks)
could slowly drift around
the busy eddying of air
5 (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
15 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
25 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?

A moment poised to fall —
30 & did,
where in the graveyard slid
& angled down the mouth that swallowed,
with its alien dream,
all, till down it went
35 replete & silent
closed up against the word
I forgot to ask in time

& never heard.

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) —
45 everything too complete for names
shadows or remainder.

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

THE WALLS

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
5 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
10 about ghettos, of walls that poison

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
15 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
20 penned in dark rain,

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
25 who've seen so much future vanishing?

MY DEVIL CURSES ME

Thought I was gone, did you?
My shrunken head still
hisses evil nothings
in your ear.
5 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.

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

And now you think
you can fix things
20 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,
25 it's confession time,
watch me drop a tear
for the stillborn child.

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

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

35 Do you like what you see?

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

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.

45 Nothing to tell.

What will you do,
blind Jew?

DELIRIUM

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

5 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
15 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?

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

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

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

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

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

FAREWELL

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,
5 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
10 aside as you dissolved into twilight?

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
15 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,
20 love — look quietly into my eyes.

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
25 that might clutch, vaguely, the darkening scene.

FANATICS

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.

5

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."

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*)

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

5 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
15 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

25 like bloody tendrils where lips once met
to close forever, yet never to forget
the grieving that kills, the hopes that hate.

DEATH IN PALESTINE

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

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

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

And let pain
bury what cannot be undone.

15 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.

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

Deep in the pith
where columns of the dead
have marked the sand,
they stay.
30 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
5 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,
10 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.
15 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...

20 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"
25 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?

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?

35 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.”
(Some who were his friends now carried suspect memories
40 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:

45 “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.”

I do not know. But he is gone,
gone beyond mourning. Self-victim now,
50 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;

55 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?
 5 And may he reign
 (if anything should reign)
 in a world he first made differently,
 I hope,
 from what he might have willed...
 10 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!
 15 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.

* * *

20 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
 25 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.”

30 I cannot cast it out, but I can rant,
(and ranting, raise a pure shout
heavenward),
and I can say: life must be found somewhere apart
from age and staleness and waste, without
cruelty, without cant.

35 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
40 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.

But if I flay the truths that tell me so
45 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
50 to rise to the humanness in another's blood...
the need to infuse

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

55 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)

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,
5 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
10 among the dead, there are so many, and so much unsaid.

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
15 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
20 in unable dreams, in sickness stranded old and far.

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 —
25 thieving my grief, a dull heart's unsacred rite.

EMENDATIONS

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