

# BROTHERS, COUSINS AND ALL THE REST



a poetic enquiry

by

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**C O N T E N T S****B R O T H E R S   A N D   C O U S I N S   5****A L L   T H E   R E S T   2 6**

# BROTHERS AND COUSINS

## **Big Bang Brothers**

the sun is high  
shouting over the world  
wake up, you're all brothers

and we open our eyes  
brown or slanted yellow  
children or wrinkled

~~~~~

it's coming closer  
each little fish  
every tadpole or gnat  
that lives in this pond  
makes its own tiny ripple  
that shivers us into a crowd of  
jostling silver molecules

~~~~~

all brothers, here in our mirrors  
our touch-screen libraries of babel  
all shouting to each other  
voices and pictures  
a shimmering graffiti  
quicksilver pond of souls

~~~~~

until the next destroyer  
dynamite stuffed  
around his body belt  
scatters us all  
fleeing from each other  
into solitary universes

## Cousins

They say we are cousins, you and I  
we share the same buses, fast food, love of football  
we walk the same sidewalks  
shop in the same stores  
and when we are ill  
we fill the wards of the same hospitals

The writing on our street signs,  
cold drink bottles and public bathrooms  
are in both our languages

Our music and the poetry of our words  
ring out in similar cadences  
but when you listen carefully  
you can feel the different headwaters of rivers  
leading back to different mountain springs

Sometimes in the places  
that we meet; the halls of our government  
the schools where our children gather  
and eye each other  
with pride or jealousy

You can hear different blood beating  
see into our inner rooms,  
the places where kinship is simply  
a thin coat of surface paint

Covering the thousand years deep  
distrust we have for one another

## **Peace Lover**

There is a wall that if you happen to be  
born on one side or the other you are  
'them' or 'us' like your father, great grandfather

Let's say you inherited some things from them,  
color of skin, eyes, hair, the way you pronounce  
words, foods you eat or don't, the direction you face  
when you worship. The name of your God

The fields on your side of the wall are lush and  
bountiful, but those on the other side you eye,  
watch the others tilling, harvesting, envious even

And then one day someone (a leader, priest, commander)  
tells you to risk your life, attack the wall (or defend it)  
and you don your gray uniform or your brown uniform

Up until a decade or two ago you hadn't ever heard  
the words 'pacifist' or 'conscientious objector' all  
you asked was that if you got killed on the wrong

Side of the wall, they would return your body home  
where it belongs, alongside your father, your great  
grandfather, so that when the war was over, your children

Would come once a year to drape a brown flag or  
a gray flag over your grave, go to prayers, go home for a meal,  
donate a small sum to strengthen or rebuild the wall

And now your children, your grandchildren  
are demonstrating. They stand quietly with placards  
'Pull down the wall'

And you know not whether to weep for them  
or bless them

## Whimper

7 am on the last morning  
before everything explodes

into shrapnel, flying masonry  
broken statues, Eroica, bone splinters  
blood, old newspapers, tears, regrets  
Frank Sinatra singing My Way  
seismology, a three-legged dog  
walls, floors, elevator shafts  
incandescence, ketchup, nails  
a car door tumbling away then gone  
silence

6 am on the last morning  
baby is crying, needs a diaper change  
two cars stop side-by-side in a side street  
windows open, drivers chatting  
garbage truck honking behind  
down at the bakery fragrant bread rolls  
tumble into baskets, fishermen cast nets  
into gleaming waves

a faintness of dawn suffuses the sky  
in Australia headlights cut the darkness  
into ribbons, radio playing Chopin.  
Natasha stirs the soup, tastes, adds another  
pinch of salt, a clove of garlic

A lone jackal howls, knows something is wrong

## Cranes Over Galilee

Muscled flesh of migrating cranes  
decorates the air above our valley  
twice yearly we watch their squadrons  
their flowing flapping arrows bringing  
news from Lake Victoria  
messages from the Black Sea

how the little ones have grown so quickly  
about the scarcity of fishlets this year  
exchanging flavors of grub and tadpole

the funeral of old Kylos, the wing leader  
and how our autumn tears had hushed  
even the fretting newly hatched

warnings too, about humans to be avoided,  
that throw rocks, fire shotguns, yell barbaric threats;  
and those to be respected, that scatter corn cobs  
on stubbled fields, glint upwards only through  
snapping glassy eyes

We watch them arrive and depart each year  
above our valley, our tribal wars, our fences  
and fortifications mean nothing to them

Mapped out as we are between hills, lakes,  
feeding or resting grounds

The higher we fly we realize how fragile  
our ownership of these merging landscapes,  
these changing seasons. All our efforts,  
our patchwork scratchings on the terrain  
fading into obscurity beneath the rushing  
clouds of territorial imperative

## 5 am. Everywhere

Today cranes gaggled in clusters, wheeling then re-forming into arrows heading northwards. A girl with dark hair wearing a clutch of explosives making her feel heavy or pregnant would have seen them as in a vision, wishing it would be quick, painless. Five children under blankets did not awaken as the intruder slipped between them and in a million homes not far from Tokyo, Earth Hour passed unrecognized. At a gas station near Paris a pump attendant with Michelin across his overalls handed over the cash to a man with a stocking on his head while in downtown Chicago those queuing outside a smart phone store shuffled feet in the five a.m. cold. Viewed from space the pinkish yellow cherries in their shrink-wrapped pack seemed perfect, unblemished like the pale oversized moon rising over the rooftops of Nagasaki. Survivors listening to news broadcasts heard that no effort was being spared to return the situation to normal.

## **Slowly Sinks the Sun**

Many of these walls are covered with his landscapes,  
domes and spires of Jerusalem rubbing wooden-framed shoulders  
with bark and bough, arching hills and wandering streams  
but sadly, he hasn't painted anything for years.

His notebooks filled with witticisms, purple phrases,  
sit in corners, piled, untidy, dusty or yellowing  
in the afternoon sun, waiting for some magic, a fairy princess  
to bend and kiss, touch with her wand, cause the  
sleeping frog to croak, then stand, open his sleepy eyes  
take up the pen again.

The house is quiet now. Empty refrigerators hum  
breathlessly, perhaps waiting for a sign of his awakening.  
The day nurse exchanges greetings with the night nurse  
tidies up, adjusts the bed sheets, checks the intravenous  
drip-drip that seeps into his absent dreams. Family members  
arrive for occasional visits, straighten a painting or two,  
sip tea, read a short story or a poem of his – a fond ritual –  
remembering his smile, the way he would shrug or wink,  
surprise them with some new creation.

He sleeps on. The clock ticks unconcerned. The fairy princess  
goes about her work in far-off places, reviving ancient music,  
unearthing undiscovered manuscripts, from time to time  
reuniting parted lovers. He sleeps on.

The night nurse arrives. The sun slips lower down into  
a painted sea. The moon appears, writing its familiar poem  
across a darkening sky.

## Prayer

To all those praying, backs bent  
before dawn, repeating phrases, beside your beds  
of iron or straw, strewn with rocks, thorns  
sacrifices, psalms or incense. Look

The ship of knives sails on a zodiac of glass  
see how its hull and spinnaker glitter  
a thousand suns rain glow worms brilliant on it  
as transparent as the dolphins flying  
clicking tones in whistle-songs and silver bells

Ten just men and women steer its path  
tomorrow, next year, centuries from here  
ten thousand millennia. Look they float,  
they go about their tasks with smiles  
they break together crusts of restored bread  
drink hope from tubes, sip rescued tomorrows  
like resurrected rose wine, promises, their muscles  
pull together like stretched wire with messages

Soon. Next year a city in the sky  
bubbles on a bed of moonlit sand, destiny  
in their eyes, carrying their seeds across time's ocean  
across strange skies. Ten just men and women, a hundred now  
a thousand. Millions! Seeds bursting silver spores  
like wind-blown dandelions. Look water!  
fingers holding fingertips in peace. Look

Their backs are straight. They do not pray  
they sing, rejoice and dance. They talk with dolphins

## Side by Side

Teenagers barely out of childhood  
barefoot angels, brown skinned, muscular arms  
whirling slings, kitchen knives in pockets  
hatred burning under belts of their jeans.

Look, they could be our kids  
that one holding a rock looks like Yotam  
who rides the school bus with our daughter  
and I swear the fellow with the baseball cap  
lying bleeding, and his partner black-shirted  
struggling with two uniformed soldiers  
could be David, Avi or Nechemia  
who, loud mouthed, discuss everything  
in the next door playground three a.m. Friday night.

Two of our boys strayed into their village  
they could have been greeted with familiarity  
instead they were stoned, vehicle burned, escaped with their lives.

Don't their mothers care  
knowing their children will be caught or killed?  
don't they lose sleep as we do  
watching our babies don khaki, toys replaced by guns?

We all drink the same poison, poured by history into  
our cups. We swill it down with arrogance and distaste—  
*This is our land, not yours. Our language. Our birthright.*

Outside in the playground dusk is gathering.  
The children are jumping on and off the swings and slides  
yelling at each other. We call them home, supper is ready.  
Have they completed their homework?

Down the road, in a dusty village, the others  
are playing soccer as the moon comes up.  
Just kids all of them.

## **Psalm**

*– after Yehuda Amichai*

I want to celebrate the things that remain  
after hard winters. That survive freezing and melting,  
that have no hatred in their hearts for they have  
loving and compassionate hearts. Those with smiles  
in their voices despite the conflicts.

I want to celebrate the small pleasures,  
music that accompanies the sun's warmth  
when eyes and ears open to birds  
and little children. Fragrance of breakfasts  
cooking in a thousand accents, from porridge to pita  
from watermelon to Esh Tanur\*.

Mist in Jerusalem's streets as night-shift workers  
wend their way home and those that open the day,  
prepare their wares.

Above all I want to celebrate strength that remains  
in willing legs and arms, muscles that volunteer  
to lift burdens in distant places, heal sick and wounded,  
protect endangered species; hearts and bodies  
that believe in common good, with patience and determination  
that dissolve borders, those that build, rebuild  
and reconstruct after argument and war all those pieces  
of the puzzle that we call Zion.

*Esh Tanur – a large flat pita bread baked in Jerusalem*

## Reality Show

The Emperor of North is squat and obese. He wears a knee-length black coat which goes well with his pudgy scowl. His subjects go hungry while slaving to assemble weapons and compose blood-chilling threats which the emperor hurls on festive occasions at his industrious neighbors who are building cars and latest model smartphones. The emperor's every move is filmed by TV cameras made by his neighbors. When he farts the smell reaches the shores of the New World. Dvorak's skeletal fingers cover his skull's nostril sockets in disgust.

The Emperor of West is thin and graying. His dark fingers grasp a gold Parker 51 carefully penning a scholarly speech which he will give next week at the Organization For International Cooperation. His beautiful wife is touring a school for underprivileged children and his two daughters are studying medieval languages and computer science.

When the threats and smells arrive the Emperor of West writes a reprimand into his speech, calls his economics secretary to add a new sanction against the North to the already purposeless list. Tomorrow he will take the family off on their annual holiday to play golf and frolic in the surf somewhere out of earshot.

The Professor of History who also doubles as a writer of crime novels scratches his head. He can't decide whether to add these goings on to his book "The Rise and Fall of Despots" or to use them as part of his latest novel "While the World was Sleeping".

## Chinese Poetry

I do not understand Chinese poetry  
its ancient traditions of Shijing and Chuci  
my mind is set in Mozart, mustard and mayonnaise  
in bullfights, the thrust of costumed muscle  
wheels and cogsprings in Swiss watches

The West has enough beef  
to make hamburgers for ten million  
aspiring poets and pop music addicts  
hungry after their writing exercises and juke box routines  
sports fields, cheerleaders, novels with unpredictable  
endings – even for those who love opera  
small print and dandelions

I want to sing my own composition  
sit in the auditorium of my thoughts  
perhaps we're not so far away from  
each other as the planet spins  
all blue ice from space

Flying over the Alps  
I see snow covered mountains from above  
and valleys  
winding creases in the world's skin  
like veins on an old man's hand  
writing Chinese poetry  
carefully dipping into the ink  
of his mind

signed with a dot and a flourish  
of our common blood

## Migrants

*Close the door, they're comin' through the window*

*Close the door, they're runnin' up the stairs. The Stargazers 1955*

Over mountains, across desert, step after painful step  
they trudge, remains of yesterday in tattered bundles  
Step after step, hopes and expectations crammed  
into sardine-can vessels leaking and groaning through turbulent seas  
their eyes on promised new lives.

Their world is moving, rearranging. Neighbors have become foes  
watering holes have dried, soil sun baked, crops fail,  
summer days collapse in sudden snowstorms, oceans rise  
and sweep across the land. Villages become matchsticks  
families become drowned ants.

Many drop on the way. Boats burst their timbers  
helpless parents and children, dreams capsized — here a few rags  
there some upturned suitcases bob on the waves  
marking the place where dreams ceased to exist.

We watch survivors from our newspapers, television sets—  
dwelling in cellars and outhouses on the fringes  
of our luxury. Avoid them, huddlers, vagabonds, thieves  
They are armed with desperation, with knives, machetes,  
beg and steal our jobs, march in our streets  
demanding justice. Their placards scream at the cameras  
we disperse them with water cannon, rubber bullets  
troops on horses.

Who are you? we yell. Usurping our birthright, dirtying our neighborhoods. We write petitions, hold meetings, demand action the value of our property is falling. Our children fear to go out at night. Contain them we insist, detain them, close the borders, erect walls, fences against these intruders.

Somewhere a few voices are heard, quickly dismissed. It could have been us, they say. Fifty years, sixty years, a century. It could have been us, it was us. Tomorrow it may be us.

Others say It's just a story. Turn the page.

## Waters of Gaza

They moved out of Gaza  
not without protest, not without prayer  
feeling like ivy ripped off the walls  
like irrigation pipes torn from the soil  
they moved out on unwilling legs  
on buses to nowhere  
fathers, mothers, children  
and children without fathers  
without mothers

They moved into Gaza  
not without covet, not without envy  
feeling like water released from a dam  
bursting into surrendering fields  
carrying all before it, trees, houses  
places of prayer, fences, gardens  
waves breaking over alien temples  
again and again till water covered all

After the water came briny hatred  
lusting for a redder liquid  
and the skies darkened again  
lightening and thunder returned to Gaza  
rained on this thin strip of unhappiness  
writhing between the wrath of history  
and the dark depths of the sea

## Nursery Rhyme for Jihadi Children

Ten little Jew boys from Palestine  
One got shot while crossing the line

Nine little Jew boys from the British Mandate  
One went to Cairo, waiting for his fate

Eight little Jew boys born in Devon  
One was bombed in Tel Aviv and didn't go to heaven

Seven little Jew boys teaching Jewish tricks  
One got stoned while jeering at some well flung bricks

Six little Jew boys asphalting their drive  
The tar was made in Gaza so it buried one alive

Five little Jew boys fighting their cold war  
One froze in Siberia and now he breathes no more

Four little Jew boys sniffing the sea breeze  
A germ arrived from Istanbul and gave him a disease

Three's now the number of boys who are called Jew  
One got killed by ISIS and now that just leaves two

Two little Jew boys having Jewish fun  
One was decapitated and so that leaves just one

One little Jew boy just fell flat on his face  
Now there's no more Jew boys, Allah be praised

## Just Another Morning in Haifa

She was Arab and he was Jew  
but it mattered not  
this cold November dawn  
on the tenth floor  
of the city hospital  
as she took his hand  
comforted him with soft words  
listened to his final rasping breaths.

There was something about him  
she thought, so similar to her own father  
gone these twenty years – the dusty village streets  
he used to stroll, games they used to play  
perhaps it was his mustache, the fiery glint  
in sun-scorched eyes, the hoarseness in his voice?

She couldn't tell exactly – just another patient  
said the day nurse as they together cleaned  
the room, spread fresh sheets over the empty bed.

They're all so similar aren't they  
just bags of bones, said the day nurse  
with a sigh – don't take it so hard.

But she could not hold back her sadness  
she was Arab and he was Jew  
yet he looked just like her father.

## That Same Old Sideshow

We're off on this seaside holiday  
sun flawless over a petticoat sea,  
this morning we're sitting in the shade  
Yasser, Bashar and me, taking a break from  
improving our tans in the 40o heat  
watching Punch and Judy while nibbling  
at pistachios and licking frozen ices.

Punch is bashing Judy with a baseball  
bat, she falls but gets back up, then he kicks  
her with his boots, draws a dagger from his  
clothing and slashes at her — again she drops  
and when she stumbles to her feet, Punch  
shoots her in the back with a submachine gun.  
Meanwhile the policeman despite all the going  
on is snoozing under a palm tree, stage left.

Then a miracle — Judy recovers, takes Punch  
by his robe and throws him to the ground. He  
lies there groaning. The policeman wakes, slaps  
handcuffs on Judy and drags her protesting to  
the International Court which unanimously  
declares her an aggressor and demands that she  
apologize to Punch, pay him reparations.

Serves her right, says Yasser to Bashar, taking  
a lick at his frozen lolly. Vicious little bitch.

## Silkworms

their bodies pale and barely moving  
as they patiently chewed on mulberry leaves  
becoming over time cocooned and yellow.

Then we waited long weeks for moths  
to break out and mate, pinpoints of eggs  
appearing afterwards on blotting paper  
a reassuring confirmation of  
nature's wonderful predictability.

My son, like his uncle, my brother  
was born into a new country  
the great ships that sail the seas and air  
carried them cocooned in stoic mothers  
to brighter futures – from Britain to Africa  
and then from Africa to Palestine.

As they grew, changed their accents,  
their games, the hues of their lives  
Palestine changed to Israel, English to Afrikaans  
to flowing Hebrew while parents and  
grandparents like moths, aging and quivering  
on their blotting paper memories  
slowly dried, motionless and shivered to dust.

The young men went on to different futures  
my brother left the box, married a gentile  
my son married religion, grew a beard.

Fed on mulberry leaves, the worms spin yellow silk  
on lettuce pure white and on beetroot leaves their  
silk is tinted a dusky rebellious carmine.

## Unnoticed on a Bus

she still glosses her lips  
that moon girl  
wears long sleeved sweaters  
up to her nostrils  
dark slits for eyes  
moonbeam catching eyes  
vigilant and bright  
layers of halos  
she spins out of limbo  
while dressing

coffee she sips through a kaleidoscope  
between her glossed lips

he still uses his prayer book  
lest memory err, that moon man  
praising the Lord he winds and unwinds  
strips of leather, cramped text  
recites solemn syllables thrice daily  
at bus stops, in bomb shelters, again  
and again, and again again  
a comforting ritual, like stirring tea  
waiting for mercy, limp as a rag doll  
to drop from heaven; one spoon,  
two spoons, no moons, all moons

squeezed beside themselves in a bus  
moon girl, moon man  
she averts eyes into a fashion magazine,  
he into a pocket sized bible,  
under her sweater a full-breasted moon  
slit eyes deciphering his ink blot hieroglyphics,  
bracketed eclipse, moon meets moon  
on a bus, between limbo and heaven

## **Books I Never Opened**

At school we showed them off  
proudly lifting lids of shoe boxes  
When father and mother  
packed our belongings into crates and sailed away  
from the old house they shared for years  
with my paternal grandparents  
its living room flanked by shelves  
of gold-embossed holy books, which as a child  
seemed to me had seldom been opened  
a handful of secular books, unpretentious  
in their canvas covers, somehow survived  
and made their way across the ocean  
to a new chapter of my childhood.

Two of these sat for years  
side-by-side in a built-in bookshelf  
and I, immersed in robots, time machines  
and space adventures, hardly gave them a thought  
as they lay forgotten – rescued relics from  
my parents' past – parents who grew further apart  
from each other, in their preoccupations,  
their separate lives, that unbeknown to me then,  
would soon part them forever.

Looking back, decades later, I can still  
see those two books, one pink, the other brown,  
rubbing shoulders in some closed-covered mutual act  
of disregard, like strangers who pass daily on the street  
wordless, avoiding eye contact, just two old books  
in implausible juxtaposition:  
*"World Without Borders"* and  
*"The Man Who Understood Women"*  
titles, each in its own way, representing a wish, un-granted  
my father passed down to his son.

## Family Reunion

My son, the one in the white shirt, long beard fedora, black coat, drives past the hospital in his French Renault assembled by anti-semitic workers in Turkey. He calls the hospital "House of Healing". It is a religious institution; in the lobby long-sleeved receptionists munch slices of apples and clementines grown by some Muslims in Jordan in this "Shmitta" year.

While washing his hands reciting a blessing to the creator, his smartphone rings. It is his brother from Ireland – the one who lives with his Catholic girl friend and who travels each year to Yelm in Washington State to hear the words of Ramtha who ascended to immortality 3000 years ago and who preaches that God is inside every one of us.

They are the best of friends, these two boys, now grown men. The one from Ireland will come after Christmas to visit his nephew, named Menachem after the Lubavicher Rebbe. They will prepare a barbecue together with kosher chicken slaughtered ritually. My daughter, now in the army will come from her kibbutz to join them. her grandfather was a famous rabbi in Poland too. She only eats chicken, not red meat.

My other son who for twenty years was a vegan, but now eats anything as long as it's not cooked in wine will miss his AA meeting to be with the family. He will take a photo of all of us smiling, arms around each other, which I will hang in my office to remind me how much I love them all.

This poem I will print in a book and give a copy to each of them which they will bury in bottom drawers, dusty bookshelves, leave in the boots of their cars.

## Lunchtime in the Old City

Twisted together since 1967  
the two halves of the city rub shoulders.

At the entrance to the shuk, an old man is selling beigele a Jewish adaptation of an old Arab tradition. For your few piasters now morphed into shekels, you also get some tangy zaatar mixed with sesame seeds flung into a twist of newspaper, pockmarked like the ex-Jordanian relic it is, with times and places of daily prayers, weather forecasts, exchange rates and pronouncements by visiting dignitaries all mouthing peace, then returning to the bombings and beheadings in their own embattled cities.

We descend into the depths of the market on narrow cobbled steps flanked by colorful stalls and shops displaying trinkets, garments, vegetables and sweetmeats side by side like liquorice allsorts. Merchants eye us, profit and disdain mixed in their eyes. The steps wind further down – a centuries-old, perhaps millennia-old stench of donkeys and camels laboring with goods fills our nostrils.

A group of tourists from some Eastern country (Vietnam, Cambodia perhaps) passes us on the way up all carrying suitcases purchased somewhere further down – don't they have suitcases in their country, we wonder.

Deeper down we hunt for the restaurant we've been recommended – the place where they make the best hummus in the Middle East, the most superbly fragrant grilled chicken – but it's closed. They didn't tell us Sundays they're not open.

Disappointed we buy Shwarma from a vendor in a nook of the alleyway, wash it down with freshly squeezed pomegranate juice, start our way back up to the open air and its suddenly sunlit view of the golden dome with its long history of conquest and dispute

## Mulberry Memories

Lately she's been writing poems  
about her childhood in Sofia  
the playground, its painted carousel,  
smoke curling from chimney pots  
as drifting down a curve of Danube,  
oars idle, head on Uncle Oskar's shoulder  
as he read from a picture book of legends

She recalls her coming-of-age ball, sitting  
watching the couples swirl past, then  
looking up, finding a boy there  
requesting a dance and how light she'd felt

As he gently held her waist, waltzed her  
on to the balcony and there next to the  
mulberry tree had bent to kiss her shocked  
question mark lips into something new, exciting

How after two such short decades she had  
laid him to rest in some quiet slope framed  
by the falling dark red blood of mulberries

Now here she is, nearing eighty, a little girl  
again, lying in an uncomfortable hospital ward  
awaiting surgery, not knowing whether or  
whether not or what— looking up at an off-white  
ceiling on which she sees a row of poppies,

A mulberry tree, a quiet bend with ducks,  
a rowing boat and Uncle Oskar opening a bag of  
chocolate éclairs, reading a page from the  
story of Baba Marta as the river floats idly by  
with all the time in the world



# ALL THE REST

## Friend

You were not with me in the long boats  
in the jungles, through the deserts, not with me  
while radios crackled static, not by my side  
as I wandered past cities, through villages  
spent nights at roadside inns and drinking friendships.

You were not with me while I browsed reference  
libraries, bookshops, magazines, encyclopedias  
schools and classrooms searching for knowledge  
eyes straining by candle light, learning a foreign  
language, how to say love in Italian, how to  
sum up rows of jittery numbers to achieve the  
perfect result every time.

You were not there in the dance halls, waiting  
for a smile of friendship, an invitation, not with me  
in my strolls alone, dreaming of some lost  
acquaintance, or paging through some dusty album  
trying to remember a face, how her eyes would  
crinkle when she smiled, how she once held my  
hand in some shaded glade.

All through my wanderings, I never really missed  
you, imagining your existence only once or twice  
in some thumbed and dropped science fiction novel  
shrugged, almost forgotten in the hurly burly.

I never thought the day would come when I would  
possess you, familiar as my fingers, companion, mentor  
benevolent lover - jingling, whistling, singing jewel  
of glass and aluminum, warming my back pocket,  
calling out to itching fingers, at times my only friend.

When you were not here I never missed you. Now I  
hold and hug you, cannot live without you.

## The Eyes and the Ears of the World

*Paramount Pictures 1927-1957*

Yesterday

it was New Year again  
we watched a documentary  
about our country

Plane loads of immigrants  
arriving  
dressed in Balaclavas, Bermuda shorts  
and chic Parisian costumes

Lots of flashbacks  
Tel-Aviv on the sands  
of the Nineteen Thirties  
a yarmulke wearing Yemenite  
selling falafel  
somewhere in Dimona

A nostalgic soundtrack  
accompanying sights of  
newcomers kissing the ground  
pioneers draining swamps,  
we listened again to  
Shoshana Damari, Arik Einstein,  
David Ben Gurion

Our visitor from the UK  
remarked; “*very interesting*  
*but hardly objective*  
*certainly wouldn’t wow them*  
*back in Dublin or London*  
*it doesn’t give apartheid*  
*a single mention*”.

## Cantata for Bus and Cell Phone

Ten a.m., Haifa Bay bus station  
green buses lined up like panting athletes  
at the starting line, dirt, diesel fumes  
and oil slicks greet passengers sipping coffee  
smoking, talking into cell phones  
soldiers lean on railings, rifles  
and submachine guns slung carelessly  
between their legs

Everyone here has cell phones, each with  
its own musical overture, the air is so thick  
with conversation, you could slice it  
with a metronome into scintillating fragments.

- *Where are you, you said you would be here at nine?*  
- *She said to me, I said to her, she said to me, the bitch!*  
- *Did you give the children to eat? And don't forget your keys again.*  
and soldiers' slang repeated everywhere  
in acronymic anagrams of military shorthand  
that only parents of conscripted children  
can attempt to decipher

Here we all commingle, zealots and hobos,  
gum-chewing youths with pierced tongues and nostrils,  
mothers with bottle-fed babies, all rubbing shoulders  
in the rush to go home, back to the base, visit friends  
in hospitals; three dozen and more assorted life stories  
thrown together for two brief hours into a green, caged tiger on wheels

The morning paper tells the news that might have been:  
a terrorist was captured on his way to explode his body bomb  
at the central bus station in Tel-Aviv

Three dozen cell phone users continue their conversations  
almost uninterrupted. They're used to this routine,  
tomorrow they'll be repeating it again

## The Voice of Peace

From somewhere in the Mediterranean  
'No more war, no more bloodshed'  
My two sons awaiting adolescence  
Turned up full blast each morning

The voice of peace...and Beatles  
The voice of peace...and Pink Floyd  
Why no more black shirt? asked Guy aged eleven  
I corrected no more bloodshed

Patiently I tried to tell him; the peace flight to Egypt  
Abie Nathan talks to the Pope about peace  
The money collected for refugee camps  
For victims of earthquakes, hunger and war

From somewhere in the Mediterranean  
Something filtered through, alongside Abba  
Enhancing Elvis, quickening Queen  
Came the message, absorbed like osmosis  
Through the ether of this growing generation  
No more war

And then, the last song, the disappointment,  
The failed Oslo peace accords  
The disillusionment, the voice of peace  
Scuttled sinking somewhere in the Mediterranean

Yet somehow the message lived on, lives on  
In the hearts of that generation and ours  
We still hear dimly between the rock music  
The albums and the reminiscences

And my sons, who while patrolling on reserve duty  
Still remember how, over the waves it came, every day  
The wish, faint now but still recognizable  
No more war

## May You Live in Interesting Times

Picture young lovers, nineteen or thereabout, star-crossed  
he Druze third son hewed from Golan oak  
descended from honorable generations  
of proud mustachioed builders soil tillers  
sent to Damascus to study medicine  
in his knapsack a book of poems by Khalil Gibran.

She younger child of holocaust survivors  
somehow still a dreamer playing a soft guitar  
her father had bulldozed his tank into fortified dug-outs  
her brother now in poppies felled by an October bullet.

A chance meeting on some rocky outcropping  
birds-view-soar above blue sea of Galilee  
winking like a pool of tears clenched between  
the mountains' clasped palms  
he turns a thumbed page she strums a chord.

Implausible but yes perhaps it could happen  
as in the distance volcano ash an oil spill,  
ships steaming into barricades the Holy City  
domes minarets and churches synagogues  
echoing calls of allegiance twisting into a hard-faced dawn.

Picture indigo children  
playing computer games flashing knives  
swords dragon-slaying weaponry winging airless space  
clad only in the stuff of dreams. From broken homes  
in London, 9/11, Sri Lanka, Teheran, Chernobyl survivors  
entangled in 2012 predictions planetary upheavals  
underground eruptions rearranging continents.

They're meeting on the Internet  
chatting facebook language comparing Lady Gaga  
with Madonna across rhythms and jangling riffs  
interspersed with narrations of violence and desire.

Picture a pair of backpackers  
fresh from college traveling the planet hand-in-hand  
continent and ocean arriving Port-au-Prince  
11th January as from the guest house window a day unfolds.  
Watch with them as while the serpent underground slumbers  
people rise go about their labors forget dreams demons  
shake heads wash eyes study their outlines in mirrors  
pour from streets into their daily business.

Trams rumble by motorized millipedes smells of fresh bread rolls  
shouts of fruit vendors barrows with sweetmeats  
as on a street corner outside the United Nations relief agency  
an old man arranges a pile of fragrant herbs on a wooden crate.  
It's just another tropical summer day children on the third floor  
prepare satchels for school sandwiches neat in lunch boxes  
their teacher 23 has never seen a serpent tectonic plates far from  
her imagining. Outside gaily clad thousands throng the day.

Now the serpent stirs. Tomorrow children old man relief workers  
dreamers backpackers vendors of bread rolls sweetmeats  
thousands buried broken bleeding under smoking rubble underground.  
The serpent turns. Two hundred years has passed  
the world stops whirling for a moment stands aghast counts casualties.

Night falls. Outside hordes of civilizations, religions, do battle  
destroy one another build houses of worship on ruins  
of their enemies iron boots on throats quoting a single  
fire god's words victorious hymns of hatred  
and we're confused by all the blind cacophony wish to  
close the shutters pull up our eiderdowns. All we wanted  
was a little quiet a place to meditate read a Jane Austen novel  
go back to horseless carriages gaslights in streets plagues pestilence  
infant mortality life spans of 35. Robert and Clara singing sweetly  
against the backdrop of the fate we know awaits him.

## **Breakfast in Tunis**

This Tunisian is a sandwich  
bready and sliced down the middle  
resentment shows against his spine

He goes about his work carefully, a routine  
he has learned all his life. Freedom is a dream,  
he slices tomatoes, peppers, spreads hummus

His father worked in the market, grandfather too  
nothing changes, toil, poverty, his burning anger  
a hot piquant relish he spreads on everything he thinks

Olives, onions, chopped parsley and a helping  
of oily canned fish. Far away in Africa he hears  
wielders of punishment. They ring their enemies

With black rubber tires, douse them with petrol  
set fire to them, laugh while cowards burn,  
he takes a plastic bottle from his mind, squirts

A viscous stream of tahina over his thoughts  
grabs a sheet of cut paper, twists it around  
the sandwich, gives it to me

## Friend

You were not with me in the long boats  
in the jungles, through the deserts, not with me  
while radios crackled static, not by my side  
as I wandered past cities, through villages  
spent nights at roadside inns and drinking friendships.

You were not with me while I browsed reference  
libraries, bookshops, magazines, encyclopedias  
schools and classrooms searching for knowledge  
eyes straining by candle light, learning a foreign  
language, how to say love in Italian, how to  
sum up rows of jittery numbers to achieve the  
perfect result every time.

You were not there in the dance halls, waiting  
for a smile of friendship, an invitation, not with me  
in my strolls alone, dreaming of some lost  
acquaintance, or paging through some dusty album  
trying to remember a face, how her eyes would  
crinkle when she smiled, how she once held my  
hand in some shaded glade.

All through my wanderings, I never really missed  
you, imagining your existence only once or twice  
in some thumbed and dropped science fiction novel  
shrugged, almost forgotten in the hurly burly.

I never thought the day would come when I would  
possess you, familiar as my fingers, companion, mentor  
benevolent lover - jingling, whistling, singing jewel  
of glass and aluminum, warming my back pocket,  
calling out to itching fingers, at times my only friend.

When you were not here I never missed you. Now I  
hold and hug you, cannot live without you.

## For His Name's Sake

There is only one person in the universe  
and he is a lie.

No throne his nothingness, no lightning bolt  
can describe his inscrutability  
his blind immortal eye.

Alone, he invents armies of children  
to disobey him. They reinvent him  
in multiple disguises.

He ignores their games.

Child, you are but a passing fable  
told by a drunkard on a stormy night.

Come, climb these stairs up to the attic  
meet your father.

Look, he is a bespectacled fellow in  
a yarmulke reading a yellowed newspaper.

He hands you a slice of bread and a pickle  
the bread crumbles in your grip to star dust  
the pickle is a comet dipped in green vinegar.

You turn to thank him and he is gone.

### Homo Proponit, Sed Deus Disponit\*

*Thomas à Kempis circa 1425*

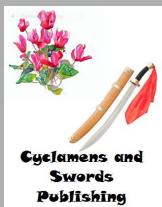
Once upon a time there was a family of gods  
who lived somewhere far out among the stars.  
Mama God was a composer, well known for her  
hymns and anthems. Papa God was a blacksmith who made  
shields, swords and things and on weekends performed  
miracles for charity. Baby God was still quite small  
and loved mostly to play and have fun.

When Baby God turned seven, Mama and Papa bought him  
a universe building kit as a birthday gift. The set contained  
a whole lot of mud and some wriggly worms as well as  
a rather battered brass bugle. After a bit of experimenting  
Baby God used the mud to make a large ball and with his  
finger he poked a number of tunnels in it. Then he placed  
the worms each inside its own tunnel. When he blew some  
loud notes on the bugle the worms would poke their heads  
out of the tunnels and sing Hallelujah.

Tiring of this game, Baby God put the world aside and turned  
to more adult things. But every now and then he would look  
to see how the worms were faring. One day he noticed that  
all of them had crawled out of their tunnels and were busy  
building castles, temples, mosques and churches over the  
surface of the mud ball and when he now blew the bugle,  
hordes of worms wearing Papa's swords and shields and singing  
Mama's hymns started pulling down and setting fire to  
each others' edifices.

Baby God (who by this time was no longer a baby) was horrified.  
This was not what he had intended when he placed the worms  
in the tunnels. He took the universe building kit down to a  
large black hole and dropped it in with a noisy plop.  
And there it has remained ever since.

\* *Man proposes but God disposes*



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