

Through the Eyes of the Other II

Mandelbaum Gate

Emile Habibi

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Tell then, tell her that she intends to get out of here, mister,” the Israeli policeman called out. He was standing, arms folded, at one entrance to Mandelbaum Gate when I explained to him that we had come with my mother who intended to go through after being allowed to pass. I pointed over the Jordanian side of the gate.

That was at the end of the winter. The sun was hinting at spring. The dust between the mounds of rubble was covered in green. Rubble heaps to the right, mounds of rubble to the left. Children with *pe'ot* (side curls) playing amidst the piles and the green stirred a sense of wonder in our children's hearts. Our kids had come with us in order to say goodbye to their grandmother. “Children and hair braids – how on earth?!”

In the heart of that old neighborhood we always called “Musrara”, there was an expanse of dusty asphalt which formed a wide courtyard. It was marked off by two doorways: the “here” door and the “there” door. These gates were made of stones from ruins and flattened tin, and were whitewashed by plaster. Each was wide enough to ensure proper passage for the “exiting” or the “entering” car.

Stressing the word “exit”, the guard said, as if he wanted to teach me a lesson; “What’s important is leaving the Garden of Eden, not getting in over “there”.” The customs officer did not want us to miss the lesson either. When everyone was kissing mother goodbye, he said: “Whoever exits from here never comes back”.

And I think that such unsettling thoughts also plagued mother during her last days with us. When our close friends and family members gathered the night before the trip to Jerusalem she said, “I lived in order to see my mourners (those who would eulogize me) with my own eyes.” And in the morning when we slid down the sloped alley to the car, she turned her gaze behind and gestured toward the olive and apricot trees at the door of her house, musing, “Twenty years I’ve lived here, and who can count the number of times I’ve gone up and down this alley!”

And when the car passed by the cemetery on the outskirts of town she turned to her deceased dear ones and let out, like an inner whisper, “Why isn’t it my fortune to be buried here? And who will place flowers on my granddaughter’s grave?”

In 1940, when she had gone up to Jerusalem, a fortune teller had told her that it would be her fate to die in the holy city. Would his prophecy come true in the end? She was seventy-five back then and had not yet experienced this feeling of terror that was taking over her heart and injecting utter emptiness into her soul; a feeling like the pangs of a suffering conscience – missing one’s homeland. And if one were to ask her, for example, to explain the meaning of the word “homeland”, she

would undoubtedly become confused just as she did that time she first came across the word in her prayer book and didn't know whether to say it meant house, or at a minimum, laundry tub. Or perhaps it meant the piece of land – the Kuba crater – that had come down to her from mother (her friends laughed at her when she wanted to take the laundry tub with her but she did not even dare to think of the Kuba crater). Or maybe “homeland” was the cries of the milkman that came with the dawn, or the din-don of the oil vendor's bell, or her sick husband's coughing voice, or nights like the nights when her children were home – those who had gone with their families and abandoned her doorstep, leaving her alone.

Of all places, this lintel was her house's doorstep, the one on which her last gaze rested, and the one that was privy and could attest to the countless times she stood on it, day in, day out – to see her children off, having gladdened their hearts, or to sing them a song; a tender, mother's song, with tears in her eyes:

Dark-feathered chick, your expression grew
Into that of a bird; to sing and to nest were your teachings
Now you have grown, your wings have lifted your feathers,
You have flown, and I troubled over you for nought.

Even if she were told that “homeland” was each and every one of these things all together, the term's riddle would not have been solved. But now, when her legs are stepping over to the “no-man's land” and she is expecting them to let her move and step forward – now she turns to her daughter and says, “How my soul yearned to sit and rest, if only one more time, on that lintel!” Her elderly brother, who had troubled himself to come from the village to part from her, gave an instant nod, his face pained and puzzled. For indeed, this was the mysterious thing which caused him to mourn and his sister to suffer; that which she could not uproot from the ground and take with her – this thing that was most dear to his heart as well. A neighbor of ours said to him: “When all's said and done you'll be forced to sign on to their vendor's contract. The law's on their side!”

But the old man turned to me and said: “Listen, my dear, one day my father, my younger brother, and I were watching over the field. Suddenly a flock of thrushes engulfed the field. My little brother took a hunting rifle in his hands, to show that he was a real man. A loud laugh burst from my father (you remember how your grandfather laughed, my dear?). When he saw the son of his old age thus, he called out, “Hunting thrushes is a man's job, my boy!”

But the little one was immensely stubborn. He held on to the rifle without relaxing a muscle. Sometime later he came back with a live thrush in the palm of his hand. The wonder of wonders! We were dumbfounded. And he, the little wild thing, was jumping with excitement. He was so proud of this chance to hunt that had come his way. “But we didn't hear the gun shot!” my father called out, to which the little

hunter replied, “I put a spell on the rifle, Dad!” And my father and my father’s fathers made me swear never to tell his secret – which was: he saw the thrush in danger when it was caught between the teeth of a big cat. Without a second thought, the boy bolted after the cat amid the boulders and the corn stalks, until he caught it and rescued the feathered thing from the predatory jaws.. .voila! And they expect me to sign on to a contract to sell (out) these memories? They have no power in their laws to do such a thing – none!

My advice to you is not to come to Mandelbaum Gate with your children. And it’s not because the ruined houses fascinate or entice them to cast about inside for a magic lamp or adventures like Aladdin’s. In fact, it’s not even because of the Hasidim’s waving sidecurls (*pe’ot*) that cause children to ask intriguing questions. They shouldn’t come with you because the road that leads to Mandelbaum Gate does not stop at it, even for a fleeting second, for those entering “there” or exiting “here”. There are American luxury cars whose passengers are healthy and dressed up, either with a blaze of color around their necks or in their army uniforms.

There are the cars of the “cease-fire people”, and of groups of U.N. inspectors. The rest of the passengers are ambassadors and representatives of Western states, with their presidents and their presidents’ cooks, their drinks, and their beautiful women. They do stop briefly by “our gate” so their drivers can exchange greetings with “our” guard — as cultured people do. And after passing through the no-man’s land, they stop briefly by “their gate” and exchange greetings with “their policemen” too, such that in this space of good manners and culture there is a back-and-forth Israeli-Jordanian competition.

The “he who goes from here” death sentence does not fall on these travelers; nor do they come under the Garden of Eden law of “he who enters does not leave.” For this way the honored observer can take lunch at the “Philadelphia” hotel over there, and dinner at the “Eden” hotel on this side, while his smile never skips off his face.

When my sister turned to the soldier – to the one who stands by “our gate,” to ask his permission to accompany mother to the Jordanian gate, he replied: “It’s forbidden Ma’am.” But I see those foreigners entering and leaving as if this were their home!” “Everyone is allowed to pass through these gates except Jews and Arabs. Except for the natives, my good lady.” He then said, “I must ask you to move out of the street. This is a main road bustling with traffic -.” He broke off in mid-sentence to joke with the passengers of a car pulling up (was it an “exiting” or an “entering” car?)

But we didn’t see what was funny here.

“Everything comes to an end, even in a time of parting!” said the customs official. An old woman leaning on a stick set out from “our gate” in the direction of “their gate.” She slowly crossed the “no-man’s land,” turning her head back from minute to minute, waving her hand and advancing further. And why should it be precisely now that her conscience knocks at her?

A soldier in a kaffiya and band burst out from among the ruins on the opposite side. He approached the old woman who was entering and stopped to snatch a bit of conversation with her. The two of them looked over to our side. We stood here with the children waving our hands. A soldier who looked deprived because of his exposed head stood in front of us and talked with us as well. He repeated that it was forbidden to go one step further.

Why did he say, “It’s as if she’s crossed the Valley of Death from which we don’t come back. That’s the reality of war; borders and Mandelbaum Gate. I must ask you to move over to the other side of the U.N. car”?

And suddenly a small body, squirming with life sprang out — leaped like a ball thrust into the air by a soccer game kick, streaking conspicuously towards the rival team’s goal post. The body leaped out and started to run ahead of us, cutting across the “no man’s land.” With a shock we realized that this was none other than my little daughter running after her grandmother, yelling, “Grandma! Grandma!” Look — the “no-man’s land” is already behind her and she’s reaching Grandmother..and Grandma is lifting her up in her arms.

From afar we saw how the soldier in the kaffiya was looking at the ground. My eyes were moist and I can attest that the soldier stood there pecking at the ground with his foot. And as for the soldier who stood with us, he also lowered his head and started scuffing the ground. The guard who was standing by the office doing nothing faded back and went inside. The customs official started looking for something in his pocket which he had apparently lost all of a sudden...

A great miracle happened here. A little girl cut across the Valley of Death from which none return. And see, in spite of everything she does come back to us crowned with triumph over the present reality of war, borders, and Mandelbaum Gate.

A girl ignorant of all of this, who doesn’t understand the real difference between the soldier in the kaffiya, and this one here with no head covering. A small, innocent girl! And because in those days there were no open hostilities towards the remote lands, how could the silly little one not think, as she was accustomed to, that she was still in her country? Here she saw her father stand on one side and her

grandmother on the other. Here were cars galloping back and forth across the “no-man’s land” just like they did by her house. Here people speak Hebrew, there they speak Arabic. And therefore she speaks in the two languages, in the one with her great-grandson and in the other with his horse. The customs official despaired, it seemed, of finding the thing he had lost (there is an end to everything, even to embarrassment), for he suddenly stopped the exhausting search, moved in his place, and said to the soldier as if to comfort him: “an innocent child.” “I must ask you, good people, to move away from the street lest one of your children fall between the wheels of the stampeding cars.”

And he moved back first.

Do you understand, therefore, why I advised you not to come to Mandelbaum Gate accompanied by your children? Their logic is so simple and uncomplicated, but so healthy!

*Translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Sasson Somekh, 1955

Translated from Hebrew into English by Stacy N. Beckwith, August 1999

Salman Massalha

ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN THE NATIONAL ERA

Because I am not a state, I have no
Secure borders, or an army guarding
Its soldiers' lives night and day. And
There is no colored line drawn by a dusty
General in the margins of his victory .
As I am not a legislative council ,
a dubious parliament, wrongly called
a house of representatives. As I am not
a son of the chosen people, nor am I
an Arab mukhtar. No one will falsely
accuse me of being, supposedly,
a fatherless anarchist who spits into the
well around which the people feast
on their holidays. Rejoicing at their
patriarchs' tombs. Because I am not
a fatalist, or a member of an underground
that builds churches, mosques and synagogues
in the hearts of children. Who will no doubt die
for the sake of the Holy Name in Heaven.
Because I am no excavation contractor or earth
merchant, not a sculptor of tombstones polishing
memorials for the greater glory of the dead.
Because I have no government, with or
without a head, and there is no chairman
sitting on my head. I can, under such
extenuating circumstances, sometimes
allow myself to be human,
A bit free.



Salman Masalha

In Haifa by the Sea

(In memory of Emile Habibi)

In Haifa, by the sea, the smells of salt
rise from the earth. And the sun
hanging from a tree unravels wind.
In a row of trees bathed in stone
men, women and silence have been
planted. Tenants in an apartment
block called homeland.
Jews whose voices I haven't heard,
Arabs whose meaning I haven't understood.
And other such melodies I couldn't
identify in the moment that went silent.

There in Haifa, by the sea,
he had them all. Poet, exile
in the wind, seeking the past
in a question blessed with answers.
Pulling words out of the sea and
throwing them back to the waves
that, like Messiah, will return eternally.
A poet has returned to a poem he never wrote
in the night of captivity, and hasn't yet returned
to the place that he drew as a child in a cloud.

There in Haifa, by the sea, at the end
of the summer that broke on the treetop,
a moon unfurled. I return to the
silence I had split with my lips.
I return to the words asleep inside
the paper. Moist clods of earth
and a salty path have forever wrapped
the fisherman's pole. Little
words lay down to rest, and a poem
went silent there in Haifa, by
the sea.

Translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden

*

בחיפה מול הים לזכרו של אמיל חביבי

בְּחֵיפָה, מוֹל הַיָּם, רֵיחוֹת הַמַּלַּח
עוֹלִים מִתּוֹךְ הָאֲדָמָה. וְשֶׁמֶשׁ
הַתּוֹלָה עַל עֵץ פּוֹרֶמֶת רוּחַ.
בְּתוֹךְ שׁוֹרֵת עֲצִים טוֹבֵלֶת אֶבֶן,
נִטְעוּ גְבָרִים, נְשִׁים וְאֵלֶם. דְּרָרִים
בְּבֵית דִּירוֹת וְשִׁמּוֹ מוֹלְדָת.
יְהוּדִים שְׁלֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת קוֹלָם,
עֲרָבִים שְׁלֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת פִּשְׁרָם.
וְעוֹד כְּאֵלֶּה מְנַגִּינוֹת שְׁלֹא יָדַעְתִּי
לְזֵהוּת בְּתוֹךְ הֶרְגָע שְׂדָמָם.

שֶׁם בְּחֵיפָה, מוֹל הַיָּם,
כָּלֶם הָיוּ לוֹ. מְשׁוֹרֵר, גּוֹלָה
בְּרוּחַ, מִסְפֵּשׂ אֶת הָעֶבֶר
בְּשִׂאֵלָה בְּרוּכַת תְּשׁוּבוֹת.
שׁוֹלָה מְלִים מִתּוֹךְ הַיָּם,
וְשׁוֹב מְשֻׁלֵּיךְ אֶל הַגְּלִים אֲשֶׁר
יָשׁוּבוּ, כְּמוֹ מִשְׁיחַ, לְעוֹלָם.
מְשׁוֹרֵר חוֹזֵר לְשִׁיר שְׁלֹא כָתַב
בְּלִיל הַשָּׁבִי, וְטָרַם שָׁב אֶל
הַמְּקוֹם אוֹתוֹ צִיֵּר כְּיָלֵד בְּעֵנָן.

שֶׁם בְּחֵיפָה, מוֹל הַיָּם, בַּקָּצָה
הַקְּיִץ שְׁנוֹשֵׁבֵר עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֵץ,
לְבָלֵב יָרֵחַ. אֲנִי חוֹזֵר אֶל
הַשְּׁתִּיקָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצַעְתִּי בְּשִׁפְתַי.
אֲנִי חוֹזֵר אֶל הַמְּלִים הַיִּשְׁנוֹת
בְּתוֹךְ נֶגֶר. רִגְבִי עָפָר לַחִים
וְשִׁבִיל מְלוּחַ לְפָתוֹ לְעַד אֶת
חֲפָתוֹ שֶׁל הַדְּיָג. מְלִים
קִטְנוֹת שֶׁתִּקּוּ לְנוֹחַ, וְשִׁיר
נָדָם שֶׁם בְּחֵיפָה, מוֹל
הַיָּם.

מתוך: **אחד מכאן**, עם עובד. (2004)

Revenge Taha Muchamad Ali

At times ... I wish
I could meet in a duel
the man who killed my father
and razed our home,
expelling me
into
a narrow country.
And if he killed me,
I'd rest at last,
and if I were ready—
I would take my revenge!

*

But if it came to light,
when my rival appeared,
that he had a mother
waiting for him,
or a father who'd put
his right hand over
the heart's place in his chest
whenever his son was late
even by just a quarter-hour
for a meeting they'd set—
then I would not kill him,
even if I could.

Likewise ... I
would not murder him
if it were soon made clear

that he had a brother or sisters
who loved him and constantly longed to
see him.

Or if he had a wife to greet him
and children who
couldn't bear his absence
and whom his gifts would thrill.
Or if he had
friends or companions,
neighbors he knew
or allies from prison
or a hospital room,
or classmates from his school ...
asking about him
and sending him regards.

*

But if he turned
out to be on his own—
cut off like a branch from a tree—
without a mother or father,
with neither a brother nor sister,
wifeless, without a child,
and without kin or neighbors or friends,
colleagues or companions,
then I'd add not a thing to his pain
within that aloneness—
not the torment of death,
and not the sorrow of passing away.
Instead I'd be content
to ignore him when I passed him by
on the street—as I
convinced myself
that paying him no attention
in itself was a kind of revenge.

נקמה

לפעמים
מתחשק לי להזמין לדו-קרב
את האיש
שרצח את אבי
והרס את ביתי
ושלח אותי עירם ועריה
לכל הרוחות של עולם
הבריות הצר.
שאם יהרגני
ומצאתי מנוחה נכונה
ואם אחסלהו
מצאתי נקמה.
אבל...
אם יתגלה לי
במהלך הדו-קרב
שייש ליריבי
אמא
שממתינה לו
או אבא
שמניח את כף ימינו
על כפרת הלב בְּחֶזֶהוּ
בכל פעם שהבן שלו מאחר
אפלו רבע שעה
מעבר למועד שובו—
או אז
לא אהרנהו
אם הכנעתי אותו.
זאת ועוד...
לא אחסלהו
אם יתברר לי
שייש לו אחים ואחיות
שנוטים לו אהבה
ומתגעגעים עליו בלי הרף;
או שייש לו
אשה הששה לקראתו
וילדים
שאינם אוהבים פשהוא נעדר
ושמחים במתנות שלו
או שייש לו
ידידים וקרובים

שכנים ומכרים
חברים לתא-המעצר
שתפים לחדר בבית-החולים
רעים לספסל-הלמודים—
שמתעניינים במעשיו
ומקפידים לומר לו שלום.
אבל אם יהיה עירי
כרות עץ-משפחה
שאין לו לא אמא ולא אבא
לא אחים ולא אחיות
לא אשה ולא ילדים
בלי חברים וקרובים ושכנים
בלי מכרים
בלי רע או עמית, בלי ידיד
לרפואה...
לא אוסיף
למצוקת ערירותו
לא יסורי גויעה
ולא עצב כליון.
רק בזאת אסתפק:
אעלים עין ממנו
כשאתקל בו ברחוב
ואשכנע את עצמי
שהתעלמות,
בפני עצמה, גם היא
סוג של נקמה.
מערבית: אנטון שמאס

Qasim, Taha Muchamad Ali

I wonder now
where you are....
I haven't forgotten you
after all these years,
long as the graveyard
wall is long. I always
ask the grass of the field
about you, and the dirt paths.

Are you alive,
with your poise,
your cane, and memories?
Did you marry?
Do you have a tent of your own,
and children?
Did you make it to Mecca?
Or did they kill you
at the foot of the Hill of Tin?

Or maybe you never grew up,
Qasim, and managed to hide,
behind your mere ten years,
and you're still the same old Qasim,
the boy who runs around
and laughs
and jumps over fences,
who likes green almonds
and searches for birds' nests.

But even if they did it,
Qasim,

if, shamelessly,
they killed you,
I'm certain
you fooled your killers,
just as you managed
to fool the years.
For they never discovered
your body at the edge of the road,
and didn't find it
where the rivers spill,
or on the shelves
at the morgue,
and not on the way to Mecca,
and not beneath the rubble.

As no one saw you
concealing your corpse,
so no one will ever set eyes on you,
and no earthly breeze
encounter a bone of your body,
a finger of your hand,
or even a single shoe
that might fit you.
Qasim, you fooled them.

*

I always envied you, Qasim,
your skill at hiding
in the games of hide-and-seek we played—
barefoot at dusk—forty years ago—
when we were little boys.

Ayat Abou Shmeiss

Homeland

I don't want to write about homeland
And about land
I don't want to write about an identity that has been stolen
And about a girl who was killed
I don't want to write
About humiliation oppression or anger
I don't want to write about discrimination
I don't want to write about love
Of an Arab man and a Jewish woman
Or a Jewish man and an Arab woman
I don't want to talk about a wonderful friendship
And not just friendship
I don't want to write about a dream to have peace
I don't want to write about any warrior
And any hero
I want to write about the birds
That are not in the sky
Whose wings have been clipped

לא רוצה לכתב על מולדת
ולא על אדמה
לא רוצה לכתב על זהות שנגנבה
ולא על ילדה שנהרגה
לא רוצה לכתב
על השפלה דכוי או כעס
לא רוצה לכתב על אפליה
לא רוצה לכתב על אהבה
של ערבי ויהודיה
או יהודי וערביה
לא רוצה לכתב על ידידות מפלאה
ולא סתם ידידות
לא רוצה לכתב על חלום של שלום
לא רוצה לכתב על אף לוחם
ואף גבור
רוצה לכתב על הצפרים
שלא בשמים
שגזרו להם את הכנפים

Sex

I won't write about sex
Because I'm embarrassed

Religion

I won't write about religion
Because it's banned

Power

I won't write about power
Because it weakens the soul

Murder

It revives my pain

Politics

It's a bit messy

Identity

I already know what I am

Love

Is boring

I'll write about

Me

Ayat –

Verses from the Quran.

סָקַס
אֲנִי לֹא אֶכְתֵּב עַל סָקַס
כִּי אֲנִי מִתְבַּיֶּשֶׁת
דָּת
אֲנִי לֹא אֶכְתֵּב עַל דָּת
כִּי תֵל אֲסוּר
כַּח
אֲנִי לֹא אֶכְתֵּב עַל כַּח
כִּי אֵת הַנְּשִׂמָה נָה מִחֲלִישׁ
רְצַח
נָה מַחֲיָה לִי אֵת הַכָּאֵב
פּוֹלִיטִיקָה
נָה קִצֵּת מְלַכְלָךְ
נְהוּת
אֲנִי כֹכֵר יוֹדַעַת מָה אֲנִי
אֶהְבֶּה
נָה כֹכֵר מְשַׁעֲמֵם
אֲנִי אֶכְתֵּב
עָלַי
אֵיֶת –
פְּסוּקִים מֵהַקּוּרְאָן