

Elisah Porat

Metamorphosis

To the memory of Arieh Lahola

He did not attempt to saw the bars
but carried his cage around on his back:
days, nights, years, ages.
And when the gleam of the water beckoned,
the small pleasant ripples tempting him,
its heavy weight pulled him to the depths.

He did not kick and did not rail
just sank, succumbing to
the river: resigned, passive, estranged,
so far from the Land of Israel.

He did not chant and did not speak,
language deserted him in the bubbles
empty, soft, dizzying.
His throat was waterlogged and he
choked, stifled, was transformed
and floated, voiceless and without language:
A rhythmic hum emanated from him,
his swollen legs twitched
and his arms beat like those of a drummer.

Translated from the Hebrew by Cindy Eisner

Verbal Abuse

“So, have you seen it?” asked the journalist
on the phone. “Not yet,” I reply.

“It doesn’t matter, read it now. I just love
the way the press can hit so hard.”

And I, who have written tens of thousands
of superfluous words, have never even once
succeeded in throwing a punch,
and I haven’t seen the arms
of a single reader raised
against me in self-defense.

Translated from the Hebrew by Cindy Eisner

A Short Biography

“You’re a dead horse,” the publisher
told me, rejecting my poems,
“and it would cost too much to resuscitate you.”
“He’s as dead as a door nail,”
the man from the Mobile ICU told my wife
when she begged for another electric shock.
“No way can he be resuscitated.”
But I, ‘doubly dead,’ am still
alive and pounding along
in the saddle of my horses’ memories.

Translated from the Hebrew by Asher Harris

Old Friends

This prickly rush, with whose spines
I stitched my tattered youth;
this weeping willow, played
by the wind on my secret ramblings;
this purple loosestrife, whose
pink flowers I placed on
a table for my love; they all
call to me along the path: Come,
join us, come, fade
with us into the moist morning mist.

“Don’t wait for me,” I
call out to them from my groaning memory,
“I am on my way, I’ll be there
soon.” And on my return from the stream bank
I know: They will wait,
I will come, my aging heart
is already there, with them, anticipating
me always by a few steps.

Translated from the Hebrew by Cindy Eisner

Homecoming

They waited for him to come home:
the trimmed lawn, the tree in its saucer,
the faded plastic chairs, the rusty
gate, creaking on its hinges.
Mother, brother, father, sister,
frozen in time: wilting, transparent,
bowed down with weight of days.
And then, when suddenly he comes in,
everything begins to move, the lawn thickens,
the tree bears fruit, the plastic
chairs are scrubbed, the gate turns
and creaks, moving endlessly.
If only he would come in, come home.
The bubble of time bursts. The scarred heart
beats again. Slowly they go down
on their knees, lift their eyes
to him in grief, in gratitude.

Translated from the Hebrew by Eddie Levenston, April 2007

My “Jerusalem Syndrome”

My “Jerusalem Syndrome,” that emotion fever that attacks the faithful of the three large religions when they step upon the soil of Jerusalem, befell me many years ago. Even before it was diagnosed by the learned psychiatrists. Even before it was defined and before it was granted the poetic name that reveals a little and covers a lot, “Syndrome Jerusalem.” I was hit by its punch even before it became an I.D. lineup and identification line of all the world’s lunatics when they ascend to Jerusalem.

I was a young lad when for the first time in my life I came up to Jerusalem. It was on my class trip, a journey of 2 nights and 3 days, to the hospitable home of Grandma Mazal. The house in the shade of the eucalyptus, in Old Bak’a neighborhood, near the railroad station. Grandma Mazal Mutseri-Mani was the mother of the Palmach convoy commander, Macabbi Mutseri-Mani, who fell in the fighting to break through the road to the besieged city. Macabbi’s son, Oded Macabbi, was our classmate. He, like his father, was not granted long life. He died in the hospital that had just opened, Hadassa Ein Karem, in the Oncology Department on the 5th floor. His whole life was still before him; he was only 26 years old at his death.

Grandma Mazal, of blessed memory, very lovingly hosted our kibbutz children. On the broad, flat roof of her home, mattresses and blankets were placed in long rows. And whoever got weary of wandering through the unfamiliar city could come to sleep between one train and the next. So few trains then came into and out of Jerusalem that even the train station nearby did not disturb the slumber of the weary.

I could not fall asleep. Not on the first night of the trip, nor the second. Some strange fever, some unfamiliar excitement, gripped me and shook me without rest. Was it possible that I was one of the youngest victims of “Jerusalem Syndrome”? In the books of the learned psychologists and psychiatrists I have not found descriptions of patients so young. I would add a line or two to my poem-on-stone that was in time inscribed in Jerusalem, thus: “Stroller, as you stand before the poem engraved in stone, know that its writer was taken with ‘Jerusalem Syndrome’ in his youth. While still a boy, contact with the city aroused me so that I could not fall asleep for two consecutive nights.”

I remember that we walked in an illusionary, dreamy parade from one stone wall to another. I remember the thousands of steps we climbed to get to the tops of Jerusalem’s towers: the YMCA tower, Mt. Zion tower, the stairs of the Learning Farm opposite the Governor’s

Palace and the red stairs going up to the roof of the King David Hotel. Every one of Jerusalem's towers, those to the west and those past the Wall that climb the mountains to the east, all of them pierced my galloping heart with fierce and painful stabs. Did those researchers, authors of scholarly books on the "Jerusalem Syndrome," write about the peaks of the city's towers that really penetrated my heart, wounding it with a bleeding lover's wounds?

At the end of the Fifties I returned to the city. A young soldier with heart yearning and lusting for her restlessly. About a decade passed between the first rendezvous and the next. That nameless fever attacked me again, more forcefully. As soldier and scout of the Golani Division, this time I got to the narrowest and darkest places in the city. I descended into her caves and crawled in her tunnels. I learned to know all her hidden curves, the dangerous bends of "the City Line" that went through the heart of the divided city like a huge scar. Again I could not close an eye entire nights. That old excitement came back to me. With the joy of discovery and familiarity, the sudden proximity to threatening Arab Legion posts, the ambushes, night patrols, unexpected snipers shots and quiet penetrations past earthworks, past fences and land-mined fields.

There was no time for symptoms revealing my "Jerusalem Syndrome." I wanted to swallow the city completely. Quickly, expertly, with mature knowledge. And with a no holds, no limits curiosity. I was the young commander of "PAGI Post" in the north of the city. Across from the fortifications of the Police Academy and the obstacle heaps of the enormous sheds of UNRRA, the refugees' relief agency. This tangle of names that in time would become the complex of "Ammunition Hill." I was a young scout who lead his men past swirls of barbed wire, I was a greedy boy who desired the wonderful figs in no-mans-land and caused a great mess and an urgent meeting of the Israeli-Jordanian Truce Committee.

The Jordanian soldiers in the Wall post opposite "Notre Dame" church shouted to us: "Tel Aviv caput!" and passed a palm flat as a knife across their throat and we, with jubilant voices of adolescents called back to them: "Emir Tallal—No brains at all!" and rushed to take cover as they got angry and cocked their weapons. I was ready then to throw away my young soul for this intoxicating city. Her stony being trickled into my burning blood and settled inside me for many years.

I remembered how I embraced a girl for the first time, in sleepy Zion Square, after the dancing of the Youth Movement meeting. I remembered first kisses that made my skin quiver, made me tremble unforgettably. Only in time did I understand that the skin quiver and trembling that furrowed my back were part of my private "Jerusalem

Syndrome.” I remembered a long, feverish night, without sleep, without strength after an early basketball game and the long Youth Movement soul-to-soul conversation about values, about youthful sacrifice, about unlimited dedication to this predatory city. And even if this time I did desert the towers and if I did desert the thousand steps, I always knew in my soul, in some primordial knowledge of the senses; I will yet return to this city; I will not forget this city. I, without her, will not be able to spend my life.

And indeed, I returned to her. Defeated and with bent head I returned to her. With prolonged battle shock after that accursed Yom Kippur War. The combination of my “Jerusalem Syndrome” with my private battle shock was hard, painful and almost fatal. I ascended to this city in a last and desperate attempt to replenish, to renew my soul, to free myself from the post-war depression forced on me by the Jewish Lord of Fate. From my narrow room in the students’ dormitory on a hillside of Neve Granot neighborhood, I looked out and did not recognize the city. Giant cranes advanced on the hilltops around. Their iron necks mercilessly broke the familiar skyline, from Mount Gilo in the south and up to Ramot in the north.

The home of Grandma Mazal, in the shade of the eucalyptus, along the old railway track, in the heart of Bak’a neighborhood, changed its form and lost its old magic. Even the memorial stone in honor of Oded Macabbi of blessed memory, that I encountered by surprise on a cold, rainy night in a garden near one of the classes on the Givat Ram Campus, even it did not succeed in peeling from my injured heart the horrors of that accursed war. And the old towers of Jerusalem that once moved me so, stood in the clear air, swayed to the peal of the bells as if they were standing in some old faded album. The bell chimes changed to cries of the muezzins, and what once drew me to go out after it, to float in the transparent air above “the City Line,” a souvenir of the flaming days of my youth, slowly declined. Sounds of the city that once enchanted me could not compete with the cannon barks that echoed within me, those that rose from abandoned basalt towns and ashen mounds of “the Syrian Bulge.”

My hope was nearly disappointed. The beloved city betrayed me. My “Jerusalem Syndrome” was already starting to abandon me. Was my mad fever about to pass? Was the benevolent forgetfulness that I was taken with in the city one of the signs of my recovery? I walked to the places where I had fevered in the past. Their magic was gone. After a few weeks of disappointment, I left off the city walks. I delved into books. I immersed myself until oblivion in ancient Hebrew texts. If Jerusalem’s stones betrayed me and have not the power to restore to me

my youth, my sanity, the strength of my love, why, the mountains of books will take their place.

The process of parting from Jerusalem was long and painful. At each visit another dear memory slipped into oblivion, another picture was erased, another sound of bells disappeared and turned into longing. I suddenly noticed how dirty she was, her aridity was hostile, winds blowing through her were merciless. Her stony being, lacking greenery, arose before me. My "Jerusalem Syndrome" began to separate into details: dates, names, streets, something very crumbled and incohesive.

My life in Jerusalem. My real life and that which was only in my feverish imagination, slowly gathered into memory. They gave way to another life, other memories, a foreign feverish intoxication.

Until one day, by some inexplicable trick of the invisible Fate-Spinner, I received a "hot," "knockout" request, to give poems of mine to a project of neighborhood restoration, "Picture in Stone." Engraving pictures of founders of the Ohel Moshe Neighborhood in Nahlaot. Unexpectedly, a gigantic circle in my life was completed. Grandma Mazal Mutseri-Mani, where are you today? The clumsy boy that couldn't fall asleep on your rooftop will stand and read his poems in the heart of the city. Oded Macabbi, memory of a faraway and forgotten friend, where are you? I who chanced upon a memorial to you, set up a poetic memorial to my own life. My Uncle Avner and Aunt Shosh of the Yellin family, two of my dear ones who passed away, whose home was always open to me and full of love for my family, where are you today? Why, you would be thrilled with joy had you been granted to be among the invitees at the inaugural ceremony of setting my poem in stone. My beloved girl, "the one love of my life" from that nocturnal Zion Square, is she now standing at my side, when I can barely speak from the burst of emotion that chokes my throat? My Jerusalem, scratched and scarred within me, fell upon me again for a moment, one brief, moving moment, before the video camera that captured the ceremony.

My "Jerusalem Syndrome," my drunken, crazed fever, my love of Jerusalem without rhyme or reason, my tremendous longing for her squares, her stones, her towers, all these returned and hit me suddenly. Who is this hidden Fate-Spinner who brings back to me a love so belated, named Jerusalem? My abandoned one, my forgotten lovely, my bitter sweet, my eternal heart?

I knew that I would not stand the excitement were I to read my poem at the ceremony, and I deliberately chose to read Yehuda Karni's poem, "Put me in the Breach." A wonderful poet who is forgotten, a lover of Jerusalem who is abandoned. How well he expressed the desire

of poets, the eternal desire of the Hebrew poets, to be one of Jerusalem's stones.

I read the poem with excitement, and I added a few words to it. I hope the audience understood them. Because I do not know where they came from. Again I burned for a moment with that fever. And I only said that from Yehuda HaLevy, through Yehuda Karni and until Yehuda Amichai, it is the same way that scorches the hearts of Hebrew poets and turns them into one of the stones of this city. And at long last I made my peace with the city, at long last I could love her openly, above the wall of the project "The Picture in Stone," without fear that I will be hospitalized among her community of madmen whose lives were wrecked by the "Jerusalem Syndrome". . .

Translated from the Hebrew by Zehava Lerech

Elisha Porat, the 1996 winner of Israel's Prime Minister's Prize for Literature, is a Hebrew poet and writer. Born in 1938, in Palestine-Eretz Yisrael, to a "pioneer" family, of Jewish Halutzim, he was raised in Kibbutz Ein Hahores, and was a farmer and soldier. He has published 20 volumes of fiction and poetry in Hebrew since 1973. His works have appeared in translation in Israel, the United States, Canada and England. And now in New Zealand.