

ABSTRACT

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Ishai Barnoy, Master of Fine Arts, 2008

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This is a self-portrait collection. But it begins in response to texts that I read. Before, I write automatically, nonsensically, intentionally unintentionally; and the engagement with literature directs my writing toward the ‘determined’ strain that defines this collection. Starting, for instance, with Pound's Chinese translations, used in the earliest poem here, I build my own ‘translations.’ And I follow the work of poets that interest me: Miroslav Holub, from whom I borrow lines; John Ashbery, Cesar Vallejo, Kenneth Koch, James Tate, Samuel Beckett, on all whose themes I vary; and more. Certainly, my fascination with nonsense and the absurd continues, but throughout the collection I respond more and more to what I read, twisting what I can into my own language—and I reflect more and more on my own personal and interpersonal conditions, less and less reveling in pure senselessness, although even nonsense is a self-reflection.

DIRECTIONS TO MY HOUSE: POEMS

By

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Contents:

I.	
My Picture	2
My Childhood	3
Directions to my House	4
Turkey Balls	6
The Doe's Monster	7
The Bad Date	8
To X	9
Don't Tell Anyone, I've Got a Crush on You	10
Ishai Barnoy's <i>Satyrikon</i>	12
II.	
A Mirror	17
At Home	18
Work	19
The Domestic Scene	21
Walking with Adì	23
What to Do	24
Red Hawk	26
The Diaries	27
Poem Beginning with that Day I Went into the Woods	28
III.	
Home in the Woods	33
My Life	34
Immortality	35
The Urologist's Office	36
The Poem in which I Die	39
Beautifying Strength	41
Twelve Movies	43
The Barbarian Fact of Civilization	45
Space	46

I

My Picture

I have tried to reflect on the beginning of my story.
There are things I do not understand.
But a plot unfolds.
A man named Stashek arrives at the center of a city,
a mall with escalators and stores.

He is not himself, anxious ever since he reads my story,
finding messages he thinks are addressed to him.
And I'm at the cafe, a place where I like to reflect,
looking at a picture of myself and realizing
how much I resemble my sister. And I'm pleased to seem feminine.

I flip around another picture.
I'm not even two years old in this one—
the aging color print reddens my hair
and my grandmother's hair
far from our soft blond.

But Stashek has a different role in my story. He shoots me!
And the reader simply can't believe it.
He shoots me and he gets away with it.
Because maybe Russians are good at that.
Nobody's sure, because the story centers mainly on my character.

And then, in my story, Stashek drives away in a tractor.
And in the desert, he takes out three photographs.
One is my personal portrait.
The next, a picture of me as a baby in a carriage
and my grandmother in sunglasses.

In the last photo, he stands near a flaming patch of weeds,
yards away from his tractor, in the desert,
and he tosses three pictures into the fire and smokes.

My Childhood

Always some sort of failure.
I don't know what came first,
showing up at all the wrong places
or remembering too late things I used to know—
a network of tunnels leads to a room where I stayed.

Walking to Masaryk Hall after the rain in the dark,
tired from the repetition
of the Mustek metro and having to pee,
I smelled wet carnations on the way.
Oh, they were generally okay;
they interconnected the living matter of that place.

But, past the bearded bust of the famous statesman,
there was a wholly new scent.
It smelled like home. I wondered
where everybody else went.

The white underbellies of leaves smelled like a stolen image,
a lack of flowers in the muddy distance of trees.
It's simply not there. It doesn't look like a disease,
just attentive listening, which falls over the eyes like a hood.
But yes, I had to pee, and therefore yes, I went.

When I was a child I couldn't think like this
about pines or the desert rosemary. But today
my childhood does come to mind, my infancy, and that relaxing scent
in the progressive waiting-rooms of the womb.

A spindly finger pokes me in the shoulder and reminds me
that yes, there may have been a smell there,
looking vaguely at the cannon tower,
or at the Mala Strana view of the entire city,
leaning up against a post,
or the medieval rampart—I remember,
yes, I was a body, and certain things I deserved.

Directions to my House

You're right, I said, which left little to question—
the sky in autumn rain does glow alkaline white.
Below all that is where my house is.
House for the soul indeed!—but no,
my real house, with wood and bricks.
The Schitzkowsky's late today, I think to myself

waiting at the station. This is what it is
these days, a house in the middle of nowhere—
that is, every house, in the middle of nowhere.
Houses are all the same. The station is a tiny hut
constantly washed by the rain—with clear sidings like a box
for a pet spider. And there is only one way out to Ben Gurion

International—yes, it still has that name.
The only way to get anywhere is that ubiquitous Schitzkowsky!
Where is that thing? They predicted this rain
for the rest of the week. Everything is so smart
these days! As a child,
I used to walk home through the bramble fields—the valleys

around the neighborhood. I could even see the brambles bloom.
They opened like trumpets, and after the rain, they stretched their purple bells
toward the sky—then the sky turned blue again.
Mother is expecting me. Always the goal in itself—
goal? The churning Schitzkowsky engine
whispers now, and in the distance blurts its final afterburner hiccups

growing quieter and quieter. Then, only that
endless swishing rain—that magnesium sky.
It's time. I'd missed it.
What should I do? I always wait for it—
this was the last one for today.
Imagine, when I was a child they had buses

everywhere, and trains, at all times of the day—
so slow, but so many,
going everywhere. One of them I took
to Ben Gurion. And airplanes—what hunks of junk!
Scrambling around the world like flies over meat.
And there were pines, and cypresses—conifers, wonderful trees!—

all gone. Today—no sir! You take the Schitzkowsky
in and out of town, or to Ben Gurion. Then, they ship you in tubes
wherever you want to go. And, thanks to modern medicine,
my mother's still alive. Hell, everyone's still alive

who wasn't dead before! Oh mother! I guess
my coming home can wait for the next legal day.

Only tell me when it comes.

Turkey Balls

I can recall precisely what they tasted like—
and I've said some stupid things in my life.
In the pine forest near school I found part of a dog, a bone,
but I lost it while conjecturing about its origin.
It was fresh, implying the dog died
and was stripped of its meat—a jaw bone
or a fragment of a thigh bone—a small dog,
eaten by something, morsel by morsel.
I talked on the walkie-talkie Grandma gave me
and I reported my findings in code
to the static at the other end.
Then, Grandma picked me up from school
and we sat down on the rock by my favorite pine
to eat turkey balls. I forget what I said to her.
She spoke in such fragments
as she revealed the contents of the pot—
there they were. I remembered how they would steam
in the porcelain dish on Grandma's kitchen counter.
I concluded she must have lost that dish
or broken it, but that's not what I had in mind
to say. I looked up at the pines,
and I pictured to myself what all this might have looked like
from up there—how everything would be situated—
with the dull, humming wind throwing down pine needles
and pieces of bark covered in sap,
and with fall coming on in a dim afternoon gray.
It was the usual manner—
Grandma half-rolled one ball in a napkin and gave it to me.
Or was it stranger than I thought?
I perfectly recall the sensation and sound
of those turkey balls, that texture,
chewing—the grain of the ground meat;
and the other napkin in Grandma's hand
wiping oil and small chunks from my mouth.

The Doe's Monster

-Yona Wallach

And all the fowl were in my garden
And all the animals were in my garden
And they all serenaded me with my bitter love
And wonders of them all the doe sang best
And the song of the doe was the song of my love
And the animals' voices shut up
And the fowl quit their squawking
And the doe climbed to the top of my roof
And she was singing for me the song of my love
But in every animal there is a monster
Just as in every fowl there is something strange
Just as there is a monster in every person
And the doe's monster circled round the garden
When the fowl bowed their heads when Doe sang
And the animals slept when Doe sang
And I was pleasantly undone when the doe sang
At that soft moment the monster smashed its fists upon my gate.
And all the fowl flew and the animals ran scared
And the doe fell from the roof and cracked her head
And I escaped and in the garden of my love a monster stands guard
A gorilla black and wicked like amnesia.

The Bad Date

(The whippoorwill is heard briefly.)

Engineer:
Did it have to end this way?
Moon:
Are you talking to me?
Engineer:
Can you talk?
Moon:
I can dance!

(The moon descends an until-now invisible ladder and does not dance.)

Prostitute:
Did it have to end this way?

(They all hold hands in a circle and float.)

Stars:
The hour Twelve has dawned upon the Earth.
Sky:
The sun is somewhere to be found.
Stars:
We never sleep!
Palm Tree:
I am pregnant and will soon bear fruit.

(Children come on stage, holding hands in pairs.)

Everyone:
Did it have to end this way?
Earth:
I smell an eternity of dates.

To X

-translated by the Hebrew from the author

1.

At first we hear music.
Birds in the night,
the different creatures, the electric company,
buildings, dreams, clouds.

2.

The clouds are loud.
The moon flutters quietly the length of a puddle.
The sky is translucent
and a pair of fish swims there,
you and I, swimming.

3.

I am like an old book.
And you, X, are a desolate road in the spring
when I visited Provence—
I rode a horse and it made
the sun rise.

4.

X, you are the sun (warm, blinding, blonde). X,
I won the lottery.

5.

X, I'm the lake (algae-green and restless), and you,
you're the southbound train.

Don't Tell Anyone, I've Got a Crush on You

When ever will I tell you?
Just before you go swimsuit-shopping with your friend?
—or maybe I'll just look your way and smile.
Then you'll talk about me with your friend by the clearance aisle.

But when you reappear again, my chance will come,
when we walk to the park—to that hill,
to the middle of it—when we walk to the park: to make love!
—and we won't even know we will.

Because we'll even bring sandwiches,
ones that I'll have spent the whole morning making,
with cheese and mustard—intended for the kiss—
such sandwiches, such simple tastes, so worth the taking!

Because what could be better than mustard and cheese—
as we read clever poetry, about love,
as we laugh, I suppose, while we eat my special sandwiches,
sputtering bits of bread, attracting doves.

Because then I'll tell you—as I've planned it—
tell you how much I like the sound of your voice—
tell you how I remember you from years ago, maybe high school,
though I just met you.

I'll tell you all of this, then suddenly you'll take my hand.
Then I'll be sweating in your hand and talking,
scaring you with my love, my desire for children of my own,
my desire to have them with you.

Then I will read you my poetry, poetry that I wrote,
letting you think that it's bad, letting you pity my bad poetry.
Or you'll flatter me, and I'll turn red—
for I will be embarrassed, and to no small degree,

even if no one is watching us or listening to what we say!
For we won't care to imagine someone there—
someone with so little courtesy, making his way,
but then hiding somewhere where he can sit and stare.

Because I'll tell you everything,
all that I secretly wanted you to know,
like the things in this poem,
the things I'm telling you right now!

Because I'll scare you with some weird-looking soup that I cooked

and somehow brought along in a pot,
not to mention the fancy bowls and spoons and garnish,
and how long the soup will have stayed fresh and hot.

Because I'll surprise you with how good the soup is,
this onion soup that I secretly made, risking fiery death!
But there, I'll have already made it—forget the sandwiches.
Then I'll surprise you by loving the onion on your breath.

Ishai Barnoy's *Satyrikon*

Volcanic towns, islands irrespective
floating on the universe,
and we, who sail in these—on one barge
into life or another—one suburb
or a different suburb,
enormous creatures harbored
by our cowardice, our love—
and only lately will I myself
own up to both of these—which we like
to give such odd names to,
and taking away, and bargaining for—
like chalices to house the soul.
Ah, and these, my poems,
my little imbeciles,
like lesions on the lips
of a public shitting hole.

This is what I remember.
How the man I once was
preferred men's company: mathematicians,
scientists, engineers, perfected bodies all
at one stage or another—all men—
even the one girl among them
penetrating my small, difficult heart.
And even her I squeezed
all the youth juice out of.
Smooth skin, bright interior,
such a hard and dedicated worker—
so hard to find on the telephone,
but so easy to sniff out:

In my own cohorts' rooms, for instance,
or in the heft of the fragrances
she douses in between her flaps—
What rich jealousy to follow
around a perfumed corner—Smug grin,
spaces in between her teeth.
Such a shame that I wasted my time.
But what could I have done with more time?
Only to start over and over,
to helplessly, continually begin.

No point now but to admit it:
That was the body I loved, those small
grey eyes (like my mother's),
small voice, golden jewel

in her nose—though that, too, grew
infected; lost; and those small
hands that beat me off
all the more violently. Small mouth
that sank its teeth into me—
such wonderful sores!

I remember talking to her.
We talked about girls, closely,
about fucking them: she was a man
like any man. Distance
was her comfort, her weapon.
And I was just another wall to her. A man
is not a wall. A wall is no great hope.
I was a naked, flat board, and she
had her eyes set much further east and south.
I was to keep my cock well away from her.
I was to use only my mouth.

And though it was I who taught her
the ways of life, the ways
of love, still it was I
who learned. And she, simply,
conveniently, was. Ah, the man
that she was. Mechanic
to my churning engine,
churning out the empty candy of me—and *I*
the one *she* ought to admire.
She sailed off—I imagine the choir:

For she sailed off to God—no doubt
went as far as Jerusalem,
ridiculous little birthplace—
No, this is not the first Satyrikon—
no doubt she's property by now to some
old, rich, or handsome man—a senator?—
Some charm of a ceremony.
Who could possibly want more?
But when I found him, when I
chased that legislating man—oh, everywhere—
I found that the sodomized wife-hole
was me. That I had always been.
So I sailed off—*me*—to escape.
Escape what? Escape whom?
For weeks there'd been no one after me.

I hid with a famous poet,
dined in palaces; we swallowed

pig leg after pig leg. (How
curiously, how morbidly
and in my own head I survived)—
We aesthetes, stopped only
to vomit in between each meal.
But in time I'd left even the poet.
It was inevitable, I think.
I was different—incurably alone,
and rotten, and beginning to stink: I know it.

I skulked among the city nights.
I shouted at an actor coming home,
in the street by the picture-tiled
pools of the billionaire heiress—
kilometers away from my dilapidated room—
he was older than me, hence
not my friend. But no friend
was mine as so many used to be.
Nothing was mine anymore. Ah, the dreams
of the old cities haunting the new.
He was rich. He purchased her,
just as I found out—I knew it—she,
my man, my girl, my what, my ever.
He hid the object of my love
away from me, in the theater,
in plain sight—my beautiful stupidity.

He bought her off—my one greatest.
I demanded her back. The stage
swallowed me leg after leg. I hid my head
in its shadowy skirts. Who knows
if darkness is good or bad?
I didn't know what I was doing
and still don't. Off sailing
as I am now, or floating aimlessly
somewhere, or running, flailing, ravenous!—
without even the energy left to yell:
But there! Someone there,

in the dry straw, in the ruins,
old guy—I *knew* him—talking
to a sick fellow with breasts,
or to Apollo's obelisk—where the priestess
lovingly fellates *him*
to grant prophecy—and I, and I ...
ravenously flailing still, shaking—
man in the minotaur mask, stumbling
after him, after her—after my love,

despicable animal, imbecile flesh!

II

A Mirror

When my father called me, I split.
Feeling sorry partly—
and rightly so, since likely he was worried.
But then I came back home. Mother
spoke to me in a voice
of penny jars, or of a nail
hammered into our mysterious drywall:
the tip broke on the hidden steel backing, but still held
on the inside. “There,” we thought,
“now we can hang up the family portrait.”
Instead, that’s where the mirror went.

I was reading. Stayed silent.
The family spoke about eggs fusing,
the scientific family—
about singular people born, in effect,
as two: ‘chimeras,’
that was the word in the paper. Then, Grandmother
asked, “How could they see
the baby come out of the mother and decide
it’s not her baby?” She was baffled. But Mother and my brother,
they got it right away, and mother said, “It’s simple,
the scientists took blood from where the mother
was another person”—and Grandmother and I
then joined in the talk,
though only partly understanding.

The first person divides into two,
but then swallows the second;
then he matures with both, essentially, inside.

Here I had finally put the book down and looked:
it was a memory—I was in two places.
Then I saw that other guy come in my room.
He looked distorted
because we never hung the mirror up,
we, the roommates, who so wanted a mirror;
it warped over time,
bending backwards as it leaned there, waiting.

The room looked like a sphere from the inside,
a permeable bubble of flesh
housing two—there they are. I can count them.
I shake the mirror back and forth.
The bubble grows, becomes crowded,
then crashes in on itself. No one there.

At Home

My mother whispers when I teach her things.
She looks out, searching frantically for something,
as if she'd felt the sun peel away suddenly;
then she squints, as if noticing the same sun ease cleverly back by the window
like a bloated poet-child.

Back home she poured out countless stories
like cream, from that red corner couch, when I curdled on her knee—
and when she pumped for my sister,
she let me taste those two sweet pin-spurts,
as if I could have understood.

There were all the old heirlooms she hoped to inherit,
from different mothers on my father's side,
no doubt each mother with her own boy-children mouthing-off delicate wisdoms
nonchalantly.
I hear my parents in the car
tear out an endless reconciliation, father shouting,
then I hear lips slither.

Is there a single bit of sense to any of it—
before I came in blurting my curious intricacies?
What was it she wanted for herself?
What was it she wanted for anyone—she and father,
two innocent people, in innocent love, intent on having children?

I remember how mother gives up with grandfather,
and he's nearly deaf.
She's far too smart, his brightest, better than a son—
her eyes grown grey.
She hates it here, so far from everyone.

She's quiet now, reaches to brush fallen hairs from off my scalp—
and I remember how grandfather bows his neck down
in all the arguments back home with the family,
how his enormous bald head drifts with dejection,
then I touched the lines in his forehead
and he smiled, almost secretly.

My mother sits beside me. She's fifty-four now—
first child to make it, and first not to be taken away;
who came into the world fully grown,
fully dressed and educated; aware of her surroundings; gone straight to school.
Or that's how I think of it.
Now she starts telling me again how things were when she was little.

Work

-after Abraham Sblonsky

1.

Our palms are small bowls.
We spread them out
and there, five fingers:
fingers of wax, burning out on the edges,
melting into nothingness.
The pulse churns on at their roots;
at their tips, nails.

Beat against greatness, you human rhythm!
Grow crooked, nails!
You're coming with me, going off with me to work!

Oh bless you, fingers—gripping a sickle
on such a Spring-ish Summer day!
Hugging bunches of microwaved wheat!
Tell me, will I ever learn to work?
Could I ever trade my sweat for pay,
however much the day goes dark?
And how to stay professionally discrete!
For what will happen to you, my lovely fingers,
when I've worked off both my feet?

2.

Dress me, mother, dress me,
in my father's coat,
the one he wore to work in a former world,
and with morning prayers
lead me to the road.

The land has put on its light
like a loosely-covering blanket.
Houses stand up like strange horns,
and, like strips of hardened skin,
roads glide off, flattened by innocent palms.

The morning prayer will bend
a pretty town to me, its maker.
But never will it break, and never crack.
Hard work will be bought and sold.
And among makers, my mother,
your son, paving all of the world!

And in the evening, between the suns,
father will come back from his creeping.
He'll stop his messianic weeping
and, like a prayer, whisper comfortably:
"A dear, dear son to me,
leather and tendons and bones.
Hallelujah."

Dress me, mother, dress me
in my father's coat,
and with morning prayers
lead me to the road.

The Domestic Scene

Scene 1:

(A Living Room)

Man:

Are you picking hairs?

Woman:

Yes, what do you think? You don't have to stand there looking.

(He turns away, walks, slouches in a chair.)

Man:

You know I pick hairs too, but usually from my face.

Woman:

That's lovely.

Man:

No, I mean where else will I pick? I grow hair on my face. I'm a man.

Woman:

Okay. I just said it was lovely, that's all.

(He slouches lower, deeper, then starts up noisily, gets up, goes upstairs.)

Scene 2:

(Enter large, bushy pair of EYEBROWS.)

EYEBROWS:

We're a pair of eyebrows,
a very bushy pair—so what?
You want to fight about it?
Many have said how
unbearable a pair of
bushy eyebrows can be.
And many have said that
the domestic scene is
a lot like opera. But
nothing is more boring
to us than opera music!

(Enter TENOR. He begins to sing something from Pagliacci.)

TENOR:

Un tempo ridevo soltanto
a veder l'incanto di noi
vestiti di piume e balocchi
con bocche a soffiutto
e rossetto negli occhi...

(EYEBROWS fall asleep.)

TENOR:

scimmie, vecchiette obbedienti
e cavalli sapienti
sul dorso giocar
ridere era—.

(He cuts off his singing. The opera has come to an abrupt end. Re-enter MAN and WOMAN, holding hands with the other characters, TWEEZERS, electric SHAVER, unmelted WAX and WAXING STRIPS, as well as the JEALOUS BARBER from Seville and his chagrined WIFE and CHILDREN, all of whom were killed in a missing earlier scene, and the ousted MAYOR of Seville in his 'undercover' garb. Audience gives a standing ovation. All the characters bow in grand opera style. Someone throws flowers onstage. Then, as a practical joke apparently, electric SHAVER shaves off still-sleeping EYEBROWS while clapping and whistling intensifies.)

Walking with Adí

So many things around, it's endless: this gargoyle's head
crumbling on the street—fallen probably
from over the museum's entrance, or the old church's gothic roof,
dragged here by hyperactive children. So I think
as I walk down New York Avenue with Adí.

We catch the bus and watch the evening smear like rash cream.
Lights come on in a xylophone trill past the windows.
A hazy, slow drip washes over the neighborhood-panes.

I see something of the city's underside sighing, neither resigned
nor willing to show anything more of itself,
neither singing nor thinking to talk about
whatever it is that's bothering it.
Oh, places and the paths between them...

Already my heels shy away trembling from my sandal straps.
Already my uncle's friend's daughter, Adí,
loses interest in my musings on the afterlife,
showing it with her cheeks, with her forehead,
now when our last energies lead us both, a little longer,
to say the same things I find always said
a few heads'-distance between handle-rails.
Oh, this progression of time...

Maybe she came without interest—I couldn't tell—
but I let her inside so she could meet my mother,
so she could call home. And even then we talked still,
about important issues—she wanted to do it, she did.
And she explained everything to me that she cared about.
And she absolutely loved my mother.

What to Do

Sometimes I lose control.
I turn into garbage.

She was talking to me. Tears were coming
like a far-off trombone. "I knew something—

maybe I was being paranoid—
I knew that he was always

doing something. We were
in Art together, and I was falling for him,

but it never worked out. What I think is,
he had a fiancée. What he made

were these sculptures out of trash.
You'd never realize it was art.

It was subtle. He said only trash
made sense to him, that People didn't

know what they were
throwing away. When I lived

in Charles Village—
when he lived there too—the trash

would always change, the trash
by the street. Like a red torn-up old suitcase;

or pieces of a fire truck;
or like a ripped umbrella

balanced on a tin bucket; or a rusty old washer
with cardboard boxes piled up on it.

The arrangement of the trash seemed
more and more intentional.

Somehow I knew he was responsible.
He made these sculptures

for me—I always thought so.
Maybe it sounds crazy." She paused.

We were looking at each other.
“I do like this story, you know? It's not
crazy. It's poetic, really. Tell me:
so you still saw him then?” “Oh—,” she said,
“—no, but I knew he lived there. I knew which house was his,
I think.” She paused and we stayed mostly quiet.
I didn't know myself quite what to do then.
“I'm sorry—I guess what I mean is,
it's hard to say anything.”
But she'd already let her hair down
and ran her fingers through it.
We didn't talk much after that.
All the things that I could say...
Still I never really did anything
except be there. I didn't even mention my condition.
Then she unlocked her car doors,
joking that maybe she forgot.
We both saw what was happening.
I stepped outside and it was cold.
I sighed mechanically. Then,
when I looked over my shoulder,
my head fell. The screws loosened
and it fell right off that old broomstick.
It made a big clunk on the asphalt
like a tin bucket. Then it rolled
down into the gutter in the street—it rolled
right off my rusty stove-top shoulders,
then stopped somewhere, close, and too far away.

Red Hawk

In his war bonnet, in a peaceful moment,
Red Hawk swarmed over the mission complex, bearing marks.
Rough-hewn tribesmen did I then behold in steady streams. Oozing out,
They rode against the fort, gashing by the cruel hatchets.
And he killed twelve more in the forest of Columbia:
A small band, with curiosity at first.

Beneath the ground he violated white men's goods.
He then took women, passing along the coast.
Arriving in corners, his countrymen divided like the sea.
Long-festering, imprisoned by soil, he greatly diluted the land.

At the junction, those who did not scatter decided to settle.
The first fertile bodies achieved their purposes to be used by all,
Modified and modified and modified.
How could the sea enter the American streams?

As the federal law set out,
The warrior pushed around the Rockies, the clear water of the upper Walla Walla,
And he had accumulated thirty heathen factions.
The Spaldings led admiration over the business of whiskey.
The Whitmans traveled in the American trade near the mouth.
Along the fertile meadows, the rye grasses were fearless, the different rye grasses,
Not so alien as to be beyond comprehension!

The bird people stand, this year, deep in disease.
The unbending Jesuits are already overland with beliefs and customs
In a newly built millrace near the legendary Northwest Passage;
They suspect him. He continues violently.

If hatred raises platforms for corpses as his very own,
Forces will march with executive talents;
And the American River will be marked for massacre,
In the gold country of Sierra Nevada.

The Diaries

When I traveled through India I got back into my diaries again.
I wrote this one for someone, for the accident he had after his wedding.
He and I grew our beards out of neglect. I had vodka every day
because I could afford it. They took my kids away. They wrecked my house
and locked away my friends. And far from there, they built another house for me.
There was a boy who made hair-figurines in the house next door.

Trees grew there, fruit trees. And here, a recipe for dried fruit compote:
three or four tablespoons of sugar, add to several handfuls of pitted dried fruit
in a medium pot, cook mixture with fresh apple slices,
or mango, and chill in fridge or with ice. This ought
to have helped me get out of my diaries, I thought,
but they went on, and I went after them—when I drove the school shuttle, when I

sailed on the wide river, when I climbed on someone's back,
the back that carried me in my illness, when I hiked
through India: the rains, the winters—in Maharashtra, by the Arabian Sea;
and in my later life, Provence. These are the sites of my travels—the last
too populated, I am told, to appear in my diaries.
And the barren lands of India, and the breathtaking

green-lands as well, the varieties of wildflowers, fruits, and vegetables, all
at my open hand—inscribed here—such
distances from me now. A stack of rag papers in between
two plastic sheets, and a hole through them, a screw
driven through the hole. That is how I bound my diaries. Many friends
watched. They conversed among themselves.

Here they were—in pencil, fading marks
delineating the village. And the rest: I saw the leaves
blowing, the air-patterns rustling. I saw the clouds
and the lightning. I was tearing apart
an old shack with a shovel. I was writing
all of this down so I won't forget while I had a sandwich. This atmosphere

was a dark black. I was there. So were all the old stains.
And the river, the stars, the village soccer team, the old petrol cans
strewn about, the questions I dared not ask beautiful women—the beds of the village
bunked in a chain of equal signs for you, my dark protectors, browning
in the pages of my diaries; and the girls all the men of the village married in school.
Of course there were the sands of your enchantment, my diaries—

I carried you with me in a canvas sack. And I smelled terribly of sweat.

Poem Beginning with that Day I Went into the Woods

That day I went into the woods,
went because I was tired of this life—
all of this standing around
waiting for nothing to happen.
And I ran, being quite out of practice
at running—I scampered onward,
kicking myself despondently,
and soon enough I felt a hard bounce
in my chest. Then a voice
accosted me: “Is this the man
who hides a trampoline
in his heart?” It was the woods!
And there I was collapsing.
“We love you,” said the woods.
And there I was, struggling for breath.
“We love you and we want you to stay.”

A soft branch bent down and
held me as I’ve never been held before,
so firmly, and softly, and naturally.
“Seriously,” they said, “we have a real
thing for you,”—and I felt the branches
reverberating. “Finally, you’ve come—
to be with us, to live inside of us forever!
You’ve come, and we are infinitely
glad to have you—you, the thing we
most wanted—the thing we loved!”

“Ah, woods,” I said, utterly breathless,
“That could be quite a materialist rigmarole!”
But the woods, they knew perfectly
what they were doing. And they knew me!
“We’re unconcerned” they said. “We’ve
loved before. We keep things in perspective.
No, of course you’re not special. And
neither is love—though we do love you.
You are the thing that we love. Yes,
and if you stay, we’ll always love you—
yes, no matter what!” And I knew that they
loved me, and would. Ah, the ways of love,
the ways of being me!—although
no doubt even the love of the woods
has its limits.

“Anyway, we’ve read
your poetry,” the woods continued,
“and we don’t like it. No, we find

nothing in it that really interests us,
or that we feel has any merit. You just
talk about random things, things
which you probably know nothing about—
as if it's *supposed* to make sense!
Yes, certainly we imagine some people
might like you, might like your poems,
people who get used to reading you.
But darling, people will love anything—
or they would, if they bothered to read—
anything, if it's there around them
long enough, or at least there in their mind,
and they keep thinking about it.
These people can decide suddenly
to hate you, or suddenly even
to stop deciding altogether, and forget
all about you—they would! But not us—
the times can change nothing
for us; we still love you, and truly!”

And they started to rustle their leaves
in a salacious autumn dance; reds, yellows,
and browns, like all my bad paintings.
Yes, yes, I painted, too. God knows
when the woods'll bring *that* up!
They shook and shook. Many leaves fell.
Then more branches bent down and started
to massage my shoulders—and I hadn't
been massaged in years, not since Rachmiel
and that fatherly gesture at the synagogue.
He said that I might be somebody.
“You've got talent!” And the woods
raised their umbrage to shield me from that
disgusting sun; for I so hated the sun!
And they caressed my head tenderly.
“Yes, you've got talent, we know;
listen, what we mean is—maybe poetry
isn't your thing. Why don't you
write a novel? Novels sell so well
these days. So much better than poetry.
You could make a living!”

Ah, but then
I already felt the different kinds of tree sap
sticking to me in all the wrong places,
and I already felt the kind of stuff
you only get to feel in the woods,
like animal droppings, rubbing onto, into me
in every wrong way, and I felt all the

prickly leaves scratch me, and I said, “What do you, you the woods, have anyway to do with making a living?” And I was no longer panting so loudly. “Yes, you make do, I suppose. I mean, you’re still here!” And I started to come back to myself—yes, my normal, old self, and I said, “Woods, would you give me a break? Do you know what it takes to do anything? For one, how much of an attention span do you think I have to write a novel? And do you know how much I love to make movies?—well, I can’t! Besides not having the kind of money for that, I certainly don’t have any patience; and I don’t have a film-crew, nor actors. And isn’t there something to be said for doing something that doesn’t ‘bring home the bacon?’” But then—ah, ‘Bacon’—that was it. I was starting to say something ‘clever,’ something funny; but really I just lost it again. I trailed off as I normally do.

I started talking, on and on, about myself—me—then the woods called me out. I walked out on a sheet getting thinner and thinner... “There!” they shouted, “There you go again!” The woods cut my babbling to pieces. “There you go on doing it again—it!—what we so love about you—yes, we do!—but what makes for such confusing poetry. Honestly, reading we can’t tell if you’re serious or joking; though in person it’s exciting—we think so—it’s your personality!” And the woods, they kept on babbling, just as I would have done, had I been as endless as the woods, talking on and on as if I could never be convinced of their love—although I was! Yes, I love easily. I get helplessly used to those who persist, those who insist to be around me. And what is love except a getting used? In any case, even endless things can suddenly end, quite unexpectedly.

And in almost no time, my face became perfectly blank, and not a blank as befits love

or sexual attraction, since my face usually blanks
after a while of doing the same thing,
worst of all just lying back and listening.
And the ever-present woods couldn't
even tell if I was attentive or bored—
or maybe I only imagined that, and they hadn't
even paid attention, because they still talked,
caressing me in all kinds of pleasant and
unpleasant ways, and in all kinds of pleasant
and unpleasant places. And though the weather
generally stayed cold—it was freezing!—
despite that, indeed the woods felt warm to me,
and I fell asleep, there, lying in the tangled
branches and leaves, forever lost
in the amorous grasp of the woods.

III

Home in the Woods

For years I've been ordering books from a book collector.
Being a poet himself, he kept the recommendations flowing like air,
which is the same thing he and I breathe, I believe, although distant;
distant although we are friends, like the seasons.

Every book comes with a uniquely crafted bookmark—
look at the ivory blade of this one, how cleanly it slices
into a thicket of leaf; and this one, plain cardboard it seems, however
cut from the cedars of Lebanon! The story is, in that time

the Sultan thought to promote literacy
much in the manner the Bible promotes the Temple of God.
And the Bible I've read more times than I can tell, so many rare copies—
this forest, inside of which hides, in a way, someone's momentary hold.

My friend wrote me letters with all the packages he sent, countless by now—
about his books, how they transformed the people in them,
as if Sultans in their own domain!—I keep these to myself,
and these bookmarks. The only rule is, I can never take a bookmark

without finishing the book that hides it—
that hides the bookmark, much in the manner the forest hid people
in less illuminated days, the way it hides me now. Do we really know the forest?
My friend is dead, and these days the years seem to pass without summer.

But the family keeps the books coming, and I respond as I always have,
exchanging envelope for hefty package from deliverymen's hands;
on my darkening porch—from evening, from winter,
the darkening wetness of rain, then an even slower wetness, of snow—

my porch which in a manner is a symbol for the soul,
which is what the people of the world would call 'winter' if they saw
past the weather—'the Changing of Seasons,' as they say,
just as I begin again to taste this listless winter, to breathe this air.

My Life

I think I'll die in Prague, the city where I could finally croak, yes, there,
where living is dying continually and death is a perpetual joke;
and I believe I will suffer for only a moment, as now it is only a moment, and then
only air.

Here comes Ishai Barnoy again, he bursts out into the street like all these years,
drunk for the millionth time, bitten by every dog on his path,
follows a young man to the metro, chases a youth down the stairs.

He must have dropped something, an object slipped out from his gentlemanly purse,
followed by the famous drunken bum, shadowed by that fast-paced stagger,
this young man gushing down, this fellow hard on his treadmill called the universe.

I have seen Ishai tumble down the stairs, looked on as he cartwheeled on the marble
tips,
his cranium clapped on the sharp divide, the hard step smacked on the ridge of his skull.
Lifted on his back by tourists, hoisted up by vacationers supporting his hips,

and under his cap a pool—is it blood?—juices dropped from his head like a sauce.
Then he breathed again, huffed from behind closed eyes,
pushed out air like a violent sob, rolled out a sleepy excess like a rock.

He ran downstairs, the young man, escaped into the cycles of an earthly mother,
held his face in his palm, cowered from a darkness that pursued him.
And what could I have done, and what help could I have given my eternal other?

What are these pulls that I feel toward these places; forces guiding my hand?
And what will satisfy me finally? When could I leave this dream by the alley?
I have imagined a vagrant dying, considered to myself how he arrived at his end.

The metro station shook. The stairs withdrew. And I had already gone down below.
The ambulance appeared. And the paramedics? Some people stayed.
But a lot of people died in Prague; yes, many souls expired there, don't you know.

Immortality

If I were to live forever, I don't think I would do anything differently. The lovers, for instance, of one generation—would love, as they do, one another, oblivious to any absences drawn up between them—those giving them that sublime hint as if of love, that empty feeling of air—then they would pass and those of the next generation would come, and they, too, would pass, and so on. And I myself won't notice any of these disappearances. If other people should live forever also I don't think that I would notice. I wouldn't look for them, and they wouldn't look for me. Anyway, they wouldn't find me if they were in fact looking for me, as I would have avoided them just as now I avoid people in general. As I avoid you. I would look to myself at nothing—the sky or the sea—looking to myself because that's where all of it is happening anyway, all of this nothing, forever nothing, comfortably and eternally nothing. I would be glad, if I remembered that I were alive forever, ah forever, forgetful as I am, now and then, since I had reasoned well already that there is nothing beyond death, that to die, too, is to disappear—unless I were to forget that reasoning also, then I don't know what. In any case, we—you and I—we'll do best, now, to forget all of this. No doubt I will. Then I could go on and die, go on anxiously. So yes, perhaps I would continue to fear death, if I were to live forever, continuing, as I notice abstractly again, the fear of death in everything—in love, for example, in the sense that I won't love for fear of death. I would continue what I do, this doing absolutely nothing at all—forgetting, since I can't help my forgetting, forgetting this, forgetting that, since nothing is composed of many, many things, all these things that clutter up my view, as I look outward like a stone—since I am probably as useful as a stone—as I look out into a strange infinity. Forever—that's a big, big nothing, I would say, if I were told today that I were now to live forever; if I were told, Surely you don't want such a terrible gift, to live forever. And I would say, Ah, terrible indeed; who could want to live like this? But then I would take that opportunity, that opportunity to be as I had always been, but forever, to show it, to show that I had been given it, that I had taken it myself, this thing, this thing which exists forever, this nothing—this nothing without which what would I be, what would I do? Forever not knowing.

The Urologist's Office

(At the foot of Karl I on horseback.)

PATIENT:

I have waited for so long,
to have sex, to make love—
to talk to a woman,
or, for that matter, anyone—
and now I can't;
can't have sex—
or, at least, can't enjoy it—
what with all this
pain in my gonads.
But maybe
somewhere inside—
inside my
head, probably—
I enjoy this,
in a tragic way,
this being in pain...

(Enter DOCTOR.)

DOCTOR *(in extreme state of mirth)*:

You *come*,
hee hee!—

(suddenly turns serious)

or rather
don't, can't—
to me ...

(mirthful again)

yes, it
hurts you
too much,
physically—
ho ho!—

(serious)

Be still!

(mirthful)

Here are
some pills!

(He tosses around different-colored pills.)

(Enter TIME, the beautiful but middle-aged foreign woman, with her manservants.)

TIME *(in heavy accent)*:

I give sex.

(She skips childishly around the stage.)

30 Kronos for blowjob! 30 Kronos for blowjob!

(She twirls white ribbons, performs a salacious dance, and approaches DOCTOR.)

DOCTOR:

Honey, the Kronos are gone—
they belong to an expired system.
The superior Euro beat them.
United Europe has won.

(He reveals a gold Euro sign hung around his neck.)

TIME:

You don't worry; I bring past to life—

(She pronounces "past" like "pest.")

life to past?—no, I think opposite.
Take here, my hand, best customer!

(She gives DOCTOR her hand and they start off.)

DOCTOR *(stops, gestures dramatically towards PATIENT)*:

Not to make love—I mean:
not to have sex!
Not to fuck!
And I and you, Time, you,
my love, we two
so often do, we screw!
Oh, let us go,
let us go somewhere new!

(Manservants dress them in regalia, and they leave.)

PATIENT (*alone on stage*):

Ah well,
I suppose
that those
guys will
do just fine.
And me, too:
what's mine
isn't what's new;
and so I have it...

(He undergoes a meaningful transformation.)

...My pain, for one,
I'll grow to love it
as I might love the sun,
or possibly a woman's butt.
Still, one less nut—
in whichever way ...
ah, the days, the days!
Though, who cares
what the doctor says?

The Poem in which I Die

I tell this not without seeing all the holes.
Whether an occasional force or pure figment,
something very big hangs high over this family drama.
Knowing I'm alive. Mostly from memory; the memories;
continuing to remember.
There's my mother, talking on the phone, to this relative
or that one, to *her* mother, to my siblings overseas,
my father coming home bringing unexplained sausages.
And Mother's heart palpitations. She stays
up all night wondering
which hospital she'd go to. And me,
lying back in a chair.
Doing nothing.
Adding to the tension.
But these are only beginnings, then only the same progressions,
the same currents flowing on from origin to origin.

But I remember my first dream, as a child, about it.
Something about a time-bomb on a helicopter, an explosion,
or I'm in a jungle,
being chased by venomous cobras,
or by Adolf Hitler again. It all makes sense.
He wields a water-gun.
There are others. And, like a game,
they chase me, and I try to make it.
But nobody's bad in my dreams, not the cobras, not Hitler.
I died, or actually I *was dying*. I was
dying simply because I was getting killed.

I didn't suddenly wake up
from the dream. I did remember it—or rather, not even,
not exactly what the dream was, what was in it,
but how it moved forward by flipping
back into darkness. The sort of darkness in sleep
where you just wait for the next dream?
I don't know. It's not a darkness you can feel.
There are no words, so I call it darkness.

When the dream was over, it was over, that's
when my death stopped. Or, when it started. There was
no was. Everything stopped.
There was no vision or lack of vision. No memory.
Just darkness.
I was gone. It was all over.

But at some point in the night, I woke up.
Really. I found my parents' bedroom in the dark, half-crying,
and they let me sleep in their bed, just because.
I don't think they ... I don't know if they understood—
how I saw my own end, or rather was still seeing it.

Beautifying Strength

-David Avidan

[To all those interested]

What in any case
justifies this loneliness—
more than anything
how disappointing
it all is, the holding on,
still, when everything's gone,
the holding on throughout the haze,
and that old despairing daze—
what justifies it:
it's the simple, biting fact:
we have nowhere; we can't go back.

In clear nights, the air,
it freezes; the scenery is spare.
And sometimes it rains,
and sometimes it's hot.
And beautiful bodies and faces
sometimes smile, sometimes not—
sometimes he, sometimes she complains.

Yes, the body is simple
and totally clear,
angels don't climb up toward heaven,
and they don't come here.
And sometimes we hate,
and sometimes we love:
such a thing as we,
few friends thereof
and usually enemies;
but there's passion in all of these—
the flowing on, as you were,
like a river, singular
in some odd light someday;
and if young and always dreaming
why not stay that way—
dreaming in a rhythm,
onward in the light of day,
dreaming just as you were,
just like a river dreams, singular,
to flow, to flow...
Only our aging flesh will know.

And what, in any case,
justifies this loneliness—
more than anything
how disappointing it all is—
though you already know,
and clearly, that it must be so—
then there's the blinding
stiffness of that knowledge:
that finally what justifies,
or seems to, all the despair,
it's the simple fact in there,
that penetrating, biting fact:
we have nowhere; we can't go back.

Our aging flesh will know—
yes, only our bodies will pay—
and we, like rivers, in the light of day,
flowing, glowing, brightly flaring
through the haze—what justifies this fantasy,
what justifies all that despairing,
and all that this knowledge may bring,
what justifies it more than anything...

* * *

[P.S.]

The nights are clear
and freezing, with a freezing air,
there's power, there's energy there,
but there's no love,
and already no smile, and already no words;
no angels anywhere above,
and none down here—no.
Poems, as they are, can never show
what words cannot presume to, and so
they toss themselves off and away,
into the big, big sea, where the waves have gone,
up and down, up and down.

Twelve Movies

Then I was told to watch twelve movies—
oh, any twelve—which isn't
bad advice, told
probably to make me take time off
from being so serious.
Or as if time, like this, can be so simply
gleaned into rough twelfths
to some effect,
which isn't an incorrect view, nor an imperfect figure—
on the contrary, both correct and good!
Like twelve people I know, like twelve perfected parts of me.
And the books in the room turned,
or just angled slightly,
as if to say, "Hell,
why not? We don't know!"
And since I normally place my trust in them,
I let it come,
the deluge of phrases.
I let it wash off these layers of mine—
these confused skins—
until it would be satisfied with its flensing.
And I let the movie theater
wrench itself out of the concrete and creep up
seductively, with its lips
gradually opening over my head—"Hello, Ishai," it said.
"Hello, movie theater," I echoed
from inside that long throat.

And my scarf rolled off my neck, and my coat
dropped ripe onto the carpeted floor,
then my shirt and pants and other mentionables,
and I came out pink as on my birthday—though, I suppose
with black spots here and there,
a partly healthy, partly still-alright
pinkish onion.
Like an overgrown child,
imagining myself unveiled—
a tragically trusting twelve-year-old,
which is the person that I resemble
when drunk, or when heavily flattered,
as in a room—the room—
hearing a voice recite all the possible courses of action,
and me, ah me,
expecting that this time (whatever time it is),
when I step outside, it might finally be Spring,

or possibly the end of days,
which is okay—perfect even!

And I would reach out
in the post-apocalyptic dark of the movie theater
for those handles grafted
in between the other animals,
those ones that used to eat one another,
the handles that marked my place
in that poetic future,
all of which I surely must have seen
and somewhere still remembered from a dozen movies.

The Barbarian Fact of Civilization

(Three AZTECS walk into a bar. Elevator music is playing.)

Aztec #1: This is a murder mystery.

Aztec #2: The telephone rings.

Aztec #3: An ominous music plays.

Aztec #1: A pretty woman runs and screams.

(A scream is heard in an interior room. Music stops. Enter MEL GIBSON.)

Gibson: What is done is done, what is made is made, and what is unmade is unmade. We need no longer concern ourselves with worries of the past, or worries of the future, or worries of right now, the present. These, my hands, have done what these, my hands, can do, even if I never knew they could do it. And now I am both defined by what I did and also finally devoid of definition for the fact that I am suddenly empty of function or possibility. I remain who I am, and yet I am also he whom I look like but who fails to be the person whom I should conceivably be. And as for the what, the questioning of more basic significances, matter even, they are both here and not here, making me, unmaking me, doing and undoing that which I have done but that which, since I have finished doing, is not possible to be done anymore.

(GIBSON sits at a table. AZTECS bow and exit. Music resumes. Enter four MOTHERS.)

Sarah: Empire, our empire for instance, is defined by the ability to keep things around without function, and also the ability to reject the transience inherent in them.

Rebecca: The frontier, the edges of civilization is a site where it is worth living to see for once who, what we are, our shifting values of being, our living at the edge of life.

Leah: Beyond definable borders, the basis of living flows naturally out from existence – particles like jealousy, hatred, impatience, quality, usefulness, and love. Worth.

Rachel: Today, like any day, is a day defining an independence of some sort, just as it is a definition for humanity's being continually occupied by itself, and continually tired.

(They serve GIBSON a sandwich, fries, a beer, and a shot.)

Space

“There’s no such thing
as perfect love,” I went
out into space saying, muttering
under my astronaut’s breath.
A quiet, uneventful launch,
and an air of synthetic or
imaginary bees; imaginary birds;
but even the computer
was quiet (no words).
Ah, I had gone out
for no reason, banished
from someone or another’s
happy life. Or perhaps it was—
and likely that—something
which I had no interest yet
in so fully exploring,
though there I was—
thinking about myself.
But then, I realized I simply went—
I had already done it.
I was never an idealist,
and I wasn’t a big fan of space
in the first place, though
I did work hard
as always, and as if interested.
The mission was for a year.
Not especially good or bad,
and not that I cared,
but certain people were invested.

And then, in space, one day
I started dancing with myself,
alone, however feebly—
me the subject, me the test;
with all those who would give
a sublimely dysfunctional help,
with emptiness—forever
demanding, defining
a marriage, a cosmic fix
in the eyes of this loneliness,
in the stomach of the waste.
There I am, because I can,
praising the void with my dance.
And, floating about, I’d say
such silly things as, “Space,
won’t you show your face?”

and it both always and never did
show, in a manner of speaking.
And love is the same, the same way,
in the manner that in the end
what I say goes simply to myself—
in the end! And I danced in utter doubt
right through all of this floating about.
“Here I am,” I would answer myself,
knowing it isn’t space, nor love
talking. “And here I am,” I heard
myself say back, and it sounded
then both clear and shadowy,
both dark and brilliant, with countless
un-understandable things.

Then I performed my experiments,
watching both plants I’d grown
and faraway planets with rings
(thinking uselessly of home),
or placing tiny animals together
in pairs, in small tanks or in jars,
in perfectly weightless conditions—
and I turned the devices on them,
then I turned them on myself.
Even the radiation gauges
showed that I was hopeless—
a document, a piece of paper
riddled with the universe’s
loneliest, hence most negligible rules,
its least wanted of all cosmic rays—
all charged with humanity
itself, why not—moving in faint
seas of light, in radiant pools—
oh, and all of humanity’s
most lethal existential questions
excusing all of its adamant tools.

For who but me will have answered
the call, who the quiet whispers?
And me, my own questions,
my whispers? Ah, silence—
“What am I? What is love?”
Then I whispered nonsensically,
“Ah, silence!” I’d begun to enjoy it,
floating so silently in spacey fluff,
doing what I’m so distantly told,
and what I so distantly must—
growing old, negligibly.

And what I mustn't ever do, either
for my own fears—those I fear
I'll always listen to, or never—
that which simply isn't done,
remains there, getting old, neglected...
It's been nearly a year now,
with so many weightless rotations;
feels like it's been forever, ah,
this objectivity that I've affected.

And who or what will I finally
touch-down upon, and what
will I trouble to say, and how
will I reach out my hand
to be lifted up, so drained
of all my earthly powers, so
uninhibited by manner or grace.
And of all my now-previous work,
will there remain a trace?
Will I be given flowers?
Will I miss being out in space?
Will I have gone insane entirely?
Will I be given a feigned
sort of speech by someone?
I reach for a test tube, a jar, a tank—
reach to touch my last experiments,
to see what now is still around,
what then, so soon, will be only above.
And I feel a sting—feel tough—
waving goodbye, so to speak, like this,
to what I had made here in space,
what I had made, why not, in love!