*Who’s Afraid of Jerusalem*

Who’s afraid of Jerusalem?
Who loathes and despises her?
Who execrates her, heart and tongue?
Who says, What am I doing in this city of black hats
And maniacs
This city of blood and enmity
Where Hillel the Elder pursues peace
Amid the broken cups and carnage?

Who hates Jerusalem
For the love wherewith he loved her once in secret
Courtyard shadows of the vine
Twilight, jasmine blue?

How cruel is the hatred of Jerusalem
A very flame
Many waters cannot quench it.

After the terrorist attack at Café Hillel in September 2003

Michal Govrin, from: And So Said Jerusalem, Poems and Hymns
Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\*

*A Speckle of Fig and Jasmine*

There’s Jasmine, skipping past the Old City Walls
With her satchel and her pony-tail
And a Hey, look at me!
“What eez your name?” we bandy
And I exclaim she has a pretty name
Before the morning breezes waft us on our separate ways
Me to the Sabbath, Jasmine to her doings
In the shade of a fig tree, where chickens scurry
A tourist bus wheezes up the slope and Jasmine bounces by
Like a blossoming placard for a meeting between enemies

Or brothers - in grief and blood and newborn hopes
Dashed against the rocks -
Something we forgot in our prayers, could be
That’s where we should have started from this time around
Like winter, reaching out of thirsty pods -
The way the seasons taught us.

The light of revelation is breaking
Far away, a crashing light
Charges us with words,
The sole immortals here:
“Es Stand, it stayed,
The sweetness stayed,
A speckle of fig stayed
On your lip.”

\* “Es Stand”, a poem by Paul Celan, written during his only visit to Jerusalem in October 1969.

Michal Govrin, from: And So Said Jerusalem, Poems and Hymns
Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\*

*At the Close of Time*

On the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah
At the close of time
Before it opens forth again
Unsure
We are immured in straits
Dire as judgment, blind
And absolute

On the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah
Not the Sabbath of Return, not “By your might”
For of what use in your sight is all our striving
If not to disclose these crimps of
The soul, to recall them
Like a dove that finds
A moment’s respite in the cleft

On the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah
In this city clamped
Like an ant-infested
Orange rind
Cast into the dust heap where the
Cats of devastation prowl
On the night of the mantled moon

On the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah
The city unfolds like the draper’s shop
In creases of the shaded alleyways
And the stairs we climbed to the rooftop
When a tingling whiteness flowed
From belfry towers
So close to the sky

- Still our feet shall stand before you
Unsounded polyglot of many faces,
You who watch as we tread the flagstones,
You to whom all words flow -
Even the orange-vendor drawing near
Breaks into smile
Before the pen that
Draws us both together
If only for a moment
In your alphabet

Shabbat before Rosh Hashana 2003

Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\*

*How Has the Gold Become Dim (Lavinia\* Ravished)*

That ravishing beauty of hers:
Zion, Lavinia, Philomela, the concubine of Gibeah,
Even as she lay slaughtered, hacked into twelve pieces
Still it lived on in her, swooning, bleeding through -
Her consummate beauty.

After the terrorist attack on Gaza Road in January of 2004

Michal Govrin, from: And So Said Jerusalem, Poems and Hymns
Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\* (From Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, Act 3 Scene IV)
“ Enter the Empress' sons, Demetrius and Chiron, with Lavinia, Her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished
Dem.: So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.
Chi.: Write down thy mind, between thy meaning so
As if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.
Dem.: See how with signs and tokens she can scrowl.
Chi.: Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.
Dem.: She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;
And so let's leave her to her silent walk.
Chi.: An 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.
Dem.: If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord."

\*

*Like Ravished Women with Severed Tongues and Hands*

In those days when the city was torn again right out of the verses of Lamentations
Not by the voices issuing from the shtebels on the eve of destruction
But by blood and corpses, and weeping of hard-faced men
And missile-fire over Bethlehem, the screaming of mothers there,
And the din of planes in the dark of night demolishing our mutual slumber

In those days when the city was puking its guts out
When blood from the altars of the Valley of Hinom flowed over Aceldama,
At dawn, pillars of smoke would raise the stench to heaven
At sunset the smell of scorching would ascend on high,
Stinking through the shattered night

Only the Minister of Hatred, raving in a trance that flickered till morn,
Floated over the suq and the men sitting
In their shop fronts, shrunken, limp,
Then swooped down on a scattering of worshippers at the Wall, and circled
Sardonically, reeking of spring
Over the hills that knew so much and still kept their counsel -
Like ravished women with severed tongues and hands.

After the terrorist attacks in Beit Yisrael and Café Moment in March of 2002

Michal Govrin, from: And So Said Jerusalem, Poems and Hymns
Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\*

*Near the Poet's House*

Near the poet’s house
A boy is crying at the juncture
His mother darts out into the traffic to retrieve
The ball that rolled away
“This ball is the best!” he hugs it close
Still sniffling

If the poet were alive he’d have
Something wise to say about loss, about solace
And the stones of Jerusalem and her inhabitants
But on the path that winds uphill
The mourners’ stone and the radiance of winter are all that is left
To reflect his image along the lanes, stone-rough, word-gentle, in a game
Of hide and seek between the living and the dead of the eternal city

For how shall we not hear Winter Winter when all is radiant again
How will the days go by in her eternity
How will our flesh be buried alive on the slopes of Jerusalem
And yet it is the stories on our lips,
The Songs of Ascent we sing that
Raise her towers
The human monuments we fashion with a mouth-
Full of air to fecundate the field of blood and consolation

Today the Vale of Hinnom holds the radiant morn of Edom
Like the ball that rolled away
Like the sudden burgeoning of hope, Winter Winter
A crocus frilled in crimson
Sprouting up with all its gentle might,
No stem or foliage,
Right from the ground

\* Near the house of the poet, Yehuda Amichai, Shabbat, November 15, 2003

Michal Govrin, from: And So Said Jerusalem, Poems and Hymns
Translated from the Hebrew by: Betsy Rosenberg
\*Translation sponsored by the "Museum On The seam", Jerusalem

\*

*Nocturnal Landscapes*

[Commencement]
Jerusalem’s fate. Then, at night.
Desired and abandoned, gripped by her kissers’ hands
drunk with desire, they desert
as lust abates
gripped with revulsion, their mouths full of spittle and contempt
again they fall blindly groping in her dirt.

[First Watch]
The rain washed Jerusalem all night.
Finally. After she waited so. Months.
In a blinding dust that shrouded her eyes,
her mind swooning from longing.

The rain erupted. Its fingers twirling droplets in her hair,
The river-streets streaming to their source,
and in moist caves of calcite sediments
in veins of dust, ancient travelers’ bones
crawl anew
drifting with the rain into the mountain’s belly.

[Second Watch]
So said Jerusalem: “That night things were done to me
whose tides are dipped in violet and red.
Winged embryos fluttered
a shower of blind stones was shot in the horizon and spattered
then, as the gorge reawakened.”

And an echo responded: “Then, that night, a day with no night –
so bright was the wheel of the moon shining in its depths,

a mute rootlet of green turmoil
groped the gleaming phosphoric screen of the frozen twilight.

It was dusk. Hour of concealment
when only the memory of belief – not the hymn – beat bat-like on the womb’s membrane.”

[Third Watch]
Concealment it was. All night.
The body said so. Warm and cold. Washed in sweat and gripped with chill.
As though feet danced around the home’s walls.
Circles of ancestral fathers in white robes
tiptoeing between the watches,
Erected from the parchments, from the letters,
raising high their wives,
they, the mute, the head-scarved,
they, whose voices even I refused to listen to,
because their wail did not cry out in the streets.

At night they came out. They and the head-scarved women
rising from amidst the tombstones on the hillside
which I visited in the heat of day
drenched in sweat and olive myrtle fragrance in my hair.

[Last Watch]
The city sang anew:
“O, lemon trees with jasmine ascending amidst your buds,
O, rain droplets that covered your foliage at dawn –
sing your song to the night, as it is short, as it is long
sing the fragrance of your blessing to the gaze
that set for a moment on the spark as morning came.

O, lemon blossom, a moment’s droplet
that will shine till sundown
this is the dawn rising from the heart of darkness –
to which obscurity points,
this is the teaching of the depths in force
this is a shimmer of the turquoise gaping in their abyss.”

[(Daybreak]
No measure has the dawn, no limits
Opening from a body which devoted itself like rain to the darkness
rising like the miracle of an answered prayer,
cracking with Jerusalem’s laughing voice

“Deep is the gold of sunrise
soaked in my night of love.”
Blessed are they who knew the secret of the waters’ gates
blessed
those who came to dust.”

Translated by Rachel-Shlomit Brezis