

*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

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*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.

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*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

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*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

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\* (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 scowl.  
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."

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*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

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*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 sniffing

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

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### *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