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Such A Good Invention: Yehuda Amichai's Poetry as Travel Journal

While we are forced ahead by the relentless dynamic of the time-tabled present, our soul, the seat of the heart, trails nostalgically behind, burdened by the weight of memory.

Alain de Botton, *On Love*

I don't like taking photographs.

There are many possible reasons for this, and over the years I've considered quite a few of them. It may stem from some personal insecurity and that seeing my own image in a picture is only barely more tolerable than hearing my voice on an answering machine. I suspect that my place in a large family of technology-addicted amateur photographers has made me keenly aware of some photographic conventions (usually beginning with phrases such as "Now stand over there!", "Put your arm around her!" or "Smile!") producing barely memorable portraits that have little to do with the realities of any lived situation. Maybe the act of taking out a camera, lining up the perfect shot and then hoping the lighting, shutter speed and aperture cooperate are just too interruptive. I'd rather enjoy the moment and find a more personal technology to hold what I've seen. Amy Tan writes in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, "The world is not a place but the vastness of the soul...all that moves us toward knowing what is true" (320). In the calculus of this delicate and personal geography, I haven't yet found a camera capable of holding onto where I've been.

Poetry can. Muriel Rukeyser writes: "The images of relationship, in which the ancestor carried out of Jerusalem and the unborn son may meet; the music of the images of relationship...experience taken into the body, breathed-in, so that reality is the completion of experience, and poetry is what is produced. And life is what is produced" (221). Poetry is at once a lived experience and the memory of lived experience representing itself in music, silence and language. It has the ability to bring back our own past as strongly as any of the other senses, and it recalls more than event. Poetry can navigate where we've been and who we've become since; subtly, we can confront memory to arrive at the understanding that the past is written in itself and the present, and that where we are now is always a function of where we've been. Poetry is a capable guide in the unreliable terrain of memory. As Rukeyser tells us, "Both empathy and memory present new possibilities. We know that memory has a great deal to do with the power of poetry" (121,2). A poem might also be seen as a retroactive travel journal, a companion to the physical pictures we take. In 1956, German poet Gunter Eich noted that he writes "poems to orient himself in reality." We might read them for the same purpose. Gregory Orr, in his book *Poetry as Survival*, notes that certain human and "unstable" situations in our lives must be held "for a moment in steady state. One such suspended moment is the poem, which freeze-frames the interplay as language so we can contemplate it, feel it, and concentrate on it" (51).

I can think of few systems more capable of rendering meaningful those pivotal and unsayable moments of unconditional existence that make us human and alive. In short, it is possible to find ourselves in poetry and it may be that poetry is part of a greater narrative, a way towards coherence. In *Living by Fiction*, Annie Dillard writes that "poetry's materials, its characters, objects, and events, its landscapes and cities, its mornings and afternoons, are far more likely to have been actual than fabricated. This means that poetry has been able to function quite directly as human interpretation of the raw, loose universe...we have not lost all that has already been written, nor have we yet understood it" (147). In the same way that we chronicle our travels by photography, we write our lives by what we read; if we are lucky, if there is determination and providence and grace, the lives we lead are sometimes written

in poetry.

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My first trip to Israel was in July of 1996, months after the sudden and unexpected death of my father. Looking at that time a decade later, I can see the turmoil of my own world as I visited a country defined by many centuries of uncertainty and conflict. It's easy for me now to know that I was searching for something to hold onto against the fragile and empty darkness of loss, something that the promise of family and history and travel seemed to hold.

I'd read the poetry of Yehuda Amichai earlier that year. The gentle humour, human compassion and wisdom his poems offered padded for me a fallen world. As reality must always be, my six weeks in Israel were completely divorced from what I had expected and the only answers I found there were questions I'd been unaware needed to be asked. I've come to know this as one of travel's great gifts. Understanding these questions, however, and my time in a land where the political so often overtakes and destroys the personal, did not come until months later. It was in the long shadows of November, when I picked up Amichai's poetry yet again, that the memories of my time in the Holy Land began to breathe strongly enough to facilitate the reliving necessary for the birth of personal meaning. I was stunned to find that each poem brought back a specific memory of the people I'd met, the lives I'd shared and the often misunderstood living through defined by the human and the political.

Amichai's poetry became a travel guide to those six weeks. Now, the rereading of these poems is undistinguishable from the experience itself. They are a collection of snapshots and life. This is what I offer today, a sort of travelogue in poetry. I believe that it is part of the work of creativity to confront our difficult understandings; it is my hope that this paper values the story of that knowing.

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Tuesday, July 30, 1996

I am on the plane, seven hours into the journey. Beside me, a friendly Christian missionary woman is sleeping. Occasionally her head bobs onto my shoulder and rests there. She spent the first hour of the flight explaining to me how the Jews are an important part of the Second Coming of Christ, and that's why she chose to make her home in Jerusalem. I was surprised by her stance but also by how friendly and respectful she was to me, maybe because of my status as one of the Chosen. We exchanged numbers and contact information, promising to meet up in Jerusalem. She asked if I had anything to help her sleep and I offered her a Gravol. She said she'd take two, that she has an iron-clad constitution. I gave them to her. That was five hours ago.

My mother cried at the airport and I couldn't tell if it was because she was sad that I was going somewhere or worried for my safety. Maybe some pre-programmed genetic pride kicked in, an ancient satisfaction that another member of the tribe was claiming a piece of historical birthright. I felt bad as she hugged me, crying. She's been through so much this year, lost so much and dealt with so much sadness. My trip might be just another piece of normal life abandoning her, another goodbye to add to the list. I didn't realize how much of life could break off and disappear, or how deep the feelings when it does. Even feeling alive is more intense since my father's death. It's more urgent, even if it does lack all the familiar colours.

My missionary stirs beside me. The stewardess arrives to ask if either of us would like a drink. I smile and shake my head no, and then I fix the blanket so my neighbour is snug. She will sleep until half an hour before landing, and I will be thinking of the year I'd left behind, and of my mom.

Amichai writes:

I've never been in those places where I've never been
and never will be, I have no share in the infinity of light-years and
dark years.
but darkness is mine, and the light, and my time
is my own...
The years of my life I have broken into hours, and the hours into
minutes
and seconds and fractions of seconds. These, only these,
are the stars above me
that cannot be numbered. (OCO 5)

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Thursday, August 1

My cousin Gideon called this morning to announce that on the occasion of visiting relatives from abroad, he has a tradition: to take them to McDonald's and have a very un-kosher cheeseburger. That is why, hours later, I find myself at the Dizengoff Center McDonald's eating a Big Mac (no cheese) while my Hebrew-speaking Israeli cousin devours his cheeseburger and milkshake. I can see the difference between my hybrid brand of North American Judaism and the Tel Aviv version. Gideon tells me he sees no need to keep kosher when his first language is Hebrew.

I'm surprised in a way to be at the Dizengoff Center. Five months ago, almost to the date, a terrorist detonated a bomb here that killed 13 people, many of them children. Life has found a way to go on. Shoppers show each other their finds the way they might in any country. People excitedly talk and make plans, and my cousin gets up to order another burger. A child's birthday party loudly materializes beside us.

Invisible scars are present though, and I learn the lesson that violence rips through time as well as space. Moments after Gideon leaves to place another order two of the balloons at the birthday celebration burst. My Canadian sensibility thinks nothing of it, recognizing the sound for what it is. But as I bring my Big Mac to my mouth I sense a change. Something else is present here, something I have not felt before. Gideon rushes back to our table, sharp eyes watching for me. People have stood up, and I notice one man has reached inside his jacket for an army-issue revolver. His eyes sweep the room before he replaces it, and calm slowly returns. Half a year is not so long after all, especially in a place where normalcy is tightly governed by memory.

The Diameter of the Bomb

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimetres
and the diameter of its effective
range—about seven metres.
And in it four dead and eleven wounded.
And around them in a greater circle
of pain and time are scattered
two hospitals and one cemetery.
But the young woman who was
buried where she came from
over a hundred kilometres away
enlarges the circle greatly.
And the lone man who weeps over her death
in a far corner of a distant country
includes the whole world in the circle.
And I won't speak at all about the crying of orphans
that reaches to the seat of God
and from there onward, making
the circle without end and without God.

Wednesday, August 7

In Tel Aviv I share a room with my cousin Amir at his parents' apartment. He is six years younger than I am but we've always had a close relationship. I remember him as a sensitive and intellectual kid, a lost soul, a kindred spirit in a sea of relations. With him more than anyone else, I find myself united in a past I was not born to see; we are the first post-survivor generation of a holocaust family and somehow in Amir, I can feel the darkness and tragedy that befell relatives I will never know. We share this knowledge and that blood, and we go on. My first night in Israel, the two of us stay awake until sunrise, sitting on his bed, talking. For two days he shows me the city, his life. I am happy to be a part of it, enjoying the random connection of family, this accented boy who shares my history.

My third day in the city Amir suddenly becomes distant and stops speaking to me, acknowledging me only when absolutely necessary. I ask him what's wrong, force a conversation, demand an explanation. He offers nothing and heads off, leaving me to fend for myself. After a few days, I make plans to leave Tel Aviv and visit other cousins in Jerusalem. Amir comes in late at night and silently gets into bed. He is gone when I wake up. Years will pass but I never ask what went wrong in Tel Aviv. I live instead with the feeling of committing an unknown betrayal, a transgression of our histories impenetrable even into the future.

In a poem called "We Were Near", Amichai writes:

We were so near to each other,
like two numbers in a lottery,
just one cipher apart.
One of us will win, perhaps.

Beautiful are your face and your name,
Printed on you as on a tin of a marvelous preserve:
...Are you still inside?

Time will come, when days will be
sweet as nights
and beautiful for people
to whom time will be unimportant.

Then we shall know.
(AMEN 78)

Tuesday, August 13

The first time I was in Jerusalem, I didn't realize I was. On the bus leaving Tel Aviv, I meet three traveling companions –two Europeans and one Canadian—and the four of us decide to hitchhike from Ein Geidi back towards Tel Aviv. Our plan lasts until we pass the first rental car store. We procure a small vehicle and take turns driving.

After a happy and long afternoon on the road, we pull over just as the sun begins to set. I've never seen a sunset so subtly practiced; the light and sand share a tender familiarity, bound together by colour and time. As I watch the dusk turn the white coarseness of stone houses red, my European friend approaches and puts an arm around me. "Do you know where you are?" he asks, and when I say that I don't, he pronounces the name that has been home and destiny for so many souls for so many centuries. A cousin here would later impart a truth that easily captures the city's history but so little of its beauty: "In Jerusalem," he told me, "Modern times begin with Herod the Great."

From: "A Majestic Love Song":

You are beautiful, like prophecies,
And sad, like those which come true,

Calm, with the calmness afterward.
Black in the white loneliness of jasmine,
With sharp fangs: she-wolf and queen.

...

You are beautiful, like prophecies
That never come true.
And this is the royal scar;
I pass over it with my tongue
And with pointed fingers over that sweet
roughness.
(AMEN 41)

Thursday, August 15

I stand at the grave of Yitzhak Rabin, filled not with awe or humility but with layers of disbelief. It is difficult to understand that I am here, at the site where nine months ago the CNN cameras had brought pictures of statesmen and royalty, standing somberly with a similar bewilderment on their faces. It is hard to believe that the story begun on that early September day in 1993—the hope of the Oslo Accords, Bill Clinton’s smile, Yassar Arafat’s unrehearsed handshake and Rabin’s unexpected acceptance of it—ends here, at this lonely tomb in the dry air. How could the cautious optimism of Jewish friends and the joyous reaching out of Palestinian classmates over that week come to this? It is beyond understanding that hope might be so fragile, that it might survive, that it might end. That peace agreements between nations, that smiles and handshakes could suffer assassination. I place a stone against the alter and notice that the breeze carries within it a hint of respect. It is easier for me to believe in winds than bullets.

And ten years later it is still impossible to believe I stood at that graveside.

Amichai:

They dismantled us
Each from the other.
As far as I’m concerned
They are all engineers. All of them.

A pity. We were such a good
And loving invention.

...

We hovered a little above the earth.

We even flew a little.

Wednesday, August 23

I am meeting yet another cousin in what has become an endless parade of Jerusalem family, each dutifully taking me to lunch or dinner and telling me stories of my father as a boy, a man, a friend. I’ve selfishly figured out a way to guard a bit of time for myself though: I wake up at 6am, escape into Achad Ha’Am street before anyone I’m related to wakes up and realizes I’m gone, and eat a falafel for breakfast. My stomach is usually quite upset by the time I get back to my relatives’ apartment, but they pass it off as a reaction to the spiritual energy of the ancient city. I leave this alone, mostly because I’m not entirely sure they’re wrong.

Today my lunch date is a first cousin of my father, a woman who survived the horrors of Bergen-Belsen to build a life in Israel and become a professor at Hebrew University. At her

office, she is meeting with a student and asks me to wait for her in a car-park down the street. I exit the elevator and pass time watching the diverse population of university students. It is here, at last, that the entire population of Jerusalem's history is represented: there are orthodox Jewish students and others dressed in Muslim garb. I notice accents from Chicago, Sydney and London. A group of Asian students walk past me, talking in a language that is not Hebrew or English.

Suddenly the lights flicker and go out. For a moment there is complete darkness and then the weak emergency generator kicks in. It's enough light to stop a panic but not to calm me entirely, and my first instinct is to seek the shelter of a group. I imagine us laughing and joking about the situation, maybe groping toward the stairs and finding daylight together.

Instead, the diverse groups take up separate positions against the walls of the garage. They stand mostly with their friends, although a few people are solitary. Nobody moves toward one another, there is no nervous laughter or sudden association. We are, instead, multiple solitudes, protecting our safety in a dim underground world.

The power is restored after ten minutes.

Forgetting Someone
by Yehuda Amichai

Forgetting someone is like forgetting to turn off the light
in the backyard so it stays lit all the next day

But then it is the light that makes you remember.

Monday September 2

In a poem he calls "Autumn, Love, Commercials" Amichai writes:

"In the airplane in the sky, those who are returning home
sit beside those who are leaving, and their faces are the same." (OCO 164)

I find his words true as I sit in my seat on the Air Canada charter jet, surrounded by napkins and walls and magazines emblazoned with the familiar maple leaf. There is no Christian missionary sitting with me today; instead I am against the window, boxed in by an Arabic family returning to Toronto after a visit to family in Gaza. They are a man and a woman, two small children and a baby. We exchange a brief hello as they sit down and say little else.

My last night in Tel Aviv, Gideon of the unkosher cheeseburger took me to the beach. It was a night of magic; I would write later that the light on the beach at Herzliya was something new to me. It wasn't the light, though; it was the feeling of ancient and unspoiled seashore and the sight of Gideon's long hair sprawled beneath his head as we lay on the sand. It was a sense of how far I was from home, the hopelessness of knowing, and how in less than a day, I'd be far again from this place and this cousin, an impossible premonition of being lost in a vast and unmappable terrain, of leaving behind the whole world.

Beside me, my neighbour is struggling to change a diaper while holding his sleeping baby. His wife is dozing beside him, and he clearly does not want to disturb her. He's having a really terrible time and it's clear that if he continues this way, the baby will wake up. "Excuse me," I say, "Can I help?" And then, quickly, afraid I'll be conscripted to change a diaper, I add: "I can hold the baby."

He thinks about it for a moment and I have no idea what recent or ancient history he is reviewing. Pragmatism wins out, however, and he finally hands me the baby. I hold her to me, protective and gentle, as her hand unconsciously reaches my shoulder for support. I think of the faces I've seen over the last month and know that this family will join them in the unstable province of memory once we land in Toronto. And yet somehow, there,

altitudes above nowhere, bathed in a living darkness known only to oceans, holding the daughter of a stranger, I understand that I am going home.

Amichai writes:

Like our bodies' imprint,
Not a sign will remain that we were in this place.
The world closes behind us,
The sand straightens itself.
(AF 549).

Works Cited

In this paper, Yehuda Amichai's poetry comes from three sources:

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