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OUR FATHER JACOB

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YEHUDA AMICHAI

OUR FATHER JACOB

Our father Jacob, on the beaten track,
carries a ladder on his back

like a window washer to the VIPs.
He does God's windows, if you please.

The ladder is all that's left of his dream;
the angels finally ran out of steam.

He carries the ladder back every night
into his dream and out of sight.

At dawn he wrestles a man to the ground.
That man is a woman. They roll 'round and 'round,

roll till they're ravished, till both of them reel,
grasping at chest and crotch and heel,

day after day, by the first morning light,
till the angel and Jacob are too weak to fight.

He'll climb that ladder, if ever he dies,
right out of this world and into the skies,

till the world vanishes into thin air.
For all that we know, he's still climbing there.

THE SCHOOL WHERE I STUDIED

I passed by the school where I studied as a boy
and said in my heart: here I learned certain things
and didn't learn others. All my life I have loved in vain
the things I didn't learn. I am filled with knowledge,
I know all about the flowering of the tree of knowledge,
the shape of its leaves, the function of its root system, its
pests and parasites.

I'm an expert on the botany of good and evil,
I'm still studying it, I'll go on studying till the day I die.
I stood near the school building and looked in. This is
the room

where we sat and learned. The windows of a classroom
always open
to the future, but in our innocence we thought it was
only landscape
we were seeing from the window.

The schoolyard was narrow, paved with large stones.
I remember the brief tumult of the two of us
near the rickety steps, the tumult
that was the beginning of a first great love.
Now it outlives us, as if in a museum,
like everything else in Jerusalem.

PROBLEM IN A MATH BOOK

I remember a problem in a math book
about a train that leaves from place A and another train
that leaves from place B. When will they meet?
And no one ever asked what happens when they meet:
will they stop or pass each other by, or maybe collide?
And none of the problems was about a man who leaves
from place A
and a woman who leaves from place B. When will they
meet,
will they even meet at all, and for how long?
And as for that math book: now I've reached
the final pages with the Table of Answers.
Back then it was forbidden to look.
Now it's permitted. Now I check
where I was right and where I went wrong,
and know what I did well and what I didn't. Amen.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld