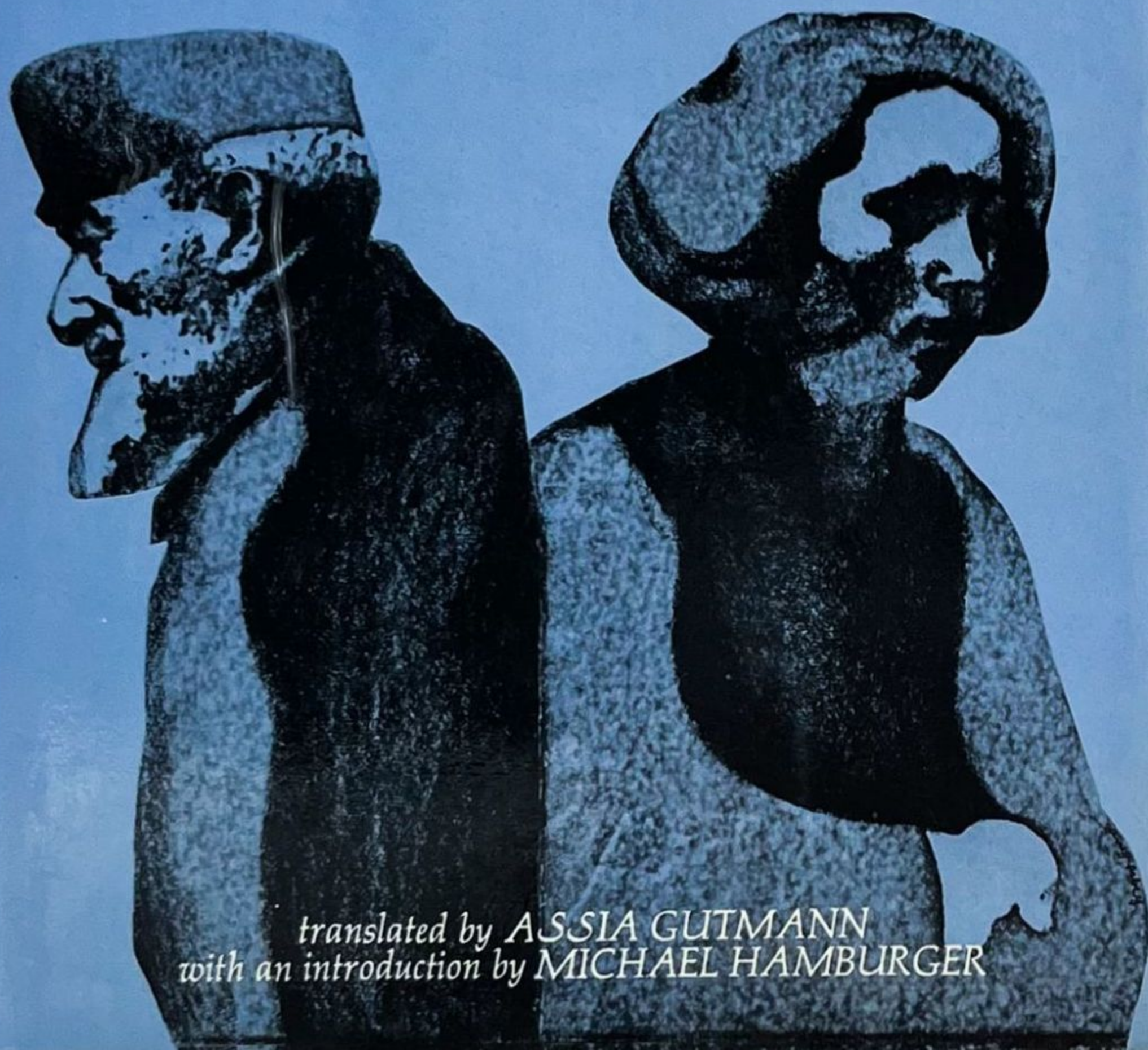


POEMS

by

YEHUDA
AMICHAI



translated by ASSIA GUTMANN
with an introduction by MICHAEL HAMBURGER

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*Translated from the Hebrew by
Assia Gutmann*

With an Introduction by Michael Hamburger



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INTRODUCTION

Poems are made of words, and I cannot read the words of which Yehuda Amichai's poems are made, cannot follow—let alone judge—his way with the Hebrew language, what he does with its ancient and modern, literary and vernacular components, how he combines and contrasts them to make them talk or sing as they have never talked or sung before. Something about his relation to the language in which he writes can be gathered from the poem "National Thoughts," where it is characterized as

“. . . this tired language
Torn from its sleep in the Bible—
Blinded, it lurches from mouth to mouth—
The language which described God and the Miracles,
Says:
Motor car, bomb, God.”

The relation is not a simple one, because Amichai cannot take his language for granted. For one thing, it is not his first language; and the language itself is an historical anomaly, like other languages that have not grown continuously and organically, but have been preserved, revived, and modernized with a high degree of deliberateness. Amichai's awareness of that peculiarity is inseparable from the historical awareness that distinguishes all his work. The repetition of "God" in the sixth line of the passage quoted is seemingly contrary to the logic and rhetoric of argument. It sets up an ironic tension between the deity worshipped in Biblical times and the purposes which the old religion can be made to serve in the age of motor cars and bombs. Amichai, therefore, is not only characterizing a language, but rendering the predicament of those who use it; and the rendering includes a criticism.

The background of Amichai's poems is almost as unfamiliar to me as their language. Almost. For though I have never seen Israel, and was not brought up within the rites and traditions of Judaism, Amichai is a first-generation Palestinian, born in the same country, Germany, and in the same year, 1924, as myself. His first language was German, and it has been suggested that his way with the Hebrew language owes much to that circumstance. The biographical link in itself may seem tenuous enough, but the more I immersed myself in Amichai's poems and in his novel, *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*, published in 1968, the less tenuous it became for me.

If in 1936 Amichai's family had emigrated not to Palestine but to Britain or America, he would have written in English, as I do, or in German, as his near-coevals Paul Celan and Erich Fried continue to do, though one lives in Paris, the other in London. The fact that Amichai's parents were Jewish enough to choose Palestine, and to send their son to a Jewish school before their emigration, is far from being irrelevant to the poems; but neither is Amichai's pervasive awareness of what he owes to the Diaspora, his sense of displacement, anachronism, division, incongruousness, fortuitousness, his ironic shifts between three layers of Jewish history—the Biblical past, the new nation's future, and, separating these two, the long unheroic, wearying centuries of dispersion, terminated by the destruction of Jewish communities throughout the greater part of Europe. Not only is Amichai's novel set both in Jerusalem and in his native South Germany, but the alternating chapters of first- and third-person narrative convey the simultaneous presence of one character in both settings. Only this extreme resort enabled Amichai to give his novel the full dimensions of his own awareness; and whatever the themes of his poems, the same multiple awareness informs them all.

In the collection *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, edited by

Stanley Burnshaw, et al., 1965, I found transliterations of the Hebrew texts of four poems by Amichai, together with literal renderings and critical analyses of the same poems. These not only confirmed that Amichai's poems show the influence of modern English and German poets, but revealed that the poem rendered here as "My Father Fought Their War for Four Years" was written as a sonnet, with a rhyme scheme basically Shakespearean, and that the title and refrain of another poem are derived from a phrase in a lease contract—a phrase to which Amichai gives implications and modulations of meaning undreamt of in the legal profession. One of his Hebrew texts contains the word "Luna Park"—a loan word derived from German fair grounds and amusement centers with that name, but used by Amichai in such a way as to invoke distinct childhood associations with the German prototype.

What another critic, Arie Sachs, has censured as "mere metaphorical fireworks" in some of Amichai's poems strikes me as a resort analogous to the simultaneity rendered by the narrative structure of his novel: seemingly incompatible images are juxtaposed or telescoped in order to enact Amichai's essential awareness of simultaneity. If that awareness is essential to Amichai's work, the same critic is wrong to speak of "shock tactics" or of "a kind of superabundance, sometimes overabundance" in his work, "a feeling that the richness of the metaphorical display sometimes exceeds the emotional matter with which it is designed to deal." If the emotional matter of a poem has not been fully enacted within that poem, we have no means of knowing what it was; and in Assia Gutmann's translations, at any rate, the metaphors do their job of relating and contrasting the everyday with the mythical, heroic and exemplary, the poet's own experience with that of Biblical or mediaeval paradigms, King Saul or Ibn Gabirol.

It is his acute historical consciousness that makes Amichai's poems at once tragic and humorous, tender and tough, direct and intricate. Although he has fought in two wars, against the Germans and against the Arabs, he cannot accept the simplifications of nationalism. Although he is steeped in Jewish scripture, he cannot accept the certainties of an exclusive faith. For Amichai, therefore, to be an Israeli is quite as difficult as to be a Diaspora Jew; and his preoccupation with his parents, in the poems, means that he assumes the burdens and dilemmas of both. If it was imperative for Diaspora Jews to remember Jerusalem, the Kings and Prophets, his poems suggest, it is equally imperative for Israeli Jews to remember the Diaspora. Otherwise they will lose the benefits, as well as the scars, of a unique experience; Israel will fall into the errors of other new nations, only more deeply and dangerously, because the threats and the desperation are greater. Amichai does not preach or prophesy, but his ironies and his gift of total recall provide a corrective to every kind of national complacency and intransigence. His sensibility remains European enough to experience the very landscape of Israel as savage and alien, as in the poem "Mayor"; he has retained the skepticism, liberalism and individualism which more militant Israeli intellectuals have been eager to discard. In the novel, too, the narrator-protagonist's plans for vengeance are thwarted by the complexities of human nature. As in the poems, no motive proves more powerful or more tenacious than love, a love sharpened by the awareness of pain, transience and death.

Many of Amichai's poems are intimately personal without being mere private confessions. Just as he applies a long historical memory to the immediate situation of his country, he applies a sense of his whole past life to any personal occasion. The questions he asks about his own life are also questions about other

people's lives. His poem "My Child," for instance, is also a poem about his father, about himself, and about anyone. Although he is a poet of experience, rather than of innocence, his sense of history and alienation through history has not blunted his sense of wonder, any more than his "tiredness" has impaired the energy of his poems. For all his knowingness, his perceptions are fresh. To read these poems, therefore, is both to be reminded of things one has tended to forget and to discover things that one has never known.

—*Michael Hamburger*

POEMS

1

They gave him a finger, but he took the whole hand.
They gave me the whole hand; I didn't even take the little finger.
While my heart
Was weight-lifting its first feelings
He rehearsed the tearing of oxen.

My pulsebeats were like
Drips from a tap,
His pulsebeats
Pounded like hammers on a new building.

He was my big brother,
I got his used clothes.

2

His head, like a compass, will always bring him
To the sure north of his future.

His heart is set, like an alarm clock,
For the hour of his reign.
When everyone's asleep, he will cry out
Until all the quarries are hoarse.
Nobody will stop him!

Only the asses bare their yellow teeth
At the end.

Dead prophets turned time wheels
 When he went out searching for asses
 Which I, now, have found.
 But I don't know how to handle them.
 They kick me.

I was raised with the straw,
 I fell with heavy seeds.

But he breathed the winds of his histories.
 He was anointed with the royal oil
 As with wrestlers' grease.
 He battled with olive trees,
 Forcing them to kneel.

Roots bulged on the earth's forehead
 With the strain.
 The prophets escaped from the arena;
 Only God remained, counting:
 Seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten . . .
 The people, from his shoulders downward, rejoiced.
 Not a man stood up.
 He had won.

I am tired,
 My bed is my kingdom.

My sleep is just,
 My dream is my verdict.

I hung my clothes on a chair
For tomorrow.

He hung his kingdom
In a frame of golden wrath
On the sky's wall.

My arms are short, like string too short
To tie a parcel.

His arms are like the chains in a harbor
For cargo to be carried across time.

He is a dead king.
I am a tired man.

Sometimes pus
Sometimes a poem.

Something always bursts out.
And always pain.

My father was a tree in a forest of fathers
Covered in green cotton wool.

Oh, widows of the flesh, orphans of the blood,
I must escape.

Eyes sharp as tin openers
Opened heavy secrets.

But through the wound on my chest
God peers into the world.

I am the door
To his apartment.

THE PLACE WHERE I HAVE NOT BEEN

The place where I have not been
I never shall be.

The place where I have been
Is as though I have never been there. People stray
Far from the places where they were born
And far from the words which were spoken
As if by their mouths
And still wide of the promise
Which they were promised.

And they eat standing and die sitting
And lying down they remember.
And what I shall never in the world return to
And look at, I am to love forever.
Only a stranger will return to my place. But I will set down
All these things once more, as Moses did,
After he smashed the first tablets.

OUT OF THREE OR FOUR IN A ROOM

Out of three or four in a room

One is always standing at the window.

Forced to see the injustice among the thorns,

The fires on the hill.

And people who left whole

Are brought home in the evening, like small change.

Out of three or four in a room

One is always standing at the window.

Hair dark above his thoughts.

Behind him, the words.

And in front of him the words, wandering, without luggage.

Hearts without provision, prophecies without water

And big stones put there

And staying closed, like letters

With no addresses, and no one to receive them.

IF WITH A BITTER MOUTH

If with a bitter mouth you will speak
Sweet words, the world will
Neither sweeten nor become bitterer.

And it is written in the book that we shall not fear.
And it is also written, that we also shall change,
Like the words,
In future and in past,
In the plural or in isolation.

And soon in the coming nights
We shall appear, like strolling players,
Each in the other's dream.

And into these dreams
There shall also come strangers
We did not know together.

IN MY TIME, IN YOUR PLACE

We were together in my time, in your place.
You gave the place and I the time.
Quietly your body waited for the seasons to change.
Fashions passed over it, to shorten, to lengthen,
With flowers or in white silk, clinging.

We swapped human values for those of beasts,
Calm and tigerlike and forever.
And for all that, ready to burn any moment
With the dry grass of the end of summer.

I divided the days with you, nights.
We exchanged a look with rain,
I was your Lent and your Mardi gras
In one body. We were not like dreamers,
Even in our dreams.

And in the unquiet, nestled the quiet,
In my time, in your place.

The many dreams I now dream of you
Prophecy your end with me—

As the multiplying crowds of seagulls
Come where the sea ends.

IN MY WORST DREAMS

In my worst dreams
You, with bright eyes,
Are always standing near walls
Whose foundation stone
Is a heart.

Of all the things I do,
Parting is the inevitable one.

In my dreams I always hear a voice—
It is not my voice
And not yours,
Neither is it the daughter of your voice.

Eyes creased, my eyes are
Like the eyes of exhausted beasts
Lusting for days
That have passed with the nights.

They have taken a love mask off me
Just as they take a death mask.
They took it without my noticing
As I lay beside you.

It is my true face.

FAREWELL, YOU

Farewell, you; your Face, already the Face of memory,
Wandering, rising from the world of the dead, and flying, flying.
Face of beasts, Face of water, Face of going
And a forest of whispers,
Face of the womb, Face of child.

No longer ours the hours of touch,
No longer ours to say: Now. Now.
Yours was the name of winds, once the wife
Of directions, purpose, mirror, and autumn.

Whatever we failed to understand, we sang together.
Generations and the dark, Face of alternation.
No longer mine, unsolved,
Locked nipples, buckles, mouths, screws.

Farewell then, you, the never sleeping,
All was fulfilled by our word; that all is of sand.
From now on
Dream through your own dreams, the world and all.

Go in peace, go, bundles and cases of death.
Threads, feathers, the household mash, pawn of hair,
Whatever will not be, no hand writes,
Whatever was not of the body will leave no memory.

A PITY.
WE WERE SUCH A GOOD INVENTION

They amputated
Your thighs off my hips.
As far as I'm concerned
They are all surgeons. All of them.

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.
An airplane made from a man and wife.
Wings and everything.
We hovered a little above the earth.
We even flew a little.

IT WAS SUMMER, OR THE END OF SUMMER

It was summer, or the end of summer,
And I heard then your footsteps, as you went from east to west
For the last time. And in the world
Handkerchiefs were lost, and books, and people.

It was summer, or the end of summer,
There were hours in the afternoon,
You were;
And you wore your shroud
For the first time.
And you never noticed
Because it was embroidered with flowers.

TWO SONGS ON CAESAREA BEACH

I

The sea preserves in salt.
Jerusalem preserves in dryness.
And where shall we go?
Now, in the exacting twilight,
To choose.
Not what we shall do
Or how we shall live
But to choose the life
Whose dreams
Will hurt least
In all the nights to come.

II

“Come again next summer”
Or words like that
Hold my life,
Take away my days,
Like a line of soldiers
Passing over a bridge
Marked for exploding.
“Come again next summer.”

Who hasn’t heard these words?

But who comes again?

LIKE OUR BODIES' IMPRINT

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

Dates are already in view
In which you no longer exist,
Already a wind blows clouds
Which will not rain on us both.

And your name is already on the passenger lists of ships
And in the registers of hotels
Whose names alone
Deaden the heart.

The three languages I know,
All the colors in which I see and dream:
None will help me.

GOD HAS PITY ON KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

God has pity on children in kindergartens,
He pities school children—less.
But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,
And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the roasting sand
To reach the dressing station,
And they are streaming with blood.

But perhaps
He will have pity on those who love truly
And take care of them
And shade them,
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
Our last pennies of kindness
Inherited from mother,
So that their own happiness will protect us
Now and on other days.

TWO QUATRAINS

1

Once I escaped, but I do not remember why or from which God,
I shall therefore travel through my life, like Jonah in his dark fish,
We've settled it between us, I and the fish, we're both in the
world's bowels,
I shall not come out, he will not digest me.

2

The last rains came on a warm night, in the morning my disaster
blossomed.
The race is over. Who is first, who second?
After our death we could play: I shall be you, you—me,
In the dead moon, in the returning ancient time, in my window's
tree.

EYE EXAMINATION

Go back a bit. Close your left eye.

Still?

Go back a bit further. The wall has moved on.

What do you see?

What do you recognize in the dimness?

I remember a lovely song which went . . .

Now? What do you see now?

Still?—All the time.

Don't leave me. Please. Please.

You're not leaving.

I'm not.

Close one eye. Speak in a loud voice.

I can't hear—I'm already far away.

What do you recognize? What do you see?

Close one sad eye.

Yes.

Close the other sad eye. Yes.

I can see now.

And nothing else.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS CENTURY

In the middle of this century we turned to each other
With half faces and full eyes
Like an ancient Egyptian picture
And for a short while.

I stroked your hair
In the opposite direction to your journey.
We called to each other,
Like calling out the names of towns
Where nobody stops
Along the route.

Lovely is the world rising early to evil,
Lovely is the world falling asleep to sin and pity,
In the mingling of ourselves, you and I,
Lovely is the world.

The earth drinks men and their loves
Like wine,
To forget.
It can't.
And like the contours of the Judean hills,
We shall never find peace.

In the middle of this century we turned to each other,
I saw your body, throwing shade, waiting for me,
The leather straps for a long journey
Already tightening across my chest.
I spoke in praise of your mortal hips,
You spoke in praise of my passing face.

I stroked your hair in the direction of your journey,
I touched your flesh, prophet of your end,
I touched your hand, which has never slept,
I touched your mouth, which may yet sing.

Dust from the desert covered the table
At which we did not eat.
But with my finger I wrote on it
The letters of your name.

POEM IN AN ORANGE GROVE

I am abandoned by God. "You're abandoned by God,"
Said my father.
God forgot me—
So did he, later.

The scent of orange groves in blossom
Was in me for a while. You. Hands sticky
With juice and love. You cried a great cry
And threw two of your last thighs into battle.
And then silence.
You, whose handsome head learned history,
Know that only what's past is silent.
Even battles,
Even the scent of orange groves.
Blossoms and fruit were on one and the same tree,
Above us, in that double season.
Even then we spoke with that foreign
And strange accent of those who will die.

I WAS THE MOON

My child is very sad.

Whatever I teach him—

Geography of love,

Strange languages which can't be heard

Because of the distance—

My child rocks his little bed towards me in the night.

What am I?

More than forgetting.

The very language of forgotten.

And until he understands what I did

I am as good as dead.

What are you doing with our quiet child?

You cover him with a blanket

Like heaven, layers of clouds—

I could be the moon.

What are you doing with your sad fingers?

You dress them with gloves

And go out.

I was the moon.

As for the world,
I am always like one of Socrates' disciples,
Walking by his side,
Hearing his opinions and histories;
It remains for me to say:
Yes. Yes, it is like that.
You are right again,
Indeed your words are true.

As for my life,
I am always like Venice:
Whatever is mere streets in others
Within me is a dark streaming love.

As for the cry, as for the silence,
I am always a shofar:
All year long hoarding its one blast
For the Terrible Days.

As for action,
I am always like Cain:
Nomad
In the face of the act, which I will not do,
Or, having done,
Will make it irredeemable.

As for the palm of your hand,
As for the signals of my heart
And the plans of my flesh,
As for the writing on the wall,

I am always ignorant;
I can neither read nor write
And my head is like the
Heads of those senseless weeds,
Knowing only the rustle and drift
Of the wind
When a fate passes through me
To some other place.

..2
,

I know that she knows.
They think she doesn't, but know otherwise.
She knows.

My heart tears with this game
And in the night its blood hears the cry
Like the cry of paper tearing
Across the forty-two years of my life.

Under a broad vine,
In the yard of a house
In the Valley of Hinnom,
An old woman once told me :
“Because he was burned inside,
His head turned white as snow.”
I forget what she was talking about
Or whom—
My life is forty-two years of torn paper.

She showed me her swaying hair
In the four winds of her coming.
I showed her some of my folding ways of life
And the trick, and the lock.
She asked after my street and my house
And I laughed loudly.
She showed me this long night
And the interior of her thirty years.
I showed her the place where I once laid tefillin.

I brought her chapters and verses
And sand from Eilat
And the handing of the Torah
And the manna of my death
And all the miracles that have not yet healed in me.

She showed me the stages of joy
And my childhood's double.
I revealed to her that King David is not buried in his tomb
And that I don't live in my life.
While I was reflecting and she was eating,
The city map lay open on the table—
Her hand on Qatamon,
My hand on hers—
The cup covered the Old City,
Ash dropped on the King David Hotel,
And an ancient weeping
Allowed us to lie together.

God's fate

Is now

The fate of trees rocks sun and moon,

The ones they stopped worshipping

When they began to believe in God.

But he's forced to remain with us

As are the trees, as are the rocks

Sun moon and stars.

MY MOTHER ONCE TOLD ME

My mother once told me
Not to sleep with flowers in the room.
Since then I have not slept with flowers.
I sleep alone, without them.

There were many flowers.
But I've never had enough time.
And persons I love are already pushing themselves
Away from my life, like boats
Away from the shore.

My mother said
Not to sleep with flowers.
You won't sleep.
You won't sleep, mother of my childhood.

The bannister I clung to
When they dragged me off to school
Is long since burned.
But my hands, clinging,
Remain
Clinging.

MY PARENTS' MIGRATION

And my parents' migration has not yet calmed in me.
My blood goes on shaking at its walls,
As the bowl after it is set down.

And my parents' migration has not yet calmed in me.
Winds continually over stones.

Earth forgets the footsteps of those who walk.

An awful fate. Stumps of talk after midnight.

An achievement, a retreat. Night reminds

And day forgets.

My eyes, which have looked a long time into a vast desert,

Are a little calmed. One woman. The rules of a game

Nobody had ever completely explained. The laws of pain and
weight.

Even now my heart

Makes only a bare living

With its daily love.

My parents in their migration.

On the crossroads where I am forever orphaned,

Too young to die, too old to play.

The weariness of the miner

The emptiness of the quarry

In one body.

Archaeology of the future,

Museums of what is still to happen.

And my parents' migration has not yet calmed in me.

And from bitter peoples I learned bitter languages

For my silence among the houses

Which are always
Like ships.

Already my veins, my tendons
Are a tangle of ropes I will never undo.
Finally, my own death
And an end to my parents' migration.

TO SUMMON WITNESSES

When did I last weep?

The time has come to summon witnesses.

Of those who last saw me weep

Some are dead.

I wash my eyes with a lot of water

So as to see the world once more

Through the wet and the hurt.

I must find witnesses.

Lately, I have felt for the first time

Needle stabs in my heart.

I am not frightened,

I am almost proud, like a boy

Who discovers the first hairs in his armpits

And between his legs.

THE END OF ELUL*

I'm tired of summer.

The smoke rising from the convent of the silent nuns
Is all I have to say.

This year winter will come late
When we're ready for its coming,
And we won't be.

I'm tired. And curse the three Great Religions,
Which won't let me sleep at night
What with bells and howls of muezzins and loud shofars and
noisy atonements.

Oh, God, close your houses, let the world rest.

Why hast thou *not* forsaken me?

This year the year hesitates.

The summer drags on.

If it weren't for the tears that I have kept back all these years,
I'd have dried up like thorns.

Great battles are conducted within me in dreadful quiet,
With only the sighs of thousands of sweating, naked wrestlers.
There is no iron, and no stone, only flesh, like snakes;
And afterwards, they'll fall away one from the other with surfeit
and weakness,

And there will be clouds, and there will be rain
When we're ready for it, and we won't be.

* *Elul* is the last month of summer.

QUICK AND BITTER

The end was quick and bitter.
Slow and sweet was the time between us,
Slow and sweet were the nights
When my hands did not touch one another in despair
But with the love of your body
Which came between them.

And when I entered into you
It seemed then that great happiness
Could be measured with the precision
Of sharp pain. Quick and bitter.

Slow and sweet were the nights.
Now is as bitter and grinding as sand—
“We shall be sensible” and similar curses.

And as we stray further from love
We multiply the words,
Words and sentences long and orderly.
Had we remained together
We could have become a silence.

My uncle is buried at Sheik Bad'r.
The other one is scattered in the Carpathian mountains.

My father is buried at Sanhedria,
My grandmother on the Mount of Olives.
And all their forefathers
Are buried in the ruined Jewish cemeteries in the villages of
 Lower Franconia,
Near rivers and forests which are not Jerusalem.

My father's father kept heavy-eyed
Jewish cows in their sheds below the kitchen—

And rose at four in the morning.
I inherited his early rising,
My mouth bitter with nightmares
I attend to my bad dreams.

Grandfather, Grandfather,
Chief Rabbi of my life,
As you sold unleavened bread on the Passover Eve,
Sell my pains—
So they stay in me, even ache—but not mine,
Not my property.

So many tombstones are scattered behind me—
Names, engraved like the names of long-abandoned railway
 stations.

How shall I cover all these distances,
How can I keep them connected?
I can't afford such an intricate network.
It's a luxury.

TWO SONGS OF PEACE

I

My son smells of peace when I lean over him.

It isn't just the soap.

Everybody was once the child with the smell of peace.

(And in the whole country there isn't a single windmill which
turns.)

O torn country, like torn clothes

Which can't be mended,

And hard, lonely forefathers in Hebron's grave

In childless silence.

My son smells of peace.

His mother's womb

Promised him that

Which God can't promise us.

II

My love was not in the war.
She learns love and history
Off my body, which was in two, or three.
And at night.
When my body makes battles into peace
She is bewildered.
Her perplexity is her love. And her learning.
Her wars and her peace, her dream.

And I am now in the middle of my life.
The time when one begins to collect
Facts, and many details,
And exact maps
Of a country we shall never occupy
And of an enemy and lover
Whose borders we shall never cross.

When I last saw my child
He ate only porridge.
Now he's sad.

He eats bread and meat with a fork and knife
And with manners, which already prepare him
to die politely, and quietly.

He thinks that I'm a sailor,
But knows I have no ship.
And that we have no sea.
Only vast distances, and winds.

My father's movements in prayer
And my own in love
Lie already folded in his small body.

To be grown-up is
To bake the bread of longing,
To sit the whole night long
With a reddening face
Opposite the open oven.

My child sees everything.

And that magic spell "See you,"
which he's learned to say,
Is only valid among the dead.

SONG OF RESIGNATION

1

I resign!

My son has my father's eyes,

My mother's hands,

And my own mouth.

There is no further need of me. Many thanks.

The refrigerator is beginning to hum towards a long journey.

An unknown dog sobs over the loss of a stranger.

2

I resign!

I paid my dues to so many funds.

I am fully insured.

Let the world care for me now;

I am knotted and tied with it and all of them.

Every change in my life will cost them cash.

Every movement of mine will hurt them,

My death will dispossess them.

My voice passes with clouds

My hand, stretched out, has turned into paper. Yet another contract.

I see the world through the yellow roses

Someone has forgotten

On the table near my window.

Bankruptcy!

I declare the whole world to be a womb.

And as of this moment

I appoint myself,

Order myself

At its mercy.

Let it adopt me. Let it care for me.

I declare the President of the United States to be my father,

The Chairman of the Soviet Union to have my power of attorney,

The British Cabinet to be my family,

And Mao Tse-tung to be my grandmother.

I resign!

I declare the heavens to be God:

They all together go ahead and do those things

That I never believed they would.

1

Like an old windmill,
Two hands always raised
To howl at the sky
And two lowered
To make sandwiches.

Her eyes are clean and glitter
Like the Passover eve.

2

At night she will put
All the letters
And the photographs
Side by side.

So she can measure
The length of God's finger.

3

I want to walk in the deep
Wadis between her sobs,
I want to stand in the terrible heat
Of her silence.

I want to lean on the
Rough trunks
Of her pain.

4

She laid me
As Hagar laid Ishmael
Under one of the bushes.

So that she won't have to be at my death
In the war,
Under one of the bushes
In one of the wars.

It's sad

To be the Mayor of Jerusalem.

It is terrible.

How can any man be the mayor of a city like that?

What can he do with her?

He will build, and build, and build.

And at night

The stones of the hills round about

Will crawl down

Towards the stone houses,

Like wolves coming

To howl at the dogs

Who have become men's slaves.

MY FATHER FOUGHT THEIR WAR FOR FOUR YEARS

My father fought their war for four years
And he didn't hate his enemies or love them.
But I know that even there
He formed me daily out of his little calms,
So rare; he gathered them out of the bombs
And the smoke,
And he put them in his frayed knapsack
With the last bits of his mother's hardening cake.

And with his eyes he gathered nameless dead;
He gathered many dead on my behalf,
So that I will know them in his look and love them.

And not die, like them, in horror . . .

And he filled his eyes with them in vain:

I go out to all my wars.

THE UNITED NATIONS' COMMAND IN JERUSALEM

The mediators, the peace makers, the compromisers, the pacifiers
Live in the white house

And receive their nourishment from far away,
Through twisting channels, through dark veins, like a foetus.

And their secretaries are lipsticked and laughing,
And their immune chauffeurs wait below, like horses in a stable,
And the trees whose shadow shades them have their roots in dis-
puted territory,

And the delusions are children who go out into the fields to find
cyclamen

And do not come back.

And the thoughts circle above, uneasily, like scout planes,
And they take photographs, and return, and develop the film
In dark, sad rooms.

And I know that they have very heavy chandeliers,
And the boy that I was sits on them and swings
In and out, in and out, and out, and does not come back.

Later on, the night will bring
Rusty and crooked conclusions out of our ancient lives,
And above all the houses the music
Will gather all the scattered things,
Like a hand gathering crumbs off the table
After the meal while the talk continues
And the children are already asleep.

And hopes come to me like daring sailors,
Like discoverers of continents
To an island,
And they rest for a day or two,
And then they sail away.

YOU ALSO WERE SO TIRED

You also were so tired of being an advertisement for
The world, for the angels to admire. It's lovely here.
Take a rest from smiling. And without complaint,
Let the sea wind pleat your mouth.

You won't mind, like flying paper
Your eyes also fly; fruit also dropped off the sycamore.
How does one say "to love" in the language of water?
What are we in the language of earth?

Here is the road and the going on it, what does it mean?
Whatsoever hill, the Last Wind. Which prophet . . . ?
And at night, out of my sleep you speak.
And how shall I answer, and what shall I bring?

TWO BEDOUIN SONGS

I

HE LIVES IN A HOUSE IN THE CITY

Buttons fall away, one by one,
Not in battles, not in rape—
From time to time they jump off in little explosions.
A dry sob of trousers and shirts.

Across the wall a yellow woman
Teaches children to play the guitar and a harmonica.
I provide her
With the dry air, the air longing for harmonicas.

Against my will
The barber cuts off a black straggling hair growing in my nose,
Extinguishing the rage,
Castrating the fury
In my nose.

And in the nights
Moonlight pierces through the crack in the letter box,
Lights it,
White
Like a letter.

II
HE LOVES

No house would have us.

I stretched myself above you, like a tent,
I spread myself beneath you,
A straw mattress.

Your red dress opened up heavenwards,
Like a goblet—
You sat on me upright
To keep your thighs off the hard ground.

“Madman,” you said in your strange language.

His dog died in his chains.
His friends remote—
His son dreams the saying of Kaddish.

INDIAN SUMMER IN PRINCETON

Indian summer is a Jewish summer.
Your eyes are so heavy they almost fall out—
Held back, they are, by the sadness of your face.
They do not fall out because of dryness,
And the forgetting of the fruit,
But because of the weight of the remembering.
The ground beneath us moves further away—
This falling away will go on,
And go on.

It was Sunday, their Sabbath,
Time to sit down and ask ourselves
Whom we really love.
In the house lives someone whose name is not the same as the
name on the gate—
A woman told me that she does not love her life
And which of the trees are sick, just as people are sick.
But in my dreams I look at bright, blinding Jerusalem—
And that's why Jerusalem's black now,
Like an underexposed photograph.

THE HEART IS A CORRUPT DIRECTOR

The last days of summer
Are the last days of two, together.

The heart is a corrupt director.

Departing departs from departing.
And in the nights it is written :
Despair which despaired of us
Became hope.

I think that even Newton discovered
Whatever he discovered
In the lull between
One pain and another.

What bearing could this have
On the headiness of our lives?
What bearing on the soft talk
Which surrounds them?
What manner of things have to fall
From which tree, for us to learn?

It is terrible to battle against love
With sleeping pills. What have we come to!

NATIONAL THOUGHTS

You: trapped in the homeland of the Chosen People.

On your head a cossack's fur hat,

Child of their pogroms.

"After these words." Always.

Or, for instance, your face: slanting eyes,

Pogrom Year eyes. Your cheekbones, high,

Hetman's cheekbones, Hetman the rabble king.

Hassid dancing, dutiful, you, naked on a rock in the early evening
by the canopies of water at Ein Geddi

With eyes closed and your body open like hair.

After these words, "Always."

Every day I know the miracle of

Jesus walking upon the waters,

I walk through my life without drowning.

To speak, now, in this tired language

Torn from its sleep in the Bible—

Blinded, it lurches from mouth to mouth—

The language which described God and the Miracles,

Says:

Motor car, bomb, God.

The squared letters wanted to stay closed,

Every letter a locked house,

To stay and to sleep in it forever.

IF I FORGET THEE, JERUSALEM

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Then let my right be forgotten.
Let my right be forgotten, and my left remember.
Let my left remember, and your right close
And your mouth open near the gate.

I shall remember Jerusalem
And forget the forest—my love will remember,
Will open her hair, will close my window,
Will forget my right,
Will forget my left.

If the west wind does not come
I'll never forgive the walls,
Or the sea, or myself.
Should my right forget,
My left shall forgive,
I shall forget all water,
I shall forget my mother.

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Let my blood be forgotten.
I shall touch your forehead,
Forget my own,
My voice change
For the second and last time
To the most terrible of voices—
Or silence.

RAIN ON A BATTLEFIELD

It rains on my friends' faces,
On my live friends' faces,
Those who cover their heads with a blanket.
And it rains on my dead friends' faces,
Those who are covered by nothing.

THE FIRST BATTLES

The first battles raised

Terrible love flowers

With near-killing kisses

Like shells.

The boy soldiers

Are driven in our city's handsome buses:

Number 12, number 8, and number 5 go to the front.

HIGH-HEELED SHOES

The earth answered several times :

Come in!

When you crossed the road in your tapping

High-heeled shoes,

It said, Come in!

But you couldn't hear.

Taxis below
And angels above
Are impatient.
At one and the same time
They call me
With a terrible voice.

I'm coming, I am
Coming,
I'm coming down,
I'm coming up!

IT'S A LONG TIME SINCE ANYBODY'S ASKED

It's a long time since anybody's asked
Who lived in these houses, and who last spoke; who
Forgot his overcoat in these houses,
And who stayed. (Why didn't he run away?)

A dead tree stands among the blossoming trees. A dead tree.
It's an old mistake, never understood,
And at the edge of the country; the beginning
Of somebody else's time. A little silence.
And the ravings of the body and hell.
And the end of the end which moves in whispers.
The wind passed through this place
And a serious dog watched humans laugh.

About the Author

YEHUDA AMICHAI was born in Würzburg, Germany, in 1924, and emigrated to Israel with his parents in 1936. He served in the British Army in World War II, and afterward in the Palmach (commando troops) of the Haganah underground. He saw active service on the Negev front in the Israeli War of Independence and later in the Sinai campaign. He has published several collections of short stories and poetry in Israel, and has had his plays produced there. His first novel, *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*, was published in 1968 by Harper & Row. In America his poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Mademoiselle*.

