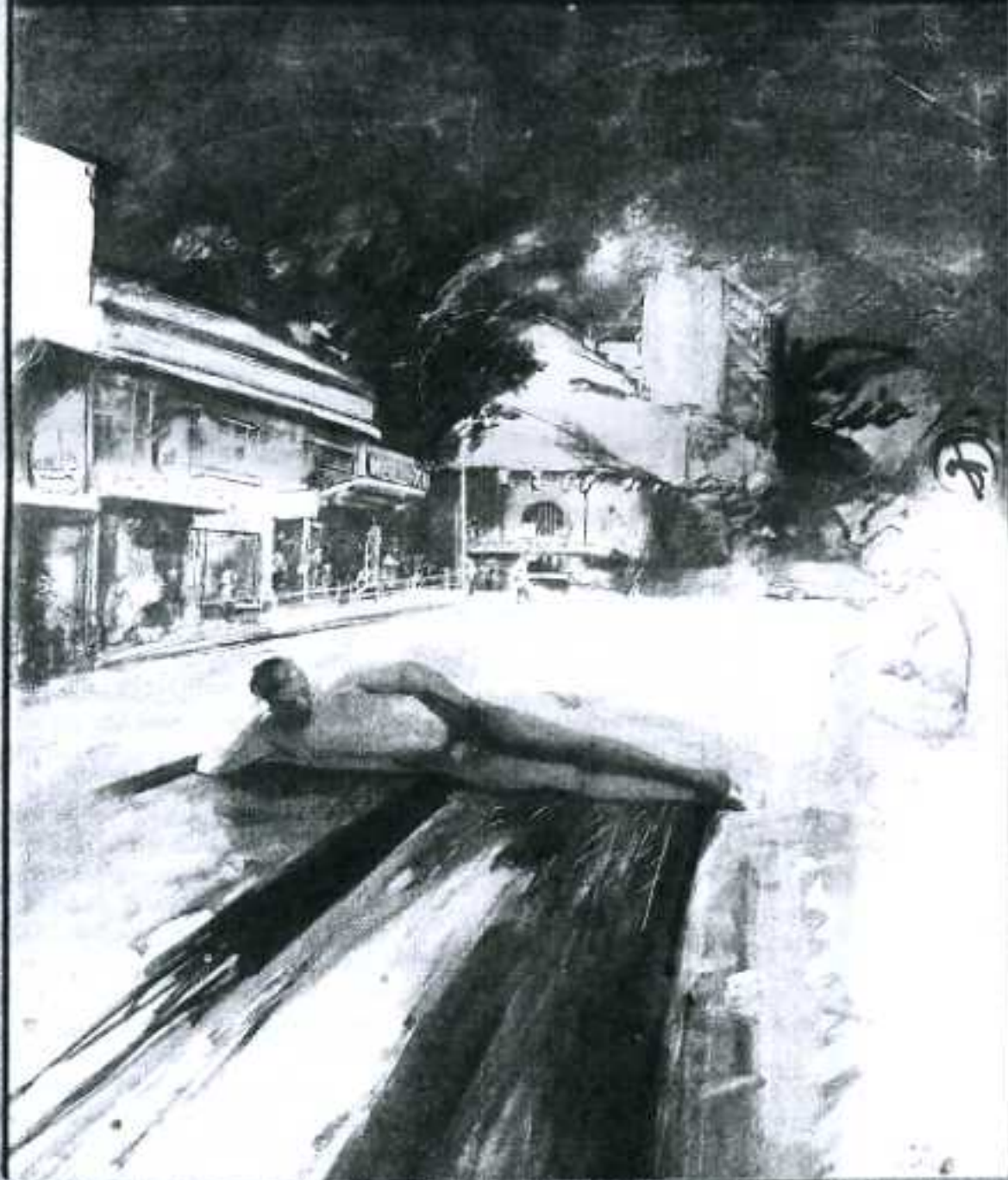


NEWLY REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

TRANSLATED BY CHANA BLOCH AND STEPHEN MITCHELL

THE SELECTED POETRY OF

YEHUDA AMICHAI



continued to listen. It seemed as if someone was calling.  
We extended the outer ear with the palm of a hand,  
we extended the area of the heart with a further love  
in order to hear more clearly, in order to forget.

But the child died in the night  
clean and well groomed. Neat and licked by the tongues  
of God and night. "When we got here, it was still daylight.  
Now darkness has come." Clean and white like a sheet of  
paper in an envelope closed and chanted upon  
in the psalm-books of the lands of the dead. A few went on searching,  
or perhaps they searched for a pain that would fit their tears,  
for a joy that would fit their laughter, though nothing can fit  
anything else. Even hands are from a different body.  
But it seemed to us that something had fallen. We heard  
a ringing, like a coin that fell. We stood for a moment.  
We turned around. We bent down. We didn't find  
anything, and we went on walking. Each to his own.

Jerusalem, 1967

*To my friends Dennis, Arieh, and Harold*

I  
This year I traveled a long way  
to view the silence of my city.  
A baby calms down when you rock it, a city calms down  
from the distance. I dwelled in longing. I played the hopscotch  
of the four strict squares of Yehuda Ha-Levi:  
*My heart. Myself. East. West.*

I heard bells ringing in the religions of time,  
but the wailing that I heard inside me  
has always been from my Yehudean desert.

Now that I've come back, I'm screaming again.  
And at night, stars rise like the bubbles of the drowned,  
and every morning I scream the scream of a newborn baby  
at the tumult of houses and at all this huge light.

2

I've come back to this city where names  
are given to distances as if to human beings  
and the numbers are not of bus routes  
but: 70 After, 1917, 500  
i.e., Forty-eight. These are the lines  
you really travel on.

And already the demons of the past are meeting  
with the demons of the future and negotiating about me  
above me, their give-and-take neither giving nor taking,  
in the high arches of shell-orbits above my head.

A man who comes back to Jerusalem is aware that the places  
that used to hurt don't hurt anymore.  
But a light warning remains in everything,  
like the movement of a light veil: warning.

3

Illuminated is the Tower of David, illuminated is the Church of Maria,  
illuminated the patriarchs sleeping in their burial cave, illuminated  
are the faces from inside, illuminated the translucent  
honey cakes, illuminated the clock and illuminated the time  
passing through your thighs as you take off your dress.

Illuminated illuminated. Illuminated are the cheeks of my childhood,  
illuminated the stones that wanted to be illuminated  
along with these that wanted to sleep in the darkness of squares.

Illuminated are the spiders of the banister and the cobwebs of churches  
and the acrobats of the stairs. But more than all these, and in them all,  
illuminated is the terrible, true X-ray writing  
in letters of bones, in white and lightning: *MENE*  
*MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN.*

4

In vain you will look for the fences of barbed wire.  
You know that such things  
don't disappear. A different city perhaps  
is now being cut in two; two lovers  
separated; a different flesh is tormenting itself now  
with these thorns, refusing to be stone.

In vain you will look. You lift up your eyes unto the hills,  
perhaps there? Not these hills, accidents of geology,  
but The Hills. You ask  
questions without a rise in your voice, without a question mark,  
only because you're supposed to ask them; and they  
don't exist. But a great weariness wants you with all your might  
and gets you. Like death.

Jerusalem, the only city in the world  
where the right to vote is granted even to the dead.

5

On Yom Kippur in 1967, the Year of Forgetting, I put on  
my dark holiday clothes and walked to the Old City of Jerusalem.  
For a long time I stood in front of an Arab's hole-in-the-wall shop,  
not far from the Damascus Gate, a shop with  
buttons and zippers and spools of thread  
in every color and snaps and buckles.  
A rare light and many colors, like an open Ark.

I told him in my heart that my father too  
had a shop like this, with thread and buttons.  
I explained to him in my heart about all the decades  
and the causes and the events, why I am now here  
and my father's shop was burned there and he is buried here.

When I finished, it was time for the Closing of the Gates prayer.  
He too lowered the shutters and locked the gate  
and I returned, with all the worshipers, home.

6

It's not time that keeps me far away from my childhood,  
it's this city and everything in it. Now  
I've got to learn Arabic too, to reach all the way to Jericho  
from both ends of time; and the length of walls has been added  
and the height of towers and the domes of prayer houses  
whose area is immeasurable. All these  
really broaden my life and force me  
always to emigrate once more from the smell  
of river and forest.

My life is stretched out this way; it grows very thin  
like cloth, transparent. You can see right through me.

7

In this summer of wide-open-eyed hatred  
and blind love, I'm beginning to believe again  
in all the little things that will fill  
the holes left by the shells: soil, a bit of grass,  
perhaps, after the rains, small insects of every kind.  
I think of children growing up half in the ethics of their fathers  
and half in the science of war.  
The tears now penetrate into my eyes from the outside  
and my ears invent, every day, the footsteps of  
the messenger of good tidings.

8

The city plays hide-and-seek among her names:  
Yerushalayim, Al-Quds, Salem, Jeru, Yeru, all the while  
whispering her first, Jebusite name: Y'vus,  
Y'vus, Y'vus, in the dark. She weeps  
with longing: Ælia Capitolina, Ælia, Ælia.  
She comes to any man who calls her  
at night, alone. But we know  
who comes to whom.

9

On an open door a sign hangs: Closed.  
How do you explain it? Now  
the chain is free at both ends: there is no  
prisoner and no warden, no dog and no master.  
The chain will gradually turn into wings.  
How do you explain it?  
Ah well, you'll explain it.

10

Jerusalem is short and crouched among its hills,  
unlike New York, for example.  
Two thousand years ago she crouched  
in the marvelous starting-line position.  
All the other cities ran ahead, did long  
laps in the arena of time, they won or lost,  
and died. Jerusalem remained in the starting-crouch.

all the victories are clenched inside her,  
hidden inside her. All the defeats.  
Her strength grows and her breathing is calm  
for a race even beyond the arena.

11

Loneliness is always in the middle,  
protected and fortified. People were supposed  
to feel secure in that, and they don't.  
When they go out, after a long time,  
caves are formed for the new solitaries.  
What do you know about Jerusalem.  
You don't need to understand languages;  
they pass through everything as if through the ruins of houses.  
People are a wall of moving stones.  
But even in the Wailing Wall  
I haven't seen stones as sad as these.  
The letters of my pain are illuminated  
like the name of the hotel across the street.  
What awaits me and what doesn't await me.

12

Jerusalem stone is the only stone that can  
feel pain. It has a network of nerves.  
From time to time Jerusalem crowds into  
man protests like the tower of Babel.  
But with huge clubs God-the-Police beats her  
down: houses are razed, walls flattened,  
and afterward the city disperses, muttering  
prayers of complaint and sporadic screams from churches  
and synagogues and loud-moaning mosques.  
Each to his own place.

13

Always beside ruined houses and iron girders  
twisted like the arms of the slain, you find  
someone who is sweeping the paved path  
or tending the little garden, sensitive  
paths, square Bower-beds.  
Large desires for a horrible death are well cared-for  
as in the monastery of the White Brothers next to the Lions' Gate.  
But farther on, in the courtyard, the earth gapes:

columns and arches supporting vain land  
and negotiating with one another: crusaders and guardian angels,  
a sultan and Rabbi Yehuda the Pious. Arched vaults with a  
column, ransom for prisoners, and strange conditions in rolled-up  
contracts, and sealing-stones. Curved hooks holding  
air.

Capitals and broken pieces of columns scattered like chessmen  
in a game that was interrupted in anger,  
and Herod, who already, two thousand years ago, wailed  
like mortar shells. He knew.

14

If clouds are a ceiling, I would like to  
sit in the room beneath them: a dead kingdom rises  
up from me, up, like steam from hot food.  
A door squeaks: an opening cloud.  
In the distances of valleys someone rapped iron against stone  
but the echo erects large, different things in the air.

Above the houses—houses with houses above them. This is  
all of history.

This learning in schools without roof  
and without walls and without chairs and without teachers.  
This learning in the absolute outside,  
a learning short as a single heartbeat. All of it.

15

I and Jerusalem are like a blind man and a cripple.  
She sees for me  
out to the Dead Sea, to the End of Days.  
And I hoist her up on my shoulders  
and walk blind in my darkness underneath.

16

On this bright autumn day  
I establish Jerusalem once again.  
The foundation scrolls  
are flying in the air, birds, thoughts.

God is angry with me  
because I always force him  
to create the world once again

from chaos, light, second day, until  
man, and back to the beginning.

17

In the morning the shadow of the Old City falls  
on the New. In the afternoon—vice versa.  
Nobody profits. The muezzin's prayer  
is wasted on the new houses. The ringing  
bells roll like balls and bounce back.  
The shout of *Holy, Holy, Holy* from the synagogues will fade  
like gray smoke.

At the end of summer I breathe this air  
that is burnt and pained. My thoughts have  
the stillness of many closed books:  
many crowded books, with most of their pages  
stuck together like eyelids in the morning.

18

I climb up the Tower of David  
a little higher than the prayer that ascends the highest:  
halfway to heaven. A few of  
the ancients succeeded: Mohammed, Jesus,  
and others. Though they didn't find rest in heaven,  
they just entered a higher excitement. But  
the applause for them hasn't stopped ever since,  
down below.

19

Jerusalem is built on the vaulted foundations  
of a held-back scream. If there were no reason  
for the scream, the foundations would crumble, the city would collapse;  
if the scream were screamed, Jerusalem would explode into the heavens.

20

Poets come in the evening into the Old City  
and they emerge from it pockets stuffed with images  
and metaphors and little well-constructed parables  
and crepuscular similes from among columns and crypts,  
from within darkening fruit  
and delicate filigree of hammered hearts.



I lifted my hand to my forehead  
to wipe off the sweat  
and found I had accidentally raised up  
the ghost of Else Lasker-Schüler.  
Light and tiny as she was  
in her life, all the more so in her death. Ah, but  
her poems.

21

Jerusalem is a port city on the shore of eternity.  
The Temple Mount is a huge ship, a magnificent  
luxury liner. From the portholes of her Western Wall  
cheerful saints look out, travelers. Hasidim on the pier  
wave goodbye, shout hooray, hooray, bon voyage! She is  
always arriving, always sailing away. And the fences and the piers  
and the policemen and the flags and the high masts of churches  
and mosques and the smokestacks of synagogues and the boats  
of palms of praise and the mountain-waves. The shofar blows: another one  
has just left. Yom Kippur sailors in white uniforms  
climb among ladders and ropes of well-tested prayers.

And the commerce and the gates and the golden domes:  
Jerusalem is the Venice of God.

22

Jerusalem is Sodom's sister-city,  
but the merciful salt didn't have mercy on her  
and didn't cover her with a silent whiteness.  
Jerusalem is an unconsenting Pompeii.  
History books that were thrown into the fire,  
their pages are strewn about, stiffening in red.

An eye whose color is too light, blind,  
always shattered in a sieve of veins.  
Many births gaping below,  
a womb with numberless teeth,  
a double-edged woman and the holy beasts.

The sun thought that Jerusalem was a sea  
and set in her, a terrible mistake.  
Sky fish were caught in a net of alleys,  
tearing one another to pieces.

Jerusalem. An operation that was left open.  
The surgeons went to take a nap in faraway skies,  
but her dead gradually  
formed a circle, all around her,  
like quiet petals.  
My God.  
My stamen.  
Amen.

### The Bull Returns

The bull returns from his day of work in the ring  
after a cup of coffee with his opponents,  
having left them a note with his address and  
the exact location of the red scarf.  
The sword remains in his stiff-necked neck  
And when he's usually at home. Now  
he sits on his bed, with his heavy  
Jewish eyes. He knows  
that the sword too is hurt when it pierces flesh.  
In his next incarnation he'll be a sword: the hurt will remain.  
("The door is open. If not, the key is under  
the mat.")  
He knows about the mercy of twilight and about the final  
mercy. In the Bible, he's listed with the clean animals.  
He's very kosher: chews his cud,  
and even his heart is divided and cloven like a hoof.  
From his chest, hairs burst forth  
dry and gray, as though from a split mattress.

### A Luxury

My uncle is buried at Sheikh Badr, my other uncle  
is scattered in the Carpathians, my father is buried in Sanhedria,  
my grandmother on the Mount of Olives, and all their forefathers  
are buried in a half-destroyed Jewish graveyard