

A midrash on The House of Dolls  
= Christian saint; turn the other cheek

LIT 5173 / ROSKIES

12

## A Hat of Glass

by NAVA SEMEL

Specker = survivor

THIS IS NOT the whole truth. Just bits and pieces of it sloughed off over the passing years. As I gather them up, they seem at times like crumbs from bread that's turned mouldy. Whenever I've tried to see the whole of it with my own eyes, it's been like walking backwards. I take care not to bump into the wall behind me. It's an ache I've known before.

Clarissa, I called after her in the street.

I think about her sometimes. Never actually forget her.

I started running after her, but stopped. She'd become no more than a speck of grey that kept getting smaller and smaller. Something turned inside me, then turned again and again, until it reached all the way back to the way things were at the beginning.

It was three months before the end of the war, but we didn't know it yet. I had no recollection of my face; hardly remembered my age either. I had no way of knowing that the man I'd married three years earlier and had lived with in Western Hungary had been consumed in a cloud of smoke.

Nor could I conjure up the dead foetus I'd been carrying inside me for two whole months – the soundless, motionless load that left no trace save a hidden line curving its way across my stomach. The body was one I hadn't seen in all those years since the war began. Even the menstrual blood, dependable as the seasons, the blood that might have assured me that at a time like this the sun was still revolving on its axis and that the universe was following its usual course; it too was taken away from me.

Janine, the French girl, said they were adding some sort of potion to the watered down liquid they used to shove at us

New Women's Writing from Israel

shattered. A few loaves of bread tossed inside just a moment before the train pulled away represented the innermost wish of someone hoping to buy us a little more time. Between the slats in the sides you could catch a glimpse of the earth moving. Were we going around in circles, only to wind up back where we'd started? The passing of time was marked by the jerking of our bodies packed together like worms, coupled with the relentless churning of the wheels as they thrust us forward along the overworked tracks.

Many hours later the train stopped. Its doors opened suddenly, but instead of daylight we saw the dusk of evening. A rush of cool November air clashed with the stench. That was when it hit me full force (as palpably as when a cripple fingers his deformity, only to be overcome by excruciating shame) We stood there in the big station, and the darkness cringed before the blade of light along the tracks. Trembling we stood, exhausted from the trip, our rags clinging to our bodies, enveloped in stench. I had no idea what phantom world they'd brought us to and where they'd be hustling us to next. The end was near, but we didn't know it. A man stepped out of the darkness and started in our direction. He was tall and his white locks glistened as they fell neatly over his forehead and temples. He was wearing a Wehrmacht uniform without the SS skull and crossbones. Five hundred pairs of eyes looked at him in mute terror. I heard a sigh, but it may have been a delusion. His face was clearly visible in the light of the emerging moon. Incredulous at first, he soon turned his head away in disgust. Later I saw the sorrow too; he could not wipe it away.

'Women,' he muttered and his face cut through our tightness. 'You've arrived at a labour camp. You are in Germany and this is Zittau.'

There was a wrenching moan of anguish. He came a step closer and the front row of women moved back, pushing the ones behind. He held out his arm.

'You women have nothing to be afraid of. Nobody is going to harm you here. This is a labour camp.'

We'd heard about those by now. We'd already been in another camp. I couldn't believe it. The old man in his elegant uniform

A Hat of Glass

announcing: 'Soup.' Except that for me, to know that the bleeding had stopped was undeniable proof that time had frozen, and that something was guarding the straits, lest even the slightest rush of hot dust push its way through and dissipate the heavy slumber. Those who had been consumed through the chimneys were the only ones to rise away, to beg for mercy.

In the long line that shuffled through each morning, only one thought kept flickering in my mind. I longed to spot those bombers in the sky zeroing in on the cursed spot and wiping it away, like someone who wipes a spot of blood after being struck across the mouth, then wipes it away again, until the only traces are the small drops on her hand, not a sign of it remaining on the mouth. But the wound kept oozing, and there was nobody to rise up and put a curse on the place; to make certain that nothing ever grew there again.

FUTURE

When my son went to see it, only one generation later, he returned heavy-hearted and told me: 'Mother, the ground is covered over with grass.'

I asked myself, what kind of a short memory the Creator must have, to be so good to that soil and not to have damned it. Planting a seed in it, no less, never felling its grass. He may go so far as to add some flowers just to please it. He did not even bide His time until those of us who curse it would no longer be here to watch.

It was my last Selektion. Who knows, perhaps the face unwittingly etched on me by my father and mother was what had kept me alive. Even now, when I study the rounded lines that frame my children's faces, I wonder whether that was what made me seem healthy enough, still fit.

Five hundred of us were chosen and taken to the sealed railway car. The doors were bolted and just beyond them we could hear the horror-stricken voices of those not chosen.

'Don't go near the door,' the Kapo said. 'They're finishing off the ones left behind.'

Then they hitched the sealed car to the back of the train. For four days we travelled, us chosen girls, our bodies deep in excrement and degradation. The stench was polluting the planet like the detritus of giants, bound to fall like ripe fruit and be utterly

metaphysical

A Hat of Glass

did not conceal the surge of compassion that swept him at the sight of the tortured creatures before him. He took another step and touched one of the women standing near him, then fingered the frayed edge of her dress.

'It's a disgrace,' he said. 'It's a disgrace to look this way. Das ist eine grosse Schande.' He brought his palms together. 'Women,' he said again, 'I was an officer in the First World War. You were brought into the Reich in order to work in the factories here.' With a flourish, he motioned towards the large barracks whose silhouettes stood out against the darkness.

'So long as I am here and you apply yourselves to your work, nobody will harm you. I give you my word – the word of an officer who fought in the First World War.'

Then he turned on his heel and hurried off, disappearing in the darkness.

'It's a disgrace,' he had said.

We're nothing more than a criss-crossing shadow, a huddle of humanity with a flimsy breath of life still flickering inside us. The old officer was not with us long. Some SS women assigned to guard us let it be known that he was too soft, and that the surge of pity had been his downfall.

I don't know what they did with him. A solitary ray of light had touched the darkness, only to be extinguished. The selfsame darkness was free to reassert its haughty sway over a locked planet. We are still no more than prey, I told myself, still not members of the human race.

- 2 -

At four-thirty, with the morning still reluctant to unfold, we would rise. Treading gingerly, we made our way to the washroom at the end of the corridor. Shaven scalps bent over the basins. Every time I brought water to my mouth, it worked its way into the spaces where I once had the shiny, white teeth of a young girl. When they took me from my home, the Nazi struck me, and during those first few hours, fragments of teeth kept rolling about inside my mouth. I could neither spit them out nor swallow. All I drank was my blood, and its taste was peculiar.

At five, the kitchen workers would haul in a large pot, holding

it by both handles and dragging it along the floor. One at a time, we filled our dishes and sipped the murky liquid in short gulps. It had neither smell nor taste, and only the heat of it reached our bodies. We'd stand there, in rows of five, in the doorway, pressed up against each other, huddling tightly to keep warm. The prisoners' uniforms hung loosely on our bodies, and the stripes outlined our emaciated forms. Over our shrivelled breasts, there was a grey stripe with our badge, the yellow Star of David, on it, and a number. Even in the darkness it lost none of its shine. Two, nine, six, three, four.

'Who are you? Who are you? I don't know. I don't remember.'

I would recite my number over and over again, like a dybbuk slipping out of its bottle, then back in again.

We would stand there tensely, side by side, in frozen anticipation. At a quarter to six we heard the sound of footsteps - master of the woman. What an icy expression God has given him. Never a twitch. Nothing ever fluttered, or glinted. He would flash a look in our direction as though seeing the scum of the earth. Marching behind him was his bevy of women officers, his chorus, in their spotless uniforms and shining boots, taking count. Day after day, the same count. Next, one of them would tour the rooms, inspect the pallets and depart. Then he would move on. Sometimes he would crack his whip; he'd never use his open palm. The very touch might be infectious. The overseer's entourage included one golden-haired officer, Brunnhilde of the Black Forest, Utterly untarnished, without so much as a furrow near her eyes or cheeks. Only the slightest rosininess, as if to say - how healthy I am, Oh noble beauty.

The rows extended as far as the eye could see in either direction and the only sound was that of plodding footsteps. The women's arms drooped like two extra stripes, like flaccid worms.

In the large workshops, along the workbenches, were the airplane parts for us to polish with whetstones and wheels and assorted implements whose exact nature baffled me. Nor did I know just how to fit them together. And in my dreams I found myself holding a shiny metallic object and struggling to fit it back where it belonged, but it resisted. I tried to force it but it refused.

the parched sound that comes from unremitting hunger and a wilting mind.

'You fool,' she said to Janine. 'You know I wouldn't let her die. Just leave her here.' Bowing to Clarissa's authority, Janine loosened her stubborn grip.

'Now leave,' she ordered.

Clarissa knelt and took off my shoes. She lifted my spindly legs back onto the cot.

'I'll be back soon,' she whispered.

I didn't know where she went but she did come back and in the hollow of her palm were some tablets, gleaming. A kind I had never seen here. Perhaps she's out to poison me, to embed her evil in me, to scar me with her shame I thought. But I kept still. Like an obedient child, I opened my mouth and swallowed. Into another desert I sunk. There was the hint of a breeze brushing its precious sands, stirring up pillars of dust.

For three days she kept coming, putting the medication in my mouth and disappearing. On the fourth day, as Janine told me, Clarissa stood during the first roll-call at the end of the corridor and waited. Then, when the golden-haired officer arrived, Clarissa stopped her and whispered something in her ear. The officer approached her master and he took the roll-call, but not a single woman was missing.

I was not the only one that Clarissa took charge of at the moment of collapse. There were others like me. She brought medicine to the ailing, and solace to the dying. Wetting their foreheads with soothing compresses until the end.

For Sara Mendelssohn who came down with the sailors' disease, scurvy, she brought fruits and vegetables.

The only islands of potatoes we ever saw floating in the lake of soup appeared on those rare days when the factory owners came to see the prisoners. That was how we found out about the orders to give us more and better food to make us more productive. But the SS men would fish any morsels of vegetable and shreds of meat out of the soup leaving us nothing but the greasy water, without a trace of the nourishment it once contained.

When I tried to thank her, haltingly, she brushed me aside with

Until suddenly it dissolved and the molten steel slithered across my fingers and up my stripes, reaching the back of my neck, where it settled, trying to strangle me.

She hardly said anything. Only the bare essentials. Mingling among us and watching. A broad-framed woman, she wore a prisoner's uniform like the rest of us but she was different. Imprisonment hadn't clung to her.

Janine the Frenchwoman, whose pallet was next to mine, said:

'This Clarissa was a "Fronthüre".' = KA-TZERNIK

I tell my children that she was a whore sent to the front more than three years earlier as a diversion for the soldiers. Several others like her had already thrown themselves against the fence to sever the frenzied memories. Others had turned into wild dogs, directing their humiliation and disgrace at women as yet unafflicted.

But not Clarissa. The way I remember it, the torment never took hold of her.

Day followed day in confusion. There was no keeping track. One morning I awoke on my pallet, but it felt like smouldering stones. There I was in a vast desert, the furnace overhead sapping whatever precious fluids still flowed inside me. I implored it to take even more.

Janine dragged me off the cot. 'Get up,' she said, almost shouting. I didn't budge. The goodness of the desert was what I wanted. She prodded me, but I couldn't move my legs. They were drowning in the desert sands and I didn't have the will. Janine beat me with her fists.

'On your feet,' she said, 'or you'll be missed in the roll-call. You mustn't be sick!' she shouted. 'Mon Dieu, you just can't take that kind of risk.'

'Leave me alone,' I begged of her. Janine persisted and forced my feet towards her, tying my shoes on.

And above, out of the fiery skies, came a different voice. 'Leave her alone!' Janine pounced on her.

'Monster,' she yelled. 'She'll die if she doesn't get up!'

The vast desert drifted away. I opened my eyes, which felt like tiny flames. Like one from days gone by, Clarissa's voice lacked

a flick of her hand, and turned away, as though it was more than she could bear.

Late one night, the door came open quietly. Clarissa got up and walked towards it, treading very carefully, as though on sizzling embers. She made her way to the pale slit of light, and as the door opened wider, I could make out the shadow of the golden-haired officer. She was standing there blocking the light. As soon as Clarissa crossed the threshold, the officer turned on her heel, and Clarissa followed. The door closed silently, as though it had never moved. I fastened my head to the hardness of the pallet, and as I turned back, I found Janine's eyes, like a cat's slicing through me in the darkness. I turned away. The silence hung so heavy that I could almost hear the Frenchwoman's eyelids batting, and the sound of my own breathing rumbled in my ears.

Other times she would be gone all night. We knew well enough where she slept those nights. Nestling in the embrace of the woman officer, her gateway to the world. Sometimes, she would be allowed to hear a Chopin polonaise or a Wagner symphony, resting her back against crisp sheets. And the Brunnhilde would offer her soft clothes, wash her body in a tub, shampoo her hair. Clarissa would lie there with her legs curled up, and her mind closed within itself. At the morning parade, a telltale nerve would twitch in the officer's cheek as she passed by Clarissa.

Clarissa never said much during working hours. Only once, she started singing in a deep, low voice, like a husky gurgle. She fought back the strange sound but it kept pouring out of her, unchecked, spilling on to our workbenches.

Unable to continue joining the airplane parts with that terrible sound, we stopped. It was like a mute straining to use his voice, the tremor of his vocal cords causing his listeners to shudder.

One night I awoke and found that Clarissa had returned to her cot from the hidden room. But instead of stretching out, she was sitting there like a statue in whom life had frozen, staring out into the darkness.

I could not stop myself from going over to her.

'Clarissa.' I spoke softly, 'What does she do to you?' Suddenly her face contorted with a pain so intense that I recoiled. She

turned her head slowly, as though a key had been inserted in her back and said dryly:

'She doesn't do me any harm.' Then she touched my head. 'You're young,' she said.

'Why, I almost had a child, and my youth is gone.'

'You'll have other children.' She touched my forehead. 'I never will.'

- 3 -

Once a fate is sealed, wherever the body goes, that fate precedes it. People shy away as they would from someone with a dreaded disease, but the body has its own truth to tell. It follows its course, spinning and stumbling, without distinguishing. Once she was branded, the stigma could never be wiped away. Clearly, she would never be disengaged. If we ever got out we would be free to love again. The bruises and emaciation, the disease and the wounds had gnawed away at the racked bodies, but though they were torn, they would be given another chance. Like a forest that goes on burning after a fire. The soft murmur of the sea at high tide and the waves of the moon would bring other loves and children into those wombs. Under the dome of this horror, we would love. There we would give birth and raise our children. Not on bread but on water. Not on the body but on the scarred soul. This scarred soul of mine opened up to her, longing for her support. But she had already been branded. For the rest of her life she would wander through the Land of Nod. With no brave hunter to go with her. Nothing but her seared spirit.

Softly I asked, since she was the one who knew. 'Will we ever get out of here?' She said: 'They're getting closer. It won't be long before the echoes of the explosions reach us.'

She bent over me and shared her secret. 'I'll be going to Palestine. I have an uncle there, my mother's brother. We used to make fun of him. We said he was crazy going to such a godforsaken place. But here I am now, without any God. I'll join him. He's an important man by now in Palestine.' She uttered the word gently, splitting the name of the country, syllable by euphonious syllable, before her voice dropped to where it became eerie and remote, and terrible.

unfolded it, revealing the shiny redness of forest berries. She opened her mouth and flicked in one berry, then another. The juice oozed down her chin like a festering wound. The meisters, the German mechanics appointed to guard over us during working hours, stopped what they were doing and watched. We all huddled around her as she began stuffing our hands and our mouths with ripe red berries. My mother's jars are filling with red jam, and she lined them up, one by one, on the pantry shelves for all the seasons to come until the following summer.

'Where did you get them?' one woman asked.

'It's a present,' said Clarissa breaking into a raucous laugh and swaying from side to side. 'I'm kept as a lover, didn't you know?'

Then she pressed her head into the empty kerchief and breathed in the lingering fragrance of the fruit. The kerchief covered her, but we could still see the shivers running down her spine. We left her there in her kerchief. Not a single one of us touched her. We went back to our workbenches and clung to them. Even the meisters left her alone, until the door opened again. In the doorway was the officer, some loose strands of golden hair dangling under her hat and falling damply along her neck. She went over to Clarissa, took her by the shoulders and shook her with one powerful jolt. The kerchief dropped to the ground. The red spots had stained it. Then she bent over and picked it up. It was the first time I had seen her bend over. Her spine jutted out under the blouse of her uniform and her breathing came in waves. The sight of her stunned me. A tremendous revelation. Even she, proud as she was, knew how to kneel. The taut cord that had learned how to stretch, never allowing itself to slacken, had loosened ever so briefly. So she was human too.

'Das ist meine Clarissa,' she said in a stiff voice. 'Sie ist Mein.'

'Mine, mine.'

As she straightened up, the kerchief dropped again and she stepped on it. We turned around. Janine was the only one who dared; she took one step forward, shooting out a piercing look. The officer stopped directly across from her.

For a split second their eyes met, a moment that froze in space. The officer turned, let go of Clarissa and Clarissa stumbled. Where

Clarissa rocked herself as though in a lullaby. She was far away from me by then and we were like moles in a tunnel, except that we hadn't had the welcome sleep those wise animals have. All we had done was to crawl down into the deepest holes where the abomination flowed submissively, begging to pour out to sea. But the sea was thousands of miles away over occupied land. The roots of the burning trees trembled and cowered under the weight of the abomination, demanding to know where the water came from. Every last one of the bridges had been bombed that winter and yet the trains had not stopped crossing the rivers. People had become roots and roots, people. The wise animals listened to the sound of the flowing abomination and wondered when it would let up.

I couldn't go any closer to her. I returned to my cot, as she went on rocking herself, consoling her flesh and her spirit, no longer taking any notice of me.

- 4 -

Winter was digging in around us and we were forgotten.

Heavy rains started to fall it seemed to me that every drop was also carrying a grain of ashes from those consumed by the smoke.

The camp was not bombed, but the approaches were covered in marshy mud, as the trudging of the sticky feet and the sheer fatigue kept beating, like the room of a watchmaker gone berserk. Whenever I turned to look beyond the fences, I saw the treetops swaying in the forest.

It was there that the leaves would fill up with drops of water and the early winter winds loosened off rows of foliage. Some of the leaves blew over the fence and even drifted down into the doorways of the barracks.

These were left untouched. Except by the wind, which, after all, was good to them.

New airplane parts were piled high on the workbenches, and we fitted them together helplessly. The door opened and Clarissa entered, wearing a pair of men's boots. Water dripped off them onto the floor, leaving the tracks of her hurried entrance.

Out of the coat wrapped around her, she took a kerchief and

is Janine? A Catholic who had coupled her fate with a Jew. Following him eastwards. That's how she wound up with us. Where is Janine now? In some vinegrowers' village near Montpellier not far from the Spanish border, where the grapes are especially juicy, where one can get as drunk on a single bunch of them as on a flask of wine.

- 5 -

I am not yet sixty. I took my granddaughter Hagar to the house from which they took me.

I could not tell the ten-year-old that this was where I had loved another man. There had been a foetus inside me who might have become her father. I told her:

'This is where I once lived. This is where they banged on my door. This is where they dragged us outside and took us to the town square.'

Hagar looked wistfully at the house we had not entered and asked:

'Why don't you knock on the door, Grandmother?'

I said to myself: that door has been slammed shut for good. It can't be reopened. Deep in the recesses of my memory I buried that man who had slept in my bed and was the first to come to me. I don't dream about him anymore. When Hagar's grandfather took me, I cast that chapter of my life aside into a sealed box and threw the key into the depths of the sea. Still it is beyond me how these things seep through and gather in other parts of me, filtering into my children.

The dammed up waters seek new outlets. When I heard them forcing their way, I clasped my head with both hands and ordered: 'Stop!' But they disobeyed. Outsmarting me, they worked their way in between the cracks.

I clasped my granddaughter's hand and felt its fervour. She was standing next to me, so stirred and pure. I said to myself: I'm not trying to get even. I'll be sixty next year, after all. I've brought along my son's daughter, to show the intruders who broke the door down - those masters of the stripes and the whip - that they haven't outdone me.

The foetus died, but here is the child.

3

Winter was coming and the sun had almost vanished. The rumble of distant explosions blended with the sound of thunder. Nothing but the lightning, slashing the cloud, could keep them apart.

A few weeks before liberation, the meisters began shooting indiscriminately. The factories emptied and the owners vanished. A day before the liberation, we remained all alone in the camp.

We woke up in the chilly dawn and stood in formation waiting, but there were no footsteps to be heard. We ventured out into the gateways of the barracks. Everything was in place. The fences were bolted. In the distance, the tree tops were swaying as though nothing in the forest had changed. Utterly indifferent to us, it had never turned a receptive ear. By noon, the gate had been uprooted. Two dogs still posted to watch over it were shot on the spot, and their carcasses rotted in the alleys.

A Russian division arrived in the camp and our fears gave way to new ones. Fresh from the battles of Stalingrad, they were overcome by cold and lust. But as soon as they saw us, they turned away. Our emaciated bodies were incapable of arousing passion.

We lined up for the last time, facing the row of Russian officers who wished to provide us with the first piece of paper we would need to begin life anew. They gave us back our names. I saw mine but we were strangers to one another.

Janine said it amounted to a baptism, and kept crossing herself. Three Russian officers sat on a desk taken from the camp headquarters. I remembered the fifth chapter. God takes the finest rib, the one that has suffered nightmares, and releases it in the Garden.

Clarissa's icy hand was tugging at mine, the way it did that time when she handed me the medicine.

I turned towards her and she pointed wordlessly at a woman who was working her way into the waiting row. She had taken on our appearance, turned into one of us. Got hold of a striped shirt, hoping to find refuge in our fold as among Jacob's lot. Gone was Brunnhilde's golden hair. She had shaven it all off and her skull bones were showing. All that time, they had been covered by the flowing Brunnhildian mane. The colour was gone from her cheeks, and her anxiety was seeping out, as if through a faulty

stopper. I looked and saw her. She had pushed her way into the hush of the women and even from as far away as I was standing, I could see the roundness of her breasts between the stripes. Cut off like us. Now she was hoping for the final Judgement Day. The trumpets of angels.

'Oh, Merciful Christ,' said Janine, stretching out an arm in her direction. Then she spit on the ground and made the sign of the cross.

Thus in the haze of my illness she re-emerges out of the ground in her striped uniform. Her hair falls on her shoulders and the SS insignia is etched in blood on her forehead. Even in my nightmares she bears that same deathly pallor. She leans over me, opens her fist, and shows me some yellow tablets.

I yell: 'I'm not to blame!' She grabs me and forces them into my mouth. I purse my lips, seal them tight, and cry:

'Clarissa, come, help me!'

But it's my husband who shakes me by the shoulder and asks: 'What's wrong? You've been having a nightmare.'

One morning he asked me: 'Who is the Clarissa you keep dreaming about?'

She keeps surfacing. Weaving in and out of the corridors of my memory. Pulling behind the dignity of man and his degradation, his anguish, and his powers of resistance. The eyes of Janine of Gaul harden as she struggles to record what she sees, indelibly, to make sure that she never forgets. Clarissa had said: 'I can't be the one to turn her in.' 'You go,' she told me. 'Go tell the Russians that she's hiding among us.' I froze. My legs wouldn't move. I was unable to shout. I remembered the outstretched palm and the tablets. But Janine had already stepped out of the line and her legs were carrying her unhaltingly, overcome by some secret power. She approached the Russian officers and told them something. Two of them followed her back. Ever so slowly, they approached the line.

Janine stood opposite the Nazi woman and pointed her out with an arched hand. 'That's the one!' The officers dragged her away and the Brunnhilde started screaming and jerking convulsively. But the Russian had a firm grip on her. He made her

stand up, as he struck her on her bald pate. That was how I was able to picture her skull lying on the ground after the worms had gnawed at it. He wasted no time, pulling at her shirt, ripping it right off. She began screaming again and covered her nakedness with her hands. But those breasts were not like ours. Full and fleshy they were apparent through the torn material.

He slapped her once across the face and she stopped. Her arms fell to her sides. He raised her arm for all to see. Under her armpit was the mark, carefully etched, as though on a sheet of paper. Furiously he struck her again. She lifted her head and searched over the entire row of women until her eyes rested on Clarissa.

Clarissa turned away, no longer seeing her. Like a madwoman she screeched, her cries rising and falling over our frozen silence. 'Clarissa, help me!' The Russian waited another minute, then dragged her away. She stopped screaming and he pulled her behind him like a tattered sack, behind the first barracks.

A single gunshot, and he was back from the corner. As he stuck his pistol back in its holster as if nothing had happened, he returned to his seat by the desk. I turned to look into the row of women, but no longer saw Clarissa. She had vanished. I shut my eyes. The entire row turned into one long strip, and at the tip of the worm, one after the other, we undressed and put on the clothes provided by the Russians.

Ever since those sinister days, the light for me will forever be flawed.

When I returned home, I found my parents alive. For three days, my ageing father sat with me. Then he packed a small bag. I asked him: 'Why are you leaving now that I've been saved?'

For two months he travelled all over Europe to collect the proof we would need to prove I was widowed and could remarry under Jewish law. 'The only way to find two witnesses,' he explained, 'is to start searching right away. If we wait, they'll scatter all over the world.' My children are grown, and the dead one who dropped out of my womb is over and done with. The ones that followed covered over him with their beauty and brightness.

I once took out a picture of my dead husband to show my

oldest son, but he didn't believe me. The truth, after all, is a great mosaic, with motley pieces forever falling into place. When one piece is missing, sometimes I look for it and sometimes I stop.

Whenever I pass by the road signs of our country, I think about her. Maybe she is sitting here, maybe there. Maybe her face is sealed, revealing nothing, except for the wet and oozing sap of berries.

Whenever I dare to lift the stone, I turn it over and over, and things are not the way they were before but rather, the way one sees them in a crooked mirror or through a window on a foggy day. I'm not going to breathe warm mist onto the pane, because I don't really want to see. Clarissa in a golden embrace, and Janine with the vinegrowers of Gaul, and myself in Tel Aviv. Only rarely does my soul wander and turn over, and it no longer reaches back to the way things were at the beginning.

They say: time adds layers of its own and you cannot reach back to the day of Creation without climbing down a great canyon. After passing all seven layers of the earth one moves back a million years, to the Day of Chaos when Creation and Disintegration were one, nesting in a single womb, like Rebecca's irreconcilable twins.

There, a great darkness emerged. They say: it will heal. They say: I will be healed. I am grateful for the sun and for the new light, but on the children's heads, my anguish and and torment will rest like a hat of glass.

(1985)

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

- anthologies are in Hebrew: *Sippurei Nashim Bnot Ha'aliah Harishona (Stories of Women of the First Aliyah)*, ed. Y. Berlowitz, Tarmil, Tel Aviv, 1984, and *Hakol Ha'acher-Sipporet Nashim Ivrit (The Other Voice: Women's Fiction in Hebrew)*, ed. L. Ratok, Hasifriah Hahadasha, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1994.
2. See Simon Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature From the Enlightenment to the Birth of the State of Israel: Trends and Values*, Schocken Books, New York, 1974.
  3. See the introduction to T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, 1981.
  4. See E. Silberschlag, *From Renaissance to Renaissance II*, 1977, pp.157-76.
  5. See R. Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, 1975.
  6. For more on this see the introduction to *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, Anita Norich, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York and Jerusalem, 1992.
  7. For more on Zilla Drapkin see Janet Hadda's article in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, op. cit., p.93-112.
  8. See Dan Miron, 'Imahot meyasdot, 'ahyot horgot, 'al shitey hathalot bashira ha'eretsyiraelit hamodernit (*Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*), Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991 (Heb.).
  9. See Yaffa Berlowitz, *Sippurei Nashim Bnot Ha'aliah Harishona*, op. cit.
  10. Ben-Yehuda is the compiler of the first Hebrew Dictionary and is regarded as the initiator of the use of Hebrew as a spoken language.
  11. Pseudonym for Rachel Bluwstein.
  12. Op. cit.
  13. Pseudonym for Elisaveta Ivanovan Zirkowa.
  14. For more on Raab's poetry see the article by Anne Lapidus Lerner in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, op. cit., pp.17-38.
  15. See A. Band, in *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, Schocken Books, New York, 1974. For more on the poetry of Bat-Miriam see the article by Ilana Pardes in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, op. cit., pp.39-63.
  16. See the critic Ariel Hirschfeld in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, op. cit., pp.20-23.
  17. See, for example, her book *The Thorny Path and Other Stories*, Israel Universities Press, 1969, and *Hebrew Short Stories, An Anthology*, selected by S.Y. Penueli and A. Ukhmani, Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1965, Volume One, pp.169-181.
  18. As it was termed by the leading Israeli scholar Gershon Shaked.

about barefoot. Old women sat on rickety chairs outside their houses, flapping in vain at the fetid, steamy air with flowery sweat-soaked handkerchiefs.

His wife came in and he turned again to inspect the room. Sophie, who was in the final months of her pregnancy, dragged the four tall chairs to the table and smoothed the blanket from time to time. He didn't rush to help her. Instead, he leaned his elbows against the blazing rail and watched her with concern. Now she had only one house-dress left - all the others were too small and stifled her stomach. He glanced at her belly, which stood out before her like a strange hill teeming with life, and a tiny thrill of delight ran about at the base of his spine, like an animal with multiple slender legs. They had been married about three years, but had decided not to have the child until they were properly established in the little carpentry workshop. And indeed, only when the old women who spent the summer days glued to the walls of their houses began to greet the meticulous and prompt carpenter and his delicate wife, hurrying to take him his meals even in the broiling midday heat - it was only then that Sophie had wanted to conceive, and he willingly consented. But the peak of social acceptance was when Baruch the upholsterer, to whom he sometimes brought furniture frames for covering, suggested that he become the fourth hand in the traditional card game, which was an established routine among several groups of players in the southern neighbourhood. He remembered how his fingernail reddened with excitement on the frame of the bare chair, and he couldn't help wiping away his sweat with the back of a hand powdered with itchy sawdust.

He was already sufficiently versed in the ways of the neighbourhood to know that the upholsterer's group, which should really be called the dentist's group, was the oldest and most respected. After Dario, the old porter at the electrical appliances shop, succumbed to a fatal heart attack - there had been much gossip as to who would be the fourth hand. The other member of the club was Samson the butcher, owner not only of his big shop with its modern and sophisticated cold-storage facilities, and the empty lot near the school, but also of the grocery store attached to the

## Until the Entire Guard has Passed

by LEAH AINI

FROM TIME to time he couldn't resist leaning over the rail of the balcony to peer at the path leading to his house. He still had some twenty minutes to wait, and the men didn't usually arrive early, although Dr Mashiah, the dentist, was capable of popping up suddenly a quarter of an hour before the rest, eager as ever, his hat crumpled in his hands.

He smiled to himself nervously, and turned to inspect the living room once more. The two heavy armchairs had been moved against the wall, and the round table brought into the middle of the room, where the imitation-crystal hanging lamp cast a slight shadow on the navel of the room. A woollen army blanket, old but freshly laundered, was spread on the table meticulously. In the centre, a new pack of cards stood to attention together with writing paper and a fountain pen carefully filled with ink. On the footstool stood the old fan, poised and ready to rattle the air. He glanced at the blanket once again and then left the rail and hurried to the sideboard. His gaze darted among the ornaments until he found what he was looking for. He placed a polished glass ash-tray on the table and then returned to the balcony, swallowing his excitement.

Passers-by walked down the street with hands clasped behind their backs, and children scampered among them. They sauntered down the street and back again. The intense heat of the Sabbath eve was still exhibiting lavish signs of dying, and most of the men were clad only in white vests and shorts. The children jumped

shop, which was leased to the tiny shopkeeper. Baruch the upholsterer was also known for spending his spare time repairing vehicles that had been written off as wrecks. With admirable determination, he often worked wonders, sending some rusty and wheezing old banger, bought with the limited savings of a soldier, racing down the road like a wild colt, with hooves flailing and nostrils steaming.

But presiding over the club was none other than Dr Mashiah, the widower dentist, who lived above his little surgery and was widely respected for his gentle hands and modest fees. In particular, he earned the gratitude of mothers, because at the start of the school year he would lecture the school children on proper brushing and deficient nutrition. Not only that, but afterwards he would examine the mouths of the urchins free of charge.

Now Levi rubbed his calloused hands with pleasure, and smoothed down his light shirt. Sophie had gone to work in the kitchen and he again turned his back on the room, scanning the street anxiously. Suddenly, a great fear crept, like a chilling blast of wind, onto his face, stiffening his sprouting stubble. The heat was unbearable, but that wasn't the problem. The game, which took place every Sabbath at the home of one of the players, was to be held for the first time in his house, and he wondered how he would manage to get past 11 o'clock. Usually the game finished at midnight, since all were early risers, but the critical time could be expected to come an hour before this, and suddenly he was no longer confident of the fortune that had seemed to smile on him till now.

Light taps on the door roused him, and he hurried to the entrance, greeting the old dentist with evident pleasure. Gradually the others appeared, scrubbed and perfumed and wearing neat white shirts, rubbing their broad hands together in keen anticipation, as if scenting a victorious run of cards. Sophie came in too, wearily smiling, moving ponderously, to greet the guests and to pour cold water with lemon slices into glasses. Her neck flushed at the compliments of the men on seeing her full stomach, infused with new life, and she made an effort not to spill water on the tray in her delight, hurrying away to hide in the kitchen.

The host pressed the button of the fan which hummed softly, and they all took their places round the table. The cards were distributed at first with slow deliberation, and then with growing momentum from round to round. The dentist, who loved to sing to himself, soon began humming softly while he deftly sorted his cards, and the butcher, though used to the distracting crooning, tried to set his fleshy face in a frown.

Levi smiled thinly and swivelled, in the intervals between his turns, to write down the names of the participants in the order they were sitting. From time to time he stared at his hand, at the accordian of cards alternately opening and closing, his heart singing the fourth verse. For two and a half hours the game proceeded smoothly, as the small sums of money piled up alternately in front of the host and the butcher. The dentist, who was used to losing because he was a poor player, didn't seem unduly perturbed, and he continued with his soft humming, although the upholsterer was visibly tense during the deal, and was often enraged at the sight of a desirable card tossed casually to one of the others. At around 10 o'clock Sophie appeared again, bearing a silver-plated tray which exuded the smell of fresh baking, went away and returned with slices of moist cucumber, hard-boiled eggs freckled with paprika, and red cubes of sweet watermelon. As one, the four men threw their cards on the table, moved their chairs back in anticipation, and hastily set about the food. Levi glanced at his wife with satisfaction, seeing her sinking gently into one of the armchairs, her hands clasped contentedly around her stomach, revelling in Dr Mashiah's sighs. The dentist was licking his thin and oily fingers like a child, before seizing another helping of juicy watermelon.

'Well done, Sophie!' The plump butcher was complimenting her now, sugary saliva running down his solid chin, his eyes moist with desire.

Only Baruch the upholsterer was bolting his food, as if eager to return to the table as quickly as possible and recoup his losses.

When the refreshments had been consumed, Levi helped his wife rise from the armchair, a line of worry etched between his eyes. Sophie ignored his look and approached with hands clasped

to gather the dishes. When she returned for the third time – now with cups of fragrant coffee on a little tray which had muddy pools gathering at its edges – she was already fingering the tightly stretched button on her belly, and her movements were jerky.

'Perhaps you should go and rest, you look very tired!' suggested Dr Mashiah, and she responded to his kindly eyes with awkward gratitude. 'Yes, you should go and lie down,' said Levi, a cautious threat in his voice. Then he glanced knowingly at the rectangular clock on the sideboard, expecting his wife, in extreme nervousness, to follow suit.

A soft pallor spread over Sophie's face, and her lips were clenched. Now she thrust her hands into the big pockets of her smock, stretching the tight cloth across her belly, which seemed to have swelled appreciably in the last hour. She shrugged her shoulders, in vain ignoring the penetrating looks of her husband, until she blurted a hasty 'Goodnight' and all but fled from the room. The butcher, whose turn it was to deal, gathered the cards towards him very slowly, his worried eyes still preoccupied with the strange disappearance of the hostess. As he began shuffling the pack, he turned cautiously to the dentist, whose delicate fingers were tapping smoothly on the blanket.

'Maybe her time has come?' he asked hesitantly, with a meaningful glance at the carpenter.

The dentist shook his head, smiled, and gathered up his cards eagerly. Impatient to start the game and annoyed by the interruption, the upholsterer urged the carpenter, who was still a little stunned, to make up his mind and throw down a card.

'Come on! Come on! Let's get back to the game!' he urged, and Levi, startled, threw down one of his cards without even noticing its value.

He wiped away his sweat and looked fearfully at the butcher, but the latter was already ordering his cards, arranging his best sets, as usual, in the upper storey, and, looking pleased with himself, he turned to seize the card thrown down for him in telling haste.

'What's true is true. A poker face you don't have ...' the dentist teased, enjoying the sight of the butcher's childish face, while humming melodiously.

The butcher's hairy eyebrows rose for a moment in disdain, then he angrily ignored the words.

Levi took his eyes from them, but while still debating whether to peer at the clock again or to throw down another card distractedly, he was forestalled by the first hand-clap, sharp and loud. He swallowed his saliva and froze in midthrow, even though it wasn't his turn. A series of loud and harsh hand-claps came rolling down in the wake of the first: a repetitive, staccato avalanche, assaulting the ears of the players. Trembling, he discarded a red queen, and peered at the others, startled.

For the moment they weren't troubled by it, with the exception of Baruch the upholsterer, who moved uncomfortably in his chair, his lips pursed. After a few minutes he couldn't restrain himself and he cried, 'That's your crazy neighbour, right? Damn it! You can't even play a quiet game of cards round here!'

'What crazy neighbour?' hummed the dentist in amusement.

The upholsterer threw down his superfluous card angrily and explained, 'My wife told me. The deaf old woman who lives upstairs, who hardly ever goes out. Three times a day she claps her hands for half an hour – without stopping! I don't understand how you can live here!' he uttered resentfully, the newly drawn card conciliating his voice a little.

Levi struggled with his vocal chords, until he heard his metallic mumble creeping out somehow – 'You get used to it ...' and then glanced sideways at the butcher, seeing the green number under the thick hair of his arm, lit up for a moment in the light of the lamp as he reached to snatch up the card thrown down for him. Taking courage he added, 'It's because of the Germans. That's what she told someone ... told me.' He didn't know where his voice was coming from, but his lips continued to form the words. 'The convent where she hid during the war was close to the SS headquarters. Every time the guard on patrol passed near the place, the nuns taught the frightened children to clap their hands until the entire guard had passed ...' he whispered, flushed with shame. He looked again at the butcher, desperate for his understanding, but he only lifted dull eyes to the lamp, shrugged his powerful shoulders and said dismissively: 'Nobody came out in one piece.'

He hurriedly lowered his eyes in time, making an effort to decide which of his cards to throw down, but not one of his cards matched the others. For a moment he stared at the jumbled sets, and then closed the coloured fan, as if by doing so he could stop his ears as well.

The dentist hummed sadly and laid a short set of clubs on the table. 'It isn't so bad,' he said. 'I have a patient, an Auschwitz survivor, who's completely round the bend.' He launched into a lengthy story, but Levi could hear only the beating of his heart, pursuing in vain the tempo of the hand-claps, as stiff and as rhythmic as boots thudding on a parade ground. The upholsterer, whose luck had improved somewhat, waved aside the distraction impatiently, again urging the others to concentrate on the game.

Gradually the clapping subsided and faded, as it had begun – out of nothing. The clock ticked on to midnight, and the dentist rose from his chair, stretching gracefully, despite the considerable sum he had lost. The upholsterer, gratified by his victory, was still poring over the score. When he found that the butcher was in fact the overall winner, he glowered, but began to share out the profits fairly. Now they all rose and went out to the balcony. The butcher stuffed the banknotes into his pocket with obvious impatience, and hung back a little from the others. The heat had subsided now, but the air was still humid and leaden, barely stirred by the lazy, intermittent gusts of wind rising from the sea. The dentist tried to take a few deep breaths, but the experiment only elicited a sour grimace from the upholsterer, who was wiping the sweat from the nape of his neck with a handkerchief.

At last the guests began to take their leave of the host, and the last to shake his rather tense hand was the dentist. His handshake was soft and consoling, like a woman's and his eyes were kind.

'Tell Sophie that we enjoyed the meal very much, and many thanks. Next week – at my house, don't forget,' he warned, taking his pale blue hat from the hook and softly closing the door behind him.

Levi's polite smile disappeared at once. Slowly he shuffled towards the living room, seeing the heap of cards on the table, the

blanket which had slipped slightly, and the ashtray, black with watermelon pips. The coffee cups were encrusted with muddy grounds, and the lamp glared tastelessly. He switched off the light and the fan, and stepped dejectedly to the kitchen. Like an automaton he took two ice-cubes from the freezer, found the little kitchen towel, wrapped the ice in the soft material, and turned to the bedroom.

Sophie was sprawled on the bed, her pallor melted into cold sweat, her hands hanging limp at her sides. Her large belly towered above her, concealing most of her neck from him. He approached the bed, trying in vain to dispel the wave of nausea that had assailed him, and turned over his wife's hands.

Sophie let him do this, as if she were a doll. The palms of her hands were red and hot, her flesh tingling like roasted meat. He enclosed a dripping ice-cube in each of her tormented fists, and wrapped them both in the towel. Then he moved away from her and sat on the end of his bed, his back turned to her. From behind him he heard the whisper of the ice in her hands, and the rasping of the towel in turns.

Sophie's voice was hoarse.

'Did they say anything?'

Long minutes passed before he found an answer, deep in his seared throat:

'What do you think ...' he began harshly. Then he withdrew a little, trying to sound casual as he added, 'They talked about the neighbour. I think they believe it ...'

Sophie didn't answer, and he knew from the sound of her frantic breathing that tears were streaming down her cheeks. Still he didn't turn round.

'I've asked you before,' she began again in turmoil, 'I've asked you before to tie me up, bind my hands with rope, with steel wire ... at least when there are people here ...'

He uttered a scornful sigh and half-turned towards her. 'And what will you do instead? Beat your head against the wall?' His shoulders rose and fell wearily. 'No, we've discussed it before. You're better off clapping your hands, that way at least you're not doing yourself any harm, they can think what they like ...' Sophie

began to wail like an abandoned cub, the towel making its way from her chilled hands to her wet face.

'Stop it! Stop it, that's enough!' he pleaded in despair.

'But it was so, so important to you ... to be the fourth hand and ...' she choked.

'I don't give a damn,' he snorted, but his eyes were wandering.

'And what's going to happen, what's going to happen when the baby is born,' she panted, gasping for breath. 'How will he sleep? I'm a mad woman, a mad mother. I'd be better off dead!' She was groaning now, harried by spasms of weeping.

He rose stiffly, wrenched the damp towel from her face, and then, without any intending to, his hand shot out like an arrow and slapped her cheek.

Sophie's head slumped forward at once, lifeless, but a powerful shudder racked her stomach, and then her weeping resumed, soft and moaning.

'Quiet now, be quiet.'

He straightened her trembling legs, raising the light blanket from her dominant, over-weening belly, which was all-consuming.

Sophie curled up in the bed, her hands limp on her chest, her breathing still irregular.

'Go to sleep. That's enough for today. We'll sort it out,' he concluded angrily.

He returned to his bed and continued sitting with his back to her for some time, until he realized she was asleep. He turned cautiously, and began to undress.

When he slipped into bed, he momentarily clutched her hand, soft as a cotton-wool cloud, intending to put it to his mouth. But he changed his mind, and the hand sank back sleepily and powerlessly onto the bed. He laid his aching head on the pillow, listening to her faint breathing. A yellow moon shone at the window, and by its light he could see the mighty belly, teeming with life. Suddenly it seemed to him he could hear the breathing of the embryo too, tiny and rapid. He smiled to himself, remembering what Dr Mashiah had told him once.

'At this stage,' the dentist had told him, 'he's already smiling and frowning - even sucking a thumb! There's no doubt,' he

concluded pleasantly, 'he's going to be a fine, healthy boy!'

A thrill of thin pleasure tickled him, its thousand feet wandering along his spine. Calmly he closed his eyes, slowly dreaming of his baby, and he is already as he himself was in his infancy. Plump and soft-haired, laughter rolling from his mouth, with two pearly teeth blocking a pink and greedy tongue. Sophie, close by him, distracted and sweating, clapping her hands to death. Fear reigns in her face, in the stamping black boots and the claws of the Alsatians. But look at the child, he too is clapping a soft, unsteady hand against its partner, clumsily, without coordination, and starting to dance around in his new white shoes. His mother is very far from him, but he - his tongue hanging from his mouth in a bold and spirited laugh, his head giddy and spinning - and for a long time he turns and turns, clapping and clapping, until the entire guard has passed.

(1991)

Translated by Philip Simpson

## 2

## A Good Spot

by RUTH ALMOG

## I

IT COULD be said of Tzila Kasten that there were two things in her life: her son Urinko and her balalaika.

As for her husband, Arnold Tanzmann, the ties between them were like the tangles in a head of very curly hair: if you leave it uncombed for more than a few days, the only answer is to cut it off.

Tzila Kasten had known some famous people: Marcal Rubin, the composer who had succeeded in getting to Mexico; Broch the novelist, who had fled to the States. There were women too: Milna Yoshinka, who did not escape (Tzila only found this out many years afterwards) and Gertrude Kraus, who, like Tzila, had come to Palestine. Tzila had had the privilege of appearing with Gertrude once (though not in the capital city), but even so, she had never had quite the necessary courage, and her hair remained long, curly and full of tangles until the day she died.

From the moment Urinko was born, Tzila was convinced there was nobody like him in the whole world. But Tanzmann said the child cried too much, so Tzila would lull the child in her arms for hours or whole nights at a time. Tanzmann did not allow this: his book on the rearing of children stated quite clearly it was not to be permitted, but he himself slept the deep sleep of the innocent, waking, like them, at a prescribed hour every morning, so Tzila was able to manage.

When Tanzmann complained, Tzila would say: 'Perhaps he's just hungry.' But Tanzmann replied that his book said a baby

should only be fed small portions at regular intervals, and that was the end of the matter.

'Then perhaps I don't have enough milk,' Tzila would say. But Tanzmann explained that the author of the book, a famous German pediatrician, wrote that if a woman could suckle for ten minutes at a time this was a clear indication she had sufficient milk, and that any overfeeding could have dangerous consequences.

Tanzmann had found the book in a second-hand bookshop. It stocked largely German titles, since the refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia had arrived in Palestine penniless but with trunks full of books. This had certainly been the case with Elsa, whom Tzila had once made a special journey to Jerusalem to visit, and got such a shock when she saw her that she rushed straight out again to find the nearest grocer's.

Sometimes Tzila would gather together all the things scattered inside her like the fragments of shrapnel in the body of their neighbour Mr. Zahor. Apparently the doctors had used a magnet to take the pieces out, and in winter the pain was particularly acute, overshadowing his face like darkness on the fringes of the sunset. It was at such times that Tzila would permit herself to confide to Tanzmann that there was nobody like Urinko in the whole world. But Tanzmann refused to be swayed, and his reply was always: 'He's a crybaby, that's all. He yowls all night like a randy cat.'

Tanzmann's voice was like sheets of metal clashing together. Sometimes Tzila would pluck up the courage to go on and whisper, 'Perhaps he's just hungry. Perhaps I don't have enough milk.' Tanzmann's replies to this would come in a voice composed only of the echo of iron striking iron: a harsh, grating screech which made the ears ring unpleasantly. His exact words would be: 'I've already told you once what I think. In any case, obedience is the most important lesson in life, that's what my book on education (he had purchased it in the same shop) says, and if we don't start as we mean to go on there'll be a little outlaw in the house, just like Tzila Kasten was when I took her off the street to marry her. And perhaps I was wrong to do it.'

Tzila did not take this seriously. For Tanzmann, practically

everyone was an outlaw, especially people who played or sang in the street or in cafés, as she had indeed once done. This meant that Elsa was an outlaw too, of course, and Tanzmann was of the opinion that God had chosen to punish her by taking away her son.

'But,' whispered Tzila – people had already forgotten how strong and resonant her voice had once been – 'he had consumption.'

'And who gave it to him?' shouted Tanzmann. 'Not God? Well?'

Which was why when Tzila went to visit Elsa she kept it a secret from Tanzmann and said instead that she was going to buy new strings for her balalaika. Tanzmann could not object to this; the contract drawn up for them by Dr. Uichselbaum the registrar contained a specific clause regarding the balalaika, and Tanzmann was an 'honourable man' who 'kept his promises', as he was fond of saying. Indeed, signing the contract had been his idea in the first place.

Tzila was a tiny woman with a round, flattish face like an Eskimo's. The skin was stretched tight over her cheekbones, as thin and pink as the skin of a peach, but because it was also as fine as the net canopy which protected Urinko from mosquitos and flies it was possible, from close up, to decipher the network of bluish, fragile veins which ran beneath it. She had a little red nose like a cherry and her china-blue eyes shone and twinkled. She was cheerful by nature, and it came as no surprise that her great love was music; when Tanzmann was not at home she would put the baby on the rug in the main room and play record after record on her gramophone until her arm ached from turning the handle.

She became very plump after having the baby, and since her movements remained quick and agile she resembled nothing so much as a ball rolling itself along. It was obvious she could not return to work as a dancer, but this was of no importance; firstly, because she was more of a singer, and secondly because Tanzmann's contract contained a specific clause covering this situation.

At the beginning, Tanzmann called her Tzila, as did her friends. Thereafter he took to calling her Cecilia, and she would cringe when they heard him.

Tanzmann was not tall, but standing next to Tzila he looked like one of those young trees which get planted at the entrance to courtyards: they have smooth trunks and their leaves are cut into spheres and other shapes. He gave this impression largely because of his hair, which sprouted smoothly and profusely in all directions, with no parting. He wore a black hairnet in bed; if he forgot to do so, his whole head would look like a crowded pincushion in the morning.

He had hollows where his cheeks should have been, and gazed unforgivingly out at the world from shadowed hollows. His sharp features bore a permanent expression of defiance, and his red lips, swelling out below a moustache which was so fine it looked as though it had been drawn on with charcoal, stood in such stark contrast to the rest of his emaciated features that they rendered them dubious.

Initially, Tzila called him 'Fuchsi', or 'my fox'. 'Not just because you look a bit like one,' she explained, 'but because you managed to catch the silly goose.' 'But it's not completely right, is it,' she would continue, 'because you haven't gobbled her up.'

'Not yet,' replied Tanzmann, laughing. 'Not quite yet.'

For all that, she continued to call him Fuchsi for some time, because another of her friends, a cousin of Stefan's who now lived in Haifa up on the Carmel, was also called Arnold; and to set him in contrast to her friend Leo, with whom she had once been head over heels in love, and whose muse had not deserted him.

Ah, Leo! He had married a beautiful, fashionable woman, who had brought such hats, such silk dresses, with her to Tel Aviv. Tzila's heart wept, and remained in pieces for some time afterwards, right up to when Urinko was born. Leo's wife would sit in the café on the promenade where Tzila was working on the very same evenings Tanzmann would go there for a game of chess. From the moment Tzila came out onto the little stage, she fixed her gaze on the woman as she sang the plaintive gypsy love-songs. This might have been the reason she finally decided to sign Tanzmann's contract.

Tanzmann was an expert tanner. He had a small factory on the outskirts of the city and would go to work on his bicycle every

morning. Once Tzila was left alone, she would feed Urinko every time he cried. The doctor had said that at his age – he was five months now – he could begin to take cow's milk or even solids provided they were thoroughly heated first. Perhaps this was the reason he cried at night.

One day Tanzmann returned unexpectedly early, apparently because of a headache; he had a tendency to suffer from migraines. He found his wife sitting on the armchair in the main room with Urinko in her lap, feeding him thick white liquid.

Tanzmann checked the time and announced, 'It's bad enough you haven't waited long enough between feedings, what do you think you're doing giving him something that looks like porridge?'

Tzila, startled, made no reply.

Tanzmann took the child from her and put him back in his cot in the small room. Urinko immediately began to cry. Tanzmann picked him up and bounced him up and down, shouting, 'Quiet! Quiet!' But the child was screaming.

'If you don't stop, I'll ...' bellowed Tanzmann, and shook the child to and fro. But it was hopeless. Tanzmann choked back his anger, put him down, and returned to the main room. Tzila was still in the armchair.

'Look what you've done now, you outlaw,' hissed Tanzmann, and bent over her. An ugly, blue blotch appeared on her left cheek. She gripped the arms of the chair and did not move.

'Do you think this is why I took you off the streets? Is this the thanks I get?'

He bent over her again and the blue blotch became still uglier.

Tanzmann went off to shower. It was a very hot day (which perhaps explained the headache) and he stank of sweat and animal skins.

The sound of the rushing water almost obliterated the baby's cries. Tzila got up, picked up her balalaika and went outside. She sat in the yard on a little stool and played until evening came; the summer sun took a long time to set. The neighbours heard her plucking the strings and remarked, 'How well she plays.' But her voice was hardly audible.

When the sun finally set she went inside and prepared a salad



and two omelettes, sliced some black bread and put a bottle of cold water on the table. She called Tanzmann and they sat opposite each other eating in silence. When Tzila looked at her watch, Tanzmann said, 'You've already fed him once, so you can't feed him again now. That's your punishment.' A sneering smile appeared on his lips as he closed them over the end of the sentence.

As was to be expected, that night Tzila lulled her son in her arms. Her breasts had swollen, and the milk had hardened into little crusts around her nipples, but she dared not feed him, not even when she heard Tanzmann snoring. She dozed during the moments the bitter pain receded, but for much of the night her thoughts roamed in her head like travellers lost in the desert. She imagined, for example, that she had sold herself like that brother of Jacob's – what was his name? – just for a bowl of soup. She also considered the meaning of the lies. But this she did not think was so dreadful; she had been an actress, a singer, she was used to it. All the world's a stage, she thought, all actors. So what? Not so terrible. No. But the other matter was more of a problem, the one which forced people to turn the world into a stage. Ah, well, she thought, it can't be helped. There's nothing I can do. The deep desolation of this thought washed over her and almost engulfed her, and she prayed that Urinko would be as free as a bird.

## II

And so Urinko grew up between the soft, plump arms of Tzila Kasten who sang him songs by Schubert, and the coarse hands of Tanzmann which bore an ineradicable smell of tanned leather not yet turned into shoes and wallets.

When Urinko was five years old, Tzila brought him a harmonica, which he quickly learned to play so well that he enchanted anyone who heard him. Sometimes Tzila would smile and say to him, 'Suppose we were to go out on the main street and find ourselves a good spot? We could play, and I could sing, too, and we could make a little money and run away to another country,

because we can, you know. The war is over, Arnold has gone, Leo goes to Vienna every summer now ...'

The first time she said this, Urinko asked what a 'good spot' was, and she explained it was a spot in the thick of things with lots of passers-by. The second time, Urinko asked, 'Why?' Tzila hesitated before replying, and Urinko said, 'Mutti, when I'm a big boy I'll work with skins and I'll have a big factory and I'll make wallets and shoes from snakes and crocodiles, and I'll make lots of money and I'll take you around the world like Mr. Fogg and his servant, what was he called, Mutti?'

Tzila had forgotten the servant's name. 'But you're such a good musician,' she said.

'I like the smell of the skins,' replied Urinko.

But for the moment he played the harmonica, and took apart and rebuilt all sorts of things. Despite Tzila's insistence that he read lots of books because the books her friends like Franz, Arnold, Leo and even Elsa had written naturally contained all there was to know about culture, Urinko preferred to repair things; and when a neighbour's watch, or radio, or gramophone, or even fridge stopped working, Urinko would be called in, which meant he spent his days running from house to house.

When Urinko went out on his repairs, Tanzmann (if he happened to be at home) would say to him, 'I hope you're not doing it for nothing. That's exploitation, it's not right.'

Urinko had a specific way of working. First he would dismantle the object, observe its structure and make a sketch. Then he would rebuild it, and always, the broken part would miraculously begin to work again. The neighbours were impressed, and sometimes Tzila would permit herself to tell Tanzmann that Urinko was a genius, an Einstein even. Tanzmann was dismissive: 'He's a little outlaw, just like you.' He said this because Urinko was not a good student; his teachers complained that he was disruptive, and that he bullied and threw stones.

More than once a windscreen had been broken and Tanzmann had been forced to pay for the damage. Once Urinko had even broken another child's wrist. The case went to the juvenile court and Tanzmann was fined; but Urinko paid too, in another way.

So it was that Tzila would still whisper to him that perhaps it was time to find a good spot somewhere 'so that you'll never have to have a long face ever again'.

But Urinko refused. He maintained that he liked the smell of skins and that he intended to begin work as soon as he finished his army service.

'But you'll finish high school first?' begged Tzila, and Urinko promised her that he would.

The neighbours said the boy had golden hands but that the rest of him was uncivilized, offensive and downright dangerous, and they refused to let their children be his friends. Once Urinko's voice broke his shoulders broadened and his arms thickened like tree trunks. Nobody dared fight with him now, and he spent the breaks between lessons alone. Even his father had begun to hesitate before touching him.

In his two final years of school he changed; he stopped playing the harmonica and doing repairs. Instead he buried himself in his studies, particularly in mathematics, and in his free time he played chess against himself. Sometimes he would play a game with Tanzmann, or go to the café on the promenade to watch the masters. Once, he challenged the best of them to a game and checkmated him in seven moves, to the general astonishment of everyone. But he never went back after that.

It had now become clear to Tanzmann that he would have to sell his factory, and he grumbled to Tzila: 'If that outlaw thinks I'm paying for him to go to university, he's got another think coming.'

'A college then,' suggested Tzila.

'College or university, Jerusalem or Haifa, I'm still not paying.'

Tzila smiled and said: 'Then perhaps it's time for me to go and find myself a good spot again.'

Tanzmann looked out at her from creases of shadow and said, 'We signed a contract, remember? Promises are made to be kept. But do you know something? I don't care. You can both go, you and him. He was born an outlaw and he'll stay an outlaw, and so are you, and there's nothing to be done about it.'

Tzila took her balalaika out into the yard. She sat on the little stool and played. The neighbours heard her plucking the strings,

but her voice was hardly audible. 'She's playing again,' they remarked to each other.

Urinko did not hear her; he was no longer at home. By now he was taking apart tanks and spending odd spells in prison. When the news came one day that Urinko had been wounded, Tzila made the long trip to the military hospital at Sarafend to be with him. She took her balalaika with her and found that the hospital was a good spot; the soldiers said she had a marvellous voice. Before she had left, Tanzmann had said to her, 'He used to be a little outlaw, now he's a big outlaw.' But Tzila's voice rang through the hospital ward like silver bells.

Urinko spent a long time in hospital, and then he was sent to a convalescent home, from which he moved to Haifa to work in the docks. He never came back home. 'You see?' said Tanzmann to Tzila. 'I told you so.'

Urinko worked hard and saved his money. He supplemented his scholarship by working as an official mourner, watching the body at night and on the weekends. Sitting at his post on Friday nights he could see lighted windows where people sat at tables covered in white cloths, with candles in candlesticks. The tables were festive, beautifully set.

Urinko graduated with distinction. Tanzmann announced, 'I'm not going. That suit I brought from Germany which you filled with mothballs is too tight.'

'How do you know if you haven't tried it on?' murmured Tzila, and Tanzmann bellowed back, 'Why do you have to argue over every little thing?'

Tzila went alone. After the ceremony, she and Urinko went for a walk; he pointed out the place where he worked and said, 'Do you see? That's my good spot.' Then he took her by taxi to the park where he used to sit and study, but the park was closed. Tzila spent the night in a hotel and they left Haifa together the following day, she to return home and he to go south to work in the oil drills.

One day Tzila received a letter from Urinko which said:

'Dear Mother, I'm going to Australia. I've found a good job there, also in the oil business. If I get rich I will send you a ticket.'

I'm sure there are a lot of good spots in Melbourne. Yours, Urinko.'

'He's gone to Australia,' said Tzila to Tanzmann, who had not asked.

'I'm not surprised,' said Tanzmann, 'it started out as a prison colony, didn't it?'

'You'll see,' said Tzila, 'he'll be a millionaire one day.' But her voice was dead.

As the years went by, Tzila became thin again. Her Eskimo cheeks became even flatter, like planes of sand etched into lines by the desert wind. Every so often a letter would come, and the neighbours would say: 'Listen to her singing. What a voice she has, it's just like bells.'

The first letter said:

'Congratulate me, I have married a millionaire, and now I am rich. I work hard for her father. But I'm happy.'

'Congratulate me, I have a son. We have called him Uriel. I am rich and working hard. But I'm happy.'

'They're short, his letters, aren't they?' said Tanzmann.

'Of course they're short,' said Tzila, 'since when did outlaws write novels?'

Tanzmann looked out at her from shadowed hollows. His hollow cheeks showed no movement, but it could be seen that a little hump was forming on his back.

Another year went by and another letter came. It said:

'Congratulate me. I have a daughter. We've called her Aliza. I am rich. I'm working harder than ever since my father-in-law died. Now I run the whole business. But I'm happy.'

This time Tanzmann did not complain that Urinko's letters were short; he got up from the armchair, went to the kitchen, took a bottle of water from the fridge, poured a glassful and drank. The water filled the hollows for a moment. Tzila came in after him: 'What's the matter with you? Stand up straight.'

'Keep your advice to yourself!' roared Tanzmann.

These three letters were the only ones Tzila ever received from Urinko, despite the fact that she wrote to Melbourne once a fortnight. Sometimes, as she sat opposite Tanzmann in the evenings

two years ago. Do you know where he could be? I miss him very much. If you know anything, please write. Yours, Aliza.'

'I told you so,' said Tanzmann. 'I always knew he was an outlaw who couldn't keep his promises.'

Tzila wrote back at once: 'Dear Aliza, I don't know anything. For years I have written to you every fortnight and you have never written back. However, if you do hear anything about Urinko I would be grateful if you would write and let me know immediately.'

Aliza did write from time to time after that, but it was always the same letter: Urinko had not come home and nobody knew where he was.

Tzila had become an old, sad woman, and Tanzmann had become a hunchback, and they were cold in winter. 'We can afford a little luxury now, Cecilia,' said Tanzmann, and bought an electric blanket.

They say it was the blanket that did it. Who can tell? They were two old people sleeping the sleep of the innocent, and they felt nothing.

The neighbours smelled the smoke and summoned the fire brigade, but Tzila and Tanzmann had become cinders long before they succeeded in putting out the fire. Of the balalaika Tzila appeared to be holding in her charred hands only the strings remained, twisted like broken springs.

The neighbours approached the Australian Embassy, but the family informed them that they had not the faintest idea as to where Urinko might be found. The clerk explained to them that the granddaughter had suggested looking for him in one of the hippy colonies on the West Coast, though her mother's private investigator had reported, among other things, that the case was hopeless and that he would never come back. The report said: 'I traced the subject to San Francisco, where he is making a living busking; he plays the harmonica. Everything points to him being a member of a cult though there is no hard evidence to this effect; such cults are extremely suspicious of strangers and cannot be investigated.'

Thus Tzila's prayers were answered, if she had only known.

knitting a sweater for Uriel or for Aliza – a bigger sweater every year – the vague thought of how many good spots there must be in Melbourne would make its way into her head. But when she looked up at Tanzmann and his hump, the thought would dissolve into the notes of some song or other. Then she would pick up her balalaika and play until Tanzmann complained, 'That's enough for today.'

### III

The years passed, and Tzila, who had once looked so like a ball rolling itself along, became a matchstick with a silver head. Her hair was as long and curly as ever, and just as full of tangles, but she never cut it. Tanzmann sold his factory and retired. He kept a stock of tanned leather at home and would sometimes sew a wallet or a satchel which Tzila would post to Melbourne together with the latest sweater she had knitted. Sometimes he would repair things; he liked taking them apart and putting them back together. If he found an old radio thrown away in the street he would bring it home, and he once even hired the dustman to drag back an old fridge for him.

'That's dangerous,' said Tzila. 'I've read about children falling into them and getting trapped. They die.'

'There aren't any children left around here,' replied Tanzmann.

While he tinkered, Tzila would play, but the neighbours could hardly hear her now since the area had become so noisy. Buses and lorries filled the street. So even though Tzila sang loudly, nobody told her now what a marvellous voice she had.

One day she received a letter from Aliza. She knew immediately that it was not Urinko's writing, and had worked out who had written the letter before she even opened the envelope. Aliza wrote:

'Dear Grandma, I am writing to tell you my father has disappeared. He told us one day he was going to America on business, he left, and we have not heard from him since. That was almost

The neighbours made a collection to bury them side by side along with the strings of the balalaika. They even paid for a tombstone, upon which was inscribed: 'Here lies Tzila (Cecilia) Kasten, singer and musician, and Arnold (Fuchsi) Tanzmann, tanner, who kept his promises.'

(1993)

Translated by Deborah Silver

## New Women's Writing from Israel



## Nava Semel

## The Author

**N**ava Semel was born in Tel Aviv in 1954. She holds an MA in art history from Tel Aviv University. She is the author of poetry, prose for children and adults, and drama. She is the recipient of several literary prizes, including the American National Jewish Book Award for children's literature.

## Books Published in Hebrew

- Poems on Pregnancy and Birth, Sifriat Poalim, 1983  
 'A Hat of Glass' (stories), Sifriat Poalim, 1985  
 The Child Behind the Eyes (monodrama), Modan, 1987  
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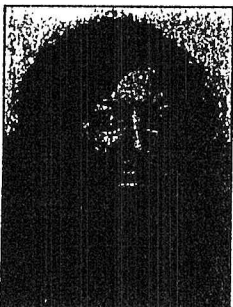
232

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 'Until the Entire Guard has Passed', *Jerusalem Post Magazine* (28 July 1995), pp. 20-2

\*The star indicates in each case the book containing the story which is included in this anthology.



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**R**uth Almog was born in Petah Tikva in 1936 to an Orthodox family of German descent. After studying literature and philosophy she taught for a number of years. Since 1967 she has been an editor at the literary section of *Ha'aretz*. She is well known in Israel as a novelist, short-story writer and author of children's books. In 1986 she was awarded two prizes for children's literature. *Roots of Light* won the distinguished Brenner Prize in 1989. Some of her works have been

'A Hat of Glass', *The Best of Ariel: A Celebration of Contemporary Israeli Prose, Poetry and Art* (1993), Vol. 1, pp. 249-63

*Flying Lessons*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995

*Povestea Gershonei, Fiat Lux*, Bucharest, 1995



## Leah Aini

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**L**eah Aini was born in 1962 in the south Tel Aviv neighbourhood of her stories. She is an award-winning poet, novel and short-story writer and children's author. She received the 1994 Prime Minister's Prize.

## Books Published in Hebrew

- Portrait (poetry), Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988  
 The Empress of Imagined Fertility (poetry), Hakibbutz Hameuchad/Siman Kriah, 1991  
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213

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 The Exile (novel), Am Oved, 1971  
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 The Stranger and the Foe (novel), Sifriat Poalim, 1980  
 Death in the Rain (novel), Keter, 1982  
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