

An extract from *Jerusalem, through dewdrops of light*

by Daniella Pinkstein

Translated by Vineet Lal

This is an extract from *Jerusalem, through dewdrops of light*, forthcoming (in French) this October (Éditions Biblieurope, Paris). The text consists of a series of 'short novels' centred on Jerusalem – tales which are not only conceived of as a city in themselves, but also as fables that tell of an enlightened humanity, turning each of us into a shard of eternity.

Introduction

Where does Jerusalem begin?

‘*Lech Lecha*, go towards thyself, go forth out of thy country’ not only marked the beginning of a civilisation, but also ushered in the transhumant language of hope. A unique mode of expression, capable of holding its own among the many tongues of the world, a language of truth among tongues that divide. Their transcription, like letters of credence, was not purely – as the West stubbornly maintained – part of the world of aesthetics and metaphysics, but also part of the continuity of the temporal space inhabited by man.

‘When a man begins to utter the word which will ultimately be that uttered by all men, it is inevitably a sharp, sudden word, which strikes like a rock or a bolt of lightning deep in the mountains at the beginning of winter, in the core of the earth.’¹

But on what shores should we now wait for all those *Luftmenschen*, those visionary spokesmen who, across the whole of Europe, were inspired by their incandescent words to believe in that inner Jerusalem, ‘of gold and light’? What now remains of their earth-shaking prophecies?

In this world sporadically plunged into ‘the darkness’, as André Chouraqui called it, we should still be able to dream of a Jerusalem, one both tenacious and verbose, which would carry within it, by means of this alphabet bathed in dewdrops of light, the spirit of an extraordinary future. Because from that Jerusalem was born an unbreakable promise,

¹ Claude Vigée, *Vision et silence dans la poésie juive: Demain la seule demeure*, L’Harmattan, 1999.

carried from mouth to mouth, from century to century, far beyond days, beyond fear, the desert, beyond oblivion and even disbelief, turning each of us into a shard of eternity.

Wrestling with 'Ish', a being with neither a name nor a face, earned Jacob the name 'Israel': he who 'wrestles with God and with men' on the dusty earth of history. From that struggle in a shapeless night, which left him limping forever after, he emerged fully conscious of his encounter – the embodiment of absolute time – in which man had come face to face with Mankind.

Jerusalem is not the only face of time, nor the sole face of History. But these shores which divide, at their heart, a host of civilisations, urge us – from Athens to the East – to yearn for such a confrontation, so as to find ourselves, eye to eye, longing for that new dawn, impatiently dreaming, as we must, of its imminent arrival.



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Extract

In this particular story, we encounter a character who finds himself adrift, stunned by History, losing and then finding himself again in the desert leading to Jerusalem.

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This was my first journey to the Land so promised, so hoped for, so eagerly awaited. I had taken a scheduled flight, not just to ensure my comfort but also my drinks and meals which – for their part – were not so much promised as guaranteed. I'd even invested in a first-class ticket, forcing me to spend my first night in Jerusalem in a hotel classed as 'youth accommodation' so as to balance my budget. For sixty years, my homeland had never allowed me to travel anywhere at all, and the faintest sigh of longing for Israel would have sent me to prison for 'high treason'. If I were lucky.

My family and I had lived through the communist era while striving to turn our gaze elsewhere. Until he was arrested, Imre, my uncle, would bravely organise discussion groups focused mainly on Jewish philosophers and painters, and when he was set free, all skin and bone, his eyes sunk back to the far reaches of infinity, he no longer wished to hear about our so-called 'election'. Yet in this country which had no elections, in neither a literal nor a figurative sense, in this chillingly communal place built around a black hole, they remained our last proof of eloquence. It was around this time, during the final spasms of the decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall, that Jerusalem became for us a hope-filled place of bliss, slipping neatly between a horrific reminder of European sadism and the spectacular rebirth of the horizon of humanity. A new dawn that two thousand years of exile and death hadn't managed to overshadow. Being Jewish had become a sudden space you could occupy, despite everything, liberated from the shackles of our designated places.

A space for an everlasting Sabbath. In any case, this was how Jerusalem was recreated, centred on a group of Jews made of broken glass and shattered windows, of suffering and nostalgia. We were a dozen or so in all, and we'd rolled up our sleeves, studying the layers of history that, over the centuries, the city had embodied, foreshadowed, assigned in our name – we, who were still held hostage by barbarians.

Of that loyal, amorphous group, forever expanding and contracting, from week to week, to the random beat of arrest and release, I am the only one left. And yet, for years on end we had breathed the same rotten air, the same murky sky, the same shabby living room where, hearts blazing with passion, we would hold forth and debate that earthly Jerusalem, our feet treading its soil in the weightlessness of our shared vision. When Anna, the first to leave our little circle, escaped beyond what they referred to as the Iron Curtain, the group began to lose its sense of unity. Then Miklós, my closest friend, emigrated secretly to France; as for Csilla, she had married a British conductor who was visiting Hungary, and who passed away a year after their wedding; Gyula, my brother-in-law, never returned from his stay in hospital, without the slightest illness ever being diagnosed; and the remaining five disappeared into the bottomless depths of fallen communism, which collapsed one autumn day like some flabby, shapeless mass.

When the aforementioned curtain became nothing more than acrylic, Jerusalem no longer brought us together. I was left holding the torch on my own, its flame now extinguished, slumbering in a deep, perpetual darkness from which I finally seemed to awaken that morning, in that El Al plane, packed to the point of suffocation.

It was only a few hours' flight from Budapest, but I had fallen asleep immediately after we took off. I awoke with a start in a rash state of panic, while the darkness stretched out, across the cloud-covered sphere which curved itself smoothly around us. The sheer range

of people I saw before me, lit by the yellowish neon of the plane, was so striking that it took me an eternity to be sure I really was there, and not in the place I'd just dreamt of. Amongst those standing to pray, I could barely tell skullcaps from kippas, their jerky movements evoked no ancient times, not even those we had imagined with such an elated sense of euphoria in our group. Some of the women wore coloured headscarves, others had short wigs or long, silken hair which might have been real or fake, it was impossible to say. Without any jostling, without even brushing against one another, children were handing out drinks along each aisle. I observed the scene like a hallucination in which I was the dissonant element. Languages mingled, clashing, I recognised my own, that Hungarian with its gently cooing, staccato lilt, and of course I also recognised Hebrew, German, a bit of French, but there were yet more, muscling in, ruthless, unyielding, as if to say to the rest that they served no purpose. No purpose at all, unable to speak of the world yet to come.

Were we in that everlasting space?

A stewardess suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. In fluent Hungarian, she offered me a choice between some hummus and an Israeli salad. Increasingly preoccupied by the unreality of my surroundings, I opted for the salad which seemed more 'materialist', to use vocabulary which had abruptly become familiar again. I ate slowly, deliberately. The man sitting beside me, who'd been snoring contentedly, then flicking through an Arab newspaper, rustling the pages noisily, was now reading the Amidah, his body bent over at a ludicrous angle to remain standing upright. My mother, who had in fact wanted to forget her Judaism, had managed to convince my father – who for his part had wanted to forget everything – to organise my bar mitzvah. Studying for it, just like the ceremony itself, has faded in my memory, as if lost in a dense fog. The synagogue on Rumbach Street, the only

one we were allowed to attend, was cold and austere. But I do remember the silence, so strange, which was not the inverse of speech – a silence during which, standing, we would recite the Amidah in little more than a whisper. I now looked at this slightly gruff, awkward man, neither completely doubled over nor perfectly straight, who took me, as if floating, back to my parents, wearing my special-occasion suit, such as it was – like that timid child, not daring to confront his own self just moments before his appointment with destiny.

The landing was like thousands of other landings, accompanied by loud sighs of relief; the scrum around our baggage, just like anywhere else, was violent and utterly pointless.

A taxi was waiting for me outside, with my name written on a sign. Vázsonyi! But the ‘z’ and the final ‘i’ were missing. I pretended not to recognise myself. I had no intention of going to a youth hostel, nor any hotel.

I got into a yellow bus whose destination was written on it in Hebrew. I had no idea what it said. The people onboard were carrying heavy parcels, knapsacks, backpacks, they seemed to be embarking on a long journey. Among them, women, men of all ages, dark-skinned individuals, pale-looking patriarchs with thick beards; in couples or alone, they entered patiently and slowly took their seats. I sat down near the driver, facing the huge tinted window of the vehicle.

We drove for a long time, crossing changing landscapes, noise and chaos, roads less travelled, silent highways, precipitous slopes.

When I caught sight of the first cliffs in that rocky desert, which I could never have conceived of in my dreams, nor even imagined in some nostalgic state of exhilaration, I was filled with the poignant certainty that one day all roads would lead us, hearts

pounding, to Jerusalem. To believe once more that, with each incandescent setting of the sun, we would be the first to hope.



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