

Writing Jerusalem

Introduction.

In January of 2010, we held an evening of reading and discussion called "Writing Jerusalem". A group of Jerusalem writers, both amateur and published, came together to discuss the process of writing in Jerusalem; their relationship with the city. The evening started with a reading by Matt Rees, author of the Omar Yusuf mysteries, who gave a general overview of what it means to be a writer in Jerusalem, part of a chain of writers who have carried the "rumour" of the city to where it is today. This was followed by a reading by Channa Coggan from Amos Elon's work "Jerusalem: A city of mirrors", vignettes discussing Jerusalem as a guarded city, and Jerusalem's beauty. Next, we had a reading from Judith Sudilovsky, a journalist and writer, who read her own piece, "Basma Rides the Bus", a snippet of life on a Jerusalem bus, the thoughts and worlds of its passengers. Barbara Roth, a Jerusalem-based film producer read the next piece, a "love poem to Jerusalem" which some of our audience described as "very Davidic" in style. This was followed by a series of poems by the award-winning Jerusalem-based poet Lynley Shimat Lys. Another award-winning poet spoke next, the Efrat-based poet Yakov Azriel, who read his poem, "Seeking in Jerusalem the gateways". The last reading of the evening was by Nadia Jacobson. Between each of the readings, there was discussion of what they added to our understanding of Jerusalem, and of writing Jerusalem. The evening finished with a focus on the audience, as each member said something about themselves, a process which we hope aided the establishment of a more genuine literary community in Jerusalem. After the meeting, I received a piece of Jerusalem-writing from Yosefa Fogel, who had been working on it at the time that the meeting took place.

Most of the evening's readings can be found below:

Matt Beynon's Rees' introduction:

"Jerusalem is a rumor, fed by the whispers of centuries, until its echo returns distorted from its tittle-tattle travels, unrecognizable to those who live in it. Like all rumors, it is unreliable and somehow more broadly accepted than the reality.

I arrived in 1996, drawn by my relationship with a woman, rather than any particular fascination with Jerusalem. Of course, I had heard the rumors like everyone else; they crept out from the Bible and the histories of Rome and of Islam, on through my two great-uncles, who rode into town with Britain's Imperial Camel Corps in 1917. But I came with few preconceptions, and that's how I stayed. Though my business at first was the news, I was under no illusions about the uselessness of newspaper and magazine formulas for unveiling the truth of a place. I tried to travel the neighborhoods of Jerusalem with an anthropologist's eye. It turned out I was attempting, as a writer, to do just what Ilan Mizrahi has been able to do as a photographer.

When I arrived, journalists were busy writing about the dull mechanics of the Oslo peace process. Lots of stories about the first Palestinian beer, the first Palestinian

Olympic team, Palestine's acceptance into FIFA, and the first joint patrols between Israeli and Palestinian soldiers. None of these developments amounted to much in the end, except perhaps the beer, but foreigners were so preoccupied with these pointless milestones that they were slow to see the danger signs. When I joined Time as Jerusalem bureau chief in 2000, the magazine's editors had been considering hiring a business writer, because they believed that peace was on the way and that Israel's high-tech industry would become the center of the story. Then came the intifada. Which only goes to show how little editors know.

I wasn't as surprised as many by the violence which engulfed the second half of the period covered by Ilan Mizrahi's book. One morning in 1998, I awoke in my Abu Tor apartment to discover 300 East Jerusalem Palestinians protesting on my street, where one of their compatriots had been stabbed early that morning. It wasn't the fact that they turned out to chant and throw their fists in the air that shocked me, but that ready and waiting they had a massive Palestinian flag, five meters by three, which they had draped over a wall. This was supposed to be a neighborhood where the Arab residents weren't militant and yet this flag materialized. But I heard something else in their cry, choking them less with politics than with the dryness of the old desert traditions of blood feud. So it was no surprise to me four years later when a Jewish woman was stabbed in the woods abutting the same street.

Since then, the Jerusalem of the newspapers has been the realm of endless suicide bombs and clichés about an "intractable conflict." But the intifada revealed so much more, if you only looked. In 2002, 45 percent of small businesses in Jerusalem went bankrupt. That, in a city already stricken by some of the worst poverty in Israel. A city with a Palestinian refugee camp within its municipal boundaries, and another "camp," Mahaneh Yehuda, where junkies shoot up at night.

When I came to write my nonfiction account of life here, *Cain's Field*, I went to the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods around Mea She'arim to write about the conflict between the burgeoning religious population and the old inhabitants, mostly from Morocco, being shoved out because they weren't religious enough. As I walked through these streets, I noticed that schoolchildren stopped to stare suspiciously at me. I felt more foreign than I've ever done wandering a Gaza refugee camp. To me it was an important lesson about Jerusalem: its alienness comes to you when you least expect it. The sights and sounds to which you've been attuned all your life -- the Bible, the news, poetry and art -- can inspire, so long as you let them. With repetition, they dwindle into inflated half-truths for which you feel contempt or anger or boredom. But in the places where you'd expect Jerusalem to be drab and rotting, the places which aren't the subject of scripture or famous songs, there you find the timeless moments of enlightenment. There, the city is no longer a whispered rumor. Instead, *it* speaks to *you*, loudly, berates you, until you're forced to acknowledge that it isn't what you thought it was. It never will be."

Matt wrote this piece as an introduction to Ilan Mizrahi's photobook about Jerusalem, "Existence". You can find out more about "Existence", here:
http://www.photoshelter.com/c/ilanmizrahi/gallery/EXISTENCE-THE-BOOK/G0000SAGqcbk_vuM/

You can find out more about Matt's work, here:

Website: www.mattbeynonrees.com

Blog: www.themanoftwistsandturns.com

Some Jerusalem Poems by LynleyShimat Lys:

The Waiting Alley

Through the space of an arch a world opened for me.

I reveled in its shaded turns as a time traveler.

The stairs climbed out of view like an Escher maze :

An ascent of aged stone angles into the air.

Some quick impulse led me to this alley.

If it were you, I would write it the same.

And One Night

I smell the Jerusalem rain,

Hovering in the air, thick as sheep's wool

Not yet carded and spun. Your laughing

In contrast to the ancient stone.

You were so beautiful, you were edible.

Just sweet enough and I wanted to take you

From the tree, like the fruit of knowing good and evil.

I wanted to weave stories around you,

To be your Scheherazade for a thousand nights

And one night. But you were tired high,

Running on three hours of sleep to

An eight a.m. class changing rooms.

The low roll of your voice, *shukran*,

Ana jaayy la sinema ma9kum, the warm stone

Of your response. And *Shimat* reveals
My listening. Or hearing the vibrations.
Your words seep into my inner ear.
I understood because you spoke.
And the Arabic teacher will say, *mazbuut*,
Richtig, c'est vraie,é verro, because in me
A thousand tongues will take root.
The correct story would align me, you,
Soft limestone wadis, a path
Flavored with fog suspended.

Lifta – Still Life

It could be midnight.
The dark, draped like leaves.
An open door.
The grasses gather on all sides.
The house is silent.
No echos.
But someone lived here.
Not long ago a key turned
In the brass lock.
(Was there a door here?)
The window frame, a moment ago paned with glass,
Has merged into the night outside.
Welcome, come enter. Someone's absent,
Hear the air holding its breath

As if suspended.

A balcony mosaic remembers missing tiles.

A bedroom stands open, waiting for its sleepers.

(So deceptive, this illusion of frozen time!)

On the stone wall, a sunflower.

On the earth under the windowsills a blue tile,

Dusty but still bright.

Tea Room

A seamy gilded over

Russian tea room

completed in samovar gleam

arranges itself around

our candle lit darkened frames.

Oeuvre of pictures:

We reveal the raw materials

our lives draw from.

Language floats about the air

r-shaped curls eliminate

French origins: we breathe in

Jerusalem night.

Russians trail their lines

and queues across our thoughts;

your men, my books, obsessive,

our causes. We arrive.

If Arad Exists

After Zagajewski's "To Go To Lvov"

When the train stops in Arad (which it never did, but say it does)
Streams mumble underground, and wadis unfold in all directions.
Every street end vanishes into soft signs of earth and weeds
I call by other names from Bedouin folklore, thistle lances.
Walk into the wadi, sand hills climbing on all sides, salt rivers
Cascade down with every step, turning me to sodium like themselves.
A stray acacia embeds itself under my skin, images
Visible and unseen, rivers that feed its underground channels.
The army firing range on one side lies silent as night falls
Concealing sharp drops just steps beyond the dark path's subtle contours.
I was never lost in Arad, while its limits drew shifting maps
In the waiting desert, erasing the imprint of my footsteps.
Fogs breathe aloud, starch white joy hovering over the amber sands.
I write the scent of morning into a series of Arad poems.
O to go to Arad, where the dotted line of a roe deer bursts
Into the streets where Amos Oz writes his Jerusalem novels.
O to leave in haste for Arad, before the last Be'ersheva bus.
The rain peals its encores over and over on summer scorched hills.
But only if Arad exists – I'd resurrect the cooking school's
Absorption center location, bring back the Argentinians.
The steak grills smoking through the jasmine scented air. The giant moths,
The porcupines crossing the sidewalk, the flatness of their penknife spines.
There was too much of Arad, I looked out on its boundless limits.
The Tel Arad temple a cutout of holy Jerusalem.
It isn't Lvov, with thickets of burdock, fresh cream with raspberries,

Though the odd Pole may brim over with Fredros and Brzozowskis.
There was too much of Arad, the shuk with Arabic coffee mills
Revolving by themselves, my feet cold on absorption center floors.
There was too much of Arad, the cacti spread littered like soft ferns,
Acacia trees' voluptuous dresses, casting me small mercies
From the constant sun. Just go to Arad, where stands of palm trees
Tremble in the desert winds and all roads lead to waiting wadis.

Leaving Be'er Sheva

Naive as a ewe flock I stood looking
out over the Negev, facing North,
judging the Judean hills. white length.
It took us three days journey walking
to reach the peaks I see in the distance
and the arid sands stretching out before us.
As I stepped down to face the hazy light
the dry desert air sliced across my eyes
tinting all crimson with the flush of tears;
red waves to swallow up the desert white.
My vision came clear and I was seeing
omens to visit an unnamed mountain.
Called Mount Moriya in verse and we followed
to a place we were shown, toting incense
wood and flame for the fire. The angels,
the ram came later. We sought to hollow
out a groove within the rock, to hallow
that space we were given with our marrow,

To sanctify our fate against the sky.
The wadi's clay confetti hue washes
across windowsills, over eyelashes,
copper dust mascara to frame the eye.
In red bright iron the vision wavers.
I dream that I am Isaac being offered.
O Yiftach, give me back who I was
before the dance, before the white solstice,
before the gleam of the slaughtering blade
carved out our destiny in granite lines.
Be'er Sheva gleaming in the light of dawn -
Our schismed legacies becoming one.

You can find out more about LynleyShimat Lys on these sites;

<http://lynleyshimatlyspoetry.weebly.com/>
<http://essaysAndPlays.weebly.com>

“Seeking in Jerusalem the Gateways” by Yakov Azriel

"Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem." (Psalm 122:2)

Jaffa Gate: Saturday. Dusk. From the Throne of God

Silently descend threads of a blue veil

To enwrap, entwine, and tint the pale

White stone houses of Jerusalem. Three stars wait

In the darkening sky for us to celebrate

Havdalah, and shut the Shabbat gate.

Zion Gate: Monday's dawn unlatches the gate

Of learning. Can you overhear God

Whisper, or can you glimpse the veil

That masked Moses as we read from the pale

White parchment of the Torah? The Jerusalem winds impatiently wait

Outside the stone study-hall, and in the leaves of olive trees, celebrate.

Flowers' Gate: Tuesday morning clouds embrace, merge, celebrate,

And stroke the Jerusalem hills. The gate

Of beauty never closes; the clouds, in their search for God,

Transform into stones, trees, temples, and finally a veil.

Leaves of olive trees (turning from dark to pale

Green), turning like the pages of a prayer-book, whisper and wait.

Damascus Gate: Do you too seek revelation? Why wait

For the blinding sun-rays of Wednesday noon to celebrate

Jerusalem's splendor, and entrance you; the gate

Of prophecy needs only a gentle touch; God

Has written you a message in the crevices of stone; under the veil

Find inscribed your name: deciphered, decoded, and pale.

Lions' Gate: After touching the Kotel's stones, a pale

Hand opens a prayer-book. The words do not wait

For a minyan to gather as they reverberate, celebrate,

And ascend on Thursday afternoon, unlocking the gate

Of prayer. Beyond words, beyond Jerusalem's skies, God

Listens as words of prayer strive to move aside the veil.

Dung Gate: Do the large, silent stones of the Kotel veil

The Shechinah, blushing beyond the pale?

The stones, losing color in the Friday twilight, wait

For us to dance, to herald and celebrate
The Shabbat's arrival, opening the gate
Of compassion, the gate closest to God.

The Gate of Compassion:

Who cannot celebrate Jerusalem? Who can wait

Outside the Sanctuary's gate? Pale

Pilgrims, we lift, hands trembling, the veil of God.

“I thought I knew this city” by Yosefa Fogel

I thought I knew this city. Countless times in past years I have walked through its narrow alleyways on tired feet, on anxious feet, on feet crowded by the presence of many others. I have walked here, past these thick limestone blocks on my way to buy a book from the silver-haired clerk, on my way to pray at a wall currently a hopeful remnant of something greater, on my way to read in a quiet corner, unifying text with its origin. I thought I knew all the joys these ancient streets had to offer and what rooftops were ideal for city-gazing at the aerial boundaries between us and them. I thought the whispers escaping from the cracks between the stones were all that was to be heard.

But I was mistaken. Because walking through these alleyways with you is like walking through a city I have never seen before; a city, that is slowly becoming our own. I never saw that playground on the lower right-hand side of the parking lot—empty at the time of day we pass it together—a resting playground, tired after its hot day in the sun. I have sat in this corner illuminated by bright yellow-tinged lights, the one overlooking that looming beige wall promising to one day be something greater; a corner with a clear view of the black and white anarchy below. I've been here. Of course I've been here. But sitting on this black, porous bench with you transforms this place into something excitingly unfamiliar; as if the hours I spent sitting in the corner across the way, is from another lifetime altogether. A lifetime before you.

We pass by the young yeshiva students, sitting there for what seems like years on end. They sit by the orange telephone booth that's surprisingly still in use, on slabs of concrete I once sat on in the center of the square, making jokes and playfully pushing one another. The clothes have changed with the passing years' fads, but the conversations are the same, hovering in an eternal spiral above the square. The conversations and singsong rhythm of their familiar voices now feel distant, for I have left my makeshift concrete stool for a bench with room for two.

You say there's something incomplete about that sweet-faced young girl in a baby blue Bnei Akiva shirt. People are meant to walk with a partner, you say. See? That couple looks different. You can sense the difference in their postures, their joint posture. They, are a team, you say looking directly into my eyes, stopping our stride in the middle of the pathway. Just like us.

Tonight, the stones tenderly whisper words in my ear that I've never heard before. So accustomed to listening intently to these voices, I am surprised because their tone has changed completely. Once they spoke of idealism and religious fervor, but tonight they speak of love and devotion to a place and a person I never want to lose. Perhaps the whispers are yours, traveling from your lips to my waiting ears, for I can no longer tell the difference between the collective voice of the stones and our own. But I think they're praying with us, also hoping this will work. They're hoping that the spell this city has placed on us isn't limited to a specific time and place, but that we will stay in this place forever.