

Israel: A Cycle of Poems

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OLD

1. Balinese Carver

This is VERY old
MORE than 400 years.
No, not over 200
that would be my grandfather
this is before my grandfather
I know the style
this is over 400
somebody must have taken it from a temple.

2. Javanese Store

This is very, very old
How old?
About forty years.
(Where does that leave me?)

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This is seventeen six
one seven six
from the palace in Solo
seventeenth century
about one hundred fifty years old.

3. *Varanasi Shop*

This is Buddha
very old
he said
and reading the label
fifth century A.D.

But this head is not old
said I
it is new.

No
it is old
sir
very old
more than five years.

You want to see really old things
come to my house
to see really old things
a thousand
two thousand
ten thousand years old.

Oh
you know about these things
you are like my father
you know and I don't know
maybe you are a professor.

4. *Near Bethlehem*

This is not old
it was built by the TURKISH Solomon
four hundred fifty years ago.

ABRAHAM IN JAVA

Today is a Mohammed holiday.
I am a Christian
My name is Abukadaba
everyone calls me Harry.
The Mohammed celibate
do you know the name of the man
he almost killed his son
but at the last moment he turned into a goat
so today they sacrifice goats.
—Do they really sacrifice goats? or sheep?
Goats and sheep
that is the same thing.

KIBBUTZ EIN HAROD

fell family fell children fell only son fell
wife's father first husband only son fell
Flowers
playground children's house cheerful talk
 I am courting Millie with some success
 she is fourteen months old
 her father was killed before she was born
 his father also fell
stars and a glass of Cremisan wine
 I planted olivetrees

she has eight children
 barren soil we redeemed
 with money and toil and blood.

Clearing the ground at Bet Alpha nearby
 spades hit a synagogue floor
 mosaics of Abraham and Isaac
 ass ram and altar
 the names in legible Hebrew
 lions Menorahs and birds
 old when Muhammad was born.

Near the olive grove
 Gideon's Spring
 the Biblical book about it
 was ancient when Rome was founded.

Fighting since time immemorial
 to hold on to this land
 fathers prepared to sacrifice
 sons whom they love.

THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

1

They are not against Jews
 against Zionists only
 but no Jew may enter Arabia.

They have nothing against the religion
 but to enter Jordan
 you need a baptismal certificate
 and when Jordan annexed the Old City

no Jew could pray at the Wall
synagogues were destroyed
gravestones were used to build
and the world said nothing.

Their hands are the hands of Esau
but the eyes of the world are weak.

2

Let the Jews go back where they came from!
to the womb?
To the lands where their parents were born!
More than half came from Arab countries
should they join their brothers
in Syrian prisons
or go back to Iraq to be hanged?

Before the Sinai War
shopkeepers in the Cairo bazaars
echoed the Leader
We love the Germans
the only thing wrong with Hitler
was he didn't kill All the Jews.

3

Never mind what they say
they don't mean it.

Sweet words of comfort
heard often when Hitler spoke
Never mind what he says
never mind.

JERUSALEM

1

The newborn clouds
and ancient stones
are fire in the wind.

The city wall
and rocks that play
among the olivetrees

glow in the changing light.

2

Nothing is smooth
the shortest walk
a stony climb

Nothing is bland
the trees and rocks
a dance of light.

Nothing recurs
each tree and stone
has its own face.

Nothing is mute
each has its past
and sends its roots
into my soul.

3

The mountains in the sun
rise beyond the deepest rift
and the oldest city.

We live on the edge
of the abyss.

Thousands of years of destruction
haunt us wherever we walk
putting to shame what is new.

4

Huddled in smog they write
the mood must be somber
not knowing the stars that burn the night
rocks glowing like suns in the day.

Yours is the column of smoke
ours the pillar of fire.

Are we dancing to Nero's music?

We did not kindle these flames
they were lit in the desert
brought here by David
who danced as they entered
king of sorrows and love
poet
fighter
and harpist.

This is the city of David.

INTENSITY

I

Every bush burns
every olivetree speaks

the earth is emaciated
rocks protrude

pierced by
relentless time

what is not essential
has been chiseled away

but the most needed
are also dead.

II

Even boarding a bus
the survivors of Auschwitz

for years lived in terror
of staying behind

Avoid the crowds
every olivetree speaks

The distance between us
went up in smoke

our masks were burnt
in ovens.

III

Naked we meet
brothers at first sight

Your breath on my face
does not mean I look different

and unlike fairskinned
Indians won't hit you

You have known me forever
and seek common memories

Every soul burns
Few speak like olivetrees.

GEHENNA

In Berlin I became a rhinoceros
walking alone
with a skin like armor.

The Buddha taught
in the Sutta Nipata:
 Like a huge elephant
 that quits the herd and finds
 a lotus-covered pond
 wander alone like a rhinoceros.

In Jerusalem I feel flayed
walking alone I succumb to attachment
nothing shields me
from sun or stars.

Among those who hated me
I had peace.

In the lucid beauty
of the Valley of Hinnom
I burn.