Classic Poetry Series

Yehuda Amichai

- poems -

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A Dog After Love

After you left me
I let a dog smell at
My chest and my belly. It will fill its nose
And set out to find you.

I hope it will tear the
Testicles of your lover and bite off his penis
Or at least
Will bring me your stockings between his teeth.

Yehuda Amichai

A Jewish Cemetery In Germany

On a little hill amid fertile fields lies a small cemetery,
a Jewish cemetery behind a rusty gate, hidden by shrubs,
abandoned and forgotten. Neither the sound of prayer
nor the voice of lamentation is heard there
for the dead praise not the Lord.
Only the voices of our children ring out, seeking graves
and cheering
each time they find one--like mushrooms in the forest, like
wild strawberries.
Here's another grave! There's the name of my mother's
mothers, and a name from the last century. And here's a name,
and there! And as I was about to brush the moss from the name--
Look! an open hand engraved on the tombstone, the grave
of a kohen,
his fingers splayed in a spasm of holiness and blessing,
and here's a grave concealed by a thicket of berries
that has to be brushed aside like a shock of hair
from the face of a beautiful beloved woman.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

A Man In His Life

A man doesn't have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.
When he loses he seeks, when he finds
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul
is very professional.
Only his body remains forever
an amateur. It tries and it misses,
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,
drunk and blind in its pleasures
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,
the leaves growing dry on the ground,
the bare branches pointing to the place
where there's time for everything.

Yehuda Amichai

A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention

They amputated
Your thighs off my hips.
As far as I'm concerned
They are all surgeons. All of them.

They dismantled us
Each from the other.
As far as I'm concerned
They are all engineers. All of them.

A pity. We were such a good
And loving invention.
An aeroplane made from a man and wife.
Wings and everything.
We hovered a little above the earth.

We even flew a little.

Yehuda Amichai

A Precise Woman

A precise woman with a short haircut brings order
to my thoughts and my dresser drawers,
moves feelings around like furniture
into a new arrangement.
A woman whose body is cinched at the waist and firmly divided
into upper and lower,
with weather-forecast eyes
of shatterproof glass.
Even her cries of passion follow a certain order,
one after the other:
tame dove, then wild dove,
then peacock, wounded peacock, peacock, peacock,
the wild dove, tame dove, dove dove
thrush, thrush, thrush.

A precise woman: on the bedroom carpet
her shoes always point away from the bed.
(My own shoes point toward it.)

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

An Arab Shepherd Is Searching For His Goat On Mount Zion

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy.
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
Both in their temporary failure.
Our two voices met above
The Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.
Neither of us wants the boy or the goat
To get caught in the wheels
Of the "Had Gadya" machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes,
And our voices came back inside us
Laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or for a child has always been
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.

Yehuda Amichai

And We Shall Not Get Excited

And we shall not get excited. Because a translator
May not get excited. Calmly, we shall pass on
Words from man to son, from one tongue
To others' lips, un-
Knowingly, like a father who passes on
The features of his dead father's face
To his son, and he himself is like neither of them. Merely a mediator.

We shall remember the things we held in our hands
That slipped out.
What I have in my possesion and what I do not have in my possession.

We must not get excited.
Calls and their callers drowned. Or, my beloved
Gave me a few words before she left,
To bring up for her.

And no more shall we tell what we were told
To other tellers. Silence as admission. We must not
Get excited.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Before

Before the gate has been closed,
before the last question is posed,
before I am transposed.
Before the weeds fill the gardens,
before there are no pardons,
before the concrete hardens.
Before all the flute-holes are covered,
before things are locked in then cupboard,
before the rules are discovered.
Before the conclusion is planned,
before God closes his hand,
before we have nowhere to stand.

Translated by Chana Bloch And Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

Do Not Accept

Do not accept these rains that come too late.
Better to linger. Make your pain
An image of the desert. Say it's said
And do not look to the west. Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too
To live alone in the long summer,
Eat your drying bread, refrain
From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,
My return late at night, what has been written
In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference

Now. See your events as my events.
Everything will be as before: Abraham will again
Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Ein Yahav

A night drive to Ein Yahav in the Arava Desert,
a drive in the rain. Yes, in the rain.
There I met people who grow date palms,
there I saw tamarisk trees and risk trees,
there I saw hope barbed as barbed wire.
And I said to myself: That's true, hope needs to be
like barbed wire to keep out despair,
hope must be a mine field.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

Forgetting Someone

Forgetting someone is like forgetting to turn off the light
in the backyard so it stays lit all the next day

But then it is the light that makes you remember.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Submitted by Angelica Rodriguez

Yehuda Amichai

God Full Of Mercy

God-Full-of-Mercy, the prayer for the dead.
If God was not full of mercy,
Mercy would have been in the world,
Not just in Him.
I, who plucked flowers in the hills
And looked down into all the valleys,
I, who brought corpses down from the hills,
Can tell you that the world is empty of mercy.
I, who was King of Salt at the seashore,
Who stood without a decision at my window,
Who counted the steps of angels,
Whose heart lifted weights of anguish
In the horrible contests.

I, who use only a small part
Of the words in the dictionary.

I, who must decipher riddles
I don't want to decipher,
Know that if not for the God-full-of-mercy
There would be mercy in the world,
Not just in Him.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

God Has Pity On Kindergarten Children

God has pity on kindergarten children,
He pities school children -- less.
But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,
And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the scorching sand
To reach the dressing station,
Streaming with blood.

But perhaps
He will have pity on those who love truly
And take care of them
And shade them
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
Our last pennies of kindness
Inherited from mother,

So that their own happiness will protect us
Now and on other days.

Yehuda Amichai

Half The People In The World

Half the people in the world love the other half,
half the people hate the other half.
Must I because of this half and that half go wandering
and changing ceaselessly like rain in its cycle,
must I sleep among rocks, and grow rugged like
the trunks of olive trees,
and hear the moon barking at me,
and camouflage my love with worries,
and sprout like frightened grass between the railroad
tracks,
and live underground like a mole,
and remain with roots and not with branches, and not
feel my cheek against the cheek of angels, and
love in the first cave, and marry my wife
beneath a canopy of beams that support the earth,
and act out my death, always till the last breath and
the last words and without ever understanding,
and put flagpoles on top of my house and a bob shelter
underneath. And go out on rads made only for
returning and go through all the appalling
stations—cat,stick,fire,water,butcher,
between the kid and the angel of death?
Half the people love,
half the people hate.
And where is my place between such well-matched halves,
and through what crack will I see the white housing
projects of my dreams and the bare foot runners
on the sands or, at least, the waving of a girl's
kerchief, beside the mound?

Translated by Chana Bloch And Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

I Have Become Very Hairy

I have become very hairy all over my body.
I'm afraid they'll start hunting me because of my fur.

My multicolored shirt has no meaning of love --
it looks like an air photo of a railway station.

At night my body is open and awake under the blanket,
like eyes under the blindfold of someone to be shot.

Restless I shall wander about;
hungry for life I'll die.

Yet I wanted to be calm, like a mound with all its cities destroyed,
and tranquil, like a full cemetery.

Yehuda Amichai

I Know A Man

I know a man
who photographed the view he saw
from the window of the room where he made love
and not the face of the woman he loved there.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

I Want To Die In My Own Bed

All night the army came up from Gilgal
To get to the killing field, and that's all.
In the ground, warf and woof, lay the dead.
I want to die in My own bed.
Like slits in a tank, their eyes were uncanny,
I'm always the few and they are the many.
I must answer. They can interrogate My head.
But I want to die in My own bed.

The sun stood still in Gibeon. Forever so, it's willing
to illuminate those waging battle and killing.
I may not see My wife when her blood is shed,
But I want to die in My own bed.

Samson, his strength in his long black hair,
My hair they sheared when they made me a hero
Perforce, and taught me to charge ahead.
I want to die in My own bed.

I saw you could live and furnish with grace
Even a lion's den, if you've no other place.
I don't even mind to die alone, to be dead,
But I want to die in My own bed.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Then let my right be forgotten.
Let my right be forgotten, and my left remember.
Let my left remember, and your right close
And your mouth open near the gate.

I shall remember Jerusalem
And forget the forest -- my love will remember,
Will open her hair, will close my window,
will forget my right,
Will forget my left.

If the west wind does not come
I'll never forgive the walls,
Or the sea, or myself.
Should my right forget
My left shall forgive,
I shall forget all water,
I shall forget my mother.

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Let my blood be forgotten.
I shall touch your forehead,
Forget my own,
My voice change
For the second and last time
To the most terrible of voices --
Or silence.

Yehuda Amichai

Jerusalem

On a roof in the Old City
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight:
The white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,
The towel of a man who is my enemy,
To wipe off the sweat of his brow.

In the sky of the Old City
A kite.
At the other end of the string,
A child
I can't see
Because of the wall.

We have put up many flags,
They have put up many flags.
To make us think that they're happy.
To make them think that we're happy.

Translated by Irena Gordon

Yehuda Amichai

Love Of Jerusalem

There is a street where they sell only red meat
And there is a street where they sell only clothes and perfumes. And there is a day when I see only cripples and the blind
And those covered with leprosy, and spastics and those with twisted lips.

Here they build a house and there they destroy
Here they dig into the earth
And there they dig into the sky,
Here they sit and there they walk
Here they hate and there they love.

But he who loves Jerusalem
By the tourist book or the prayer book
is like one who loves a women
By a manual of sex positions.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Memorial Day For The War Dead

Memorial day for the war dead. Add now
the grief of all your losses to their grief,
even of a woman that has left you. Mix
sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history,
which stacks holiday and sacrifice and mourning
on one day for easy, convenient memory.

Oh, sweet world soaked, like bread,
in sweet milk for the terrible toothless God.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."
No use to weep inside and to scream outside.
Behind all this perhaps some great happiness is hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt is dressed up
as a little girl with flowers.
The streets are cordoned off with ropes,
for the marching together of the living and the dead.
Children with a grief not their own march slowly,
like stepping over broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay like that for many days.
A dead soldier swims above little heads
with the swimming movements of the dead,
with the ancient error the dead have
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.
A shopwindow is decorated with
dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.
And everything in three languages:
Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

A great and royal animal is dying
all through the night under the jasmine
tree with a constant stare at the world.

A man whose son died in the war walks in the street
like a woman with a dead embryo in her womb.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."

Yehuda Amichai

My Child Wafts Peace

My child wafts peace.
When I lean over him,
It is not just the smell of soap.

All the people were children wafting peace.
(And in the whole land, not even one
Millstone remained that still turned).

Oh, the land torn like clothes
That can't be mended.
Hard, lonely fathers even in the cave of the Makhpela*
Childless silence.

My child wafts peace.
His mother's womb promised him
What God cannot
Promise us.

* The traditional burial place in Hebron of Abraham
and the other Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

My Father

The memory of my father is wrapped up in
white paper, like sandwiches taken for a day at work.

Just as a magician takes towers and rabbits
out of his hat, he drew love from his small body,

and the rivers of his hands
overflowed with good deeds.

Yehuda Amichai

Near The Wall Of A House

Near the wall of a house painted
to look like stone,
I saw visions of God.

A sleepless night that gives others a headache
gave me flowers
opening beautifully inside my brain.

And he who was lost like a dog
will be found like a human being
and brought back home again.

Love is not the last room: there are others
after it, the whole length of the corridor
that has no end.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

Of Three Or Four In The Room

Out of three or four in the room
One is always standing at the window.
Forced to see the injustice amongst the thorns,
The fires on the hills.

And people who left whole
Are brought home in the evening, like small change.

Out of three or four in the room
One is always standing at the window.
Hair dark above his thoughts.
Behind him, the words, wandering, without luggage,
Hearts without provision, prophecies without water
Big stones put there
Standing, closed like letters
With no addresses; and no one to receive them.

Yehuda Amichai

On Rabbi Kook's Street

On Rabbi Kook's Street
I walk without this good man--
A streiml he wore for prayer
A silk top hat he wore to govern,
fly in the wind of the dead
above me, float on the water
of my dreams.

I come to the Street of Prophets--there are none.
And the Street of Ethiopians--there are a few. I'm
looking for a place for you to live after me
padding your solitary nest for you,
setting up the place of my pain with the sweat of my brow
examining the road on which you'll return
and the window of your room, the gaping wound,
between closed and opened, between light and dark.

There are smells of baking from inside the shanty,
there's a shop where they distribute Bibles free,
free, free. More than one prophet
has left this tangle of lanes
while everything topples above him and he becomes someone else.

On Rabbi Kook's street I walk
--your bed on my back like a cross--
though it's hard to believe
a woman's bed will become the symbol of a new religion.

Yehuda Amichai

Temporary Poem Of My Time

Hebrew writing and Arabic writing go from east to west,
Latin writing, from west to east.
Languages are like cats:
You must not stroke their hair the wrong way.
The clouds come from the sea, the hot wind from the desert,
The trees bend in the wind,
And stones fly from all four winds,
Into all four winds. They throw stones,
Throw this land, one at the other,
But the land always falls back to the land.
They throw the land, want to get rid of it.
Its stones, its soil, but you can't get rid of it.
They throw stones, throw stones at me
In 1936, 1938, 1948, 1988,
Semites throw at Semites and anti-Semites at anti-Semites,
Evil men throw and just men throw,
Sinners throw and tempters throw,
Geologists throw and theologists throw,
Archaelogists throw and archhooligans throw,
Kidneys throw stones and gall bladders throw,
Head stones and forehead stones and the heart of a stone,
Stones shaped like a screaming mouth
And stones fitting your eyes
Like a pair of glasses,
The past throws stones at the future,
And all of them fall on the present.
Weeping stones and laughing gravel stones,
Even God in the Bible threw stones,
Even the Urim and Tumim were thrown
And got stuck in the beastplate of justice,
And Herod threw stones and what came out was a Temple.

Oh, the poem of stone sadness
Oh, the poem thrown on the stones
Oh, the poem of thrown stones.
Is there in this land
A stone that was never thrown
And never built and never overturned
And never uncovered and never discovered
And never screamed from a wall and never discarded by the builders
And never closed on top of a grave and never lay under lovers
And never turned into a cornerstone?

Please do not throw any more stones,
You are moving the land,
The holy, whole, open land,
You are moving it to the sea
And the sea doesn't want it
The sea says, not in me.

Please throw little stones,
Throw snail fossils, throw gravel,

Justice or injustice from the quarries of Migdal Tsedek,
Throw soft stones, throw sweet clods,
Throw limestone, throw clay,
Throw sand of the seashore,
Throw dust of the desert, throw rust,
Throw soil, throw wind,
Throw air, throw nothing
Until your hands are weary
And the war is weary
And even peace will be weary and will be.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

The First Rain

The first rain reminds me
Of the rising summer dust.
The rain doesn't remember the rain of yesteryear.
A year is a trained beast with no memories.
Soon you will again wear your harnesses,
Beautiful and embroidered, to hold
Sheer stockings: you
Mare and harnesser in one body.

The white panic of soft flesh
In the panic of a sudden vision
Of ancient saints.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Tourists

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall
And they laugh behind heavy curtains
In their hotels.
They have their pictures taken
Together with our famous dead
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb
And on Ammunition Hill.
They weep over our sweet boys
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Yehuda Amichai

Try To Remember Some Details

Try to remember some details. Remember the clothing
of the one you love
so that on the day of loss you'll be able to say: last seen
wearing such-and-such, brown jacket, white hat.
Try to remember some details. For they have no face
and their soul is hidden and their crying
is the same as their laughter,
and their silence and their shouting rise to one height
and their body temperature is between 98 and 104 degrees
and they have no life outside this narrow space
and they have no graven image, no likeness, no memory
and they have paper cups on the day of their rejoicing
and paper cups that are used once only.

Try to remember some details. For the world
is filled with people who were torn from their sleep
with no one to mend the tear,
and unlike wild beasts they live
each in his lonely hiding place and they die
together on battlefields
and in hospitals.
And the earth will swallow all of them,
good and evil together, like the followers of Korah,
all of them in thir rebellion against death,
their mouths open till the last moment,
praising and cursing in a single
howl. Try, try
to remember some details.

Yehuda Amichai

What Kind Of A Person

"What kind of a person are you," I heard them say to me.
I'm a person with a complex plumbing of the soul,
Sophisticated instruments of feeling and a system
Of controlled memory at the end of the twentieth century,
But with an old body from ancient times
And with a God even older than my body.
I'm a person for the surface of the earth.
Low places, caves and wells
Frighten me. Mountain peaks
And tall buildings scare me.
I'm not like an inserted fork,
Not a cutting knife, not a stuck spoon.

I'm not flat and sly
Like a spatula creeping up from below.
At most I am a heavy and clumsy pestle
Mashing good and bad together
For a little taste
And a little fragrance.

Arrows do not direct me. I conduct
My business carefully and quietly
Like a long will that began to be written
The moment I was born.

s Now I stand at the side of the street
Weary, leaning on a parking meter.
I can stand here for nothing, free.

I'm not a car, I'm a person,
A man-god, a god-man
Whose days are numbered. Hallelujah.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Wildpeace

Not the peace of a cease-fire
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,
but rather
as in the heart when the excitement is over
and you can talk only about a great weariness.
I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult.
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.
A peace
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,
without words, without
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be
light, floating, like lazy white foam.
A little rest for the wounds - who speaks of healing?
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation
to the next, as in a relay race:
the baton never falls.)

Let it come
like wildflowers,
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

Yad Mordechai

Yad Mordechai. Those who fell here
still look out the windows like sick children
who are not allowed outside to play.
And on the hillside, the battle is reenacted
for the benefit of hikers and tourists. Soldiers of thin sheet iron
rise and fall and rise again. Sheet iron dead and a sheet iron life
and the voices all—sheet iron. And the resurrection of the dead,
sheet iron that clangs and clangs.

And I said to myself: Everyone is attached to his own lament
as to a parachute. Slowly he descends and slowly hovers
until he touches the hard place.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

You Mustn't Show Weakness

You mustn't show weakness
and you've got to have a tan.
But sometimes I feel like the thin veils
of Jewish women who faint
at weddings and on Yom Kippur.

You mustn't show weakness
and you've got to make a list
of all the things you can load
in a baby carriage without a baby.

This is the way things stand now:
if I pull out the stopper
after pampering myself in the bath,
I'm afraid that all of Jerusalem, and with it the whole world,
will drain out into the huge darkness.

In the daytime I lay traps for my memories
and at night I work in the Balaam Mills,
turning curse into blessing and blessing into curse.

And don't ever show weakness.
Sometimes I come crashing down inside myself
without anyone noticing. I'm like an ambulance
on two legs, hauling the patient
inside me to Last Aid
with the wailing of cry of a siren,
and people think it's ordinary speech.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai