

introduction

“Be plural like the universe!”

—Fernando Pessoa

Mordechai Goldman came of age as a poet in the seventies, a heady and auspicious time in the development of modern Hebrew poetry. Young poets such as Yair Hurwitz and Yona Wallach—friends and contemporaries of Goldman with whom he shared a strong affinity—were publishing their first books, inspired by and benefitting from the freedoms their elders had established. These poets—David Avidan, Natan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, and Dahlia Ravikovitch—who began publishing two decades earlier, had turned away from the poetic conventions of their immediate predecessors, notably Natan Alterman and Avraham Shlonsky, who were still very dominant in the fifties and sixties. Avidan, Zach, and their contemporaries vehemently rejected the flowery, the hyperbolic, and the sentimental, along with rhyme and formal verse. They advocated for and embraced the modernism of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Wallace Stevens, to name a few, and so paved the way for Goldman and his generation.

In addition to the revitalization of language, the modernist poets also had to engage and reclaim the self. The prominent poets of the previous generations had adopted the persona of prophet-poet, “bearing an enormous weight of national responsibility,”* whereas their successors shed collective responsibility and placed their focus on the individual.

If Goldman’s early poems tended toward the surreal, relying on linguistic exploration and wizardry, his vision soon turned inward, as Goldman more and

* Aminadav Dykman. Introduction to *Poets on the Edge: An Anthology of Contemporary Hebrew Poetry* (SUNY Press, 2008).

more came to favor the simple, the true, the authentic. Initially, he was inspired primarily by Rilke; later, such poets as Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Eliot, and Stevens were also instrumental in reshaping his poetic sensibilities. The translator and poet Rina Litvin said of his work, “One of Geldman’s poetic characteristics is the arc of his cultural associations and sensibilities. . . . The sensual and cultural richness, the fine musicality, the originality of observation, and the thematic singularity combine to make Geldman’s work an important and beautiful treasure in contemporary Hebrew poetry.”

To date, Geldman has published fourteen volumes of poetry and five essay collections. He has received every major poetry prize, including the Bialik Life Achievement Prize in Poetry (2010). The poems presented here are drawn from his two-volume *Collected Poems: Years I Walked at Your Side*, published by Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House and the Bialik Institute in 2010–11. The Hebrew edition begins with *New Poems* (2010) and goes back in time till 1970; this edition also begins with 2010 and goes back in time to 1988.

The first poem in *Collected Poems*, “Voice,” begins:

What is his true voice?

Have words enfolded him
in murmurs
in forms
in worn-out patterns that came before him?

A practicing clinical psychologist, a student of Kabbalah and Zen Buddhism, it seems natural for a poet like Geldman to open with a question. A question or doubt begets another: Nothing is taken for granted, not even such basic notions as one’s voice and identity. Geldman’s act of questioning allows for the complex development and examination of differing aspects of an issue and ultimately leads to revelation and creation. Explorative, yet without ever being dogmatic or aiming for any one “logical” conclusion, Geldman frequently surprises with the turns he takes. The second stanza informs us:

“Person” described him
better than “frog”
but the croaking of frogs in the night’s ponds
or the whistle of birds at dusk
or the sound of fruit dropping to the ground
drew him out better than Hebrew
as Being revealed itself to him in its fullness

The evocation of sound—“the croaking of frogs or . . . the sound of fruit dropping to the ground”—brings about a mystical stirring in a way that language alone cannot. Equally stirring, later in the poem, are “Yiddish melodies”—“songs of mournful wisdoms” from the past—evoking a history of dispossession and suffering, both personal and cultural. Many of Geldman’s generation grew up with such melodies, frequently sung by mothers homesick for family members, for a landscape, for a way of life that was now lost to them. The poem continues for six more stanzas, leading poet and reader in an ever-widening circle. Here, as elsewhere, the long breath suits Geldman’s slow, careful, meditative tempo; the son of Holocaust survivors, collective memories cling to him. And in his poem “Spring,” he takes us back to “a city in ruins,” to Munich after the war; to a time he may remember mainly from his parents’ stories; to a time when

horrific sights huddled in the streets
refusing to sink in the gutter of oblivion
.....

American soldiers with glinting teeth were the messengers of purity
German women famished and sallow copulated with able-bodied
blacks
Jews from the camps went back to commerce
and put flesh on their bones

Geldman himself is a survivor of sorts. In the cycle “Home Poems” he describes himself as “the only son of nomads,” repeatedly banished from their homes,

whose last homes
were burnt by homicidal platoons, officers of death
who decreed new lodgings for them:
convict huts, mass graves, heaps of ashes, chimneys,
tunnels, cellars, gutters, the thick of forests

Moody, authoritative, and oftentimes ironic, the poet straddles multiple modes of being, epitomizing the dual facets of the artist: on the one hand, he is an individual living his personal life and, on the other, he is a messenger from the beyond, engaged in an impersonal creative process. One gets the sense that Goldman is an intensely private person and yet is compelled to reveal areas of vulnerability, weakness, and hurt. As he explains in his preface, he discovered early on that poetry suited his need to “reveal and conceal” himself at the same time. He also discovered that through language he can recreate himself as an unconstrained being in a fanciful universe that serves as a temporary hideout. In “Rivers,” he finds sanctuary as “a water child”:

Our dinghy sailed upon sweet waters
that flowed pure from a wondrous source
father paddled the oars
mother shuddered with the dinghy’s jolts
.....
I became a water child
an orphan living in the depths of the river
with the other water kids
among intelligent and silent fish
amazing daffodils

Similarly, in “Home Poems” he builds himself a home in a massive ficus tree where “birds were my mother and father / chicks were my brothers / an ant became my cousin.”

In addition to his work as a poet, Goldman is also an art critic and essayist, and his poems frequently include themes from and references to classical mythology, while also echoing the roots he sprang from. Growing up in a religious environment, he assimilated the power contained in speech

through the study of the Torah and Talmud, through the exercise of *pilpul* (disputation), and through the act of memorizing the daily recitation of prayer and verses from *Tehillim* (Psalms)—all poetic forms in themselves. And even though he no longer practices Orthodox Judaism, his language is a conflation of the old and new, inflected by biblical cadences, alongside the vernacular and colloquial. In the words of Uzi Shavit: “The clarity and virtuosity of [Geldman’s] language, its musicality, grant a classicist dimension to his natural non-conformism, as he engages the darker corners of human existence.”

His poems, invariably, are a journey, both physical and internal, as they touch on a wide variety of issues and preoccupations ranging from the petty, everyday incidents, such as a female passenger on a bus trying to peek into his notebook, to sudden, if brief, realizations of harmony and alignment with the sublime; from a murder in his quiet neighborhood, to reflections upon the fleeting and the eternal; from Socratic ideals of love for truth and beauty, to the reality of anonymous sex. The poem “At Your Side” begins as an introspective, nearly metaphysical, disquisition, but soon plunges into a seedy nightclub where

the G-string girls
are blind dolls
hollow Hebrew dolls
hungry and hunger-inducing
.....
ticking beauties
like an explosive shaheeda*
tinkling cunts
in a chill-out trance

Routinely solitary, whether on foot or on his bike, Geldman is a tourist in his own town; Tel Aviv, especially his neighborhood near Kikar Milano, plays an important role in the poems. Particularly prominent is Nahal Ha’Yarkon, a river near his home that, over the years, has been transformed from a polluted,

* In Arabic, female martyr

neglected area into a park where the poet finds access to the unseen and to the incessant flow of the mind, leading to epiphanies such as:

*

All at once
with no preparation or intent on my part
the ocean of infinity was revealed

The play of lights
on the dark water of the neighborhood river
the hum of distant roads
spilling into the empty lilac of the horizon
the jittery waves in the soft alien sea
into which the river flows—
all spoke of its presence

I did not ask to be lost in it
and I did not fear to exist in it
as a tiny speck

With lucid delight
I perceived the blind giant
in whose palm the planet spun
and I mulled over my mystifying ability
to overlook day after day
his immense presence

Geldman's poetic journey is transformative, and he exhorts us to pay attention, to be *mindful*, and perhaps share in the kabbalists' vision that "There can be no perfecting above without the perfecting influence of humans when they are righteous and act from love" (Zohar 2:155a). Expansion and transformation of the self are paramount in his work, as is the need for beauty and love. For Geldman, one of the first openly gay poets of his generation, physical beauty and its consort, sexual attraction,

is the nexus of exaltation and pain. Beautiful forms attract him, not only on the physical plane but also on the spiritual plane. In “Form” he tells us:

All he ever wanted was a form—
at times it was revealed to him in boys
at times in paintings
in old ruins or poems
and at times even in frogs or birds
in other words a living breathing form
.....

He sought after his form
like one fleeing formlessness
he sought after his form
with great desperation
he sought after a form
that would be admired by all
because his parents his progenitors
had willed his excellent form
because the form of his parents
had been broken by polished officers of murder
who murdered even their own god

When the poet turns sixty, he sees a naked skull in the mirror and is frightened. But

against the gaping void
your slender dark silhouette suddenly appeared
stirring in me such a powerful passion
.....
but something impenetrable in your nature—
a strange and alien charm
a psychopathic Eros a cruel temptation
entrapped my consciousness in your illusion
.....

you became the denied love
the love denied me beforehand as ever
from the moment of my birth
and I with a queer tenacity
set out on a last battle to conquer it
in your boyish immature heart

“Sixty” is from Geldman’s 2007 collection, *Tamir’s Poems*, a book-length cycle of love poems inspired by the twelfth-century Sufi mystic Rumi’s love poems for Shams, *The Works of Shams of Tabriz*. Geldman wrote most of *Tamir’s Poems* in Anatalia, Turkey, not far from Konya, where Rumi is buried. In “True Compassion” the older poet addresses his young lover Tamir directly, again reflecting on his own mortality:

You probably won’t believe this
but when my love for you first flared up
I considered above all how you would handle my corpse
when my time came

Although habitually alone in his poems, Geldman is not a recluse. We also find him in cafés, bookstores, clothing stores, the post office, the gym. Cell phones, favorite ringtones, and texting get their due, including in a twenty-two-poem sequence entitled “Text Messaging Poems.” Sometimes his neighbors invade his poems (“Abused Neighbor”), and other times, assuming a different persona, he invades their homes, if only in his imagination (“Dolinger”). In “Dolinger,” the eponymous figure “grew to hate/the life of a single poet,” preferring, for a change, to contemplate, in the home of his neighbors,

coitus kindled by scant desire
electronic gadgets collecting in the kitchen
defrosted Chinese dinners
eaten quickly in front of a flickering rectangle

In conjunction with a sharp intellect, a thread of compassion runs through the poems, embracing the weak, the voiceless, the foreign—sometimes

illegal—migrant worker. Humor is also present, especially in his poems about cats, dogs, birds, even flies and mosquitoes. A most affecting and witty poem, “Chu,” is about his beloved cat, who was run over by a car:

The cat Chu like most of the cats in our land
was a fourth-world citizen
living at the bottom of society’s ladder
.....

But I raised him from the gutter
to be a domestic noble tiger
a green-eyed striped tiger
daintily stepping on pillows and armchairs
feeding on Italian preserves
and choosing to catnap with his head in my palm
.....

At night Chu came to me in his spirit
and said in the language of humans:
“Now that you’ve written two poems
you’re ready to forget me
but I’m a cat of three poems
if not more”

Geldman tells us in his preface, “My poetry comes from the inner void that meditation creates.” In kabbalistic tradition God had to contract himself (*tsimtsum*) to make room for His creation, and the poet, too, “empties” himself to make room for the poem. And just as God used language in the act of creation (“Let there be light”), so does the poet. For Geldman, the determination to seek and to understand through the act of writing is equated with the determination to live. To feel and to formulate becomes not only a way of life but a survival strategy. The devotion to the written word is sacramental and binding, impelling him toward precision, on the one hand, and toward humility, on the other. The long, seminal poem “At Your Side,” whose first line is the title of this volume, begins meditatively, biblically, addressing someone specific who yet remains unnamed, addressing God, and addressing all of us:

Years I walked at your side
like our prophet Isaiah
barefoot naked and bare
I will put on no cover
until you see me
until you recognize an other
one person
at least
and so know yourself as well
no need for you to come
to a Jerusalem submerged
in the depths of the ocean
I'd be content if you reached into your heart
the heart within your heart
I'd be content with innocence lost
with a white lamb
grazing in the brilliant green
of budding wheat

— *Tsipi Keller and Ruth Kartun-Blum*