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## A Heart Pierced by an Arrow



What motivates you as a writer?

In the schoolyard at the Gymnasia Rehavia high school, in Jerusalem, there was a eucalyptus tree on which someone had carved a heart pierced by an arrow. On the pierced heart, on either side of the arrow, were the names “Gadi” and “Ruthi.” I remember that even back then, when I was roughly thirteen, I thought: It must have been Gadi who did that, not Ruthi. Why did he do it? Didn’t he know that he loved Ruthi? Didn’t she know he loved her? Even then, I think I said to myself: Perhaps some part of him knew that it would pass, that everything passes, that his love would end. He wanted to leave something behind. He wanted there to be a vestige of that love when it was over. And that is a lot like the urge to tell stories, to write stories: to save something from the claws of time and oblivion. That, as well as the desire to give a second chance to something that will never have a second chance. That, too. My impetus to write also includes the desire for things not to be erased, for it not to be as if they had never existed. Not necessarily things that happened to me personally. I was never, for example, hired to live in the attic of an old house and spend hours talking with an old invalid, the way Shmuel Ash was in *Judas*. That did not happen to me. But there were people in Jerusalem who talked a bit like Gershom Wald did. They existed, and now they are gone.

2 WHAT MAKES AN APPLE?

I wanted that to be remembered. That Jerusalem of the fiery intellectuals, who stood with one foot in [Yosef Haim] Brenner and one in the Bible, and another foot in Ben-Gurion's court and yet another in Nietzsche, and another in Dostoevsky.

Do you feel that your motivations for writing have changed over the years, or have they remained essentially similar?

I don't know, Shira. I think they're the same, but I'm not certain. I hardly ever ask myself about my motivations for writing. When I sit here before five a.m., after walking the empty streets, with my first cup of coffee, I never ask myself what the motivation is. I just write.

But do you ask where the story comes from?

Yes. Yes. Sometimes I do, but I don't always find an answer. I'll tell you something related to what you asked. I once translated a Russian poem by Anna Akhmatova, but I translated it from Stephen Berg's English translation, because I don't know any Russian. And this poem touches exactly on your question. I typed it on a typewriter, before there were computers. Here is how the poem ends:

And sometimes I sit. Here. Frozen sea winds  
Blow through my open windows. I do not get up, I do not  
Shut. I allow the wind to touch me. Freeze.  
Evening twilight or early dawn, the same shimmering  
cloud-brights.  
A dove pecks a wheat seed from my palm held out,  
And this space, borderless, the whiteness of paper on my  
writing page—  
A solitary, vague urge lifts my right hand, leads me,  
Far more aged than me, it comes down,  
Blue as an eyelid, godless, and I begin to write.

That's beautiful.

I'm not a translator, but I wanted to translate that poem from English. Perhaps in Russian it's even more beautiful, I don't know.

Every so often I ask myself where the stories come from, and I don't really have an answer. Look, on the one hand I do know, because I've always lived the life of a spy. It's written in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. I listen to other people's conversations, I watch strangers, and when I'm in line at the doctor's clinic, or the train station, or the airport—I never read the paper. Instead of reading the paper I hear what people are saying, I steal fragments of conversations and complete them myself. Or else I look at clothes, or shoes—shoes always tell me a lot. I look at people. I listen.

My neighbor on Kibbutz Hulda, Meir Sibahi, used to say: "Every time I walk past the window of the room where Amos writes, I stop for a moment, take my comb out and comb my hair, so that if I end up in one of his stories, I'll be neatly groomed." It makes a lot of sense, but that's not how it works with me. Let's say: an apple. Take an apple. What makes an apple? Water, earth, sun, an apple tree, and a bit of fertilizer. But it doesn't look like any of those things. It's made of them but it is not like them. That's how a story is: it certainly is made up of the sum of encounters and experiences and listening.

My initial urge is to guess what I might feel if I were him, or if I were her: What would I think? What would I want? What would I feel ashamed of? What, for example, would I hope that no one in the world should know about me? What would I wear? What would I eat? This urge has always been with me, even before I started writing stories, since childhood. I was an only child and I did not have any friends. My parents would take me to a café on Ben Yehuda Street,

in Jerusalem, and they would promise me an ice cream if I sat quietly while they talked with their friends. And ice cream was a rare commodity in Jerusalem in those days. Not because it cost a lot of money but because all of our mothers, across the board, religious and secular, Sephardic and Ashkenazi, believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that ice cream meant a red throat, and a red throat meant inflammation, and inflammation meant flu, and flu is angina, and angina is bronchitis, and bronchitis is pneumonia, and pneumonia is tuberculosis. In short—it's either the ice cream or the child. But still, they did make an exception and offer me an ice cream if I didn't ever interrupt their conversation. And they would talk with their friends there for at least seventy-seven hours without a break. To avoid going crazy from loneliness, I simply began to spy on the people at the other tables. I would steal bits of conversations, I would look and see who was ordering what. Who was paying. I would guess what the relationships between the people around the table were, and, based on their appearance and their body language, I even tried to guess where they came from, what their homes looked like. That is something I do to this day. But it's not that I take a photograph, go back home, develop the picture and there's my story. There are usually many iterations. In *Black Box*, for example, there's a young man who has a habit of scratching his right ear with his left hand, which he reaches behind his head. And someone once asked me where I got that from. Because she also knew someone who scratched his right ear with his left hand behind his head. I told her: I'm almost positive I saw it once and it made an impression, but where did I see it? I couldn't possibly say. It comes from some forgotten memory, not out of thin air, but I have no idea where exactly.

You know what? I'll put it this way: When I'm writing an essay, I usually write because I'm angry. But when I write a

story, one of the things that motivate me is curiosity. Insatiable curiosity. I'm fascinated by the idea of getting under other people's skin. And I think that curiosity is not only an essential condition for any intellectual work, it is also a moral virtue. That is also perhaps the moral dimension of literature.

I have an ongoing argument about this with A. B. Yehoshua, who locates the issue of morality at the forefront of literary creation: crime and punishment. I think there is a moral dimension in a different sense: putting yourself for a few hours under another person's skin, or in another person's shoes. It has indirect moral weight, although it's not very heavy, let's not exaggerate. But I truly believe that a curious person is a slightly better partner than a noncurious person, and also a slightly better parent. Don't laugh, but I think that a curious person is even a slightly better driver than a noncurious person, because he asks himself—what's that guy in the other lane capable of suddenly doing? I think a curious person is also a much better lover than a noncurious person.

You speak, justifiably, of curiosity as a humanistic virtue. But there is also a different kind of curiosity, an almost contradictory kind, the kind that motivates a child to pull apart a bird to find out what it looks like inside. In your view, can literature written out of curiosity, which portrays people at their low points, and sometimes touches on sadism, be great literature?

That's true. We mustn't forget that there is also morbid curiosity. We find it in children, also in adults, also in writers. The curiosity of people who crowd around an injured person to see his suffering and derive pleasure from it. Works in which the writer is fascinated and even enchanted by evil, such as Shakespeare's or Celine's, have a moral dimension too. Because they challenge the reader, or stimulate moral antibodies in the reader.

And with you, in your books, is there sometimes that morbid curiosity? I think there is.

Of course there is. For example, in the detailed descriptions of dying in the story “The Way of the Wind.” Or in the descriptions of sadism, torture, and abuse in “Crusade.”\*

You are a very familiar author now, people recognize you. This business of “contact with reality”—has it become more problematic over time?

No. In the places where I watch people, I am rarely recognized. If I go to a restaurant, there are sometimes people who recognize me. If I’m at the university, they recognize me. At the auto-shop or in line for the doctor, almost no one recognizes me. Once in a while someone says, “Aren’t you that guy from TV? Didn’t you used to be in the Knesset?” It happens. Taxi drivers sometimes. But usually people don’t recognize me. Certainly not when I’m overseas. And in recent years, when I go to a foreign city, I no longer go to museums because my knees hurt. I don’t go to see the famous sites, either, because I’ve seen enough. I sit outside at a café, or if it’s cold then in a glass-enclosed café patio. I can sit alone for two or three hours looking at strangers. What could be more interesting than that?

And when you get back from the café or from the doctor’s office, to your writing desk, do you have regular rituals to do with writing?

Look, I’m not going to tell you everything for the record. If the tape recorder wasn’t here, I might say more. Not everything. My main ritual is to have everything in its place. Always, for

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\* “The Way of the Wind” appeared in Oz’s first book, *Where the Jackals Howl and Other Stories*. The book *Ad Mavet* was published in English as *Unto Death*, although the title story was renamed “Crusade” in the English translation.

everything to be in its place. It makes my family miserable. Someone gets themselves a cup of coffee—Nily, my daughters, my son, my grandchildren, even guests—they leave it for a minute to take a phone call, and when they come back their coffee is down the drain and the mug is washed and drying upside down on the rack.

It's hard to live like that in a house where children live, or used to live.

They were always getting angry at me. Everything left out is immediately removed: keys, papers, letters, notes, anything on a surface must quickly go into a drawer. No mercy.

Yes, I see how full your drawers are.

Listen, my father was a librarian, my father-in-law was a librarian, my sister-in-law is a librarian, my wife is an archivist. So how else could I have turned out? Even my cat arranges his food in the dish. And if he doesn't, I do.

I don't think I have writing rituals. Maybe in other people I would consider them rituals. For me they're work habits. My day starts early. It's very rare in my life that anything gets written at night. Even if I can't sleep at night, I don't write. Only in the morning. I used to be completely dependent on cigarettes. I couldn't write a single line without smoking, and it was very hard for me to separate writing from smoking, but we got through it.

Do you write in longhand or on a computer?

I handwrite several drafts. I don't copy from one draft to the next, but I write a passage and put it in the drawer, I write it again and put it in the drawer again, and I write another version of the same scene. When there are four or five, sometimes ten versions, I pull them all out, put them in a long line on the desk, and take something from each, and that might



be the revised version, the one I type into this computer myself with two fingers.

And before you write, you take your morning walk.

Yes. Every day, unless it's pouring, or if it's a dusty day like today, when you can't breathe. It helps put things in perspective—what is important? What is not? What will be forgotten in a few days? And what might not be forgotten? I walk even before drinking coffee. I get up, shower, shave, and go out. By four-fifteen I'm outside, quarter to five I'm back, and just before five, when it's still completely dark outside, I'm already at this desk with a strong cup of coffee. Those are my hours. That's the entire ritual.

Wisława Szymborska has a poem called "Four in the Morning," where she writes: "No one feels good at four in the morning."<sup>1</sup> She's right. Four in the morning is horrible!

Ms. Szymborska, how unfortunate that you and I never met. I would have asked you to have a coffee, I might have shown you the magic of four in the morning, and the coffee would have been on me. I don't suffer, it's not hard for me at four in the morning. I wake up without an alarm clock. On Saturdays and holidays, too. No one calls me on the phone, Nily is asleep, and if there are other people at home they're also asleep. Those are the hours when no one needs me. In Arad I used to go for a walk in the desert before sunrise, because the desert started five minutes from my house. Here in Tel Aviv, I sometimes walk in the little park, or just on the streets, because I find it interesting. The windows are dark, apart from the ones where people leave a light on in the bathroom. A lot of people leave the bathroom light on at night. Maybe they think it'll scare off the thieves. Maybe they leave it in case their child wakes up at night. Maybe they think death won't come if there's a light on in the bathroom.

Once a woman was standing in a lit window at four-thirty a.m., looking out into the dark. I stood there watching her from the dark and I asked myself: What happens to her in these hours? Then she moved away and turned off the light, or perhaps she kept standing there, looking at the dark, and I kept walking, but I walked away with the first kernel of a story. Which I still haven't written. I may write it one day, or I may not.

Besides, sometimes I get to say good morning to the newspaper delivery guy. Now that we're almost at the Days of Awe, sometimes there will be someone going to synagogue very early in the morning to recite *Selichot*,<sup>†</sup> with his phylacteries and prayer shawl in their case. So then it's "Good morning," or if it's Saturday, "Shabbat Shalom," and that's that. I don't stop to talk to people. Not on those morning walks.

Do you think about what you're writing at the time?

Yes, I think about what's waiting for me at my desk. Because I'm almost always in the middle of something. So I think about where I was yesterday, where I left off, where I want to take it.

What I think isn't always what happens, but I do think, and I also somehow bring the people, I bring the characters. For example, that woman Bracha from the story "Curls,"<sup>‡</sup> or her husband, Moshe. This Moshe, he doesn't say more than five or six words in the whole story, and he comes out of it pretty despicably in general. He's physically repellent, too. But the thing is, I knew a little more about him. I know far more about all my characters than I write. About their

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<sup>†</sup> Prayers of repentance recited early each morning throughout the month of Elul, leading up to Rosh Hashanah.

<sup>‡</sup> "My Curls Have Flown All the Way to China" (*The New Yorker*, September 14, 2015, trans. Maggie Goldberg Bar-Tura).

childhood, their parents, their erotic fantasies. I just don't use everything I know about them. And while I was writing "Curls," I even knew about the other woman Moshe found himself, in Netanya. It was clear to me from the start that it wouldn't be in the story, but I wanted to know a bit more about what happened there, what sort of person he was and what complaints he had about Bracha, because he did have complaints. So it was necessary for me to know that. Not for the story. Just so that there would be enough cloth to cut the dress out of. Something like that.

You've never written about wars, even though you took part in wars. Or rather, wars are present in your books in various ways, but there are no battle scenes.

That's true. I've never written about wars, about the battlefield. I tried, but I couldn't do it. I fought in two wars, the Six-Day War in the Sinai Desert and the Yom Kippur War on the Golan Heights, and I can't write about it.

Did you try?

Yes. I tried to tell a story about it. Fiction of sorts, or perhaps something like reportage, to describe it, to record it. I was absolutely unable to do it. Not even to myself. One of the reasons is that my sharpest memory from the battlefield is the smells. The smells never get through. Not in literature and not in film. Not even in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, in his descriptions of the Battle of Borodino, or in Remarque's descriptions of World War I. And not in movies, either. The terrible stench doesn't come through. And without the smell it just isn't right.

Nothing in the world smells worse than a battlefield. Burning metal and burning rubber and burning corpses and exploded ammunition and feces and urine and smoke and decay—the most stunning thing is the smell. The stench. Yes,

you can stand up on stage and say, “You should know, war is a putrid thing,” but it won’t do anything. There are not enough words in language for the smell. You recently reread *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. There is nothing in there about battlefields. Nothing. There are a few things about the days I spent as a child in the siege on Jerusalem. Twenty people lived in our basement apartment, because it was a basement and it served as a shelter for the whole building. Even that, that aspect of war, of people—not soldiers but civilians, the elderly, children, everyone unbathed, everyone going to the bathroom, crowded into the apartment. The thing most engraved in my memory is how badly it smelled. So I think that in that book I wrote about the smell.

You did. And you wrote about the stench at home in the days after your mother died, when you and your father were secluded in the apartment.

You cannot convey the stench of the battlefield in words, I gave up. But there are two things I might be able to tell you, from the very first hours of the war. In the Six-Day War, I was in Major-General Israel Tal’s division, and I was exactly in the spot where, on June 5, 1967, at eight a.m., or five minutes after eight, the code word “red sheet” came over the radio, which meant we had to turn on all the communication networks, because up to then everything had been silent. Then we heard Talik’s voice come through: “Advance, advance. Over.” It’s mythology by now. There must have been fifty tanks in that small area, and all fifty of them started up at the same moment. The noise was unbelievable. Imagine fifty heavy, noisy engines. And I remember saying to myself: No, no, this isn’t the war yet, it’s not real, this isn’t it. And it took me a long time of recollecting and rummaging, after it was all over, to understand what was missing for it to be real. Do you know what was missing?

The music?

Exactly. Because where in my life had I seen dozens of tanks roaring into battle? In the movies. And in the movies it's always accompanied by very dramatic music. Afterwards, still on the first day of the war, in the early hours, I sat with a few people on the sand dunes and we waited; I don't even remember what we were waiting for. And suddenly shells started exploding right around us. And I look up and I see, on the hilltop, four hundred meters away, or maybe only three hundred, strangers in yellow uniforms aiming a mortar at us and firing. I remember that I didn't get scared, I was simply astonished. I was insulted: What is the matter with those people? Have they lost their minds? Are they crazy? Can't they see there are people here? My first impulse was not to drop to the ground, or to flee, or to return fire. No. My first impulse was to call the police: There are some nutcases here shooting at us with live ammunition! The desire to call the police was the last normal and logical thing that happened to me in the war. Everything that came afterwards was insanity.

There have been cinematic adaptations of your books. It must be strange for you to watch them.

There is a sort of glass wall—it looks familiar but it's not mine. Dan Wolman made a film of *My Michael*. That film has aged well. It was made on a joke of a budget but it still holds up. I remember that after I saw it, I said, it's so beautiful and touching, but so peculiar to me: it's as though I composed a violin piece and someone was playing it for me on the piano.

You've never been involved in writing a screenplay based on your book, have you?

I've often been asked to be involved. Natalie Portman, for example, very much wanted me to collaborate on the screen-

play for *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. I refused. To me, writing a screenplay is a different art than mine, but perhaps the distance is not as great as I think. Lots of people these days write novels and stories in the present tense, as if they're writing a screenplay. Perhaps that's a sign that those people actually want to write for film. They don't have the means, they have no money to invest, but in fact their eyes are on film and not literature. Maybe those writers see a lot of movies and only read a little literature. I'm not saying there aren't wonderful works written in present tense, in literature too, but the natural time for literature to occur in is the past. That is why it's called a *story* or *history*. Writers have this sort of congenital defect where they're born with their head and neck facing backwards.

I remember at least one story, "Nomad and Viper," from your first book, *Where the Jackals Howl*, which is written in the present tense.

I'm trying to remember. I hardly ever reread my own books. I think the last page in the story "Digging," in *Scenes from Village Life*, is also written in the present. I'm not dogmatic about the grammatical tense of a story. You can tell a story in the present tense, there are also a few fine stories told in the future tense. In A. B. Yehoshua's early stories, if I'm not mistaken, there is one that is partly written in the future, I think it's in *Facing the Forests*. . . . Here it is: the final sentence in the story "A Long Hot Day," from *Facing the Forests*.<sup>2</sup> The whole story is written in the present, but at the end Buli<sup>§</sup> switches to the future. And in fact I also did that, on the last two pages of *My Michael*. I have no dogmatic position on the matter, but I think that even if the story is written in the future, it still looks to the past. Take science fiction. Let's say, a story that takes place in the year 3000, a

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<sup>§</sup> The nickname of A. B. Yehoshua.

thousand years from now, it will still say: Captain Nemo woke up in the morning. It won't say: Captain Nemo will wake up in the morning. The grammatical past tense is the water in which the fish named literature lives.

Do you really not read your books after they're published?

To read a page you've written is a bit like hearing your voice on a recording: strange, embarrassing. If I sometimes open up a book I wrote, one of two things happens: either it frustrates me because I see that I could have written it better now, or it frustrates me because I feel that I'll never write that well again. In both cases it frustrates me, so why would I read it? The only exception is *The Same Sea*, which I do go back to, because I find it so hard to believe that I wrote it. In fact I don't even treat it as one of my books. I don't know where it came from. It passed through me and came out the other end.

You taught a university course on *The Same Sea*. Why that book? For the reason you mentioned?

Because it's the only one of my books that I can go back to, even with some enthusiasm. I read it and I'm impressed. It's an immodest thing to say, but I really am surprised when I read it. I think it's well written, that book. I look at it like a cow who gave birth to a seagull.

You don't reread the books you wrote because it frustrates you. But tell me a little about how your attitude toward your books has evolved over time.

There are books that have gained a little distance from me and there are those that have gained a lot. For example, I still get invited sometimes to give readings from *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, so it hasn't grown very far from me, because I read a chapter, or talk about it. I'm sometimes

asked to read from *Between Friends*. But if you were to ask me today about, say, *The Hill of Evil Counsel*, I could hardly remember a thing. I remember that it takes place in Jerusalem, that it's a story about childhood, that it's during the British Mandate. More than that, I can no longer recall. Other people remember far better than I do, and sometimes it's embarrassing, because I get a letter from someone who's doing research, or perhaps writing about my books, and she asks me a question, and I reply: "The answer is in the book." And she gets back to me three weeks later and says, "No, there's no answer in the book, it's not there." Because after all these years I can't remember what was in the drafts I got rid of, and what ended up in the book.

It's far, far more interesting to me to read other people's books, whether they write better than I do or not as well as I do. My standards are very arbitrary, and apparently not very politically correct: if I pick up a novel or a story, read twenty pages, and think, "I could have written that," then I consider it not a good book. Only if I read it and think, "I could never have written that," does it count as a good book for me.

Does that happen to you?

Yes, it happens.

With young writers, too?

Yes. When I say, "I could have written that," I don't mean that I would have used the exact same language. Or written about the exact same world. But rather that I could have carried that weight. Or perhaps I would have carried it in a completely different way. But when I come across a book that isn't in my league, then it isn't in my league. And they do exist. There are many of them. In Hebrew literature and in world literature.



Does writing get easier over the years? I have a feeling that in your case the answer is no.

Why?

I've read your books, and that's my sense.

Your sense is correct. People think that if someone has been writing books for fifty years, like I have, then it gets easier with time. That is probably true about almost every profession. A carpenter, if he's making his thirtieth table, it must be easier than the first one. And a hairdresser, on the twentieth haircut, it's easier than the first. Perhaps in research, too, the accumulated experience helps you find shortcuts, you know where to look. With a novel or a story—no. For two reasons: Firstly, I don't want to write the same book twice. There are writers who do that. Mainly with a book that did well, they write it again and again. I don't think I've written the same book twice. But perhaps that's just what I think. And secondly, writing is like driving with one foot on the gas and one on the brakes the whole time. The foot on the gas is made of innocence, excitement, the glee of writing. The foot on the brakes is made of self-awareness and self-criticism. Over the years, when you become more aware of your writing and of yourself, the foot on the brakes gets heavier and heavier and the foot on the gas gets more and more hesitant, and that's very bad, it's very bad for the driver and for the vehicle. Everything you've already written rises up against you. Even self-confidence is not something you acquire over time. It's a bit like saying to a detainee at a police station: "Anything you say may be used against you."

Also, "You have the right to remain silent."

Yes. And I say to myself: Maybe you've written enough, sit down and read. There are so many beautiful books to read,

and I really have written a lot. But my hand is drawn to the pen, and the pen to my hand. *Judas* took five years to write, and it's not a long book. Five years with long breaks.

Is that reflected in the ratio between drafts and the book? Meaning, as time goes by, do more pages get left out?

Yes. I write more drafts and throw them out. In *Judas*, chapter 47 is the only chapter that does not occur in the twentieth century but on the day of the Crucifixion. And not even the entire day. It begins while Jesus is dying, which is in the afternoon, according to the New Testament, and ends when Judas hangs himself on the fig tree before the holiday and the Sabbath begin. Meaning, the duration is four or five hours, something like that. I wrote that chapter many times. I remember writing it and ending up with sixty pages. I said: That won't do, it'll sink the whole ship. This isn't a historical novel. So I sat down and wrote it again and I got to eighty pages. I wrote it over and over again. I didn't copy from one draft to another but wrote one, threw it out, wrote it again, threw it out again. I think that chapter was written something between twelve and fifteen times. It is now ten and a half pages, and I think there is no fat. But it's hard. I think it was Chaim Weizmann<sup>¶</sup> who once wrote to someone in a letter, "Forgive me, my dear, for writing you such a long letter, I just don't have the time to compose a short letter now."

I've heard that story about Churchill and about George Bernard Shaw.

All the witty anecdotes in the world have been attributed at some point to George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, or Mark Twain. All of them.

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<sup>¶</sup> The first president of Israel.

Which reminds me that I have to give you back the newspaper clipping you gave me, the shelved sequel to “Fernheim.”

Oh, yes. Isn’t it a pity that Agnon’s daughter, Emunah Yaron, published that?

Why is it a pity? It’s interesting.

Well, it’s interesting for scholars, but it does nothing to increase Agnon’s acclaim.

To my mind it is to his credit that, after writing it, he chose to shelve the story and not publish it. That’s difficult.

But he didn’t want it to be published. I almost never leave manuscripts. I just don’t leave them. I left a few final drafts of manuscripts in handwriting, so the kids would have an inheritance. But earlier drafts, I throw away. Things I started and didn’t like, I throw away. Things like “Fernheim sequels”—I throw those away all the time, I leave no trace, because I don’t want someone later thinking it would be interesting for scholars and publishing it.

That really is an interesting question, the status of these works that a writer leaves behind. Because writers who really don’t want that to happen probably do what you do. They throw them away. The clearest example is Kafka, of course.

Kafka, exactly. If you want something burned, burn it yourself. That’s what Max Brod always said, and he was right. You wanted to burn them—who was stopping you? You had a match, you had a burner. Why would you leave it up to me?

Do you ever regret throwing away manuscript pages?

To take a recent example, from my last novel, *Judas*, in the drafts I had lots of pages about Shmuel’s childhood, which I hardly used, there was no need. But there were all sorts of

stories in there, about why he doesn't love his parents even though they are very devoted to him.

I knew a lot about him, about his parents and his betrayal of them, about his parents' betrayals of each other, and their little betrayals of him in his childhood. I think I told you that to me, that is the core of the story: not Christianity, not the question of statehood versus no statehood, but Shmuel's betrayal of his parents. That, to me, is the engine driving the whole story. For one winter, he adopts himself a different father and mother. He betrays his parents. In the drafts there was much more, and in hindsight, it's possible that I took out too much, that I should have left in a little more about his childhood. His and his sister's. To make "the mother of all betrayals" more prominent in this novel of traitors. That's possible, I'm not sure anymore. I haven't read it for a while. But on the other hand, I wanted there to be no unnecessary fat. I told you that I took two very long breaks from writing that book. Two places when I said: This isn't for me, it's too much. It's beyond my strength. In the end of course I made compromises.

Do you remember what those places were?

I remember, yes. Once I put it aside for a year and a half, almost two. It was where Atalia asks Shmuel out for the first time. I just didn't know what would happen between them. I only knew what could absolutely not happen. Absolutely not. I looked, I asked her, I asked Shmuel. Where would they go? What would he tell her? How would he say it? What would she ask him? Would they touch each other? How? When? What could I do with them? And if nothing happened between them, how would I write it? The hardest thing to write might be a scene between a man who wants and a woman who is wanted, or even a man and woman who want

each other, but where nothing happens between them. Nothing. *Nada*. I realized I couldn't write it. I couldn't see them. It was like they were both in the room but they'd turned off the light and that was that, I couldn't see anything.

How many days do you sit with that before deciding: Okay, I'm letting it go.

A lot. A lot. Either I sit for an hour or two, and do nothing. Look out the window. Doodle on paper. Or I sit and write a half-page draft and rip it up, because I know it's not right, it doesn't work. But I write many such drafts before I say: We're done, this isn't for me. I struggle. I don't give up quickly. Meaning, I sometimes give up on a draft, or on an attempt, but I don't give up on the essence—not that quickly. And the second place, I've already told you about.

The Crucifixion chapter. It's hard to write a scene that's had so many adaptations and interpretations in literature, and in fact in every form of art.

When I wrote it, I had this feeling: How can I? Who do I think I am? After all, describing the Crucifixion is like—like a painter who is told: Here, draw a vase with flowers. How can he? All the great masters have already drawn a vase with flowers. Or a sunset. There are endless Crucifixions in art, there are thousands of paintings of the Crucifixion, and there are stories, and there are novels, and there are numerous films, and of course before all that there are the powerful depictions in the New Testament. And there are Bach's Passions. And the sculptures. And there is Bulgakov, and Saramago. You can lose your mind. Only when I finished the book did I go and look at Saramago, in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, where the Crucifixion occurs at the beginning of the book and in one more page right at the end. I checked to see what he'd done there. And I'm not ashamed.

I'm not giving out grades, but I'm not ashamed of the Crucifixion I have in chapter 47.

Then when did you take the long break from writing? After writing those two long versions of the Crucifixion scene? In between them?

No, it was in between them. I started, and I realized it wasn't working, so I left it, and then on the second break I wrote all the stories in *Between Friends*, and I wrote a book of essays with my daughter Fania, Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words*. It took eighteen months before I went back to *Judas*.

And when you did, was it easier?

When I did I realized I had to compromise. That it wasn't going to be the way I wanted it.

As an editor, the question of compromise in writing is very interesting to me. When is the answer that you have to keep working, persisting, because a better solution is hiding somewhere, and when do you have to let it go, to compromise, to move on? For the good of the book or even the good of the author.

I'll give you another example of a place where I compromised in *Judas*, a very difficult part, at the end, when Shmuel is planning to go to the library to say goodbye to Wald, and suddenly Wald comes to him. Shmuel is still in Abravanel's room, he's still limping slightly. And Wald comes to him on crutches. It's a short scene, less than half a page, and in the end Wald kisses him on the forehead. There, that's a compromise. I didn't want them to part that way. I wanted something more powerful. I tried for a long time, many times. I wrote it over and over again. Most of the drafts were longer than what's in the book, but not any better. It's something Dostoevsky would have done much better than I did,

that parting scene. Chekhov, too. Far better than I did. For example, I really wanted to also have something slightly comical in that scene. I made a compromise.

I remember something William Faulkner said, about how since none of the books he wrote met his standards, he judged them based on which had caused him the most suffering. Like a mother who loves the son who became a criminal more than the son who became a priest. What you say is fascinating, because I've read your book and that is a beautiful scene, Shmuel's farewell to Wald. But, after all, I have no access to these versions you fantasized about.

You know, Shira, in every book there are at least three books: the one you're reading; the one I wrote, which has to be different from the one you're reading; and then there is a third book: the one I would have written if I'd had the strength. If I'd had the wings. That book, the third one, is the best of the three. But in all the world there is no one other than me who knows that third book, and there is no one other than me who grieves for it. All in all, I think it turned out pretty well, that farewell scene, I'm not ashamed of it, but if there'd been something a tiny bit funny, it would have been even better. I don't know, maybe there are writers in the world, artists, who never compromise. I don't know, for example, whether or not Bach compromised. The music he heard in his mind versus the music he wrote. Have you ever been to Leipzig?

No.

I once gave a reading in Leipzig and the next day I had a flight at nine a.m., maybe to Frankfurt, I can't remember, for the next reading. So I got up very early and I went to St. Thomas Church at six-thirty a.m. Outside, in front of the church, there is a statue of Bach, I think it's bronze, and he's

wearing a jacket like they wore in the seventeenth century, and under the jacket he has that kind of waistcoat, with one button undone. And I loved that so much, that the sculptor gave him one unfastened button.

In the middle?

Yes, in the middle. Here. As if it was out of carelessness. And I don't know if that's what it was or not, we'll never know. But I liked it. Then I went into the church, and the organ that Bach composed on is there, and one thing immediately struck me: how cold it was in there. The church was not heated, and in Bach's days it certainly wasn't. And it's an enormous space, like being inside a refrigerator. And the man sat there for hours upon hours writing heavenly music. How? At home he couldn't write. He had twenty children, from two wives. Not all of them survived into adulthood, but there were lots of children at home and most were still little. He went to write music in the church for hours and hours. How?

For someone trying to work, being cold in a church is better than loads of little kids at home. I'm pretty sure of that.

I don't know. He needed an organ, I don't believe he had one at home. I stood there for fifteen minutes and I couldn't feel my toes and hands because it was so cold. True, it's not like that year-round. Perhaps on terribly cold days he stayed in bed and didn't compose. But still, he went there when the congregants were not there. Do you know about *The Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena*? It's written as a sort of diary told from the perspective of Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, about her life with Bach. It's such a touching little book. When you read it, you really love her, and if you weren't a feminist, you will be by the end of the book, it's unavoidable. I must show you the poem Pinchas Sadeh wrote, called



“On the Margins of the Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena.” I’ll read it to you, it’s short:

My lady, fifty-seven years of age were you, and a widow  
receiving aid  
When in your slender, neat handwriting you began to write  
The little chronicle of your late husband  
The cantor of St. Thomas Church  
And when you were told that long forgotten  
Was the name of the deceased and his works would never  
be remembered  
You told yourself that only God knows  
If that shall come to be, or not  
My eminent lady, a man of distant generations,  
After two hundred years and more, sitting in a room  
At midnight and listening to the chorale *Schmücke dich, o  
liebe Seele*,  
Wishes to tell you that the name of your late cantor husband  
Is lauded now from the rising of the sun to its setting  
And for having been a good woman to him in his life  
My dear lady I kiss your hand.<sup>3</sup>

It’s not exactly feminist.

Not at all. On the contrary. Neither is the chronicle. But both the chronicle and this poem practically demand that this reader—namely, that I—be a feminist. Because the poet bothers to thank Mrs. Bach solely for the greatness of her husband and for her willingness to serve him. And because the way Anna Magdalena belittles herself in her chronicle is also a shocking internalization of an age-old social injustice. How did we get onto this topic? Oh, we were saying how cold it was in St. Thomas Church, and we said there might be artists in the world who produce something that is exactly what they wanted, who don’t compromise. I thought about Bach.

Perhaps he didn't compromise. What do I know? But for me, I know that without compromising you cannot finish any work. None at all. And you also know that.

There's no doubt.

But that's how it is in everything. People think compromise is a bad word. Mostly enthusiastic young idealists think compromise is something slightly fraudulent, spineless, dishonest, opportunistic. Not to me. To me the word "compromise" is a synonym for "life." And the opposite of compromise is fanaticism and death.

In literature, too. Not only in politics.

In everything. Everything. Don't misinterpret that: when I say "compromise," I'm not saying turn the other cheek. I'm not saying, abrogate yourself. Abrogate yourself to your partner, or your child, or your parents, or the neighbors. I'm saying: try to explore, maybe there is something, a third of the way, or two-thirds, or halfway. And that's how it is in work, too. Things didn't work out the way you wanted? Try to compromise as high as you can, to negotiate. The way [Prime Minister] Levi Eshkol used to. Do you know what Eshkol once said about compromise? He had a wonderful line. He said something like this: Everyone makes fun of me for being a compromiser, and I really am a compromiser. If I don't get what I want, I compromise. And if it's not enough, I compromise again. And if it's still not enough, I compromise for the third time until I get what I want.

Wonderful. Especially in the context of drafts.

And I understand what he meant. I think I do. When he gets into negotiations he names a far higher price than what he's

really hoping to get. And then he compromises and compromises, until he gets roughly what he wanted. I think that's what he meant, but I'm not sure.

Assaf Inbari has an essay I like, called "Be Thankful for That Which is Complete," where he writes that finishing the work and saying goodbye to it are the most important creative decisions—and the hardest. Because of the compromise we spoke of, because of the drive to keep polishing endlessly.<sup>4</sup> When do you know that you've finished writing a book?

When I can no longer look at it. And I hand the manuscript in to the editor. Then I know, of course, that it's not the best thing I've ever written. I keep mourning the third book, the one I wasn't able to write, the unborn child. But I feel in that moment that it was the best thing I was capable of writing. It's a sort of mantra, for me: "This is the best I can do at this moment. I once did better things, and in the future—who knows. But for now it's the best I can do." It's not an alibi, I know, you can't take that to the police, or to the critics, but I find it reassuring. "More than this, I cannot do now."

When I write, somewhere deep inside I know that it didn't come out the way I saw and heard it. I know that, a priori. Perhaps from experience. It can't come out exactly the way we wanted it to. But what does? You go abroad for the first time ever. Such excitement, such turmoil, such tension, you don't sleep all night, what if we don't wake up, what if the alarm doesn't ring, and when you get back you know it was lovely and full of experiences and rich, but it wasn't a revelation.

Mostly because we took ourselves there, too.

Yes. That's a wonderful thing you said. Accurate. Both the fact that we took ourselves, but also the fact that what we had in our mind, as always, was a little more. Because

we heard, we read, we dreamed, we hoped, we had a little more in our mind.

To me those two things are connected.

Yes, you're right.

Are there places in your life, or areas of your life, where you don't compromise? Where you don't believe in compromising?

Yes. There are a few, but I'm not sure if I want to put them on record. I can tell you, for example, that I've never in my life taken an advance for a book from any publisher. Not even when we left Kibbutz Hulda without a penny and I was forty-seven years old. We had nothing, and then suddenly Am Oved offered me an advance for the next book, and I turned it down. Because an advance necessarily binds me to a date. That's something I've never compromised on. It really scares me to have a deadline. That paralyzes me. When I was a university student it was terrible, that pressure of what would happen if you didn't finish your paper by tomorrow, by the next day. University papers were the last time I worked with a deadline, which is like a roof that's going to fall on your head and pieces of plaster are already crumbling.

You told me there are books or stories that you start and then leave. Is that because they can't get close to that third book you spoke of? Or do you just not like them? All sorts of reasons?

It's like this, Shira. I've worked hard all these years. I used to work many hours a day, now only three or four hours in the morning, but I work every day. Meaning, I don't write books based on bouts of inspiration, as if the muse suddenly comes to me and I sit down and write a book, but then a few years later the muse disappears and I rush off to see a psychiatrist and tell him I have writer's block and I can't write. I've never had that. Neither a psychiatrist nor writer's

block. I'm not familiar with that. I always write. But over the decades that I've been writing, I've had many more abortions and miscarriages than births. When does that happen? When do I get a sign that I have to throw it out? If I'm writing and writing and writing, and lots of pages build up, and the characters keep doing everything I want them to. The baby doesn't start kicking me in the belly from inside. Then I realize he's not alive. If things are going so easily—like modeling clay—get in, go out, sit down, get into bed, have sex, it's a sign that something's wrong. When is it right? When do I know the fetus is alive? When it starts resisting me. When I wrote *My Michael* and Hannah pulled me into a scene that wasn't right for her, I told her: Sorry, I'm not writing that, it's not in your character. Then she tells me, in the middle of writing: You shut up and write. You're not going to tell me what is and isn't in my character. So I say: Excuse me, but you're my protagonist, I'm not yours. You work for me, I don't work for you. And she says: Leave me alone. Let me live and don't get in the way. I decide who I am and what I do and what I don't. And I answer her: I'm very sorry, I won't write that, and if you don't like it—go find another writer. Stop bossing me around. This is my book, not yours. And this Hannah keeps insisting, and so do I, and that's when I know the story is alive. But if I write for a month, two months, once even longer, and the characters are too obedient, I realize the fetus is stillborn. It has to be thrown out. I need a new pregnancy.

Have you ever shelved something you worked on for years?

Yes. Two years.

How frustrating.

I didn't shelve it. I destroyed it. I don't shelve. I rip it up into tiny shreds and flush it down the toilet. Because I can't light

a fire at home. And I'm afraid to throw it in the trash—pages might fly away, someone might find them, I don't want that.

When did it happen?

In between the car crash I had in '76 and *A Perfect Peace*, which came out in '82 or '83. In between those two things there was something I worked on for two years and nothing came of it. Instead I wrote a little children's story, *Soumchi*.

But do you think that could happen to you now? That you could work on something for two years and let it go? Or would you recognize it earlier?

I hope I would recognize it earlier. I wouldn't struggle for two years. Today I'm a little more stingy with time. I don't know how much time I have left. No one can know. I don't know if what I'm going to tell you now is true, but this is how it seems to me: you know those cartoons, Mickey Mouse, or Tom and Jerry, where the cat walks and walks and walks, gets to a crater and keeps walking, and only falls after a few seconds, because at first he just doesn't realize he's over a crater? When I started writing I was like that cat, I just didn't know what I was doing, where I was going. Today I have much less courage than I had when I wrote my first stories. Even *My Michael*, I don't know if I would have the courage to write that kind of book today.

What do you have instead of courage?

Patience.