

“This Bequest of Wings”
*On Teaching Poetry in a Region
of Conflict*

Rachel Tzvia Back

The Twelfth Judith Lee Stronach
Memorial Lecture
On the Teaching of Poetry

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The Morrison Library
The University of California,
Berkeley

The Bancroft Library
The University of California,
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Introduction to Chana Bloch

Last summer the violence surrounding the confrontation of Israel and Palestine over the issue of the two-state solution—"two states for two groups of people"—was personally riveting, as Israel is dear to me. For years I have had a relationship with students and some faculty at Birzeit University near Ramallah in the West Bank. So I decided to invite a poet from the area to serve as proof that civilized people can withstand this madness with dignity. I reached out again to Chana Bloch, a colleague, poet and friend who gave the eighth lecture in this series, *Learning from Translation*, in 2011. She has scholarly relationships in that world, so I asked her to recommend a speaker for tonight. I am grateful for her enthusiasm for this lecture series and participation this evening.

Chana Bloch is a poet, translator, scholar and teacher. She is the author of five books of poems: *Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems, 1980-2015*, *The Secrets of the Tribe*, *The Past Keeps Changing*, *Mrs. Dumpty*, and *Blood Honey*. She is co-translator of the biblical *Song of Songs*, as well as six books of translation from Hebrew poetry, ancient and contemporary, and a critical study of George Herbert. She is Professor Emerita of English Literature and Creative Writing at Mills College. Among her awards are the Poetry Society of America's Di Castagnola Award, the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry, and the 2012 Meringoff Poetry Award. Please welcome Chana Bloch, who will introduce this evening's speaker, Rachel Tzvia Back.

Raymond Lifchez

May 29, 2015

An Introduction to Rachel Tzvia Back
Chana Bloch

Thank you, Ray, for inviting Rachel Tzvia Back to speak tonight, and for asking me to introduce her. I had the pleasure of meeting her for the first time this week. I believe her talk about teaching poetry in a region of conflict is precisely the kind of event you envisioned when you established this lecture series in memory of Judith Stronach, and the kind of talk that Judith would have found deeply meaningful.

Dr. Rachel Tzvia Back, a professor of English literature at Oranim College near Haifa, is an Israeli poet and translator. Her family has lived in Jerusalem and the Galilee for seven generations; her great-great-great-grandfather from Berdichev, in what is now Ukraine, settled there in the 1830s. She herself was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1960, and raised and educated in the United States and Israel. She studied at Yale and Temple Universities, as well as the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she earned her Ph.D. in English *summa cum laude*. Her dissertation was published as a monograph, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*.

Since 1981—which is to say, all of her adult life—Rachel has made her home in Israel. She lives with her family in a tiny rural community with a population of 150 families in the north of Israel. But ask her where she truly lives and she will tell you her home has always been in the Jewish texts—biblical, midrashic, and liturgical—that she came to know as a child growing up in a modern Orthodox family—and with the English poets, among them her beloved Emily Dickinson.

I first learned about Rachel Tzvia Back when she wrote to me in her capacity as the English-language editor of *With an Iron Pen: Twenty Years of Hebrew Protest Poetry* (2009), an anthology of poems about the Occupation. The title is a verse from the prophet Jeremiah: “The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen and with the point of a diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart” (Jer. 17:1). The anthology includes poems by well-known Israeli writers like Yehuda Amichai, Yitzhak Laor, Agi Mishol, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Tuvia Ruebner, Aharon Shabtai, Meir Wieseltier, Natan Zach, and many others—all in all, eighty-eight poems by forty-two poets. When the Hebrew version, edited by Tal Nitzan, appeared in 2005, it was hailed in the Israeli press as groundbreaking. Heartbreaking too, these poems of rage, sorrow, shame, weariness, and despair.

Rachel saw the anthology in a bookstore, read it through on the spot, and at once recognized its importance. As she described that moment to me later, she knew “it *had* to be in English” even before she left the store. She undertook this project on her own initiative, translated most of the poems herself, solicited the remaining translations from other poets, and found a publisher. The English version she brought into being was a labor of love on her part and an act of public service. Adrienne Rich wrote a ringing endorsement: “These dissident Israeli voices, recognized and new, prophetic, raging, heartbroken, challenging, public and intimate, from the moral core of Jewish tradition, have gone almost unheard in America until now. The lyrical range is impressive, the edition scholarly; this is a historic collection.”

Back’s translations include the selected poetry of Lea Goldberg (2005), the renowned Israeli poet, playwright, translator, and scholar. Although Goldberg’s poems are considered classics of Hebrew literature, only a handful were available in English translation before Back undertook this project. Rachel has also translated a collection by contemporary Israeli poet Hamutal Bar-Yosef (2008). And in 2014 she published *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Ruebner*, a bilingual edition that includes work from his fifteen books of poetry from 1957 to the present, with her translations, introduction, and annotations.

Ruebner was born in Slovakia in 1924 and came to Mandate Palestine with a youth movement group in 1941; a year later, his parents and sister were deported to Auschwitz and murdered. Ruebner’s poetic trajectory is unique in Israel. Although known as a poet of the Shoah, he rejected the role of the “professional Holocauster” (Yehuda Amichai’s sardonic term) and has written unsparingly about the Occupation. About the “monsters ... walking among us,” who “multiplied, in every class, every rank and place, [and] started deporting whomever they could deport”—this from someone whose parents were deported. But if Ruebner speaks in the third person about “the soldiers [who] opened fire / ... following their orders” at Hebron or Khan Younis, etc., in what he calls “this blood-crazy / land” (*ha-aretz hazot/meshuga’at dam*), he uses the first person plural when he writes: “What we have done even God, Full of Compassion, will not forgive” (*mah she-asinu gam el malé rachamim eyno soleach*). In his old age—he’s now ninety-one—Ruebner has continued to write with wisdom and insight about what life holds for each of us:

*A human being can bear almost everything
and no one knows when and where
happiness will overcome him.*

FROM “WONDER”

Ruebner has received awards for his poetry in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, as well as every major Israeli literary award. Back's translation of his work is a gift to all of us.

Rachel Tzvia Back is one of a small group of poets in Israel who write in English. She is the author of four books of poems, *Azimuth* (2001), *The Buffalo Poems* (2003), *On Ruins & Return* (2007) and *A Messenger Comes* (2012). Her poems, like Ruebner's, are spare and subtle, formally restrained, distinguished by their beautifully sculpted lines and their expressive use of broken syntax. They are filled with the liturgical and biblical resonances that are typical of Hebrew poetry (the Israeli poet Aharon Shabtai, who translated *Azimuth*, said his task was made easier because Back's English was already halfway to Hebrew). The spareness of her lines is offset by the counterpoint of commentary or dissent that is part of Jewish literary tradition.

In that tradition, Back will often question or rewrite a familiar text. Here's an example: "I believe with perfect faith" (*ani ma'amin be-emunah shelema*) is the initial phrase in the thirteen articles of faith enumerated by Maimonides; it is now part of the liturgy, recited in the morning prayers. It is also heard in a song that is often sung at the Seder table: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. And though he may tarry, nonetheless do I believe." This credo bespeaks the yearning for redemption that will come, that surely must come, though perhaps only in the far-off future. Back turns it into a pained acknowledgment of the wrongs committed in the recent past:

*I believe with perfect faith
that I will find the strength to believe
that what happened really happened.*

FROM "AZIMUTH (IV)"

One of Back's subjects is the endless cycle of violence and suffering that has blighted the lives of Palestinians and Israelis: the "demolished walls [and] crushed cinder blocks" on the one hand, the suicide bomber and "burnt out bus carcasses" on the other. She is dismayed by the apathy of Israeli society: "we count our days / by which bloody 'incident' / killed whose children / ... and we no longer care // so long as our own / can still run through sprinklers / in the late-afternoon / blazing / heat."

On Ruins & Return, written during the Second Intifada, begins with a startling image, like one of those hallucinatory visions in the prophetic books. On the road to Jerusalem, where the hills had been charred to a shaggy black by wildfires, Back is haunted by a spectral presence: a buffalo, an animal totally alien to the landscape. "From that moment," she writes, "it stays

with me, wanders through my days, carrying the weight of the violence on its broad back... and it allows me to write what I could not have otherwise." What is a buffalo doing in Israel, of all places? When Back summons up the nineteenth-century slaughter of the buffalo in our own country, she prompts the reader to think about the native Americans of the Great Plains who were driven from their land as a result—one step toward the fulfillment of "Manifest Destiny," the belief that the American settlers would and should possess the entire continent granted to them by Providence.

In a new, as yet unpublished, poem, Back poses the question she will consider tonight:

*... the buried alive and the buried dead and the burned
and the broken are all one in the heart's darkest undertow so
what use is poetry, the poet
demands to know.*

FROM "WHAT USE IS POETRY, THE POET IS ASKING"

Back's work as a professor of literature at Oranim College is of a piece with her poetry and her translations. The classes she teaches are more diverse, I venture to say, than most of us have encountered. They are made up of Israeli Jews (Ashkenazi and Sephardi) and Arab citizens of Israel (Muslim, Christian, and Druze)—men and women, young and old, new immigrants and native-born, secular and Orthodox. Imagine trying to teach poetry to a class like that—especially during an election, or a flare-up of violence, or simply the grueling dispiriting daily tension. She does so, as you will see, with empathy and delicacy.

Back's latest collection, *A Messenger Comes*, a book of poignant elegies for her father and sister, has an epigraph from Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish* that illuminates her work as poet, translator, and teacher:

A messenger comes to the mourner's house. "Come," says the messenger, "you are needed." "I cannot come," says the mourner. "My spirit is broken." "That is why you are needed," says the messenger.

The words "broken" and "wings" recur throughout her oeuvre, answering each other like call and response. Please welcome Rachel Tzvia Back, a messenger who bears a message we need to hear.



Rachel Tzvia Back

“This Bequest of Wings” *On Teaching Poetry in a Region of Conflict*

Rachel Tzvia Back

Good evening. Thank you, Chana, for your beautiful introduction, and many thanks, Ray, for inviting me to deliver this talk. I am deeply honored to be here tonight. I never met Judith, but in the last months I've been reading and rereading her collection of poetry *Love is Strong as Death*, and through her words, I feel myself becoming acquainted with Judith in a powerful and very intimate way. It is as though these poems are Cope's hat from Judith's beautiful poem of that title; like that hat resting on the piano long after Cope is gone, Judith's poems sit on my desk and articulate for me her spirit, a woman's spirit of great compassion and tenderness, particularly in the face of death, a spirit trying to understand the divide that is, or is not, effected by a beloved's leaving the physical world. And I, for my part, have found myself responding to these poems, answering them in my own poems and thoughts, and so through them I have established a relationship with Judith, for which I am very grateful.

I want to pause over the eponymous opening prose piece of Judith's collection as segue into my talk here tonight. In this beautiful evocation of the last months of her friend Ortha Zebroski's life, Judith describes the garden Ortha has planned for Judith and Ray's house, describing the history of that garden, the relationships embodied and sustained in each new layer of planting. "Ortha's own major contribution," writes Judith, "was what she called 'The Brambles.'" The passage continues thus:

We took out an old privet hedge overgrown with ivy, and [Ortha] replaced it with viburnum, philadelphus, lilac, elderberry ...

The vision was that the birds and birdsong would fill it half the year, and then, during winter, the bare branches would reveal the nests. [However], the garden is not enough neglected for the brambles to materialize in such abandon, and the nests have never appeared. But the branches arch and intermingle as Ortha had planned, and her vision remains strong enough to summon up the nests when I walk through the birdsong.

Birds in a bramble, birdsongs and the imagining of bird nests: a gift of love from one woman to another, a gift translated for us into words that conjure the image and love both, and in the moment of reading, through those conjuring words, uplifts our spirit, as though on those same birds' wings. These are, of course, the wings of poetry—poetry that, like hope, is "...the thing with feathers— / That perches in the soul— / And sings the tune without the words— / And never stops—at all—." It is this winged aspect of poetry, particularly as it expresses itself in teaching poetry in a region of conflict, that I will discuss here tonight.

The poem I referenced above is, of course, Emily Dickinson's oft-quoted and very beloved poem "'Hope' is the thing with feathers—"; however, the title of my address, "This Bequest of Wings," comes from a far lesser known Dickinson poem, composed in the last years of her too-short life. The poem reads as follows:

*He ate and drank the precious Words –
His Spirit grew robust –
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust –*

*He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a book – What Liberty
A loosened spirit brings –*

I am struck by the great simplicity of the opening stanza, a simplicity bordering on the prosaic, imparted through the somewhat formulaic concurrence of syntax and lineation uncharacteristic of Dickinson's poetry. Indeed, this simplicity, together with the seemingly heavy-handed repetition of "he" and "his" in the first four lines, could lead one to disregard the poem altogether. However, the evolution of the second stanza complicates the poem's opening with the sudden shift away from the mortal "He" to an unexpected and ethereal "Bequest of Wings," a collocation that in its surprise and uniqueness raises up the text, as though with a sudden gust of wind. The enjambment that follows this stunning phrase then lifts the reader aloft into the white and open page space of the suspended line, into the open space of poetic possibility and promise.

This "Bequest of Wings" is the bequest of poetry; this "Bequest of Wings" is what I bring to my students at the college where I teach, a college in the foothills of the Carmel Mountains, in the western Galilee. My students are Jews and Arabs; the Arab students are Christian, Muslim and Druze. My courses run the gamut from introductory courses on English poetry to upper level seminars on African-American literature, feminist literary studies and creative writing workshops. As all these courses are in the Department of English Language and Literature, the language of instruction is English—which is for the vast majority of the students their second, or even third, language. An additional difference between my undergraduate students and the traditional American student body is the age range in my courses, which is unfailingly wide, from the very young nineteen and twenty years old (often young Arab women, just out of high school, or young Jewish women straight after their two years of army service), to much older students, men and women both, in their late twenties, even into their thirties and forties.

The region we live in is embroiled, has been embroiled—for as long as forever, it seems—in unrelenting conflict and violence. I state the sadly obvious and self-evident. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has proven relentless, with no sign of peaceful resolutions, or even peaceful intentions, on our horizons. My students are all citizens of Israel—that is, my Arab students are not Palestinians of the Occupied Territories—and still their identities, affiliations and loyalties are varied, often oppositional, and the violence on our borders is matched with a violence within, the violence of intolerance, racism, rage, profound fear, distrust and even hatred.

Within this context, to these students, I teach poetry. Within this context, to these students, one must ask: "What use is poetry?"

I lift the question "What use is poetry?" from the title of poet Meena Alexander's address delivered to the Yale Political Union in 2013. In this

address, Alexander ponders the place of poetry, particularly in the violent world we live in. The question “What use is poetry?” was directed to her by a young audience member at the end of a different address on poetry, and became the starting point of her Yale lecture. Alexander’s own question, a corollary one, appears midway through the address: “Why do we have poetry in a time like this?” she asks. When first I read this stripped-bare query, it at once evoked in me a question in response to her question: “How can we *not* have poetry at a time like this?” And from that rhetorical question, the next one unfolds most naturally: “How can we *not teach* poetry at a time like this?”

“These are the poets’ times, these dark times,” writes poet Michael Heller, “for the world takes as real its own fanatic thought.” The “fanatic thought” of politicians, generals and ideologues, from every side of the conflict, oft-times becomes the only language we read and hear, the only language we know how to speak, a language that we seem unable to escape. It is a language that is heavy with dirt clods—from too much land-worship and too many fresh graves. It is a language that weighs us down with rhetoric, propaganda and lies, until we cannot lift ourselves to stand upright. It seems as though we have accepted the violent cadences and contours of this language as inevitable, and with that acceptance comes our despair and, ultimately, our demise. And so I’ve come to understand that part of my job as a teacher of poetry in a region of conflict is to offer my students a different language, an alternative mode of discourse—the poetic. In sharp contrast to the political, nationalistic and militaristic discourses dominating their lives, the poetic mode insists on exactness and aspires toward truthfulness, even as it understands at the outset that words are ever-approximations of what they strive to express. Hence the poetic mode offers a certain humility, much needed, and a willingness to acknowledge that there are many realities co-existing and many perspectives one may have on each event and object; there are at least thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, I tell my students (introducing them to Wallace Stevens), and at least six significant landscapes (Stevens, again), all worthy of our careful attention and devotion.

Not surprisingly, in the opening session of my Introduction to Poetry class every year, I meet a group of students who is mostly wary of poetry; as the course is required—that is, they are there with no choice in the matter—most of them are, from the onset, resistant, sometimes even hostile. My students are hardly unique in this attitude; they are one more manifestation of this wide-spread phenomenon, poetry an art-form long out of favor, deemed

irrelevant at best, suspect at worst. They are impatient—after all, we live in impatient days—and so I open the first lesson begging their patience with this extract from William Carlos Williams' poem "To Daphne and Virginia":

*Be patient that I address you in a poem,
there is no other
fit medium
The mind
lives there. It is uncertain,
can trick us and leave us
agonized. But for resources
what can equal it?
There is nothing. We
should be lost
without its wings to
fly off upon....*

This image becomes my first offering of wings to them, the possibilities of flight embedded in poetic content and form as one—how the poem moves back and forth across the page as though each tercet is a new opening of wing-span, a testing out of what words may do in space. They are intrigued. But what they also encounter in this poetic extract, and what engages them no less than the winged image, is the earnestness of the "I" in its address to the "you"; that is, they read and hear the genuine effort the "I" is making to bridge the gap between the "I" and "you." This may seem to you insignificant, but in my region, the positions of the "I" and "you"—or, more commonly, the positions of the "we" and the "they"—are calcified in stark and intransigent polarization, the distance between them seemingly unbridgeable. Here, the "I," which they come to understand as multiple, it being Williams himself, then Rachel their lecturer, and later countless other "I"s they have yet to encounter, reaches out with a gentle, though insistent, appeal, trying to explain himself, or herself, and in that simple effort creates a "We" that stands boldly on its own at line's end. This is a "We"—the students and I acknowledge together—that will be lost or will take flight, through poetry, as one.

The vast emotional distance between the "I" and the "you" is, of course, a central concern in every realm of conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian realm being no exception to that reality. The "I" (or the "we") demonizes or dehumanizes the "you" (or the "him," the "they"), this demonization or dehumanization enabling and facilitating the violence that follows. Doubtlessly,

if we recognized and felt the humanity of the Other, we would be unable to inflict with such ease the damage and pain we do. Here too poetry proves invaluable, and utterly necessary, for the poem often provides an entryway into the other's emotional reality, an entryway otherwise unavailable across borders and enemy lines.

Consider Langston Hughes' now iconic poem "I, Too" with its uncompromising assertion of selfhood in the face of oppression and societal negation. I have taught this poem in both my African-American literature seminars and poetry courses. The poem reads as follows:

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

This is a poem my students have adored. They read it first within the context of African-American history, understanding the significance of Hughes' poetic statement (and of course the bold dialogue he is developing with Walt Whitman, self-fashioned Poet of America). They register and revel in the speaker's insistence on joy and hope, even in the midst of struggle. And then, quite organically, the poem leads them to reflect on how this speaker tells their own stories too. Indeed, my Middle-Eastern students, Jew and Arab alike, each resonate to the speaker's refusal to accept second-class status, to "eat in the kitchen," to be other than a full citizen of the state,

and of the world. The surprise to them all, across all their divides—Jew and Arab, male and female, Christian and Muslim, Sephardic Jew and Ashkenazic—is the revelation the poem precipitates, that no one of them is alone in his or her feelings of disempowerment and marginalization. Thus, they find themselves, in a small classroom in the Galilee, looking around the room through the prism of an “I” so distinctive from their own, presented to them in a fashion as direct, precise and emotionally honest as they have ever heard, and understanding in a new way themselves and their classmates.

Hughes’ poem takes flight through song: “I, too, sing America,” the speaker gloriously and defiantly asserts at poem’s opening, sending his words into the open air. But I return now to more explicit winged images and their impact on my students.

During the autumn of 2014 and into the winter months, violence took hold of Israel yet again, within its borders and beyond. Jerusalem was an epicenter of bloodshed, with the synagogue massacre in Har Nof a distinctively horrifying event in a series of unbearable episodes, occurring in rapid succession. The devastating ravages and repercussions of the 2014 summer’s war in Gaza—ravages and repercussions apparent above all in Gaza, but evident in significant ways in Israel too—weighed on everyone’s hearts, though were, and still are, being actively and crassly ignored by the politicians. In the north, where my students and I live, our days seemed to balance themselves on the edge of violence waiting to happen. And we were studying poetry. The poetic device I was introducing in the lesson in question was allusion; the poems I had chosen to exemplify the effects of allusion were three poems from Lucille Clifton’s poetic series “september song: a poem in 7 days,” composed in the days immediately following 9/11.

Even before entering into the poem series, we paused to discuss the allusion of the series’ subtitle: “a poem in 7 days.” The students identified at once the Genesis seven-day creation week paradigm and through it offered the reading frame that would carry us through the seven poems. The 9/11 catastrophe, they suggested, had cast America, and to a certain degree the entire world, back into a primal chaos, the *tohu va’vohu* of the unformed pre-creation world. This post-9/11 chaos, however, was not innocent, as the primal chaos had been; this was a chaos marked by terror and fear. Perhaps the seven poems of the seven days from 9/11 onward, the students continued, will represent the poet’s efforts to create—or recreate—a new world, from out of the dark destruction. The poet, like the original divine presence, will articulate the unworded into being.

The first poem of the series reads as follows:

1 TUESDAY 9/11/01

*thunder and lightning and our world
is another place no day
will ever be the same no blood
untouched*

*they know this storm in otherwheres
israel ireland palestine
but God has blessed America
we sing*

*and God has blessed America
to learn that no one is exempt
the world is one all fear*

*is one all life all death
all one*

The heavy weight of wisdom acquired through profound suffering and loss envelops the reader; the poem pulls downward, just as the towers plummet earthward, creating craters of burning wreckage. All is one in the face of such hatred and fear. This is knowledge one would rather not have, just as it is knowledge one cannot avoid. This poem, first in the series, is the world's gravity with no mitigation of grace, the world as underworld where darkness reigns supreme.

But then in the third poem, on the third day—yes, the day Jesus rises, my Christian students remind me—Clifton offers the following:

3 THURSDAY 9/13/01

*the firemen
ascend
like jacobs ladder
into the mouth of
history*

The “Jacob’s Ladder” reference—which most of them remember in some shape or form from their Bible classes, but not well enough to fully flesh out the image—leads the students back to Genesis (28:10) where they read: “And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and

descending on it." The classroom is a-flurry with what they suddenly *see*, with their offerings of interpretations and understanding: the firemen are, of course, the angels, but unlike the biblical angels, who go up and down and up again, these "angels" only ascend. The firemen entering the burning towers *expected* to eventually descend the stairs they climb, one student says, and the biblical verse leads *us* to *expect* them to descend, but they do not. What does "descend" – as in "goes down in history" – or here, goes "into the mouth of / history" – is their tale of selflessness, sacrifice and devotion. The oxygen bottle on their backs, another student says, could well be their wings, a single wing of captured air resting between shoulder blades. But this wing fails them, the student continues, her voice trailing off. The discussion continues; the fireman-as-angel image has touched them deeply, as has the poem's extraordinary precision, its brevity, its haiku-like incarnation. Their engagement with the poem, their close reading of it, their careful listening to its rhythms, its layers and nuances, their respectful listening to each other's interpretations of the text, their new understandings emerging, has carried the students aloft; from out of the 9/11 devastation, from out of the mire of their own landscape's unrelenting violence, something has lifted.

Before I proceed to the third poem from Clifton's series that I want to share with you, I pause to reflect on the issue of "listening" which I've just mentioned. Earlier in this talk, I spoke of teaching my students a new mode of discourse through poetry. Unfortunately, in discussions of "discourse," new or old, too often it is exclusively the speaking side of the equation that is addressed; obviously, there would be no discourse at all without the listening side. In regions of conflict in particular, listening skills are severely limited, if not absent altogether. In reading and understanding and learning from poetry, one may argue that "listening is all" (to revise the words of Edgar from Shakespeare's *King Lear*). This is, of course, a different type of listening, a listening that most often does not occur in the daily world. I think of a mother listening for her sleeping infant's breathing in the darkened room; it is that type of listening: attentive, alert, active, sometimes anxious, always informed by love. Indeed, poetry asks of us "to be listening," as Rainer Maria Rilke writes in "Sonnet 1" of his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (as translated by Stephen Mitchell), the act of attentive listening creating a "tall tree in the ear." And the poet, through the type of listening his or her poetry evokes, brings the sacred into being; as Rilke writes in the final line of that opening sonnet: "You created for them a temple deep inside the hearing." A temple deep inside our hearing, there in our Galilean classroom.

I return to Clifton, to the seventh and final poem in the "september song" series. The poem reads as follows:

ROSH HASHANAH

*i bear witness to no thing
more human than hate*

*i bear witness to no thing
more human than love*

*apples and honey
apples and honey*

*what is not lost
is paradise*

At sundown on the 17th of September 2001, the seventh day after the towers were brought to dust and 2,977 innocent people were killed, the Jewish New Year began. This Christian African-American poet insists we take note of the Jewish holy day, with its offering of new beginnings; this Christian African-American poet “bear[s] witness” to our common humanity, across religious, racial and ethnic divides. The seven poem (re)-creation week is done; there, at week’s end, at sundown, despite the overwhelming devastation and sorrow, the poem asserts that paradise is “what is not lost.” This paradise is not the Old Testament Garden of Eden, nor the later Christian—and Miltonian—incarnations of heaven, nor is it the even later Islamic *firdaus*. The sectarian paradises are lost, indeed must remain lost; what remains viable and possible is the shared garden of human connection: “apples and honey / apples and honey.”

Teaching poetry in Israel—to students who are continually bombarded with messages inciting aggression and fear, students who are personally affected in myriad ways by bloodshed and violence, students who lost their innocence early to the daily reports of racism, death and destruction—is a humbling and uplifting task. They carry, we all carry, a great weight on our backs and in our hearts. But poetry has the potential to transform that weight into wings. By offering an intrinsically humanist discourse-model radically different from the militarized and politicized languages that dominate the public realm, poetry proffers a unique space for reflection and exchange—even across divides that have come to define them. Indeed, a poetic discourse offers the possibility of transcendence above those divides, and above our own darker impulses and weaker selves.

Denise Levertov, great poet, great lover of angels and wings, articulates it thus, in her poem “The Wings”:

*Something hangs in back of me
I can't see it, can't move it.*

*I know it's black,
a hump on my back.*

*It's heavy. You
can't see it.*

*What's in it? Don't tell me
you don't know. It's*

*what you told me about—
black*

*inimical power, cold
whirling out of it and*

*around me and
sweeping you flat.*

*But what if,
like a camel, it's*

*pure energy I store,
and carry humped and heavy?*

*Not black, not
that terror, stupidity*

*of cold rage; or black
only for being pent there?*

*What if released in air
it became a white*

*source of light, a fountain
of light? Could all that weight*

be the power of flight?

Look inward: see me

with embryo wings ...

Inimical black power transformed, by language, into a source of light and the power of flight.

I want to end this address with a personal tale and finally a poem of my own. The tale first, naturally following Levertov's image of "embryo wings," which makes me think of my children. My eldest son Daniel participated in the summer 2014 war in Gaza, as an air-force rescue paramedic. The day the ground invasion began, he was in the north; it was a Friday night, and we had planned a book party for my recent publication of translations of the Hebrew poet Tuvia Ruebner, a book titled *In the Illuminated Dark*. In our wild garden, composed mostly of weeds and dirt, we gathered to share poetry. Though the news was horrendous and we were all anxious and upset, everyone who had been invited came. Daniel was there too, waiting for the call that would force him to leave the north, and rejoin his unit. The call came; he left the north, left the poetry in the night-time garden, to travel south and into war. Later he told us that the further south he went, the stranger and more surreal the landscape became, until they were at the Gaza border, the bombing echoing through the night sky, the horizon lit up with orange fire.

Two interminable, indescribable weeks later, we traveled south on an early Saturday morning to try and see our son at his makeshift border base. We had been told it was unlikely we could reach him, as many of the roads leading toward the south had been closed, but we set out nonetheless. We drove from the north of the country through the center, passing by strange normalcy, as though we were not a country at war. Gradually, however, the seeming normalcy faded, and as we drove deeper into the south, the roadside stores were all closed up, the towns and villages seemed deserted. The roads were in fact open, and completely empty. But the strangest thing of all was the skies; they were vacant, utterly bereft of birds. It was a bright summer August morning, the air was still cool, the skies were blue, but a strange silence reigned, and there were absolutely no winged creatures above to remind us of flight, of peace, or of hope. In that morning, and through those terrible weeks, the bequest of wings had been rescinded.

I will end with a poem called "Dream-inquiry (2)," this being my own offering of a winged image. The poem is from my last collection entitled *A Messenger Comes*, a book of elegies. The poem comes from a long poem series called "Lamentation," for my father, written as he was dying and in the months immediately following his death. The image at poem's opening is taken from real life: at the age of eighty, my father—scientist, humanist, religious Jew—had joined the group Rabbis for Human Rights and went with them one autumn afternoon into the occupied territories to help

Palestinian villagers pick their olives. The group was needed in order to protect the Palestinian villagers from Jewish settlers who had come to harass the Palestinians and block them from their labor. So there was my father, at eighty, up in a tree, becoming a bird, a sheltering spirit above:

DREAM-INQUIRY (2)

*There in a grove of old olives
my father at eighty has climbed
the highest branch
to pick fruit and perch
among pale dust-covered leaves
ripe specks dangling
against a sun-blinded sky —
his eyes
toward the grove's edge where
pillagers have gathered
stones from the wounded land in
their angry hands and when
they raise weapons for harm
my father lifts both his arms
into the unblemished blue
a bird
spreading white woven wings
wide
over us all
in the ancient grove
steadfast
sun glistening
still through the wings even
after
he's gone.*

May poetry's winged images fill your hearts, lift you up and even protect you in dark days. May the gentle bequest of wings be our inheritance and our legacy both.

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