

**TOWARD THE “WHOLE FRAGMENT”:
AN INTRODUCTION TO
LEA GOLDBERG’S LAST POEMS**

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In 1940, at the age of 29, Lea Goldberg wrote: “Maybe, just maybe we are learning only now / that the foundation of poetry is *not* / in the formations of harmony, but rather in the great fear / which startles a person’s heart before death, with longings for homeland and rest – / always far off?”¹ Of course, Goldberg went on in her illustrious poetic career to construct those aforesaid poetic harmonies, in exquisitely crafted poems with intricate rhymes and rhythms; master craftsman that she was, her often elaborate verses insisted on forms of harmony and perfection. And yet, the search for poetry’s essence remained an open question for Goldberg, her ongoing investigation fully in evidence and unrelenting in the evolution of her poetry. It is only in her last two books – quietly and gradually in *With this Night* (1964), and more dramatically in *The Remains of Life* (1971) – that inherited closed forms with their predetermined rhyme and rhythms were left behind. With these works, Goldberg entered into new poetic terrain, a terrain eventually stripped bare also by the reality of the poet’s own impending demise. On the threshold of her actual death, Goldberg revisited the question she had pondered thirty years earlier: Does poetry’s truth reside more in aesthetic constructions, or in primal emotion?

This expression of a different poetic truth, a truth manifested in the verses’ form as much as in their content, distinguishes Goldberg’s final, posthumously published book *The Remains of Life* (*She’eirit HaChayim*) – retitled here *On the Surface of Silence* – from all her previous poetry collections.² And yet,

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¹ Quoted by A.B. Yoffe as the epigraph to his book *Lea Goldberg: an Appreciation of the Poet and Her Work* (Tel-Aviv: Reshafim Books, 1994) [Hebrew]. All translations from Hebrew are mine.

² Tuvia Ruebner, the editor of the posthumously published final collection, chose the book’s title *The Remains of Life* from a poetic series of that name (see pp. 106-117 in this collection). For this English

this is a surprisingly understudied collection, with very few essays devoted exclusively to it.³ One can only surmise that this intriguing book, marginalized in Goldberg's oeuvre even as it is commonly recognized as a small masterpiece by all who read it, challenges many of the conceptions readers and researchers have held regarding Goldberg's poetry. In what I see as a purposeful development in her poetics, this collection's predominant use of *fragment poems* sets it apart from her previous work; indeed, Goldberg's final verses as collected in *On the Surface of Silence* are among her most accomplished and daring *because* they are fragments; they make meaning as much from what is not written as from what is written, foregrounding their own inevitable movement into silence. Unadorned, unelaborated, lucid, spare and precise, the poems in *On the Surface of Silence* achieve, as Tuvia Ruebner's puts it, "the mature simplicity [of] life's essence... a simplicity that no longer needs to prove a thing, not even itself."⁴ It is an investigation into the nature and significance of this fragment form I will develop here.

The term "fragment" as utilized in literature denotes variously in different contexts; hence it is necessary, first of all, to clarify the type of fragment Goldberg adopted in these final poems. These are not, of course, ancient fragments like Sappho's, whose material partialness testifies to the eradicating forces of history and whose presence marks always what is unrecoverable, forever lost to time and circumstances. Nor are these the Romantics' fragments, with their conceit of interrupted poetic transcendence, as represented most forcefully by Samuel Coleridge's dream-vision of "Kubla Kahn." Most importantly, these are not the modernist fragments popularized in the rupture and chaos

publication, the collection has been retitled *On the Surface of Silence*, and it will be referred to thus throughout this book. The phrase "on the surface of silence" is from the final line of the third section of "White Poplar Leaves" (see pp. 126-131).

³ While very little research has been devoted to this collection, quite a few reviews of the book appeared upon its publication; Goldberg was, ironically, much in the public eye then, following her untimely death at the age of 58 and the posthumous award of the Israel Prize to her that same year. The reviews, however, focused almost exclusively on the poet's emotional and psychological state while writing these final poems, and little attention was given to the poetic choices and strategies evident in them. One reviewer went so far as to argue that "one must not relate to these poems' poetic attributes in and of themselves," for the poems in the book and the "defining personal process" in the poet's life "are a single unit ... inseparable." See Daniel Gedanka, *Haaretz*, Feb. 2, 1971 quoted in Haya Shaham, "On the Reception of the Poetry of Lea Goldberg and Dahlia Ravikovitch by Reviewers of Their Day," in *Sadan – Studies in Hebrew Literature: Selected Chapters in the History of Hebrew Women's Poetry*, II, ed. Ziva Shamir (Tel-Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1996), pp. 212-13 [Hebrew].

⁴ Tuvia Ruebner, *Lea Goldberg: Monograph* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1980), p. 201 [Hebrew].

following World War I, such as those of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, whose rhetorical force resides in their lament of the lost cohesion of a lost world. Goldberg's contemporary fragment is something different altogether. To characterize it, I borrow the term "whole fragment" coined by the American poet and scholar Ann Lauterbach in her intriguing essay "As (It) Is: Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment." Lauterbach argues that the whole fragment rejects "totalizing concepts of ... unity, closure and completion" and intentionally situates itself on the fault-line between presence and absence, between text and silence. In this liminal space where borders are tested and undone, the whole fragment embraces incompleteness as generative and meaningful. It offers a series of "openings" toward new and multiple "constructions of significance."⁵

Of course, Goldberg did not herself edit this final collection. Shortly after her death, Ruebner, her friend and literary executor, sifted through her notebooks and papers, chose poems, established an order and added to those retrieved texts the last poems Goldberg had published in journals in her lifetime.⁶ With select Goldberg illustrations interspersed between, and in conversation with, the poetic texts, Goldberg's final collection was published in 1971, a year after the poet's death.⁷ Obviously, with regard to final authorial intent, the element of the unknown remains, as is unavoidable with any posthumously edited and published book. Ruebner himself raises this question in the brief afterword he included in the Hebrew original: "There's no knowing," he writes, "if Lea Goldberg would have included all these poems [in the collection]."⁸ However, this not-knowing does not negate the presence of a clear poetic direction in Goldberg's final writings. The fragment *as form* is already in evidence in some of the last poems she chose to publish, and the poems themselves speak with authorial force and certainty.

What engages the reader's eye right from the first poem in *On the Surface of Silence* is the great brevity

⁵ Anne Lauterbach, "As (It) Is: Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment," in eadem, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience* (New York: Viking Press, 2005), pp. 40–45; first published as "On Flaws: Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment," *Theory & Event*, 3/1 (1999).

⁶ After Goldberg's death, Ruebner was appointed literary executor of Goldberg's literary estate by her mother, Tzila Goldberg.

⁷ In her final years, Goldberg saw drawing as "an escape" from writing and expressed her artistic impulses more and more in the visual medium. See Giddon Ticotsky, *Light Along the Edge of a Cloud: An Introduction to Lea Goldberg's Oeuvre* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad/Sifriat Poalim, 2011), pp. 145–46 [Hebrew].

⁸ Tuvia Ruebner, untitled afterword to *She'eirit HaChayim* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1971). An English translation of Ruebner's afterword appears as prefatory remarks in this volume on page 141.

of the pieces, the sparseness of words in contrast to the abundance of white-page space, and the frequent absence of the traditionally defining – one could say confining – title.⁹ All these attributes may be considered markers of the whole fragment. So, too, are the enigmatic, un-contextualized and often unexplained poetic assertions. Here is the collection's opening poem:

משורר צעיר משתתק פתאום

מפחד לומר את האמת.

משורר זקן משתתק מפחד

מיטב השיר

שהוא כזבו.

A young poet suddenly falls silent

in fear of telling the truth.

An old poet falls silent in fear

of the best in a poem

which is its lie.

(pp. 2-3)

The self-reflexive and forceful *mishtatek* (falls silent) – rhythmically and denotatively more assertive than a simple *shotek* (is silent) – is repeated twice in this tiny five-line poem and announces what will become evident as the collection unfolds: Silence is the leitmotif of this book, as silence is the leitmotif of the poet's life. Silence crouches at the edges of every poem and every page; indeed, one may argue that it is the poet's relationship with silence that sits at the heart of each poem.

Intriguingly, in this epigraphic and enigmatic text, haiku-like in form and sensibility (where meaning

⁹ Of the thirty-eight poems and poetic series in this collection, twenty-five are untitled (which includes the four poems Ruebner grouped under the title "Fragments"). This significant majority of untitled poems is a noteworthy and meaningful deviation in Goldberg's oeuvre, where titled poems are the clear norm. Similarly, two-thirds of the poems in this collection are eight lines or less in length, a brevity that distinguishes them from all of Goldberg's earlier poetry.

is made through the juxtaposition of images, lines devoid of explanatory punctuation), the “old poet” – and Goldberg saw herself as old even from a much younger age – imposes silence on herself for fear that “the best in a poem” is its lie. The phrase “the best in a poem is its lie” (*meitav hashir kezavo*) was penned by Andalusian Hebrew poet Moses Ibn Ezra (c. 1055–after 1138), one of the preeminent poets of the Golden Age of medieval Hebrew poetry.¹⁰ On first reading, the “lie” seems to have a negative connotation; however, Ibn Ezra’s full assertion casts this poetic “lie” in a different light altogether. “The best in a poem is its lie; and if the poem strips away its lie,” continues Ibn Ezra, “it stops being a poem.”¹¹ Thus, for Ibn Ezra and other medieval Hebrew poets, the “lie” – which is the secular poem’s artifice, its formal adornments and figurative offerings, which together create a fictional reality of pleasure and erudition – is intrinsic to poetry’s essence and *raison d’être*.

However, in stark contrast to this somewhat lighthearted poetic sensibility offered by Ibn Ezra and clearly alluded to by Goldberg in her use of the well-known phrase, Goldberg expresses “fear” of the deceitful “best in the poem” – a fear that results in self-silencing, which, for a poet, may be considered nothing less than self-erasure.¹² What exactly is this deceit for Goldberg, and what are its constitutive elements? The fragment does not offer elaboration or explanation; indeed, in a powerful example of

¹⁰ In his seminal critical work *Secular Poetry and Poetic Theory: Moses ibn Ezra and His Contemporaries*, Hebrew poet Dan Pagis (1930-1986) develops a complex and nuanced reading of the phrase *meitav hashir kezavo* as used by Ibn Ezra and the other medieval Hebrew poets of Spain. Pagis points out that the phrase had, variously, rhetorical, moral and social significances, dependent to a considerable degree on whether it was referring to the formal “lie” – that is, the ornamental nature of poetry – or the “lie” in content. See Pagis, *Secular Poetry and Poetic Theory* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1970), pp. 46-50 [Hebrew]. For a discussion of Ibn Ezra, see Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950–1492* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton UP, 2007), pp. 121–122. Cole names Ibn Ezra as one of “the four giants of Hebrew verse in Spain,” alongside Shmu‘el Hanagid, Shelomo ibn Gabirol and Yehuda HaLevi; see *ibid.*, p. 12. See also in this volume Goldberg’s “Songs of Spain,” pp. 40-51, where she names herself as “anonymous inheritor” of these medieval Hebrew “princes of song” (*negidei-hashir*).

¹¹ Ibn Ezra makes this full assertion in his Arabic prose work *The Book of Discussion and Remembrance* (*Kitaab al Mubaadara wa-al-Mudhaakara*), a collection described by Cole as “the only contemporary work that critically examines the Andalusian Hebrew poetry in belletristic ... fashion” and as “[c]ombining elements of a literary memoir, manual, biography, and meditation on the art of poetry.” Cole, *The Dream*, p. 122.

¹² Ibn Ezra’s *The Book of Discussion and Remembrance* had been translated into Hebrew by Ben Zion Halper and published under the title *Shirat Yisrael* (Leipzig: Abraham Yosef Shtibel, 1924). The phrase “the best in a poem is its lie” was common parlance in Hebrew literary circles following that publication.

poetic form manifesting poetic content, the poem itself abruptly falls silent at the assertion's end. But considering the classical European tradition from which Goldberg emerged, that of the perfect sonnet and of complex *terza rima* verses, of crafted and complete rhyme schemes and rhythms – a tradition she herself adhered to in much of her life's work¹³ – one can reasonably surmise that it is exactly this which Goldberg is now naming the poem's best feature and its lie: aesthetic perfection. Thus, this opening poem in *On the Surface of Silence* may be read as a late-in-life bold statement of poetics, an aesthetic and ethical position¹⁴ that rejects the authority and “absolute” beauty of predetermined forms striving toward formal perfection and completeness, forms which by definition obfuscate the truth of human transience and the lasting reality of human solitude and solitariness.

The “whole fragment,” as I read its expression in Goldberg's final collection, foregrounds this human solitude and solitariness. In many of the poems collected in *On the Surface of Silence*, one encounters what American poet George Oppen so exquisitely termed “the shipwreck / of the singular.”¹⁵ Certainly, solitude and solitariness are hardly new themes in Goldberg's poetic oeuvre.

¹³ In her early poetry collections, Goldberg made extensive use of the sonnet form, the Petrarchan sonnet in particular; she translated Petrarch's sonnets into Hebrew and was clearly influenced by his work. Her best-known sonnet series include “Love Songs from an Ancient Book” and “Love Sonnets (in Thirteen Lines),” in the collection *Al HaPrichah (On the Flowering, 1948*, and “The Loves of Theresa de Meun” and “Trees” (including the oft-quoted “Pine”), in the collection *Barak BaBoker (Lightning in the Morning, 1955)*. All of Goldberg's sonnets – including unpublished sonnets discovered in her papers – were collected and published in *Love and Gold Poems: The Sonnets of Lea Goldberg*, ed. Ofra S. Yeglin (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2008) [Hebrew]. Goldberg's most famous use of the challenging *terza rima* form appears in her ambitious nine-part poetic series “On the Flowering,” in the eponymous collection *On the Flowering*.

¹⁴ “Ideas of perfection and wholeness can easily translate into ideas of moral absolutes,” writes Lauterbach, in “Whole Fragment” (above, note 5), p. 43. I see Goldberg's apparent refusal here of aesthetic perfection as intertwined with a refusal of such moral absolutes.

¹⁵ Oppen elaborates on this image in his letters: “‘The shipwreck of the singular’ I wrote. *We cannot* live without the concept of humanity, [that] the end of one's own life is by no means equivalent to the end of the world, we would not bother to live out our lives if it were – And yet we cannot escape this: that we are single. And face, therefore, shipwreck” (italics in the original). *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 121, 265; quoted by Marjorie Perloff in “The Shipwreck of the Singular: George Oppen's ‘Of Being Numerous,’” www.bigbridge.org/BB14/PerloffShipwreck.pdf (accessed May 5, 2011).

With similar poignancy and clear-eyed vision, Oppen writes: “It is difficult now to speak of poetry.... One would have to tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what happens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and therefore what art is, and the

From the “alleyways of loneliness” in *Smoke Rings* (1935), her first collection, to the “solitary of the night” in *On the Flowering* (1948) and the great loneliness resounding throughout “The Love Songs of Teresa de Meun” in *Lightning in the Morning* (1955), solitariness and solitude are everywhere in Goldberg’s poetry.¹⁶ However, what is new in this final collection is that the poems themselves, their visual and material presence, represent and embody solitariness. Because of their haiku-like brevity, the poems themselves *look* solitary on the page, adrift in a sea of white-page silence. Thus, in the four-page series “Fragments” (*Shevarim*),¹⁷ each small poem-fragment alone negotiates the physical white-page vastness around it as it negotiates the imagistic and emotional vastness expressed within:

רק מדרגה אחת.
לא תפלי לעמק.
אדמה קשה
ללא חסד של תהום
...

One step only.
You won’t fall into the depths.
Hard earth
without mercy of the abyss
...

(pp. 16-17)

This isolated four-line poem-fragment alone on the page is, I argue, whole; that is, it isn’t part of something larger, something else or something lost. This elliptical poetic statement is all there is; there is no more: just one step, and then one more, on relentlessly hard earth. A human existence. There is no redemption; there isn’t even the grace or mercy of an abyss in which one may lose oneself (much

isolation of the actual.” *Idem*, “Of Being Numerous” in *George Oppen: Collected Poems* (NY: New Directions, 1975), p. 168. For Oppen, as for Goldberg in her final book, artistic expression and “the isolation of the actual” are inextricably intertwined.

¹⁶ The phrase “alleyways of loneliness” is taken from the poem “Perhaps” (*U’lai*). With the anaphoric repetition of the word “perhaps,” Goldberg’s poem recalls the poet Rahel’s earlier text “And Perhaps” (*Ve’Ulai*). See *Shirat Rahel* (Tel Aviv: Davar Publishers, 1975), p. 79.

¹⁷ The title of this four-part series was given by Ruebner; in Goldberg’s notebooks, the poems were untitled and not arranged as a series. For more on this series, see the end-note on page 144.

as the reader may lose herself in the free fall into white space following the poem-fragment, a free fall accentuated by the absent period at line and poem's end). The "mercy of the abyss" is, of course, paradoxical, seemingly oxymoronic; and yet, there is "mercy" in oblivion, in the self-forgetfulness offered by a void.¹⁸ Thus, the real paradox of human existence resides, ironically, in the image of the "hard earth" we must traverse, step after step – in the hard and real fact that our walking across the earth is fleeting and our ultimate return to earth is what endures and lasts. This is the paradox of human existence which knows it is transient and yet pretends it is not; the paradox of the poet who knows she cannot capture the world in words and yet keeps trying.

The acknowledgment of this paradox is part of what unfolds in Goldberg's final book; together with this acknowledgment comes, I believe, an acceptance of final silences. Thus, Goldberg writes:

כבר השתיקות קלות.
האור בהיר.
כשאין דרכים
אין פחד מגבלות.
ואין מה לגלות
כשאין מה להסתיר.
.....

Already the silences are easy.

The light is bright.

When there are no roads

there's no fear of borders.

And there's nothing to reveal

when there's nothing to hide.

(pp. 18-19)

¹⁸ The word *tehom*, "abyss," which may also be rendered as "depths," "deep waters" or "great floods," evokes the pre-creation landscape. See Genesis 1:2: "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*Ha'aretz haytab tohu vavohu vehoshbekh 'al-penei tehom*). In this context, the poem may be read as suggesting that the indefinable and ever-changing pre-creation state offered a mercy unavailable in the rigid framework of the post-Genesis world.

One encounters in this poem a surrender and a release; a surrender to silence, a release from fear – perhaps the same fear alluded to in the previous poem, and the fear evoked in the above-quoted lines penned by Goldberg in 1940. Now, toward life’s end, defenses are down, and the struggle is over. The silence that surrounds this small text also permeates it through poetic statements that end abruptly, are brief, unadorned, bare and definite. The described landscape has no past or future, no roads toward or from it, and meaning is found in this suspended, singular place of the *now*. Borders are undone and ultimately made meaningless; speech and silence intermingle, as do presence and absence. The tautological equation of the poem’s last two lines seems to offer the relief of “breaking cover” (as in the cover of espionage) – refigured here as the cover of elaborately crafted form and embellishments, what might be considered the cover of formal authority. What stands in place of that authority is the fragment, offering an opening toward multiple readings (what was revealed; what was hidden?) and toward what might come next.

Not all the poems in *On the Surface of Silence* as are short as the two discussed above; however, even the longer poems manifest the sensibility of the whole fragment. Thus, the thirteen-line poem “The clasp of sand and stone” offers in both form and content this poet’s complex self-situating at the threshold between speech and silence, between the crafted poetic artifact and the fragmented, half-articulated saying. A poem of culturally charged images and rich motifs, it reads thus:

סגור החול והאבן
של הגר,
של אנטיגונה,
שלי.

סגור החול והאבן.
האהבה קמוצת השפתיים.
הגאווה המשפלת,
העלבון הגא.

בדרכי הגולים
סגור החול והאבן
ושמים קרובים
ובשמים
קוצי כוכבים.

The clasp of sand and stone.
Hagar's,
Antigone's,
mine.

The clasp of sand and stone.
The tight-lipped love.
The downcast pride,
the proud insult.

On the exiles' path
the clasp of sand and stone –
the sky nearby –
and in the sky –
star cacti.

(pp. 28-29)

This poem is surprising on every level, from Goldberg's unexpected affiliation with Hagar and Antigone at its opening, to the "tight-lipped" exile descriptions in its middle, to the sudden transcendence at its end. The two quatrains and closing quintain are composed of telegraphic images delivered in very short, mostly end-stopped lines, in which the syntactic unit is complete and closed at line's end. These poetic choices promote a quiet certainty, and a sense that every moment in the poem, as in life, may be the last. What resounds most forcefully in the poem is the absence of verbs; indeed, there is not a single verb in the thirteen-line text. Verbs in general, and action verbs in particular, are no longer necessary, it seems – and perhaps no longer possible. This is the landscape of the suspended, the unmoving; this is the landscape, again, of no roads and no borders, hence no direction; a landscape of sand and stone and open horizons.

Certainly the notion of motionless suspension seems paradoxical in a poem about exile: Hagar's exile for being a threat to the single narrative of nationhood; Antigone's, for defying patriarchal law and logic; and the speaker's – from what and why, we do not know. Exiles in general and Jewish exile in particular traditionally connote wandering, endless and relentless movement from place to place. However, the exile here, in a fiercely embracing desert of "sand and stone," is of a different sort

altogether. Rewriting the biblical motif of desert as the place one must traverse to get *to* the Promised Land, and rewriting exile as the imposed and punishing state one must endure *away* from that Land, this is a desert and an exile that do not exist in relation to anywhere else; this desert and this exile offer instead an end-to-wandering to or from. The thrice-repeated “clasp of sand and stone” links stanza to stanza and asserts the literal and figurative *bold* of this non-place place.¹⁹ Thus, the traditional construct of exile as not-homeland is revised; indeed, this exile offers an alternative to the very notion of homeland. In Goldberg’s poetic and personal trajectory, this seeming embrace and acceptance of the non-homeland is of supreme significance. Having spent a lifetime suffering “the heartache of two homelands,” might she be asserting at life and poem’s end that in this dividedness one has, finally, no homeland at all?²⁰ “I left a land not mine / for another, not mine either,” wrote Algerian-French writer Edmond Jabès, describing, perhaps, the emotional reality of many immigrants, Goldberg’s too. “I took refuge in a word of ink,” he continues, “with the book for space, / and word from nowhere, obscure word of the desert.”²¹

Jabès’s “word of ink” aspires, it seems, toward stability, offering refuge; however, that stability is complicated by the continuation of the passage, where the once-authoritative poetic “word of ink” becomes a “word from nowhere, obscure word of the desert.” Similarly, Goldberg’s desert of “sand and stone” is a place both seemingly stable (as in stone) and ever-shifting (as in sand); a landscape of innumerable particles which together fashion the impression of a whole. As I read Goldberg’s final poems, I believe that this literal desert *topos* doubles as a trope for poetry’s terrain; to return to

¹⁹ The thrice-repeated phrase that opens the poem offers us the intriguing and unconventional word *segor*, which I’ve translated as “clasp” both to render the denotation of “fastener” and to evoke the sound of something closed/closing (*sagur*), embedded in the Hebrew original. An additional denotation of the word is “pure gold.” It also evokes the collocation *segor halev*, the thorax or breastbone, and the expression *kara et segor libo*, “he opened his heart.” Thus, in this image of the “clasp of sand and stone” beats the quiet pulse of the human heart.

²⁰ The phrase “the heartache of two homelands” is from Goldberg’s oft-quoted and canonic poem “Pine,” English version in Rachel Tzvia Back, *Lea Goldberg: Selected Poetry and Drama*, (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2005), p. 91. Of relevance to this conception of the non-homeland, see Tuvia Ruebner’s 2009 *Haaretz* interview where he states the following: “Lea Goldberg wrote that there are [for her] two homelands [the one in which we are born and the one we choose.] I feel that I have two ‘no-homelands.’ . . . Poetry became my homeland” (*Haaretz*, Interview with Dalia Karpel, July 29th, 2009). I view the poems of *On the Surface of Silence* as placing Goldberg in agreement with Ruebner’s conception of the non-homeland.

²¹ Edmond Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book*, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 79.

Lauterbach's terminology, this is a "distilled or stabilized 'reality'" that is, finally, nothing more than "an illusion of syntax."²² The poem as whole fragment exposes the illusion.

Other "illusions" are similarly exposed in Goldberg's poem. She refuses the traditional paradigm of affiliation and self-identification according to nationality and religion – a paradigm most forcefully present in Israel throughout the years of Goldberg's life. In this refusal, in establishing a gender-based collective identity (with Hagar and Antigone), across ethnic and religious borders, Goldberg exposes the "illusion" of those borders and of the single androcentric narrative of identity formulation. This refusal is an act of feminist "re-vision" – the "re-vision" conceptualized by Adrienne Rich as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" and of understanding "the assumptions in which we are drenched."²³ Hence the "old texts" of exile and of what is or is not homeland are entered from a new direction, and the "assumptions" of identity demarcated by national borders and ideologies are foregrounded as the speaker in Goldberg's poem seems to find refuge and, finally, transcendence in the open, indeterminate fluctuation of the unnamed, unbordered desert.²⁴

Undoubtedly one may choose to read this place of "sand and stone" differently, not as the refuge Jabès suggests, but rather as a claustrophobic and confining place. I see it otherwise, and I believe the poem's ending fortifies my reading. In the borderlessness of the whole fragment, earth and sky are near each other and eventually merge in the startling and exquisite image of *kotzei kokhavim*. With these thorned stars or starred thistles – rendered above as "star cacti"²⁵ – two elements otherwise belonging

²² Lauterbach, "Whole Fragment," (above, note 5), p. 42.

²³ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (NY: Norton, 1979), p. 35.

²⁴ Goldberg's refusal of self-identification according to the parameters of nationality recalls her response to the literary debate that raged among the Hebrew poets in Palestine during World War II over the "legitimacy" of writing lyrical poetry in wartime. Goldberg was taken to task by Natan Alterman for her failure (or refusal) to write "mobilized poetry" (*shirah meguyeset*) – poems on the horror of war, the importance of nation-building and the noble sacrifice of young men. Goldberg's response was that poets had the right – even the obligation – to continue writing poems of nature and love, *especially* in wartime. It was the poet's job, she argued, "to remind humankind, every moment and every day, that the opportunity to return and be human is not lost." See Ruebner, *Lea Goldberg* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1980), pp. 69–74, 116; and see Goldberg's poem *Ha'omnam* ("And will they ever come"), in idem, *On the Flowering (Al HaPrichah)* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1948), p. 72; English translation in Back, *Lea Goldberg* (above, note 20), p. 76.

²⁵ The rendering of *kotzei kokhavim* as "star cacti," rhyming with "nearby" and "sky" and repeating the "t" sound across the two words, is intended to echo the rhyming and alliteration of the Hebrew. A

to opposing and separate realms are linked through the rhyming of their first syllables, thus unifying the heavens and the earth.²⁶ The image is one of transcendence, of limitless possibility and beauty in the moment, in the singular experience of one's singular place. In his own writing on the desert and exile, Jabès termed this place “the inhabitable infinite,”²⁷ a place/non-place that was for him, and perhaps in the end for Goldberg too, “a haven of grace.”²⁸ The “inhabitable infinite” – or “haven of grace” – operates also on the level of the reader's encounter with the text and her “making of meaning” in a poetic landscape that is regenerative, fluid, multiple and ever-changing.²⁹

Inevitably, the sand and star images placed in close juxtaposition in this spare and stripped-down poem evoke God's blessing of Abraham, in which he is promised that his descendants will be “as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore; and your descendants will seize the gates of their foes” (Genesis 22:17). This fundamental moment in Jewish national and religious identity formation³⁰ and the political and ideological framework it proffers are, however, challenged by Goldberg's whole fragment. In place of the promise of a great and numerous nation that will defeat all other nations – a promise based on patriarchy's paradigms of power – Goldberg's sand (of the desert, not the sea) and stars offer nothing but themselves, which is the promise, I believe, of individual moments of meaning and beauty in a fully paradoxical and imperfect world.

The final poem that I will consider offers an additional and elucidating manifestation of the whole fragment. The poem, appearing halfway through the collection, reads as follows:

more literal rendering would be “thorns of stars.” What is lost in this translation is a possible allusion to Jesus' crown of thorns.

²⁶ I see this merging of heavens and earth as an alternative creation story, a revision of the Genesis creation story in which the world comes into being through distinction and differentiation, through the separation of natural elements from life forces. The elements in Goldberg's tale reject separation in favor of an intermingling that challenges normative and bounded definitions and visions.

²⁷ The paradoxical, seemingly oxymoronic construction of the “inhabitable infinite” bears a strong similarity to Emily Dickinson's “Finite infinity” – a condition or place reached when the “soul [is] admitted to itself,” a solitary place of “polar privacy” more extreme than the solitudes offered by space, sea and even death. See *idem, Final Harvest*, edited and introduced by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, NY, London: Little Brown and Co., 1964), no. 1695, p. 312.

²⁸ Jabès, *A Foreigner* (above, note 21), p. 7. Though *sui generis* in nature, Jabès's writings lend themselves easily to comparative poetic analysis, as they are poetic in their precision, in their insistence on isolated images as truth-holders, and in their associative leaps.

²⁹ Lauterbach, “Whole Fragment” (above, note 5), p. 45.

³⁰ The sand and star allusion to Abraham is accentuated by the reference to Hagar, who bore Abraham's son Ishmael and was banished into the desert; see Genesis 21.

ההרים היום כצל הרים
והדממה כהד דממה.
היום אני יוצאת לדרך
וקול צעדי לא נשמע.

היום אני יוצאת לדרך
וקול צעדי לא נשמע

The hills today are like shadows of hills
and the silence like an echo of silence.
Today I set out on my way
and the sound of my steps is not heard.

Today I set out on my way
and the sound of my steps is not heard
(pp. 70-71)

The landscape Goldberg portrays in this six-line poem is, above all, a landscape of uncertainty. The very hills – traditionally viewed as distinct, definite, dominant – are here no more than their own ephemeral shadows, while silence is enigmatically an echo of its soundless self.³¹ The figurative language is itself intrinsically equivocal, with the use of simile – a figurative device that proposes a possible similarity between elements (the hills are *like* shadows of hills) – in place of metaphor, which would assert an absolute relationship and complete identification between the two sides of the equation (the hills today *are* shadows of hills). In the Hebrew original, the uncertainty and instability of the imagistic terrain is again accentuated by the lack of verbs in the poem's first two lines. The noun-elements – hills and silence – seem suspended, unanchored in a verbless world. Of course, the missing verbs are only half-missing, in that there is no present tense of “to be” in Hebrew, and so such statements are always verbless. However, the appropriate third-person pronoun (in this case,

³¹ The aural image of silence echoing itself, or of silence being an echo of silence, is beautifully accentuated in the Hebrew through the doubled *dalet* in *bed bademamah*. The aural and visual mirroring of the *dalet* – across the white-space valley between the two words – creates an actual echoing effect.

“they” or “it”) often stands in for the missing present tense of “to be,” and here its absence is marked.³² Thus, the opening two lines are balanced on the interstice at their center, an interstice that marks the fragmentary nature of poetic and personal experience as one.³³

From within this landscape of uncertainty, into these shadow-hills and echoes-of-silence, Goldberg departs, soundlessly: “Today I set out on my way / and the sound of my steps is not heard.”³⁴ The reader cannot be certain if her footsteps are unheard because they make no sound, or because there is no one to hear them. In either case, the isolation evoked by the image is extreme. And yet, the volitional nature of the speaker’s departure, conveyed in the active “I set out” (*ani yotzet*), foregrounds the speaker’s independence, even a newly claimed freedom. Indeed, in one of the last two poems Goldberg wrote in her lifetime – the haunting sixteen-line untitled penultimate poem in this collection that opens with the words “Tomorrow I die”³⁵ – Goldberg utilized a similar image of departure, of setting out on a journey that she claims as wholly her own. “Tomorrow all will be / yours and for you,” she writes, “[b]ut today I stand at the threshold / and I’ll cross over my border / and no one may trespass.” In this context, I read the unheard steps in “The hills today ...” as an expression of liberation – from frameworks and expectations, poetic and personal, imposed throughout a lifetime.

The poem’s assertion of unheard footsteps turns on itself in the poem’s closing couplet, which is a word-for-word repetition of the previous two lines, but for a missing period at the end. And so, the unheard footsteps *are* heard, in the echoing final stanza, and the poem’s form insists thus on at least one, if not many more, alternative readings to the seemingly categorical nature of the speaker’s disappearance into silence. At poem’s end, in the white space of the missing period and beyond, the reader can hear the echoing silence of this whole fragment poem. Meaning is made, though it never claims to be more than it is in the moment of meeting between reader and text.

³² In my English translation of the first line, I added the present tense of the verb “to be,” as the oddity of the line without it far exceeded the affect of absence rendered in the Hebrew original.

³³ In an intriguing and oddly relevant reflection on the verb “to be,” Lauterbach writes of the gap between “the reified ‘is’ of an imaginary yet knowable present and the imperfect or furtive ‘is’ of the *actual* ‘as is.’” Eadem, “Whole Fragment” (above, note 5), p. 43 (my emphasis). In Hebrew, the “is” is even more imperfect and furtive, as it is in fact a marked absence.

³⁴ The word *kol* in the fourth and sixth lines of the poem, translated here as “the sound of my steps,” also means “voice,” subtly alluding in the silenced sound of footsteps to the poet’s silenced voice.

³⁵ Goldberg wrote this poem, together with the poem “And this will be the judgment,” in the hospital, in the last days of her life; see Ruebner’s Afterword p. 141. Both poems make extensive use of repetition, particularly (though not exclusively) anaphoric repetition, giving them a powerful litany-like effect. The many declarative statements in both texts lend them a defiant, assertive tone.

“It is the fragment and the fragmentary state that are enduring and normative conditions,” writes art historian William Tronzo. “Conversely,” he continues, “it is the whole that is ephemeral, the state of wholeness that is transitory.”³⁶ In Tronzo’s intriguing assertion, the “fragment” is burdened with negative weight, while the “whole” seems to allude to the solely positive, an Eden long gone.³⁷ The “whole fragment” as conceptualized by Lauterbach refuses the traditional negative and positive weights of these terms; indeed, the whole fragment as manifest in the *On the Surface of Silence* deconstructs the duality altogether.

Goldberg’s final poems foreground the fleeting nature of artistic creation and the paradoxical nature of writing as ever the present signifier of the absent; however, in that acknowledgment of the absent objects, and of the about-to-be-absent speaker herself, the poems are not mournful. The tone of self-vaediction prominent in this final collection conveys acceptance, and even accomplishment. Throughout these fragment poems, it seems that Goldberg is finally at peace with herself, at peace with her poetry and with the approaching end.³⁸ These stark and stripped-bare poetic texts tell no lies, because there’s nothing left to hide; in Ruebner’s exquisite phrasing, they have “laid the palms of their hands on the gate leading beyond crafted form, beyond the directing hand, beyond poetry itself.”³⁹ This is the terrain of Goldberg’s bold final poems. In this terrain, which had looked so fearsome thirty years before, Goldberg gifts us with poems of great lucidity and liberation, poems whose visions and

³⁶ William Tronzo, “Introduction,” in *idem* (ed.), *The Fragment: An Incomplete History* (Los Angeles: City Research Institute, 2009), p. 4.

³⁷ Glenn W. Most aptly describes the traditionally negative connotations of the fragment thus: “The very term *fragment* [is endowed] with an emotional tone, connoting loss, injury, and deprivation, that is entirely lacking in such partial synonyms as piece, excerpt, and citation.” *Idem*, “On Fragments,” in Tronzo, *The Fragment* (above, note 34), p. 14.

³⁸ In asserting that Goldberg’s final poems express peacefulness and self-acceptance, I disagree with the standard reading of her work as sad and depressed to the end. See, for example, poet Natan Zach’s late review of *The Remains of Life*, in which Zach praises Goldberg’s last book as “the most wondrous and moving in her oeuvre” but describes the poems as “without residue of hope, without shadow of amnesty.” *Idem*, “‘Tomorrow I Die’: Natan Zach on Poems by Lea Goldberg,” in *Hed bahinukh* (December 2001), p. 35 (Hebrew). Zach’s reading was repeatedly echoed in other reviews which were, in my opinion, profound misreadings of Goldberg’s last book.

³⁹ Ruebner, *Lea Goldberg* (above, note 24), p. 202.

truths have the power to keep us company through our own lifetimes, through the reality of our own
“shipwreck of the singular.”