

# between the words

Bethlehem West Bank Palestine  
Oakland California USA

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*Psalm 1: Cave of the Beatitudes*

you whose heart yearns pure  
who smears mercy and sparks peace

you who know yourself weak  
and devious yet walk upright:

because you observe my law  
here you will grieve and suffer

treachery, still you hunger  
for justice, for you are blest.

get up holy one fear not –  
tap-rooted in my love

consecrated by delight –  
for I shall soothe you now; feed

from that sweet fruit you bear, drink  
of the spring bathing your feet

deck yourself in lilies, find  
shelter from the sun and wind

that parch hollow men and send  
them spinning down to the sea

*Psalm 4: Kfar Cana*

A welcome in hands brimful  
of pears and a slow smile:  
his water to wine miracle.

Futile to pin such bounty  
down, like some skimmer  
on a Riker mount.

In these days of light trap,  
killing jar and shadowbox,  
we yearn for mystery;

Yet robots play musical  
chairs for our home, hustling  
their claim of no safe harbor

In competing dynamics  
until we hear the beat  
of that phoenix, fear and fear.

Float your coracle  
through the channel  
occupied by sirens

I am near you, holding  
the far corner of your net:  
Here ends the singing.

*Psalm 8: Mount Tabor*

floating lanterns, their parchment aglow  
waltz in a crowded ballroom, paper  
cranes spinning on air trail water:

a thousand souls in flame arc in turn,  
skin slips from their limbs like silver  
scales, mist drifts far above the river.

consider man, work of your fingers  
formed but little lower than angel  
with dominion over all, mindful

of whatsoever cross his path:  
beast of field, fowl in air, fish at sea,  
ordained in might to still enemy

and avenger; you place your glory  
and honor as a crown: head and tail  
unfold heaven, moon and stars set sail

on rippling feathers, earth bows and bends  
in concert as peacock and dragonfly  
reiterate transfiguration.

*Psalm 11: Sepphoris/Tsipori*

soldiers march along the road  
Rome shaped from sea to sea,  
merchants edge a caravan  
aside, for royal horse must pass  
sheep and goat and camel cross

to pasture; but no birds fly  
here, no common shrike, no lark  
no raven, kite or stork  
who know only the highway  
of star and sun and sky.

arms thick as rock, a carpenter  
carves chisel, cloth, mortar,  
mallet, spike, sand; ceramic  
chips sift from saddlebags strapped  
to the waist of a potter:

glitter of ruby and gold, as coins  
or pomegranate seed spilled  
to sign the night trail home,  
then harvested for sealing nest  
and marking migratory roost.

blessed are the poor in spirit:  
you persecuted, accused,  
starving for the kingdom  
who paint your lover's wistful  
smile in a mosaic tale;

blessed are the pure in heart:  
flee, *tsipori*, as a bird  
to your mountain: the wicked  
bend their bow, ready arrow  
upon string, aim at the upright.

*Psalm 19: Ein Karem*

who is true mother, true love?

Elizabeth, believed barren,  
married to a priest broken  
down and dumb, she whose son leaps  
up in her womb. Maryam,  
lacking bridegroom and chamber,  
uncertain of her welcome  
belly shaky with its new weight.

who is true prophet, true son?

John, wild in the river, wild  
on the *wadi*, drinking law  
and judgement like honey straight  
from honeycomb, undefiled.  
Yeshua, sifting fine gold  
of respect from dross decree,  
who runs in sure joy his course.

who is true wisdom, true one?

nothing is hidden from her heat  
no desire, no fear, no heart;  
her handiwork by day and night  
couches fire against sky, knits  
land and sea as one, beads  
dew on petal and wing, plucks  
holes in heaven of pure light.

*Psalm 22: Al'Azarieh/Bethany*

Flying checkpoints sprout and wilt  
daily on West Bank roads, like gourds  
God appointed to shade Jonah  
awaiting the worst at Nineveh.  
Twenty-five feet tall, with sheer  
concrete walls hugging watchtowers  
(home to snipers), the Fence appears.

An old limestone wall borders  
the monastery. Passionist  
hospitality dismantled  
it, cleared a path through orchard  
and garden on property still  
sacrosanct from army seizure  
(by grounds of security).

Flying taxi stands emerge  
at either side: gondolas  
to and from Jerusalem  
for a pilgrimage of children  
with schools in *Abu Dis*, men  
from Bethany seeking work,  
the pregnant and elderly.

Vigiling the voiceless churchyard,  
refugees shake olives from trees  
near the wall of three white tombs  
where tear bottles and icons bind  
themselves in dust. Quartets of men  
drinking *qahwe* or *arak* tend  
dead shops, smoke *narguileh*, play cards.

*Psalm 23: The Sea of Galilee*

No illusion: Whisper a kiss  
slit your throat, slam your dear head  
down to dirt – wedging clay in blood  
embrace. A hit and run. Jordan

muddy and shallow, our toes  
make banquet for minnows.  
Above, a triad of crimson  
dragonflies hums in canon.

*Jezebel* fragrant with haze green  
light: basalt millstones capsize,  
an olive press sinks in sprouts  
and soil cracks up stone.

Fish cavort, tilapia stalking  
gnats on the lake as heron stand  
sentinel. A flock of storks poise  
in the mist, aloof. Lulled to trust

by the rocking water: we  
are this boat, this cradle the sea.  
*Za'atar* for bread, *d'vash* our wine,  
through the radiant night wing desert doves.

*Psalm 24: Caesarea Maritima*

not ours, this fragile island.  
we plant our monuments here:  
bridge and aqueduct and palace,  
stone cut smooth to seize the earth  
a thousand, thousand years.  
still, this plot is not our home:  
we sojourn in a holy place,  
we borrowers of space and time.

who dares ascend the sacred *tel*,  
fingers clean, muck rinsed from nails,  
to claim of virtue virtue's due:  
the blessing of salvation?  
this is the generation  
of those who seek truth unmasked,  
as fast food, ready-made; they  
read no signs, but make history.

*Psalm 27: Bethlehem*

here is a little door:  
blackened wood set in stone  
arch within arch, hall in hall;  
a cohort of idle young men,  
*kaffiyehs* drawn over heads,  
slides into her cool, dark womb.

*here is an iron gate:  
its guillotine splits the line  
of tanks spitting tear gas  
and rubber-coated metal  
bullets, round like marbles  
(shooters, ringers), knuckled down.*

here is a narrow door  
whose velvet tatters frame a cave  
smudged by oily smoke;  
a brief descent on tapered  
spiral stairs while a thousand  
tender chants echo wonder.

*here is a sniper tower,  
where Rachel wept and died; false  
witnesses have risen  
up against these children  
playing in the narrow streets  
of three refugee camps.*

here is a tiny door  
vast enough for hand's caress  
and the kisses of my mouth;  
ancient women veiled in black  
stoop swollen backs as Mary  
once bent her pierced heart's knee.

*here is a checkpoint in the wall  
protecting such as breathe  
out violence, whose dragon  
claws crush homes and uproot trees;  
come to Bethlehem and see  
Him whose birth the angels sing.*

*Psalm 31: Wadi Qilt*

Some self-starting principle  
of malevolence at play  
like the Gadarene mirage  
pregnant with evil.

Empty vessels craving oil  
and wine, their intrigue flashes fire  
circles. First on the scene finds  
melting skin: glaze glues clay to kiln.

A toy road curves round hills  
bald and tufted with cactus.  
Crawl into my secret *khan*  
in the sand, this heat swells.

*Psalm 42: Ein Gedi*

Shy soul, her necklace  
of tears pearl by pearl  
comes unstrung; she thirsts,  
blurring night song.

Beyond this desert  
seven cataracts flee  
*Kinneret* to pickle  
in the Dead Sea.

Deep summons deep.  
Fresh springs bubble up  
and all around her flows  
pomegranate wine.

Incense beads on tree  
bark like almond milk  
syrup spreading silk  
over skin before the burn.

*Psalm 46: Gaza*

mountains shake  
and topple, withdraw  
into the sea

into the midst  
of the sea

waves recede:  
spoon, cup, scarf and stone  
mint, orange (crushed)

pulp-stained hand  
torn by tanks  
eager to plow  
under garden

edgily  
turning up secrets  
among the living

restless, they move  
on muddled land

where earth melts  
skin and bones dissolve  
troubling water

*Psalm 55: The Dead Sea*

Every desert thorn a rose  
its mummified essence  
verging on succulence

Crimson-edged stars  
oleander trumpets rise

In Arabia and Saba  
kings distill their poison

Obcordate emerald  
shoots a mask for pale  
underbelly dressed in down

Crystal blades bite and bless  
beneath the sand grey gloss  
full-blown in your hand

Tree of life fingers leafless  
in mischief reversed

Come rainfall baobab blooms  
luminous, a cloud at sunset

*Rousette* bats echo  
savoring pollen, petals  
wreathes its cork trunk white

Leaves and fruit and seedpod tart  
hollow bole sweet shelter  
in camel bark a sealed spring

*Psalm 56: Hebron*

silence spreads like twilight heat  
trees listless listing toward sleep;  
at home hothouse windows weep

ice cubes in caress of water  
collapse to melt with algae  
as goldfish triad spits stones

three spines bend above the vase  
in our illicit shrine, rose  
heads bow, paper petals fade

tango playing on my mind:  
two flesh merge, *mortise et tenon*,  
a prow parting cruelty

while cleric socialites still  
circling prayer wink at evil,  
judas love, keep their feet still

*Psalm 57: Qumran*

the children of darkness prevail  
as was foretold of the end time  
fighting by night in the street  
by day soldiers snatch our girls

from the market, bar the gate,  
knock water jars from the head  
of each *nazirite*, douse torch  
and candle, our sacred light.

darkness enters the city,  
takes up abode in our quarter,  
sows leaven along each crevice,  
swells seed within virgin belly:

our young wives no longer pure,  
no longer ours, we children  
of light set down in haste  
this scroll lest we perish here.

be merciful, for our soul  
yet trusts your law; your truth  
be our refuge, beneath the shadow  
of your wings we tent, we booth,

we cave, until this calamity  
pass. we pray you permit that lion  
whose teeth are arrows, his tongue  
a sword, to swallow his whelp whole.

let the net they fixed for our steps  
trip them up, each pit they dug cradle  
them so we may rejoice to see  
your glory above all the earth.

*Psalm 60: Nablus*

Nablus divided: checkpoint,  
assassination, curfew, midnight  
invasion, house arrest, torture,  
home demolition, closure,  
administrative detention.

Death dealt out among the tribes  
like cards, an equal share for each – Druze, Jew,  
Orthodox, Samaritan, Muslim,  
Latin, Melkite, Bedouin, Anglican  
– we all drink the wine of wonder.

O God of Jacob and Joseph, you  
cast us off; their pennant flies above  
us, blazing a contrary claim:  
Shechem is ours and transfer makes  
freedom. O yes, transfer is their peace.

*Psalm 80: Nazareth*

we huddle against cold  
cloaks pulled close, hand in hand  
one stokes the oven with olive  
branches stripped clean of fruit

gone are our cedars, give ear:  
wild boars mining moist earth upturned  
the roots you set deep in these hills

we huddle against cold  
cloaks pulled close, arms locked tight  
one lowers the bucket, hand  
over hand to reach the hidden spring

sheep of the field nested here  
finding cedar bark and leaves  
to stir up their strength and devour

we huddle against cold  
cloaks pulled close, cheek to cheek  
one dips from the olive press oil  
green and sweet into my clay jar

wayfarer and soldier, merchant  
returned, veiled in the shadow,  
to pluck grapes from our hedgerow

we bake the bread of tears, anoint  
it still hot with fresh oil, sop  
it in sorrow and sour wine  
behold Lord, and visit this vine.

*Psalm 84: Masada*

What if sparrows are true  
and home is anywhere?  
The tail pipe of a twenty  
year old car locked in a dank  
garage and driven only  
to church on Sunday  
by an elderly lady

Birds build where they will  
indifferent to Jesus,  
the first century Jew  
who raised such a ruckus  
with free food and forgiveness  
that his followers offed him

His eye is on nesting stuff  
a cache of rings and feathers  
where rabbits confect  
an altar behind the armoire  
even the window-box  
reliquary for leopard  
gecko and calico moor.

*Psalm 97: Mount Carmel*

fire clears the way and hills melt  
like wax in our path, earthquake,  
waterspout, lightning, wind awake  
the complacent, drive us deep  
into our caves, backs to the wall  
and pleading for that still, small  
voice of affliction: you shall speak;

you shall act without regard  
for outcome; you will not know  
foe from friend, only show  
what you hear to all who come  
to listen; write what you see,  
set it down plain, those who read  
now and later bear the blame;

and rejoice: earth hates evil  
and so shall you; all that's hidden  
is revealing, like light shaken  
from the wheels of my chariot  
of fire, sparkler in the air,  
spinning yet still at center, where  
you shall find rest for your soul.

*Psalm 104: Jaffa*

a flock of storks wheels  
on the wings of the wind

as trees shed not leaves  
but citrus clusters  
alight with sunset's flame

a diamond necklace strung  
along the shoreline

where ships and other ghosts  
sport around the harbor

light dancing in darkness  
on its liquid mirror  
in dying constellations

wild asses and goats, we  
creep from the hills and wait

*Psalm 105: Kfar Naum/Capernaum*

home boy dancing with his scroll  
crying from fugitive sheets  
today we set the captive free.

small bells sing on silver crown  
their call to prayer: Israel  
hear, a spirit compels me:

*torah* resists hardened hearts  
each stroke of ink chafes flesh thick  
with pre-emptive savagery.

remember caterpillars  
innumerable in our time  
of bondage, devouring tree

and vine; bear in mind the lure  
of Babylon: her temptation  
to assimilate, betray

the covenant; ponder  
our prophets, their cadence  
of repentance, then mercy.

wait no more, we act today:  
heal the sick, restore the poor  
our table awaits you hungry.

*Psalm 120: Mosque of the Ascension, Mount of Olives*

Snails consume away in dust  
tracks glazing earth break  
apart, drift – fragile curls  
on a whirlwind of chatter.

Treacherous lips crack off dry  
shells, razors mimic currency,  
these deceitful tongues wolves  
dressed in lambswool.

Empty skulls tinted white  
bones leak, mouths an ornate  
tomb, teeth prick, blood beads  
on chaste skin. Climbing, I sing.

*Psalm 121: St. Peter Gallicantu, Jerusalem*

At cockcrow broken birds choke  
heaped at the foot of the hills

Feet slip and fall into Foucault's  
orbit, wandering circuit of desire,  
they wither in moonlight bloat by day

Perishing: ring bells spin  
censers dance wake the shepherd  
flirt with death savor remorse

Sleep – going and coming, tears  
collect in the flask at the nape of my neck

*Psalm 122: Church of All Nations, Gethsemane*

Fingers bend and twist weaving  
silk strands with linen and wool  
Truth and justice vex at the fault

Floss clings to lanolin rejoice  
tribes knit together embrace  
Peace and mercy pool in their cracks

Shelter the stranger, feed sparrow  
and dove, shadow love  
Golden hill we home to your gate

*Psalm 123: Ecce Homo, Via Dolorosa*

Show me some street cred;  
this town's a haven for drive-bys.  
Stay back, you get too close  
you risk the whites of her eyes.  
Blow her away – in and out –  
leave the rubber-necking to me.

Back bite, sweet talk  
posse, whispering campaign, hey –  
you're a social climber – play  
the fear card. I want to see  
her face run like watercolor;  
I want to hear her bleat.

*Psalm 124: Hagia Maria Sion, Jerusalem*

Rescue unforeseen  
fretful pelican spearing  
flesh for fledglings

In crack of snare's release  
flash floods explode  
shrub and sheepfold

Aloft on the *wadi*  
teeth worrying air  
ache to swallow

A hover artist  
in abrupt escape  
from the verge of rage

*Psalm 125: The Cenacle, Jerusalem*

Bent boys twist and spiral  
shuffle a *danse macabre*

Chaff on winter wind  
breath birthing mischief  
dry seeds in a gourd

Trees rooted by wells bear  
branches lush with perfume

Bursting in petals and fruit  
their suckling shoots spring  
up waltz on the breeze

*Psalm 126: Dominus Flevit, Mount of Olives*

Tears dry on contact salt  
pillars encircle the sea

Women watch as shooting lava  
stars spark burns and light  
skips stones on water

Sodom ruined, each tree  
a rocket whose leaves cascade  
in ribbons of flame

Exiles caravan; children cling  
at legs; seed-bags slide  
off backs, chicks scatter

A camel tilts, trailing tent  
pegs, horse-carts shed  
doves, sheep lap at oil

And wine spills. Dare to sing  
of winnowed wheat

*Psalm 130: Ramallah*

out of the darkness a drumbeat  
of feet, soldiers on night march  
in the street sever harmony

the *hemiola* of their turn  
a transient arrhythmia  
steadily ratchets up the heart

slap of metal on thigh, gun cocked  
a time lapse as bullets in still  
air echo, red rose petals fall

a voice cracks, a fellow down.  
Lord, hear our cry: let your ears  
attend; if you mark sin, who stands?

song sprays from her mouth, each word  
a hummingbird homing where white  
blossoms spring up among green trees

out of the depths, backbeat of feet  
all night soldiers march on our street  
more than they who watch for morning

*Psalm 134: The Benedictine Abbey at Tabgha*

Servants of the Lord  
three sheep from a living  
crèche strip the bark off trees

You that stand by night  
at the edge of the sea  
two conies rest on an altar

In the house of God  
angels frame the cloister  
peacocks dreaming shake out light

Lift up your hands  
dragonflies tangle, teal wings  
rise on the spray of seven springs

In this holy place  
where petals multiply  
magenta, cream, rose, red

And bless the Lord  
break fish and bread  
cup hands for new wine

*Psalm 137: Jericho*

emerging at the edge  
of my heart of flesh  
a fugitive black etching;

boundaries soften  
and bleed, blur, skirt, dart;  
a dragonfly's smudge

at dusk: afterimage  
of color, tracer  
on the horizon.

dynamite lodged in rock  
(genocide, pandemic)  
transference backlash;

that slow, steady drip  
of water (poverty, rape)  
stone-hearted earthquake;

sculptor's hands on hammer  
and chisel (age, betrayal)  
a complementary fracture.

perfume in a Jericho  
side street: jasmine and rose  
mask pungent mosaic

of incense or myrrh  
caught fast by the net  
of our tesseract.

*Psalm 139: Kfar Nain*

offerings bereft of touch  
cold coins brittle roses  
candles half burnt chaplets  
scapulars wedding rings  
golden crucifix hung in chains

a plastic bottle brimming  
chrism drips velvet tracing  
on my palm your fingers warm  
my wrist thumb tenderly  
anointing vague stigmata

in reverse pray prostrate  
as jumbled bits of paper  
in awkward script rivet  
our tongues like Pentecost  
impenetrable yet known

*Psalm 146: Tiberias*

Beneath green glass curved to suckle  
wood and rock, tilapia swarm  
and champagne bubbles branch out.

A breeze toys with acacia  
leaves, an Aeolian harp  
shaken, its *maqam* tunes *saba*.

The sentinel egret tracks  
erratic water fleas, trapped  
as if in amber. Shaft from buoy,

the egret shoots. His talons nocks,  
wing coverts fletching, he spears  
a silver minnow dancing

on still water. Fringed tail dapples  
and diamonds drip from beak to lake  
as fingers fall on *tabla*.