

EFRAT MISHORI
A text and a poem

THE KNOWLEDGE OF LAND

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The knowledge of land I shall bring from the sea.
Wet shall I walk among its people
And my moist speech on their lips shall be.

Each day I raise to the shore
My heavy baggage, foreign, obscure.
Each day the shore swallows
A wealth of water, thick and impure.

The shore is a long wavering line
It is my verse in sharp relief
My two sides writing it
Turn it

Into one leaf.

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She couldn't quite recall the squat and charmless young man who said hello. She still couldn't remember him when he stood close up to her, and yet she asked "How are you?"

Okay, at last I've become human, he took pleasure in acquiescing, and she smiled at him and returned a reassuring look, as if she knew perfectly well who and what she was dealing with. He was dying to confess. To lodge his boring confession within her. To announce to the world his engagement with the world. I got married, I took out a mortgage and bought an apartment in Holonⁱ. He was dying to share with her the intimacy of boredom that he'd join with a face flushed with pride. He worked for Cellcomⁱⁱ.

And she?

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She crossed the moist lawn in the dark. The fig tree emitted a sharp odor of rot. A sour summer night smell displaced the familiar sweetness of its fruit. Today she stood before it and searched for the plump, purple figs hidden within the trees broad leaves. Even as one hand felt and pressed the fruit, her mouth held a half-bitten fig swarming with

spinules. She drew out the fig in fright and dozens of tiny bright creatures leapt in every direction.

She spat on the lawn.

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The crumbling kibbutz is a land of milk and honey. Yehudit hates it, but the fig and olive trees, the pink prickly pears ready to burst open, standing row upon row like jewels at the end of the thick green stems, all these offer themselves to her with a lavish hand that keeps opening, still unfenced, still belonging only to itself. Ever so slowly even here the ring around the landscape tightens, ever so slowly even here nature is transformed into a concentration camp fenced in by barbed wire and surrounded with searchlights. She plods up the steep incline adjoining the water tower, breathing hard. She wonders whether to prolong her walk and enter the factory, but decides not to, deliberately avoiding everything that is man-made, everything that reminds her of the city.

She'll soon head downhill and the meadow will assail her with its green, painful splendor. The horses are already stomping toward her and approach the fence. Their moist noses turn into coal beneath her hand's touch, their nostrils flare and release hot vapors. Here too the end is near, but she doesn't want to think about it. Yehudit is disappointed, the kibbutz is no longer a home and she has nowhere to go, but she, a guest on holiday can compose for herself whatever picture she desires, if only because she is foreign here. Of all things she despises literature, and the more she learns from her own experience the greater her hatred, her silence. But among these hills, far from home, everything yields to her imagination and the dissolving picture continues to obey her will, appearing before her in its deceptive splendor as if prepared to give itself generously to her illusions demand for wholeness.

Vacation, by now it's more than a week that she's here, in the crumbling kibbutz undergoing privatization. Far from her husband, she prattles with his sister Yehudit and filters out every detail that might upset her own peace of mind that she needs to award to herself. She is working hard. The book she is reading reveals to her that she is working hard. The anguished women characters in it pierce the idyll which she tries to hold on to with sentences sharp as lead bullets. They get stuck in her mind, the sentences, they clutch at the one loose link and won't loosen their grip. In the evening she talks to him in a faint voice, tries as much as she can to breach the distance.

Where is the truth? She thinks it exists deep in the depths of her body struggling to keep up appearances. Within her defeated body, that won't rebel. Where is the truth? It is always present in the inner, strong voice that bursts from within, that calls out to her to raze everything to the ground. She will discover herself only if she divorces. She'll start a new life only if she destroys the old. Where is the truth? The murmur surges within her, what was initially a suppressed appeal turns into a shout, into a rebuke and finally appears as a command: Go! Go forth from your country and kindred ...

She goes on. She walks on. And on. Nothing divides her from the landscape. Neither does she feel separate from the book she is reading. Her child is now far and big, she hasn't raised a large family, and her husband he too is far and big. Is it the eyes of the writer that demand of her to draw her own blood? To be honest with herself, to produce truth?

She skirts a rusty lamp-stand flung behind bales of hay and arrives at what was once a carpentry shop. The frames of furniture hang clumsily on the wall of the building and empty shelves are thrown in a jumble on the rough brick floor from which wild weeds shoot up. The blue gate of the kibbutz can be seen on the left. The first, lone car noses toward the gate, which slowly gapes open like the shriveled mouth of an old demented man. The car laps up the black asphalt and she stands under the shade of a large fig tree and waits for it to pass. Where is the truth?

In the children's animal farm, behind the wide gate that greeted guests, the "Welcome" sign still stands, hidden by enormous thorns that grew wild. A couple of years ago something strange happened here, that might have precipitated the closing of the animal farm. A huge hole gaped open beneath the red earth and its soft chalky subsoil causing the pen to collapse and bury a white mule and donkey. She recalls how she and Nadav would come there whenever he asked to stroke the ponies and feed the ducks. With this smell of the hot winds in the air and without a trace of the unhealthy humidity of the city, always soaked in soot, lying here, in the kibbutz, on the cot, in the near-empty room with the humming of the fan above her, she knows that she was born in a place like this, on the shores of the Kinneret. With the withering heat and the sound of water lapping. With the withering scrub and the surrounding mountains that dry out and yellow in summer.

Her knees twinge. She presses on. Further from there, in the small graveyard, where his mother is buried, a dog stands next to one of the four tombstones and pisses. She's glad to have the chance to rest and decides to abandon the footpath and enter. She's pleased to do so without him, to appropriate what belongs to him, without his being present. The dog wags its tail and looks at her when she picks up a small stone and places it on the simple, marble slab. Is it possible that I never crossed the hidden line between what I wanted to be and what I am? Who are the people I dreamed about? She always wanted to be normal, caught in this silly snapshot of this, or that, loud family. The family sitting at the table in the evening with children who've grown up and have brought their friends over for supper on Friday. The family where the mother, whose beauty has long faded, always prepares the meal. Gracefully accepting her fate and what one difficult birth after another did to her young body. Do I not know how to suffer? Is my suffering exceptional? The one and only?

Leaving the graveyard the road dips and curves, revealing its steep end. She turns towards its shoulders, towards the gravel path trampled and subdued even before asphalt was steam-rolled over it like black flattened dough. She deliberately presses her heels against the stones and tells herself not to look down but to walk on, bold-faced. Does the gesture itself generate the depression? Will she be able to overcome it? Sometimes, like now, it seems to her that she isn't alone. That she is walking with someone else by her side. That a force stronger than herself robs her lungs, takes away

her breath, bends her head down. Sometimes, like now, she wants to stop, something strong and stubborn wraps itself around her heart, two iron needles knit her heaving breast, her lungs expand to suck in air. She doesn't want to sink, she wants to reach the top of the paved road, where words have already been placed, but sometimes, like now, it just isn't possible. Sometimes, like now, she finds herself pounded like a slab of meat, gasping underneath the asphalt, trying with all her might to hold on to the shadow that always stands at a fixed distance from her body. As if she was a grain in a space suit. A single throbbing pea, trying to grip the rim of a pot filled to the brim with boiling water. She doesn't always succeed.

She'll call him. She'll cling to words even if for a long time now they've slipped away from her and she'll ask, How are you? She'll sound firm and she'll let her legs losing their hold on the road flee his field of vision. It's none of his business. The city is far away, and he who perhaps still loves her is far away too. She doesn't want him. She doesn't desire him. She wants both his help and to rebuff his body. She wants to circumvent the place where she comes to him as a woman. To crawl into the crack behind the wall, from which he approaches her as a man. She isn't interested in the man in him. She only wants to tell him, from behind what she is, he is, they are, that she is floundering. She crosses his skin and reaches the soft tissues of his being. She wants his hand without it being his hand. She wants to suck from within him the maternal juices. She wants to milk his motherliness from his fatherliness and his femininity from his masculinity, or the other way around. He, in this case, is just some guy she met, just some guy whom she forced to attach himself to her simply because he was there, just because he loved her, just because they married.

At the foot of the slope. Another slope. She doubles her pace as though she were afraid of falling any minute now. The coop stands deserted, empty of its baby chickens. Once, after they'd just met they went to look at them. Hundreds, yellow, small as the soft palm of a hand, quietly chirping and soaking up the wattage from the artificial lighting that stayed on round the clock in order to speed up their growth before being slaughtered. She breathes hard from the effort. She's finally on a holiday, she's had a tough life and can now imagine herself as the daughter of another, normal family.

The normal family loves her. It is a sort of unwritten agreement that she will remain what she is, trapped in someone else's fantasy of her, while they'll remain what they are, trapped in her fantasy of them: they don't suffer as she does, they're healthy, sane, home builders. Or perhaps they are more modest than her? Never asking from life what they can't give back? They love to cook, to bring children into the world, gazing as far as they can reach and no further. Protecting their dreams from being fulfilled, reading the gossip columns and adopting the routine heroes with a warmth and devotion devoid of doubts. Only she is still annoyed by the news that Yael Chen, the model, got divorced. They'll never succeed in actually seeing her, but they'll continue to give her their simple love and support her with their own unacknowledged frustrations. They will continue to exchange recipes, to dream about famous chefs whose digitally improved faces burst out of photographs of Tuscan kitchens, and to make chocolate balls decorated with colored candies. She admires them. She can lick over and over their ingenious determination. Their closed, protected, simple world.

The foal she saw today stood next to its mother in the irrigated meadow, while she found herself producing strange sounds that escaped from her throat. Her Nadavi and the horse they bought him were far away. When she has another child she'll be far wiser, less vulnerable. When she has another child she'll want to live here, surrounded by people. She choked down a sob. She didn't know whether from loneliness or longing. How lonely she'd been and what misery! Misery, that couldn't be shaken off. Misery that didn't ask for a thing. Misery that branded itself into the walls of the body again and again and again. She wants another child. She doesn't want to feel like she felt back then.

How we strolled down these lanes together, Nadavi! You, with your long socks that nearly reached to your hips, teeny with a white puffed-up nappy, a dummy dangling from your shirt and tired mother, who loved you to death and was terrified of the shadow of her own motherhood. It surges from within her like an ulcer, like a cyst oozing tears. Is she longing? For Nadavi? For those times? For the awful loneliness? For the brisk walk down the kibbutz paths early in the morning? Only you and I? For the cowshed and your small, sweet finger, only you and I? Yearning so much for mother, for a glance, for warm surroundings, she stood there facing the cows, only she and her little one in a noisy, impatient world, no one's queen. Without a circle of family, without any dotting circle of eyes, they stroked together the head of the startled cow that drew back and got stuck between the bars. No one's queen, not even of her own drama. He's sweet, they said, but she needed more and the great sadness didn't bring with it anything apart from a husband who stood by her. Always by her side and not within her. Always at a fixed distance from that awful place.

What words are needed to place there, my big sister? What words, and besides who had any words there? In the place where one needs to thrust good hands it isn't possible to put down words, it isn't appropriate to put words. And she doesn't want to enter this lack, this home, this abuse. She doesn't want to sketch with her body an empty circle like a dog chasing its tail. To lick her bleeding vagina and cry from its empty center. She doesn't want to spray words from that hole, to perforate them from within in a blind stream, hollowing itself out from moment to moment, and to sing the song of the hollow fertility, the sterile, of nothing, nothing, nothing.

The turquoise rectangle of the empty pool slipped past the newly built wire mesh fence and met her glazed eyes. She won't go to the pool. Not this time. Not on this vacation that was in fact arranged so that she might be able to swim. She tried to go, but the pool too was requisitioned and turned into a tourist attraction. Swimming hours were posted, a wood booth was built at the entrance to collect an entrance fee and crowds of strangers from the surrounding villages filled the pool. What once had enticed her to plunge into a square of amazing cold water, surrounded by mountains and fields, was now no more than a jerky dip into a chlorine sanitized toilet. Is her body betraying her? Is her body no longer capable of pleasure? Once, soon after meeting, they had stretched their young bodies on the lawn to dry. They'd shut their eyes and had offered themselves to the sun. The withering heat, the sound of water lapping and the sight of the mountains that dry out and yellow in summer, all at once brought her back to her birthplace.

Don't desire me, don't come to me. I attach myself to you only to push you away. To reject you again and again. I hate your affection when I'm not in the picture, when only the surface of my being greets you. That one, with whom she stopped talking since Nadav was born, wasn't satisfied with facial mimicry. She wanted everything, even the interior space that moves it. The face contracted in front of her as if it were a satisfied vagina and continued to retreat backwards, deeper and deeper until it was expelled to a place outside of her body shrinking in the end to a tiny spot somewhere out there in space. Can life grow out of this microscopic sperm? Why doesn't she want to confess to someone? Why doesn't she have any longer the patience to die? To discover within herself more and more death? Vast expanses of wasteland, vast expanses of sand, sand, sand, that neither water nor fire can rejuvenate.

The kibbutz begins to rouse itself from sleep. A flock of pigeons flutter from the pine trees to the red tile roofs. Bedouins in the valley emerge from their tents. The jangling of bells from their herds can now be heard from afar, fanning across the wadi. Today she'll talk to him. She wants to split up. She wanted this even before she got married. From where is this enormous hunger to destroy, she asks herself? Sometimes this craving fills her entire being, like some ancient command she has to follow: Go forth from your country and kindred ...

She goes on. She walks on. And on. She crosses the narrow lane running behind the buildings and walks toward her small, rented room. The dog from the cemetery leaps out of one of the apartments and wagging his tail scampers toward her like an old acquaintance. She knows it will be a disaster, breaking up, but ever since she has known herself the notion has been ticking within her like a bomb, the disaster. She almost misses it, the disaster, as if it had already taken place. She never understood why she's always seen the path her life has taken as involving some sort of reparation. She wants to break up because she wants to have something to mend, something from which to recover. She wants to break up, because as far back as she can remember she feels damaged, deficient, banished from everyone but mostly from herself, as though an infant was buried in some part of her body that hasn't been born yet.

She crosses the back lawn and approaches the room. The dog capers about her, releasing a barrage of loud barks, mad with joy at finding someone to talk to at such an early hour. To mend a flaw you need a flaw. To mend what has been destroyed – you need destruction. To break up – you need expulsion. Are poets the sort of people who have no other aim in life but to live? And what happened to her? When has she ever lived? When died?

She stands in front of the room and as she stoops by the door in order to recover the key she's hidden under the sandstone rock, the turquoise rectangle of the pool leaps into view – all promise.

The water is cool and the hour early. The sweaty, yearning body encounters as if for the first time its birthplace, with a withering heat and the sound of water lapping, with withering scrub and surrounding mountains that dry out and yellow in summer. The

kibbutz is a land of milk and honey. Yehudit despises it, she's disappointed, for her it is a land of expulsion, but for her, a guest on holiday, this landscape, this water, is her native ground. Her one and only home, the place her body, like a river, strives to stream into. The place to which her body now desires, more than anything else, to return.

Ah, will! How coiled back is her will! How concealed! And when she brings her tongue close to the small, wet tongue, that quivers like a sharp fleshy beak in her throat, that knows only right and left like a pendulum, she can only think of the inner space of the man or woman to whom this tongue belongs? She only thinks who is the man or the woman whose retreating tongue slips back with such wondrous caution, with such trepidation, into her mouth? She doesn't want her will to kiss her. She doesn't like to run into it. She doesn't like its caution, its lack of demands, its refusal to possess her. She'd like it to pull her out of herself, to stretch out its hand and retrieve the grain that sank under the awful stream of dadandmom, to draw her out of the amniotic fluids that pushed her further and further in, further and further in, until nothing was left.

ⁱ Holon. Suburb south of Tel Aviv.

ⁱⁱ Cellcom. Israeli Mobile phone company

Translated from the Hebrew by Gabriel Levin
Poem translation: Anat Schultz

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The Sea

The sea hid itself in the water.
The sea turned away in its waves.
The sea disguised itself as a transparent color
And the waters over it gave.
The sea drowned in the sea.
The sea toppled over and stomped its waves.
The sea came from itself to itself
And the seafoth covered its face.

For years it has heaved its mass
Without future, without past
Presenting us with its changeable front
Whose depths have dried and become water.

Awash in the blue lull of its wakening smell
The sea cannot read itself
Only bring itself forth:
Breed waves
From more waves
And bring forth quiet
From disquiet.

Translated from the Hebrew by Anat Schultz
