

Yael NEEMAN

What's the fuss?
War breaks out from time to time, you know.
It goes together with the seasons in this country:
Winter, Spring, Summer, War.

~ *Shitz*, a play by Hanoch Levin

The Elephant in the Room and Me

For me the conflict is the elephant that's always in the room, whatever room I'm in, and I have to find my place beside him. This external conflict creates a conflict within me. My political views and feelings are situated on the extreme left. I don't see the conflict in Israel as symmetrical. Its first name—the name of the conflict and the elephant—is 'Arabs,' is 'Occupation,' is 'Territorial Occupation.' And me, even as I oppose the occupation, I belong to the side of the occupiers. And so grows the embarrassment of how to talk about it. Added to this embarrassment is the question of how to talk about it with strangers from 33 foreign countries in a strange land.

My three older brothers and I find ourselves talking about our mother for hours. We tell each other how crazy and awful she is. We can start the minute we meet, no warm up required. Again and again, for example, the oldest of the four of us tells the story about how she called him once in the middle of a business meeting.

He told her, "Mom, I'm sorry. I can't talk right now; I'm in the middle of a meeting."

And she told him, "That's ok, you don't have to talk, just listen. I just wanted to tell you that you're not my son anymore."

She was always firing us, getting rid of us. Though we know these stories by heart in all their details, we never stop telling them.

But we couldn't stand hearing it from someone else. From others we like to hear about what a wonderful nurse she was on the kibbutz, how she helped everybody. Which is true, by the way.

Just as we couldn't stand hearing someone outside the family criticize our mother, it's different talking about Israel and the occupation among Jews than among people who may or may not know that there is another elephant in the room called 'Concentration Camps'—from which my parents came after almost their entire families were murdered, my father from Vienna, my mother from Budapest. And so now we're talking about a whole family of elephants, and this room is getting kind of crowded.

What's a radical left-winger to do? We could protest, for example, or sign petitions. I admire those who do. And sometimes I go to demonstrations, but I feel despair when I do. Like an imitation of the demonstration's choreography, I can't wave my hands with as much enthusiasm. I can't shout as loud, as if for me there's no connection between the demonstrations and the reality.

My other solutions are not much better—they stutter, they're emotional, they are the solutions of deserters. They can't even scratch the elephant's rough skin.

Even into my writing the elephant comes clumsily, with elephant steps. Suddenly, in a story that has nothing to do with the conflict, a sentence or paragraph appears with the explicit name—Arabs, or Occupation. Not necessarily aesthetic from the point of view of the plot. Suddenly, you can see a

detail of the elephant—a tusk, a toe—and then the writing develops a sort of tumor, like the huge foot of someone suffering from elephantiasis that you occasionally see in books about genetic mutations. Almost all of my books and stories suffer from this.

I would like to end this panel with a little story of a moment when I can forget the elephant: when I met Nael Eltoukhy of Egypt for the first time, he mentioned that he brought with him the book *Arabesques* by Anton Shammas. He said it is a very beautiful and interesting book, but at times difficult to understand because of its rich language. I always wanted to read it, too, but hadn't, so we decided to read it together out loud in Hebrew. And since then we've been reading a chapter a day.

Arabesques is a rich autobiography dealing with Shammas's origins and roots. He was born to a Palestinian father and a Lebanese mother in Fassuta, an Arabic Christian village in Israel. Fassuta is only a 10-minute drive from the kibbutz where I grew up, but they're light years apart.

Shammas took part in this very program, IWP, in 1981. There are four chapters in *Arabesques* that take place in Iowa. *Arabesques* was published in Israel in 1986. It was a huge success and translated into eight languages. Arabic wasn't one of them, by the way. Since 1987, Shammas has been living in the US and is a professor at the University of Michigan.

Nael and Shamas have been corresponding for the past six years around a common issue that they both share: their interest in the Hebrew and Arabic languages, but they've never met.