

## The Backside of the Nile / Nurit David

*Nameless Alley*, 1985

### The Pupil

The city square turn, turn, turn, but if you leave the main road and head further into small side streets, you'll be able to meet absolutely private people. Then the city will cease to be an alienated, faceless crowd marching confidently towards an obvious target unknown to you. At the end of a path a door will open and at the threshold a person, having just arisen from sleep or been pulled out from a book, will be awakened and returned to reality by the faint knocking sound. Thus were *Nameless Alley* and *Anonymous Alley*, branching out side by side from King George Street.

I was in the army then. The painting teacher recommended to me lived in *Nameless Alley*. I suspected being ridiculed; the person who recommended her and who gave me her address – she did not have a telephone those days, the mid eighties of the twentieth century – also said: “She doesn’t accept just everyone”, as if drawing me near and pushing me away, giving and holding back. So I was relieved to find that the alley with the mysterious name truly exists, and when I passed between the two stout concrete obelisks that seemed to have landed at its entrance, welcoming the visitor but also discouraging, it felt like I had entered a secluded, somewhat bewitched compound. Where am I? In what place and what time? Number three was a two-storied building that had known better days, now dilapidated and in tatters. On its walls, under the peeling layers of plaster, you could detect here and there a triplet of black lines in varying widths, a reminder of the building’s past that excavates the young archeology of Tel Aviv.

I followed her along a long narrow corridor, through a square-shaped room that seemed to double as a sleeping room and a living room, into an improvised kitchen with a wide window looking out on *Anonymous Alley*.

I introduced myself: Hillel.

- Hello Hillel, you are still in the army.

- It’s hell

- And your hometown?

- The town of two hills, Givatayim.

She told me about the class while eating a hard boiled egg; a rugged, angular, slightly embarrassed woman, yet trustworthy.

The class didn’t take place in the apartment which she shared with a boyfriend, but in a two-room studio above it, on the roof. We were five pupils, four boys and a girl, Luna, my wife to be. The payment was modest and each month I handed over a check signed by my mother. Between the two whitewashed rooms there was an opening without a door. The desk under the window in the front room consisted of a plywood board sitting on two wooden sawhorses, all painted light grey. On the floor, leaning against the wall, stood a large relief work painted in intense, brilliant turquoise and on the opposite side, a similar work painted in yellow ochre, while in the inner room to the left, where a few chairs were arranged in a circle for us, the pupils, a large plywood panel was lying on the floor with matches, tongue depressors, brown cardboard cutouts and letters scattered on its surface.

So it came about that the class was actually inside the teacher's paintings, and this might be one of the reasons for her strange confusion between her work as an artist and her work as a teacher, and for her inclusion of us, the pupils, in her thoughts, with their peculiar twisted reasoning, assuming a similarity between us by the sheer power of the genetics of our meeting.

From the inner room you could step out onto a spacious roof surrounded by trees with many crows living in their branches. During the lessons, some of them would stand on the stone railing, listening. These roofs were the pride of Tel Aviv, covered in black tar and whitewash, with solar boilers and remnants of old structures; you couldn't mistake their special odor and the atmosphere of freedom they implanted in young hearts. In those days the center of Tel Aviv was a source of attraction for young people, especially art students from all fields, who mingled with the veteran inhabitants of the neighborhood, mostly orthodox religious people, and surprisingly enough they all got on harmoniously. Many an apartment opened its light blue shutters after long years to let in dusty diagonal rays of light, to brighten brown geometrically patterned floor tiles, and many a contract was signed in rooms decked with holy scriptures, with a skinny bearded husband whose nose was thrust in a book and a stout wife with a keen commercial sense that did not contradict motherly care.

As I came to realize, those were not exactly painting classes. I later understood that teaching painting by talking was a regular practice among the teachers of the *Midrasha School of Art* where she was then teaching and where she had studied in the past. But probably her case was extreme. With her, almost every subject was appropriate for a discussion or a lecture under the mere pretext that it popped up in her mind or was of any interest to her. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she aspired to such a state of affairs in which the small class would be one of her own artworks, and indeed, more than learning anything, we served as witnesses and were part of the teacher's working mechanism. However, strangely and unexpectedly, our own creative urges were fostered as well, and the works we brought to be critiqued in class bore hardly any resemblance to the works of the teacher or to those of the other pupils. Concerning painting talent, I suspect the teacher didn't have much superiority over us.

The first lesson as I remember it – after all it was thirty-five years ago – was actually about painting, though not really about what is in the painting, but about its edge. She started with an obvious declaration, surprising in its simplicity: “The edge of the painting is where the world stops and the painting begins”. So is the painting not in the world? Yes, she tried to explain, the painting is not just another thing in the world; it pushes the world away from itself. The edge, as a determined given of measurement, exists only from without, from the point of view of the world, but the painting has its own plans for expansion. The edge seems to be flickering: on the one hand it is as crisp as a guillotine and on the other it is flexible and tends to infinity.

She talked about elements in painting that shy away from the edge and others, all they want is to traverse it, to cross the border, and how the edge cuts them down cruelly. At this point she positioned herself in the opening between the two rooms, as if she was the painted figure and the lintels were the frame and in order to demonstrate the ruthless function of the edge, she gradually disappeared behind the wall. She had a fondness for that lintel theatre and would come back to it from time to time. She praised the rectangle for its qualities that facilitate the construction of a place and emphasized the importance

of the placement of each element. The rectangle speaks the language of locations, she said: above, beneath, at the center, touching the edge, one beside the other. Even things that happen one after the other become one beside the other in the rectangle.

In order to cross the edge and enter the rectangle, in order to understand its language and speak its dialect, one must be a bit dead to the world; she suppressed a short giggle. You'll walk the streets, you'll pass people who look just like you, people who enter a bank, a coffee shop like you; like you they have to make a living, tired just like you, but the similarity is only on the surface, as you already are subordinates of the rectangle; it is it that you serve, but since you have subjugated yourselves willingly, it is freedom in all its purity.

But, she added soberly, not many will persevere; the attractions of life will have the upper hand: shopping malls, hiking in nature, the security of family life and all kinds of temptations of reality, not to mention its revenge against those who underestimate it, will eventually dispossess the rectangle of the majority of its adherents.

There were many things I could not understand then, and perhaps in this first lesson I already had some reservations budding inside me against the sovereignty of the rectangle. Though even in those there is a certain acknowledgement of its authority. At home my mother asked about the class and I said something like: "The teacher said that the world starts where the painting ends; that is, it starts very much near its edge, it gathers around the frame, it threatens to conquer the blockaded city which is the painting, but the painting fights back. When you frame a painting you are establishing a demilitarized zone... we, as the people of the rectangle, must fight back..."

"Oh, well, such territorial disputes, it sounds worse than the army. But you must be hungry, have something to eat," she urged me to the kitchen.

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The lessons were on Friday afternoons and when we arrived the floor had just been washed clean. While we were standing by the door the teacher was mopping up the last traces of water with a dry cloth in large arc-like movements. When she finished, she laid the cloth at the doorstep and we entered one by one, wiping our shoes thoroughly.

In the classroom, we were surprised to see the plywood panel from last week now leaning against the wall, covered in radiant, almost dazzling yellow. It was a wonder to see how, paradoxically, the thick paint revealed the glued images beneath it, making them more distinct, mainly by creating dark shadows. We were shy and good-mannered and worried lest it be considered impolite and too forward to comment on the teacher's work, to ask anything. Stealing glances at the big rectangular sun we seated ourselves each in his place. In the corner, stood a stool with a water jug and some glasses. One by one we spread the rolls of paper we brought with us and put weights at the corners. The class was mainly dedicated to a discussion of our works. I cannot testify for the others, but for me, the youngest among them, the whole style of talking was completely new. It never occurred to me to give such importance to the size of the painting, its shape, the qualities of the support, and to the relation of all these to the painted images, their size, color, texture, their position one in relation to the other, to the whole and to the edge of the painting, not to mention their reference to similar images in art history. As if every single painting had a life program, be it only for a short moment. I was introduced to new terms like composition, texture and format, Cubism and Expressionism, and although these were not completely unknown to me, they were revealed now, here, in a new light. The

teacher, looking at our paintings, pointed out small details to which we hadn't given a second thought, but when mentioned, smiling, we pleaded guilty. A few times during the class the teacher went down to the apartment below to bring up art books which she thought were related to our work, or might serve us as learning material or future inspiration.

Towards the end of class, one of us, the one I'll call *The Bright Boy*, was courageous enough to point at the yellow relief work. It seemed he was preaching to the choir, as if this was what she had been waiting for from the start, and as if the river of words stuck in her throat, was now gushing towards us, engulfing us.

The relief work, it turned out, came about from four words in James Joyce's *Ulysses* which she was then reading in the recently published Hebrew translation. *Nile. Child, man, effigy.* And indeed you could make out a large image of a river delta and the words *child, man, effigy* written once in regular print letters and again as if traced by hand in the sand. There were footprints made of matches, and other hard to identify details. This short sentence, she said, she sees as an ancient impression picture of the Birth of Art, a stamp issued to mark the event.

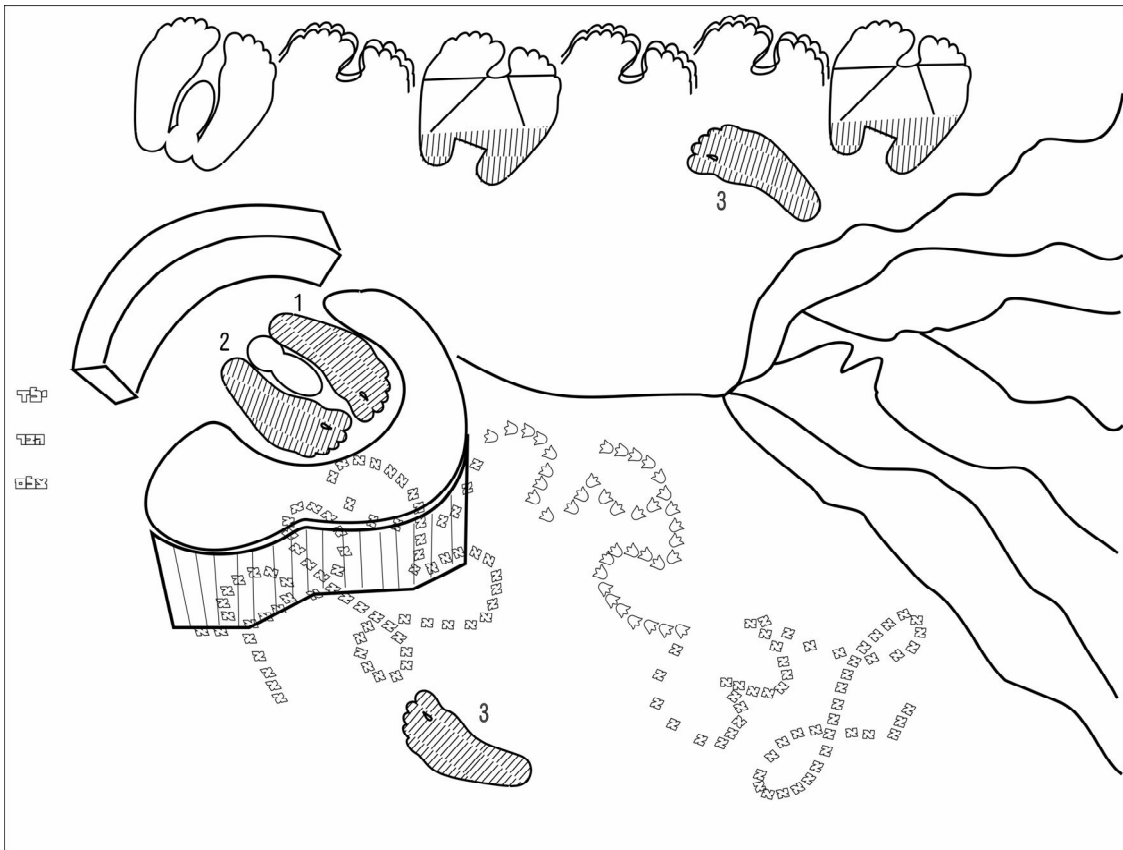


Figure A

She went over to the other room to fetch the book:

—*Why will you Jews not accept our culture, our religion and our language? You are a tribe of nomad herdsmen: we are a mighty people. You have neither cities nor wealth: our cities are hives of humanity and our galleys, trireme and quadrireme, laden with all*

*manner of merchandise furrow the waters of the known globe. You have but emerged from primitive conditions: we have a literature, a priesthood, an age long history and a polity.*

Nile.

Child, man, effigy.

.....  
.....

*—But, ladies and gentlemen, had the youthful Moses listened to and accepted that view of life, had he bowed his head and bowed his will and bowed his spirit before that arrogant admonition he would never have brought the chosen people out of their house of bondage, nor followed the pillar of cloud by day. He would never have spoken with the Eternal amid lightning bolts on Sinai’s mountaintop nor ever have come down with the light of inspiration shining in his countenance and bearing in his arms the Tablets of the Law, graven in the language of the outlaw.*

The words of the Egyptian priest are part of a quotation, she explained, while the short description of Egypt: *Nile. Child, man, effigy* is by the narrator. It seems that Joyce and his narrator, unlike the character whose words are quoted, are ambiguous about the question as to which of the two cultures their sympathy is given. It’s true that in *Portrait of the artist as a young man* Stephen Dedalus compares the hawklike man whose name he bore to Thoth, the Egyptian god of writers, and their proximity to birds, their hybrid nature, he fears. The arrogant language put in the mouth of the Egyptian priest exudes that age old hostility, as old as the Jews, towards Egypt, with which the Irish, the Christians, are infected here. As far as I know, she told us, such conceited language was not the demeanor of the ancient Egyptians, who, according to the evidence left by them, were shy, delicate, polite and pious. The language of arrogance, I suspect, was rather the custom of the one and only God, the dialect of the chosen people.

Egypt never called the Jews; they went down there due to food shortage. Blessed Egypt, the gift of the Nile, was a country traversed by a wondrous river all along its land, to revive a magnificent oasis, checkered by irrigation tunnels, fertile fields and orchards. This was a people not idling away their time; they knew how to elicit the best from the generosity of the gods. Diligent and talented, they created first class agriculture and art.

The short sentence, she added, makes use of the strategy of Egyptian painting, termed *Aspective* in contrast to *Perspective*. In *Perspective* all the elements of a painting are subordinated to a single point of view, personal and temporal, whereas in Egyptian painting each element is painted so as to be easily identified by its unchanging characteristics, with the result that each painting and even each object employs several points of view. The word *Nile* evokes a picture of the river in its entirety, probably as it is known to us from the map: a long arm with seven fingers, whereas in order to see the triplet *child, man, effigy*, we find ourselves getting closer to the figures standing by the riverbank.

She beckoned us to move to the other room and pointed to the sand-colored relief work. In these works I’m walking in sand, wandering the desert, but, having accepted the invitation of the Egyptian priest, my face is turned backwards, towards Egypt, she declared in a stifled, excited voice, to entry instead of exodus. From the Egyptians I’m hoping to learn the art, the secrets of the trade, and why won't you join me and we’ll enter

Egypt together? She invited us, and I was immediately reminded of the two strange obelisks at the entrance to the alley. *Child, man, effigy*, she hummed again, are you, too, having the eternal picture emerge in your mind's eye, that of the father training the child, guiding him in the craft of image-making on the banks of the Nile, the source of fertility? Our eyes were fixed on her, staring in astonishment.

The sandal-wearing plump boy with the almond-shaped eyes started to sweep the floor of the studio and Luna carried the water jug down to the apartment. On the last bus to Givatayim before Shabbat, as the moving frames of the city, making its last preparations for rest-day, were passing before my eyes, I vaguely wondered whether such blending of painting and literature is allowed, and wouldn't such a course lead eventually to falling between the cracks, leaving you lost out on both sides.

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An amusing lesson, in which literature and Joyce-style Mathematics were blended, comes to mind. Hanging on the wall was a large elliptic pencil drawing with two figures sitting on top of each other (*Figure B1*) on a notebook-like lined background. An image of an aqueduct (*B2*) drawn in a thin red line was passing across their laps, and to their right were two pairs of parentheses: inside one of them a drawing of a class in a straw-covered shed (*B3*), and inside the other workers bending over a rice field (*B4*). On top of these were two large red footprints (*B5*) while tiny red spider-like river deltas (*B6*) were clinging to the desks in the class and to the peasants working in the rice field. Two halves of the letter *Aleph* were drawn each on either side of the ellipse (*B7*), so that in addition to the elliptic format of the drawing, another, imagined ellipse could be traced by rolling the paper and attaching the two halves to each other to form a full letter *Aleph*, thus turning the end into a new beginning.

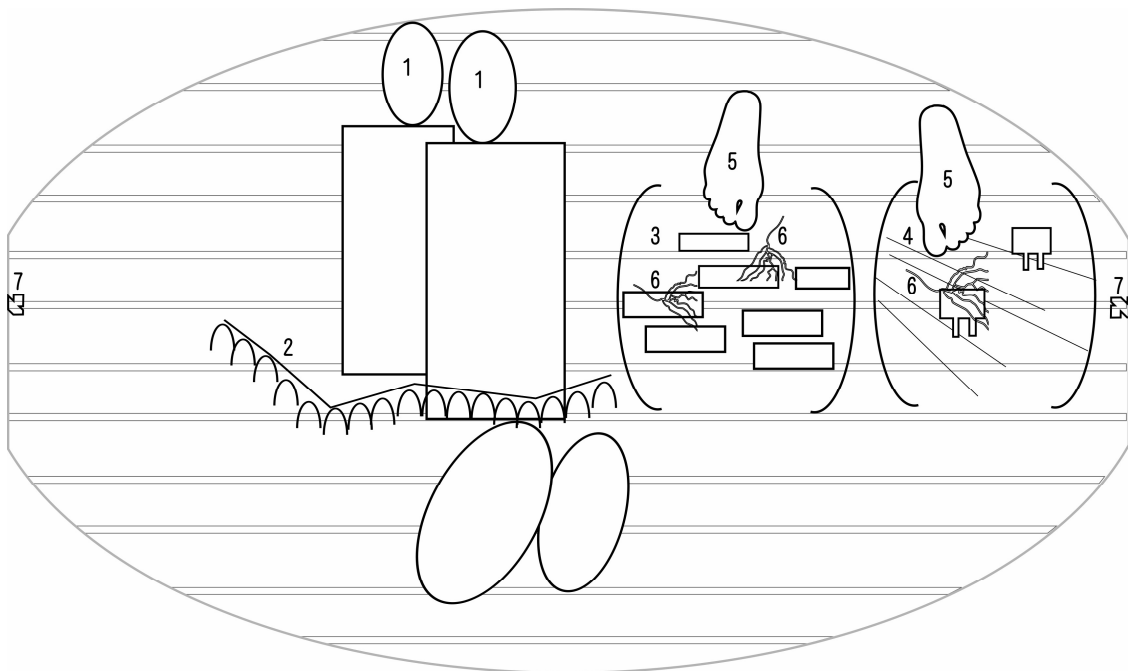


Figure B

She named the drawing *Clear Hebrew* and claimed that it is organized like a mathematical equation in the spirit of what is said about Stephen in *Ulysses*, that *He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father*. By a similar logic she intends to prove by algebra that: an equation of two members with one unknown who is Father is constructed from *me* squared that equals self-consciousness multiplied by duty multiplied by study, and when you put a zero or an ellipse in place of the unknown, it turns painting into writing and life into an arithmetic problem that has no solution. Or perhaps: an equation with one unknown that equals a two-fold footprint of father painted red by stepping into the blood-plagued Nile multiplied by the plague of the firstborn and raised to a second power degree of misery proves that thirst cannot be quenched by blood. Or maybe: if you open the parentheses the flood of the Nile will reach the rice fields in China by way of the gorges in a Leonardo painting and directly to the lap of the doubled *Madame Cézanne* to express surprise divided by dissatisfaction.

"I have absolutely no understanding of mathematics, but I'm sure the calculation is accurate," contributed the teacher's boyfriend, a sculptor and teacher himself, who joined us that day to take part in the discussion of our works. It was interesting to see the difference between the styles of criticism of the two. She always made comparisons to other artists and references to art movements with associations to poetry and literature, as if creating a timeless, universal network in which she set our work, while he surprised us with his straightforward matter-of-fact observations of what is given just here, under our noses. She elevates and magnifies while he keeps to the scale of the mundane.

When I chanced to see them walking in the street, she always walked ahead with big strides, her head tilted back facing the sky, while he swayed a few steps behind, a cigarette stuck in his mouth, his gaze stuck in the pavement.

At this stage it could be said that each of us had developed a distinct style. I painted simple structures of mountain and sun on large paper; *The Bright Boy* painted round wounds or orifices, rich in texture, in red, orange and yellow, that strangely enough were associated in my mind with the peculiar shape of his mouth which was full of expression, mainly thanks to the fact that his upper lip was longer than the lower one, and, while talking, an asymmetrical surplus was formed that moved from side to side, which he could use for amplification and emotional emphasis. The pupil with the almond-shaped eyes painted large format underwater scenes; whereas the one with the Austro-Hungarian manners used to draw a lot but then would cut his drawings up and stick the cut-outs into a new drawing, with the result of always remaining with one single drawing at any given moment. Luna surprised me by painting bisected figures; to me she seemed whole, not to say perfect.

The idea of dividing in two brought the teacher back to Egypt and its geometric geography. Two perpendicular lines guided the life habits, the beliefs and thoughts of the Egyptians, and implanted in them the love of geometry: the line of the Nile, the river whose stream flows backward, from south to north, and the line of the journey of the sun from east to west. Both were subjected to perpetual cycles: the first, to the annual inundation of the Nile; the other, to the daily cycle of the rising and setting sun. The irrigation system, built to regulate the flooding of the fields, tailored checkered skirts to the river. And those grid-like patterns were copied to wall paintings and to hieroglyph

writing arranged meticulously in squares. They were fond of measurements and measuring tools as well, like the Nilometer that served to measure the water level of the river in the flood season, the accuracy of which was so decisive to the country's economy, and work tools like the cubit ruler which was a coveted gadget.

Their love of the rectangle was transferred to the three-dimensional as well, in their block sculptures, in which seated human figures with folded knees are packed into a box-like shape whose facets are used for writing. Above the box lies the head and from underneath a pair of feet stick out. It might well be that these were conceived in the image of Meskhenet, the goddess of childbirth who was depicted as a brick with a head, for it was her assistance women in labor were pleading for, while their feet lay on two bricks. Imagine an assembly line of rectangular, cubist babies whose bodies are flat surfaces for painting and writing...

And it's not that the triangle was overlooked: it stars in the pyramids, in the *Benben* structures on top of the obelisks, in the fertile triangles in sculptures of women figures which bear proximity of meaning to the delta, the triangular entrance to Egypt.

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I recall the following classes as vaguely mingled sentences, the order and shape of which were probably twisted in my mind, not to mention their meaning. Gradually I developed an emotional attachment to Luna and a large part of my enjoyment in participating in the class was due to the opportunity of being in her company. When I left home, heading to class, I used to announce: Mom, I'm going down to Egypt. And Egypt, to where the teacher guided us, became thus the background of my love too. Books about Egypt were scattered around and while flipping and leafing through their pages I sank into the pleasantness of our presence with the mumbling of the teacher as a backdrop, either explaining something or debating with herself. Sometimes she forgot the time, and without realizing it, evening would descend and enfold the little class on the roof.

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### The Teacher

*The class is in a deserted boat;* so I wrote just a few years before. Now luckily enough I succeeded in gathering around me a few attentive and talented pupils. Our boat is parked at the bank of the Nile, I tell my pupils, the year is thousand two hundred seventy five BCE, autumn, the planting season. Five year old Nebnefer and his father Neferhotep are from the village of *Set Maat* (the place of truth), within one hour walking distance above the river. From the exquisite silt left behind by the magnificent receding river they form tiny figures in the image of Osiris, the green god, to be planted when dry, along with the barley seeds, in their small plot of land. The figures made by the father are pleasant to the sight, their limbs perfectly molded, whereas the son rolls the mud between his little palms to create minute cylinders in which he pokes two eyes with a straw stalk. It is one of father's two days of rest; in the remaining eight days of the week he works as an artist and craftsman, just like everyone else in the village, in the tomb of May He Live Long, King Ramesses the second.

Nile.

Child, man, effigy.



I lay the relief work I finished last week on the floor, take off my slippers, extend one leg and put my foot down so it fits perfectly into the footprint made of matches (*Figure A1*), followed by the other foot in the second footprint (*A2*). The height of the relief is the width of a match whereas my height is a hundred and seventy one centimeters, but I imagine myself growing smaller and smaller, sinking into the landscape of my own making. I enter the large footprints of the father, and in between them is a small footprint of the son. Two large footprints with a small one in between can be used as a hieroglyph for the word *ABA* (father), I suggest and go on: soon young Nebnefer will join the youth of the village to become one of the *Children of the Tomb*, those delivery boys, running barefoot between the tomb and the village, carrying bread and beer, mineral pigments, tools forgotten at home etc. before his becoming a real apprentice.

The two are climbing back now in the golden landscape which shimmers ferociously in the scorching sun, its limestone rocks gliding in steeping slopes and abrupt inclines onto an elevated plateau where their village lies like a colorful tray. Tomorrow, the second rest-day of Neferhotep, is Nebnefer's favorite, the day of visiting the family grave at the edge of the village, father in order to work, that is to paint, and he himself to watch. For, not unlike the kings, the artists too were building a tomb for themselves and their families all during their lives. Each family in the village of *Set Maat*, I try to revive the interest of my pupils, owned the real estate in which they lived, the one in daily use, and the other real estate, the festive one, the one that awaited them with its cool rooms dug into limestone, with its walls painted and inscribed, its sculptures, utensils and furniture.

Neferhotep would first draw his paintings on papyrus or on shards of pottery called ostraca by archeologists who love to collect them. The drawing was transferred to the wall painting by means of a net of lines, what we call a grid. The lines were drawn with a string soaked in red ochre paint, the traces of which we can observe even today. The ancient Egyptians were lovers of order and devotees of knowledge.

After the era of the pyramids, the Egyptian kings chose to be interred in secretly hidden dark rooms reached by long corridors excavated in the entrails of the rocks in one of the most remote and desolate parts of the world, the Valley of the Kings, perforated with tombs like a sieve. It was there they retired for their deep, eternal sleep which can be compared to nothing in its complexity and sophistication. The construction of a tomb with all it entails started immediately after a king's coronation and was carried on until his death. Try to conjure up in your mind, there, in the thick of the earth, deep down inside the sun-burnt monochrome desert, the existence of dozens of art museums with dazzling paintings unparalleled in their inventiveness, beauty and magnificence of color. Darkness preserved them; when exposed to light, to be seen, they gradually fade. Their existence in consciousness alone, in hiding, enables their rich visual life, which is dependent on never being revealed.

Their sleep was a huge body of knowledge that has occupied more and more researchers and devotees for at least hundred and fifty years. The common opinion in these sleep research laboratories is that the ancient Egyptians craved eternal life. Allow me to have my doubts, it just contradicts any logic: they spent their lives, the only life ever given to them, in erecting, decorating and furnishing a tomb, they dedicated it to death, and those same researchers claim that the afterlife they envisioned and wished for themselves was similar to their life here and now, that is a life, as said before, entirely committed to death and so on and so forth, death inside death inside death, so where is

life here, where is eternal life? It would be ridiculous to think that the Egyptians did not know the true nature of death, for they were the ones to write: *...the bones are softened and the flesh is a stinking mass; he reeks, he decays and turns into a mass of worms, nothing but worms...*

In my humble opinion, I said, raising my voice on purpose, more than enough years of life were given, and in any case, anyone who doesn't exchange life for work is considered to never have lived. One who is unable to show the produce of his hands at the end of day is seen as someone who let life slip like sand through his fingers. And the most wonderful work of all is Art, and, yes, I mean work as labor and work as worship. The Egyptians, as I see it, understood better than any nation the concept of displacement, the freedom and necessity of a twin life. At this point I carefully moved my feet to another pair of footprints, one that oversees the entire surface of the work (*Figure A3*), spreading my legs wide, investing some effort in stabilizing myself. And what was forbidden by the name of the one and only God, the likenesses and the graven images, were the pride and joy of their lives, beloved as children. The twin world, the one teeming with tales and legends, thoughts of the heart, deliberations of the brain, wreaths of wisdom and mischiefs of the imagination, the one swarming with innumerable gods that don and shed their forms incessantly, they constructed skillfully and deposited for safekeeping in the tomb, growing and flourishing side by side with their life. But as a reflection its growth was upside down, into the earth.

The big metaphor of the tomb was the afterlife. And under its umbrella they invented a system of cosmic communication channels between the living and the dead, between the tomb and celestial bodies. Myriads of tiny figures or effigies named *Shabti* or *Ushabti*, found in tombs, replaced the dead in tilling the land, tending the beasts or in construction projects, and it was enough to inscribe their readiness to do their job on their backs for it to be done. For not only works of art, but words as well, were considered equal to reality in this magic land.

One of the devices of the tomb was the false door, a recess in the wall through which the soul of the dead or part of it could move in and out, between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and by which food, drink or incense could be transmitted to the mummified body lying hidden behind it. It is quite common to compare painting to a window, especially those paintings that obey the laws of perspective, I said while moving my feet from the footprints of father back into my slippers, as if what is painted inside the rectangle is available to the eye only, but no, a painting is exactly that false door, physically blocked yet mentally allowing free passage to thought in all its transfigurations. Saying this, I started to pass back and forth through the opening between the rooms as if I was the ghost of painting. If you look at a painting intently, I called from the other side, you'll find yourselves coming and going in and out of a false door to a world beyond life. And about the painter, whoever and wherever he is, it can be said that throughout his life he builds himself a tomb, a launch facility by way of which he and his faithful spectators move between the worlds. The barque of painting takes us to the terrain of Aaru, the land of golden reeds, and in front of a painting we cannot know anymore whether we are still living or perhaps we have already departed to the afterlife.

Oh, oh, I might have gone too far, but how good it is that you are still here, I felt a need to thank my pupils. I had a pang of remorse for burdening their young shoulders. The bright spot in all this is the sun, I said, disappearing behind the radiant yellow relief work.

She, who completes a cycle every day from sunrise to sunrise, from *Aleph* to *Aleph*. The bright spot, or is it really? According to the Egyptians, the magnificent sun, the golden sphere that lavishes light and warmth upon our planet, unites at night with the dead body; the one buried in darkness and spared from total decay thanks only to its innards being removed and conserved in jars, and to its being wrapped in linen strips soaked in salt solution and now lying in a sealed room at the bottom of the desert in a set of coffins packed one into the other like a Russian doll.

But let's go out to the roof to see her last rays before she descends to the tomb, I suggested to my pupils. In my childhood the sun used to work for my father, I told them, on a roof similar to this, of the commercial center building in Ness Ziona where his office used to be, there stood a device with a convex surface covered in dark yellow felt on top of which he would put his architectural drawings with light-sensitive paper underneath. The pages were then covered with a thick transparent plastic sheet fastened to the device with butterfly screws, and the sun was the one to make the copies. He used to call them sun prints.

Actually each and every dead person in Egypt was a copy of Osiris, the god who was torn to pieces by his own flesh-and-blood brother who scattered his limbs all around the nomes of the land. The sister of the two, who was also the wife of Osiris – the Egyptians liked to coil family bonds around tighter and tighter – the lively and merciful Isis collected his limbs and pieced them together, just like Frankenstein and his monster, but here, in complete opposition, her majesty the sun, the fairest among women, shares his bed of death, and it can be a consolation of sorts to the ugly and wretched among us, I whispered, letting the crows hush my voice.

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### The Pupil

At the end of class, the teacher, like an inflatable doll, seems to be deflated, descending the stairs bent and grey. As for myself I've never thought of art as a drama of opposites and counterparts; for me it is a quiet stream flowing from inside me.

Once, when I came with Luna to return a book she had lent us, we were stopped at the doorstep by shouts from her apartment. They sounded like horrible screams full of despair, displayed as terrifying anger. Like dry cracked earth afflicted by thirst, pleading for due rain that failed to come.

After one and a half years of weekly lessons, the teacher announced the dissolving of the class as they were moving out of town. It can be said that during this time we all became friends, so there was nothing odd about the boyfriend asking us, the pupils, to lend a hand in the job of coating the roof in tar before their move. In retrospect it was a graduation ceremony of sorts. A large barrel full of black liquid, spreading its smell and vapors all around the neighborhood, was placed on an improvised brick stove. The teacher positioned herself by the barrel in wide sack-like black trousers and a large men's shirt, her long tangled hair sticking out in all directions. Holding a ladle made of a tin can and a pole, she was in charge of filling the buckets with the boiling black liquid. She stood there babbling:

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair:*

*Hover through the fog and filthy air.*

While we, the pupils, ran up and down the stairs, turning them over to the boyfriend waiting on the roof, he spilled out their contents and handed them back empty, and so the chain went on. Meanwhile and without any advance coordination, the two students of the academy of music living in the building started their daily practice, one on percussions, the other playing the cornett, making the climbing easier for us by measuring the rhythm. Tomorrow the roof will be whitewashed and a page turned.

Ibn Gabirol St. 2020

### The Pupil

I'm not sure if it was because of Egypt that we saw the teacher as an ancient relic; in fact she was in her early thirties then. Recently I heard about her death; we had not been in touch for many years. Luna and I moved to live in another country, but a few months ago, during a visit to Israel, it occurred to me for some reason to pay her a visit. Indeed it was in that class that I found the two daughters of the moon, my two faithful companions since then, my wife Luna and Art.

The teacher's home was now in another corner of the city and served mainly as a studio. It was like *Déjà vu* when she said:

"Hello Hillel from the town of two hills. Welcome to Heliopolis."

Paintings with the motif of a big sun were hanging on the walls all around. And how strange it was to see a yellow gown hanging there, made of thin foam sheets, imitating the relief work from long ago. *Nile. Child, man, effigy.*

- "Perhaps it's the yellow dressing gown of Buck Mulligan who shared the tower with Stephen Dedalus," she laughed. "Recently I found out that Joyce had chosen to read this very paragraph from *Ulysses* in a radio program in nineteen twenty four. He told Sylvia Beach, his editor, who arranged the recording, that this is *the only passage that could be lifted out of Ulysses, and the only one that was "declamatory" and therefore suitable for recital.* He also added that *this would be his only reading from Ulysses.*"

We discovered, to our surprise, that both of us had lately read Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*. I feel especially close to Joseph, whose coat of many colors I tailored many years ago in resin and paint.

- "I came back to Egypt after a long detour in other realms, how many years have passed since then? In reading *Joseph and his Brothers* I felt as if the short sentence from *Ulysses* was only the entrance key given to me then to the enormous palace of Mann which I've entered now. It's as though Mann took those short paragraphs with the words of the Egyptian priest and extracted three fat volumes out of them. But with Mann the scale is more balanced; he endows both the Egyptians and the Jews with equal wisdom, charm and grace, and equally does not spare them when it comes to criticism. Although the Jews themselves, the people before receiving the stone tablets, are not yet the people that dwell alone and in Joseph himself Egypt and Canaan meet.

As for Egypt, it's of course more relevant than ever. One of the names given by the Egyptians to death is *Come*, for anyone called by death to come, is coming. And I start to hear the call clearly. There is not any sadness in it. You remember that this is my favorite subject. I'm almost like those *suckling babes that begin to babble of death within an hour*

*after they emerge from the womb*, although nowadays it would be more appropriate to compare me to *That ancient, stiff-necked people who make their dead their gods.*"

She had in her a strange mixture of morbidity and love of work, enthusiasm for her own work and the work of others. These two, death and art, merged in the distorted mirror of her mind by dint of a chain of whimsical syllogisms. I heard she collapsed by the easel; her fall left a stripe of gold color on the surface, like a signature hand-written by death.

- "There is no sadness in it not because I believe in the afterlife, god forbid, I believe in death in life, which is the bell calling us to Art, the one endowed with the skill to delineate a life different from real life which is unbearably painful. The Egyptians too did not have an afterlife except as museum displays. I feel much pity for the delicate Egyptian kings who took such care to hide their dead bodies far from the eyes of the world, and who are now inconsiderately displayed before inquisitive eyes. In this way all their elaborate science of death is mocked; that's how our time looks down on ancient times, and how West patronizes East."

She talked about her aversion to the new trend of young old age and about the madness of medical science in its attempts to draw back the half-dead from the grave. Instead of investing in hospitals and expensive equipment she suggests organizing clubs for tomb building. She has an idea for a start-up or rather a start-down of constructing tombs in the depth of the World Wide Web.

- "Do you remember the death of Isaac in the book, how he bleated like the bound ram that took his place on the altar? And Thomas Mann says that *the sacrificial child could have been no more strange to him in his old age or distanced from him to any greater degree than was the child he once was*," I said.

My work is more likely to be identified with the shepherds, dwellers of tents, men of shadows, lovers of the moon, while the teacher's love is given to the rectangles of painting and rectangles of fields nourished by sunlight.

At some point she went to the bedroom and brought out the three heavy tomes, and passing them between us we started to leaf and flip through the pages, gleaning the gems.

- "I paid special attention to sentences like *...their warmth, their life of gamboling and scattering only to huddle together again... the meek reserve of those faces, the ears flared out to each side...* said about the beasts of the herd," I remarked.

- "And some of my favorites are *...nourishing fields among the branches of the Nile...as far as fertile soil extended between desert and desert...*," she retorted.

- "As I see it," she added, "Mann's book is a history book, I believe every single word in it. And the objective existence of the gods of all countries that lines the inside of the universe makes my lonely, despairing, skeptical, random life with its empty skies much more resilient and pleasant."

But the one thing that surprised me was the One and Only God's delight in commerce, in a degree of flexible, bent honesty, a kind of bypassing of truth accompanied by a cunning wink. As I said, I see every word in the book as a historical fact and so God too must be a historical figure and therefore no way I would dare to attribute it to Anti-Semitism on part of the author. It was a lesson for me: God blesses those who know how to get along; he leans back on his celestial throne and enjoys the pranks of his crafty children, overlooking the dreary honest ones. No doubt he prefers the merchants over the artists whose work he disdains and forbids."

- "It's called in the book *Moon Grammar*, that imprecision, rounding off and bending sums and numbers, calculations that would not pass the test of full daylight," I remembered.

- "The idea I found very interesting is that of our stepping and entering into the ancient footsteps of the fathers, ready made patterns of life that leave us very little choice and thus diminish our uncertainties. You, an expert in molds, must know this. And how beautiful was the idea of the recurring festival ritual as if it was always the first time; everybody knows the turn of events and the end, but, entrusting knowledge in the hands of forgetfulness, they are excited, tensely awaiting the unfolding of events, just like reading for the umpteenth time the story of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers in *Genesis*. Thomas Mann indeed loves the idea of recurrence and return; do you know that my leaving Tel Aviv then was inspired by Adrian Leverkühn, the protagonist of his *Doctor Faustus*, who time and again found himself homes in places similar to his hometown, and my moving to Ra'anana in the mid-Eighties was like returning to Ness Ziona? According to the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann – what are all these Germans doing here now, exactly five years after calling back my ambassador from Germany, or rather his being called to a consultation on the underside – the Egyptians saw in death, a return home and in the coffin, a womb from which you are never born. And yes, my wish is to be buried above my mother in her small rectangle of real estate at the edge of Kiryat Shaul cemetery."

- "Not to compare, I'm reminded of King Khufu lying ... *within a chamber barricaded by the weight of seven million tons of heavy stones, a sprig of mimosa over his heart...*"

- "And what do you say about a sentence like this: ... *they cannot rest until they have wrapped the living form and turned it into a mummy...* Just like you.

News for me, you know, is only that which arrives from Ancient Egypt, and surprisingly enough, it comes almost every day; the desert provides it lavishly; it tears its belly open to feed us. What a refreshing aberration it was from the frame of mind, the doctrine, the life chart of a Jew, to imagine that Joseph, as described in the book, saw all the treasures of Egypt, toured all those underground museums. I would have liked to borrow some books from Potiphar's library: *Song in Praise of Death by a Man Weary of Life* I fancy most, but it would be interesting to read *Sun's Journey by Night through the Twelve Houses of the Underworld* as well."

Suddenly she seemed distant; it was hard to know if she was serious or joking.

- "Why wouldn't you make a sculpture of the Sphinx?" she asked. "You are a dreamer and it's a habit of the Sphinx to appear in dreams." She hastily flipped through the pages of the book to find the epithets of the Sphinx. "Here, ...*the mystery... the monstrous creature... intoxicated by a deep draught from time's chalice...* and here is a *stone headkerchief...* you have a taste for heads and kerchiefs and you even sculpted stones, though not on such a scale...you remember Joseph's sculptural idea, not much different from yours, one that had commercial success as well, of modeling ceramic sycamore fruits to replace the real fruit as food for the dead in their tombs?"

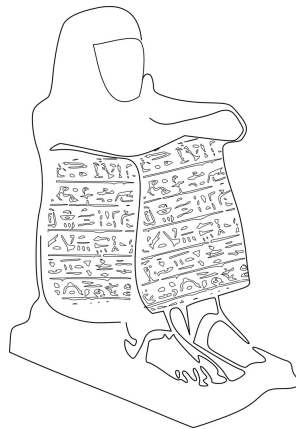
You can imagine how glad I was about Mann's choice of Akhenaten to figure in the role of Pharaoh the Dreamer, though this is probably a historical inaccuracy. It's not that I'm a supporter of his monotheistic revolution; I'd never relinquish the arsenal of Egypt's magnificent gods, their unique family. But his chiseled face I find so beautiful; I hung two photographs of his sculpted self in my bedroom and every morning I salute him with

a bow. He himself pushed away the roofs of his temples to let the sun flood them with light; I can do no more than open the shutters for her to sneak in and come to him in stripes. He was one to dream in the sun while blinking."

All around us were paintings of a large sun in gold and yellow. She continued:

- "I'm reminded of one of my students from the few years I taught at the academy; about her it could be said that she was a *darling of light* like Akhenaten. Bright, tall, slightly gangly, having inner riches, she was one of those who needn't dirty their hands in order to create beauty outside themselves. That student saw in the museum a mostly white-colored painting of mine with a circle of deer made of matches, and that same night she dreamt she was the one who painted it. I declare here and now that she was the one to paint it. How difficult were all those ponderings of thought with its delusions and whims; how hard it was to give it a shape; how much ugliness was needed to feed beauty. And now, what are all those paintings if not dreams? How much stupidity, how much awkwardness, how many interior and exterior disputes fertilized that painting, whereas she painted it in her dream, while blinking in her sleep, and no mathematic calculation is needed to prove it's hers."

I went down to the city, which from the double-glazed window of the teacher looked like an aquarium, and headed south on the straight long road.



Translation from Hebrew: Nurit David  
Linguistic editor: Jenifer Bar Lev