

On Ruins & Return

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Azimuth (Sheep Meadow Press, 2000)

The Buffalo Poems (Duration Press, 2003)

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RACHEL TZVIA BACK

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The Buffalo Poems

(1999-2005)

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For my children

Daniel, Ariel and Talya

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Until we all see buffalo

June 1999 – Jerusalem Hills (first sighting):

Because there are moments the heart waits, though it doesn't know it is waiting, at an unnamed threshold of vague contours, and it hasn't yet made out the shape of what it will be or need, or why it will be weeping, or how to hold itself from despair, all obscured in the burning air-currents of a middle-eastern midday sun. Because there are moments when every chamber of that heart listens for its own echoes (though it doesn't know it is listening), to be told it is beating as it should and to undo the great loneliness of all transitions, of distances, of violence. Because there are gifts unexpected, bundled in frayed wrappings, left as abandoned spirits on your doorstep – to be brought indoors, nursed and embraced. Quiet, at first, then growing louder: an arc of *beckoned listening* and tender answers, always uncertain, always open – an entryway back into the still-waiting heart.

A season of wildfires. The hills all scarred and blackened, sloping into changed valleys where the always sparse-in-summer vegetation is now burnt down or dusted with ash. Nothing is as it was or should be – everything shifted with the fires, earth and animal and birds who now have nowhere to perch. Paths that once led to fragrant spring or deep well swerve in jagged blackened stones and lead one astray. I am driving home, almost sundown – mother of sons, pregnant now with a daughter. She lies inside me horizontally, refuses to turn her head down – we both wait. On the curving road between severed hills, I stop –

must stop, the road is spinning, will not settle. I step out of the car, crouch by the side of the road, put my

head between my knees for a moment until the nausea passes. When I raise my eyes toward the vast silence of the charcoaled gnarled hills, I see it.

There, where the slope meets valley floor, as though it had just stepped out from behind the charred wings, unwedded to the broad stage, shifting the balance – all

eyes (my eyes) to the far corner, to the hulking mass in a crevice of space, in shimmering still smoke-tinged air –

a buffalo.

Still, erect, frozen. Silent. Its thick furred hair motionless in the windless air. Its hump its own solitary mountain, carried from far-away places. Its head half-lowered, in profile – a dark brown buffalo, wandered into these Jerusalem hills.

Israel (*Jacob's terrain*), Palestine, Canaan, Palesti'na (*land of strangers*), Judea, Holy Land. All, and none of the above. No name fits. Every name too beautiful and too narrow. Every name too desirous of sovereignty (where wild hills nightly wander off to visit distant sisters, return by daybreak, their white stones telling the tale to anyone who will listen). Land (he said) fatally embraced by the deity. Land that punishes itself and all who love it (too much); land that is punished by all who love it (too much). Land that is my home. Here, where there were never buffalo – but here

it is.

I watch it. I wait for it to move (which it does not). I want it to look at me (which it does not). Cars behind

me speed their way to the capital, but I do not hear them – I am immersed, deep in a silent embrace, in the space and stillness between us, in everything it carries in its unwieldy shape: dark peace and darker pain.

I watch it – this wandered-from-far buffalo – for a minute or an hour, until the muezzin calls, until the baby turns, until the last light slips away and I can no longer distinguish its form from the black hills, or from the burnt valley.

January 1, 2000 – from Mount Scopus (an interim):

The baby girl is six-months old. The buffalo is mostly forgotten. And this night, bundled in blankets and drinking black coffee, looking out toward the still-in-darkness desert, we are all waiting for first rays of the new millennium. Perched on this mountaintop facing east, strangers and friends, we want to believe – so, we have convinced ourselves of false things. We choose

not to see. The baby girl has blue eyes we say are from far seas – the desert too (we say) promises fertility and blossoms, and we watch the first tinge of pink creep over the ridge, the baby's soft soft cheeks cool in the pre-dawn breeze. The light spreads slowly, first slender golden arms stretching, gentle awakenings, as the sky's darkness gradually retreats. And when the first shy sun of the year 2000 finally appears over the desert mountains, everyone cheers.

October 2000 – the Galilee/the Occupied Territories

First or final insult. Every insult and wound in between. Wound of what is wrenched away, of wrestled will that can bear no more. We (Israelis) are ignorant. When the first riot erupts, we fail to understand. Fires reach our doorstep, and still we fail to see. In the rage and flames, the ripped-out street-lamps, the young boys shouting in the village square, the roads blocked with burning tires, the riot police shooting into the crowd – in the rage and flames, I remember the buffalo. By riots' end, thirteen (Palestinian-Israeli) Galilean boys are dead. So the second uprising begins. The streets are soon bloody (Ramallah, Jenin, Sachnin, Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Gaza, and again demolished Jenin). The ledgers are quickly filled with the names of children. My three grow strong, as though they are safe. Hearts close, and then seal shut. I remember the buffalo, and a heart waiting (to be opened). From that moment, it stays with me, wanders through my days, carrying the weight of the violence on its broad back, in its vast and silent eyes – and it allows me to write

what I could not have otherwise.

I. From Between Kastel & White Stone Quarry

1 (*Palimpsest of place*)

Swell of hills across Judea

stretch
to open clear
between peaks where
sky

slips lower
into smooth cols –
down slender neck, as sweat
in crook of a collarbone –
sloped stunted shrubs
half-burnt trees or absent
trees

coal dust on gnarled
thornbushes, their tufted centers
thick in place of
and the air
parched

edges curling inward like bleached and
brittle parchment

here, in midday
mid-range
at footslip on incline
where stones scattered
are white markings
to nowhere

in the bright glare of rays deflecting
what I believe
I see
deeper into first sighting

a dark and heavy shape
move

a buffalo
wandered far from white
cedar hickory red-berried hawthorne wild and ice
laced
curled horns downturned
head he carries low
cannot raise but to shoulder level I think
I see his body
heave
in this heat in this wavering
air under the weight
of this wide flame-white eastern
sky

On American plains there were once
sixty million, here
there were none

though now I see him here
as though returning
remnant

(dark thick-tongued ruminant
massive beast of crowded herds)

his solitary ruins
to this narrowland
still brown body
in still and dry heat
suspended

The scene should be framed and hung on walls as

is, as
from anywhere
in these hills –
highpitch of air punctured –
single shot
in perfect flight through will
pierce fur
flesh and he too
will fall

another small
soon
indistinct
dark decomposing

heap
as ancient and pointless
as the rest

The past I didn't choose
that is mine.

The desire unwieldy and wide
in a body disobeying

again and a mind clouded
down. A doubt,

ruined metal rooted
at a roadside along the rush of cars,

the unrelenting rust taste at the tongue's edges
that will not lift with water – doubt

in a place of stonesteady
believers. Always misnamed, he is this

and he is what wakes
when I wake, wherever I wake,

what sleeps when I do, he is
what walks when I walk, his weight

the lead-marrow in my bones
singed and spiked branding on my legs,

longings, words. He is what I dream,
the black ropes

that will not hold, the blood
that flows unnoticed though the dirt

stained darker smells of fresh
kill, he is the someone,

something of broad uncertain shape,
dragging a broken self

into these jagged hills, my always
foreign horizon.