

Classic Poetry Series

Yehuda Amichai
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Yehuda Amichai(1924 - 2000)

Amichai was born in Würzburg, Germany, to an Orthodox Jewish family, and was raised speaking both Hebrew and German. According to literary scholar Nili Scharf Gold, a childhood trauma in Germany had an impact on his later poetry: he had an argument with a childhood friend of his, Ruth Hanover, that caused her to bicycle home angrily; she fell and as a result had to get her leg amputated. Several years later, she was unable to join the rest of her family, who fled the Nazi takeover, due to her missing leg, and ended up being killed in the Holocaust. Amichai occasionally referred to her in his poems as "Little Ruth".

Amichai immigrated with his family at the age of 12 to Petah Tikva in Mandate Palestine in 1935, moving to Jerusalem in 1936. He first worked as a physical education teacher. He was a member of the Palmach, the strike force of the Haganah, the defence force of the Jewish community in pre-state Israel. As a young man he fought in World War II as a member of the British Army Jewish Brigade, and in the Negev on the southern front in the Israeli War of Independence.

Amichai traced his beginnings as a writer to when he was stationed with the British army in Egypt. There he happened to find an anthology of modern British poetry, and the works of Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden included in that book inspired his first serious thoughts about becoming a writer.

Amichai began writing poetry in 1946, at age 22. He also changed his name to Yehuda Amichai around that same time. According to Nili Scharf Gold, the idea for the name change, as well as the specific last name "Amichai", came from his girlfriend at the time, whom he has called "Ruth Z.", and who soon afterward broke up with him and moved to the United States. According to Gold, Amichai later claimed that he only started writing poetry in 1948, partly as a way of hiding from the public record this portion of his life.

Following the War of Independence, Amichai studied Bible and Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Encouraged by one of his professors at Hebrew University, he published his first book of poetry, "Now and in Other Days," in 1955. Later, he was poet in residence at numerous universities, including Berkeley, NYU, and Yale.

In 1956, Amichai served in the Sinai War, and in 1973 he served in the Yom Kippur War. He later became an advocate of peace and reconciliation in the region, working with Arab writers.

He died of cancer in 2000, at age 76.

A Jewish Cemetery In Germany

On a little hill amid fertile fields lies a small cemetery,
a Jewish cemetery behind a rusty gate, hidden by shrubs,
abandoned and forgotten. Neither the sound of prayer
nor the voice of lamentation is heard there
for the dead praise not the Lord.

Only the voices of our children ring out, seeking graves
and cheering
each time they find one--like mushrooms in the forest, like
wild strawberries.

Here's another grave! There's the name of my mother's
mothers, and a name from the last century. And here's a name,
and there! And as I was about to brush the moss from the name--
Look! an open hand engraved on the tombstone, the grave
of a kohen,
his fingers splayed in a spasm of holiness and blessing,
and here's a grave concealed by a thicket of berries
that has to be brushed aside like a shock of hair
from the face of a beautiful beloved woman.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

A Pity. We Were Such A Good Invention

They amputated
Your thighs off my hips.
As far as I'm concerned
They are all surgeons. All of them.

They dismantled us
Each from the other.
As far as I'm concerned
They are all engineers. All of them.

A pity. We were such a good
And loving invention.
An aeroplane made from a man and wife.
Wings and everything.
We hovered a little above the earth.

We even flew a little.

Yehuda Amichai

An Arab Shepherd Is Searching For His Goat On Mount Zion

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy.
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
Both in their temporary failure.
Our two voices met above
The Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.
Neither of us wants the boy or the goat
To get caught in the wheels
Of the "Had Gadya" machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes,
And our voices came back inside us
Laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or for a child has always been
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.

Yehuda Amichai

And We Shall Not Get Excited

And we shall not get excited. Because a translator
May not get excited. Calmly, we shall pass on
Words from man to son, from one tongue
To others' lips, un-
Knowingly, like a father who passes on
The features of his dead father's face
To his son, and he himself is like neither of them. Merely a mediator.

We shall remember the things we held in our hands
That slipped out.
What I have in my possession and what I do not have in my possession.

We must not get excited.
Calls and their callers drowned. Or, my beloved
Gave me a few words before she left,
To bring up for her.

And no more shall we tell what we were told
To other tellers. Silence as admission. We must not
Get excited.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Do Not Accept

Do not accept these rains that come too late.
Better to linger. Make your pain
An image of the desert. Say it's said
And do not look to the west. Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too
To live alone in the long summer,
Eat your drying bread, refrain
From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,
My return late at night, what has been written
In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference

Now. See your events as my events.
Everything will be as before: Abraham will again
Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Ein Yahav

A night drive to Ein Yahav in the Arava Desert,
a drive in the rain. Yes, in the rain.

There I met people who grow date palms,
there I saw tamarisk trees and risk trees,
there I saw hope barbed as barbed wire.

And I said to myself: That's true, hope needs to be
like barbed wire to keep out despair,
hope must be a mine field.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

Endless Poem

In a modern museum

In an old synagogue

In the synagogue

I

Within me

My heart

Within my heart

A museum

Within a museum

A synagogue

Within it

I

Within me

My heart

Within my heart

A museum

Yehuda Amichai

God Full Of Mercy

God-Full-of-Mercy, the prayer for the dead.

If God was not full of mercy,
Mercy would have been in the world,
Not just in Him.

I, who plucked flowers in the hills
And looked down into all the valleys,
I, who brought corpses down from the hills,
Can tell you that the world is empty of mercy.
I, who was King of Salt at the seashore,
Who stood without a decision at my window,
Who counted the steps of angels,
Whose heart lifted weights of anguish
In the horrible contests.

I, who use only a small part
Of the words in the dictionary.

I, who must decipher riddles
I don't want to decipher,
Know that if not for the God-full-of-mercy
There would be mercy in the world,
Not just in Him.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

God Has Pity On Kindergarten Children

God has pity on kindergarten children,
He pities school children -- less.
But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,
And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the scorching sand
To reach the dressing station,
Streaming with blood.

But perhaps
He will have pity on those who love truly
And take care of them
And shade them
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
Our last pennies of kindness
Inherited from mother,

So that their own happiness will protect us
Now and on other days.

Yehuda Amichai

Great Serenity: Questions And Answers

People in a hall that's lit so brightly
It hurts
Spoke of religion
In the lives of contemporary people
And on the place of God

People spoke in excited voices
Like in an airport
I left them
I opened an iron door that had written on it
"Emergency and I entered within.
Great serenity: Questions and answers

Yehuda Amichai

I Don'T Know If History Repeats Itself

I don't Know if history repeats itself
But I do know that you don't.

I remember that city was divided
Not only between Jews and Arabs,
But Between me and you,
When we were there together.

We made ourselves a womb of dangers
We built ourselves a house of deadening wars
Like men of far north
Who build themselves a safe warm house of deadening ice.

The city has been reunited
But we haven't been there together.
By now I know
That History doesn't repeat itself,
As I always knew that you wouldn't.

Yehuda Amichai

I Have Become Very Hairy

I have become very hairy all over my body.
I'm afraid they'll start hunting me because of my fur.

My multicolored shirt has no meaning of love --
it looks like an air photo of a railway station.

At night my body is open and awake under the blanket,
like eyes under the blindfold of someone to be shot.

Restless I shall wander about;
hungry for life I'll die.

Yet I wanted to be calm, like a mound with all its cities destroyed,
and tranquil, like a full cemetery.

Yehuda Amichai

I Know A Man

I know a man
who photographed the view he saw
from the window of the room where he made love
and not the face of the woman he loved there.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

I Want To Die In My Own Bed

All night the army came up from Gilgal
To get to the killing field, and that's all.
In the ground, warf and woof, lay the dead.
I want to die in My own bed.
Like slits in a tank, their eyes were uncanny,
I'm always the few and they are the many.
I must answer. They can interrogate My head.
But I want to die in My own bed.

The sun stood still in Gibeon. Forever so, it's willing
to illuminate those waging battle and killing.
I may not see My wife when her blood is shed,
But I want to die in My own bed.

Samson, his strength in his long black hair,
My hair they sheared when they made me a hero
Perforce, and taught me to charge ahead.
I want to die in My own bed.

I saw you could live and furnish with grace
Even a lion's den, if you've no other place.
I don't even mind to die alone, to be dead,
But I want to die in My own bed.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

I Wasn't One of the Six Million: And What Is My Life Span? Open Closed Open

I

My life is the gardener of my body. The brain—a hothouse closed tight with its flowers and plants, alien and odd in their sensitivity, their terror of becoming extinct. The face—a formal French garden of symmetrical contours and circular paths of marble with statues and places to rest, places to touch and smell, to look out from, to lose yourself in a green maze, and Keep Off and Don't Pick the Flowers. The upper body above the navel—an English park pretending to be free, no angles, no paving stones, naturelike, humanlike, in our image, after our likeness, its arms linking up with the big night all around. And my lower body, beneath the navel—sometimes a nature preserve, wild, frightening, amazing, an unpreserved preserve, and sometimes a Japanese garden, concentrated, full of forethought. And the penis and testes are smooth polished stones with dark vegetation between them, precise paths fraught with meaning and calm reflection. And the teachings of my father and the commandments of my mother are birds of chirp and song. And the woman I love is seasons and changing weather, and the children at play are my children. And the life my life.

2

I've never been in those places where I've never been and never will be, I have no share in the infinity of light-years and dark-years, but the darkness is mine, and the light, and my time is my own. The sand on the seashore—those infinite grains are the same sand where I made love in Achziv and Caesarea. The years of my life I have broken into hours, and the hours into minutes and seconds and fractions of seconds. These, only these, are the stars above me that cannot be numbered.

3

And what is my life span? I'm like a man gone out of Egypt:

the Red Sea parts, I cross on dry land,
two walls of water, on my right hand and on my left.
Pharaoh's army and his horsemen behind me. Before me the desert,
perhaps the Promised Land, too. That is my life span.

4

Open closed open. Before we are born, everything is open
in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed
within us. And when we die, everything is open again.
Open closed open. That's all we are.

5

What then is my life span? Like shooting a self-portrait.
I set up the camera a few feet away on something stable
(the one thing that's stable in this world),
I decide on a good place to stand, near a tree,
run back to the camera, press the timer,
run back again to that place near the tree,
and I hear the ticking of time, the whirring
like a distant prayer, the click of the shutter like an execution.
That is my life span. God develops the picture
in His big darkroom. And here is the picture:
white hair on my head, eyes tired and heavy,
eyebrows black, like the charred lintels
above the windows in a house that burned down.
My life span is over.

6

I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah,
I wasn't even among the survivors.
And I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt.
I came to the Promised Land by sea.
No, I was not in that number, though I still have the fire and the smoke
within me, pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me
by night and by day. I still have inside me the mad search
for emergency exits, for soft places, for the nakedness
of the land, for the escape into weakness and hope,
I still have within me the lust to search for living water
with quiet talk to the rock or with frenzied blows.
Afterwards, silence: no questions, no answers.
Jewish history and world history
grind me between them like two grindstones, sometimes

to a powder. And the solar year and the lunar year
get ahead of each other or fall behind,
leaping, they set my life in perpetual motion.
Sometimes I fall into the gap between them to hide,
or to sink all the way down.

7

I believe with perfect faith that at this very moment
millions of human beings are standing at crossroads
and intersections, in jungles and deserts,
showing each other where to turn, what the right way is,
which direction. They explain exactly where to go,
what is the quickest way to get there, when to stop
and ask again. There, over there. The second
turnoff, not the first, and from there left or right,
near the white house, by the oak tree.
They explain with excited voices, with a wave of the hand
and a nod of the head: There, over there, not that there, the other there,
as in some ancient rite. This too is a new religion.
I believe with perfect faith that at this very moment.

Yehuda Amichai

If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Then let my right be forgotten.
Let my right be forgotten, and my left remember.
Let my left remember, and your right close
And your mouth open near the gate.

I shall remember Jerusalem
And forget the forest -- my love will remember,
Will open her hair, will close my window,
will forget my right,
Will forget my left.

If the west wind does not come
I'll never forgive the walls,
Or the sea, or myself.
Should my right forget
My left shall forgive,
I shall forget all water,
I shall forget my mother.

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Let my blood be forgotten.
I shall touch your forehead,
Forget my own,
My voice change
For the second and last time
To the most terrible of voices --
Or silence.

Yehuda Amichai

Jews In The Land Of Israel

We forget where we came from. Our Jewish
names from the Exile give us away,
bring back the memory of flower and fruit, medieval cities,
metals, knights who turned to stone, roses,
spices whose scent drifted away, precious stones, lots of red,
handicrafts long gone from the world
(the hands are gone too).

Circumcision does it to us,
as in the Bible story of Shechem and the sons of Jacob,
so that we go on hurting all our lives.

What are we doing, coming back here with this pain?
Our longings were drained together with the swamps,
the desert blooms for us, and our children are beautiful.
Even the wrecks of ships that sank on the way
reached this shore,
even winds did. Not all the sails.

What are we doing
in this dark land with its
yellow shadows that pierce the eyes?
(Every now and then someone says, even after forty
or fifty years: 'The sun is killing me.')

What are we doing with these souls of mist, with these names,
with our eyes of forests, with our beautiful children,
with our quick blood?

Spilled blood is not the roots of trees
but it's the closest thing to roots
we have.

Yehuda Amichai

Let The Memorial Hill Remember

Let the memorial hill remember instead of me,
that's what it's here for. Let the par in-memory-of remember,
let the street that's-named-for remember,
let the well-known building remember,
let the synagogue that's named after God remember
let the rolling Torah scroll remember, let the prayer
for the memory of the dead remember. Let the flags remember
those multicolored shrouds of history: the bodies they wrapped
have long since turned to dust. Let the dust remember.
Let the dung remember at the gate. Let the afterbirth remember.
Let the beasts of the field and birds of the heavens eat and remember.
Let all of them remember so that I can rest.

Yehuda Amichai

Love Of Jerusalem

There is a street where they sell only red meat
And there is a street where they sell only clothes and perfumes. And there
is a day when I see only cripples and the blind
And those covered with leprosy, and spastics and those with twisted lips.

Here they build a house and there they destroy
Here they dig into the earth
And there they dig into the sky,
Here they sit and there they walk
Here they hate and there they love.

But he who loves Jerusalem
By the tourist book or the prayer book
is like one who loves a women
By a manual of sex positions.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Memorial Day For The War Dead

Memorial day for the war dead. Add now
the grief of all your losses to their grief,
even of a woman that has left you. Mix
sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history,
which stacks holiday and sacrifice and mourning
on one day for easy, convenient memory.

Oh, sweet world soaked, like bread,
in sweet milk for the terrible toothless God.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."
No use to weep inside and to scream outside.
Behind all this perhaps some great happiness is hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt is dressed up
as a little girl with flowers.
The streets are cordoned off with ropes,
for the marching together of the living and the dead.
Children with a grief not their own march slowly,
like stepping over broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay like that for many days.
A dead soldier swims above little heads
with the swimming movements of the dead,
with the ancient error the dead have
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.
A shopwindow is decorated with
dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.
And everything in three languages:
Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

A great and royal animal is dying
all through the night under the jasmine
tree with a constant stare at the world.

A man whose son died in the war walks in the street
like a woman with a dead embryo in her womb.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."

Yehuda Amichai

My Child Wafts Peace

My child wafts peace.
When I lean over him,
It is not just the smell of soap.

All the people were children wafting peace.
(And in the whole land, not even one
Millstone remained that still turned).

Oh, the land torn like clothes
That can't be mended.
Hard, lonely fathers even in the cave of the Makhpela*
Childless silence.

My child wafts peace.
His mother's womb promised him
What God cannot
Promise us.

* The traditional burial place in Hebron of Abraham
and the other Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

My Father

The memory of my father is wrapped up in
white paper, like sandwiches taken for a day at work.

Just as a magician takes towers and rabbits
out of his hat, he drew love from his small body,

and the rivers of his hands
overflowed with good deeds.

Yehuda Amichai

Of Three Or Four In The Room

Out of three or four in the room
One is always standing at the window.
Forced to see the injustice amongst the thorns,
The fires on the hills.

And people who left whole
Are brought home in the evening, like small change.

Out of three or four in the room
One is always standing at the window.
Hair dark above his thoughts.
Behind him, the words, wandering, without luggage,
Hearts without provision, prophecies without water
Big stones put there
Standing, closed like letters
With no addresses; and no one to receive them.

Yehuda Amichai

On Rabbi Kook's Street

On Rabbi Kook's Street

I walk without this good man--
A streiml he wore for prayer
A silk top hat he wore to govern,
fly in the wind of the dead
above me, float on the water
of my dreams.

I come to the Street of Prophets--there are none.
And the Street of Ethiopians--there are a few. I'm
looking for a place for you to live after me
padding your solitary nest for you,
setting up the place of my pain with the sweat of my brow
examining the road on which you'll return
and the window of your room, the gaping wound,
between closed and opened, between light and dark.

There are smells of baking from inside the shanty,
there's a shop where they distribute Bibles free,
free, free. More than one prophet
has left this tangle of lanes
while everything topples above him and he becomes someone else.

On Rabbi Kook's street I walk
--your bed on my back like a cross--
though it's hard to believe
a woman's bed will become the symbol of a new religion.

Yehuda Amichai

Once A Great Love

Once a great love cut my life in two.
The first part goes on twisting
at some other place like a snake cut in two.

The passing years have calmed me
and brought healing to my heart and rest to my eyes.

And I'm like someone standing in the Judean desert, looking at a sign:
'Sea Level'
He cannot see the sea, but he knows.

Thus I remember your face everywhere
at your 'face Level.'

Yehuda Amichai

Pity, We Were A Good Invention

They amputated
Your thighs from my waist.
For me they are always
Surgeons. All of them.

They dismantled us
One from another. For me they are engineers.
Pity, We were a good and loving

Invention: an airplane made of man and woman,
Wings and all:
We soared a bit from the earth,
We flew a bit.

Yehuda Amichai

Poem Without an End

Inside the brand-new museum
there's an old synagogue.

Inside the synagogue
is me.

Inside me
my heart.

Inside my heart
a museum.

Inside the museum
a synagogue,

inside it

me,

inside me

my heart,

inside my heart

a museum

Yehuda Amichai

Quick And Bitter

The end was quick and bitter.
Slow and sweet was the time between us,
slow and sweet were the nights
when my hands did not touch one another in despair but in the love
of your body which came
between them.

And when I entered into you
it seemed then that great happiness
could be measured with precision
of sharp pain. Quick and bitter.

Slow and sweet were the nights.
Now is bitter and grinding as sand—
'Let's be sensible' and similiar curses.

And as we stray further from love
we multiply the words,
words and sentences so long and orderly.
Had we remained together
we could have become a silence.

Yehuda Amichai

Temporary Poem Of My Time

Hebrew writing and Arabic writing go from east to west,
Latin writing, from west to east.

Languages are like cats:

You must not stroke their hair the wrong way.

The clouds come from the sea, the hot wind from the desert,

The trees bend in the wind,

And stones fly from all four winds,

Into all four winds. They throw stones,

Throw this land, one at the other,

But the land always falls back to the land.

They throw the land, want to get rid of it.

Its stones, its soil, but you can't get rid of it.

They throw stones, throw stones at me

In 1936, 1938, 1948, 1988,

Semites throw at Semites and anti-Semites at anti-Semites,

Evil men throw and just men throw,

Sinners throw and tempters throw,

Geologists throw and theologians throw,

Archaeologists throw and archhooligans throw,

Kidneys throw stones and gall bladders throw,

Head stones and forehead stones and the heart of a stone,

Stones shaped like a screaming mouth

And stones fitting your eyes

Like a pair of glasses,

The past throws stones at the future,

And all of them fall on the present.

Weeping stones and laughing gravel stones,

Even God in the Bible threw stones,

Even the Urim and Tumim were thrown

And got stuck in the breastplate of justice,

And Herod threw stones and what came out was a Temple.

Oh, the poem of stone sadness

Oh, the poem thrown on the stones

Oh, the poem of thrown stones.

Is there in this land

A stone that was never thrown

And never built and never overturned

And never uncovered and never discovered

And never screamed from a wall and never discarded by the builders
And never closed on top of a grave and never lay under lovers
And never turned into a cornerstone?

Please do not throw any more stones,
You are moving the land,
The holy, whole, open land,
You are moving it to the sea
And the sea doesn't want it
The sea says, not in me.

Please throw little stones,
Throw snail fossils, throw gravel,
Justice or injustice from the quarries of Migdal Tsedek,
Throw soft stones, throw sweet clods,
Throw limestone, throw clay,
Throw sand of the seashore,
Throw dust of the desert, throw rust,
Throw soil, throw wind,
Throw air, throw nothing
Until your hands are weary
And the war is weary
And even peace will be weary and will be.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

The First Rain

The first rain reminds me
Of the rising summer dust.
The rain doesn't remember the rain of yesteryear.
A year is a trained beast with no memories.
Soon you will again wear your harnesses,
Beautiful and embroidered, to hold
Sheer stockings: you
Mare and harnesser in one body.

The white panic of soft flesh
In the panic of a sudden vision
Of ancient saints.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

The Little Park Planted

The little park planted in memory of a boy
who fell in the war begins
to resemble him
as he was twenty eight years ago.
Year by year they look more alike.
His old parents come almost daily
to sit on a bench
and look at him.

And every night the memory in the garden
hums like a little motor.
During the day you can't hear it.

Yehuda Amichai

The School Where I Studied

I passed by the school where I studied as a boy
and said in my heart: here I learned certain things
and didn't learn others. All my life I have loved in vain
the things I didn't learn. I am filled with knowledge,
I know all about the flowering of the tree of knowledge,
the shape of its leaves, the function of its root system, its pests and parasites.
I'm an expert on the botany of good and evil,
I'm still studying it, I'll go on studying till the day I die.
I stood near the school building and looked in. This is the room
where we sat and learned. The windows of a classroom always open
to the future, but in our innocence we thought it was only landscape
we were seeing from the window.
The schoolyard was narrow, paved with large stones.
I remember the brief tumult of the two of us
near the rickety steps, the tumult
that was the beginning of a first great love.
Now it outlives us, as if in a museum,
like everything else in Jerusalem.

Yehuda Amichai

Tourists

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall
And they laugh behind heavy curtains
In their hotels.
They have their pictures taken
Together with our famous dead
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb
And on Ammunition Hill.
They weep over our sweet boys
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Yehuda Amichai

Try To Remember Some Details

Try to remember some details. Remember the clothing
of the one you love
so that on the day of loss you'll be able to say: last seen
wearing such-and-such, brown jacket, white hat.
Try to remember some details. For they have no face
and their soul is hidden and their crying
is the same as their laughter,
and their silence and their shouting rise to one height
and their body temperature is between 98 and 104 degrees
and they have no life outside this narrow space
and they have no graven image, no likeness, no memory
and they have paper cups on the day of their rejoicing
and paper cups that are used once only.

Try to remember some details. For the world
is filled with people who were torn from their sleep
with no one to mend the tear,
and unlike wild beasts they live
each in his lonely hiding place and they die
together on battlefields
and in hospitals.
And the earth will swallow all of them,
good and evil together, like the followers of Korah,
all of them in their rebellion against death,
their mouths open till the last moment,
praising and cursing in a single
howl. Try, try
to remember some details.

Yehuda Amichai

What Kind Of A Person

"What kind of a person are you," I heard them say to me.
I'm a person with a complex plumbing of the soul,
Sophisticated instruments of feeling and a system
Of controlled memory at the end of the twentieth century,
But with an old body from ancient times
And with a God even older than my body.
I'm a person for the surface of the earth.
Low places, caves and wells
Frighten me. Mountain peaks
And tall buildings scare me.
I'm not like an inserted fork,
Not a cutting knife, not a stuck spoon.

I'm not flat and sly
Like a spatula creeping up from below.
At most I am a heavy and clumsy pestle
Mashing good and bad together
For a little taste
And a little fragrance.

Arrows do not direct me. I conduct
My business carefully and quietly
Like a long will that began to be written
The moment I was born.

s Now I stand at the side of the street
Weary, leaning on a parking meter.
I can stand here for nothing, free.

I'm not a car, I'm a person,
A man-god, a god-man
Whose days are numbered. Hallelujah.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

Yad Mordechai

Yad Mordechai. Those who fell here
still look out the windows like sick children
who are not allowed outside to play.
And on the hillside, the battle is reenacted
for the benefit of hikers and tourists. Soldiers of thin sheet iron
rise and fall and rise again. Sheet iron dead and a sheet iron life
and the voices all—sheet iron. And the resurrection of the dead,
sheet iron that clangs and clangs.

And I said to myself: Everyone is attached to his own lament
as to a parachute. Slowly he descends and slowly hovers
until he touches the hard place.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

You Mustn'T Show Weakness

You mustn't show weakness
and you've got to have a tan.
But sometimes I feel like the thin veils
of Jewish women who faint
at weddings and on Yom Kippur.

You mustn't show weakness
and you've got to make a list
of all the things you can load
in a baby carriage without a baby.

This is the way things stand now:
if I pull out the stopper
after pampering myself in the bath,
I'm afraid that all of Jerusalem, and with it the whole world,
will drain out into the huge darkness.

In the daytime I lay traps for my memories
and at night I work in the Balaam Mills,
turning curse into blessing and blessing into curse.

And don't ever show weakness.
Sometimes I come crashing down inside myself
without anyone noticing. I'm like an ambulance
on two legs, hauling the patient
inside me to Last Aid
with the wailing of cry of a siren,
and people think it's ordinary speech.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai