

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAAR YACHIN

Alexandra Zelman-Doring for The Saint Ann's Review

ALEXANDRA ZELMAN-DORING FOR THE SAINT ANN'S REVIEW: Where do you live?

SAAR YACHIN: I live in Mitzpe Ramon, which is the most beautiful place. It's a town in the Negev Desert about a half hour's drive from any other town. Forty-five hundred people living on the rim of a crater. It's not really a crater, it's a *makhtesh*—used to be a sea and got dried up, looks like a crater. I've seen a hyena here, and I've seen *jerboa* and wild donkeys.

TSAR: What is a jerboa?

SY: Something like a kangaroo rat with big ears and springy legs that can jump really high. I told someone earlier that I would like to write poetry as ridiculous, but that can jump even higher.

TSAR: Ridiculous?

SY: There is a freedom in the ridiculous, any great effort has something ridiculous about it. To assume some things are of utmost importance and by assuming, making them that important—you have to know how ridiculous that is.

TSAR: We once had a conversation where you talked about art and poetry in an almost religious way. You seemed to be saying that art and poetry exist even without human beings. Were you messing with me?

SY: No. I believe that. Everything you can say about God I say about poetry as well. It predates us and doesn't need us to exist. I don't think of poetry as having a function. We should understand that it has a purpose of its own that we can't necessarily comprehend and we should respect that purpose as we would any object of worship—thou—as *I and thou*—thou art poetry—thou—Martin Buber, he has this concept of the *thou*... I do believe that poetry is greater than us.

TSAR: How can poetry exist without us?

SY: There is the poetry which is on the surface when we read a poem or write one but there is also the poetry that is manifest; everything in the world which can be

realized—that’s what I mean when I use the word “poetry.” I have a pylon next to my house that buzzes and hums all the time, and its noise is also music in a sense; we can tune into the aspect of it that is music, which does not mean this aspect is non-existent without us. So poetry is the same way, it’s a tuning in. I think of it as something we experience only an aspect of; it is greater than us.

TSAR: Tell me a little about your three books, and your pamphlet!

SY: My first book is called *Crimes Against Despair*, it’s a pun on “crimes against humanity,” it’s fourteen poems and one letter, and a lot of them are love poems but also some thoughts on poetic ecology, eco-poetry. At that time I was thinking a lot about cut-ups and what it means to create when there is so much already out there...so many words contributing to verbal pollution, language pollution, which we are not necessarily aware of, like we are aware of other pollutants. My second book is a book on a process. It’s all cut-ups of the Bible with three great modern Hebrew novels, one from the 20s and 30s, one from 40s, one from the 70s. It’s called *Hebrew Epitaph*. I describe it as “a verbal still life where each word is granted the space to call out its own name in its own language...unsignified and unsignifying, its meaning is derived from that of its sisters who like herself are free of meanings. Each and every word eulogizes itself.” My third book is called *divided by seven*, this one has four chapters in it, each for a different planet. For example the one of “Jupiter”—“Jupiter in Hebrew also means justice, this chapter starts with a contract, with legal language. The second one is called “Gate to Mercury.” It’s in the form of twenty-two poems, like the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, each poem having one word less until the last poem is only one word. I mean Mercury as the messenger—like the messenger of god. And you asked about my pamphlet—that has great quotes from Netanyahu, Lapid, Lieberman, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin. It’s called *Poems of No Return*, it’s kind of apocalyptic. It has a collage. I took Bibi [Netanyahu]’s famous photo from the UN where he’s standing with an acme bomb that looks like it’s from Loony Tunes and he’s pointing at it, showing the progress of the Iranian nuclear program, so over Bibi’s face I pasted a great image of a cracking egg, something from an old textbook on Nature. It says, “Image 197, egg fractured by Chick in act of liberating itself.” Isn’t that fantastic?

TSAR: Yes.

SY: And Chick is capitalized.

TSAR: How did you distribute them?

SY: I printed five thousand on A4 sheets and folded them into three.

TSAR: Are you writing a new book?

SY: At the moment I'm working on a musical project, I can't talk about it.

TSAR: Each time I've seen you read it's been from memory. Do you always memorize your poems before a reading?

SY: I rehearse them and recite from memory, yes. You can't ignore that everything in art has gone performance, the execution is a crucial part of everything today. A book—you print it—it's an action that can be replicated infinitely. People want performance because they want action, the actual creation of something in the moment. I try to not to ignore that aspect, I practice them, I work on them, and I recite from memory.

TSAR: How do you write?

SY: I write first on a typewriter, it gets you in rhythm. On my Olivetti Lettera 32, it's a great typewriter. I have a few, but this is the best. I have a very old one from the 30s. I usually rewrite things a few times before moving to the computer where I edit it. I also do a lot of cut-ups, I used to do all sorts of random writing, like the game where you have a chessboard of verbs you can use and you have to move on it like a chess knight...or just poems that use the letters of the word *peach*, say...anything to challenge any traditional notion of writing. I don't believe in inspiration. I believe in work and making it happen.

TSAR: I'm always shocked by how many kinds of poetry you like, the way you enjoyed this workshop with Kenneth Goldsmith, you have such broad taste....

SY: I also like legal contracts. I translate them for a living and I like that kind of language. What I like about legal language is that lawyers work in language. Language is of utmost importance and it's not just language, it's LAW, and it has an accuracy and effect in the real world. Utility of language impresses me, there's something very elegant and beautiful in it. I like some business writing. I

like old Hebrew sources like the Bible and a lot of different styles. I like sentences in *Wikipedia*, like “Marktesh Ramon is the world’s largest marktesh”—a great sentence....

TSAR: Your poems take on a lot of different forms. For example, you have a poem in the form of a contract in one of your books. Do you experiment with a lot of different forms?

SY: I also have a poem in the form of a flow chart, one which is a procedure, horoscope cut-ups. Horoscopes are great, ridiculous but fantastic

TSAR: You also use your poems in a lot of different ways. I remember you once told me you threw a poem onto someone’s balcony.

SY: You want to hear that story?

TSAR: Absolutely.

SY: My then-girlfriend and I broke up and then I saw her on a balcony and it messed up my night. I couldn’t sleep. The next morning I sat in a café and wrote this poem really fast, which is unusual—most of them take me a long time, a few weeks—but I wrote it right on the spot and I got two plastic cups and stuffed it in them to form a projectile and threw it at the balcony. It hit it and fell, then some other guy wanted to try and he threw it and it got in. So technically another guy threw this poem. Successfully threw it. I was all worked up, and the next day I called to meet her and we met and I asked her if she had read the poem and she told me that she never went out on the balcony.

TSAR: Did she ever read it?

SY: Yes and she didn’t like it. Until she came to my book launch reading in Tel Aviv. Then she liked it.

TSAR: What are your biggest influences?

SY: As far as art goes, I’d have to say Bach. Everything, really. Hebrew poets—who would know them?—Yonatan Ratosh, I like him, also David Avidan...I don’t think I draw inspiration particularly from poetry—a good contract can be just as inspiring.