

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Near the Wall of a House

Near the wall of a house painted
to look like stone,
I saw visions of God.

A sleepless night that gives others a headache
gave me flowers
opening beautifully inside my brain.

And he who was lost like a dog
will be found like a human being
and brought back home again.

Love is not the last room: there are others
after it, the whole length of the corridor
that has no end.

Yehuda Amichai¹

Reflections

Yehuda Amichai's work has been important to me since my graduate school days when my teacher, Van Jordan, introduced me to a poem called "A Poem That I Wrote in a High Fever" that had just appeared in *The New Yorker*. It still gives me chills. The first stanza goes like this:

You who are lengthening your lives
with the best doctors and the best medicines
remember those who are shortening their lives
with the wars
that you in your long lives are not
preventing.

"Near the Wall of a House" is of a much different tone, but upon finding it I felt a similar kind of fire that might be particular to Amichai's talent. He, now deceased, is recognized still

¹ "Near the Wall of a House" by Yehuda Amichai. Public Domain.

as one of Israel's finest poets and his work, written in Hebrew, has been translated into over 40 languages. Among English speakers, he is particularly popular and his imaginative and accessible style has opened up Hebrew poetry in deeply enriching ways.

One thing I appreciate about “Near the Wall of a House” is its offering of a vision of God in the everyday landscape. A *domestic* image of God. God is right there at—and *in*—the house. And not just any house, but a house made of one thing and painted over to look like something else. (How is that for a metaphor for domestic life? How true does that feel, that we are made one way but spend much of our time posing as something else?) And yet, nevertheless, it is there, even among a façade of sorts, that a vision of God appears.

This poem has an interesting structure because each stanza (that is, each set of three lines) can almost stand alone; the stanzas don't quite seem to depend on each other, or even inform each other the way stanzaic structure often does. You'll notice how the second stanza may have very little to do with the first, the third very little to do with the second. But the thread connecting them is a domestic thread, one of our earthly landscape. Even a sleepless and fugue-inducing night conjures “flowers / opening beautiful in the brain.” It is as though whatever divine clarity we might seek from above can be found, as Amichai would have it, right here where we already are.

I wish I could say with confidence that I understood the third stanza, understood what it means to be “lost like a dog” but I imagine it's feeling akin to being lost as a human being—disorienting, frightening, panic-driven. And I *do* have a sense of what it means to be “found” and “brought back home again,” if not literally, then certainly figuratively; I have experienced relief, comfort, mercy, redemption.

And redemption may be what the poem is *About*, universally. About with a capital “A.” The poem is one of homecoming though the home we return to is made of far more than we once knew and is more expansive than we first realized. There are doors to rooms in the house we did not know existed and “the whole length of the corridor/... has no end.” Amichai's poem says to me, then, that the endlessness of *home* reflects the infinitude of God.

✧ About the poet

Born in Germany in 1924, Amichai left the country at age twelve with his family and journeyed to Palestine. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war he fought with the Israeli defense forces and his experiences of war inform much of his poetry. Amichai later attended Hebrew University in Jerusalem and taught all over the world; in the United States, he was on the faculty of such prestigious institutions as New York University, the University of California-Berkeley, and Yale University. He died in September 2000.



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