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SECRET OF THE WITHERED LEAF:
PERSPECTIVES ON THE POETRY OF LEAH GOLDBERG

by
JAMES D. COHN

Thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the
requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish
Institute of Religion

1978

Referee, Dr. Werner Weinberg

To my parents,
and to the Kid

DIGEST

The goal of this Thesis is to produce a new perspective on the poetry of Leah Goldberg through translations of poems (most heretofore unpublished in translation), biographical and bibliographical material, and a critical evaluation including comparisons with other Hebrew poets contemporaneous with her.

The main body of the Thesis is comprised of the translated poems. This collection of poems is divided into three sections, organized about the themes of love, loss and uprootedness, and the perspective wrought by advancing age.(the "secret of the withered leaf").

The collection of translated poems is preceded by an introduction, discussing the format of the Thesis and its purposes; a section about Leah Goldberg herself, containing biographical and stylistic considerations, as well as a brief treatment of the three themes about which the poems are organized; bibliographical information, listing the works of Leah Goldberg in Hebrew with the titles translated into English; and a note on the translation of the poems, explaining the principles guiding the translator in his work.

The poems are followed by a critical evaluation of the poetry, discussing the imagery and metaphors of individual poems and relating them to one another in an attempt to analyze the treatment of the indicated themes.

The Thesis concludes with notes indicating the sources of materials cited in the Thesis, and a list of works consulted and/or cited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANKS are due Dr. Werner Weinberg, gentleman, for his invaluable insights, his contagious love for the Hebrew language, and his respect for his fellow human beings -- all of which have made it a singular honor and a singular pleasure to work with him. As this Thesis is my own, however, so too are any imperfections it may suffer;

also to Dr. Alex Fraser, poet, who has dedicated his life to the empirical investigation of the secret of the withered leaf;

to Dr. I. Martin Shartar, doctor of the highest order, without whose timely friendship I may never have come to write this Thesis;

to the polydox Jewish religionists in Cincinnati, from whom came the support of community necessary to my appreciation of Leah Goldberg's celebration of the finite;

and most of all to my wife Elizabeth, who has shared with me the frustrations and the joys encountered in the work whose culmination this Thesis represents.

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INTRODUCTION

This Thesis is intended to be of interest to two types of reader. For the reader who is familiar with the poetry of Leah Goldberg, it is hoped that the Thesis will be able to provide fresh perspectives on the poetry, enhancing the reader's appreciation of it. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the poetry of Leah Goldberg, and especially for the reader who hasn't sufficient command of the Hebrew language to read the poems in the original Hebrew, it is hoped that the Thesis will serve as an introduction into a poetic world of honest beauty of whose existence the reader was previously unaware.

Although the format of the Thesis is basically quite straightforward, an explanation of the organization of the translated poems might be useful.

In a very rough sense, the poems are organized about three themes. The first of these themes concerns itself with the thoughts and feelings of one who is in the midst of love. The passions are at once joyful and agonized; they clearly reflect an immediate involvement with the psyche of another.

The second theme focuses on a sense of loss, of uprootedness, of faithlessness. It often centers around images of lost love and ennui; suffused with the spirit of tragedy, it expresses regret for the past and foreboding for the future.

The third theme reveals the poet's reconciliation with, and acceptance of, the vagaries of life. It is a theme of redemption, of affirmation, of (as one of the poems puts it) the secret of the

withered leaf: in the late-discovered knowledge of the exhilaration to be found in all aspects of life, even the simplest, the poet robs death of its reputed sting.

Poetry -- especially good poetry -- resists classification and the insinuation of themes by critics. Moreover, much of the poet's art lies in what might be called the intentional ambiguity of the poetry. For these reasons, it will at times seem that a poem appearing in a section oriented about one theme will exhibit indications of another theme as well. This is natural, for the poetry of Leah Goldberg is, after all, good poetry.

Consequently, it must be kept in mind that the motive for describing the poems in terms of central themes is that this provides a framework with which to approach the poems for discussion purposes. The subtleties and ambiguities of the poetry will often challenge such strictures; that, after all, is the nature of art.

ON LEAH GOLDBERG

Leah Goldberg was born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1911. Her parents were Russian-speaking and were part of the Jewish intelligentsia. Her younger years were spent at Zionist Hebrew gymnasias, where she learned Hebrew and Yiddish in addition to Russian. She attended the universities at Kovno, Berlin, and Bonn, receiving a doctorate in Semitics at Bonn in 1933. In 1935, she arrived in Tel Aviv, where she joined the ranks of the Hebrew modernists, notably Abraham Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman. She served on the editorial staffs of various newspapers and magazines until 1952, when she was invited to establish the Department of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She chaired that Department until her death in 1970. Although best known as a poet, Leah Goldberg also assumed the roles of literary critic, translator, novelist and playwright.

What was the modernist movement in Hebrew literature of which Leah Goldberg became a part? Modernism rejected the assumption that Hebrew literature had to be tied to themes which were identifiably Jewish. The universal themes of modern existence -- love, and the death of loved ones; loneliness; bittersweet memories; faithlessness; the fear of advancing age and the spectre of approaching death -- these were the raw materials from which the modernists fashioned their literary inventions. While characteristically Jewish themes were not abandoned by the modernists, they tended to find expression (when they

were expressed) in individual terms, rather than in terms of a group or national experience.¹

Modernism eschewed the formal structure in which Hebrew poetry had been cast, seeking instead to allow image and symbol to determine the structure of the poetry. The effect was one of new and original dimensions, allowing the reader to float freely down the stream of the poet's consciousness, confronted during the journey with one novel image after another.²

It was into this world of symbolism and imagery that Leah Goldberg entered when she arrived in Palestine. What was unique about her own poetry, however, was its combination of new images with old forms. It must be noted that, although considered a modernist, Leah Goldberg used surprisingly traditional verse forms and phrased her poetry in deceptively simple language. In this sense, then, her poetry departed from the modernist trend: first, because she avoided the massive and overwhelming emphasis on "pathos, passion, and prophetic rage"³ embraced by many of the modernists, preferring subtle indications of the beauty of small and even commonplace things; second, because she sought to express her images in a formalistic manner. She once explained her respect for form to Galya Yardeni:

I've never considered art as the abdication of restraint. On the contrary, it's my opinion that art has always involved the affirmation of restraint. Did you ever see an Arab woman walking with sure and easy steps, despite the fact that she's balancing a heavy load on her head? To me, that's reminiscent

of the nature of art: the ability to bear⁴
with ease things which are by no means light.

The themes of the poetry of Leah Goldberg are, for the most part, universal and not language-bound; in other words, the universality transcends the barriers of language, making the beauty of the poetry exquisite despite the fact of its translation. The images are strongly moving in their simple intricacy: the combination of basic, common words with novel and often captivating turns of thought and emotion produces an image which is intensely vital and arrestingly lovely.

Though often associated with Abraham Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman, Leah Goldberg's choice and treatment of themes and her use of form tend to put her in a literary framework somewhat different from theirs. For example, we might note that Shlonsky chooses to characterize the alienation attendant on modern city life in the following graphic terms:

There are 70 bus lines in my city,
All of them up to choking and up to the stinking of bodies.
They travel
They travel
They travel to the heart of the city
As if it were impossible to die from boredom here also --
In my own neighborhood.

Leah Goldberg uses much less explicit imagery, though no less effective:

We are embarrassed at the sight of a star
 We hurry to the teeming streets
 Lest our hearts become attracted to the open expanses.
 Such is life
 In closed rooms
 And streets girded
 With telephone and telegraph lines --
 Far from all that we loved in our innocence --
 Within time, on the other side of ourselves.

The image of alienation and loss of innocence is powerful here partly because it is underplayed, less gaunt than the blunt statement by Shlonsky.

Similarly, compare these two very different treatments of night -- the first by Nathan Alterman:

A summer wind roams. Muted. Agitated.
 Her lips are poured out upon shoulders of gardens.
 A greenish malice. Fermentation of light and of suspicion.
 Boiling of a treasure in the black foam.

And now by Leah Goldberg:

The locks of my hair are silv'ry in the moonlight.
 Before me, nestlings slumber in the branches of a tree.
 I tear open my window and cry: "Morning dove, come to me!"
 But the night sent me wise old owls.

Where Leah Goldberg uses the night as a vehicle to express -- in a strikingly conversational tone -- her own anguished sense of loss, Alterman revels in the starkness of the night itself. Night is the subject of his poem; but, in a sense, it even becomes the author of the poem: it is as if night were speaking through Alterman. But in Leah Goldberg's treatment, night is the mirror which reflects her own intensely personal (but quite universal) experience of pain and uncertainty.

Moreover, Leah Goldberg's poetry is somewhat extreme in its avoidance of characteristically Jewish themes. In contrast, the poetry of Shlonsky and Alterman contains frequent references to Jewish images, though of course not to the extent of, say, that of Bialik. Leah Goldberg's concern for rhyme and verse forms and her attitude toward art as the affirmation of restraint also serve to remove her somewhat from the orientation of Shlonsky and Alterman, despite the fact that the three poets were part of the same literary movement.

In view of these differences -- a more relaxed tone, a high regard for structure, an especially universal flavor, a simple eloquence -- it seems more natural to compare the poetry of Leah Goldberg to that of, for example, Hannah Senesh, rather than to that of Shlonsky or Alterman.

In Hannah Senesh's "To a Good Friend," translated by Ziva Shapiro, the image is simple and direct:

I wounded another not knowing
 Both ends of an arrow mar.
 I too was hurt in the battle
 And shall bear a scar.

The simplicity does not degenerate into triteness; the poem speaks gently but without mincing words. The experience is universal.

Often, and particularly in the love poems, the lyrical beauty stands against a background of suffering and ugliness, producing an effect which Robert Alter describes as the feeling of "tough strength": precisely because the beauty finds itself surrounded by ugliness, there is hope and, because there is hope, there is strength, too.⁵

The poems are of youth and love, of the soaring heights of the heavens; but most of all, they are about us and about our lives: "of the death that rears its head within our dreams, of the fear, of the nights in which rise up 'all the things whose names I secretly silenced.'"⁶ What Leah Goldberg does for us is to express what we have always felt, but never had the ability to express. American songwriter Joni Mitchell wrote similarly of a friend in "For Love or Money":

He's got stacks and stacks of words that rhyme
 Describing what it is to lose...
 Some to shed a little light on you and on me
 Some to shed a little light on the human story.

That is precisely what Leah Goldberg's poetry does: it sheds light on the whole human experience, by seeking it in the simplest, in the most basic aspects of our existence. Love, loss, and recovery, whatever we call them -- these are the cyclical components of life, the crystals in which we most clearly see ourselves. Ezra Spicehandler is correct in asserting that the poetry exhibits a "tendency toward intellectualism,"⁷ but that is the necessary ingredient which renders the poetry universal: it is Leah Goldberg's ability to emotionally distance herself from her experience which allows us to adopt it as our own.

The question of the propriety of the poet's objectivism is a difficult one. When expressing "the drama of her 'wounded, mute love,'"⁸ for example, which idiom is more effective: the blunt statement in "In the Path of the Nightmares" --

I want to wail, to wail, to wail!

-- or the controlled statement in "Last Words" --

The pain

Is clear as the light of day

Above any doubt

As perfect as faith.

Ezra Spicehandler has expressed doubt as to the value of the objective viewpoint in poetry. In writing about those few poems which make reference to the Nazi holocaust, Spicehandler has observed:

Her lines about the catastrophe itself
 are moving although one wonders
 whether their veiled and indirect symbolism
 and their restrained tone are sometimes
 aimed at concealing emotion rather
 than evoking it. Perhaps I am being
 unfair and the reader will find her controlled
 "objectivity" more powerful than a more direct statement.⁹

Leah Goldberg herself once stated that "a poem is no mere outcry,
 but rather a vehicle for rendering in an objective manner those things
 the poet seeks to express."¹⁰ Indeed, Robert Alter has argued that
 this controlled statement represents the best of Leah Goldberg's
 artistry, for it avoids self-pity and sentimentalism, expressing the
 pain in a direct way that is "at once chastened and almost blunt."¹¹

The effect of the objective viewpoint is the enhancement
 of the universality of the theme: "The universality of this pain is
 not only with respect to person, but also to place and time."¹²
 To maintain the universality, the poet renders the emotion implicit,
 veiled (though not concealed) behind a narration which at times
 appears aloof and distant. The nostalgia is not permitted to
 become self-indulgence, so that the poetry often accentuates the
 intensity of the emotion by describing it almost dispassionately.

There is in the poetry of Leah Goldberg a strong emphasis
 on the joy found in the acquisition of the "wisdom of age" --
 that is, the acceptance of the human condition, in all its pain,
 which produces an exultation and a transcending joy. However, the joy
 is not other-worldly, but quite basically human; for this transcendence

is wrought from the attempt to find peace in life on its own terms, without fleeing from it. It is a travel through bittersweet recollections, tempered by mature insight, to inner understanding and joy.

One is reminded of James Branch Cabell's Jurgan, who looks back upon his life in the company of a somewhat urbane centaur. The centaur asks Jurgan if he is proud of his experiences, and Jurgan replies; "No, Centaur, I cannot very well be proud of my folly: yet I do not regret it."¹³ The past need not be cherished, but it must be accepted.

It is the acceptance of past and future which renders the poetry of Leah Goldberg more than an exercise in imagery. Spicehandler has noted that joy and even redemption are to be found in the final acceptance of loneliness, fear, aging and death. "There are moments of redemption in the darkness of the history of the individual and of mankind," Spicehandler wrote once, "and in the end this knowledge makes Leah Goldberg a life-asserting poetess despite her wise pessimism."¹⁴

This mixture of pessimism and vitality also surfaces in the observations Leah Goldberg made with respect to the possibility of finding redemption in a modern society -- one which emphasizes the technological aspects of existence rather than the spiritual:

I've encountered many situations in which
people who are intimately involved in
technological advancements begin to seek a path
to religion, to God. This path also leads
to poetry...

[However,] this is not a matter of poetry alone,
but rather of the creative tendency of mankind in
general; and this tendency is inhibited, not only

by advancing technology, but by the interference of governments and bureaucrats in matters of artistic creativity. In such a situation there is neither poet nor public. I feel like someone who puts a note in a bottle and drops the bottle into the ocean. Perhaps someday the note will reach the shore.¹⁵

The poetry of Leah Goldberg has been described by one critic as sounding "more like a harp than a saxophone,"¹⁶ a reference to the lyrical quality of the poetry, for all its involvement with the basics of life and death. Perhaps, like the harp, her poetry will withstand the test of time, its music bringing beauty and understanding to all who stop to listen.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Following is a list of works by Leah Goldberg.

Collections of poetry:

- מבעות עשן ("Smoke Rings"), 1935
- מביתי הישן ("From My Old Home"), 1943/4
- על הפריחה ("On Blossoming"), 1948
- ברק בבקר ("Lightning in the Morning"), 1954/5
- מוקדם ומאוחר ("Early and Late"), 1959
- עם הלילה הזה ("With this Night"), 1964

Drama:

- בעלת הארמון ("Lady of the Manor"), 1955/6

Novels:

- מכתבים מנסיעה מדומה ("Letters From an Imaginary Journey"), 1936/7
- והוא האור ("He Is the Light"), 1946

Criticism:

- ספרות יפה עולמית בתרגומיה לעברית ("World Belletristic in Hebrew Translation"), 1950/1

Criticism (cont'd):

- פגישה עם משורר ("Encounter with a Poet [Abraham ben Yitzhak]"), 1952
- חמשה פרקים ביסודות השירה ("Five Chapters on the Elements of Poetry"), 1956/7
- אחדות האדם והיקום ביצירת טולסטוי ("The Unity of Man and the Universe in the Works of Tolstoy"), 1958/9
- אמנות הסיפור ("The Art of the Short Story"), 1963
- הספרות הרוסית במאה התשע-עשרה ("Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century"), 1968

Children's literature:

- האורחה מכנרת ("The Guest from Lake Tiberias"), 1958/9
- העיר והכפר ("Town and Country"), 1938/9
- שיר בכפרים ("Village Song"), 1941/2
- ידידי מרחוב ארנון ("My Friends from Arnon Street"), 1943
- נשמור על ארצנו ("We'll Protect our Land"), 1943/4
- הביתן הקטן ("The Little Cabin"), 1945
- בבקשה ("You're Welcome"), 1945/6
- הביבר העליון ("The Merry Menagerie"), 1946/7
- מה עושה האילנות ("What Do the Does Do?"), 1949
- כך ישיר עולם צעיר ("This Is How the Young World Sings"), 1949/50

Children's Literature (cont'd):

נסים ונפלאות ("Miracles and Marvels"), 1954

מלכת שבא הקטנה ("The Little Queen of Sheba"), 1956

איה פלוני ("Where's What's-His-Name?"), 1956/7

דירה להכשיר ("Flat for Rent"), 1958/9

צריף קטן ("Little Hut"), 1959/60

מעשה בשלושה אגוזים ("Story of Three Nuts"), 1960

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The poetry of Leah Goldberg is characteristically simple. This is at once a blessing and a curse for the translator: a blessing, because the vocabulary is for the most part familiar and common; a curse, because the challenge to reproduce that simplicity in English is foreboding. A word that is equivalent in familiarity and commonness to the Hebrew original might fail utterly to convey in English the nuance so vital to the evocation of the image.

For this reason, care has been taken to reproduce the simplicity of the original; however, where the duplication of the simplicity would have violated the sense of the poem (insofar as this translator perceives that sense), the simplicity of the language was forfeited in favor of fidelity to the poetry.

In this connection, it will be noted that, wherever possible, the brevity of the Hebrew lines is matched with corresponding brevity in English. However, it must be understood that the Hebrew language by its very nature uses fewer syllables to express a given thought than does English.* Therefore, the English can tend to appear cumbersome where the Hebrew is not. Again, the criterion was fidelity

*See, for example, the first line of "Odysseus' Lament," which has twenty-two syllables without a superfluous word. The Hebrew, on the other hand, has thirteen.

to the poetry: it was felt that the translator must on occasion subvert the reproduction of the original form in order to remain faithful to the original image. (This is particularly true with respect to the reproduction of rhyme and rhythm. Rhyming is very tricky: Leah Goldberg did it, and she did it well. I am not a poet and, knowing the pitfalls of the potential triteness of rhyming, I have abandoned any attempt to produce rhyme schemes in my translations. I have maintained a sense of rhythm where possible -- though not always the identical rhythm as the Hebrew original -- but, again, I have seen fit to forfeit it where the image would have been tarnished by it.)

In the poetry of Leah Goldberg, then, a tension is maintained between simplicity of language and complexity of image. Between the two, it would seem to be the responsibility of the translator to err in favor of the richness of the image and at the expense of the simplicity, rather than to capture the simplicity by destroying the image.

TRANSLATED POEMS

PART I: POEMS OF LOVE

THE ECHO

In the heavenly heights the echo remains,
Like a heavy cloud barren of rain.
Remains, not returning to my lonely voice,
To my lost, orphaned, superfluous voice.

I will lift up to the cold heavens an impoverished prayer,
I will cast terrified petitions before the silence:
Heaven, find compassion for the severed word,
Let not the song be in vain.

NIGHT SONG

He hid all the stars,
Wrapped the moon in black,
From north to south
Not a ray of light.

And the morning, a faithful widower,
Will gird its loins in grey sackcloth,
From north to south
Not a ray of light.

Light a white candle
In the black tabernacle of my heart,
From north to south
The light will shine.

From JOURNEY WITHOUT A NAME

It is weeks now that no-one has called
Upon my name, and it's quite simple:
The parrots in the kitchen of my house
Haven't learned it yet,
The people throughout the city
Don't know it.
And it exists only on paper, in writing,
It has no voice, it has no sound or note.

For days I walk without a name
On the street whose name I know.
For hours I sit without a name
Opposite the tree whose name I know.
And sometimes I think without a name
Of the one whose name I do not know.

WITH THIS NIGHT

With this night and with all its silences

With this night --

With three stars

That were lost among trees

With this wind.

With this wind

That stood still to listen

To this night --

With this night

And three stars

And this wind.

THE LOVER

From peace and contentment he flees,
Toward strife and discord he moves,
Weeping as he goes.
Falling, he becomes master
And from the heights of his surrender he reigns
And he lifts the crown as he rules
Weeping as he lifts it.

THE BELOVED

He who opens but will not be opened,

He who entices but will not be enticed,

He who saves but will not be saved,

May your merit protect him.

SICKNESS

My window: dream and division.

A happy, horrible world.

And tonight, once again, to you I am

Like a pathway through a strange city.

In soaring song, in gracious compassion

The echo of your coming awakens me.

I brighten, and I'm consumed

In the flash of a lamp, in the light of a cloudburst.

The song goes. And the frightening

Fall of the footstep cries, "Rise up!"

And again, I surrender to you

In the terrible shivering of my blood.

SELIHOT

You came to me to open my eyes,
Your body was my vision, my window, my mirror;
You came to me as night comes to the owl
Revealing everything to him in the darkness.

And I learned: Every venom, every talon has a name,
And every hair on the naked flesh;
And the smell of childhood -- the smell of glue and pine
Is the body's night-perfume.

If there were sufferings -- they steered a course to you:
My white sail into your darkness.
Let me go, let me go
To kneel on the shores of forgiveness.

MARVELOUS

I.

Marvelous, quite marvelous

Is my heart's rejoicing. Of all my sins

Perhaps God will call me to account for this one

On the Day of Judgment. And I have no excuse.

For it was a gift of grace to me, not to repay me

For my sorrows, not to compensate for my bitterness.

The light of a sudden daybreak caused my eyes to awaken

And I took my dreams at face value.

Inside a rigid, angry world,

Under the cold heavens

I stand, joy in my heart.

Foolish bird, how could you build a nest

In a dead rock! To whom will your throat raise

Your love song, your joyous hymn?

II.

In point of fact I have no right

To this happiness. I know, in point of fact

I deserve to wear, not a bridal veil,

But the grey sackcloth of penitents.

But did I not transgress when, at the end of my path,
My eyes still on the wasteland's edge,
The happiness overtook me like rain.

Since then I am like a tree in the midst of a desert
On which a thousand birds have descended,
Its dry branches filling with music.

Since then I am a pool in the middle of the night --
In which the heavens, in their arbitrariness,
Have submerged all the stars.

FOR ONE WHO HAS NO FAITH

I.

For one who has no faith
It's difficult to live this year --
The fields ask for a blessing
The sea asks for faith
And you ask for nothing at all.

My heart sleeps its slumber
And I am asleep.
My dream is heavy with silence
And my dead ones wander in my sleep
As within some ancient fortress.
How shall I awaken from my sleep
When there is no faith in my heart
And you ask for nothing at all?

II.

You ask for nothing --
Not this tree
Which has stood these ten years
Like a sentry at his post,
Not this pathway
Which after ten years
Has reached the threshold of my house,

Not the unrippled reflection
In the pond of my sleep.

You ask for nothing --
In the open eyes of the blind man
Ships pass
And the sea maintains its oath of silence.
One bird
Seeks to tear away the slumber
Of the desert.
But you ask for nothing at all.

III.

Only the mountains are already awake
And the city-walls and the moss in the crevices.
Wrench my sleep from me
Try to arouse.

A solitary dawn stands over me
An echo-less dawn.
Let it bend over me
Let it weep over me
For at this dawn the prodigal son
Has returned to me!

Only the mountains are already awake

But I am asleep.

The dawn sticks to my window-pane

And calls my name

But I make no reply.

IN THE PATH OF THE NIGHTMARES

I.

And if I should forget the prayer?

And if there should break through at the first gate

A strangled cry from a locked door?

No, no, better not to try to sleep.

I cannot, I cannot --

And if the windows should be open

And darkness burst upon the day

From the darkened chambers?

And if I should forget the prayer?

Always, always the road leads

To that place. Always, always.

But there was a spell, there was a word --

My lips do not remember the prayer.

II.

You tell me that this fire

Doesn't burn, that you pass

Among the flames by night uninjured.

You say, "I can't hear

The sound of this weeping. Your dream is mute.

You are the dreamer and I am the one awake."

You go stalwart and safe

Among my thorns, uninjured.

Everything is dulled and my dream is mute.

I want to wail, to wail, to wail --

A DAY

A day when there will rise up between us like a wall
Every vicious little remark we did not utter,
Every bitter feeling we strangled within us,
Injuries we bore in silence,

And every lowered look will be an accusation,
And cruel dreams in which our skin was scorched,
And the strange loves we loved,
Thorn and thistle everywhere the foot stepped,

On a day when we will face each other as two strangers
Robbed of a future, betrayed by the past --
How will our desperate eyes make contact

With all that we knew from before!
And to that day in its myriad rainbow colors
We will stretch forth a hand, and find nothing.

THE THISTLE

How did the leaves of a thirst stricken land
Dare to blossom on this stony ground,
How did the thistle burst into bloom
Mocking the law of desolation?

Uncorrupted, relentless and proud,
Unforgiving and merciless,
The thistle stands amid the desolation
Like a prophet exposing your shame.

DID YOU SEE THE RAIN?

Did you see the rain? We are quiet.

Three angels from an ancient story

Go unhurried among trees and houses.

Nothing has changed. Only the rain strikes

Warily on the rock. The street glistens.

We see three angels from an ancient story

Crossing the street.

The door is open. The field lies fallow.

The rain is quiet, for the miracle has already happened.

PART II: POEMS OF LOSS

ANCIENT SONG

I didn't want to, either.. And once more
It rose within me like smoke
And ate up my eyes with its bitter fumes.
That same ancient song!

And I rose up. And once more
My strength failed me.
My steps led me
Back to the cage.

And here I am --
A colorful bird and foolish --
Against my will
Singing an old song
About that which never was.

DUST OF THE CROWN

Yesterday on a little island
A little evening sat down
And looked out from the hiding-places of the wonderful expanse,
Until the gloom of the night came
And swept across the little island.
And people walked in the streets
Wearily, unmindful of the darkness.
Children played in the streets.
With the crown of my head that had fallen.

THREE DAYS OF DREAMS

I.

Three days past the boundary, beyond
Habit, at the border's edge of knowledge,
On the beautiful outskirts of reality.

Three days not subject
To obsolete law: a dream and an awakening,
An allegory and its meaning. The gate is closed.
I threw the key to the common life
Into the abyss. But it returns to me --
Twisted like the ring of Polycrates.

Three days -- and again, as in ancient times,
The magicians are swift with their solutions.

II.

Three days of dreams,
Three tower-tops.
Jacob's ladder stands
Abandoned and there are no angels.

None ascending or descending,
None touching the cloud,
None coming to awaken
With a sign, a wonder or a meaning.

Tomorrow I will open my eyes,
I will see blue skies.
Three days of dreams.
Three tower-tops.

III.

The sun shines today.
You remember that you were,
Remember that you were night,
Remember that you were dawn,
Remember that you were a boy
Wide-eyed at the end of the game.
The sun shines today.
Three towers in the sky.
Three flags in the wind
And an ancient city enclosed
Within a wall, not remembering
That once you were night,
That once you were dawn,
That once you were a boy
Wide-eyed at the end of the game.

IV.

And it was understood, that thus was our life.
And it was understood, that there would not even be
One dream that we could deny.
And thus will be our life unto the death.

And it was understood that thus was our existence:
Like a beam of light enclosed within a lamp
It shed light on everything but touched nothing.
And thus will be our life unto the death.

And it was understood, that those who were to die,
Who carried within them the secret of eternity,
Would die as a dream with no awakening.
And how shall we seek answers from magicians?

LAST LIGHT

The pure gold is deceiving

This is the last light.

The blue glass has crowned

The mountain tops.

Another few days, a little longer

Naked trees will stand

Like musical instruments, ancient and mute

Beautifully stringed.

A pale, shivering dawn

Will touch the cold stone.

And a bird will proclaim exile

From the frigid sky.

WHO HAVE GONE TO THE NEXT WORLD

I.

They have gone to the next world

And that is their world now

But my heart is consumed

By a hunger for this world.

To hunger its hunger

To drink from its thirst

To grow with the growing

Of its root and seed

And to love it

And to despise it

But to be part of

Its fears and its envy.

II.

And you walked among the dead

There were many dead there

And you sought a living soul

There was no living soul there.

And you would remember good things about me
Because I was your pain,
Because I was always
Your vibrant fountain of suffering.

But I am already among the dead
And my face is like the faces of the dead,
And my face is expressionless like theirs
Painless, without care.

III.

At the holy gate
Stands the chief-watchman
And no-one from the Temple
Comes to meet me.

For inside the Temple sit
Your good companions
And there is no more room
For the rest of your lovers.
For even on the day of your death
Another will have been with you
And my name is not recorded
In your Book of the Realm.

IV.

Ten years after your death

I'll know for certain that I loved you

Or ten years after my death

You'll know for certain that you've forgotten me.

And these are simple, petty matters

Recorded in the Book of the Dead.

THE STARS

The stars are quite lovely ---

Tiny bells around the neck of the heavens.

The stars are quite lovely

On this night, too

The night of my sorrows.

IN THE HILLS OF JERUSALEM

I.

I am cast like a stone among these hills,
Among burnt-yellowed grasses, summer-scorched,
Unmoved and silent.
Bleached skies touch the rock.
How did the yellow-winged butterfly come to this place?
Stone among stones -- I do not know
How ancient is my life
Or who has yet to come
And kick me with his foot
So that I roll down the hillside.

Perhaps this is the ever-frozen beauty.
Perhaps this is
The slow-moving eternity.
Perhaps this is
The dream of death
And the only love.

I am cast like a stone among these hills,
Among thorn and thistle,
Facing the path which flows to the city.
A wind will come, spreading its blessing everywhere,
Caressing the tops of the pines
And the mute stones.

II.

All of the things which are

Not of love

Come to me now --

This landscape and its

Wisdom of age, which begs to live

Another year, another year,

Another lifetime, two lifetimes, three,

One more eternity.

To grow thorns without end,

To stir dead stones

As infants are rocked to sleep in a cradle.

To silence memories grown old,

One more, two more, three more . . .

Ah, how strong is the desire for life

Of those at the edge of death.

How awesome the longing

And how empty --

To exist, to exist,

Another year, another year,

Another lifetime, two lifetimes, three,

One more eternity.

III.

How did the light-hearted sparrow stray
Into these hills?
A song of lovers in her throat,
Her little heart beats out the joy of love.
There yet will be young birds in her nest,
The beating of her wings is a love-song.

But suddenly
From the azure heights
There is revealed before her
Desolation strewn with stones.

Save her,
Save her,
That her eyes might not see
The corpse of all the loves,
The graves of all the joy.

In the height
So blue,
In a forlorn love-song
She is suspended
Not grasping
The death
Before her.

IV.

How shall a solitary sparrow
Carry all the heavens
On her wings
So weak
Above the desolation?
They are large and blue,
Set upon her wings
They endure by the strength of her song.

Thus did my heart carry its love,
Which was large and blue
And higher than high,
Above the desolation
And the fallen ruins
And the depths of agony.

Until the song in my heart grew silent
And its strength was spent
And it was like unto a stone
And it fell.

My wounded, mute love --
How shall a solitary sparrow
Carry all the heavens!

ODYSSEUS' LAMENT

Filled with wandering, the venerable Odysseus descended to the underworld
To inquire after the welfare of friends slain by the sword.
Shadows of fallen companions greeted him in the gate,
His ear recalling their death-scream, their wailing --
How have the mighty fallen!

Each with his steed fell in the field of slaughter.
The blood of man and beast -- inky streams were shed.
The voice of the widow's lament and the ring of metal.
The wail of orphans and the crash of the shattered wall.
Woe to the eyes staring at death,
Woe to the dumb lips -- "Give me water!"
How have the mighty fallen.

Over the stench and rot,-- the circling of the vulture.
Seven-times lonely is the living among the dead.
I have come to the underworld seeking your pardon,
For split and shattered was the snare, and we escaped.
A mark of shame on my forehead is the death of the companion,
A mark of shame on my forehead is the life ahead,
My ear recalls the voice of your death-cry.
How have the mighty fallen!

ONE PRECIOUS STONE

My beloved gave me one precious stone as a keepsake.

The day of our parting is engraved on it. It is the tombstone on my grave.

WIND IN THE HILLS

Untamed, wild,
A mighty mane,
The wind sings to the desolation
Concerning its jewel-like thistles.

-- How lovely you are with your stones,
Your speckled rocks,
On briars and on thorns,
Ours is the lovers' couch.

Look, look, such whiteness high above,
Look, look, how the wind
Vies with the flight of the eagle
High above!

-- Haughty and ugly,
Splendidly awful.
For the sun has bronzed me,
The storm has caressed me.

Go up now, go up,
To love's gallows.
Rocks will see
My blood in the clouds.

Look, look, how the cloud is torn,
Look, look, how the wild wind
Buries its face in the redness of the cloud.

Abandoned and blind
Barren ground
The sunset like a rose
Will hover over its grave.

The withering sunset,
The last, the last,
Between the black and the blue
In the shreds of the clouds.

Look, look, such a night in the hills,
Look, look, how the wind,
How the wild wind
Laments the sun's death in the hills.

DIDN'T WE KNOW HOW TO AWAKEN TOGETHER?

Didn't we know how to awaken together
Sharing the same dream,
Opening up our eyes to the day
Our bodies meeting without resentment or fear.

The night dug no chasm between us,
We bridged the distance from today to last night,
The light of day didn't embarrass us
And our oneness was pure and complete.

How did it happen, then, that one day
We rose ashamed, strangers to the knowledge
Of the verdict? I looked down

And in my hand rested another hand
That had understood how to handle fragile things --
And it was heavy and strange forever more.

PART III: SECRET OF THE WITHERED LEAF

LAST WORDS

I.

I am very cold. The landscape at my feet

Is like a torn cloak. With a weary hand

I write

The last line of a poem.

Already in the eighth century

On the bank of the Yellow River

Sat a poet who knew

The concluding word.

II.

The pain

Is clear as the light of day,

Above any doubt,

As perfect as faith.

THE VANISHING NIGHT

The vanishing night, as if roosters were crowing in the yard.

I cannot awaken.

The rising morn. As if the doors were beating a drum.

I cannot awaken.

The day will bend under the brunt of the heatwave

Choked by the smell of oleander

A dry tongue in its bitter mouth.

I cannot awaken now,

To look, to fight back

Against the never-finished.

WITH NEITHER MUSIC NOR DRUM

In a narrow sky, low clouds

Move on

In grey uniforms.

Move on and on, all day.

With neither music nor drum

They move on toward a foreboding horizon.

THE WORLD IS HEAVY ON OUR EYELIDS

The world is heavy on our eyelids.

Our head is bent, our weeping mute.

The light has been sealed up in the stretches of the sea.

The song is finished.

Clouds pass. The column marches

In a glowing, arching stillness.

We will be at peace. We will be greatly at peace.

The day is done, Our eyes are closed.

NIGHT RAIN

The black rain pounds and pounds.

The garden lies back and listens --

How the trees roar!

We stand beside an open window;

In back of us, things are quiet.

How the trees roar!

We remember childhood nights,

The black rains and their singing.

On tiptoe, barefoot.

We went down to peer through the window

And stood mute --

Cheeks flattened against the cold window pane

Eyes widened.

Behind our little shoulders, things were quiet,

The fear lying in wait

When the night-shirt brushed against the heel.

How the trees roar!

And the wells filled to the brim

Their hearts overflowing,

And the rosy-headed mornings descended

And came and drank from the pools.

The black rain pounds and pounds.

Now the lamp at the gate has been lit --

The glint of the stream like a knife blade.

How the trees roar!

PITY DOESN'T APPLY

I.

I am not for myself

Because you aren't.

And I have no tree

No fugitive leaf

Because I am not for myself.

I have no words.

Even the little word "no"

Is no longer mine,

For whom can I refuse?

II.

If I should not forget you,

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.

If I should not pluck your memory

From the heart of my nights, let

My bones

Forever cease to speak poetry.

Dried-up stack of thorns in the wilderness

Whom will the blaze warm

And what

Will it burn!

III.

The words were my youth

And my years

Are this stone upon my mouth.

How shall I move my lips?

All my songs have been slaughtered.

All my words

Murdered.

I cannot utter

Even the name of this stone upon my mouth.

IV.

With the years, the prohibitions

Against words

Grow and multiply.

With the years, the prohibitions

Against feelings

Grow and multiply.

With the years

The obligation

Of silent understanding

Grows harder from day to day

And pity

Doesn't apply

To those condemned to muteness.

IN THE DARKENING OF MY DAY

The locks of my hair are silv'ry in the moonlight.

Before me, nestlings slumber in the branches of a tree.

I tear open my window and cry: "Morning dove, come to me!"

But the night sent me wise old owls.

THREE DAYS

I.

I stand in the midst of a desert
And I haven't a single star
And the wind doesn't speak to me
And the sand won't keep my footprints.

II.

I cried out: "Answer me!"
He answered not.
I pounded: "Open to me!"
He opened not.
Outside was an evening, burning and pale.
I went to knock on another door.

I cried out: "Answer me!"

He answered not.

I pounded: "Open to me!"

He opened not.

Outside was a night, stifling and pale.

I went to knock on another door.

I whispered: "Answer me!"

He answered not.

I begged: "Open to me!"

He opened not.

On a dewless morning the sun arose

And thus they found me, the guards of the wall.

III.

Three days his memory left me not.

And on the fourth I sliced the bread

And on the fourth I opened the window

And on the fourth I saw the sea.

And on the fourth I knew the sea

Was very lovely, its breadth was blue

And in the gust of the salty wind

Was the smell of the sea, not the taste of my tears.

TREE

And he bears with ease

His heavy blossoming,

His grandeur befits him.

Without conceit

Does he wear the splendor of spring.

And the joy is simple --

As a duty.

AFTER THE STORM

Like tears between eyelashes still suspended --
Stars on a stormy cloud before the dawn.
The night-waves have taken their rest
In the waste of the colorless sea.

When the first gull soars,
Then with a silver knife
A beam of light will slice apart
The waters.

And we will kneel upon the shore
Sinking our knees
Into the salty wetness of the sand.
Over our heads, the torn heavens
That have survived the storm
Until the day is done.

TO MYSELF

The years have painted my face
With the memory of loves
And adorned my head with faint silver lines
So that I have grown quite lovely.

The scenes
Are visible in my eyes.
And the paths I've travelled
Have straightened my steps --
Weary and wonderful.

If you could see me now
You wouldn't recognize your yesterdays --
I come to myself
With the face you sought in vain
When I came to you.

OUR BACKS TO THE CYPRESSES

Our backs are to the cypresses. We conceal
The hills behind our houses
We are embarrassed at the sight of a star
We hurry to the teeming streets
Lest our hearts become attracted to the open expanses.

Such is life
In closed rooms
And streets girded
With telephone and telegraph lines --
Far from all that we loved in our innocence --
Within time, on the other side of ourselves.

LAST MOMENT

It will come at the touch of the great sunsets,
As our loneliness is blessed in the light.
When the days are as deep as the eyes of a doe
With the falling of leaves in autumn by the river.

When we go into the garden, and the dawn has advanced,
And our heart has silently surrendered
Before the serenity of the fruit heavy with ripening,
The fruit that knows the sweetness of its death.

SONGS AT THE END OF THE ROAD

I.

The road is terribly beautiful -- said the boy.
The road is terribly difficult -- said the youth.
The road is terribly long --- said the man.
The old man sat down to rest by the side of the road.

The sunset colors his hair with golden-red,
The grass makes his feet glisten in the evening dew,
The last bird of the day sings above him:
Will you remember how beautiful, how difficult, how long was the road?

II.

You said: Day pursues day, and night -- night.
Behold, the days approach,-- you said in your heart.
And you saw evenings and mornings calling at your windows,
And you said: Truly there is nothing new under the sun.

And now you have aged, you are old and grey,
Your days are numbered, their count seven times more precious,
And you know: every day is the last under the sun,
And you know: every day is new under the sun.

III.

Teach me, my God, to bless and to pray
For the secret of the withered leaf, for the ripe fruit's splendor,

For this freedom: to see, to feel, to breathe,
To know, to hope, to fail.

Teach my lips blessing and song of praise
In your renewal of time, night and day,
So that my day today not be like days gone by,
So that my day not be to me routine.

DISCUSSION OF THE POEMS

"Love," says Joni Mitchell, "is a story told to a friend."

The stories woven into the poems in the first section of translations speak of love in terms which are both stark and tender, both bright and chilling.

The section opens with "The Echo," an echo which never responds to the voice of the poetess' love. Instead, she remains stranded in her loneliness -- lost, orphaned, and superfluous. The heavens are cold and silent, mute to the prayer she raises. Her plea is desperate, her hope strained:

Let not the song be in vain.

Even to one wounded by love again and again, there is nothing quite so lonely as the voice to which no echo returns, the love which encounters no love in response. The heartbreak of love in turmoil is still more acceptable than the anguish suffered by love's orphan.

"Night Song" evokes a strong image of despair and disillusionment, coupled with an intense hope for the future:

He hid all the stars,
 Wrapped the moon in black,
 From north to south
 Not a ray of light.

But later:

Light a white candle

In the black tabernacle of my heart.

Again, the comparison with Joni Mitchell is irresistible:

Blackness, blackness dragging me down

Come on, light the candle in this poor heart of mine.

For all her despair, Leah Goldberg takes her stand on the side of the promise implicit in the future:

From north to south

The light will shine.

That promise is fully outlined in the selection from "Journey Without a Name." Lovelessness and namelessness go hand in hand; the poetess defines herself through love. Yet she is confident in the future which will convert her name from a detail which exists "only on paper, in writing" to an entity with its own voice. She spends her days walking down familiar streets, viewing a landscape well known to her; and her thoughts turn to the lover who has yet to come and call upon her name, bringing to her an identity:

And sometimes I think without a name

Of the one whose name I do not know.

The image in "With This Night" speaks for itself. The utter simplicity of the words employed by the poetess -- night, silence, stars, trees, wind -- belies the striking ingenuity of their utilization

in the poem. All of us have been overcome at one time or another with the beauty of such nights; yet it is the purpose of the poet to formulate that beauty into the imperfect perfection of words:

With this wind

That stood still to listen

To this night --

The poem can recreate the mood of that night regardless of when it is read, and therein lies its art: it transcends time and space -- with words.

"The Lover" and "The Beloved" together portray the paradox of the one who struggles in order to become prisoner -- the exact reverse of one who "stoops to conquer." The poetess describes the state of lovelessness from which the lover flees as "peace and contentment," in obvious contradiction to the loneliness, blackness, despair and loss of identity by which she characterizes that state elsewhere. It is only one who is in the midst of love, with all its "strife and discord," who would portray solitude as a peaceful and contented existence. But clarity of vision is not the primary goal here, nor should it be. It is in fact quite the case that one who is loveless will portray love as peaceful, while one who is experiencing the anguish of a love which is not harmonious will portray lovelessness as peaceful. The question left unanswered by the poems is whether in fact the kind of "peacefulness" sought by the person in either situation is truly to be desired.

The sense of surrender against one's will is again evoked in "Sickness." The poetess is consumed in the flash of her encounter with her lover, a terrifying and draining experience. Yet she rises to meet the next encounter, never choosing to exercise the freedom to refuse, the freedom which she denies herself:

The song goes. And the frightening
Fall of the footstep cries, "Rise up!"
And again, I surrender to you
In the terrible shivering of my blood.

No pain is too great, no encounter too searing, for the poetess to renounce her love. In "Seliḥot," she praises the revelation brought by love; but the revelation exposes not only beauty but injury:

And I learned: Every venom, every talon has a name,
And every hair on the naked flesh . . .

The sufferings were inevitable, ships bringing discord into a calm harbor. The guilt is profound:

Let me go, let me go
To kneel on the shores of forgiveness.

"Marvelous," the first of the longer poems, expresses a guilt of another kind. Just when she was overcome with misery, the poetess has unexpectedly found herself in love -- like "the light of a sudden daybreak,"

The happiness overtook me like rain
And I hadn't even time to cover my head.

The beauty of the love, and its providential timing when the poetess was at the edge of the abyss, cause her to feel almost as though she has no right to the joy inside her, as though it is utterly contrary to what she has come to expect from the universe:

Inside a rigid, angry world,

Under the cold heavens

I stand, joy in my heart.

Of all her sins, she regards her heart's rejoicing in the moment of travail as perhaps the greatest, the most inexcusable -- in a world of rigidity and anger, it is a transgression to be

. . . a tree in the midst of a desert

On which a thousand birds have descended,

Its dry branches filling with music.

The dynamics of love are the subject of "For One Who Has No Faith." This is a love which is not unrequited, and yet it is lifeless. The tensions which Leah Goldberg elsewhere bemoans are absent here, and that is precisely the source of her suffering. It is the fact that her lover demands nothing of her that disturbs her:

The fields ask for a blessing

The sea asks for faith

And you ask for nothing at all.

All of the images of the past come to her, ten years of devotion and growth together; the lover is unimpressed by them. He desires nothing, he demands nothing; her life is as a sleep:

Only the mountains are already awake
 But I am asleep.
 The dawn sticks to the window-pane
 And calls my name
 But I make no reply.

Again, in "In the Path of the Nightmares," the lover is unmoved by her profound distress. Again, the past comes to her, but it is spoiled by the urgent despair of the present:

. . . there was a spell, there was a word --

My lips do not remember the prayer.

But the lover is unimpressed; he is still able to forge his way among the flames of her hurt uninjured.

You say, "I can't hear

The sound of this weeping. Your dream is mute.

You are the dreamer and I am the one awake."

But her agony begs for expression. Her lover remains untouched by her distress, and the turmoil seeks some escape:

I want to wail, to wail, to wail --

"A Day" describes the eclipsing of love, when the future has been denied and the past betrayed. As with the previous two poems, there is a strong sense of the destruction of what-used-to-be, "when we will face each other as two strangers," despite all that had gone before. And part of the source of this eventual destruction

is the multitude of thoughts and emotions which we bottle up inside,
which never achieve expression:

Every vicious little remark we did not utter
Every bitter feeling we strangled within us,
Injuries we bore in silence.

In such a situation, every lowered look is indeed an accusation;
the beauty of the past has been maintained only by denying the
present, so that the end -- as strangers -- is inevitable.

"The Thistle" continues this image of dissolution and regret;
the poetess accuses her lover of refusing to blossom with her
into the radiance of love. She is like a thistle which has
"burst into bloom / Mocking the law of desolation"; she
flourishes despite the fact that the soil is parched. The very fact
of that blossoming of hers is an accusation, revealing the guilt
of the lover who failed to join her,

Like a prophet exposing your shame.

The love is already dead in "Did You See the Rain?"
The two lovers are quiet, watching the rain causing the street
to glisten. The image is one of resignation, but not acceptance.
"Nothing has changed." The angels are watched as they move about
in someone else's life, but not in that of the lovers; for there
are no more miracles to be hoped for.

The second section -- poems of loss -- is introduced by "Ancient Song," the rueful story of aborted love. The poetess feels herself drawn out into the vulnerable position which is the mark of love, only to find that the feelings of love were hers alone, unmatched by the object of her affections. Once again, she is like a caged animal, embarrassed and humiliated,

Singing an old song

About that which never was.

The image of gloom is extended in "Dust of the Crown," in which Leah Goldberg describes the fall from the heights of love, and in "Three Days of Dreams," in which all of her oracles are useless in the search for a key to the resolution of her sense of loss:

None coming to awaken

With a sign, a wonder or a meaning.

But the future must be approached with hope:

Tomorrow I will open my eyes,

I will see blue skies.

The lover is asked to remember all that he was to her -- night, and dawn, and a boy "wide-eyed at the end of the game." But the past was necessary; indeed, it was inevitable:

And it was understood, that thus was our life,

And it was understood, that there would not even be

One dream that we could deny.

And existence itself becomes a beam in a lamp, shedding light on everything, but never touching -- like magicians who never

reveal the secrets of their tricks:

And thus will be our life unto the death.

Whether or not the message is one of hopelessness is a matter which is open to interpretation. Leah Goldberg herself leaves the matter unanswered, as in "Last Light," in which the image is equivocal until the last line. The poem builds a metaphor wrapped in pure gold and blue glass; naked trees and a shivering dawn. Whether the poem is a poem of love or a poem of loss is resolved only at the end:

And a bird will proclaim exile

From the frigid sky.

"Who Have Gone to the Next World" returns us to the conflict between the desire for peace and the desire for passion:

And the faces of the dead were

Painless and without care,

And you would seek but one boon:

The boon of suffering.

She expects the lost lover to remember good things about her, precisely because she was a source of pain for him, precisely because she was his "vibrant fountain of suffering." But now, when love is lost, she has become like the dead; she, too, wears an expression of painlessness, devoid of care. Like the subject of "The Lover," she, too, equates solitude with peace, though here the image is a negative one -- she is among the dead, that is, the unloved; but she hungers for the world of life and love:

. . . My heart is consumed
By a hunger for this world.

To hunger its hunger
To drink from its thirst
To grow with the growing
Of its root and seed

And to love it
And to despise it
But to be part of
Its fears and its envy.

The poetess equates love with the immediacy of this world, and solitude with the netherworld. And yet she is so filled with exhaustion because of her spent passions that she characterizes the whole process as being comprised of "simple, petty matters / Recorded in the Book of the Dead."

In "The Stars," the poetess returns to the simple and brief exposition of anguish in conjunction with images which are opposite in tone in ordinary usage, but which serve here to color the irony of the statement. The loveliness of the stars ("tiny bells around the neck of the heavens") manages to impress her even -- or perhaps especially -- on this night, "the night of my sorrows." The broken heart salvages beauty from a wrecked universe.

Again, in "In the Hills of Jerusalem," a poem of anguish begins with a detached metaphor describing inanimate scenes -- animated by the energies of the poetess, who identifies herself with one of the stones among the hills outside the city of Jerusalem. She even manages to speak of the blessing which will be brought by the wind, "caressing the tops of the pines / And the mute stones." Yet the image changes abruptly -- or was it ever really as we had imagined it?

All of the things which are

Not of love

Come to me now --

The poem plunges into a mournful song on the passion for life (and love) of those about to die; the sparrow is unaware of the desolation before her -- she continues to bear the weight of the heavens on her fragile wings. So did the poetess reach heights of joy, unaware of the desolation before her, until love died and she was lost.

My wounded, mute love --

How shall a solitary sparrow

Carry all the heavens!

"Odysseus' Lament" returns to the image of death/loss; it is the lament of the survivor who recalls the horror of war and feels shamed by the very fact of his survival. The reference to the Holocaust is unmistakable. In the midst of the carnage, his companions were consumed; how can he reconcile his joy to be alive with the memory of his dead fellows? The answer is not given:

A mark of shame on my forehead is the death of the companion,
 A mark of shame on my forehead is the life ahead,
 My ear recalls the voice of your death-cry.
 How have the mighty fallen!

"One Precious Stone" returns to the metaphor of death as the loss of love. In a striking twist of imagery, the keepsake given to the writer by her beloved becomes the tombstone on her grave. Where we would expect to see the date of her death, the date of their parting is engraved upon it.

"Wind in the Hills" continues the mixture of images which can be of positive or negative connotation (or combinations of images which are opposite in tone): the desolation is jewel-like; the lovers' couch is of briars and thorns; the storm caresses. The fifth stanza begins to break the equivocation and states the theme of the poem:

Go up now, go up,
 To love's gallows.
 Rocks will see
 My blood in the clouds.

The sunset, the eclipse of love, death -- all are equated with one another; the gallows have done their job.

The second section of translations closes with "Didn't We Know

How to Awaken Together?" It states most clearly the death of love and the anguish which accompanies it. The past is remembered almost with envy ("our oneness was pure and complete"). There is no understanding the chasm that grew between the lovers; there is only the fact of its existence, heralding the end of love. The hand which had been the source of tenderness and love is "heavy and strange forever more."

The third section of translated poems brings us to the "secret of the withered leaf."* It is the secret of the wisdom of age; it is redemption, affirmation, liberation. It is, perhaps most of all, the acceptance which comes with true understanding.

"Last Words" hints at that understanding, though the acceptance has not yet been achieved. The poetess muses on the universality of life's experiences to all people of all ages and lands -- even the Chinese poet of a millennium earlier knew how she would conclude her poems:

Already in the eighth century
On the bank of the Yellow River
Sat a poet who knew
The concluding word.

*See "Songs at the End of the Road" above, p. 78, and in the Discussion below, pp. 99 ff.

Her anguish is clear to her, as it has been to all generations, as it will continue to be for generations yet to come, "clear as the light of day, / Above any doubt, / As perfect as faith."

But the struggle to find acceptance is not easy. The routine of life, its perpetual ennui, threatens to turn existence into a condition of boring repetition. In "The Vanishing Night," the poetess hasn't the strength to face another episode in a pattern which is changeless. The heatwave is the metaphor which conjurs the image of boredom, of emptiness, of negation:

I cannot awaken now,
To look, to fight back,
Against the never-finished.

The sense of futility is carried further in "With Neither Music Nor Drum"; the clouds move on, silent, grey, their destination uncertain; the horizon toward which they move is described in a single, ominous word: "foreboding."

The clouds continue to frame the metaphor in "The World Is Heavy on our Eyelids." Again, there is silence:

Clouds pass. The column marches
In a glowing, arching stillness.

We return to the image of peacefulness. But before, the image was connected with states of love and solitude. Here, it is connected with acceptance, and the connotation is positive, if a trifle wry:

We will be at peace. We will be greatly at peace.

The day is done. Our eyes are closed.

In "Night Rain," night and darkness have taken on a different association from the one evoked in the earlier poems. The darkness is no longer the vehicle of strife and suffering; instead, it has become once more what it had been in childhood: a time of awe, of immensity, of black beauty. The image is magnificent; the night is proud, the rain majestic.

But the struggle has not disappeared. The past is still sitting in judgment over the imperfect present. In "Pity Doesn't Apply," the poetess derives no solace from her own past. She has run out of words; "even the little word 'no' / Is no longer mine, / For whom can I refuse?" She tries to pluck the memory of her lover (lovers?) from her consciousness; as the years grow, she realizes the futility of words just as she laments the misery of her past. Acceptance grows harder to achieve as words become more and more useless:

With the years
The obligation
Of silent understanding
Grows harder from day to day
And pity
Doesn't apply
To those condemned to muteness.

But acceptance, when it comes, is not welcome at first. In "In the Darkening of my Day," the poetess seeks relief; instead, she encounters understanding:

I tear open the window and cry: "Morning dove, come to me!"
But the night sent me wise old owls.

In "Three Days," the acceptance comes to be glimpsed. After attempting desperately -- and unsuccessfully -- to touch the emotions of her lover, the poetess collapses, drained of energy ("And thus they found me, the guards of the wall."). For three days she remains rooted in the past, suffering the agony of loss. But on the fourth, acceptance comes to her; the sea regains its loveliness as she steps outside herself,

And in the gust of the salty wind
Was the smell of the sea, not the taste of my tears.

In "Tree" the poetess expresses her envy of the tree who wears "the splendor of spring" without any conceit, who regards joy itself as a duty, and whose joy is simple and untainted by fears and recriminations.

The sense of rebirth and acceptance expressed in "Three Days" is extended in "After the Storm"; when the light arrives, with all of the understanding it brings, the poetess kneels upon the shore (in prayer of thanksgiving?), the torn heavens repairing themselves as the storm departs, "until the day is done."

The acceptance blossoms to full beauty in "To Myself," in which Leah Goldberg reconciles past and present at last. Her present maturity she ascribes to the experiences of the past which molded her life:

The years have painted my face
 With the memory of loves
 And adorned my head with faint silver lines
 So that I have grown quite lovely.

She is able to speak of the paths she's travelled as having straightened her steps -- "weary and wonderful." She sees the irony: she now has the understanding she needed then; this, too, she accepts serenely:

If you could see me now
 You wouldn't recognize your yesterdays --
 I come to myself
 With the face you sought in vain
 When I came to you.

This irony -- that we are all oblivious to the most important things precisely when we are most in their midst, recognizing this fact only later -- is the subject of "Our Backs to the Cypresses." Because we are "within time, on the other side of ourselves," we are condemned to hurry about in each successive present moment, unaware of the immense beauty around us. The past is always our gateway to the beauty we missed; that is the nature of human life.

"Last Moment" is an ode to that beauty, the beauty that surrounds us

and to which we are oblivious, the beauty of every moment of life, including the moment of death. Acceptance is real when "the days are as deep as the eyes of a doe." Even the end of all things is a moment of beauty, just as the ripe fruit falls and dies at the moment of its greatest sweetness; and this, too, is beautiful:

When we go into the garden, and the dawn has advanced,
And our heart has silently surrendered
Before the serenity of the fruit heavy with ripening,
The fruit that knows the sweetness of its death.

"Songs at the End of the Road" is the concluding poem in this collection. It is the final reconciliation of past and present, the ultimate acceptance, the "secret of the withered leaf": the beauty of life, its difficulty, its length -- all of these serve to contradict the notion that there is nothing new under the sun. Indeed, with advancing age, it becomes clear that every day is the last, every day is new under the sun. The secret, then, is the total enjoyment of every moment of life; that is the key to the avoidance of regret, the key to the resolution of past and present. The secret of the withered leaf, the splendor of the ripe fruit in "Last Moment," is the freedom "to see, to feel, to breathe, / To know, to hope, to fail." The chain of repetition and ennui may be broken by an act of will:

Teach my lips blessing and song of praise
In your renewal of time, night and day,
So that my day today not be like days gone by,
So that my day not be to me routine.

This is the message Leah Goldberg brings to us; this is the secret locked within the withered leaf. We may find true understanding only when we can come to accept our past and our present, only when we can take pleasure in every moment of life we have, only when our day today is made uniquely beautiful, different from days gone by, and regarded as though it were our last under the sun.

NOTES

¹Spicehandler, 1960, p. 63.

²Ibid.

³Alter, p. 85.

⁴ירדנר, p. 124.

⁵Alter, p. 85.

⁶אורכמני, pp. 243-244.

⁷Spicehandler, 1960, p. 71.

⁸בן-אור, p. 250.

⁹Spicehandler, 1960, p. 68.

¹⁰ירדנר, p. 124.

¹¹Alter, p. 86.

¹²אורכמני p. 265.

¹³Cabell, p. 28.

¹⁴Spicehandler, 1960, pp. 72, 78.

¹⁵ירדנר p. 126.

¹⁶זכאי, p. 463.

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