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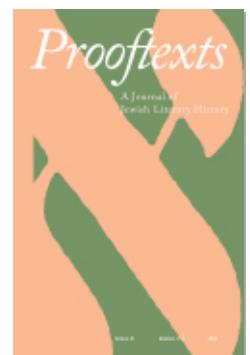
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Sister

SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON

Translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin

Na‘aman stood at his desk like a person standing on live coals, as if the setting sun had set a fire under his feet. The day does not linger, and the moment will not return, and who knows how long he will have to stay in this yellow room amid the heaps of paper that he utterly hates.

The memory of moments of twilight pleasures, an echo of sweet, scarcely felt heartbeats in a girl’s embrace—the fragrance of her fresh flesh as her breast rises and falls, the breast that makes one’s innermost desires swell to the point of ecstasy, the fragrance that leaves a person in a blank languor—suddenly blurred his mind and distracted him from office work. But he has to work, to copy the mound of letters and get them into the mail today. He is not a free man to do whatever he wants but really a sort of slave who makes his bed on a dung heap. Stupid of him to go soaring up to fantasy-land! And so his daydreams were broken. He gave up his delicious memories and dipped his pen in ink, like any of the other office clerks who fill Jaffa with their banal scribbling.

Na‘aman is a young man of about twenty. By day, he works for his daily bread; by night, he communes with poesy. That is when he writes the poems that he publishes in newspapers. But the poetry of words sometimes must defer to the poetry of life, under the aegis of a beloved soul, when the daughters of verse must bow before the daughters of the earth.

“To the devil! They say, ‘I have seen that every measure has an end,’¹ but there is no end to this futile writing!” he brooded bitterly, and he took up one of the letters

to copy. But everything does have a measure and an end, and even the letters came to an end. Na'aman put the letters into his pocket, closed the office doors, and went out.

In the vestibule, he was beset by the dull dimness that obscures a windowless room on a hot summer evening. Na'aman breathed heavily, snorted at the air as if to drive something away, to banish angrily the darkness that he had expected to encounter upon leaving. But when he left the lobby, the day was still bright. "So there's plenty of daylight left," said Na'aman to himself, "and I thought I would have no pleasure until evening." As he said this, he ran his left hand through his curls; with his right, he put the letters that he had written into the postbox, and he strode the earth like a victorious warrior.

It suddenly struck him that he did not yet know where to go. He spends time quite pleasantly with Adah and Zillah² both; neither one refuses him the sweet wine of their love. Who can tell him which he should go to now? "The torments of love!" Na'aman quoted, laughing.³ Which one did his heart yearn for when he was sad, when he was struggling under the burden of sorrow? Neither one.

Na'aman crossed over the Ocean Road and came to Neve Shalom, and from there went to the Hill of Sand in the direction of Neve Tsedeq. Inwardly he was thinking, "Lucky me! All these girls like me. They're all happy to see me, even though I'm no candidate for marriage." Na'aman was not yet thinking of getting married, but he was pleased that he was a good match. For the moment, he even made peace with his office job: no penniless writer he, half teacher and half writer. *He* works with businessmen, with tycoons! Just as his poetry makes him look good to the girls, so his office work gives him status with their parents. To get pleasure without tying himself down to any particular woman—could anything be better? But the day is dying, the night is coming on.⁴ Where to?

Which one did I fall for first? He was attracted to Adah before he even knew her. The moment he saw her brother, it was as if her face was there before him. He wanted to see her, and he was not disappointed in what he saw. He thought of Zillah, too—her full, wild, bare arms that enwrapped his neck like snakes, like the serpents of love that stand guard over a packed treasure chest. Na'aman contemplated her mysterious inner grace, and a pleasant smile played over his delicate face—a delicate girl's smile, a smile that any girl would find charming. He walked

on. Now he was passing the house where Adah lives. He passed Zillah's house, too. He passed them and went on. To the devil with it! When success snatches a person by the coat, it hurls him beyond itself. Seeing his sister's house, Na'aman said to himself, "Where am I going? Let me stop off and see how she's doing."

It has been two years since he left his parents' home. His heart longed like a child's for his family. At the same time, he was glad to be away from them, a free man, unburdened by family. He can do whatever he likes. "One day Hannah, Peninnah the next."⁵ Now, along comes his sister. His heart was uneasy, thinking that his sister would reproach him for what he was doing. But her broken heart had put the whole world out of her mind. She sits alone in her room, says little, does not irritate him with lectures on morality. She, the most beautiful of girls, with eyes that burned in the silence; she about whom her friend, the youthful poet, had sung the Song of the Black Roses; she whose gloomy hair was a crown for the torment in her placid face. Her fingers had secretly strayed about the gates of life, but before those gates had opened, she had collapsed in exhaustion. In his imagination, Na'aman saw her in the full force of her attractive power. Suddenly, Na'aman recalled that when he was younger, he had gone somewhere away from home. When he returned, the whole household was asleep, but his sister was standing on the threshold under a gate of honor that she had made out of pine branches. She leapt forward to greet him in a joyful spirit of love and youth, fell into his arms, and kissed him—but he had shoved her away. Na'aman did not know himself what he wanted.

He knocked on the door quietly. No sound, no response. Na'aman opened the door gently and entered the room. A gentle darkness emerged in his face and enveloped his eyes. Na'aman looks without seeing, sees without making out a thing. After two or three minutes, his eye broke through the darkness of the room, and he saw his sister. She was sitting by the window, sitting just as his mother, peace be upon her, would sit. His little, kindly mother, with a scarlet thread stretched around her left arm, lying on her sickbed and reading one novel after another (though in all her days, she never read a single novel all the way through). Na'aman started. It was as when an orphan dreams that his mother is there: the same trembling shoulders, the same bent head, the same distinctive sorrow that envelops anyone who approaches. And the silence of the room. Na'aman looked into the room. There was nothing to see in the room—just a dark, inert space. His body became cold and hot

in turns, both suffused by the dark, soft sorrow that squeezes the heart and makes the throat quiver so that the mouth can find no words to speak.

Na'aman desperately longed to crush the deep silence, to demolish all the sorrow in the room, and he said, "Did you really not hear that someone had come into the room?" She was startled by Na'aman and turned to face him but said nothing in reply.

The room grew dark, but Na'aman could sense the motion of her eyes, her dark eyes that were always turned to one side, that did not see a person even when they looked him in the face. Yet their gaze would embrace a person in his very essence and warmth. Na'aman stood in silence, his heart trembling within. He waited for her to speak, but her voice was not heard. A flower twitched in its pot. Na'aman looked around. She was sitting by the window looking like a mourner.⁶ Her hands rested in her lap, and her head was bent downward. Na'aman sees but does not believe: the room is summer-hot, but she is wearing a coat. Suddenly, he recognizes the coat: the very coat that she had worn when she went to skate on the ice with her first love. The coat seemed to him like the curtain for a Holy Ark that a man has had made out of his dead wife's wedding dress. Na'aman forgot what he had asked and controlled himself so as not to weep. "When a person is abandoned and alone, who would come to see him?" his sister's lips whispered. Na'aman tottered at her words, his face like the cracked skin of an apple. His eyes swallowed in tears, and he wept.

Na'aman was aware of everything he was doing, and he looked about in hope of finding something to talk about—so that words would efface the impression. At the far end of the table, he saw a book. Na'aman picked up the book and asked, "What is the name of the book?" His sister told him the name of the book. One of the novels that his mother used to read.

The silence returned as before, the same silence as when a person recoils from desires because he knows what miserable suffering will follow them; he does not fear the misery because it is better than the longing.

"Sister," Na'aman asked in a whisper. "Have you read the book all the way to the end?"

"No," she said.

"Do read it to the end," he said. "It might give you some pleasure."

She shuddered, turned her eyes away, and said with her eyes what she did not say with her mouth: no one on earth comes to a good end. Na‘aman heard what he heard and closed his eyes from the weight of what he heard.

Suddenly, his eyes gave birth to tears, and a love such as he had never before known shone on those tears. Na‘aman took his sister’s hand and lifted it up toward his mouth, and then suddenly bent down and put his mouth on it and kissed it with a lingering kiss.

NOTES

- 1 Psalm 119:96
- 2 These are the names of two co-wives in Genesis 4:19.
- 3 This rabbinic expression means something completely different in its source (b. Berakhot 5a), where it refers to the idea that God sometimes brings suffering to those he loves. Na‘aman laughs at his own wit in applying such solemn language to such a trivial dilemma.
- 4 This is an allusion to the anonymous liturgical poem “Open to us the gate,” part of the liturgy for the final service of Yom Kippur.
- 5 This is a line from the poem “Minhag ḥadash” by Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik, slightly altered. It also evokes the two wives of Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1:2.
- 6 Song of Songs 1:7