



The Visitation of Uri Tsevi

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In preparation for a blackout, Alyssa stood up and walked over to the stove, placing her hand on each piece of care gear—candles, matches, flares.

Then she returned to the poem in the dwindling light. Through the moist air, it had beckoned her back to the table. Each line was a puzzle, right to left. Each character like a family member with hidden depths, who might crack a joke or hurl an insult at any moment.

This was the angriest poem she had ever read. It rose out from the book's opened spine like a skeletal finger pointing directly at her face. Its church bells screamed and the blood mingled with the black mold edging the pages. Something noxious closing in on something beautiful. Echoes of the world.

She had to limp through each line, looking up every other word in the tattered bilingual dictionary. What does it mean for a translation to do justice to a work? Justice for whom? Her interpretations hit her like oil popping off a pan, pricking and burning.

In the Kingdom of the Cross by Uri Tsevi.

Twice a month she sorted out supplies. She was ready before dawn to queue for her allotment and haul it back to the apartment early so she might also get to the library. As she came up the hill, it rose like an abandoned space ship before her. She masked, scanned, and entered.

The librarian had taught her how to use the card catalogue. A miracle it wasn't disposed of in the before. She had a map so she could navigate the dimly-lit stacks.

Can't travel. Can't meet with friends or even with enemies. And most of them are gone anyway. What might the dead have to say? She'd check the stacks.

Uri Tsevi Grinberg. Born 1896, died 1981. Conscripted to fight in the Balkans in World War I, he escaped home to the Ukraine and saw his entire community attacked. Verses that had bubbled caught fire and exploded. He moved to Palestine and embraced ever more radical politics. Returned to Europe and then barely escaped back to Palestine with his life, the rest of his family murdered along with most of the speakers of his mother tongue. Poet, prophet, nationalist. His fire died and then flared in the first poems to rekindle an ancient language to mourn the modern slaughter.

One scholar in a dusty back issue called him a fascist. After everything, how could she talk to a fascist? What if a fascist is also a refugee? Where do you go when the plague is hate? How do you avoid catching it and how did he find the strength to hold the pen in his hand?

She continued her path through the poem, stumbling over the cracks in the translation she was using as a trot. The translation wasn't so bad. Why did she want to read this in Yiddish?

She found a few Hebrew words too, ancient stones scattered in the grain. *Emet*. Truth. *Ahava*. Love. Saying them aloud cracked open the door of a stuffy but sunny afterschool classroom decades before. She had been a student. She had been a teacher.

With this poem, each word was like trying to crack a walnut in your fist, just as her mother had said her father, Alyssa's Yiddish-speaking grandfather, could do with his right hand and even his left.

Her hands felt weak. Why was she scrounging for scraps? Just because something called, did she have to answer?

After an hour's hobbling over the words, she again failed to achieve the escape velocity needed for time travel. She could use some tea, but, of course, there was none. The stove didn't even work. Alyssa checked the electric meter. Enough for tonight. She left her notebook open and laid her pen beneath the last translated line. She twisted off the light, walked over to the bed, and lay on her back, her hair pulled out underneath her as she had done as a girl when she was tucked in. She stared into the dark. The double bed was a singular haven, the soft cool sheets salvaged from her mother's house, the knotted twists of the coverlet a braille for memory, a map for dreams.

She could sense the window's open square through the sound of the cricket orchestra and the almost imperceptibly different feel of air that wasn't imprisoned inside her room.

Where do you go when you have nowhere to go?

In the darkness, she woke to a feeling of heat beside her, as if she had walked by a stove where someone had wastefully left the burner on. Her shoulders tensed, she sucked in her breath. There was a mound beside her. She stayed frozen, willing her eyes to make out more when the mound shifted. A glimmer of eyes, that light streaming through the crack in the door. A voice like seeping smoke: *Du hast gerufn. Ikh bin gekumen. You called. I came.*

You called me, she whispered back. A rustle. No more mound.

She could only remain rigid, her body shrinking into itself until the sky began to lighten. She turned her head. The bed was empty. She stood, pulled her hair back into a knot and went back to the table.

Across the blank page of her notebook was an inky scrawl.

בלייבן לעבן

She mouthed out the words letter-by-letter: *blaybn lebn*.

She cracked the dictionary and scanned the entries that, despite all her efforts, were still unfamiliar. This language was a place she visited, not where she lived. But she could use a visit and she wanted to know: what did the dead have to say?

Blaybn: Stay. Remain. Abide.

Lebn: Life. Live.

Remain alive. Abide in life. Survive.

