

Smoke and Mirrors: An Interview with Dana Heifetz

What was the inspiration for your story “Drowned”?

Inspiration is an elusive thing; as Leonard Cohen once said, *If I knew where inspiration came from, I’d go there more often*. Sometimes, in hindsight, you can say about it something partial, and somewhat misleading by its very nature. Still, I’ll risk



saying that what drove the writing of “Drowned” was the thought, or the feeling, of a loss that is seemingly healed, but that apparent healing actually exposes and highlights what has gone and will never return. I thought of an extreme case of that feeling—the death of a loved one and his return, which is a great joy but also a torture that merely emphasizes the absence of the dead, even colors his life with the shadow of death. To that was added a visual image from the literary worlds of [Gabriel García] Márquez—a drowned man floating in a river, maybe in Macondo; it seemed that something in the colorfulness of what is usually called “magical realism” fit the story. In hindsight, there’s also something about this story that’s in the spirit of David Grossman’s book, *Falling Out of Time*, which is possibly a sadder, harsher version of the life of the Marquezian dead (there is also a net-maker in the latter novel). But I think I didn’t know any of this when I wrote the story.

What is one book that changed your life or the way you write in some way?

There isn’t one book that changed my life or my writing—there are many such, and different books stand out on different days. A significant one is José Saramago’s first book that was translated into Hebrew—*Baltasar and Blimunda* (in Miriam Tivon’s wonderful translation). For a while I became addicted to Saramago’s books, and I learned to identify and look for his particular literary thumbprint, but my meeting in 1990 with *Baltasar and Blimunda*, and even more importantly with Saramago’s style, was earth-shattering. The long, musically curving sentences made up of such simple, day-to-day words and so full of humanistic love, captured my heart and enchanted me. In a certain way, they reminded me of Yaakov Shabtai’s beloved books (especially *Past Continuous*) that are also full of endless, beautifully written sentences. But where Shabtai builds breathtaking, heartbreaking cathedrals, Saramago has the simplicity of grass, and usually at the end of or beside the misery lies comfort as well. That’s why the last lines of *Baltasar and Blimunda* have remained with me; they describe Baltasar’s death at the stake, and to my mind they manifest all this clearly:

Blimunda said, Come. The will of Baltasar Sete-Sois broke free from his body, but did not ascend to the stars, for it belonged to the Earth and to Blimunda. (Note: This is from the translation of Giovanni Pontiero, not Masad's.)

Your short story collection, *Dolphins in Kiryat Gat*, is about people who yearn for something or someone, and I see the main character of “Drowned” yearning as well. What about the idea and feeling of yearning speaks to you as an author?

Kmihah (yearning or longing) is one of my favorite words in Hebrew. It's defined as “a strong desire, craving, longing.” It's one of the best translations in my opinion of the Platonic eros that propels the lover towards the object of his desire, because yearning is a powerful motivation for action, sometimes for choosing a way of life. And there's no real way to satisfy it—as [Nathan] Alterman wrote in his poem “Urban Evening,” “He who reaches the end / will want to weep from longing.” And so indeed it is the heart of all the stories in my collection, *Dolphins in Kiryat Gat*, and also in “Drowned”—even if my heroes don't always know what they're yearning for, or even if they're yearning for something. Because maybe the most terrible thing, certainly for a fiction character, is to be yearning-less.