

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Yehuda Amichai**

**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## **A Dog After Love**

After you left me  
I let a dog smell at  
My chest and my belly. It will fill its nose  
And set out to find you.

I hope it will tear the  
Testicles of your lover and bite off his penis  
Or at least  
Will bring me your stockings between his teeth.

Yehuda Amichai

## **A Jewish Cemetery In Germany**

On a little hill amid fertile fields lies a small cemetery,  
a Jewish cemetery behind a rusty gate, hidden by shrubs,  
abandoned and forgotten. Neither the sound of prayer  
nor the voice of lamentation is heard there  
for the dead praise not the Lord.

Only the voices of our children ring out, seeking graves  
and cheering  
each time they find one--like mushrooms in the forest, like  
wild strawberries.

Here's another grave! There's the name of my mother's  
mothers, and a name from the last century. And here's a name,  
and there! And as I was about to brush the moss from the name--  
Look! an open hand engraved on the tombstone, the grave  
of a kohen,  
his fingers splayed in a spasm of holiness and blessing,  
and here's a grave concealed by a thicket of berries  
that has to be brushed aside like a shock of hair  
from the face of a beautiful beloved woman.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

## **A Man In His Life**

A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.  
He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes  
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,  
to make love in war and war in love.  
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,  
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest  
what history  
takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.  
When he loses he seeks, when he finds  
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves  
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul  
is very professional.  
Only his body remains forever  
an amateur. It tries and it misses,  
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,  
drunk and blind in its pleasures  
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,  
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,  
the leaves growing dry on the ground,  
the bare branches pointing to the place  
where there's time for everything.

Yehuda Amichai

## **A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention**

They amputated  
Your thighs off my hips.  
As far as I'm concerned  
They are all surgeons. All of them.

They dismantled us  
Each from the other.  
As far as I'm concerned  
They are all engineers. All of them.

A pity. We were such a good  
And loving invention.  
An aeroplane made from a man and wife.  
Wings and everything.  
We hovered a little above the earth.

We even flew a little.

Yehuda Amichai

## **A Precise Woman**

A precise woman with a short haircut brings order  
to my thoughts and my dresser drawers,  
moves feelings around like furniture  
into a new arrangement.

A woman whose body is cinched at the waist and firmly divided  
into upper and lower,  
with weather-forecast eyes  
of shatterproof glass.

Even her cries of passion follow a certain order,  
one after the other:  
tame dove, then wild dove,  
then peacock, wounded peacock, peacock, peacock,  
the wild dove, tame dove, dove dove  
thrush, thrush, thrush.

A precise woman: on the bedroom carpet  
her shoes always point away from the bed.  
(My own shoes point toward it.)

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

## **An Arab Shepherd Is Searching For His Goat On Mount Zion**

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion  
And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy.  
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father  
Both in their temporary failure.  
Our two voices met above  
The Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.  
Neither of us wants the boy or the goat  
To get caught in the wheels  
Of the "Had Gadya" machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes,  
And our voices came back inside us  
Laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or for a child has always been  
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.

Yehuda Amichai

## **And We Shall Not Get Excited**

And we shall not get excited. Because a translator  
May not get excited. Calmly, we shall pass on  
Words from man to son, from one tongue  
To others' lips, un-  
Knowingly, like a father who passes on  
The features of his dead father's face  
To his son, and he himself is like neither of them. Merely a mediator.

We shall remember the things we held in our hands  
That slipped out.  
What I have in my possession and what I do not have in my possession.

We must not get excited.  
Calls and their callers drowned. Or, my beloved  
Gave me a few words before she left,  
To bring up for her.

And no more shall we tell what we were told  
To other tellers. Silence as admission. We must not  
Get excited.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **Before**

Before the gate has been closed,  
before the last question is posed,  
before I am transposed.  
Before the weeds fill the gardens,  
before there are no pardons,  
before the concrete hardens.  
Before all the flute-holes are covered,  
before things are locked in then cupboard,  
before the rules are discovered.  
Before the conclusion is planned,  
before God closes his hand,  
before we have nowhere to stand.

Translated by Chana Bloch And Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

## **Do Not Accept**

Do not accept these rains that come too late.  
Better to linger. Make your pain  
An image of the desert. Say it's said  
And do not look to the west. Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too  
To live alone in the long summer,  
Eat your drying bread, refrain  
From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,  
My return late at night, what has been written  
In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference

Now. See your events as my events.  
Everything will be as before: Abraham will again  
Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **Ein Yahav**

A night drive to Ein Yahav in the Arava Desert,  
a drive in the rain. Yes, in the rain.  
There I met people who grow date palms,  
there I saw tamarisk trees and risk trees,  
there I saw hope barbed as barbed wire.  
And I said to myself: That's true, hope needs to be  
like barbed wire to keep out despair,  
hope must be a mine field.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

## **Forgetting Someone**

Forgetting someone is like forgetting to turn off the light  
in the backyard so it stays lit all the next day

But then it is the light that makes you remember.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Submitted by Angelica Rodriguez

Yehuda Amichai

## God Full Of Mercy

God-Full-of-Mercy, the prayer for the dead.  
If God was not full of mercy,  
Mercy would have been in the world,  
Not just in Him.  
I, who plucked flowers in the hills  
And looked down into all the valleys,  
I, who brought corpses down from the hills,  
Can tell you that the world is empty of mercy.  
I, who was King of Salt at the seashore,  
Who stood without a decision at my window,  
Who counted the steps of angels,  
Whose heart lifted weights of anguish  
In the horrible contests.

I, who use only a small part  
Of the words in the dictionary.

I, who must decipher riddles  
I don't want to decipher,  
Know that if not for the God-full-of-mercy  
There would be mercy in the world,  
Not just in Him.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **God Has Pity On Kindergarten Children**

God has pity on kindergarten children,  
He pities school children -- less.  
But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,  
And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours  
In the scorching sand  
To reach the dressing station,  
Streaming with blood.

But perhaps  
He will have pity on those who love truly  
And take care of them  
And shade them  
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them  
Our last pennies of kindness  
Inherited from mother,

So that their own happiness will protect us  
Now and on other days.

Yehuda Amichai

## Half The People In The World

Half the people in the world love the other half,  
half the people hate the other half.  
Must I because of this half and that half go wandering  
and changing ceaselessly like rain in its cycle,  
must I sleep among rocks, and grow rugged like  
the trunks of olive trees,  
and hear the moon barking at me,  
and camouflage my love with worries,  
and sprout like frightened grass between the railroad  
tracks,  
and live underground like a mole,  
and remain with roots and not with branches, and not  
feel my cheek against the cheek of angels, and  
love in the first cave, and marry my wife  
beneath a canopy of beams that support the earth,  
and act out my death, always till the last breath and  
the last words and without ever understanding,  
and put flagpoles on top of my house and a bob shelter  
underneath. And go out on rads made only for  
returning and go through all the appalling  
stations—cat,stick,fire,water,butcher,  
between the kid and the angel of death?  
Half the people love,  
half the people hate.  
And where is my place between such well-matched halves,  
and through what crack will I see the white housing  
projects of my dreams and the bare foot runners  
on the sands or, at least, the waving of a girl's  
kerchief, beside the mound?

Translated by Chana Bloch And Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

## **I Have Become Very Hairy**

I have become very hairy all over my body.  
I'm afraid they'll start hunting me because of my fur.

My multicolored shirt has no meaning of love --  
it looks like an air photo of a railway station.

At night my body is open and awake under the blanket,  
like eyes under the blindfold of someone to be shot.

Restless I shall wander about;  
hungry for life I'll die.

Yet I wanted to be calm, like a mound with all its cities destroyed,  
and tranquil, like a full cemetery.

Yehuda Amichai

## **I Know A Man**

I know a man  
who photographed the view he saw  
from the window of the room where he made love  
and not the face of the woman he loved there.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

## **I Want To Die In My Own Bed**

All night the army came up from Gilgal  
To get to the killing field, and that's all.  
In the ground, warf and woof, lay the dead.  
I want to die in My own bed.  
Like slits in a tank, their eyes were uncanny,  
I'm always the few and they are the many.  
I must answer. They can interrogate My head.  
But I want to die in My own bed.

The sun stood still in Gibeon. Forever so, it's willing  
to illuminate those waging battle and killing.  
I may not see My wife when her blood is shed,  
But I want to die in My own bed.

Samson, his strength in his long black hair,  
My hair they sheared when they made me a hero  
Perforce, and taught me to charge ahead.  
I want to die in My own bed.

I saw you could live and furnish with grace  
Even a lion's den, if you've no other place.  
I don't even mind to die alone, to be dead,  
But I want to die in My own bed.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem**

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,  
Then let my right be forgotten.  
Let my right be forgotten, and my left remember.  
Let my left remember, and your right close  
And your mouth open near the gate.

I shall remember Jerusalem  
And forget the forest -- my love will remember,  
Will open her hair, will close my window,  
will forget my right,  
Will forget my left.

If the west wind does not come  
I'll never forgive the walls,  
Or the sea, or myself.  
Should my right forget  
My left shall forgive,  
I shall forget all water,  
I shall forget my mother.

If I forget thee, Jerusalem,  
Let my blood be forgotten.  
I shall touch your forehead,  
Forget my own,  
My voice change  
For the second and last time  
To the most terrible of voices --  
Or silence.

Yehuda Amichai

## Jerusalem

On a roof in the Old City  
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight:  
The white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,  
The towel of a man who is my enemy,  
To wipe off the sweat of his brow.

In the sky of the Old City  
A kite.  
At the other end of the string,  
A child  
I can't see  
Because of the wall.

We have put up many flags,  
They have put up many flags.  
To make us think that they're happy.  
To make them think that we're happy.

Translated by Irena Gordon

Yehuda Amichai

## **Love Of Jerusalem**

There is a street where they sell only red meat  
And there is a street where they sell only clothes and perfumes. And there  
is a day when I see only cripples and the blind  
And those covered with leprosy, and spastics and those with twisted lips.

Here they build a house and there they destroy  
Here they dig into the earth  
And there they dig into the sky,  
Here they sit and there they walk  
Here they hate and there they love.

But he who loves Jerusalem  
By the tourist book or the prayer book  
is like one who loves a women  
By a manual of sex positions.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## Memorial Day For The War Dead

Memorial day for the war dead. Add now  
the grief of all your losses to their grief,  
even of a woman that has left you. Mix  
sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history,  
which stacks holiday and sacrifice and mourning  
on one day for easy, convenient memory.

Oh, sweet world soaked, like bread,  
in sweet milk for the terrible toothless God.  
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."  
No use to weep inside and to scream outside.  
Behind all this perhaps some great happiness is hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt is dressed up  
as a little girl with flowers.  
The streets are cordoned off with ropes,  
for the marching together of the living and the dead.  
Children with a grief not their own march slowly,  
like stepping over broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay like that for many days.  
A dead soldier swims above little heads  
with the swimming movements of the dead,  
with the ancient error the dead have  
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.  
A shopwindow is decorated with  
dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.  
And everything in three languages:  
Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

A great and royal animal is dying  
all through the night under the jasmine  
tree with a constant stare at the world.

A man whose son died in the war walks in the street  
like a woman with a dead embryo in her womb.  
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."

Yehuda Amichai

## **My Child Wafts Peace**

My child wafts peace.  
When I lean over him,  
It is not just the smell of soap.

All the people were children wafting peace.  
(And in the whole land, not even one  
Millstone remained that still turned).

Oh, the land torn like clothes  
That can't be mended.  
Hard, lonely fathers even in the cave of the Makhpela\*  
Childless silence.

My child wafts peace.  
His mother's womb promised him  
What God cannot  
Promise us.

\* The traditional burial place in Hebron of Abraham  
and the other Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel.

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **My Father**

The memory of my father is wrapped up in  
white paper, like sandwiches taken for a day at work.

Just as a magician takes towers and rabbits  
out of his hat, he drew love from his small body,

and the rivers of his hands  
overflowed with good deeds.

Yehuda Amichai

## **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.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai

### **Of Three Or Four In The Room**

Out of three or four in the room  
One is always standing at the window.  
Forced to see the injustice amongst the thorns,  
The fires on the hills.

And people who left whole  
Are brought home in the evening, like small change.

Out of three or four in the room  
One is always standing at the window.  
Hair dark above his thoughts.  
Behind him, the words, wandering, without luggage,  
Hearts without provision, prophecies without water  
Big stones put there  
Standing, closed like letters  
With no addresses; and no one to receive them.

Yehuda Amichai

## **On Rabbi Kook's Street**

On Rabbi Kook's Street  
I walk without this good man--  
A streiml he wore for prayer  
A silk top hat he wore to govern,  
fly in the wind of the dead  
above me, float on the water  
of my dreams.

I come to the Street of Prophets--there are none.  
And the Street of Ethiopians--there are a few. I'm  
looking for a place for you to live after me  
padding your solitary nest for you,  
setting up the place of my pain with the sweat of my brow  
examining the road on which you'll return  
and the window of your room, the gaping wound,  
between closed and opened, between light and dark.

There are smells of baking from inside the shanty,  
there's a shop where they distribute Bibles free,  
free, free. More than one prophet  
has left this tangle of lanes  
while everything topples above him and he becomes someone else.

On Rabbi Kook's street I walk  
--your bed on my back like a cross--  
though it's hard to believe  
a woman's bed will become the symbol of a new religion.

Yehuda Amichai

## Temporary Poem Of My Time

Hebrew writing and Arabic writing go from east to west,  
Latin writing, from west to east.  
Languages are like cats:  
You must not stroke their hair the wrong way.  
The clouds come from the sea, the hot wind from the desert,  
The trees bend in the wind,  
And stones fly from all four winds,  
Into all four winds. They throw stones,  
Throw this land, one at the other,  
But the land always falls back to the land.  
They throw the land, want to get rid of it.  
Its stones, its soil, but you can't get rid of it.  
They throw stones, throw stones at me  
In 1936, 1938, 1948, 1988,  
Semites throw at Semites and anti-Semites at anti-Semites,  
Evil men throw and just men throw,  
Sinners throw and tempters throw,  
Geologists throw and theologians throw,  
Archaeologists throw and archhooligans throw,  
Kidneys throw stones and gall bladders throw,  
Head stones and forehead stones and the heart of a stone,  
Stones shaped like a screaming mouth  
And stones fitting your eyes  
Like a pair of glasses,  
The past throws stones at the future,  
And all of them fall on the present.  
Weeping stones and laughing gravel stones,  
Even God in the Bible threw stones,  
Even the Urim and Tumim were thrown  
And got stuck in the breastplate of justice,  
And Herod threw stones and what came out was a Temple.

Oh, the poem of stone sadness  
Oh, the poem thrown on the stones  
Oh, the poem of thrown stones.  
Is there in this land  
A stone that was never thrown  
And never built and never overturned  
And never uncovered and never discovered  
And never screamed from a wall and never discarded by the builders  
And never closed on top of a grave and never lay under lovers  
And never turned into a cornerstone?

Please do not throw any more stones,  
You are moving the land,  
The holy, whole, open land,  
You are moving it to the sea  
And the sea doesn't want it  
The sea says, not in me.

Please throw little stones,  
Throw snail fossils, throw gravel,

Justice or injustice from the quarries of Migdal Tsedek,  
Throw soft stones, throw sweet clods,  
Throw limestone, throw clay,  
Throw sand of the seashore,  
Throw dust of the desert, throw rust,  
Throw soil, throw wind,  
Throw air, throw nothing  
Until your hands are weary  
And the war is weary  
And even peace will be weary and will be.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **The First Rain**

The first rain reminds me  
Of the rising summer dust.  
The rain doesn't remember the rain of yesteryear.  
A year is a trained beast with no memories.  
Soon you will again wear your harnesses,  
Beautiful and embroidered, to hold  
Sheer stockings: you  
Mare and harnesser in one body.

The white panic of soft flesh  
In the panic of a sudden vision  
Of ancient saints.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## **Tourists**

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
And they laugh behind heavy curtains  
In their hotels.  
They have their pictures taken  
Together with our famous dead  
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb  
And on Ammunition Hill.  
They weep over our sweet boys  
And lust after our tough girls  
And hang up their underwear  
To dry quickly  
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Yehuda Amichai

## Try To Remember Some Details

Try to remember some details. Remember the clothing  
of the one you love  
so that on the day of loss you'll be able to say: last seen  
wearing such-and-such, brown jacket, white hat.  
Try to remember some details. For they have no face  
and their soul is hidden and their crying  
is the same as their laughter,  
and their silence and their shouting rise to one height  
and their body temperature is between 98 and 104 degrees  
and they have no life outside this narrow space  
and they have no graven image, no likeness, no memory  
and they have paper cups on the day of their rejoicing  
and paper cups that are used once only.

Try to remember some details. For the world  
is filled with people who were torn from their sleep  
with no one to mend the tear,  
and unlike wild beasts they live  
each in his lonely hiding place and they die  
together on battlefields  
and in hospitals.  
And the earth will swallow all of them,  
good and evil together, like the followers of Korah,  
all of them in their rebellion against death,  
their mouths open till the last moment,  
praising and cursing in a single  
howl. Try, try  
to remember some details.

Yehuda Amichai

## What Kind Of A Person

"What kind of a person are you," I heard them say to me.  
I'm a person with a complex plumbing of the soul,  
Sophisticated instruments of feeling and a system  
Of controlled memory at the end of the twentieth century,  
But with an old body from ancient times  
And with a God even older than my body.  
I'm a person for the surface of the earth.  
Low places, caves and wells  
Frighten me. Mountain peaks  
And tall buildings scare me.  
I'm not like an inserted fork,  
Not a cutting knife, not a stuck spoon.

I'm not flat and sly  
Like a spatula creeping up from below.  
At most I am a heavy and clumsy pestle  
Mashing good and bad together  
For a little taste  
And a little fragrance.

Arrows do not direct me. I conduct  
My business carefully and quietly  
Like a long will that began to be written  
The moment I was born.

s Now I stand at the side of the street  
Weary, leaning on a parking meter.  
I can stand here for nothing, free.

I'm not a car, I'm a person,  
A man-god, a god-man  
Whose days are numbered. Hallelujah.

Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Yehuda Amichai

## Wildpeace

Not the peace of a cease-fire  
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,  
but rather  
as in the heart when the excitement is over  
and you can talk only about a great weariness.  
I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult.  
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows  
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.  
A peace  
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,  
without words, without  
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be  
light, floating, like lazy white foam.  
A little rest for the wounds - who speaks of healing?  
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation  
to the next, as in a relay race:  
the baton never falls.)

Let it come  
like wildflowers,  
suddenly, because the field  
must have it: wildpeace.

Translated by Chana Bloch

Yehuda Amichai

## **Yad Mordechai**

Yad Mordechai. Those who fell here  
still look out the windows like sick children  
who are not allowed outside to play.  
And on the hillside, the battle is reenacted  
for the benefit of hikers and tourists. Soldiers of thin sheet iron  
rise and fall and rise again. Sheet iron dead and a sheet iron life  
and the voices all&mdash;sheet iron. And the resurrection of the dead,  
sheet iron that clangs and clangs.

And I said to myself: Everyone is attached to his own lament  
as to a parachute. Slowly he descends and slowly hovers  
until he touches the hard place.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Yehuda Amichai

## **You Mustn't Show Weakness**

You mustn't show weakness  
and you've got to have a tan.  
But sometimes I feel like the thin veils  
of Jewish women who faint  
at weddings and on Yom Kippur.

You mustn't show weakness  
and you've got to make a list  
of all the things you can load  
in a baby carriage without a baby.

This is the way things stand now:  
if I pull out the stopper  
after pampering myself in the bath,  
I'm afraid that all of Jerusalem, and with it the whole world,  
will drain out into the huge darkness.

In the daytime I lay traps for my memories  
and at night I work in the Balaam Mills,  
turning curse into blessing and blessing into curse.

And don't ever show weakness.  
Sometimes I come crashing down inside myself  
without anyone noticing. I'm like an ambulance  
on two legs, hauling the patient  
inside me to Last Aid  
with the wailing of cry of a siren,  
and people think it's ordinary speech.

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

Yehuda Amichai