Remembering the Pandemic: Learning from Yehuda Amichai

Dr. Barbara Mann

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Verses for Memorial Day, a psalm of remembering for the war dead. The generation of memory-veterans is dying out. Half at a ripe old age, half at a rotten old age. And who will remember the rememberers?

How does a monument come into being? A car goes up in a red blaze at Sha’ar Ha Gay. A car burnt black. The skeleton of a car. And next to it, the skeleton of some other car, charred in a traffic accident on some other road. The skeletons are painted with anti-rust paint, red like the red of that flame. Near one skeleton, a wreath of flowers, now dry. From dry flowers you make a memorial wreath, and from dry bones, a vision of resurrected bones. And somewhere else, far away, hidden among the bushes, a cracked marble plaque with names on it. An oleander branch, like a shock of hair on a beloved face, hides most of them. But once a year the branch is cut back and the names are read, while up above, a flag at half-mast waves as cheerfully as a Rag at the top of the flagpole, light and easy, happy with its colors and breezes.

And who will remember the rememberers?
What is the correct way to stand at a memorial ceremony? Erect or stooped, pulled taut as a tent or in the slumped posture of mourning, head bowed like the guilty or held high in a collective protest against death, eyes gaping frozen like the eyes of the dead or shut tight, to see stars inside? And what is the best time for remembering? At noon when shadows are hidden beneath our feet, or at twilight when shadows lengthen like longings that have no beginning, no end, like God?

And what should our lament be? David's lament over Saul and Jonathan: "Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions," that is what our lament should be. Had they really been swifter than eagles they would have soared high above the war.
and would not have been hurt. From down here, we would have seen them
and said: "There go the eagles! There is my son, my husband, my brother."
And had they really been stronger than lions they would have stayed like lions, not died like human beings.
They would have eaten out of our hands, we would have stroked their golden manes, we would have tamed them in our homes, with love:
My son, my husband, my brother, my husband, my son.
No one has ever heard of the fruit of the jasmine, no poet has sung its praises, they all sing drunken odes to the jasmine flower, its heady scent, its color, white against dark leaves, the vigor of its blossoming and the force of its short life a butterfly's life or the life of a star. No one has ever heard of the fruit of the jasmine. And who will remember the rememberers?

No one praises the blossoms of the vine, everyone praises the fruit of the vine, and blesses the wine. Have I mentioned that my father, in the wisdom of his hands, knew how to prepare parcels for transport, packed tight and sealed tight so they wouldn't come undone along the way like me? So much death in everything, so much packing and transport, so much open that will never close again, so much closed that will never open.
And who will remember? And what do you use to preserve memory?
How do you preserve anything in this world?
You preserve it with salt and with sugar, high heat and deep-freeze,
vacuum sealers, dehydrators, mummifiers.
But the best way to preserve memory is to conserve it inside forgetting
so not even a single act of remembering will seep in and disturb memory's eternal rest.

Seeking roots in the Warsaw cemetery.
Here it is the roots that are seeking. They burst from the ground, overturn gravestones, and clasp the broken fragments in search of names and dates, in search of what was and will never be again.
The roots are seeking their trees that were burned to the ground.

Forgotten, remembered, forgotten.
Open, closed, open.