

*Less Like  
a Dove*



Agi Mishol

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a Dove*

*translated  
from Hebrew by  
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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2016 by  
Shearsman Books  
50 Westons Hill Drive  
Emersons Green  
BRISTOL  
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office  
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB  
(this address not for correspondence)

[www.shearsman.com](http://www.shearsman.com)

ISBN 978-1-84861-476-5

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## Introduction

I first met Agi Mishol through a slender book of poems entitled *Wax Flowers* that considers Mishol's relationship with her dead parents. My own mother was dying at the time and I would walk around with the book in my bag like an amulet. Something in the immediacy and down-to-earth quality of Mishol's poetry spoke directly to my heart, the way she infuses her poems with both humour and jarring realism; the way her poems overflow with the raw countryside around her.

We met several months later at her home in a small village in central Israel. I left after several hours of warm conversation, my arms full of the many books Mishol, a leading poet in Israel today, has published both in Hebrew and other languages; my heart full of a desire to dig deeper into her words. Mishol's poetry walks a fine line between biting reality and escapism: her words percolate with the pervading political climate.

The Hebrew language is multi-layered. Many of the words have their own biblical, cultural and social connotations waiting to be discovered through translation, waiting to be laid open for others to understand and enjoy. The writer Cynthia Ozick said that "translation can serve as a lens into the underground life of another culture," and my wish while translating was to create this lens for readers of English.

The poetry of Mishol is evocative, accessible, grounded in the present yet steeped both in Mishol's personal past and in the public past of Israel. The lyricism of her poems nestles within a language that is colloquial and familiar. Despite the simple diction, the challenge for me was to translate the words without removing them from their larger cultural context and also to preserve the gentle lyrical quality that Mishol's poetry possesses in the original Hebrew. Most of all, to open her world to others.

JOANNA CHEN



## The Sermon at Latrun

You piss on my love as if  
it were a bonfire, extinguishing it  
ember by ember with the arrogance  
of the perfect crime, and afterwards  
you cry at night in front of an empty robe,  
a shirt on a barbed wire hanger –  
What were you thinking?

So your carriages turned into pumpkins,  
your horses to mice,  
and rags began peeping through.  
Both of you, covered in fig leaves,  
biting into the apple of knowledge,  
knowing how to enter and exit the norm –  
Were you not afraid?  
Did you never hear that God  
has no God?

You will be wanderers in the cash flow  
of life, dogs without collars.  
You will never relax into form,  
never again hear the heart go boom –

A pig's head resting on a tray,  
a green apple stuffed in its mouth –  
With this you remain –  
So sayeth the Lord.

# Betrayal

All the sorrel stalks I sucked on  
revealed nothing.

Words piled up behind my back  
until they turned into a green hill.  
Phloem coursed through the trunks;  
lupine seeds plotted blue in the dark soil.

Even if there is no singular form for grass  
and only the plural makes it green,  
I could not have known.

Birnam Wood began to move,  
afterwards thought darkened  
with everything that lay behind the trees.

## Night Lamp

It takes time for the body  
to grasp what the mind has decided  
so the body strokes itself  
with an outline of consolation:  
here the shoulder, here  
the face, here the inner thighs –

This is the bottomless sigh  
devoid of a consonant  
to lean against.

## No Casualties Reported

No one counted him,  
the little donkey  
in the photograph  
below the headlines.

A white donkey,  
his life shackled to scrap iron  
and watermelons,  
who surely stood still  
as they strapped the saddle  
of dynamite to his body,  
until they patted his behind  
spurring him on with a yallah itlah  
to the enemy lines –

Only then  
mid-road  
did he notice the pale grass  
sprouting between the rocks  
and he strayed  
from the plot  
in order to munch,  
belonging only to himself  
in the ticking silence.

It was not written who fired:  
those who feared he would turn back  
or those who refused the approaching gift

But when he rose to heaven  
in a blaze  
the donkey was promoted  
to the rank of explosive messiah  
and seventy-two tender virgin donkeys  
licked his wounds.

## Showing You

Undressing for you down to my handwriting  
down to the gutturals  
the hard phonetics  
the vowels

until you see my O  
my suffixes

the trees  
pulped into  
paper, flutes and the desk  
with the chair that swivels  
empty

when I come to you  
so you will read my ink.



## My Father Speaks Again

Let's see, you probably remember  
how you followed my gurney  
with a blue plastic cup containing my teeth,  
my strength.

Your cries, searching for words,  
collapsed into Hungarian stresses  
and a doctor called Winker whistled to himself  
a morning tune.

As he covered my body with a faded sheet  
from Public Health I remembered  
how you also got a glimpse when  
you were three.

Your little eyes, with only cows  
for comparison,  
saw teats full of milk  
dangling between my legs.

## My Mother Adds

In my condition I can't remember  
what I wanted to say to you  
but I birthed you all  
bones blood and milk.

And it hurts me to see you –  
blue hair, golden eyes  
still clambering out  
of the abyss of my eyes  
like a stubborn spider on webs of spittle  
that you weave so well  
with all the words you need  
to invent for yourself  
instead of me.