

Shimon Adaf

Till Human Voices Wake Me

1.

Sometimes I hear the stars cracking and withering in the vast silence of the night. Let me tell the history of the human being as I find it. Being born, the human being screeches-- with anguish? with delight? annoyed with the leaden air of existence? Who knows; sense still evades it, the mother's song soothes it, the world but a blur, it is being awakened into a universe of voices, gradually settling into sights, it sees a moon and yelps, it wants food, it wants to express its desires; the human being is introduced into language. But the voice is strong within him, as Rilke, a 20th century poet and a human being writes "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic / orders?" and beseeches, "Voices, voices. Hear, O my heart, as only / saints have heard: heard till the giant call / lifted them off the ground." Discovering mortality and poetry, he sings about beautiful voices luring him to his death among the rocks, and makes stories about music breaking death's iron heart, a song so enchanting, it brings back his beloved ones. Tainted by experience, the human being asks, in the voice of a 19th century thinker, Kierkegaard, "What is a poet?" and answers right away, "An unhappy man who in his heart harbors a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and the cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music." Seeking to transcend time and his beastly nature, he finally forges the voice into graphical signs.

2.

When I had the manuscript for my second collection of poems ready, I felt uncomfortable. Many of the issues ailing me found their way into the poems and still something was missing; under the skin of paper and ink, the heart of the manuscript pulsed weakly, shallow as a faint breath. I put it aside and waited. An answer would show itself. Only two months later, after having read *The Diamond Age* by Neal Stephenson, it came clear to me. In *The Diamond Age* Stephenson conjures a vision of society flooded with information. In fact, information is the only currency of value. In consequence, the system of alphabetical representation of language begins to evaporate. A new and elaborate form of illiteracy evolves. Icons, ideographs, hieroglyphs, signs that indicate a narrow concept or emotion now inherit the alphabetical system. "It's a world without voices," I mused, "these signs have no aural equivalence. Is this the future of communication? What's to become of poetry then?" and in that instance I knew what had all along been missing from my manuscript. My writing stems from music; long before the themes of the poem strike me, I have their melody haunting my mind, persistent; strings of sounds whose meaning is suspended digging holes inside my thoughts. [I used to think I'm unique in this. Every writer nurses a short-termed illusion of uniqueness, until he reads other people's works and is appalled by their similarity. For me, it was Paul Valéry, of all the poets in the world, Valéry, whose poetry makes me yawn, who described this precise method of crafting a poem in one of his essays.] The music echoes, runs astray, bumps against the walls of my brain cells, grows into a poem laid on a white sheet. Its original voice streams sleepily through the veins of the letters, a lurking shadow, nothing more.

As my reflections roved, my thoughts raving, I realized there was another thing to be taken into account, the specific language I worked with, its spirit, Hebrew. Because of its morphology, Hebrew consists of many words sounding alike. Every word has a root, consisting usually of three, seldom four consonants, which, when combined with the appropriate morphological procedure, determine the word's meaning. It is common to find the same three consonants that are used in one word, giving birth, in a different order, to another word which means something quite dissimilar. Hebrew is stalked by pairs of words whose meanings graze one another but never overlap. This characteristic trait of Hebrew is used as magical principle in Jewish occultism, and was used as a vehicle to decipher the world by the sages of the Mishna, who organized the Jewish way of life for two millennia. The application of the characteristic is simple. Take two words that are made by the same three consonants, check how they outline between them a region of meaning, and let the interpretation begin. Nega and Oneg, Plight and Pleasure, are the best known duo. There is a reason why the English fails to convey the resemblance of the two words, even when transcribed. The resemblance lies within the pronunciation of each consonant separately, the formal transcription binds them together, losing the similarity and the ghost implications upon the reader. As for me, I don't care for the magical or metaphysical ground, just for the powerful intercourse between the graphical aspect of the language and the musical one.

3.

For me, language has two poles: the pole of the graphic sign and the pole of the phonetic material. Having spent my childhood reading, hearing the soft sobering of the stars at age of seven, I can't really escape the tension that resides within writing. Not as gloomy as Stephenson's vision, I still mourn the vanishing of the voice. The human being moves rapidly into what the philosopher Wittgenstein considered to be a bad dream of his youth, and Allan Turing, the founding father of the information age, regarded as humanity's greatest achievement so far - the translation of knowledge expressed by language into a set of symbols, mute, arbitrary symbols.

Think about emotions, the friendly smileys ☺, ☹, how they mutate emotions into signs bypassing vocal mediation. Think about it not as a way to enrich your chats and e-mails, but as the embryonic phase of a completely new mode of communication. Everyone who has been working with musicians in the past decade knows how music itself is being shifted toward the visual realm. I, as many of my colleagues, create music using editing programs. The music I record is translated into a graphical representation, from this moment on, I can manipulate it, sequence it, cut and paste it, rebuild it, without even listening to it, just by using colored spaces, linear grids and a shape-shifting, multipurpose cursor.

4.

Being human, I cling to the only dimension of the course of events that suits me. I could have told you a different story altogether: how poetry and music, since being invented, struggled over the centuries for the right to be held as humanity's main means for crossing over to a realm of perfect beauty, moral superiority and shining truths, how the 20th century, the vicious and broken century, introduced the rival siblings with pop culture and the decay of metaphysics. It would then have been trickier for me to explain my quest. But its essence wouldn't have changed. It became a matter of urgency for me to embark on a series of experiments in order to find the voice of my poems, to recreate the wedding between signs and sounds. I believe there are many solutions to the problem. I, for one, turned to my personal experience. I used to play in a rock band, rock and pop seemed to be the suitable musical platform.

Two of my colleagues and I sat thinking how this goal might be achieved. We had two models at hand: *composed poetry*, which is fairly widespread in Israel and means turning a poem into a pop or a rock song, and *spoken words*, a form merging poetry and hip hop music. We estimated both to be a solution giving priority to one of the ingredients: in the first one to the music, in the second one to the words. We looked in between, confused. David Gross, who was the only trained and certified musician among us three, came up with the idea of writing playbacks that will resonate the poems and will make use of my voice reading them. His idea was to create a musical metaphor, a sonic equivalent. And we did that, spending nights and dead hours in the studio, brimming with ideas or just gazing at the ceiling, cursing our hazy and dehydrated minds, playing for 30 minutes one note on the keyboards over a highly sophisticated drum loop-- only to discover that The Chemical Brothers had used the same sample 4 years earlier. Boring times, magnificent times.

After three months we came across another problem. When we listened to the playbacks and the poetry being read, we grasped that we were diminishing the poems. We weren't able to create a true equivalence to the way written poetry condenses several layers of meanings, sometimes contradictory meanings, into one line. Shimon, (not me, the other musician, who was also given this name), did an interesting experiment one evening when David and I retired to our homes. He gave another musician who was working in the same studio a poem and then recorded him, improvising on the playback we wrote for the poem. The following day David and I were fascinated. He found a method of freeing the playback from one musical interpretation. We invited different musicians with diverse biases and backgrounds to play with us. Some of them chose to make noises with their guitars, some of them asked to be sampled, some of them composed new melodies, altering the basic harmony suggested to them. One of them was offered the poem *Phonetica*. He came to me and said, "You know, when I read the poem I get the feeling that it's about a boy trapped in a glass cage, speaking a language no one seems to hear. I don't want to play in this playback. Instead, I want to sing in the background, a song that eventually will soar into a cry."