

THE CATS IN JERUSALEM

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The cats in Jerusalem are feral, warily treading those ever-thinning razor-topped walls between domesticity and savagery which characterize the long history of this region. The cats are also dirty, the only dirty cats I've ever seen; perhaps their tongues find it impossible to keep up with the smudge of the littered streets and urinous alleys. One sees and hears very few dogs: they probably don't stand a chance against the cats.

Even while they're scouring the long steep alleys for flavorsome garbage and willing partners, the question the cats keep asking each other is this: How are cats perceived in Russia now? in Bulgaria? in Poland? in the United States? In England? Is there persecution? Is it safe there for cats to congregate where they want, or are they being herded into homes and tamed to sleep on fluffy cushions? Or, worse, are they being sent to the pound and dispatched every Friday night to the world where cats go next? They ask these things with anxiety, thrusting and retracting their claws, but there is no answer which satisfies, since the answer changes with every street battle they win and lose. You daren't pet these cats. They can't trust you near their hearts; you might be wanting furs to hang upon your wall.

I'm in Jerusalem for an extended stay. It's the first of March, and today there's sunshine coming into the courtyard of my apartment block, threading its way through the flowering almonds and the verdant bushes spilling over every wall. Whatever else God may be doing in Jerusalem, He's still busy with the foliage. There are so many new blossoms every day that it seems even the birds – the mellifluous songbirds of Jerusalem – might suddenly burst into bud.

I walk everywhere in the city. In the Jerusalem Mall and in the central bus station I often find myself strolling along mere inches from an automatic rifle hanging over the back of a fit and tanned – or natively blessed with skin so brown – soldier; the young man is invariably browsing the shops while holding hands with some slim dark-haired girl in a skimpy top. I've never found myself in the proximity of a gun like this before. What kind is it? Is it an Uzi? I think about asking the soldier, but restrain myself, because I might find myself examining it more closely than I would like to. My Hebrew isn't equal to the task of explaining my motives. The gun is raw, skeletal, unadorned, stripped of everything but function. Has it killed anyone yet? Or is it new from the latest arms fair, still smelling of the greasy palms that money sticks to so easily?

I am -- not so paradoxically -- reassured by the ubiquitous presence of soldiers and guards in Jerusalem. Five, ten times a day I open my bag for someone to search, or put it through a scanner like the one that tucks into your bags at the airport, or I walk through a security scanner, or stand while someone waves a wand up and down my body. This happens at bus stops, restaurants, grocery stores, theatres, malls – everywhere that people congregate. The guards are contemptuous of me as a middle-aged Caucasian; I'm not worth their time, and sometimes they give me a wave, they give me the brush-off, they don't bother taking me seriously. They should be more careful. I want them to be careful.

Two days after I arrive in Jerusalem there's a bombing outside a nightclub in Tel Aviv. The guards on the street kept the bomber from getting inside, but even so he managed to kill five people, including a young woman who was about to get married the following week. Her fiancée was critically injured. I watch the news in Hebrew, trying to get the gist of it. Pictures of the dead. Interviews with the sorrowful survivors. "Mah shlomkha?" How do you feel about the fact that your mother/daughter/sister/fiancee is dead? "Lo tov?" Not good? We need to interview you to find this out. No, really. Pundits discuss the motives of the bomber, who funded him, who encouraged him, who told him this was a useful purpose for his life and death. But the panelists are from a different tribe than the bomber – they live on a different floor of the

Tower of Babel. They walk in and out the Gate of God, which is what Bab-el means, but it's a different gate than the bomber, and the signs are in a language nobody reads any more. Meanwhile, the questions: "Mah shlomkha hayom?" How are you doing today? What peace is there with you?

At lunch one Shabbat afternoon, someone is talking about the Lord Mayor of London, who has reportedly said that the Jews in Israel are committing genocide against the Palestinians and that Sharon is a war criminal who should be shot. Someone else says, "But he apologized afterward." Another opines that the apology was irrelevant since the Lord Mayor had clearly said what he really thought. The odd part about the conversation is that all of this is stated without any comment, so one can't tell what they think about the episode. No one seems to be outraged by it, and neither do they appear to agree or disagree with the Lord Mayor. It makes me wonder if they no longer react to such events with words, since all the words have been said so many thousands of times, or if it is only I, the only non-Jew in the room, who doesn't understand the subtext. But I do understand the subtext; I just don't think it justifies the levels of violence that everyone thinks are called for. And nobody discusses the issue of whether the Israelis do have the intention of wiping out the Palestinians. After a while, everyone starts talking about the spread of democracy. When I mention that the democratic United States has two million people in prison, more than

one-half of one percent of their entire population, almost no one believes me. As we are leaving, a woman says admiringly that at least George Bush is a strong leader. I think, but do not say, 'But it takes a particular type of leader to lure people into hell, or into committing mass suicide, doesn't it?'

Earlier at that same luncheon, a neurologist and mathematician with a strong interest in linguistics related his long efforts to track down the meaning of a rare word that he was sure was either Aramaic or Hebrew. He had consulted experts and pored over dictionaries and texts, ancient and modern, without success. After many months, he discovered that the elusive term was the Polish word for "lynx". Cats again! There are, in fact, small numbers of leopards and jungle cats still in Israel, somewhere.

Every Friday I get the English-language Jerusalem Post at a little grocer three streets away and up a sharpish hill. Today there's an article about rats. Rats in Rehavia! Rats in Katamon! Apparently this is something new, and something to be concerned about. I am living in Rehavia, a prosperous area in West Jerusalem, and I peer suspiciously around and under the open garbage bin near my apartment, a bin that by the end of each week is spilling its odiferous contents into the street. Then I look accusingly at the idle cats that sit nearby doing nothing, looking nonchalantly at their untrimmed claws. What's the matter with them?

Why can't they control the rats? There must be some way to exterminate such dangerous rodents. Perhaps one could herd them all into one place and build a wall around them. The cats could patrol the perimeter. So many cats without jobs can't be a good thing.

Later I discover this: apparently, farmers using poisons and pesticides to control rats and wolves have managed to half-exterminate the Griffon Vultures in the Israeli countryside, which species the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo is trying to assist. One can imagine other, earlier, generations putting out poison to kill off the vultures and accidentally exterminating the wolves. Or the rats. Tinkering with the ecosystem like this is exactly like sitting heavily on a water bed and not expecting the water to rise up on the other side. It somehow, I know not why, also reminds me of Australia, where in the same years that people are shooting thousands upon thousands of unwanted kangaroos, other people are rescuing and hand-feeding injured kangaroos in wildlife shelters. While you're standing and feeding one kangaroo from a long-nippled baby bottle, other kangaroos are scratching at your forearms insistently with their long sharp claws, trying to get at your bottle. I suddenly wonder how they would fare in Israel.

One day in the Old City, near an outdoor café that is bright with yellow chairs and tables, I come across an enormous stone wheel standing in a granite basin. The wheel has a round hole in the centre, through which

some kind of axle might have once turned, and a large square indentation around the hole, in which you could imagine a very large stone wheel-nut. It is impossible to know if this might have been part of an olive press, or a Roman column, or some antique and immovable stone chariot. In the centre of the wheel, inserted precisely half way through the hole, rests a black and white cat, sunning itself in the courtyard, its feet resting on the square edge of the indentation. I'm looking at its digital image now on my computer, and wondering if the cat has been paid to attract tourists to the café, and if so, how much.

It's going to take more than a few picturesque animals to lure the tourists back to Israel, though. Years ago, the lineups to enter the cable cars that waft you smoothly to the top of the desert fortress of Masada were three hours long. Now, this week, we walk directly on to the cable car and wait a while for enough people to arrive to fill the car so we can ascend. No cats on top of Masada. Just the hawks wheeling far below, watching intently for small unwary mammals.

More impressive than their small cousins, but found only in stone, of course, are the ubiquitous lions of Jerusalem. Symbolizing the Lion of Judah, they are frequently seen in ancient frescoes, statuary and engravings. But more recently, in 2002, a \$200,000 project (should they have budgeted \$200,002 instead?) funded a bevy of artists to paint and decorate 80 life-sized lions, some standing, some lying down. (The lions,

not the artists.) These brilliantly colored, fanciful and charmingly enhanced statues were displayed in public for some time, then sold at auction. Today I see a lion flowered in blue, white, navy and ecru standing regally alert in the shadows just inside a private courtyard in Katamon. Yesterday I noticed one resting high on an apartment balcony overlooking Rechov Jabotinsky. Several of them still prowl the beautiful palm-strewn courtyard of City Hall, not far from Jaffa Gate.

There are lovely gardens and courtyards in Jerusalem, but they are eclipsed by the glorious Israeli countryside, which is breath-taking, a fact that is never mentioned by the media in North America. You see towering rock fortresses, Mediterranean beaches, Dead Sea spas that are oases in the arid land around them, rocks, mountains, deserts, waterfalls, vast fields of flowers and vegetables, olive groves and avenues of palms and loquat trees, a hundred species of desert fauna, stunning rock gardens growing wild on the windswept crest of Mount Gilboa – all in the space of a few hours' drive. It's as though someone took the map of Israel and drew a little area called "Thailand here" and another called "New Mexico here" and another called "California here", fitted each area with its appropriate geographical terrain, populated it with its unique flora and fauna, and finally fitted them side by side like pieces in a puzzle. Israel. No wonder people have always been willing to fight over it.

Yet, in spite of its natural beauty, the country as a nation fails to capture my heart, although I feel a pulse of joy on top of Masada and other such places. Israel is tremendously efficient, which requires a high degree of technological advancement. Its efficiency makes it hard in some psychological way that I cannot adequately describe. People don't smile gratuitously, although they are generally kind and helpful to me. Perhaps the qualities of efficiency and hardness can not be extricated one from another. And, although this may seem irrelevant, even those whose hearts were lost to Jerusalem were not always allowed to leave them there, while others weren't allowed to take them home again. Consider these two cases: Robert the Bruce, sometime king of Scotland, had long wished to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and had asked that his heart be buried in that city. After his death in 1329, the heart was embalmed and sent with Sir James Douglas on the long trip to the Holy Land. Legend is that Douglas was killed in Spain in a battle with the Moors, and the heart subsequently returned to Scotland to be buried in Melrose Abbey. 669 years later, in April of 1998, a tourist named Alisdair Rosslyn Sinclair, originally from Arran in Scotland, made a five-day visit to Israel. Arrested while leaving the country, Sinclair died in police custody, possibly after having committed suicide. When his body was returned to Scotland and autopsied, it was found that his heart was missing. Later, the Israeli authorities shipped a heart to the grieving relatives. Since Sinclair was a descendant of the original founders of the Knights Templar, the internet is now rife with conspiracy theories. The

story of Robert the Bruce's wayward heart is commemorated on a stone plaque in St. Andrew's church in Jerusalem. But then everything is commemorated on a stone plaque somewhere in the country. Statues, buildings, pillars, walls and plaques of stone. Hard Jerusalem stone.

I see, one rainy day, two or three large snails gliding elegantly down the wet sidewalk near the Jerusalem Theater. And, appropriately, over the bed in my small studio apartment hangs a large, predominantly blue print by Miro entitled "People at night guided by the phosphorescent trails of snails." The painting has eyes in it here and there, and odd shapes that tantalize with their similarity to the human form, to strange savage needle-toothed fish, prehistoric, geometric, cosmic and vaginal. Everyone sees what they want to in this picture. I'm looking for forms that look like cats, and while there are roundish bottoms and tail-like protrusions and glow-in-the-dark eyes, none of these are pieced together into anything recognizably feline. Maybe this fragmentation is how nations look before they coalesce. Perhaps the frame of the picture is like the thick apartheid wall I see going up in long swooping sections as we drive outside of Jerusalem. All the disembodied limbs and lines in the painting might be the visible symbol of the many lives that have been pierced and fragmented by the endless bitter war between the Palestinians and Israelis. Too fanciful, maybe. You'd have to name the artist before you blamed him.

Every religious and ethnic group here warns you severely and solemnly about the others. For example: in the Church of the Paternoster on the Mount of Olives I am speaking with a very gentle French nun; as I am leaving, she cautions me absolutely not to walk down to the Church of All Nations past the Jewish graveyard because dangerous Jewish boys hide there and leap out to attack and rob travelers. It reminds me of Chaucer... The Jews warn you about the Arabs, the Arabs warn you about the Christians, and Christians warn you about the Jews. My Jewish landlady is making dark predictions about my forthcoming trip to Italy ("You'll be cheated and robbed for sure!") and I guarantee you that in Italy they would be raising the spectre of injury and death to anyone traveling to Israel.

After my conversation with the French nun, by the way, I walk peacefully down the very road she has cautioned me against, and think how I have very nearly missed seeing the fascinating old tombs because of her advice.

This morning two long streets in front of my apartment are blocked off by police at both ends, causing the hooting traffic and buses to back up for miles. Binyamin Netanyahu (who is now the finance minister) lives directly across the street from me, so I'm sure it has something to do with him. For weeks I've been careful not to look up at the penthouse of his building for fear the armed guards who are sometimes seen on the

balconies will notice me. Now I see men in the street with coiled wires leading from ear to collar. I look quickly away from the tall cubelike apartment, moving my eyes to the modest coffee shop on the corner, and the little shelter for the bus stop. A black and white cat slinks past me, into the shabby park.

Nearly every one of the ancient, enormous and monumental structures that survive in Israel from two thousand years ago were caused-to-be-built by Herod, that wickedest of wicked men. Perhaps some of his energy is still captured in the stone of which Jerusalem is made. And if so, maybe the cats in Jerusalem are right to neglect their own hygiene; maybe they know that at any moment someone ruthless and powerful, someone uninterested in the welfare of cats, might bulldoze their little shelters and drown their kittens in the rainbarrel. They can't waste any time on grooming themselves. They have to save their energies for flight.