

# Waiting in the Balcony of Darkness

An interview with Rafi Aaron

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**PAUL HAMANN**



Ruth Kaplan

I ARRIVED EARLY AT THE AROMA ESPRESSO BAR ON AVENUE ROAD IN TORONTO FOR my interview with Rafi Aaron and spent some time reading a few of his poems again. Out on the street, the people he writes for walked hand in hand with their kids in the sun, drove by in very expensive cars, looked furtively at each other and familiarly at their companions, dressed in colours for the weather and for themselves, chatted, watched traffic lights, read road signs, parking meters, storefront ads, were absorbed in the frantic language of the moment. It didn't take much watching to see in all this, the world of Rafi's poems. His words linger, pace themselves *easy*, bend gently around the staccato jumble of the day and hum the melody of its spirit.

I found out by searching the internet that in 2004 Rafi was invited by the Canadian foreign ministry to deliver the Alexander Mackenzie Memorial Lecture at the University of St. Petersburg where he read his poems about Osip Mandelstam, a poet who wrote and was incarcerated in Russia during the Stalin dictatorship. This, in a list of similarly arresting accomplishments left me a little awed and I wondered, what does someone who can write like this look like? What does he sound like?

“I have funky, blue, one-of-a-kind glasses and grey hair—Okay, it’s white!” he’d written to me so I would recognize him. He has children he picks up from school, a background in advertising, and a long-time friend, Jeff Bien, in Kemptville whom he relies on for insightful, trusted commentary and whose poetry he admires above his own. Eventually, over lattes, Rafi and I slid easily from conversation about cell phones and family to poetry. He began by describing not his own poetry, but Jeff’s. It is “filled with imagery, vivid imagery; it’s lyrical and there’s a worldliness involved with it. It imparts some sort of philosophical knowledge to you.” I couldn’t help thinking that he might easily have been talking about his own work.

I told him that I read “The Woman Walking” for the first time in his collection *Surviving the Censor*. When I encountered it again at the end of his play, *Mandelstam*, it took on a new richness for me that I had missed when I read it earlier. The play seemed to have added to it somehow. I wondered whether Rafi felt that his poems have some cumulative quality about them? Is there some great solution that each poem brings him closer to?

**RA:** No. What is important to me is the advancement of the craft of poetry, how the craft is evolving. My poems make leaps, but in the leaping you’ve got to leave the reader somewhere to take off and land. Sometimes the take-offs and landings are subtle. If you miss them then the poems become...my mother wishes my poetry were simpler. “Why don’t you write poems that are easier to understand?” (Rafi breaks into a broad smile that has about it a complete absorption in the moment that I wish I could find.) In a good poem you can’t see the nail holes and seams. You don’t see all this combustion but it sort of comes out of nowhere without all the preamble that even the best writers sometimes get trapped into using. This ball of fire is just tossed effort-

lessly toward you. I marvel at that.

I’m finding that there isn’t a lot of poetry in poems today. They’re too colloquial. We’re in a McDonalds society, fast paced. People want to get the message quickly. Poems become inaccessible to them because that’s not how poems allow readers to get their messages. I look at Blake and it’s marvellous and it’s whirling, but I don’t know what it is exactly that makes it so seductive. I read it again and get more from it. I never read any poem just once.

**PH:** You described poems as making leaps. I think I found one of those leaps in “The Naming of the Well.”

**RA:** Yeah, I’m happy with the way that poem turned out.

**PH:** The well seems to me a character taking on a variety of roles, but in last stanza “In the underbrush and the bramble, a petal of a / flower, lifeless, and sleeping, in the taste of late / night visitor that somehow banished your thirst,” the petal “banishes thirst.” Is the petal the well?

**RA:** Very few people see that. The well is poetry. That poem is like a collage. The well is a whole array of things at different times and different places. By the time you get to that last stanza, it can become another thing, like a petal, quite easily.

**PH:** “The Naming of the Well” ends with a question that has no answer: “How many days walk, how / many sunsets will come and go before the naming / of the well?” What is important about naming?

**RA:** The importance of naming is one of those things that I delve into in my latest manuscript but it’s hard to speak about the naming just like that. I talk about words and the meanings of words a lot and the way

words are changed in context. They don't mean what they once did. With "The Naming Of The Well" it's the thirst, the thirst has a lot to do with the naming.

**PH:** So, if you are still working out your ideas about naming, do you ever worry that your readers miss something by reading one of your poems without knowing the rest of your work?

**RA:** I had a magazine publisher turn down my work. I'd sent her four or five poems. She said she didn't have the space and couldn't publish just one of them. She felt they belonged together, and shouldn't be separated. (Again that smile, wide as a world). The poems should stand individually on their own.

**PH:** (I felt compelled, for some reason, to say still more about "The Woman Walking" passage from Mandelstam. I talked way too much during this interview.) The woman's burden, the buckets on a pole across her shoulders—she becomes an image of sacrifice, doesn't she? (Rafi nods. What does that mean? Not sure.) And is the water in the buckets Osip's poetry? She's so careful "not to spill a word / knowing if she does it will be gone forever / knowing that where every drop lands a flower will blossom."

**RA:** I'm glad you enjoyed the play. It was really a literary adventure—being able to take the Russian history I had learned while writing my book and the poems I had written, and creating this new piece of art with them. In the play I focussed on the relationship between the poet and his wife, but it still addresses the importance and power of words in oppressive states and the courage it takes to resist oppression.

**PH:** Do you ever find yourself tempted to use poetry as a political tool?

**RA:** There is something about being involved in causes as a poet. You are cut off and the regular things people are doing are not of interest because you are consumed with something.

**PH:** How is the poet cut off?

**RA:** I should only talk about myself. Often people laugh at me because I don't know someone in a movie and they start explaining to me who they are and what they've done. I am often consumed with pursuing something different from my neighbours. It's hard for me to relate to the things that drive them and for them to relate to what I'm doing. The Russian poets during the Stalin era had an obligation to speak out for society and when they couldn't they went silent. (Later, Rafi sent me a passage from a poem by Czeslaw Milosz to illustrate. In the poem, Milosz is talking to Paul Cezanne, about Mieczyslaw, Cezanne's disciple.)

*Your tardy disciple, he nearly achieved,  
as he used to tell me, blowing on his cold fingers  
that war winter, a clay jar and an apple.  
He looked at them constantly and constantly they filled  
his canvases.*

*And I believe he would have snatched from things  
a moment of seeing,  
had he observed the rules of an artist  
who must be indifferent to good and evil,  
To joy and pain and the laments of mortals,  
a haughty servant, as he is, of only one aim.*

*But he used his workshop to help people  
and hid Jews there, for which the penalty was death.  
He was executed in May 1943,  
thus giving his soul for his friends.  
And it is bitter to sing in praise of the mind, Cezanne.*

So there's the dichotomy. On the one hand I am cut off and on the other there are issues and causes that I want to be involved in.

**PH:** I thought "Timing" was a portrayal of the poet's struggle.

**RA:** "Timing" is an important piece for me. It's about my grandfather's escape from Russia to Romania in 1917. It is not a portrayal of the poet. He had this amazing ability to dance away from the Russian soldiers when they came hunting. He really did. As I wrote, "he two-stepped over the fallen pirouetted / around gunshots and the unforeseen / cruelty". He was only 99 when Ruth Kaplan photographed him for the exhibit and book, *A Seed In The Pocket of Their Blood*. He lived to be 103. I wonder if there's something missing in the wording that caused you to reach that conclusion. In the last couple of lines I said that three generations were "waiting [in the balcony of darkness to scream and applaud]." Maybe I should show somehow that that happened afterward. (I am holding my copy of the book open to the poem and he asks to see it). I could say "three future generations." It might disconnect the description of the audience from the description of the old man's dancing. I don't like that phrase, though. It's not poetic, the word "future."

**PH:** Do you feel a need to be poetic? Do you ever feel hampered by it?

**RA:** That's a great question. It's something I've never really explored. I have a reverence for poetry and sometimes that hampers me. I admire the poets of the past. There are two phases for me when I write. In the creative phase I'm not thinking about devices. The lyricism of my poetry comes naturally to me. It's something that happens intuitively, automatically. If I knew how to do

it I'd do more of it. But in this stage I'm not thinking about accessibility. In the editing stage I try to see what works and doesn't work. That's when I check to see if there are enough take-offs and landings for the reader. "89 Clarence Street" went through 69 drafts.

**PH:** Are there poets who have guided your effort to advance your craft?

**RA:** I am a Yeats fan. At different times it's been different poets: the poets writing in Spanish, Octavio Paz, Federico Garcia Lorca, Neruda, and certainly Vallejo. Canadian poets, Irving Layton, Jeff Bien whose work I have helped to edit. I should mention A.M. Klein as an influence on me. We've already talked about Milosz and let's not forget about Rimbaud. I always hope that some of the poets I've read and reread, and admire will seep into my work and become part of my voice. Not that I'm trying to imitate them. I'm not one of those poets who write poems after so and so, you know? Poetry chose me; I didn't choose it. It's a way of expressing myself that is as natural as breathing. It's essential to my existence.

**PH:** I find that your poems speak so often in metaphors, symbols and silences that when you set those devices aside and speak more literally, there's a shock. I felt it in the fifth stanza of "The Photograph of the Children:" "one brother arrived in Montreal / the others: sisters parents uncles and aunts / erased the family name / *as they walked into the gas chambers.*" (the italics are mine)

**RA:** Maybe there'll come a time when I'll become more literal. In the manuscript that I am currently finishing, I go into a very direct sort of line like the one you just read, after using the metaphorical. Do you follow baseball? (I nod) So you understand pitching.

Well, I look on it as my off-speed pitch.

**PH:** So, you use a metaphor to describe your tendency toward direct, literal language?

**RA:** Yeah, put that in. That's hilarious. Sometimes writing poems is like putting something new on a building—an awning over a window or door, perhaps a weather vane on the roof. I'm informing the reader in another way that I haven't before. If this process continues then maybe there'll be a new façade on the structure, or even better I'll have to knock the whole thing down and build something new. In this way the poetry evolves into whatever form it will take. (Jeff Bien concurs. In a recent letter he described the new direction that he sees Rafi's work taking: "The splendour of his most recent manuscript lies in its simplicity. In the newest of his poems I hear a deep and enduring silence, amidst the beauty of the lyricism. Rafi has an ear for the occasion, a true singer, in that silence.")

**PH:** I was taken with the rhythm of the opening of "What Mandelstam Meant to Russians During the Stalin Years": "Wait for the night when the half moon swings in a / hammock of purple fog". Are you conscious of rhythm as a force in your poetry?

**RA:** It is an element of meaning; it can bring something to life and highlight it.

**PH:** I'm curious about this highlighting. It seems to imply taking attention away from other things, the things that are not highlighted. In "The Journey" you describe "how I skipped a noun through a / verse, with a strong hand and an arrogant smile." Is poetry trickery or a pursuit of something noble and permanent?

**RA:** In certain cases language can reach beyond itself

as a medium, and become the things it represents; sometimes not. There are many mountains to climb, many achievements for poetry. Are they all noble and permanent? Good question. Words in poetry have the ability to create some spark, some magic, something they can't do in any other form. The raw material is words and I prefer to use them in this manner.

**PH:** You mentioned that some of the poetry in your play Mandelstam is translated from Osip's Russian; a passage late in the play, for example: "More frightening is the yellow sun— / Sleep, my child, hush, little one— / In the light-filled Temple, Judeans / Sang my mother's funeral paeans." I find the rhyme here very clever and natural. Did translation ever pose a problem for you?

**RA:** That was very simple, the rhyme in that passage. Translators make trade-offs. I'm going to keep the rhyme in this and I'm going to have to shift some words here. I won't have all the meaning but in this particular case I'm going for the rhyme and I'm going to get something close. I'm also wondering if it's more than just a translator's sleight of hand, that the words are very close and it was an easy job for the translator; the rhyme just evolved as it did in the Russian.

**PH:** It's a wonderful coincidence.

**RA:** Osip Mandelstam would take the sound of two words and place them together so they would conjure a third word. In other words the sound of words one and two would bring to mind another word that wasn't written. He did a lot of things that are really difficult to translate. When I lived in Israel, I had some poems published in the literary supplements of a few of the weekend papers there. In one poem that I wanted translated there was a lot of imagery, a lot of

lyricism and if we went by the literal words we were going to lose a lot of the intrinsic things. My translator, who taught English at the University of Tel Aviv, was not a poet. I remember her calling me and asking, is there a double meaning to this and I said yes and she said, in Hebrew we can only have one. You have to choose. I had to choose! So, I said to her, use the primary one because that's the one pushing the poem. She tried numerous times and every time she didn't succeed. I got a well known Israeli poet to do it, and you know on the first try he got 98% of it right because he understood as a poet, you know what I mean? But, in Mandelstam there was a lot of mystery.

**PH:** In “The Last Poem” you talk about “words stripped down to their meanings.” What is stripped away? Is that a way of getting rid of mysteries?

**RA:** Words have a lot of meanings, and I am concerned that they have become watered down fossils, something different, something less than they were.

**PH:** Does this make truth a difficult thing to get at? Are the art of writing and the love of truth ever compatible?

**RA:** I find that the problem of articulation...when you talk about truth, you're looking at yourself first—all your contradictions and half-truths. I've been examining myself for too long. (Another engaging smile).



I've included several of Rafi's poems, partly because they give a better sense of his thinking, and partly because they are such delightful poems. Choosing, though, was a little like ferreting out gold fibres in Penelope's tapestry, knowing that with another reading the nicest morsels will seem to be elsewhere.

*Czeslaw Milosz, The Separate Notebooks (The Ecco Press, New York, 1984). Translators; Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Czeslaw Milosz, and Renata Gorczynsk, p.33.*

# Three Poems

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**RAFI AARON**

## The Naming of the Well

*for Natacha*

*Who names the well? Anyone who has carried  
thirst.*

The summer well, that speaks to you in violet and  
apricot, and the staggering well that falls on its  
knees before you, breathless with its agony.

The emancipated well shouting “freedom” into  
the wind and whirling sand, and then closing its  
mouth, forever.

The star-coloured well that sent you dreaming  
when your tongue lashed its cool waters. And the  
strangled well, filled with white venom.

The relentless well pursuing you through deserts,  
villainous swamps and the long border of your  
day.

The flamboyant well, with its cape of painful  
colours, reminding you of stretched limbs and  
burned skin.



And the prophetic well that tells you what you already know; “tribes and herds will die from this water.”

The scar-faced well with her magnificent, impish eyes, that you now call naked blue.

The cursed well and the one that curses, the flying well that soars above you, its feathers softening the sun.

Well with the silk lips of the wind and the long black strands, that bored itself into your heart spring and filled with red waters.

The makeshift well that is a meeting place and a stone mouth.

The royal well, the fountain of forever within you.

All wells are childish playing with your image of taste and tongue, monastic, and overwhelmed, thinking of those outstretched hands.

The infant well that cannot speak the name of mother water. And the old well recounting how its streams were once sweet and now spittle between missing teeth.



The pious well prostrate before you praying for rain. And the salacious well that invites you in while the others are out in the fields.

The right-sided well and the left, tossing something down your throat, a twig, a granule of sand, or a misused word. And the middle well no one drank from, (or should I say trusted.)

The coy well, some water some of the time.

The outcast well no one has seen for years.

And the ancient well, where one navigates the rope the way you would a great mystery.

In the underbrush and the bramble, a petal of a flower, lifeless, and sleeping, in the taste of late night visitors that somehow banished your thirst. You see this and ask, "How many days walk, how many sunsets will come and go before the naming of the well?" And there is no answer, only a breeze that bruises your lips.

## Timing

i marvel at my grandfather's timing  
he knew when to move  
while others listened  
as the revolutionary steps were explained  
he could hear the music  
of concrete and cranes of the party  
welding theories so that his brothers  
would waltz inside the Russian cage

he kicked his legs over borders  
became a tree in the forest  
as patrols passed by  
all the while humming a native tune  
the orchestra pit empty in his stomach

he was light and carried himself  
with what all refugees carry  
sew into the lining of their clothes  
or hide in secret compartments of the body—  
the promise of tomorrow

he danced the night he danced through the white  
ashes of field and family  
two-stepped over the fallen pirouetted  
around gunshots and the unforeseen  
cruelty and we were there  
three generations waiting in the balcony  
of darkness to scream and applaud

## The Last Poem

*(Researcher's Notes #12)*

When I came to his last poem I cried thinking this was the end. Days and nights, nights and days shuffled on. I too could have been someone or something but I stopped by this well to drink the last word, to watch the seasons change, and to unmask the fruit behind the thorns.

Here I lived, ate and slept waiting for the bluebirds to summon me each morning. I tallied up my emotions (with a small piece of chalk), felt the spears of sunlight through the clouds and anointed the words that had blessed me. And those ideas that returned home from their maiden voyage were restless and paced all night in the attic. Life was filled with the sounds of weightless feet in worn slippers and the threading thumbs and thimbles of spiders who laboured to reinforce the weakened dam of days that was flooding into years.

Sometimes in my sleep the poems tap me or flex their muscles as they push aside dreams. And then there is broken glass, ransacked images and streaks of lightning tethered to green strings, and finally a tune runs away with the words. Look! This was how I discovered the world was off course, by sinking with the ship, counting coral and holding on to his poems for dear life so that when I awoke in a country near the equator the words were stripped down to their meanings and oh how they carried themselves so erect so proud!

And now to say that the world went on, that laughter choked  
and almost died, that miracles were worked or postponed in  
a back room or a barn, that people swam in streams of  
blood, that my sister was called compassion and my brother  
was called something else is not important.

I am here on the other side of the century. Stalin is gone.  
Mandelstam's poems wave from mast heads and flag poles,  
leave fingerprints for visiting cards. They stretch out in open  
fields or sit in cafés where they trick tongues into leaping  
over borders, years and unmarked graves. To stop now is  
impossible, winter is coming, I wrap myself in a verse and  
head for the mountain pass where I can watch the poems as  
they migrate to the grazing lands.