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**Special Feature**

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**GUEST EDITORS:**

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# Exploring Ronny Someck

BY ALMOG BEHAR

It would seem that Ronny Someck may well be one of Israel's most popular and best-read, living Hebrew poets of the last two decades. His popularity of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with any prominent literary critics' verdict on his body of work (quite possibly, owing to the glaring absence of any such critics with sufficient gravitas or king-making abilities in the last two decades), or the musical adaptations his poems have had (two, "Solo Arak" and "Rice Paradise", had beautiful music scored for them by Israeli musician Yair Dalal); both are factors that previously would have carried tremendous weight in determining a poet's popularity. Ronny Someck's popularity, however, has that much more to do with the poet's willingness to act as a "travelling agent" – whether for his own poems, or for poetry as whole – wherever it is required: in a library, school, café, prison, or care home, and no matter the audience. Above all else, Someck's wide appeal is inextricably tied to his deep-seated belief that poetry is an art form that must maintain a state of constant dialogue with as wide-ranging an audience as possible, as opposed to the same, niche 300 to 400 poetry devotees.

For instance, "Left Foot Goal", written in memory of Hungarian footballer Ferenc Puskás, first appeared in a newspaper's sports supplement rather than its literary section, before being part of his collection *Algeria* (2009). Another in the same collection, "When you Find me Stuffed in a Suitcase", was inspired by the harrowing disappearance and murder of four-year-old Rose Pizem, and read out on national television whilst the search for her was underway. The poet exists in his own time, and in conversation with his contemporaries; in the poem "Cellular Gunshot Blues on the no. 30 Route", also in *Algeria*, Someck quotes a fellow bus commuter, juxtaposing her words with *Song of Songs* verses whilst dialoguing with other poets including Sargon Boulus and Max Jacob.

In his earliest writings, Someck's use of pop culture was nothing



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short of groundbreaking, essentially heralding the arrival of a new generation in the world of poetry, one whose members would dedicate whole poems to Marilyn Monroe. Of course, 1976 Marilyn Monroe-referencing pieces such as “For Marilyn Monroe” in Someck’s debut collection *Exile* (1976) are worlds apart from any of his twenty-first-century poetry about the late icon, as in *Algeria*.

One of Someck’s earliest poems, “Poem of Longing” (*Exile*, also available in the bilingual English-Hebrew *The Fire Stays in Red*, 2002), demonstrates the poet’s extraordinary capacity for infusing a sense of longing with irony and a lack of any and all pathos, writing about “Grandpa’s acrobatics” and how “Grandpa talked / and dreamed, dreamed and talked”. Much later, in *Algeria*, Someck’s longing moves on from his grandfather and father to the end of his daughter’s childhood, as he is faced not with the end of his own childhood but that of his daughter’s, who is now on the cusp of adulthood.

Music has always underscored Ronny Someck’s poetry – whether Arab tunes from the likes of Umm Kulthum, Mohammed Abdel Wahab, Fairuz, and Salima Mourad or Western pop hits from Elvis,

The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and various blues musicians. Someck dedicates the poem “Taqsim” to the memory of Iraqi oud player, Yousef al-Awad (aka Yosef Shem Tov) who was a musical legend in life, and who had passed away just outside Tel Aviv in the city of Ramat Gan. In earlier poems, such as “Secret” in *The Revolution’s Drummer* (2001), Arab music was a secret which he knew how to explain.

When Someck revisits Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus’s poem *Insomnia*, set in the city of Lodève, south of France, he concludes by saying how “*The petrol that set dreams alight carried on coursing / through the engines of the aeroplanes that were bombing / his father’s tomb, / there on the ground from whence / his life took off*”. Of course, one cannot forget that Someck’s life also took off in Iraq, which he describes in the poem “Baghdad” from *The Milk Underground* (2005), and is featured below. The memory, from which the poet extracts the events worthy of commemorating in verse, is steeped in scars, haunted by the violence of a knife in a poem that began with murder and gunfire.

Someck writes how “*I am the world champion of inconsequential details / therefore I will not write about how I was there*” (in “On the Eye of the Storm”), therefore one can envisage that this is how he defines both the poet and the poetic act itself: the poet knows all the irrelevant details, and realises that what others, i.e. the historian, news anchor, military commander, or prime minister, might dub as ‘inconsequential details’, may very well be the most crucial details concerning life itself. The poet will not uncover a scientific truth, nor will he write about major events, or decide whether thousands get to live or die – instead, he will only turn his verbal torch onto those seemingly trivial details that someone may or may not have left in the shadows, thereby rendering them inconsequential. He may also mix up timelines, events, and characters in the name of reviving those so-called irrelevant details as symbols, or reimagined possibilities for his readership. The poet, unlike the author and politician, knows how to tame the urge to elaborate, to win every last dish, treat, button, and word; for it is when one sifts through and streamlines them that a poem is born. Therefore, poets who “*hang line headers off pillars of foliage*” (“Sonnet of Those who Make Do with Little”), know that “*One tree is enough to narrate the whole wood*” (ibid).

*The full version of this article is available on  
[www.banipal.co.uk/selections/](http://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/)*

RONNY SOMECK

# Eight Poems

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY ERAN EDRY

## EVE OR EVENING

“You do know,” our Russian neighbour said to my dad,  
“that Umm Kulthum you’re always playing at full blast  
said she would come and sing in Tel Aviv when Abdel Nasser  
has captured it.”

I stood next to him and in my seven-year-old mind  
a dilemma ran rampant:

Was I in favour of the woman’s blonde coiffe and turquoise eyes  
who was also Eve’s mum and who, in my heart, I had crowned  
migrant camp neighbourhood Beauty Queen,  
or the chanteuse who longed to live in the evening’s eyes  
and beckon the sun “come hither, come hither.”

“We,” the words left my father’s lips, “love her,”  
and in my eyes I saw him wishing he could only say that  
“If that is the case, then have at it, Nasser,  
Do your worst, and if only for a moment.  
Save me a front row seat,  
and don’t let me miss the second her voice  
blows even the bowties  
right off the violinists’ necks.

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## SAND

*To the sandbag Ali Farag brought me from the banks of the Tigris.*

If this sand had hands, they would paint  
arabesques of the first words to leave my mouth  
across my lips.

If it had a brain, it would recall  
a baby's feet running round its face.

If it had eyes, they would notice that  
the Tigris waters suddenly stationed  
ambassador tears in the State  
of my eyes.

*Milan, May 2019*

## GAZA. WINTER 1968

*To Ayman Hasan*

In a restaurant by the sea,  
my mother and father were having fish.  
"That's what," they were saying, "the restaurants were like  
on the banks of the Tigris in the city where you were born,  
and in that Abdel Wahab song you're hearing right now,  
not one lyric has changed."  
The smell of coffee crept in like smoke from a flame  
that once swirled on the gold chests of kings' concubines,  
the monarchs of this place.

And I, who felt the prick of the surviving bone  
from that fish's heart,  
already knew that the wooden legs of the table  
on which a white tablecloth had been laid,  
shall never recover from the saw's teeth  
that bit into them.

## SECRET

It might not bear repeating,  
but my mother wept when she suddenly heard  
Cleopatra.

So who are you, Mr. Abdel Wahab to lift an Egyptian queen  
off the history books and translate her into tears in my mother's  
diarised memories.

And you, Cleopatra, breaking hearts in nostalgia's  
game of poker on a small Ramat Gan side street,  
do you recall the musclebound slaves  
who had dived for pearls with which to glorify your throne,  
the throats you had choked up in Bagdad cafes  
and the wind that lashed at the doors  
whose hinges creaked against a belly harbouring a secret?

It's been a while since I last wrote the words 'nostalgia'  
'tears', or 'memories' in such close proximity,  
but these words are the teeth of a comb with which, I,  
in lieu of an Egyptian mistress, stroke your hair.  
May you be beautiful, Cleopatra,  
May you be worthy of melting once more  
the tip of the iceberg below which goldfish  
spell out the word 'sun'  
from memory.

## UNCLE SALIM

In the days when train tickets  
still commanded some respect,  
and were printed on green cardboard paper  
and nothing less,  
Uncle Salim would pull out of his jacket pocket  
a small pile he'd collected at Haifa Railway Station,  
and help us imagine a steering wheel  
in the round space  
between one hand and the other.

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We would close one eye, hold the punched ticket hole  
up to the other, and through it we saw  
the razor-sharp red tie he wore to hide  
the sad state of the rail workers'  
khaki shirts.

He would then exhale the memory of locomotives  
that he once ran along the rail tracks of another land,  
and the carriages heaving with tales  
from the Tigris and Euphrates  
would breathe air that much cleaner than the mothballed scent  
that clung to the new immigrants' memory baggage.

“This train service to Heaven,” he heard just before he died,  
“will be departing in three minutes,”  
and that was exactly the right time for him  
to load up his 99 years onto the carriages,  
the top hat he loved pushing to and fro,  
and also traces of the cheers  
he always had saved for the sound of  
Abdel Wahab's voice.

## BAGHDAD

With the same chalk, a policeman marks a crime scene corpse  
I mark the boundaries of the city where my life was shot.  
I interrogate witnesses, squeezing drops of Arak  
from their lips, and mimicking the dance moves of  
pita bread over a hummus bowl with some hesitation.  
When I am caught,  
they will take one third off my sentence for good behaviour  
and incarcerate me in the hallway of Salima Mourad's throat.  
In the prison kitchen, my mother will be frying the fish that her  
mother  
had pulled out of the river waters whilst recalling the word 'Fish'  
emboldened on a massive sign in front of this brand-new  
restaurant.

Whoever ate there would be served fish no bigger than a pin  
that is until one of the customers asked the owner either  
to make the sign smaller or the fish bigger.  
The fish would prick with its bones, drowning the hand  
that had descaled it, and not even  
hot oil in the interrogation pan  
could get so much as an incriminating word  
out of its mouth.  
Memory is but an empty plate, scarred with a knife's  
scratch marks on its skin.

### SEE-THROUGH

Tayeb studies Literature at Tel Aviv University.  
He has a rucksack with a grammar textbook  
and a Mahmoud Darwish essay inside.  
It's a see-through rucksack because this summer,  
any other kind in the x-ray eyes of every officer  
would flag him as a would-be bomber.  
"Inshallah," his father says, "even that  
will soon come out in the wash," as he hangs out  
clothes that have had shame stains rinsed out of them  
on the washing line of time.  
But life too must go to the marketplace,  
and he goes with it  
to buy some olives in Spoken Arabic, about which he  
will write poems in Arabic fusha\*.  
Meanwhile, Tayeb remains visible.  
The skin stretched across his arms  
does not hide the sinewy muscles,  
the pliable cartilage in the space between the bones  
and the blood vessels in which despair's  
own swimmer could row drunk  
all the way to the tower where lifeguards have flown  
a black flag.

Summer 2001

\* *Modern Standard Arabic*