

## THE HOUSE

1.

Strange that she's dragged toward awareness of sin  
as if towed by ropes onto a truck.  
Not by his arms bound tight by leather phylacteries,  
not insipid prayers at the *mikveh* on Antigonus Street,  
not parent counseling  
not under the bridal veil  
and not when clutching her parchment divorce,  
but by the house to which they migrate,  
a 45-year-old mother and two children  
climbing the stone steps skirted by plants,  
New Year's wine infused with grief,  
a drop of rusty water  
creeps down the wall.

2.

Horseshoes gallop  
up to the railway track *Nal-band-ian*.  
The land was purchased from the Greek Patriarch in 1938.  
A nine-year-old climbed the steps with his uncle:  
"I built this house and during the war  
they didn't let me in  
and what about the divine commandment  
to love thy neighbor as thyself?  
We don't count  
we're not a side  
in this war  
serving in the army  
yet unrecognized,  
stones thrown at our bishop,  
curses on the Sabbath  
and the Jewish people no longer  
a light unto nations."

3.

And these are the sounds of the neighborhood —  
the convent bell at 6:30 in the morning  
the hum of cars on the Hebron Road  
a man whistling to the cats on Tseruya Street  
the woman cursing dogs and scattering broken glass on Gihon Street  
and the bark of a dog on a balcony  
and the honking of soccer fans on Friday  
the roar of a car skidding angrily in the parking lot,  
jazz in the cafe and smoke from a bonfire  
and when you stand on the hill where Saladin stood  
you'll hear the voice of the muezzin from the Old City

and a singer in the Hinnom Valley  
and on cold nights you'll hear  
the howling of stray dogs.

4.

There's penance in the bulldozers.  
It's soaked in rusty water from the wall  
facing the lit Christmas tree.  
It's embedded in the walls.

The sin is in the floor tiles,  
crystalizing into a flower inside a circle.  
The sky shines amid the windows, trees, ferns,  
a refuge.

Tiles in the bedroom shake when stepped on.  
Perhaps they hid money underneath until they escaped,  
there's a pipe from Mandate days on a wall on the roof,  
an old gutter on the kitchen wall, a neighbor said  
water was trapped there, desolate.

5.

The wall oozes brown water  
that spreads into the girl's room, making piles of whitewash  
fallen swollen lace,  
dereliction and poverty.

Only a distracting illusion  
discourages one from acting:  
insurance, plumber, builder, funds,  
all within your reach.  
Don't think you're unfortunate  
that you're helpless.  
You weren't baptized far from home  
among crowds carrying sacks.

6.

These are the ones who greet you —  
the butcher washing his car out front,  
the owner of the gift shop speaking English at her counter,  
the dark-skinned ladder man at the hardware store,  
a school girl in a dress  
and her brother climbing a tree,  
a dog pressing its wet nose in friendship,  
the mute tailor smiling in his doorway,  
the skinny old couple with a tiny dog,  
the handyman closing a green iron door,  
excited friends leaving the movie theater,

children on the lawn approaching dogs,  
Appelfeld's translator carefully holding an old dog and a young one  
the poet striding across the road in her black leather boots  
the intoxicated seller of alcohol  
the minister's children with hints of smiles riding bikes with abandon  
the seamstress patiently mending things for survivors  
the young cashier at the supermarket  
the hairdresser in tight pants  
a Palestinian woman filmmaker on Commander Street  
and the synagogue sexton sitting at night  
on an iron bench.

7.  
A bulldozer dredges among the ruins facing the house.  
The Hebron Road will become a mall.  
Courage and neglect and cacti  
allow me to face the dust,  
bucket, rag and mop.

8.  
A Christmas tree, a blonde  
pupil, English and Armenian,  
a tapestry, remnant  
from a wedding in 1914,  
a rose-patterned weave,  
next to a photo of the grandfather who fled alone  
and his family.

The land is holy, and what  
what are the deeds? Looting and destruction and annihilation  
in the name of Jewish strength.  
The house you built for the future  
isn't within your grasp,  
nephew and sons and grandsons removed  
from wealth and diamonds.

The young woman held a calf in her hands  
three hours after it was born, wet, matted fur,  
tears in her eyes  
on the fertile American farm  
far from the Old City,  
St. James Street,  
where Orthodox Jews in fur hats  
rush toward the Western Wall at prayer time,  
Christianity haters, disavowing the army  
to what language does she belong —  
clear and comprehensible.

9.

And it's impossible to kill  
the feeling of guilt that pulses like a snake  
on the neck of existence.

The house isn't mine, it is mine  
legally

I paid a mortgage and my children's future  
thirty years in advance  
borne on my shoulders.

Buried  
as if she has no right  
to live  
that has nothing to do with it, she says  
it has nothing to do with it, nothing  
to do with a kiss.

The house is a pauper that was discovered  
holy in tatters  
and will teach me time's  
sanctity —  
cunning came late,  
innocence was revealed,  
the desire for clarity  
defeated.

10.

And these are neighborhood's borders —

On Assael Street an invisible line between the homes of Arabs and Jews.

At the end of the road, near the steps, a barbed wire fence.

On a wall of the house on the corner of Oved Street, bullet holes.

On an alleyway, a fig tree with a fence sprouting from its middle.

Among the thorns on the Hill of Evil Counsel, an abandoned washing machine.

At the end of the promenade to the British High Commissioner's Palace, the cries of stray dogs.

On Yom Kippur concrete barriers block the way to the Hebron Road.

On a wooden sign at the entrance to the neighborhood,

all the stages of occupation are engraved,

I would know the commander, if he were still alive.

Sheltered among leaves on the hill, a cat with kittens,

don't disturb her peace.