

# Seven poems from 'New Wine, Old Bottles' by Dov Ben-Zamir

Translated from the Hebrew by [David Solway](#) (June 2023)



*Embrace, Egon Schiele, 1917*

## A Song of Songs

Can't wait to hug you.  
Can't wait to kiss you.  
Can't wait to lay you down.  
Can't wait to be sought by your slender inquiring fingers.  
Can't wait to burst into the chamber of the Queen.  
Can't wait to lose myself in your eyes and not be seen again.  
Can't wait to have coffee and sandwiches with you.  
Can't wait to trade jokes no matter how corny.  
Can't wait to tell you face to face how much I need you.

Can't wait to praise the joints of your thighs which are like jewels.

Can't wait to praise your feet with shoes and without shoes.

Can't wait to walk beside you.

Can't wait to hold your hand.

Can't wait to tell you stories.

Can't wait to rest between your breasts.

Can't wait to lick your nipples and your belly button.

Can't wait to nuzzle your ear with endearments.

Can't wait to whisper "Behold, thou art fair, O daughter of Jerusalem."

Can't wait to tongue thy delicate nostrils and the roof of thy mouth.

Can't wait to discuss Yehuda Amichai with you.

Can't wait to stroke your hair when you settle your head on my shoulder.

Can't wait for the lilt of your voice.

Can't wait to hear you laugh.

Can't wait to yodel in the shower with you and play the happy fool.

Can't wait to soap you all over as if I were pouring ointments.

Can't wait to gently rub your little hill of frankincense for the fragrance thereof.

Can't wait to comfort you with grapes of Golan.

Can't wait to be taken by you.

Can't wait to see your lips round out like the curve of a spoon.

Can't wait to enter by all your doors.

Can't wait to discover your clefts and secret places.

Can't wait to open you again, my dove, my undefiled.

Can't wait to love you forever.

Can't wait.

## A Bad Job

I sit here scratching my sores with potsherds,  
squeezing pimples, lancing boils,  
watching with horror as fissures open in my skin,  
and I ask You: Lord,  
why must I suffer being innocent of malice,  
why must men be betrayed by their friends  
and cursed by their wives,  
why must the devil roam freely  
like an adolescent with a chip on his shoulder,  
an eternal grudge against those who have done him no harm,  
why must men sicken and die,  
condemned to remember and afflicted with the future,  
why, O Lord, do You permit  
such atrocities to befall,  
why have You separated the heavens from the earth  
and the angels from the demons  
and a man from his rib,  
and why, O Lord, why  
do You respond to my humble questions  
with a missile display in Red Square,  
with *son et lumière* over the Acropolis,  
with all that shock and awe  
about leviathans and mountains and lightning  
as if to say: *that will do now,*  
*what do you know about these things,*  
*suck it up, for I am the Lord*  
*and you are but a sliver of the genealogical tree*  
*whose wood will burn upon my sacrificial altars.*  
*Now take these gifts in quittance*  
*of your aches and tribulations*  
*and cease complaining.*  
What kind of answer is that, O Lord?  
I do not ask for twice as many sons,  
for redoubled flocks and wives and concubines  
and numbered accounts and safety deposit boxes

and a new Bimmer in the driveway.  
I ask only for an answer I can live with.  
I ask only not to have to ask anymore.  
And is that too much to ask,  
O Lord?

## **To Rosa on Her Birthday**

Do not fret,  
my young and vibrant girl,  
with the onslaught of the clock and calendar.  
For your beauty is the sign of time's despair  
and yet it is the gift you make it.  
The years approach you timidly,  
bearing petitions for your clemency,  
or, better still, they are like garments  
that wish only to be worn by you.  
For time does not harm you  
so much as you show time to its advantage,  
strutting down the catwalk  
to model its apparel,  
making time fashionable by your elegance,  
and later in the time of intimacy  
letting the years rustle to the floor,  
stepping out of them, lovely and unblemished,  
as you move toward the unencumbered moment.

## **Chosen**

When the smoke and the dust have cleared  
beneath the lurid arch of the sky,  
the ruins still smoldering,  
the last cries trailing off toward the horizon  
like tiny migrating birds  
that will not return in the spring,

it will begin again,  
the drama of the first creation,  
for they will have left two of us,  
a man and a woman  
to inhabit a Hebrew reverie of the dawn  
like pioneers in a burnt-out garden  
and to water the parched earth  
and tend the shriveled vine  
and bring our progeny back into the world.  
The Lord does not need us  
but men demand our presence,  
they cannot live without us,  
they cannot do without our stolid  
piety and assent.  
We have been chosen,  
we will be fruitful and multiply  
and once again assume our barren destiny.

## **Sailboats**

We walk together on the shore watching  
sailboats clip and amble snootily by  
like slim patricians, as you must think, all  
elegant manners and proud ancestries.  
Love, it's a question of both more *and* less:  
these sails, for example, tipsy on the  
sealine, when several appear, tilting  
each one in the same direction, you can  
see them as angels in formation, bent  
on some divine endeavor or intent,  
skimming, white on azure, glimmer light; or  
see them as soft-shoeing gentlemen-tramps,  
all riff and gag, ankling across the stage,  
linked by a common purpose: if one  
capsizes they all belly over. You can  
see them one way or the other, but to

see them both ways as they slant or totter  
on the windy brink between heaven and  
vaudeville gives you a clearer picture of  
the asymmetricals of sailing,  
of the two of us walking on the shore,  
leaning into the wind and holding hands.

## Consumer Reports

I walk into the store  
and ask for the recent edition  
of *Consumer Reports*.  
I want to check out the specs  
on the latest vehicles,  
specifically, the newest models of flaming chariots.  
The older models were lemons,  
many caught fire and burned to a crisp,  
others belched too much smoke  
and fouled the air with pollution,  
afflicting the faithful with troubles of the lung  
and other horrible diseases,  
and some of these defective chariots  
plummeted from the sky  
to crash on the ground  
and reduce their occupants to piles  
of crushed and mangled bones.  
The Lord understood there was a problem  
and redesigned the chariots  
with spoilers and aerodynamic lines  
while curbing their emissions  
and ensuring they would neither fall to earth  
nor be consumed.  
Here is the flaming chariot I want  
to carry me to immortality—  
this one, sleek, eco-friendly,  
equipped with OnStar directional technology,

all-weather tires, asbestos cladding, reclining bucket seats  
and all the horses needed  
to guarantee liftoff and celestial propulsion,  
this one with the sculpted shape of a wing  
guaranteed to stay aloft,  
built for seraphic mileage,  
with little resistance to the solar winds,  
less thirsty than a camel,  
a green flaming chariot  
that will get me where I want to go  
while salving my conscience  
and making me the best of prophetic citizens  
when I arrive at my heavenly destination.

## **New Wine, Old Bottles**

I pour my heart into these vessels—  
they fill with the wine of both comfort and tribulation,  
the elixir of forgetfulness in the work  
and the trouble that comes from excess and remembrance.  
The grape was pressed from the season's yield  
in the vineyard of the time  
but the bottles in the rack have been there for millennia  
preserved in the cellars of the dark Immemorial.  
I move from the field to the crypt  
and the wine I decant is both dulcet and bitter,  
nepenthe and salt, fruit and acid,  
which brings oblivion for the night by the lamp  
but the morning beats with the pulse of recollection.

## **[Table of Contents](#)**

**David Solway's** latest book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#),

Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [\*Partial to Cain\*](#), appeared in 2019.

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