

Foreword

Seeing, Reading, Breathing

W. J. T. Mitchell

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.

—Joseph Conrad

As I read these words and view these photographs, I find myself noticing my breathing. Many kinds of breath, some of them unnameable, unbearable.

Gasps, at the beauty of the South Hebron hills and Jordan Valley captured in Margaret Olin's photographs taken from early morning to dusk.

Sobs, catches of breath at the sight of the ruined, murdered houses of the Palestinian shepherds, monuments of twisted corrugated metal, shattered stone walls, punctured water tanks, bulldozed stone walls, scattered pieces of furniture.

Panting, out of breath in sympathy at the labor of rebuilding, caught in photographs of men struggling to move a boulder a few feet, gathering shattered furniture, torn walls and broken dishes.

Growls of fury and rage at the thuggish settlers who descend on peaceful shepherds, throwing rocks at them, chasing their sheep, smashing their cars, threatening their children. More growls at the indifferent soldiers and police who wave papers at

the shepherds, push and shove them, threatening them with arrest, insisting that they “are just doing their job,” writing meaningless reports, handcuffing elderly men and carting them away, and then complaining that photographing their activities is “impolite.”

Sighs of relief as the shepherds make tea and offer it to the soldiers as a peace offering. A sigh as the moments of *zulem* (cruelty, dishonor, humiliation) wrought by violence, hate, and cynical indifference are followed by Gandhian non-violence and *sumud* (perseverance).

Holding the breath while drinking the tea and feeling the ceremonial moment out of time, the suspended *epoché*, when Allah is creating and re-creating the world anew, as the shepherds rest before re-building.

The breath of speech, stuttering, inarticulate, shuttling between a shout of “NO!” and a whisper of “YES!” The big inhalation, to gather breath for a long speech describing the terror and beauty conveyed by this book; to analyze the geopolitics that makes it possible for this to go on day after day, year after year; to theorize the psycho-politics of fascism that can make one people perform a variation on the persecution and extermination that are so central to history; to appeal to the better angels of Israel and Palestine, some of them appearing on these hillsides as activists, witnesses, peacemakers, helpers; to shout out to the world that is oblivious to this reign of subtle, well-concealed terror just one more “NO!”

And then to exhale with that whispered “Yes” to children playing barefoot among the stones, the sheep and goats devouring the thorns, the donkeys waiting patiently for their burdens, the women sewing, cooking, cleaning, reading, and arguing about going to school or staying at home, the men standing firm, patient, refusing to move, waiting to be pushed, shoved, arrested, and carted away.

Cries of pain as a murdered shepherd, shot through the spine, is carted away to the hospital where he will not arrive in time because of the roadblocks and checkpoints. Cries of women over their children, arrested for picking cherries from the orchard of an illegal settlement. Cries of command called out to the sheep and the dogs who help to guide them, leading them to the tenderest thorns and greenest patches on the stony hillsides.

Gags of disgust at the settlers' attempts to poison the landscape, even by piping their sewage onto the hillsides below their settlements, poisoning the shepherds' wells, burning their olive trees. The feeling of strangulation, involuntary loss of breath as the physical counterpart to the slow, inexorable, seemingly irresistible choking off of a people and an ancient way of life where the people belong to the land as much as it belongs to them.

Time to take a breath, make some tea, and go on reading.

Breath gathered, then a longing for shouts and chants of protest, for dances of endurance and resistance: how long, O Lord, how long? Let my people go—to their homes, their flocks, their land.

I.1 Umm al-Amad, Ramadan,
South Hebron Hills, June 2018.

