



Irene O’Garden

Tell of Israel

In archaeology, a tell is an artificial hill created by many generations of people living and rebuilding on the same spot. Over time, the level rises, forming a mound.

Time As Tell

Night begins the day, we learn the night we arrive. For Jews and Muslims both, the night belongs to the day that follows it. After sundown, when the first three stars appear, the new day begins. Our day one begun.

From Tel Aviv our host drives us through the light-pricked dark of the West Bank. *Green means mosque*, she tells us. Late we reach her home above the Sea of Galilee, fall into the dreamless.

Morning and a visit to a diplomat, whose farmer husband tells us *ninety-five percent of people here have lost a loved one. Ninety-five percent. I: my brother. Young.*

We journey and he points. *Ancient Roman site.* He tells stories of Josephus. And his own: *I rescued someone from this river once. Next time I came, I heard a guide describe the rescue to*

*his group, stating **he** had done it. The guides tell lies to fascinate their clients.*

Our trip accelerates. We are guests, we have no say.

Fighter planes in tight formation, crisp as dress uniforms. Scratchy broadcast call to prayer. *The border is right there. That's the border.* Triple border: Syria. Jordan. Israel. Peacekeepers. Thudding artillery.

River Jordan. Temple to Pan. Ceasura Maritima. Herod's palace. *In this corner, Paul was two years imprisoned.*

Tel Megiddo

You cannot dig here but you find.

Dig. Noun and verb. Head archaeologist tells: *We no longer scrape off whole layers. Now just a square, just a trench at a time, leaving much untouched for future, better methods.*

Layers of life merge incrementally, until the eye opens into the Early Bronze Age: a perfect moon of basalt, five thousand years old. Part of a massive temple it may take five thousand meticulous years to reveal.

Time Will Tell

This was just discovered. This was a hip of dirt piled to that ledge till nineteen sixty- seven. This is the border.

Skeletal synagogue, patches of fresco, carved menorah stone, tripod feet, flaming wheels. Carved and painted, grown and eaten, precious yet today—the seven species of antiquity: fig pomegranate date grape olive wheat barley.

Journey As Tell

Facts stories events introductions privileges days nights meals pile on each other. No time to excavate. We are guests. We have no say. Move on. Experience mounds on experience. Sunset. Three stars. New day.

Tell Stories

This journalist, a light in his eyes like a lamp passing behind an iron door. He confesses *Poetry is my deepest heart but I do not tell it. My world is not friendly to poets, to readers of poems; readers of poems become poets, poets read feelings,*

respond to the world. The world is not kind. I cover news. His eyes darken. The iron door shuts.

This kibbutznik musician tells his communal upbringing left him free to roam the fields but not to see his parents, at work for the common good. His wife stuffs crumpled spears of lemongrass into a battered pot, serves the quenching tea with crunchy peanuts big as knuckles. Shows us then her studio, her brawny terra-cotta sculptures.

They met here at the kibbutz bomb shelter. Bomb shelter. *Every house has one.* Paper plates, household junk on the bunks.

The day we are to tour the secret bullet factory, I decline and pace instead the planted courtyard in bird-embellished silence.

This museum director tells *Intifada, from the Arabic: tremor, shivering, shuddering. Bursts of terror. Can you take a bus becomes the question. "If your bus blows up, Son, make them bring you here to this emergency room. Your brother's having his cast replaced."*

One day I came home. Long-range weapons had damaged my house and my neighbors'.

'That's it,' they said. 'We're leaving.'

Soberly we nod in her garden reclaimed, among her olives, bay, roses. Garlic big as baby fists twists over her table.

Next day, when they returned—

"Your neighbors didn't leave?" we ask.

Oh, just for the holiday. Life goes on.

Plucks a fig.

Tell Stories

Somebody swindled somebody. Somebody did C-sections on pregnant soldiers on a battlefield, watching instructions on YouTube. Somebody rescued someone.

Those two fought every day for sixty years. But they were good fights.

Experience mounds on experience.

Mount of Olives. Mount of Beatitudes. *Jesus walked here.*

Jesus taught here. Here is the route Jesus took. This is the only way Jesus could come.

They knew him. They loved him. They hated him.

He had friends in high places. Magdalene was likely rich in this wealthy town of Magdala. Likely hired Jesus for carpentry.

Remains of the synagogue. Patches of fresco. Jesus taught here, where the parables live.

The First Temple. The Second Temple. The Destruction of the Temple. The agony in the garden. The agony of everyone. Tumbled stones of the Temple, heaped here two thousand years.

Tunnels under the Temple. Mysterious, tremendous, bus-sized building-block of solid stone at the base of the Western Wall.

Pray Tell

The Western Wall above, where under the golden dome the pigeons swoop the golden stone.

The need to pray is great.

The self who prays listens.

The wall hums.

is there room for my prayer what if there's no space, no time to poke my paper in if I share my prayer will it not come true please please please thank you

Selfies, forbidden at the Western Wall, are snapped anyway: a shoulder shows, a mirror drops. Even the vain pray. Even the brash.

Wall warms the palms: *it's moving breathing like a living animal what if there's no time no space*

Now move aside. The need to pray is great. That pigeon wants that shady place that other pigeon has.

Experience mounds on experience

Sail the Sea of Galilee. Wade among curious fish. Nearby, apostles raised their nets groaning with Christ-foretold bounty.

Messiah. Has he come? Will He come? Is this He?

Sumptuous hummus. Such labneh. Fig pomegranate date grape olive wheat barley.

Mohammed climbed this rock and was lifted by Ariel. *The Dome of the Rock is a shrine, not a mosque.*

Sundown. Three stars. New Day.

No river, no sea near Jerusalem. Flow not easy. Hills and valleys hard to cross. Donkeys made it possible. Slaves made it possible. Herod made it possible.

Here at his hidden gate is probably where Pilate stood. And where we stand, the crowd cried for Barrabas.

Built around the bony stone of Golgotha and the tomb that Constantine declared belonged to Christ, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

On Holy Saturday each year for the “Miracle” of Holy Fire, twenty thousand gather in the single-exit church, holding fists of burning candles. Hair on fire sometimes, passion, weeping, screams for God, carrying flames home on special flights to orthodox Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria.

Our guide indicates the probably real tomb, unadorned but for an unlit oil lamp one of us backs into, splattering blessings.

Plazas. Quarters. Blocks. Building blocks. City on top of city on top of city, time jumping constantly. The present is the core sample.

Truth Tells

They shoot that building on the hill for Bethlehem on Christmas cards.

Christians make up one percent here. Only twelve thousand Believers.

Banksy his hotel: “The Walled-off Astoria” overlooking the West Bank Wall at Bethlehem, where it is not Christmas cards they shoot.

Security cameras and slingshots mounted on the bar wall like trophy animals; a mural of Israeli and Palestinian soldiers pillow fighting.

You can go to Jericho but only on a bus.

City of Gates: Zion Gate New Gate Herod’s Gate Dung Gate Lions Gate Gate of Damascus. Jaffa’s a Gate and a breach in the wall made for an emperor’s entrance. The Gate of Mercy is blocked, awaiting The Messiah and the resurrected dead.

The Gate of Mercy is blocked.

You must join us. You cannot join us. You don't deserve to join us.

I will not look at you. I must not look at you. Get out of here. Come in.

Bright wares. Dark markets. Blinding stone. Heaps of greens, figs, fake oreos: plareos, sugar incense dung battered peeling paint sky flags weapons. Arms in young arms.

Covered women. Women covered. *Do not look at me. I cannot look at you.*

Antiquities: the widow's mite now available in shops. Animals dance on Armenian pottery.

In your business. In your face. Checking his papers. Bumping into her. Deliberately.

Screeching brinking schoolgirls flitting. Booming boys bounce down stairs.

Please. Stay with tour.

Pure and lovely voice singing Ladino, Yiddish at table.

Sundown. Three stars. New Day.

Tiles Tell

This land is no mosaic where elements can be removed and still a picture seen. Look underfoot. Tiles tell. In this land, by design, throbbing cruciforms recede to daisies, daisies blossom into crosses back to daisies, black and white eternally whiching, switching. Ancient patterns. Both/none dominant neither ignored no either /or. Not picture. Pattern. Both.

Sundown. Three stars. New Day.

But the Babylonians. But the Assyrians. But the Romans. But the Crusaders. But the Ottomans. But the British. But the Israelis. But the Palestinians. But the Israelis. But the Palestinians.

The circle and the star. The underlying patterns.

But the cups of tea. But the babies. But the bread. The dates. The wine. The smoke. The greens. The weavings. The hanging meat. The sparkling fish. The raucous laughter. The drums. The music. Clapping rhythm. Shofar.

Sundown. Three stars. New day.

Self As Tell

Slipping under consciousness, lifetime piles up. Shards
surface. Bright memories. Whole events. We are guests.
Sundown. Three stars. New day.

*Irene O’Garden has won or been nominated for prizes in nearly every writing category from stage to e-screen, hardcovers and literary magazines and anthologies. Her critically-acclaimed play [Women On Fire](#), (Samuel French) played sold-out houses at Off-Broadway’s Cherry Lane Theatre and was nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award. O’Garden won The Pushcart Prize for a lyric essay included in her new book “**Glad To Be Human**,” forthcoming from Mango in Spring 2020. (“Tell of Israel” will also be included.) Last January Mango published her memoir **Risking the Rapids: How My Wilderness Adventure Healed My Childhood**. Other books: **Fat Girl** (Harper) and **Fulcrum: Selected Poems** (Nirala) www.ireneogarden.com.*

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