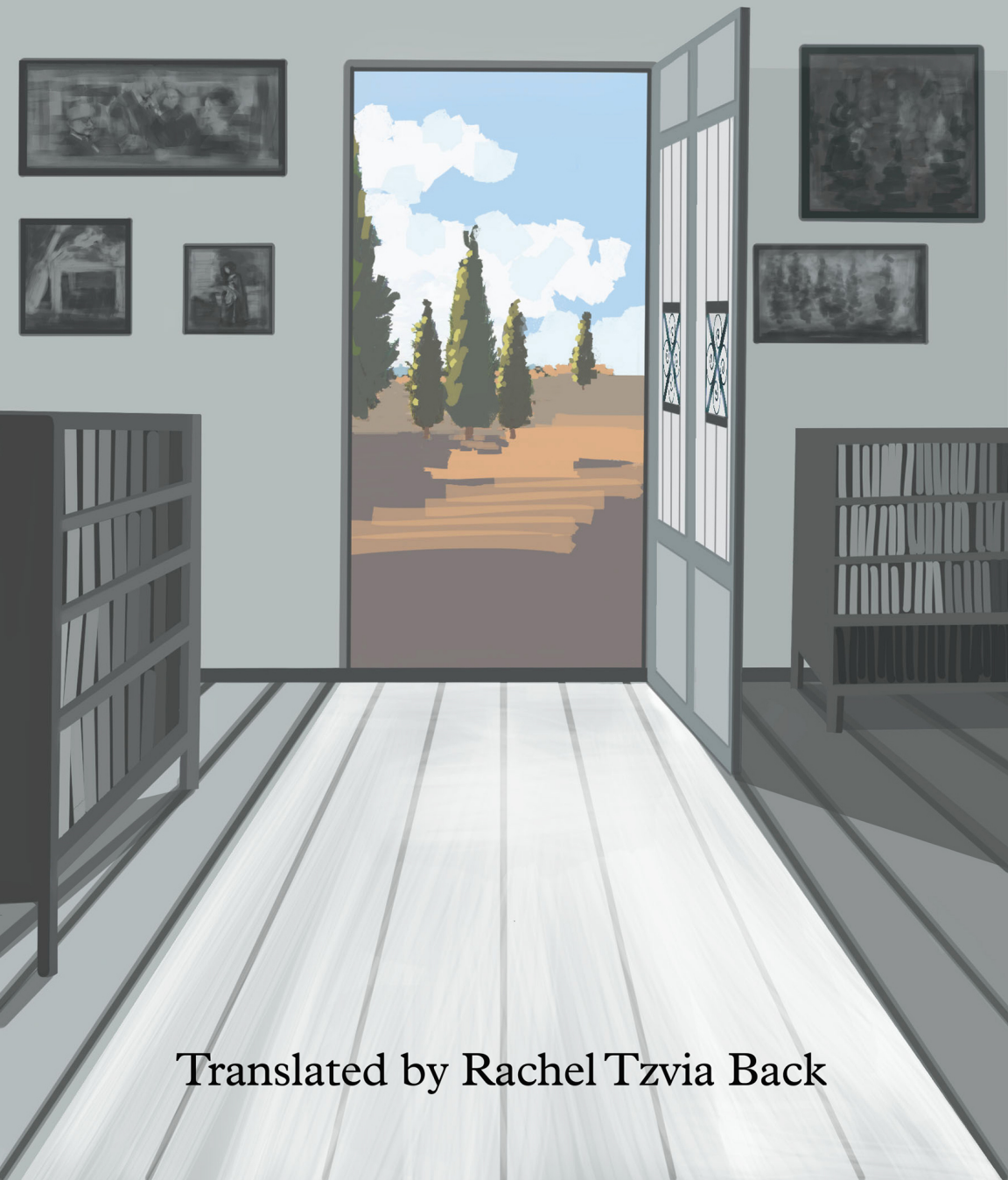
NOW AT THE THRESHOLD

The Late Poems of Tuvia Ruebner



Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back

Now at the Threshold



Tuvia Ruebner
1924–2019

Now at the Threshold

The Late Poems of Tuvia Ruebner

TRANSLATED
by Rachel Tzvia Back

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS

©Hebrew Union College Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ruebner, Tuvia, 1924-2019, author. | Back, Rachel Tzvia, 1960- translator.
Title: Now at the threshold : the late poems of Tuvia Ruebner / translated by Rachel Tzvia Back.
Description: [Cincinnati] : Hebrew Union College Press, [2020] | Summary: "The final poems of Israeli poet Tuvia Ruebner, translated and introduced by Rachel Tzvia Back"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019052364 (print) | LCCN 2019052365 (ebook) | ISBN 9780878201860 (hardback) | ISBN 9780878201877 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Poetry.
Classification: LCC PJ5054.R49 A2 2020 (print) | LCC PJ5054.R49 (ebook) | DDC 892.41/6--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019052364
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019052365
2013042361

Set in Arno Pro by Raphaël Freeman MISTD, Renana Typesetting
Cover design by Elena Barschazki
Photograph of Ruebner thanks to Mel Freilich

OLD MAN IN LOVE

The old man's in love, the old man loves!
His frozen body is all of a sudden ablaze.
A pine tree adorned with ivy he sees as a bird.
A bulging rock is for him a bull.
To the sand dunes he calls out, ho, how much water!
One, he claims, is two and none other.
At the midday sea he shouts Fire! Fire!
He's afraid, he dares, he dares, he's afraid.
Father, says he, father's a kid-goat,
and a kid-goat is *zuzei,* worthless coins of note.
To the stick he calls: Dog. A dog will chase.
And *shunrah*'s a cat or tiger or chimp out of place.
The Angel of Death will he kill or be killed?
Who is the slaughtering *shochet*? He asks, and how will
we live if no one dies?
Is he not sated? Does he still hunger?
The old man loves! He loves! He loves!

CONTENTS

Introduction xi

A Note on Organization xv

I / THE CROSSROADS

Haydn 3
A Plenitude of Flowers 5
Writing Poems 7
The Path 9
Only a Crook Gives More Than He Has 11
23.2.2014 13
Again It's Spring 15
[The silence] 17
Almost My Brother 19
What Can We Say to the Dead 23
Before First Morning Twilight 27
Night 29
Lampedusa: Terra Fermé 31
Surprises 33
The Cellar 35
Since Then 37
The Perfect Wasn't 41
The Great Waters 43
Litany 45
Plain and Unadorned 49
After Beckett 51

II / STILL BEFORE

Angel Becoming 57
In the Land of the Deer 59
[Writing a poem today is] 63
Two in Secret 65
The Valley Train, An Autumn Fairy Tale 67
No Way 71
Gaza Nightmare 73

VaYikrah 75
1 *VaYikrah* (And He Called) 75
2 *Korban* (Sacrifice) 77
3 Gold 79
Wonderings 81
Amen 83
A Boy 85
During the Days of Awe 87
Ecuador 89
[With the black pit] 91
There Are Shouts 93
Mother and Father 95
Untitled 97
Photograph 99
Will 101
At the Hour 103

III / MORE NO MORE

Fireworks, a Song in Old Style 107
On the Longest Day of the Year 109
Underground 111
Eikha / O How 113
All the Suffering 115
Draft for an End-of-Days Vision without a Trace of Poetry 117
Wrinkles 121
Friday 123
Messengers 125
I Am Still 127
He Walks in the Fields 129
Don't 131
Eyes 133
On Reading Grimms' Fairy Tales in Their Original 135
Nevo 137
[Memory of the unspeakable] 139
Eye of the Dragon 141

What Evades 143
Not Scylla and Charybdis 145
Marsyas Who Competed with Apollo 147
The Tempest 149
Hungry 151
The Echo 153
Words 155

"Farewell to You, Thank You" 159

Notes 161

Books by Tuvia Ruebner 181

Books by Rachel Tzvia Back 185

Acknowledgments 187

INTRODUCTION

In late 2013, Hebrew poet Tuvia Ruebner published his fifteenth poetry collection, which he titled *Last Ones*. In interviews and in personal communications following that publication, and following his ninetieth birthday a few months later (in January 2014), he declared that that poetry collection would, indeed, be his last one. The poems of that book felt to him both optimistic and summarizing, and – as he offered in a May 2014 newspaper interview marked by his characteristic whimsy – "…in the meantime, I don't want to ruin that for the reader. Also, after titling a collection *Last Ones*, it's a problem publishing another book – no?"[1]

But, the poet kept writing. In his ninety-first and ninety-second years in particular, Ruebner experienced a period of poetic productivity such as he had never previously known. "I write now almost every day," he described in the aforementioned interview, "…exactly like a good hen. Even if what I lay are not always golden eggs. This has never happened to me before. It's like a flood. Like a last flame."[2] Working in his small kibbutz home with its art-covered walls (Breughel's "Hunters in the Snow," Giacometti's "Walking Man," paintings by Vermeer, and much more), Ruebner composed, crafted, and revised poem after poem – as though he were a poet in the flush of first youthful creativity and not a poet in the tenth decade of his life. When visitors would come, Ruebner would pull out from beside the armchair where he sat the folder of new poems, in order to recite to the avid listening ears his latest creations. Before too long, it became apparent that there was a book to be published – and then another, and yet another.

And so, *Last Ones* was not last. In 2015 *The Crossroads*, and then in 2017 the collection titled *Still Before,* were published – the titles of both books subverting with gentle irony the poet's own earlier certainty of endings. In 2018, after months of composing haikus, Ruebner published *Seventeen*, a collection devoted in full to these seventeen-syllable poems, a form to which he had never devoted himself so fully. And in spring 2019, a few months after the poet's ninety-fifth birthday, Ruebner's nineteenth poetry collection, titled *More No More*, was published. *This* one, he said, would really be his last.[3]

1. "'By Chance I Stayed Alive': A Conversation with Tuvia Ruebner." Yoni Livneh. *Yediot Ahronot* Literature Section, 30.5.2014, 24–25 [Hebrew]. All translations from Hebrew are mine.
2. Ibid.
3. In April 2019, I sent this introduction and the completed manuscript of translations to Ruebner, so he could read and comment on them. A week later, I travelled to Kibbutz Merchavia to visit and review together with him his corrections. Our session began, as all our meetings

And so, the poetry collection *More No More* is his last. On July 29th 2019, at half past midnight, Tuvia Ruebner passed away. The last poem he composed in late June – a love poem titled "A Man Writes a Poem to his Wife on Her 87th Birthday" – had been published in the Friday newspaper ten days earlier.

There are few examples of such prolific, and consistently original and significant, artistic production by poets in their very old age. But the wonder of this poet's continued creativity seems even greater within the context of the many personal tragedies that marked his life, any one of which could have rendered him mute. Born in Slovakia in 1924, the seventeen-year-old Ruebner arrived in Palestine on his own in 1941, having left his entire family behind – a farewell that Ruebner described as "still weighing on his bones" many decades later.[4] Manfred and Elisabet Ruebner, Ruebner's parents, and his twelve-year-old little sister Alice, nicknamed Litzi, were murdered in Auschwitz in the summer of 1942, news the young Ruebner received only much later. The loss of his family, said Ruebner, was always before his eyes.[5] Settled in Kibbutz Merchavia in the Jezreel Valley, Ruebner married, and in early 1950 he and his young wife Ada – mother of his infant daughter Miriam – were involved in a bus accident. Ada was killed at once and Ruebner was seriously wounded. With burns over much of his body, Ruebner's recovery was slow and painful. Three years later, he married again, to Galila Jizreeli, a young pianist from Kibbutz Ein Harod, and two sons were born. The family flourished, and Ruebner taught and wrote, slowly establishing his literary reputation. However, yet another unimaginable tragedy lurked in the future: in 1983 Ruebner's younger son, Moran, then twenty-three years old, traveled to South America for an extended trip and after a period, disappeared. No trace of him was ever found.[6]

These lost beloveds wander also through Ruebner's late poetry, pain and sorrow undiminished by the decades that passed since their loss. There is, however, one shift in these poems: in some of them, the poem moves from "unrelenting longing," to the poet's imagining his own passing from the world – the only

did, with a small glass of whiskey. Ruebner offered corrections and clarifications, and gave his approval for this book. He was generous with praise and expressed his pleasure at having another English language collection being readied for publication. This paragraph's final sentence was then in the present tense ("This one, he says, will really be his last"), and led the poet to smile. The short paragraph that follows is now, with great sadness, added to the introduction.

4. From Ruebner's memoir *A Short Long Life*, 2006, 7 [Hebrew].

5. As a family photo taken shortly before Ruebner left Slovakia hangs above his desk, his lost family was literally ever before his eyes.

6. For a more extensive and comprehensive biographic and artistic overview of Ruebner, see "Introduction" in *In the Illuminated Dark*, 2015, xvii–xxviii. In addition, see "Chronology of Tuvia Ruebner," also in *Illuminated*, 343–45.

event, it seems, that can end his longing. Thus Ruebner writes in a tight and restrained six-line poem, one of the many about his lost son: "His eyes are in my eyes / His body is the body of a dream/ . . . / I will not let him go / Till I die" ("Untitled," p. 97). In another poem, the speaker seems to find relief in the poem's concluding realization: "If I join you, my lost ones / you will no longer be my lost ones. / Not a single one" ("Will," p. 101). The "lost ones" include, especially in these late collections , also the close friends and artist-colleagues who have passed away – a vibrant community of Israeli artists and poets, many of them immigrant/refugees like Ruebner himself, some of them survivors. There were those who died many years before (like the writers Dan Pagis and Yaakov Shabtai) and more recent losses (such as the artist Yosl Bergner). Ruebner bids them farewell one by one, even as he continues conversing with them. With the passing of Haim Gouri in early 2018, Ruebner became the last poet of his generation left.[7]

Poetry propelled by memories and informed by loss may be considered customary and expected from an old poet; what is less typical, perhaps, is poetry intimately engaged with the events of the day. And yet, in these late collections, even as the poet himself rarely leaves his home, Ruebner remains fully engaged in the world beyond the confines of his kibbutz room. Inevitably, it is the direction of Israel – the place that saved him, the land that promised redemption – that preoccupies and troubles him in particular. Everywhere he looks, the poet sees violence, racism, and corruption reigning supreme: "O how have you become / a land where truth turns its back on itself," the poet-prophet laments ("*Eikha* / O How," p. 113). Indeed, throughout these late collections, in language both bold and uncompromising, Ruebner offers fierce protest against the lies being told by those in power, against the crimes routinely committed in the preservation of power, and against the steady perversion of the Holocaust legacy.[8] Despite the toil and the toll of writing such poems, at any age, the poet keeps working and writing, resisting complacency and refusing the complicity of silence and despair.

And then there are the love poems: love poems to his beloved wife of sixty-six years, love poems to the Jezreel valley landscapes he inhabited his entire adult life, love poems to the classical music that always nurtured his spirit, to

7. Gouri passed away on January 31st, 2018, at ninety-four years of age (coincidentally, the day after Ruebner's ninety-fourth birthday). For years, the two old poets were considered "Elders of the Tribe" – with Ruebner always pointing out that he was "much" younger than Gouri, by four months.

8. "I see the Holocaust as the *caesura* of human history," said Ruebner in the summer of 2014. "This 'phenomenon' [of the Holocaust] created a new man who should be wary of himself, for he's understood what he is capable of" (personal communication). The appropriation of the Holocaust legacy for fostering nationalistic fervor "demeans the dead," asserted Ruebner.

the birds that still sing and the dawn that still comes. "The old man's in love," writes Ruebner in the poem that stands as epigraph to this English collection, "the old man loves!" Life moves relentlessly, often violently, onward – and yet, the poet's creative imaginings can transform the world (as the poem's metaphors suggest), even as his musical iterations (in this instance, the poem's light-hearted rhyming couplets) seem to turn darkness into celebration. Thus, within the replenishing force of creativity and of loving so abundantly, the unsated poet – "still hungering" – lives on.

Of course, death is also present in these late poems; for a nonagenarian poet, how could it be otherwise? Ruebner talks to death, wonders about it, how and when it will come. In one poem he wishes for himself a speedy passage from this world: "At the hour he rises up / to annihilate me – / Oh then, please, in one fell swoop, / not two, but one! // May it be done, / Amen" ("At the Hour," p. 103). In another, he asks – of whom, it isn't clear – that he may gently slip into death as into his signature white *galabiyah*, "or better yet: as in surfing the waves / to surf into the nothing" ("Don't," p. 131). As with his poems of protest and of love, these poems too are marked by the frankness of their gaze, and the honesty and fearlessness of their engagement. For the poet at the age of ninety-five, death was not an opponent, nor a force to refuse or struggle with; and yet, these poems offer a lingering sense of reluctance to pass out of this world. "Is this not the best of all worlds?" wonders the poet, confessing his desire "… to say / again and again, life is beautiful. It's beautiful to be alive" ("On the Longest Day of the Year," p. 109). Thus, one discovers in these late poems what has been present throughout Tuvia Ruebner's astonishing oeuvre but announces itself now, toward the end, with even greater force: this poet of unspeakable losses and unfathomable sorrows is no less a poet of praise. "I knew that the unsayable is / unsayable," the poet admits in a very late text. And still,

> I orbited around it
> like around a black hole
> in order to say in dark days
> there are moments of light, praise for life.[9]

In the tradition of Psalms, Ruebner's late poems marvel at the breath given, at the day offered, and at the wonder of a word speaking from the page – even as the poet himself gently moved toward silence.[10]

9. "I Am Still," p. 127.

10. See the last line of the last poem of Ruebner's last book, "Silence for you is praise" ("Words," p. 155).

A NOTE ON ORGANIZATION

This book is dedicated to poems Ruebner wrote and published from 2014–2019 (from his ninetieth to his ninety-fifth years). I have chosen poems from three of the four collections published in these years: *The Crossroads* (2015), *Still Before* (2017) and *More No More* (2019).[11] The selection process regarding which poems to include from each book was governed by various attributes and considerations, from a poem's representativeness or singularity, to a poem's beauty. As is self-evident, my personal preferences and aesthetic judgments influenced the selection. The poems from each book appear in their own section. In determining the placement of the poems within each section, I have adhered to the order in which they appear in the original collections. Ruebner, together with his editors Rafi Weichert (*The Crossroads*) and Liat Kaplan (*Still Before* and *More No More*), invested in each book's trajectory considerable thought and meaning; though I've included only a portion of each book's poems, I believe that the original trajectories of Ruebner's collections are still represented here.

The book's endnotes serve several purposes. First, the notes elucidate the many biblical, liturgical and talmudic allusions woven through Ruebner's texts by directing the reader toward relevant source materials. The second purpose of the notes is to provide historical and biographic information that impacts one's understanding of the poem. Finally, any pronounced deviation from the Hebrew original, from alternative enjambments and change in stanza length to lexis changes, are addressed and explained in the notes.

Finally, a note on Ruebner's untitled poems: in the Table of Contents, these untitled poems are identified by the poem's first line in brackets. However, the poems themselves are marked only by the asterisk at page's top, in order to recreate the opening spatial silence evoked by an absent title and in adherence to Ruebner's own presentation of these texts.

11. But for the few haiku poems Ruebner published in *Still Before*, I have not included in this collection Ruebner's poems from his haiku collection, *Seventeen*. As the poems of that collection are singularly defined by their strict syllabic form, translating them with adherence to that form (as one must) renders English versions that are stilted and do not adequately stand on their own as poetic entities.

I

THE CROSSROADS

הַיידן

הַיְדְן הַהוֹלֵךְ וּמַזְקִין.
מַה יָדַע כַּאֲשֶׁר כָּתַב אֶת הַפֶּרֶק הַשֵּׁנִי
שֶׁל רְבִיעִית הַמֵּיתָרִים, אוֹפּוּס 77, מס׳ 1?
הַאִם חָשַׁשׁ מִפְּנֵי מַה שֶׁחָשׁ?
הַאִם חָשׁ שֶׁמַּשֶּׁהוּ עָתִיד לִקְרוֹת?
מַשֶּׁהוּ אָפֵל, מַשֶּׁהוּ נוֹרָא שֶׁאֵין לְהַבִּיעַ
לֹא בְּמִלִּים וְלֹא בִּצְלִילִים?
מִמָּה הָיָה לוֹ לַחֲשֹׁשׁ? בָּטוּחַ בְּבֵיתוֹ בְּשֶׁנִּבְרוֹן,
"בְּרִיאַת הָעוֹלָם" מְשֻׁלֶּמֶת, וְהוּא חֲבִיב הַקֵּיסָר.
מִפְּלִישַׁת הַבַּרְבָּרִים לְוִינָה שָׁלוֹ, לְבוּרְגֶנְלַנְד,
שִׁלְטוֹן הַבַּרְבָּרִים בְּכָל מָקוֹם?
תְּבוּנָה תְּלוּיַת תּוֹעֵבָה?

לֹא צָרִיךְ לְהַלֵּךְ בְּדִמְיוֹנוֹת,
לְהַמְצִיא אֶפְשָׁרִיּוֹת דִּמְיוֹנִיּוֹת
בְּיַחַס לְאָמָנִים וּלְאָמָנוּת.
אֱנָשִׁים כָּמוֹנִי, פַּרְטִיטוּרוֹת לָהֶם שֻׁטַּח מְכֻסֶּה לִכְלוּךְ זְבוּבִים.
לָכֵן אֲנִי שָׁם תַּקְלִיטוֹר וּמַקְשִׁיב.
אֲוִיר הַבֹּקֶר עוֹדוֹ קָרִיר.
שׁוּם זִכְרוֹנוֹת.
הַפְּרֶסְטוֹ סוֹחֵף.
הָעוֹרְבָן מְנַסֶּה לְחַקּוֹת אוֹתוֹ עַל פִּי דַּרְכּוֹ
וְהָעֶפְרוֹנִי עַל פִּי דַּרְכּוֹ שֶׁלּוֹ.
הָעוֹלָם מַחֲזִיק, אֵינוֹ מִתְפּוֹרֵר
וּבוֹ, בַּסּוֹבֵב הַזָּקֵן הַזֶּה, עַל צִירוֹ הֶהָזוּי שְׁוֵה־נֶפֶשׁ
עִם שׁוֹחֲטָיו וְלֵיצָנָיו, עִם חֲכָמָיו וּרְשָׁעָיו,
עִם שׁוֹדְדֵי עֲנָיָיו, וְעִם תַּמָּיו
הִמְצִיא הַיְדְן אֶת רְבִיעִית הַמֵּיתָרִים.
דְּבָרִים פְּלִאִיִּים קוֹרִים. תַּעֲנוּג לְחָיוֹת.

HAYDN

Haydn, growing old.
What did he know when he wrote the second movement
of the String Quartets, Opus 77, number 1?
Did he fear what he was sensing?
Did he sense what was soon to happen?
Something dark, something terrible not to be told
not in words and not in musical notes?
What did he have to fear? Safe in his house in Schönbrunn,
"The Creation" perfect, and he a favorite of the Kaiser.
Fear of the barbarians invading his Vienna, his Burgenland,
reign of the barbarians everywhere?
Reason subservient to abomination?

One needs no flight of fancy
to invent imaginary possibilities
regarding artists and art.
For people like me a musical score seems a surface covered in flyspecks.
That's why I put on a record and listen.
The morning air is still cool.
No memories.
The presto is stirring.
The jaybird tries to imitate it in its way
and the lark in its own way.
The world goes on, without crumbling
and on it, on this old planet spinning round on its delusional indifferent axis,
with its killers and its clowns, its wise and its wicked,
with the plunderers of its poor, and with its innocent,
Haydn created the String Quartets.
Wondrous things happen. What a joy to be alive.