

ZERUYA SHALEV'S SPEECH THE 2019 JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

Dear Vera Michalski, distinguished Members of the jury, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honored and moved to be with you today, in this beautiful place, uniquely created for writers, for literature. In a world driven all-the-more in the rapid pace of technology, a pace so different from the slow and patient beat of the writing process, it is almost a miracle to encounter this kind of generosity and grace. Here, the pain that literature is made of becomes a source of beauty and inspiration. Receiving this distinguished award is for me an empowering peak of this metamorphosis. Thank you.

Pain had been the main theme of my writing since I started to write at six years old. 'Why are your poems so sad?' I remember my mother complaining, 'You have a good childhood!' I wasn't a sad child, I knew happiness, but with a sharp childish instinct I felt the potential of loss at any given moment. Growing up in Israel in the sixties and seventies meant absorbing fears and anxieties, shocks and pressures, maturing between wars. But my writing, then and now, was mainly dedicated to the wars between sexes, and not between nations, to emotional borders and not geographic ones, to the nuances of internal life, and to those of language that shape them in words. Maybe it was my way to rebel against the Israeli reality. The wars inside the soul, inside the family, were not easy either, but there's more hope in them.

I always believed that literature must startle and even break our hearts, not caress them. But more and more I see that the literary encounter with pain is not meant to torment and depress but also to open the eyes. I try to catch the tensions between change and determinism, fall and recovery, love and loss, past and present, to bring about change: in the lives of literary characters and perhaps, sometimes, to those of readers as well.

When I started writing *Pain*, I wanted to explore the growing attraction to the past. I noticed that many people around me started looking for testimonies of their pasts wherever they could find them. I felt like at a certain point in life, and not too far along the way, the past becomes more interesting and even more exciting than the future.

I tried to find ways to turn the attraction to the past into a dramatic encounter in the present, and I thought about Iris, 45, a school principle and a mother of two, who unexpectedly meets the man who abandoned her many years before. In this encounter, she would meet the girl she once was, her dreams and expectations, and whatever she left behind.

Could there be a present opportunity for a great love of the past? Could the person who caused us most pain be the one to heal us? Could we truly heal ourselves without causing pain to our most beloved?

These questions go beyond the classical conflict between the boring husband and the fascinating lover. For me they are about the substance and the nature of love: explorations of the attractions and dangers of total, symbiotic relationships, the desire of two to become one. Does this attraction threaten to erase our separate, individual existence? Must we separate from the dream of total union, in order to create an actual union?

These are ancient questions. Plato's *Symposium* tells the myth of Androgynous: in a distant past, humans were double. They had two heads and four arms, and they threatened the Gods precisely for this reason. The Gods then cut them in half, and that's why our powerful desire to unite, or reunite, still emerges. In the Talmud, there's an even more interesting version of this story. Therein, those two-headed, four-legged creatures were glued to each other at the back, so even though they were inseparable, they could never really meet, never actually see each other. They couldn't even share the same view, they could only see the opposite of what the other sees. This ancient description still reminds me so many couples I know!

These dilemmas of union and separation are of course universal. In this respect, the story of *Pain* could've easily happened in the US or in Europe. But this is where the Israeli reality, the Israeli pain, enters the picture. One regular morning, Iris rushes to work, but Micky, her husband, stops her at the door. He reminds her that today, exactly ten years ago, was the traumatic morning of her injury in a terror attack. Then, in one moment, pain comes back.

For me it was a great surprise to find the Israeli Palestinian conflict exploding right in the beginning of the novel, into the heroine's body. I survived a terrorist attack in Jerusalem in 2004, but I promised myself I will never write about it. Maybe as part of my ancient-rebel against the Israeli reality, I didn't want terrorism to enter into my novels, it was enough to have it enter my life.

But when I started writing *Pain*, the story flowed out of me without stop, and I couldn't resist it. I realized that the years that passed gave the old pain a new face and a new meaning. Throughout the book, pain grows beyond merely suffering, it becomes the engine that pushes the plot forward, that helps the characters go

beyond their pasts. In ways I hadn't expected, narrating *Pain* helped me go beyond my past as well.

On this delightful occasion, I'm so happy I didn't keep that promise. I want to thank all those who made this moment possible: my great translator Laurence Sendrowicz, my wonderful editors in Gallimard and all the staff, my devoted agent Nilli Cohen.

Zeruya Shalev