

## **A. Front Door**

Dear Sofie,

We've never met face to face. You don't know me, and I don't know you, at least not in the day-to-day sense of the expression. So, I'll admit, I feel strange writing you these words now. I don't know when or under which circumstances you will read them, but for some reason, it's important for me to imagine you reading them. Here, at my place, lights are turning on in the windows of an apartment across the building, but there's no one there. I peek into the neighbors' apartments: a tall bookcase from floor to ceiling, a bed barely lit by dim light, and see-through drapes. A city. It's not too big, you know, but it's still a city. Tonight, like all nights, the rattle of machines digging the light-rail line in front of my building doesn't cease. I think of the bitter irony of this digging fever.

I haven't seen the exhibition, at least not yet. We didn't mention it on the phone; what did we talk about? Mostly, we didn't speak, but as it happens often between people who mutually understand something, we didn't have to talk about it. You know what I mean. So, to write to you, I stopped reading your posts, didn't open the pictures you sent of the exhibition, and didn't read the favorable newspaper review. I like writing about the exhibition from a distance, building it in my imagination, room by room, like a plan, an idea. Just between us, the months that have passed since the war started were an excuse for me to retreat inward while, at the same time, they distanced me from myself, so the act of writing from a distance seems logical to me. I hope the following words will express this distance.

Meital sent me photos of the works you included in the exhibition. I decided to employ them and my memories of an earlier visit to Litvinovsky's home to see a different exhibition. I read online that the house was built by the Salmans, an Arab-Christian family, at the start of the last century, was abandoned or evacuated in 1948 (where were its owners sent? Where did they go?) and eventually given to Pinchas Litvinovsky who brought his family to live in it and opened a painter's studio in it. A home of wanderings, of displacement, on Kaf-Tet Be'November<sup>1</sup> Street. Now, it serves as a halfway house for your work. Here, too, history's bitter irony burdens my thoughts precisely because it is so apparent. I sit down again to write. Maybe this time, I'll manage to get to your exhibition.

## **B. Stairs**

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<sup>1</sup> The street is named "November 29, 1947", after the day the UN Assembly decided on the end the British mandate and the partition of mandatory Palestine and the establishment of two independent economically linked states in Israel - a Jewish state and an Arab state (Resolution 181).

I know that a staircase leads to the top floor where the exhibition is displayed. Did you choose to hang any works along the way up, or do visitors see nothing as they ascend the wooden stairs? I try to remember the creaking of the heavy wood and the smooth rail preserving the weight of this house's past. Here and there, the paint may be peeling off the plaster that covers the stone walls. The document you sent includes a photograph of a window illuminated by northern light. You could have hung it facing the backs of those who ascend the stairs, under the arched windows opening to the yard and Jerusalem. Your window, from the Islington 1988 series, opens to a different garden. Through it can be seen bushes and hedgerows of lush vegetation and an old, wide tree whose branches break in angles that remind me of stairs ascending outside the photo's inner frame, which is the house's window. It's a strange and beautiful way to photograph the inside of a home, that is, the view from the inside out—an image inside an image. I know you shot this window in 2021, so I understand this frame as your way of shooting through time. What happened that year, 1988, in Islington? You must possess this knowledge, but for me, the information is inaccessible from the distance I impose on the observation. One way or the other, this window shows the unique quality I imagine seeing in all the works you've sent me. They have some 'Victorian' quality, and no, I don't just mean it as a reference to England and the Englishness your last name alludes to. It's something else. Part of this is an obvious result of the photographic format, which conjures up the use of a 6x8 camera. The shape of the frame and the proportions draw the imagination to different times. But it's too easy. It's not there. Perhaps this window, in the context of the current exhibition, can be interpreted as 'Victorian-Ottoman,' as an act of migration within a migration. It's as if the London references seek to naturalize in Litvinovsky's Home, a crossroads for stories of exile and immigration in itself. The (imagined) gaze is drawn outward and inward through this work. Out/in to where? Per my final account, that is the question, is it not? Where do you take us in your photograph? And what if it's not some real 'where'? I move on and hope to find additional signs.

### **C. Upper Foyer**

Before entering the galleries left of the stairs, you may have hung **Flower Bell in No. 2** on the wall of the upper foyer. The wall flowers opened in the early evening, and you asked to fix them in silver halides as evidence of something. The mysterious No. 2. I think I remember this house from another photograph of yours, also a black-and-white frame, showing a brick wall covered with a gray climbing plant and a rectangular window fixed at the top. I'm trying to figure out if it's the same house; this time, the view is from the outside, but the image of the wall and the climber holding it up is gone. Maybe I dreamed it. I think of the phrase "lunar clusters," as if that is what you see here, in near-darkness, and I remember the tale about the princess who asked to have the moon to herself. With one outstretched thumb, she learned

to cover its' entirety but left out its' halo. There's always some residual. It's a tale about what it means to want the world, and how you learn to be content with an image of it, and about the distance that can't be closed, and about the body that wants to close it anyway. And in one sense, at least, it's also a story about photography.

Maybe this is the right time to place the illustrated manuscript of "The Little Brother and Sister" story. You attached a small picture of a page torn from a book to the file I received. Above the titles, which, after some effort, I manage to make out, there's a black-ink drawing with winding lines, something with a horse and a rider. It could be a good introduction to the works hanging in the other rooms, though I'm not sure you chose to display it here. I prefer to hurry and enter the small gallery. Here, I will name it 'Parlor.' A parlor, more than a simple 'living room,' receives the worthy Dickensian weight of what I am imagining.

#### **D. Parlor**

The left room is a small wood-paneled space. You must have succeeded in leaving something particularly delicate in it without much intervention. The blue frames are displayed here: a pine needle, a rose branch, and a thorn. You took all of them last year. You coated the plants' parts with gold leaves, placed each of them in turn on a bed of blue velvet, and photographed them. I love the cleanliness of this act. With its inner covert split, the pine needle is the figure of a man walking. The thorn's dry inflorescences are undoubtedly tiny hand palms now spread upwards. Perhaps not upwards. After all, the blue surrounds the gold on all sides, and it's difficult to maintain orientation if you look at this frame long enough, having no horizon. You can think of a deep sky, and you can think of a sea, of someone or some people crying out at sea.

Your blue-and-gold pictures are relatively small works, 19 by 13 inches each. You recently used a rose branch. I'm unsure if this photograph was ultimately included in the exhibition or was left out. Still, it's evident that what allows us the intimate view of the plant part, the very concentrated gaze - is also the act of its end, a branch pruned from its source. Your action recounts what it is to notice something on the ground, bend down, choose it, lift it, take it to the studio, place it on a surface, and think about how you can show all of this in a photograph. What was it that Avot Yeshurun wrote? Wait, I'm looking for the exact quote. It's the opening line of his 1971 poem called "The Collection":

"I bring everything I find.

Not everything that glitters is gold.

But I pick up

everything that glitters."<sup>2</sup>

Yeshurun calls what he collects 'Floodfall' and 'Yield.' So, it's like that, isn't it? When I imagine these three works alone in the small room, perhaps the gaze, as concentrated as your gaze upon things, upon these plant parts, regrows what is not present within them: the pine needle tells of the grove. Behind the prickly branch – a field filled with thistles. The roes thorns – what do they recreate? It's difficult to determine the direction and time of these works, which are part of a series you named **The Crown Jewels**. Being suspended exists in them as a state, causing a slight vertigo. Maybe they capture the studio's 'here and now' up to the 'then and there.'

No. I declare them timeless pictures.

### **E. The nursery**

I want to imagine the large gallery as a nursery because of the extinguished fireplace and precisely because it is too big to be a nursery. An entire family must have lived there once. I've never met Thomas and Anna—those are their names, right? But I can imagine them, or their ghostly images, wandering around the spacious room of an abandoned house in Jerusalem as if it were their own room. Thomas and Anna are fairy children in the portraits displayed in the exhibition. On television, for a moment, Thomas looks and talks like a tween, but here, meaning in your 2019, there's still something childish in him. He's immersed in something concealed within his chubby hands, perhaps a snail. Something tiny he collected in the garden. He's still a child, but you take his picture as if it is the promise of the man he will one day be. In the deer antlers on his head, I see the word 'Stag," which I find to be more accurate than 'Deer." Deer Thomas, someone must be calling him from... where?

It's hard for me to look at Anna's photo; I don't know why.

That's not true. I know why and would prefer not to think about it. What's clear to me when I manage to look at it directly... how do I put it? If I had to explain to someone who's never seen a photograph in his life how it's possible to look tenderly at someone through the lens of an inanimate device, I would show them this photograph. It's a photograph of tenderness resulting from a very close look. It's a snapshot of the ability to be near, a mother's gaze, and other things. When I look at this photo, something in the distance between her eyes makes me cover one side of her face with my finger and then the other side. Each eye tells a different story. Together, they tell those who look at the gaze the image returns that she knows she is safe, and all the looks contained in that look formulate, all at once, a question and an answer, which is knowledge. I don't know how else to describe it.

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<sup>2</sup> From: The Syrian African Rift. Translation: Harold Schimmel.

Here's a list of pangs that make this photograph truly heart-rending: the pale curl resting on the left shoulder; an Alice band that adorns the head in bulbous shapes reminiscent of frozen blooms of bell flowers with paper butterflies at their ends; Anna's front teeth, also revealing a future; the angle of the head and face towards the camera; the corner of the mouth; a neck bracelet made of plastic snowflakes.

I leave Danika's picture as is, word-less. She doesn't need my words, even more than any of the other works in the exhibition need them. With your permission, I'd like to leave her like this. It seems she holds more than one image could contain. I don't know how you took her picture, but the fact is you had the courage to do it.

## **F. Curtains**

A stork, a dead swan (so it seems), a doe, one barn owl on the sofa, another stuffed barn owl. I wrote 'so it seems' because these photographs are deceiving. And there is also one very living swan, the one from Kensington Gardens. I think of Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*: structures and shapes rising up over the horizon of an infinite ocean. In Lem's novel, a group of scientists go mad at a research station on an alien planet completely covered in water. The structures and figures appearing on this endless ocean are taken straight from the crew's memories but are life-like illusions, mental projections of repressed desires. And at your place, here, I mean there, in the lake – this swan... Well, I'm not sure. Just as it isn't clear whether the doe is on the unkempt sofa, and if the barn owl and the stork and the other swan are still within the realms of living things. But they seem alive, momentarily, living in a garden of Eden you've created between the walls of your home, when you turn the very close space into a very large one, into a forest within your home. It's always this home.

Everything is seemingly clear. It's a simple trick: you draw the semi-sheer curtains to soften the scorching light of the outside, and the room is immediately immersed in a different, more distant light. Anything you place on that brown sofa, any random arrangement of things, will turn into magic. So, what you photograph here and now is also always 'there' and 'then.' But the thing of an exact beauty also contains its factual inevitable death, which is also visible in this series. And that's the thing, Sofie. Isn't it? To put a swan taxidermy on a sofa and take a picture of it, to place a girl on the sofa and take a picture of her. Hence the trembling, hence the suffocation: in this series, through what is being photographed, the warm beauty shows the cold face of what is not photographed, and that has not yet happened.

After all, in the end, your photographs are of no place, of no time. Each and every one of them shows what is always in front of our eyes, and most of us never see. Silvery Water and Starry

Earth. What a fantastic name for the exhibition, as beautiful as the frame that shares that name. From this point, from the name and the image, I understand how you see the world and what you see in it. This picture is truly remarkable. I know that what you were trying to capture, here too, were traces of a light diminishing in the water. But it's also a record of one of those rare – and in your case, seemingly multiple – moments when intention, vision, and the world align across one vertical, in perfect concertation.

All in all, what is here? A corner of some stream, perhaps in the North, a random arrangement of stones sitting in a shallow water brook. But the basalt stones are placed, as the Buddhist aphorism goes, each is in its place. Nothing is missing; nothing is superfluous. And from what there is and what is placed in front of the eye, in some way, we see infinity. The day is gradually dimming in this photograph, and the sky becomes more visible in the diminishing light.

I prepared two more titles of old-timey science fiction books: *The Stars My Destination* (Alfred Bester, 1956) and *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* (Philip José Farmer, 1971). Contrary to the optimism implied by its name, the first is a story about a murderer. The second, again contrarily, is a story about the possibility of resurrection in a world called 'River World.'

### **G. Basement? Attic?**

It occurs to me now that my list will not have an attic or a basement. I liked the idea of adding these sections of a house, but then it seemed pointless. And I suspect you understand without me writing it explicitly: From a distance, without seeing the exhibition and walking around the actual spaces of the exhibition and the house on Kaf-Tet Be'November Street, I cannot pretend to be able to add an additional layer to it.

I'm good with the distance for now, but I believe we will meet someday. In the meantime, I hope this letter doesn't upset you and you don't feel I've crossed a line that I tried to step cautiously next to. All in all, I've offered you here my will to observe.

Wait a minute... one moment... I return to the photograph featuring Anna's face with the urgency of someone understanding anew. The close-up function on my computer allows me to zoom in again and even closer. I search, and for a moment, I think I find the endless glimmer I was looking for in the blackness of her eyes.

Until we meet,  
Avshalom