

From THE BOOK OF RESEMBLANCES\*

Edmond Jabès

Paris

**'éd,  
or the First Mist**

“But there went up a mist, 'éd, from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.”

(Genesis, II, 6)

“Preparing to create man, He made the mist rise from the abyss up into the heavens to wet the earth, and man was created in the way a baker adds water and then kneads the bread.”

(Rashi's Commentary on Genesis II, 6)

**MOMENT OUTSIDE THE BOOK**

*“I exist because you know me,” he said. “I owe you my likeness.”*

*What is Thought but the imagined death of all thoughts sacrificed to its name, Likeness examined through the questions it raises when it becomes but the distance covered by insidious likenesses?*

*“To think resemblance, does that not mean thinking the complex relation between thought and the word that prints or deletes it? We are praised or despised by our brothers for how we resemble or dissemble.*

*“Thought is a glimmer spied before sunrise. At noon, light is at its apogee. All shadows are alike, all letters in search of the same word,” you said.*

*The word strips off likenesses, intending to favor a single one.*

*God cannot be written.)*

## 1

Perhaps time has come to rid you of your first name. Long, arduous task. You must reach your death without identity, naked, virgin again.

The man you were, was he like you? You doubt it now. And yet you took advantage of the likeness.

You were never more than the distance at which you kept yourself.

. . . yourself, that is, the inadmissible emptiness you rival.

Availability remains salvation.

Emptier than emptiness, for having been its insane likeness.

Forbidden, the fruit of Knowledge, put on the index for simulating sweetness.

\*

*(I must tell you of this innocence the creation is: a likeness made tangible. The day before, there was un-likeness settled at its larval stage. Sight was but a blind plant, its stem challenged by fog, hearing, an uninhabited shell; plant challenged by the fog of the mind, shell unformed in its longing for God, longing for a man not yet man, a woman already woman. And there was man: through woman and earth, through man in exile, at the first drop of dew.*

*Sight was born and, with it, the resemblance of realms, of species, of nature with nature, and intelligence based on sight and hearing, and the hand bound to intelligence by the whole body.*

*God recognized Himself in God; but man, in his haste to be rid of the Creator, called the world into question.*

*Any act of creation is an act against the work of God, and a book, a blast at its likeness to the divine Book.*

*Thus every book is weighed down by both God's joy and pain, he said.)*

\*

You must believe in the book in order to write it. The time of writing is the time of this faith.

I believe. I write. But does the book believe in me? Ah, to make the words trust me. To give them surety.

Likeness operates on the level of faith.

There is no book outside its likeness to the book where faith is lacking.

To believe in order to grow.

To advance in the book as one advances in age, as one acquires knowledge.

. . . from earliest infancy to full maturity, from the first clumsy hours of thought to the most daring.

\*

To think, to write, means making yourself resemble. Writing and thinking are subtle approaches to likeness, a play of approximations, changing lights grappling with their nothingness in face of the object.

To think otherness means perpetuating likeness.

No two unthought things are alike.

Time marks likeness, eternity effaces it.

Fire risks its likeness in fire.

\*

*(Thought braves thought in order to justify itself in its own eye—and come to grips with Likeness.*

*. . . Likeness which, for the mind, is a thought to unthink as one undoes what is done or replants what is planted: a has-been-thought.*

*In the evolution of thought—as in creation—yesterday is tomorrow's shadow out of which light will arise.*

*Thought, intrigued by what is unthought, draws near it like fish going ashore to spawn.*

*To the fish, what is unthought is dry land.*

*"If there is a place for what is unthought," he said, "it is the place of dispersion where thinking goes bad and drowns. Noon: high locus of the unthought, of thought drowned.")*

"Out of all days, God made the day. Thus He overcame separation," said Reb Arcache. "Out of all books, we shall make one single book."

And Reb Abbed: "We shall ruin ourselves without respite, for at the end of destruction heaven opens wide."

And he concluded: "One day, we shall write, like God in heaven, the invisible book of life and death. We shall stop reading God. We shall be read."

Transparent infinite of all that's finite.

*("How should we go about going toward God," asked Reb Barsilon, "if not by knocking down the obstacles that are raised along the way toward Him?)*

*"God is behind all obstacles that are flesh and bone and also barriers of the spirit. Once these are removed, soul and body are no more than nameless dust and furtive breeze above the dust.")*

"If we cannot create the vault of heaven," said Reb Joshua, "it is because we do not know the mysterious arrangement of letters with which heaven and earth were conceived.

“If we cannot stop the light from going out, it is because the combination of letters that could save it from the dark is unknown to us.

“If we cannot help regarding you, O death, as the absurd and painful term of all existence, it is because we do not know how to group letters according to life, which would make you its leaven instead of its end.

“If we cannot save you in your last hour, O human being, it is because the secret disposition of letters that would return your breath escapes us.

“Our books are books of ignorance.”

And he added: “Ah, which are the letters that form only one impotent word, testifying to our impotence? God disdains them. Yet it is through them that we can read God.”

*(“How can we set our lives in order when nothing is under our orders?” asked Reb Chemtob.*

*“Both God and man are poor. One having given all, the other with nothing to give.”*

*And Reb Betesh; “ ‘God is in all’ means that outside All He is nothing.*

*“ ‘Man is in God’ means he is only part of this nothingness forced on him.*

*“The Void insists. Through this insistence the divine mystery becomes clear. Power of Nothing, without which All would only be a projection of the mind.”)*

\*

I only take my pen when I feel I cannot do otherwise. Up to that point, I resort to all sorts of ruses to avoid giving in to the words, to the claims of the blank page.

One day, I know, I shall not write any more. This certainty makes me tremble with fear and be glad, as on the threshold of deliverance.

I do not ask what will become of me without writing. I know when I no longer write I shall die.

How could one be dead and still live on towards death? The body is a mystery: universe and tomb, the universe of a tomb and the tomb of a universe. Skin does not bound the body.

What I write takes me (along the same road, but as if retracing my steps) to what I shall not write, into the night.

Have you asked yourself, on publishing a book, what the “achevé

d'imprimer' could mean, if not your legal death certificate from the typographer?

A banal death. How many times have I died? There was a last book that wanted to be received as such. Have I always written on its yellowed pages?

(*Nothingness, stubborn root.*)

"In every book, we are living the death of one and the same book," he said.

"A word is binding and at the same time breaks our bonds. To which of them shall I one day owe my freedom?"

"To one only. To your shredded name."

God killed the Name that killed Him.

Fierce, O fierce freedom.

If *El or the Last Book* put a full stop to *The Book of Questions*, *The Book of Likenesses* finishes perhaps the book of a life in the book. But how far out have I ventured?

Any life, in the face of eternity, is laughable, scant.

"Life is not going to defeat us, but we it. We shall die by our own hands, our own emptiness and our own fault.

"Every single gesture of ours is aimed against life though we do our best to claim the contrary.

"In our thirst to live we pretend not to know that body and mind are only moments of death ratified by thought and the senses, that knowledge is only a bait of the watchful void.

"What if this were the explanation of original sin: to burn down to the millenary rootstocks the wooded walks of life, to plug with shovelfuls of ashes the ever deeper pit of death?" wrote Reb Assayas.

And Reb Simhon: "We don't accomplish, we abolish."

(*"Tell me how you managed to disappear."*)

*"It's very simple: I broke my name in two. Now I show my absence as an open casket displays its content."*

*"Who are you? This is the first time I speak to you in the book."*

*"I have never left the book."*

*"I think I hear, but I cannot see you."*

*"You are listening to the words of the book."*

*"Even when I no longer catch your words, your voice still attacks me."*

*"It is the silence of the book."*

*"And mine?"*

*"The silence of all voices."*

*". . . but where are you?"*

*"Every character in the book is my double. Did you think I could sacrifice them all and be spared?"*

*"So you are nothing now?"*

*"Before me was the book, after me will be the book. But who will be able to identify my voice?")*

Perhaps writing means overcoming all resemblances within the very heart of resemblance, being finally like yourself, like nothing.

\*

Nothing is true. All might be.

It is our misery that we cannot hold on to the whole life that has been ours, that we despair and want to die rather than admit defeat.

"Innumerable names nest in a single one.

"There will always be birds to fill the empty space with their cries," he said.

"God is now victory of the wing, now lethal instrument of its defeat. The happy possibility of flight for the creature like Him, and the nail that pins it to the ground or wall: hope and misfortune.

"The mind knows only this two-faced God," he also said.

Shades of a name, changing hue of clouds.

Name: nimbus.

A cloud in the diamond: bad portion of dark that so depreciates precious stones.

Yet in the southern sky, O Magellanic clouds, are you not matchless, double patch of light?

We count on blood resembling blood in our thirst for silence.  
Solitude under the skin.

## 2

Any book is but a dim likeness of the lost book.

"In each of us," he said, "there is a book that transforms us into words, as blood regenerates blood.

"To each utterance, each word, corresponds a heart beat.

"The book's price is the price of an alliance."

Body recognized in a body's noises. Soul, word swollen with remote blood.

There is no end, brother, to ending up in the same word.

Our pen drinks deep at the veins of the moment.

*(Procession of figures. Mad night of revelry. Likeness plays its death, its likeness.*

*The curse that has, from the beginning, lain on all figuration, on all revels that explode the figure: this space with n dimensions.*

*"The divine prohibition is not on the image, but on the likeness every image introduces. God wants no face to face," he said.*

*To recognize yourself in . . . To multiply your likeness.*

*Fatal representation! As if in trying to be—to reveal myself—I only brought nothingness to light.*

*We shall foil the common sights; we shall celebrate fire, pupil burning within pupil.)*

In the beginning was the word that wanted to resemble.

Thus God confronted His likeness in the Word, and man his in God.

All creation is an achievement of likeness, is the act through which it risks asserting itself.

What we create resembles us. Only across likeness—as one crosses an ocean—could God create man.

To say that God made us in His image only confirms this: a logical deduction.

God fits perfectly into human logic which is always short of inconsistencies.

“Our creation rejects us” means it ceases to resemble us, questions its likeness to us when we had in vain tried to curb our resembling it.

It makes as little sense to declare that God will come where He is expected as to declare that He will not come where He is not.

To have faith does not mean expecting God, but to make Him expect us in order to quench our own desire of anticipation.

God is the illogical expectation of all expectation, its transfiguring eternity.

God voices the expectation of voice.

Voluptuous wanting, when we want only to live.

“The book is the illogical absence of any written existence, a proof of God’s,” he said.

He also said: “What seems illogical often allows us providential access to divine logic: a door where there is no door.”

“To exist in the book could only mean to absent yourself. God absents Himself in God,” wrote Reb Saltiel.

There is no more logic when we face the unknown. Instead, the absurd spectacle of logic overthrown, literally thrown over the ground, a heap of broken levers.

Heavier than the world, the unknown. We cannot bear it.

“What strength could rival that of the void?” asked Reb Basri.  
“It is nothing and, all by itself, sustains All.”

The void is not crushed by the unknown. It is dazzled.

Life disposes of all the colors it kindles; death, of a single one which it imposes.

Writer and painter part company at the first ray of sun.

One color only for the word, that of death. One death only for the word, that of color. Death's color is everlasting; black ashes and white ashes mingling in water.

The writer banks on two colors and dies of one.

One color: enough to blind us.

One day, white will stop being a color and finally be abyss.

“Black will engulf us,” he said.

The unknown stands at the end of life and at the beginning of death.

There is no way out of the known except within the known. The unknown is a dead-end, the horizon walled up.

Perhaps an exit is an answer; a dead-end, a question.

The problem is not death, but the way out.

The way out: the hole you dig within your pale.

At the bottom of the known, where the mind surrenders, the unknown lies snug.

The void has the unknown for openers.

The book leans on the void.

God is the cry of the blank word our letters trace for the eye.

The point of any pen is that of a cry.

God's cry is the cry of all absence.

"God has taken the idea of absence to its highest degree. There, the Book opens to the Book," wrote Reb Ségré.

God is the absence of the book, and the book, the slow deciphering of its absence.

No book outside God.

3

True, what you say is a little like what you are trying to say, but never more than an expression of the attempt.

Setting out to conquer the unknown shows perhaps only our secret hope to discover its likeness to the known.

There is no corrupt unknown.

*("What are these clay or marble figures like?"  
"Perhaps they are testimonials to likeness itself, resemble the resemblance they suggest.")*

*First figure—as we snatch, for no good reason, at the name of God—astonished to figure only the universe, and in vain.*

*Ignorance is the point of departure of our likenesses, the rallying point of all knowledge.*

*The unknown is perhaps divine ignorance. Then even God's knowledge would have bounds.*

*God is not, and man is not, where the unknown no longer beckons.*

*Both God and man are keenly listening to a vague, simple, unidentifiable call.*

*We once translated this call into a question for fear some day we might stop hearing it.)*

To exhaust all knowledge in order to take on the unknown, to be nothing to yourself but this unknown.

What if, behind, God were another?

"God refers back to God, like the eye to the eye," said Reb Arbib.

"To probe the infinite you must accept not to see, must stay with your darkness, on either side of sight."

*(From like to unlike, from knowledge to bald ignorance: so day runs over into darkness, so wind the paths of writing.*

*God has dethroned the light.  
Light, the image of the divine.  
God is the victim of God.*

*God's night is the dark night of the eyes.*

"Thou shalt worship no image, God decrees, thus warning us against idolatrous thought which is but a fever of images shaking the mind," said Reb Safir.

One of his disciples countered with this question: "What if, by bidding us to distrust the image, God, on the contrary, pleaded for a kind of thinking in which images clash and tear each other to pieces?"

*Divine recompense goes to the poorest, to God.*

"God is poorest, having been the richest, for He has lost the universe," said a young rabbi.

Thus the saying: "Charity begins at home" would seem to be of divine origin.

*God sustains God where He crushes Him.*

"There is no God," he said, "there is a radiant glory and a despondency of God, day and night of an incompatible universe."

*God is beyond God like breathing without beginning, a breath within breath.*

*"Who breathes?" asked Reb Sabban, "God in me or I in God?  
"I have good reason to believe that we are one and the same  
breath."*

*To which was replied: "We are quickened by two breaths, of life  
and of death. God is the latter."*

*Death: any measured horizon.)*

## 4

*(Truth is the serene materiality of God.)*

To establish as true what is perhaps only a part of the truth which warrants it, only a step nearer the edge of the abyss.

The void empties us. To go toward truth means allowing yourself to become empty. Against the body, but with your whole body.

The road of emptiness, which is the road of truth, is a detour of suspicion.

To clear the obstacle of logic—logic which keeps safe, to which we owe our safety.

Life does not keep safe any more than death; it keeps back, keeps us back, holds back.

Life is but death vibrant.

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop