# Apeirogon

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Once upon a time, and not so long ago, and not so far away, Rami Elhanan, an Israeli, a Jew, a graphic artist, husband of Nurit, father of Elik and Guy and Yigal, father too of the late Smadar, traveled on his motorbike from the suburbs of Jerusalem to the Cremisan monastery in the mainly Christian town of Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, in the Judean hills, to meet with Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian, a Muslim, a former prisoner, an activist, born near Hebron, husband of Salwa, father of Araab and Areen and Muhammad and Ahmed and Hiba, father too of the late Abir, ten years old, shot dead by an unnamed Israeli border guard in East Jerusalem, almost a decade after Rami's daughter, Smadar, two weeks away from fourteen, was killed in the western part of the city by three Palestinian suicide bombers, Bashar Sawalha, Youssef Shouli, and Tawfiq Yassine, from the village of Assira al-Shamaliya near Nablus in the West Bank, a place of intrigue to the listeners gathered in the redbrick monastery perched on the hillside, in the Mountains of the Beloved, by the terraced vineyard, in the shadow of the Wall, having come from as far apart as Belfast and Kyushu, Paris and North Carolina, Santiago and Brooklyn, Copenhagen and Terezín, on an ordinary day at the end of October, foggy, tinged with cold, to listen to the stories of Bassam and Rami, and to find within their stories another story, a song of songs, discovering themselves—you and me—in the stone-tiled chapel where we sit for hours, eager, hopeless, buoyed, confused, cynical, complicit, silent, our memories imploding, our synapses skipping, in the gathering dark, remembering, while listening, all of those stories that are yet to be told.

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Bassam was twenty-four years old when he was released after seven years in prison.

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From the prison gates he took a bus. He was dropped off in East Jerusalem in a cloud of grey fumes. In a café on Al-Zahra Street he told his friend Ibrahim that it was time to find himself a wife.

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He had never even held a girl's hand.

Her mother was there, her aunts, her cousins, her brothers. Her father was in the back bedroom. A cassette of Abu Arab was playing on a portable stereo. He was given a glass of Fanta. He sat on the couch. It was small talk at first, then her father came out of the room, shook his hand, and gestured to the food on the table. Stuffed grape leaves, chicken dishes, rice, zucchini, sesame bread, maqluba. Bassam piled up his plate. It was, he said, the best maqluba he'd ever tasted. Her mother laughed and fanned herself theatrically. Salwa poured another glass of Fanta. Soon the room cleared. He did not know how: one moment it was full, the next it was empty. Salwa was sitting on an armchair, opposite him. She had one slightly crooked tooth. Her right eyebrow arched. A dimple on her neck. He noticed a tiny stray thread of white on her sleeve. He wanted to pluck it off. He remained with his arms folded. She rose, went to the kitchen and brought back a tray of thyme cakes. They're delicious, he said. My mother made them too, she said. He smiled and took another. Did he want something more to drink? No, he said, he was so full, he couldn't eat another thing, he might burst, did she mind if he smoked? Of course not, she smoked an arghil herself, but she never smoked at home, her father disapproved. Bassam put his Marlboro out. No, no, she said, please smoke, I like it, it doesn't bother me, my brothers all do. He lit a second. They sat in silence. The light outside dimmed. He extinguished the cigarette in the belted ashtray strapped to the side of the sofa. Where did you grow up? Here. Did you like it? Of course, yes. I grew up near al-Khalil. Oh, she said, I knew. How did you know? Ibrahim told my mother. Ibrahim's a snitch, he laughed. How were the caves? They were perfect, he said, there was nothing to worry about, life was easy but we got evicted when I was twelve. What happened? They tucked a note under a rock, we didn't find it until it was too late, it wouldn't have mattered. Why not? They wanted to get rid of us anyway, that's how they evict you, they hide notes under rocks so you can't find them, they give you twenty days to respond, it's just the way it is, you don't find it, it's your own fault, then you're gone. She stood up to pour more Fanta even though his glass was nearly full. They blew the cave up, he said. She paused a moment, then came to sit on the far end of the couch. She was no more than two feet away. How was prison? He shrugged. I heard you were commander. He's a dirty snitch, that Ibrahim, I was general commander yes, just for the prison. He said you're a singer too, that you like Abu Arab. Abu Arab, yes, I adore Abu Arab, I could listen all day long. Ibrahim said they nick- named you after him, in prison. I could not even tie Abu Arab's shoe-laces, but I sang, yes, I sang, it passed the time for me, I sat in my cell and thought about a lot of things. What things? Different things, peace and guns and Coca-Cola, and Allah of course. I heard you went on hunger strike. He nodded, stubbed out his cigarette. Could you sleep? After four days the hunger passed, after twelve it returned, a terrible pain right here, after fifteen it left again. What did you miss the most? I missed your mother's maqluba. You didn't even know my mother. She chuckled, pulled a small pillow to her stomach. I thought you would be taller, she said. He rose from the couch and stood on his tiptoes. I am, he said. She laughed again into her wide sleeve, then glanced away. Her eyes shone. She offered him more to drink. No thank you. They fell silent a moment. She turned the small pillow

over and over in her hands, pulled it closer to her stomach. He tapped the bottom of a pack of cigarettes, opened the wrapper, twisted the cellophane. How old are you? he asked. Twenty-two. You look younger. You've a golden tongue, don't you? Not really, I'm shy, I've always been shy, I was a shy kid. Me too, she said. He smoked fiercely and said quietly: I've been waiting for this day for a long time. Salwa blushed and rose, removed some dishes from the table. Are you de- voted? he asked when she returned. Somewhat, she said. They were silent once more. Is that a bad answer? Nothing is a bad answer. That's good, she said. He reached forward to pick the thread off her sleeve. She drew back. Oh, she said, and she rose, flustered, moved past him. She lifted the belted ashtray from the arm of the sofa. She went to the kitchen to dump the contents. When she returned she moved once again to the couch. She had, he noticed, removed the thread from her sleeve herself.

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They were married thirty-four days later. Bassam had talked to her for a total of two hours.

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Ten months after the wedding, they had their first child, Araab, named after the singer Ibrahim Muhammad Saleh, who went by the stage name Abu Arab.

Bassam himself became Abu Araab, *abu* meaning *the father of*.

He held the child between his elbow and the crook of his hand: What can I tell you? he said aloud to the sleeping boy.

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The phone call came from the director of the school. Araab had run out the school gates with three other boys. They had gone to throw stones. He had been seen in the area. Bassam, said the director, should hurry and find him.

He found Araab behind a warehouse near the school. The boys had built themselves a barricade of tires. Inside the ring of the tires they had stored stones.

Araab had a primitive slingshot made from the Y of a tree branch, a black eyepatch, and an elastic band.
—Get in the car.
—No.
—Get in the car, ya. Now. You're twelve years old.
—No.
—You do what I say. Now!
Bassam raised the windows, locked the doors, drove through the rutted streets of

Anata. Araab played with the handle of the door. On a steep hill, Bassam pulled the hand brake, rolled down his window, put his head to the steering wheel.
—Don't move.
He could sense the rage in the boy, the clenched heart, the distant stare.
—Listen to me.
Bassam had never told his son the whole story: the flags first, then the stones, then the grenades, the lookout from the hilltop, then the arrest, then the prison, then the beatings and then more beatings.
—Do you hear me? They pick you up and they beat you. And then you get out and you throw another stone. Then they beat you again. And you keep throwing stones.
Araab shrugged.
—Do you see how it finishes?
Araab stared out the window.
—It means that they've won.
He shrugged again.
—Do you want them to win?
—No.
Bassam released the hand brake and drove on a moment. He could see the fidget in the boy's knee.
—Out of the car, said Bassam. Now.
He leaned across his son's lap and pushed the car door open. Araab unfastened his seat belt, stepped out into the dust. Bassam rounded the front of the car and picked up a stone from near the wheel. He placed the rock in Araab's hand, folded the boy's fingers across it.
—What I'm going to do is walk over there, said Bassam. And then I'm going to close my eyes. And then I want you to throw it at me. As hard as you can. And I want you to hit me.
—No.
—If you don't, I will go back to your barricade. I will stand there and I will wait for a jeep. When it comes I will throw a stone at it for you. Do you understand?
—Yes.
—If you don't hit me with a stone, I am going to go and throw one myself. And then you know exactly what will happen to me. Is this understood?
Bassam stood not ten paces away, his eyes shut firmly: Throw it, he said. Throw it now.
He heard the stone whistle far past him.
—You're supposed to hit me with it, ya. He could hear the boy weeping.
—Do it again, he said.
—No.
—We don't leave here until you hit me.



What the British might call a knee-knocker.

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What he feared most of all was that Araab would end up in prison. When they got home that night Bassam made his son put his hand on the Qur'an and promise that he would never again take part in any sort of riot.

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*Riot,* from the Old French, *rioter:* to dispute, to quarrel, to engage in argument. *Riote:* noise, debate, disorder, rash action. Also, perhaps, from the Latin *rugire,* meaning to roar.

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In the early 1990s Palestinian riot paraphernalia became popular among a small clique of Japanese teenagers. They collected rubber bullets, gas canisters, batons, kneepads, helmets, groin protectors, shin guards, tactical goggles, masks and especially the painted stones flung by the shebab during the First Intifada.

A stone in Palestinian colors, if properly documented and tagged, could sell for over one hundred dollars. A used plexiglas shield with an IDF insignia could command one hundred and fifty if signed and verified by a soldier.

A pop-up shop, The Spoils of War, appeared in the Shinjuku neighborhood, a tiny little store with a battered shutter and lopsided shelves, but it went bust shortly after the Second Intifada began, and the riot gear fell out of fashion.

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The first time they spoke in a Parents Circle meeting, it was difficult for Rami to understand Bassam's accent. Bassam's English was rapid-fire and the stresses came from Arabic. He began to talk about his friends throwing two hand grenades at a jeep but it sounded, in his Hebron accent—*two han-d-eh-gre-nay-des*—like two hundred.

It became one of their jokes: Hey brother, go ahead and throw two hundred grenades.

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In a letter to Rami, Bassam wrote that one of the principal qualities of pain is that it demands to be defeated first, then understood.

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Rami pauses for a moment at the top of the monastery road. He opens his visor, removes his glasses, takes off his helmet, shakes his head free, wipes the glasses on the end of his scarf.

To the left, the monastery. To the right, the road down toward the center of town. He glances at his watch.

The sun out now, over Bethlehem. The flocks of birds in their vaulting overhead arcs.

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While in flight, birds position themselves in order to gain lift from the bird in front. As it flies, the leading bird pushes down the air with its wings. The air is then squeezed around the outer edge of the wings so that, at the tip of the wing, the air moves and an upwash is created.

By flying at the wing tip of the bird in front, the follower rides the upwash and preserves energy. The birds time their wingbeats carefully, resulting sometimes in a V-shape, or a J, or an inversion of one or the other.

In storms and crosswinds the birds adapt and create new shapes— power curves and S-formations and even figure eights.

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On the hour, he catches sight of a black Kia climbing the hill. At first he is not sure if it is Bassam or not, the wintry light hard and bright on the front windshield.

Then there is the quick beep of the car horn and the shape of a waving arm in the front seat.

Bassam stops next to Rami, pulls the hand brake, powers down the tinted window. The inevitable cigarette in Bassam's mouth.

—Brother.
—Hey.
—How long you been here?
—I mucked up. I forgot about daylight saving time. —What do you mean?
—We have different daylight savings, brother.

Bassam shakes his head and half-grins: Ah, Israeli time, he says. He pulls hard on his cigarette, taps the ash out the window and a small rush of smoke fills the air.

—I drove around, says Rami, got a coffee in the Everest. —How many have we got today?
—Seven or eight.
—From all over?
—Think so, yeah.
—Why the monastery?
—No idea. They rented it, I suppose.
—How far down the road?
—Quarter of a mile or so.
—Ever been here before?
—Not inside.
—One hundred and fifty years old.
—Right. Go ahead.
—No, no. You. Go.
—You first.
—Hey, haven't we suffered enough?
Rami smiles at their familiar joke, beeps his motorbike horn and tucks in behind the Kia. He passes a hedge of rhododendrons. A few wild rosebushes. A row of apricot trees.

On one side of the road a wire mesh fence stretches and he can briefly see all the way down to the valley floor, the roofs of houses, the terraces moving in quick succession, Jerusalem in the distance.

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At the closed wooden gate of the convent Rami pauses the bike. Hard to fathom that one day the Wall may appear between here and the monastery. A watchtower here. A farmer's gate there. A rim of barbed wire just beyond.

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End the Preoccupation.

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It doesn't matter to them where they speak. Most of the time they meet in hotel conference rooms. Or in the auditoriums of schools. Or the back rooms of community centers. Every now and then in vast theaters. It is always the same story, heard differently in each place. Finite words on an infinite plane. It is this, they know, which keeps them going.

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The gate is swung open and Bassam's car nudges through. Rami hits the throttle and catches up, parks, removes his helmet. In the shadow of the monastery the two men approach each other and embrace.

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In Constantin Brâncuși's bird sculptures—considered by some to be among the most beautiful works of art of the twentieth century— the wings and the feathers are eliminated, the body of the bird is elongated and the head becomes a smooth oval plane.

The Romanian artist cast sixteen examples of the *Bird in Space,* nine in bronze and seven in marble.

In 1926 one of the bronze sculptures was stopped by U.S. Customs officers who refused to believe that the piece of metal amounted to art. The sculpture, along with nineteen other Brâncuși pieces, was due to appear in galleries in New York and Chicago. Instead, the customs of- ficials imposed a tariff for manufactured objects. A court battle ensued. At first the U.S. Customs agreed to rethink their classification and released the sculptures on bond under the heading of *Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies.*

The art world was delighted until a customs appraiser backtracked and confirmed the official classification. The appraiser, F.J.H. Kracke, a key figure of the Republican party in Brooklyn, claimed that he had sent photos and descriptions of the sculptures out to several well- known people high in the art world.

The responses he got suggested that Brâncuși's sculptures were little more than dots and dashes that could have been dreamed up by a simple bricklayer. As such, said Kracke, they left far too much to the imagination.

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They are greeted in the vestibule by an older monk. He is, he says, honored to meet them. He has heard much about their work.

The monk bows slightly, guides them through the corridor, towards the chapel. The ceilings are vaulted. The woodwork, intricate. The floors are stone.

He speaks in Arabic with a South American accent. He is from a family that once lived in Haifa. They left, he says, like so many others, in '48. Exiled.

It feels to Rami as if his breath operates differently here. The air is cool. The light filters through the stained-glass windows and falls in slanted rows among the pews.

The monk genuflects near the altar and then guides them into a room at the rear of the chapel. On a wooden table sits a jar of water with slices of lemon and two empty glasses.

—The green room, says the monk with a half-smile.

On the wall is the painting of a saint in a carved wooden frame. Alongside it, several photos of the monastery in decades gone by.

The monk turns on his heel. His cassock swishes. They follow him down a high corridor, the emptiness brimming with echo. The walls, he tells them, are several meters thick. The local stone is known as royal stone. The meleke is so soft, he says, that it can be sliced from a quarry with a small knife. It hardens, then, upon contact with the air. Like so much else, he says over his shoulder.

—Many generations have, he says, scrubbed this floor clean. If it could sing it would.

It feels to Rami that they are walking through a watery candlelight. They pass several small rooms. The doors are built of oak with dark iron brackets. Small windows in the doors, chapel-shaped with a cross of white wood between the panes. The rooms themselves each have a table and a bed.

They reach the end of the corridor where the ceiling vaults upwards again. The air is again cooler here. The monk turns slowly and looks along the length of yet another corridor.

—Come, says the monk, your group is waiting, we have a table set for ten.