

# Some thoughts on the valley of the Jordan river

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VIEW #1  
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE VALLEY OF THE JORDAN RIVER

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Hanna Schygulla

Seen from the sky, the Jordan Valley is a pathway—a pathway for migratory birds. Humans are not birds, yet our intelligence allows us to transcend horizons: planes are flying high above the clouds, missiles launching into space, computers connecting minds almost at the speed of thought.

Seen from space, the earth is beautiful. Looking closer, there are areas of wealth and peace in the midst of fierce fighting. More and more people are migrating, some of them touring around just anxious to see more of the world—and then all the others, those who have to escape from home because the land where they used to live has become unlivable.

More than a century ago the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf (the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature) published a book for children of all ages, growing-ups, and grown-ups, a best-seller with the title *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. It tells the story of Nils, a little boy who is always busy playing bad tricks on the others. One day a magician turns him into a tiny creature. From then on he's only able to communicate with specimen his size. Finally the day comes when a wild goose scoops him up from the ground and takes him high up into the sky. What a new perspective, to rediscover the earth from the bird's view: the king-sized territory of Sweden seems to be nothing more than an enjoyable carpet of rectangles. At the end of his journey a newly human-sized Nils Holgersson returns to his life stronger and more attentive to other beings than before.

This kind of magic works on all of us: looking down from above makes us become somehow more aware of how narrow-minded we usually are. As for me, the more a landscape is devoid of human presence, the more mind-expanding it is—making me feel as though I were being taken somewhere beyond the small concerns, dropping out of time. And yet I keep looking for reflections of human existence in the landscape and vice versa, one eventually becoming a mirror of the other. In those moments, I remember these unforgettable lines by Baudelaire:

Your head, your bearing, your gestures  
 Are fair as a fair countryside;  
 Laughter plays in your face  
 Like a cool wind in a clear sky.<sup>1</sup>

I am not too much of a romantic when it comes to the nature of Nature. Looking closely at Nature, what shows up is the omnipresent struggle: how to escape the stronger nourishing themselves by swallowing the weaker? But on a human level this law seems to me insufficient or even intolerable since the human spirit transcends the simple need for survival. In the best moments of our existence we come to know the beauty of a gesture of love that demands nothing in return. What an ego's relief: caring for the other.

I have done several trips to the Jordan River Valley, but one in particular was unforgettable, about thirty years ago. I was traveling by car from Tel Aviv to the Dead Sea together with a friend who was working on the same film as me at the time. From the very beginning of the journey, stones were being thrown at us for driving on the sacred day of Yom Kippur.

We passed the Masada Massif, a magnificent witness to the collective suicide of a Jewish community refusing to submit to Roman domination. Together, they threw themselves from the top of the cliff. Impossible to forget also is our passing through the lowest point of the region, Jericho ("Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls come tumbling down"<sup>2</sup>). There, at the entrance of a Palestinian shop, a man with fiery eyes proposed to draw something on the blond hair-framed canvas of my face. I agreed, always open to coincidence. I never quite knew what he saw in me, nor what secret message he might have written on my face. However, finally arriving at the lobby of our hotel at the Dead Sea, the people at the desk looked at me scandalized yet did not say a word... As usual, the customer is king.

1 "To One Who Is Too Gay," translated from the French by William Aggeler in *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954). Original poem by Charles Baudelaire, "À celle qui

est trop gaie," published in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1857), 91–93.

2 An African American spiritual, recorded in *Paul Robeson – Songs of Free Men*, Sony Classical, 1942.

Later on up in my room, while looking out of the window, I felt like I was becoming part of a surrealist painting by Magritte: the sea glimmering in the high noon heat and yet its waves as if frozen into a salty crust. What an image for the mystical union of contradictions—within a territory where two opposing peoples fail to coexist.

Nowadays, three decades after the Dead Sea is dying twofold by drying up more and more each day; nowadays, seen from the perspective of a bird, due to of the ongoing Jewish settlements that perforated the land like an enormous piece of Swiss Gruyère, one can hardly distinguish the Palestinian territory from the Israeli one anymore. Nowadays... rather than build more walls, we should believe in building more bridges, pursuing more common projects, and living more love stories. Wouldn't that be a better way to fight the curse of dominion, which can do nothing but engender more and more hatred?

An air pops into my mind from a vinyl record by the Eighties band *It's a Beautiful Day*: “open up your hearts, go sleep on the moment time was born...”<sup>3</sup>

3 “Bulgaria” from the self-titled album *It's a Beautiful Day* by the San Francisco based band, released by Columbia Records in 1969 (“Bulgaria” released as a single in 1968).

