
“WRITTEN IN PENCIL IN THE SEALED RAILWAY-CAR”

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the biblical story of Cain and Abel?
- Why do you think Dan Pagis chose Eve, Abel and Cain for the poem? What role does each play?
- Eve appears to be attempting to convey a message to Cain. What might that message be?
- Read “Written in Pencil” several times in succession. What is the feeling that you get?
- What is the significance that the letter written in the sealed railway car was in pencil?



ABOUT THE POET

Dan Pagis was born in 1930, in Bukovina, Romania. He spent three of his adolescent years in a Nazi concentration camp in Ukraine before arriving in Palestine, in 1946. He became one of the most vibrant voices in modern Israeli poetry and is considered a major world poet of his generation. Dan Pagis died in Jerusalem in 1986.

Photo courtesy of Yad Vashem

“TESTIMONY”

No no: they definitely were
human beings: uniforms, boots.
How to explain? They were created
in the image.

I was a shade.
A different creator made me.

And he in his mercy left nothing of me that would die.
And I fled to him, rose weightless, blue,
forgiving – I would even say: apologizing –
smoke to omnipotent smoke
without image or likeness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think Pagis was trying to say with the line, “No, no: they definitely were human beings”? Who is the “they” and why does he emphasize their humanity?
- When Pagis writes they were created “in the image,” who or what is he referring to?
- What do you think he was trying to convey with the lines, “I was a shade. A different creator made me”? What feelings about God or religion is Pagis expressing?
- Do you find the use of “forgiving” and “apologizing” sincere or ironic? What might Pagis be saying in this line?
- What is the overall tone or feeling of the poem?
- Why do you think this poem is titled, “Testimony”? If testimony is what’s given in a courtroom, then who or what is on trial according to the poem?

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