



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2016

Writing Sample

Galit Dahan Carlibach

Extract from the novel *On the Edge*.

Rights

Copyright © 2016 Galit Dahan Carlibach

Recommended Citation

Carlibach, Galit Dahan, "Writing Sample" (2016). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 547.

https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/547

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Galit Dahan CARLIBACH
extract from the novel *On the Edge*

3

Till now I've mentioned my profession tangentially: I've introduced Stein here and there, and his offer of a couch to sleep on among the rocks at the office. But I haven't properly described my work. Maybe that's because before the word "geology" even ends, snores can be heard from the balcony. Or because the topic of geology will always recall my father, and the topic of my father will always recall my profession, which I acquired at the state's expense and at Stein's instigation.

When Dad met his death I was twelve, a week past the bat mitzvah celebration that he held for me on that milestone birthday. It was a private bat mitzvah at the Ramon Crater, just the two of us, without Mother. I wouldn't willingly juxtapose my father with my mother, but thoughts of Dad's death necessarily drag in thoughts of her hysterical self-isolation at home in the hours that followed the disaster.

As I said, I'd had my bat mitzvah celebration at the crater a week before. Mother preferred to stay home. "It's too cold to be strolling outside," she said to Dad as she rubbed cucumber cream into her swanlike neck, and what she meant was that she'd have trouble amusing herself with Yiskah in the confines of a crater.

I wasn't sorry. I'd been sorry less and less in those days. I knew that what Mother didn't supply, Dad did. And besides, I could easily imagine what the excursion scene would be like with Mother. Instead of mountains without tops, it would take on the aspect of a great exercise arena, and all the rocks would compete to serve as platforms for running in place or as muscle toners.

Granted, the only invitees for the bat mitzvah were Dad and me, but it was a celebration in every way. The air was cold, and having the place to ourselves made the night more festive. There was the sky stretched above us, so different from the scraps of sky in Jerusalem that scarcely show behind the streetlamps. There was the earth — rocky, colorful, innumerable in its possibilities. There was a tent that we pitched inside the crater.

Dad pointed into the sky and explained the positions of stars. The instructions that he gave me before he died were simple and explicit, as if I could put them to practical use: "From here, in that direction, stretch out five fingers. That's Cassiopeia. Can you see the Big Bear? I can't either. But instead try to connect the dots. Can you make out the Dipper? Great. That's exactly where the Milky Way crosses Cassiopeia. And there's the North Star. Found it? Look how bright it is. Always remember: the North Star is the most important one. While the North Star is around, it's hard to get lost."

Dad lit a campfire and told me stories from Greek mythology about beautiful Helen. They say she singlehandedly touched off the baleful and shocking war that eradicated Troy, but she was just a pretext for the masculine battle-lust.

He told how Aphrodite and Persephone fought over Adonis, and how Cassiopeia sacrificed her daughter.

He told about rascally Zeus, who was no perfect model of a deity the way ours is. "It may sound strange," Dad said as he poured rice into a little pot and started stirring at an even tempo, "but it's much easier to live with a lot of gods than with one God representing all the impetuosity of heaven."

I'd knew the word "impetuous" and I remembered it well for its direct connection to me. It contained an impish fist of dark iron that would spring out and do whatever it wanted with me. That was before it lengthened and solidified into a self. The fist didn't bother me in the crater, but I told Dad about it. His eyes stayed very focused on me, and I didn't want to be a spoiler, so I didn't tell him that sometimes the fist made me want to do away with Mother. Dad leaned on his elbow and said that everyone has more than one nature. So does the sky, and so does the earth. "It's all a matter of moods," he added. "Even earthquakes, and volcanoes erupting. And even an ordinary chilly day."

Can a man foretell his day of death? Because if he can, then Dad had a moment like that when he suddenly raised his eyes from the bowl of rice and burnt potatoes and said, with a look of appreciation mixed with something else that I didn't recognize but felt the warmth of, "You'll be okay, Yiskah. You'll be okay, in spades."

From time to time, a melancholy wind passed through the crater where I sat with Dad, a completely different Dad who had emerged out of himself. Out of the Dad who gritted his teeth for the sake of supporting his family, who wanted to leave the tractor, who made a point of visiting his haunted parents every Friday at the decaying retirement home. Who came back from there wrapped in silence and smelling of stale mints. Before visiting them, he'd ask Mother evenly if she'd go with him, but she'd irritably answer "No."

And then I'd go with him. Because if Mother wouldn't, then obviously that left me to.

It wasn't easy, visiting them. Grandma had hooked fingernails, and it always seemed to me that I'd never free myself from her hug. She hugged me the way you'd hug six million people and a half. Grandpa would watch everything foggily; and from time to time, his movements unanimated, he would offer a sweet or a stick of unfashionable chewing gum. Like an old machine not quite worn out, he remained able to function while no longer serving any purpose.

Dad talked about his plans. He wanted to know our earth up close, and he'd already registered to study geology at a night college for adults. "Grown-ups need to learn too," he told me, and the bristles sprouting on his face, after two days without a shave, twitched as he smiled. If Mother had come with us, of course there'd have been no speck or spoor of the bristles. The latter served as a trifling sign of the tension between them, a transparent tension that would have matured if he hadn't died. He liked to spend days at a time unshaven. He liked the tickle of it. He liked mud, and he liked sleeping outdoors. He didn't particularly mind stray hairs and wrinkles. In short, Mother's efforts were for herself alone. He simply wasn't the man who'd find Mother's willingness to kill for the sake of a pretty nose an advantage.

Long ago, in the eighties, children used to be apprehensive of divorce. Divorce wasn't as photogenic as it is today, with visitation days full of gifts and mall hopping. Back then a child of divorcees was in a category like the Amior family from the Nofit neighborhood who were uncommonly ill-starred. One of their sons, a classmate of mine, died of cancer. A daughter suddenly lost her eyebrows, eyelashes, and hair. And the younger son died during a class excursion to the dunes of Ashdod; he entered a bog and a crane had to remove him. Those disasters began to happen after they changed the family name from Amar, the Arabic for "moon," to the awkwardly novel Amior in Hebrew ("my nation the light"). "I can't

stand it when they Hebraize names,” Mother said, with a slim cigarette tucked into her hand to emphasize her groomed fingernails. “What do they think, nobody can tell by looking at them that they’re Moroccan?”

“But Shoshke, you behave exactly the same way,” Dad said, overlaying his voice with caution.

“I do? Exactly what same way do I behave?” Mother narrowed her eyes and exhaled a thin curl of smoke. Her lips were bounteous, with a natural layer of sheen on them.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, but you color your hair on a regular basis, don’t you?” Dad said.

“There’s a difference, Micha. I’m not a blonde with a brunette history. I’m just emphasizing the color I was born with,” Mother answered, and she scratched the bridge of her nose. (It could use a tiny lift, and a little planing of the right nostril wouldn’t hurt.)

Yes, there were tensions between them; but I wasn’t frightened. Maybe because I’d been through a divorce from my mother before I was even born. I tried to imagine how they’d met. And how love came about between them and was drained to the last. I knew that the beginning was when Dad brought rocks for the landscaping of the community center; that’s where he saw Mother. I have to forcibly imagine, from that point onward, their falling in love — forcibly because I never managed to understand why Dad, who was not exactly all about paint and polish, wound up with such a woman. Anyway some kind of courtship took place, and Mother assented but not before she examined him well and realized that even the ancient Greeks, saluting his subtle philtrum and his frosted eyes, would have sculpted him as something archaeologists might label “Tranquil god with deep dimple in pointed chin.”

The courtship wasn’t particularly long, but it was long enough to put me into production, and afterward even if Dad did perceive the hand he’d been dealt, he wasn’t a man to abandon a wife and baby.

My imagination made an unhesitating jump-cut from the start of their marriage to the end, which would have been inevitable. At that point each of them would set sail in search of a brighter horizon — Mother with her make-up box, and Dad with me.

Obviously that idyllic denouement never occurred, since Dad arranged to die in advance of it.

Being twelve, mature and now better informed regarding celestial matters and Greek mythology, I insisted that Dad take me riding on his tractor. Sometimes, particularly during vacation, he used to bring me to the quarry where he worked, near Beit Shemesh, but I was allowed only to watch him work as I sat on the step of an old trailer.

This time too, Dad was not eager to oblige me. But I pestered him, saying that the time had come and if I was old enough to locate the North Star, I was certainly old enough to sit beside him on the tractor.

I managed to win Stein over to my cause. He was the company’s geologist at the time, and he was a good friend of Dad’s. He too was a son of Holocaust survivors, but unlike Grandma and Grandpa, who were poor, Stein’s parents had managed to transfer some capital from their thriving bicycle factory in Germany.

Stein always had a soft spot for me. When he visited us with his wife and his daughter Daria, a girl I couldn’t get along with at all, I sensed how his attention gravitated in my direction. He seemed to be

drawing a comparison, assessing how his daughter regrettably, but distinctly, fell short of me. And she always surveyed our modest apartment with a look of condescension.

When Stein promised that no other tractor would be nearby, and even the twins would be out of the vicinity, the gang on Olympus rattled the dice and threw.

The twins were the sons of the owner, Biton, and they'd pop up together in several places at once. Their names were Arik and Sharon, because their father was a fervent Likud supporter and all his children were named for figures of Revisionist Zionism. Each year on Jabotinsky's memorial day all Biton's children were filmed for television.

Anyway, after all the wheedling and the promising — I won't touch anything, I'll do everything I'm told — Dad relented and hoisted me to the tractor, which looked to me like a yellow monster in a cheerful mood. Dad drove it a while, and he let me raise and lower the shovel.

It wasn't right away that the attack came. We'd covered a few more yards, while for the first time in my life I felt my distance from the ground as something very palpable; I could have stretched down and touched any level of it. I was sitting squeezed against Dad's side, his right hand was holding my left one, and his left hand was resting lightly on the wheel. It was only when his hold became too light that I noticed the paleness of his face. His fingers left the wheel, his hands met on his chest, he wavered on the seat, and then he dropped to the floor of the tractor. As the tractor zigzagged, he raised his head with difficulty and he pointed to the handbrake. "Pull that," he said.

I didn't understand why he was on the floor of the tractor, noiseless, even after I made my weak pull at the brake and the tractor somehow stopped. I don't remember how I got down. From such a height, I must have jumped. Somehow I reached the quarry office, a small distance away. Stein was busy with his maps, but when he saw my face he asked no questions. He just ran back with me, and from that moment he is omnipresent. Stein is the one who prevented me from returning into the tractor, though I was crying to. Stein is the one who sat me down in the office to be minded by Arik and Sharon, and phoned for an ambulance, and in the meantime tried to resuscitate Dad and failed. Stein is the one who phoned Mother, and Stein hugged me gently and told me that Dad had gone to another land, far away. He scanned my face and said in alarm, "Just don't think it's because of you. Understand? It would have happened anywhere. It has nothing at all to do with you."

But even he, a man who thought of everything, didn't imagine that Mother would leave me outside the apartment, sobbing on the steps.

I remember I climbed the staircase, and the door was on the chain. I could open it a crack. I called to Mother; I could see her in flashes, appearing and disappearing. I asked her to let me in, but she was absorbed in her wailing and paid no attention. From time to time she took up some object and hurled it down. I kept on crying, and one of the neighbors who didn't know yet what had happened — she couldn't have known — came out and said through the crack, "Have a heart, Shoshi. Let the girl in." But she failed too, and the expression "have a heart" stirred the fear and catastrophe I'd absorbed. The feeling of incorrectness that had filled me — like a big clock that was ticking with the implication that by the power of reasoning, I could turn it back — disappeared all at once and I knew that nothing would again be as it was. He would never come home; never hug me, lift me up, and amuse me. I had belonged to Dad, and he was mine. It always was that way, and recorded in the family's annals. Or would be, if we had any annals.

I don't remember how I got in, if I did, nor what Mother said to me then. I also don't recall who took me to the funeral. My brain was merciful and draped a solid cloth over those memories. But I can't forget the funeral itself. Unlike Mother's cheap dramatics at Gramsie's funeral, her pain at Dad's funeral was as raw as if it had been poured straight into her veins and boiled her bloodstream. Even now, years later, the feeling of it comes back to me.

Mother yelled beside the grave, puncturing the hillside cemetery with her screams. I stood at a remove and crumbled a leaf. Opposite Mother, Dad's parents were standing. Without their retirement home, they looked puny and they faded from moment to moment. When the body was lowered, Dad's mother began to shout and her chicken-toe fingers slashed the air: "Resurrection when? From what? If not from the gas, just this once from a heart attack. Poor man. He shouldn't have kept it all inside. He shouldn't have exploded from it." And Grandpa, like a true Germanic Jew, tried to hush her. He didn't succeed, and she kept shouting until someone walked her away from there.

Gramsie stood by my side without speaking, and she laid a hand on my head. When they covered Dad, she didn't prevent me from sidling toward Mother. There, crouching at her feet, I took hold of her. She shook me off and kept yelling. Like a madwoman, I would have said.

But after the burial there was one moment of quiet, and she said to me in a calm voice that frightened me more than her riven screams: "You killed him. First you destroyed me, and then you killed him."

Stein stepped in and took me to Gramsie's, where my other Grandpa was waiting; he was already too sick to attend the funeral. I stayed with them till the end of that accursed day.

My father could have been selected from the figures of Philistines displayed in the museums. His grey-green eyes, deep-set for their full width. His forehead and nose connecting in a single smooth sweep of convexity. The only point of similarity between my father and me was the dimple in the middle of the chin. But while Dad's dimple was chiseled like Cary Grant's, mine sometimes stood out but sometimes, unaccountably, diminished.

There are many benefits, they say, to being loved. But I know from experience that benefits also come in the package delivered to those who — how to put it? — spend childhood unencircled by brightness and affection.

I grew up because we do.

Dad left for work at six in the morning and returned after dark, so despite his attempts, he missed my entire childhood on account of his endless working hours. The gap he left was filled by Mother — or if not filled, at least occupied. She provided me with food (while certainly not feeding me) and she dealt with the requirements. I wasn't cold, my slacks were clear of my shoes, I had a cake for my birthday, I had a costume for Purim. My bangs didn't reach my eyes. But as for a nonfunctional gesture of affection, the kind any beloved child certainly knows — rumpling the hair; counting the freckles; or admiring the fatty bulges, the sweet little hands and feet, the triumphant syllables of language, and the curled-up slumber — she bestowed no such thing. Having lived under the guiding ethos of being kept dry when it was wet, I was bequeathed a practical approach and an ostensibly stable profession.

Stein, of course, was the one who persuaded me to study geology.

Even after Dad died, Stein continued taking me to his home. Dad's death didn't change Daria's attitude toward me, and every game with her would end in bitter tones. As I waited for Mother to pick me up, the atmosphere at their place would tense up, so that by the time Mother arrived it felt tight and crowded already. Then Edna would scan Mother's shape and aspect, with a look hinting at a certain ill will, and turn her eyes toward Stein to see what effect Mother was having on him. When the door clacked behind us, I could sense her malevolent words following us and clinging to our ears. "I want to know why they're so important to you. What are you getting out of all this?" And Mother, for her part, made her consternation heard aloud: "If she has the soul of an old crone, that's her business. But why look like one? That woman never exercised or made up her face a single day in her life. How can he stay a minute with her?"

Despite the mutual hostility of the two families, Stein remained Stein even when he got around to advising me on a profession. Granted, he never mentioned that Dad — who had a lovely collection of stones — would have been pleased that I fulfill his middle-aged dream of learning. But underneath the Syro-African rift, underneath "We're living in a country on a fault line, and because of our security problems the danger of an earthquake isn't stressed enough," I could hear the beat of the phrase "For your Dad, who missed out on the chance."

So instead of treading the boards as Medea or Oedipus, as I'd dreamed lengthily and in vain, I went off for an intimate acquaintance with the wonders of our planetary crust.

Two years or so after Dad left us, I went to live with Gramsie. She hadn't been involved in my life till then, but we appeared to be a good match: Gramsie shrugged at all the trifles that Mother held dear — all the dearer as I sank into the depths of adolescence.

Funding for my studies was, of course, not at hand. The monthly support I received from my Dad's meager National Insurance benefits ended when I left the army, as if fatherlessness was grown out of. But Stein managed to scrounge a scholarship for me. Thus I had the questionable honor of joining those with a debt of gratitude, in their debtors' prison. Every two months, I would meet with some dozens of fellow prisoners for a program that was a compulsory, integral part of the scholarship. Mostly it was speeches about society: We must make good on our obligation to society, we must carry forth the banner as representatives of poverty, of excellence. Sometimes instead of a banner it was a spearhead.

But I liked the studies, and the teachers. The geologists were wonderful people. Though the world is so petty, almost all of them were detached from it.

The Introductory Geology professor — whom we called Professor Turonian, as if he too were ninety million years old — told us in a tone befitting the most natural remark in the world: "Historians consider each year worth celebrating. In sixty of those years we built a state, and during the same time just maybe the tip of the tip of a stalactite began edging out. That's proportionality."

Proportionality was the name of the game. And proportionality was the sole guideline a fatherless girl found use for.

Any ties I formed at the university weren't too close. When set against the Cenomanian age, any friendship is fleeting. Geologists prefer to invest in long, stable relationships with rock, which doesn't make trouble and generally reacts as expected: pour this solution on it, and it will effervesce. Crack it open, and we'll know what it's like inside. That's a stable, beneficial relationship.

Stein was a visiting lecturer at the university and in my life — flitting in, disappearing, but always somewhere nearby. He gave a course on “Flaws in existing structures, and constructive solutions,” and it cast a coma indiscriminately over everyone in the auditorium. But since I knew him personally, I would have felt bad about dozing in front of him, so I was the only one in the class who was able to prepare a paper on the subject.

When Stein discovered that I had written everybody else’s term paper, he said “Good writing.”

I shrugged.

“I’m not going to incriminate anyone. What impressed me the most was the change in style for each and every paper,” he said.

“So how did you find out?” I asked.

“The structure of the papers was the same, even though the style was always as if someone different was writing.” And then he proposed that I write for the journal he was editing, *Minerals*. But I didn’t want to work together with a bucketful of guilt feelings, so I declined.

Dad’s last words had been about pulling. But if I was an expert in anything, it was in letting go. I never succeeded in staying at a workplace. I wandered from one job to another at random. Gramsie didn’t frown and didn’t say anything, although she knew that sometimes I was far more fascinated with ideas than with implementing them. That’s how it turned out with the rats I’d planned to tame, and with the silkworm farm I wanted to set up as a youngster, and with the deaf people’s protest that I planned for many months but never brought to pass. I could call myself a former service station attendant, cashier, guard, librarian, and waitress. And a substitute kindergarten teacher, until the parents arrived and saw me dancing with their tykes on the tabletops. They looked askance at the idea, to say the least.

It always happened in the same way, with surprising precision: when I was in my effervescence, I could charm people. At my speed, no one could intercept me. Later, when my thoughts began to solidify like lead and their heaviness affected everything, it was only a few mutual steps to the end.

So when Stein once more proposed that I write for the *Minerals* journal I, in my weariness of jobswitching, consented. Before I could even work up any enthusiasm, he splashed cold water: “There’s not much money in it,” he said, rubbing his hand on the cactus prickles that had sprouted on his chin. “But I believe we’ll manage to dig something out for you.” (It was never “scrape together,” always “dig out.”)

At the start I didn’t feel comfortable around him. After all, this was the man who had witnessed it all, the man who saw little Yiskah orphaned of his own good friend and saw her mother go unhinged in front of her. But I began to feel at ease when Edna, his wife, cheated on him with a doctoral student of philology. It gave me the feeling that we were somehow on a common footing, and that if the truth be told, not everything was perfect in the life of the man who saw me struck fatherless. Stein wanted a divorce because, as he told me, “It makes sense for the sake of her standing. I guess I’m too old for her, and Daria is big enough now.” Although he didn’t continue, I noticed the regret with which he mentioned Daria, the girl with the silver spoon who if she fell, always fell butter-side up. Speaking in the kitchen to a friend, a few months after the disaster, Mother said — but I didn’t repeat it to Stein, of course — that if she weren’t in mourning she’d have snapped Stein up by now. Because where can you

find a man like that these days? Other than Dad of course, may his rest be sweet. A man without a comb-over, and with such pecan eyes and steely hands? Even in middle age, Stein was sturdy and didn't allow overweight to settle in although Edna gave her all to embitter his life. A thousand times I asked Stein why he let her behave that way to him, and a thousand times he shrugged and said "That's how it is."

My workspace was in a room on the appropriately named Hammer Street. It could barely be called a space, since long ago the walls had been filled up with books and maps, and the books and maps were overlaid with cobwebs, and the floor was full of rocks of every type and color. As a son of Holocaust survivors, Stein observed the cautious tradition of throwing nothing away because you never know when you'll have use for something. From this room, *Minerals* was published — an esteemed and eminent journal in which I authored articles under the fictional identities of three or four different PhD candidates.

My regular column was "Diary of a Geology Student" — the thoughts of a student presenting the scanty readership with material of a lightweight nature, at least in comparison to the center of the earth. The rest of my alter egos revealed a wondrous flexibility of profession and occupation.

"How can I pretend to be professors?" I repeated to Stein whenever the journal went off to print. "After all, anyone can go on line and find out that Professor Emeritus Carmi has spent years now pushing up daisies."

"Who'll go on line?" Stein laughed with his pecan eyes. "You're forgetting that this is geology, not literature. What's the worst that could happen? They find out we've invented some professors? At worst they'll close down the journal. Even as is, the journal doesn't dig out much profit for us."

"What's the worst that could happen?" I said aloud as I came down the staircase of Gramsie's building.

But I couldn't answer my own question.

Translated from the Hebrew by Mark Levinson