

G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

FICTION



# SCROLLS

BY  
MIRYAM SIVAN

*‘Walking is how the body measures itself against the earth.’*  
Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*

**T**he last thing I remember B.B. (before the blast—this is how it will be known to me if I live long enough for memories), was that I was on the phone with the bank to increase my credit card limit when I heard planes. Many planes. I stopped the potter’s wheel and walked to the studio door to see how many, what kind, and in which direction they were flying. Then came the strong whistling sound of missiles (like those from Lebanon that battered the Galilee a couple of years back). One ear open for the bank agent, the other scanned the

skyscape for clues. A massive jolt threw me against the door jamb. My phone fell to the ground. Then another jolt and a howling wind like nothing I’d ever known whipped me. And searing white light from somewhere to the west filled everything. Later, no sense of how much time passed, I opened my eyes and slowly peeled myself off the ground to find a world destroyed. Earth flat and gray. A crazed silence. A sky screen letting in tinted light, and everything gone: buildings, cars, trees, hills, people. I stood extra tall, feeling the stretch of my body from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, and checked all my body

parts in between. Everything seemed in place.

I used a remnant of the door jamb to orient myself and began walking toward the general vicinity of my house. It normally took 15 minutes and counting steps helped track the time. I pushed back at the gnawing dread in my stomach and pleaded with the universe that someone from the family would be there, too. Show up from wherever the blast caught them.

It was June and should have been hot but the dust cover between Earth and the rest of the universe kept things cooler. When I got to where I thought the house had been, almost impossible without reference points since even rocks had disappeared, I sat on the ground and waited. Patiently. I didn’t know where this reservoir of patience came from, but didn’t question the gift. Gone my usual frenetic current. Gone the habitual over-analyzing (an extremely annoying feature according to my kids). I was myself but not myself. Something so big was going on, I didn’t even try to unpack it.

I scanned the horizon. More than scanned. My eyes hurt from straining so hard to see a human or animal. Every time I thought I glimpsed something, my heart clenched. Then a not pleasant release when I realized that in fact it was nothing in this unmoving landscape.

So I conjured them in my mind. Noga: tall, strong, quite fearless at 16. She was at the horse ranch when the blast hit. Where she most loved to be. Matan at 13, also tall and strong, but reserved, bookish. He was at a friend’s house to prepare for an exam. Nir like me at 46, vital ... I wouldn’t allow myself to think about the love we made the night B.B. But I reflect on the kiss he gave me the next morning outside the house, before I set out on the 15-minute walk to my studio, and he drove 30 minutes to his graphic design office in Haifa. Where he was when the blast hit.

These thoughts brought on wrenching emotion. I banished their faces. STOP. And filled my mind’s screen with colors, especially the celadon I was partial to for glazes these past few years.

I waited for someone to show up and sunk into the ghostly silence of a post-boom world licked clean and colorless by heat. And after hours of sitting, of waiting, of longing, of holding hope close and yet far enough to blunt its gnawing edge, I realized I had to move, or I never would. I forced my stiff limbs up, looked back one last time, and started walking. Based on the trip from the ceramic studio, I headed in what might be a southerly direction. I walked and walked until I no longer felt my legs. Then stopped and lay down.

\* \* \*

For years when traveling abroad, I would invite people to come watch the apocalypse from my porch in south-west Asia. I would say:

“Front row seats by the plains of Mount Megiddo. Fateful Armageddon to you.”

In all those years no one came. Until the war finally did. From the north as Jeremiah predicted. Now it is too late for visitors. It is too late for everything after so much noise and chaos and violence: armies to the north at war with Israel, armies to the east agitating, armies to the south sitting on taut springs. And the whole world watching, trigger fingers trembling.

It’s been clear for a long time that the situation was only getting worse, but I never thought the weapons would tip the scales so far to one side that the world would capsize. That’s it, that explains what’s happening. The world has turned inside out and I am under the sea, the sky dome, the water line. But gills have not come with the blast. I fill my lungs with air that has no smell but carries the texture of dust. No, I still have a human body. I am still here.

I’m not totally surprised that rockets with nuclear warheads arrived. They’d been poised in Syria and Iran for years. Yet so many pundits and politicians and simple people like me agreed they would never be used, since our rockets with nuclear warheads would be launched back within seconds. It would be the end of *us* but also the end of *them*. Experts call it global nuclear balance. Guess lots of us misjudged.

I look up at the sky dome. Its opacity has thinned. A slight penumbra visible now behind the veil. Faint but still a compass. Now it’s me and the sun in this ashen world. I walk south. Toward Megiddo. Twenty kilometers as the crow flies and about four or five hours on foot. From there I’ll continue to the desert.

I walk and walk, the body pushes through air and gravity, the mind pushes thoughts away. I focus on the ground directly ahead of each step. Having a destination heartens me. Qumran. A wedge of solace inside unrelenting blankness.

I keep walking until I reach what might be Megiddo judging from the sun. It has moved from a watch face position of 10 to 2. I close my eyes along this ancient Egypt-Babylon trade route, that locus of imagined apocalypse, but feel nothing. The site has been nothing but rubble and a few low walls for hundreds of years now. B.B. Megiddo was already a ruin.

Last year Noga and I woke up early to catch the sun rising from here. The morning air was fresh and even a little cold ... in July! We looked out at the fields of the Jezreel Valley and at the necklace of Gilead’s hills in the east and were humbled by beauty and history.

Now there is no history, just this elongated present moment. Now there is no beauty. Too many people worked at killing it. And we all knew. All knew. Extreme weather patterns took over our lives as scientists predicted they would. All the time talk about the lack of clean water, food, reliable governance, viruses, genetic plants outcompeting edible produce. And then we talked about cyberattacks on electric grids and other infrastructures, and the headlines reported shrinking magnetic fields and more missile and tank incursions from territory to territory.

And now I walk in a strange peace that has arrived after that racket of war. Still, if I am the only one left to enjoy it, I won’t last long. I have near minus survival skills. How I am managing so far without food is a mystery, and my life owes itself to the water bottle that never reaches bottom.

Or maybe I am dead and walking is part of the journey to the underworld. Maybe I’ve left my body and this is the soul moving. I groove on that and then stumble over my own feet. No, I still have a body. I’m still here.

\* \* \*

I check the sun and track southeast. My shadow moves clockwise on the ground. How will I know when I reach Jerusalem? Will I feel the rise that the city is set upon?

I wonder why I am not frightened of being alone in this vast nothingness. Because I am easily spooked. Legacy of a childhood in a violent cityscape. Even in the countryside with fewer people, kinder people, my family laughs at my need to lock all doors and windows at night. And to make sure all the dogs and cats are inside. Nights are dangerous.

My dogs and cats. How have I forgotten them? I am nowhere near home but call out anyway. Maybe those clever creatures evaded the blast.

“Sonny! Cassie! Ruby! Freddy!”

How did I not think of this before?

“Sonny! Cassie! Ruby! Freddy!”

I wait for a ripple in the air, the dust, or better yet a bark or meow. Then try again.

“Sonny! Cassie! Ruby! Freddy!”

The stillness bludgeons me. I fall to the ground

and cry hard and loud for the first time since the blast. And then it’s over. I lie on my back and close my eyes. COUNT BREATHS I say out loud. In one, hold, out one, hold. In two, hold, out two, hold. In three, hold, out three, hold. In four, hold, out four, hold.

Since there is no more home, not in any conventional sense of the word, does that make every place home?

I curl into a dreamless sleep and when I wake, I miss people. I rise, drink water, and start walking, vigilantly scanning for movement of any kind.

The first thing I’m going to do when I meet someone is kiss them on the lips. A ritual greeting, an ancient declaration of devotion. Thirst for the kiss excites me and my legs propel me forward, toward another, toward answers, toward something other than the dulled colors around me and the occasional flurry of dust dancing around my feet in which I leave no footprints.

Meanwhile, I hum by my lonesome. I walk south and consider trying Road 60. Road of the Forefathers. Road of the Mountain connecting Beersheba and Nazareth, Abraham to Jesus. But I hesitate turning east this soon and continue south through what might be Wadi Ara.

Relying entirely on the sun and hope, I walk toward the fawn brown cliffs of Qumran. Might the lowest place on Earth become the lingering source of life? I stare at the sky and wonder how many missiles were actually fired. And by whom? Or were the weapons dropped by planes like in Japan? Has the whole world been flattened or only the Middle East? I hope that somewhere on Earth green and blue still exists, and people and animals and even annoying cellphones. If Qumran has survived the blast, someone there may know.

What I wouldn’t give to see some millennial angels and a golden throne. Act one: Ezekiel’s Gog and Magog. Total destruction. Act two: Enter Messiah, first time, second time, depending on your religion. Act three: Novel era of peace begins. Lions and lambs pre-Edenic in situ, resurrection of the dead, pain free childbirth, food and drink for all. Nice. It certainly will be peaceful since everyone’s dead and the flora and fauna have been taken, too. What did they do wrong? Absolutely nothing. *Homo sapiens*. Unthinking wretched destroyers.

I am beyond exhausted but can’t stop walking. I think of Jews climbing the Alps in summer clothing to escape Wehrmacht soldiers. No choice but to push beyond the screaming body’s limits.

A sudden coolness in the air, a slight incline in my feet. Something has shifted. The mountains may have vanished, but I feel a shadow imprint of their height.

A wavelet of confidence pushes me forward. I am approaching Jerusalem and my defenses go down for a millisecond. I recall my good-bye to Noga at the stables and drink in the nectar of this image. Her smile, her large black eyes. As she walked away from me, I admired her lengthening body, confident in its abilities. As if she felt my eyes on her, she turned around and backtracked.

“Have a great day, Rose.” She leaned over the fence and kissed me lightly on the mouth. Noga’s been calling me by the English translation of my name, Vered, since she could talk.

I put my hand on her cheek and kissed her on the nose. We laughed. She’s the love of my life.

Suddenly a giant hum. The earth seems to rise some more. The hum grows louder. Suddenly a group of people. Maybe 20. It’s a shock to see living, moving beings after so much time alone. Tears well up in my eyes. Oh, happy day. If there are people here, there will be in Qumran. And if in Qumran, then Noga and Matan and Nir might find me.

Eagerly I approach a tall woman in a dust covered white dress. Before I say anything, she pushes me down to the ground and points to a satellite dish.

“God speaks,” she hisses.

“Have I reached Jerusalem?”

“Pray,” she orders.

The hum is agitating and not pleasant, like once-upon-a-time late-night television snow. The sound of disconnect. But still, a satellite dish has survived the blast. If this, then other things.

I lie on the dusty earth and observe people talking out loud to themselves, some with words, some gibberish, others weep, and others lie still with eyes closed, as if dead but not. Three men in black clothing strut before us.

“God appeared in a lightning flash,” one of them thunders. Bald with corkscrew ear locks that strike out perpendicular to his long black beard, he stands near the satellite dish in a black cape and tall black boots. As if he walked off the stage of a Jacobean drama. Judging by their clothing, a priest and imam stand with him. The start of a bad joke. I want to laugh but am afraid to draw attention to myself.

“In our world there’s one thing more important than life itself,” the Jewish caped crusader roars and pauses. “Faith.” He leans over the people prostrate before him. “Words, not bread, rule the world. In the beginning was the word. In the beginning *aleph-bet*. This defines faith. Who shall live and who shall die.”

People moan. Their bodies contort, seized by spirit or fear or both.

“This is how it begins.” The black cape swirls dramatically as he paces around. What did he do B.B.? Actor? Banker? Has his entire life led up to this moment? “Women, food, Messiah. From least to most important. And purity. Zone of purity. Zone of purity.” He chants and spit flies.

Clearly rabid. What if everyone who survived is like this? But no, if I am alive, there must be others who are not feverish with fear. I will find them. I have not survived a nuclear blast to live a greater hell with these types. I plot my escape.

Crawling slowly toward the group’s edge, I rise and walk away when eyes are not on me. Then I run. One hundred paces later I reach a drop. The Judaeen Desert spreads out below. I look upon all that remains. A honey-colored terrain of slopes and cliffs. Hallelujah, it still exists! And the Dead Sea’s magnificent oval blue still exists! Blue! Blue! Blue! The sun is near the eastern horizon, morning of a new day. And it is good.

I start climbing, down into the desert, toward Qumran. There are more people now. Every time I see someone, my heart skips with hope. But everyone seems touched by messianic fervor or maybe the blast has made them fluent in the gesticulations and murmurings of the mad.

A man who looks like a bus driver in a blue shirt and careless tie steps in front of me. I walk around him. No stopping. No eye contact. Menace is in the air.

“The Gospel of Mark says a great tribulation is coming in the clouds with power and glory,” he shouts, maybe to me, maybe to himself, maybe to others.

When he is 20 feet behind, another man starts walking alongside me. Actually, I can’t tell if it’s with me deliberately or coincidentally. I glance at him to see if I can take him if he attacks me. He’s about my size and seems harmless with his shoulder-length blondish hair, soft loafers, and ringed fingers. Even so I feel threat and start to sweat. My entire being recognizes my vulnerability. My isolation. No weapon, no intrinsic fighting skills, no man. Suddenly he breaks out in a rich baritone.

*Everybody knows that the dice are loaded*

*Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed*

*Everybody knows the war is over*

*Everybody knows the good guys lost*

*Everybody knows the fight was fixed*

*The poor stay poor; the rich get rich*

*That’s how it goes*

*Everybody knows.*

Of course Cohen’s words are perfect for the moment. I take a chance and glance at him again. Is he who

I imagined meeting and kissing? He smiles back timidly. I don’t think so, though he does seem benign. Almost childlike. He continues, this time reciting the words as an incantation.

*And everybody knows that you’re in trouble*

*Everybody knows what you’ve been through*

*From the bloody cross on top of Calvary*

*To the beach of Malibu*

I recite the last lines with him as I start my way directly down to Qumran.

*Everybody knows it’s coming apart*

*Take one last look at this Sacred Heart*

*Before it blows*

*Everybody knows.*

I turn briefly. He gives me a little wave. I wave back. A sliver of hope in a bleak landscape. Then I bring my gaze back to my feet and the path ahead. The slopes are not easy, the rocks are loose and tricky, and care is needed not to fall. Suddenly another group of people appears, and I feel rather pleased with myself. I had a premonition that people would gather here. “The place”—המקום—calls out for it. Both sanctuary and pressure cooker. Jerusalem and her hills. The Dead Sea and Qumran.

But the people here are screaming and fighting. Bodies are on the ground and more are falling. I steer a wide berth while trying to understand what is going on. Then I see. A small piece of wall stands in the middle of the commotion. On it, maybe 30 centimeters from ashy earth, an electric outlet. In it, a phone charger. On the other end of the cord, a phone. A very big man stands in front of the outlet. He has a long reddish beard, wears a khaki flight suit, and looks ready to take down anyone who steps too close. People are hollering: mine, mine, now me, me, me, me.

Two people rush him, cellphones in hand. He breaks one man’s neck with a quick twist and the other he kicks in the groin. After a quick glance at the phone being charged, he calls out, “One more minute.”

People surge forward demanding access to this wonder and are too distraught to maintain a line. Some are thrown out of the pack by anonymous hands. Screams are almost deafening.

Frightened, I dash away. How do so many people still have phones? And who do they expect to call?

I continue downward. After a few moments, blessed silence again. Days alone I longed for noise, then once human noise came—chaos, violence, intimidation, indoctrination—I long for silence. The unique silence of

the desert that lands heavily yet floats lightly around the body like a down blanket in winter. Suddenly two men are talking, though I don’t see them. Sound carries far in the desert.

“But what did they mean when they asked for a sign that the Messiah was coming?”

I see them up ahead, sitting close together in an oval of shade under a hanging rock. They wear black pants and jackets and what were once white shirts, now gray like everything else. The uniform of the ultra-Orthodox.

“Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said: ‘You will see when his existing gate falls and will be rebuilt and will fall a second time and will be rebuilt, and will fall a third time. And they will not manage to rebuild it until the son of David comes.’ The students said to him: ‘Our rabbi, give us a sign.’ And Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to them: ‘But didn’t you say to me that you are not asking for a sign?’”

“Exactly, they promise not to ask for a sign, but in the end cannot resist. But what can be taken as a sign?”

They look up, see me, and stop learning. One of them stands and takes a tentative step toward me.

“Are you Jewish?”

“If she’s Jewish, we’ll keep her,” the other man calls out in Yiddish.

“From her womb a new Jewish nation,” his friend concurs and takes another step toward me.

My grandmother spoke to me in Yiddish, but they don’t know that.

“I’m Christian,” I lie and step back. “Where were you ...?”

“Father Abraham’s grave in Hebron.”

“Others?”

“Some Muslims on the other side of the tomb ran east to Moab.”

A slight tremor comes from the earth. We freeze.

“There was another one earlier,” the seated one says. “Bigger.”

I nod. “Good luck with your studies.” I feel their eyes on my back and continue my descent. A new nation out of my womb. At 46. (Though Sara was 90!) Ha.

I am close to Qumran. I sense the Great Rift Valley, mother to significant seismic activity, mediator of earth tensions. And right on cue another tremor. I walk faster, I am the beloved, a gazelle on the steep cliffs that unto themselves are a miracle after hundreds of kilometers of flat. And even though everywhere I’ve walked these past few days has been surreal, the desert is even more so.

The heat of the day is upon me. I look up. The filmy coat separating our world from the one above has thinned and it looks like noon. I have now met people, what I wanted more than anything besides wanting my

children and Nir, but feel lonelier than ever. I would cry but it is too hot and too dry and too much everything. I carefully climb down the heated rock face to a ledge wide enough with shade for me to lie down. I close my eyes and seek relief. A wave of doubt and regret hits me. Should I have remained in the powdered plains of home?

Suddenly I feel hunger after days of none and wonder if I’m coming back to life. I try to sleep but can’t. The caves are calling. The sun has moved considerably and I should too, even if Qumran is empty and I have nothing to do there but die like most of the others.

I journey down slowly, weaker, shakier, uncertain. Black nuggets of ibex dung on the trail are a good sign. Unexpectedly, from a patch of rock reflecting light in earth’s beige blanket, an American flag rises and flutters. I realize that a) someone is here, and b) there is a strong wind. Another earth tremor, larger this time, forces me to grab hold of the rock face to steady myself.

“Don’t worry.”

My body freezes but my head turns toward the soft voice. A man slides down from a perch above me. “I don’t think there’ll be a big quake. Earth is just responding to the chaos.” He looks about my age and is handsome with a short gray beard and kind brown eyes. “Welcome, I’ve been waiting for you.”

I don’t know what to say yet there is something comforting in his presence, but also not. Waiting for me, really?

“I’m Shabtai.”

“You’re American.”

“Also that. Steven in English.”

“I’m …” I can’t remember my name. Noga, Matan, Nir and … Nir and Vered. “I’m Vered.”

“And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; For I

am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”

“Jeremiah 1:19.”

“Written 600 CE.”

“And this is Qumran?”

“Yes. Come, Vered. May I call you Rose?”

I gasp and hang back. Rose opens up the chasm of pain where Noga resides. He smiles gently. He cannot know about Noga and Rose. But he can know I hurt.

“This is all very hard.” He puts out his hand.

Something about him—the serendipity of Noga Rose, the soft timbre of his voice, his limber figure, his eyes—urges me to trust him. After so many men have unleashed the beast inside them, has he done the opposite? Might he be someone I can go through days with until my family arrives? For the burden of solitude weighs on me. Tears rim my eyes. I don’t care if he sees. I will stay with him for a while to rest and reassess.

I take his hand. Shabtai leads me to a cave. I feel a strange joy. For years I’ve wanted to climb the cliff to explore these very caves. But it’s not allowed, though some stubborn types manage to enter *the one* where the scrolls were found.

And here I am, finally, in a cave looking down at the blue Dead Sea whose surface ripples with wind. The stone structures of the Essene community are gone. But I don’t need them to feel who and what has been *here* before: the mystics, the rebels, the genizah, the library.

“Rest.” Shabtai points to a thin mattress on the cave floor. I sit. I take the pita and olives he hands me but hesitate. “Please, eat. It’s probably been days.

I take a bite of pita and my mouth fills with taste and saliva. Suddenly I am ravenous but pace myself. I note each bite of wheat, each wave of salt, an olive slips around my mouth, its oil moistening the bread. These simple foods have never been more wonderful.

“Where were you when …”

“Shrine of the Book,” he says. “Happened to be visiting the museum but I understood right away when I heard the missiles. I figured more were coming from the north.” He sits down and stares into his hands. “I broke the glass, carefully removed the scrolls from the case, and hit the deck. They’re back where they belong.”

“In Qumran.”

“In Qumran.”

“Other people?”

“Not yet.”

“You sure? I have children …”

“We’ll wait for them.”

“You have enough food?”

He points to another small cave. In the dim light I see dozens of tall clay jars whose lids inspired the Shrine of the Book’s design. Though new, the jars are cast in rough pottery to resemble the ancient ones that cradled the ancient scrolls for millennia. Some potter did nice work. Maybe him?

“I prepared for this.” Shabtai says slowly. “I knew the big war was coming.”

Suddenly there’s a bird call and I realize I have not heard one since B.B. I look up but see nothing.

“There’s enough food here for two years. With you now, enough for 16 to 18 months.” I look at him. He is serious. “When the children come, there’ll be enough for one year. We’ll figure it out. We’re starting over. Armageddon’s come, sweetheart.”

Shabtai takes me in his arms and kisses me softly on the lips. A ritual greeting. An ancient declaration of devotion.

In the deep blue sky over his shoulder, a sand-colored lark flies by, and then another. They sing. They dance together. ☉