SHORT STORY

Shadows over Jerusalem I

by Philip Steiner

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

The Edge of the World

My dear friend Elah,

For almost three centuries our people have been captives — since Armageddon, when humanity disappeared from the surface of the earth and only the children of Abraham were left, confined behind Jerusalem's walls.

Maybe we should have gotten devoured by the shadows like the rest of the world. That might have been true salvation. But I do not care, my friend. It simply does not matter. Since the day the lights of humanity were extinguished and only our tiny candle remained lit, people have transgressed; the mighty predators have become feeble and cowardly. The day the shadows took our world, they took our future. I can see the dimness in the people's eyes; I can see it in yours. Yet I do not care. They all have it backwards. The Three Friends, Job's Daughters, and the Accusers; it's a thousand lies. This is not about Yahweh, it has never been. It is not about being a critical secularist; it is not about the great reward that awaits us for our patience. Neither should we switch to the dark side and hail the shadows. Foul hubris of man! That we deem ourselves to be of greatest importance even when the glorious light that was our civilization has been reduced to a shivering petty flame. Elah, my dearest friend. I am sorry. I leave everything behind, and you with it. For once I dare what for a century nobody has dared. I will leave this cemetery of humanity, this decrepit fortress, and find the truth. I would rather die with clear eyes tomorrow than to carry on this hopeless dim existence. I still hope, and therefore I fear.

Goodbye,

your Anah

Day 15:

For over two weeks, Anah had been wandering through the Judean Desert. She did not know what she was searching for, yet in her heart a heroic spark resided; a relentless voice, driving her through the wasteland. The unknown excited her heart and soul. Nobody knew what would be at the end of the desert in the far west. There might be wild animals, beautiful vegetation, and maybe, just maybe, even people. Her provisions were minimal but enough to last for at least one and a half months. Since darkness had fallen over the world, the Children of Abraham had scarcely had enough of anything. Three centuries of almost constant famine and thirst had forged their being. Shaped by this culture of deprivation, Anah knew how to handle sparse resources. A piece of bread and a few sips of water were enough to bring her

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

through a day of walking in the desert. There was almost a sort of Epicurean happiness to this journey. Finally, she had been freed from the depression that kept all of Jerusalem in its suffocating grip. All her life, over twenty years, she had been surrounded by an impermeable eclipse and now she had stepped into the light. As dim as it was, light was always the antagonist of darkness. During the day, she would march head on, filled with determination. There was not much to explore in the vast area of sand. A pre-Armageddon person would have been completely bored, most likely bored to death. For Anah, however, every snake, tiny bug, and sand dune was special; each a unique phenomenon that delighted her. When night approached, Anah would build a small camp, tightly cover herself in blankets, and look up to the stars with riveted gaze. Their lights could not make it through the darkness that surrounded Jerusalem. They were something fresh and utterly exciting to her. What might be out there in the grand nothingness that was sprinkled with myriads of bright dots? There were legends that humanity had once made it to the moon, something completely unimaginable from Anah's perspective. How could any person manage to get up there? With a flying horse? Innumerable myths ranked themselves around this story, yet all the elders agreed that it had to be made up. There was hardly any quality to it, unlike the stories of the Old Testament that glistened with metaphoric wisdom and precision. Still, Anah loved the idea of mankind roaming the cosmos. As she slowly drifted away into the dreamworld, she thought about the ideas of the Daughters of Job. Maybe they were indeed right; it could all be just a divine scheme. Perhaps she would wake up the next morning and human civilization was back, shining even brighter than before. These nights she would fall asleep with warmth in her heart and a merry smile. Her clear celestial eyes closed; her crow-black haired head sunken to the ground.

***

They are here! Have always been, will always be! Elah! The shadows have finally found me. When I entered the world of dreams, I ventured too far. You know how the elders say we shall not, even in our dreams, dare to touch a shadow. I did it. I was walking a bright path through a field of golden corn, next to a tranquil river. The birds sang their lovely tunes, accompanied by the soft chirrups of grasshoppers. There were many people; talking, playing, greeting me with happy smiles on their well-fed faces. I have had this dream many times. At the end of the field there is always a pitch-black tunnel. For over two weeks, I have been avoiding this gate into the unknown, as a last act of respect toward our elders. Yesterday, I went into it. A dark guttural voice was calling me. It told me that if I wanted to find the pure light of reason, I would have to enter absolute darkness. As I reached deeper into the tunnel, the world began to change. The stone-cold walls gradually blurred and lost their structure. Holes appeared suddenly beneath my feet. Sometimes I would almost fall

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

down their throats, at other times they behaved like glass surfaces, letting me tread on them. Reality continuously shifted out of its place the closer I got to the centre of the cave. Eventually, I reached the end. I found myself in a mighty cavern, seemingly endless in height and width. In its centre a tall bluish flame burned, creating abiotic luminescence. The cavern was materially empty, only dozens of shadowy figures were roaming in the twilight. Slowly, I walked past these apparitions, waiting to be attacked any second, but they ignored me. I was not worthy of their attention. Whispers in unknown tongues echoed from the unreachable walls, crawling through my skin up to my brain, like cursed scarabs. Further and further, the world seemed to shift away from me. While my field of vision followed the concentric circular motion of the shadows, I gradually gave in to the pressure that was building up in my mind. Finally, the threshold was reached. The last piece of pious resistance was shattered like glass and I touched one of the shadows. Every fibre in my body lusted for this sensation.

It all happened in the fraction of a glimpse. My hands just went through it. Right in front of my eyes a leprous face took form. Empty eye holes penetrated my faint heart and a bone shattering grip squeezed my right arm. The ear-piercing howl of the spectre and my equally intense scream merged into one another, so did our physical forms.

Now they know where I am. While awake, every step, I can feel their hollow gaze. While asleep, I cannot return to the golden fields anymore. My lucid being is stuck in the cavern, until, as I fearfully assume, the day I will leave this world. As I slowly fall into darkness, I do hope that your days are as bright as mine are dark.

Day 20:

Anah moved on. Gone were the days of joyous wildlife observations and naïve astronomy. Her mind was restless. Objectively, everything seemed to be the same. The bugs and snakes still carried out their daily routines and the sand dunes kept their leisurely pace. However, Anah perceived the world differently now. The shadows had reshaped her senses. Things and their movements created apparitions that were constantly changing. In shapeshifting perfection, they glided above the ground, merging, building titanic beings that would collapse right over Anah into tiny fragments. Somehow, they seemed to keep her as their centre. Whenever she altered her position, they did so too. She finally understood. Since the day the shadows had found her in the dreamworld, Anah's consciousness had changed irrevocably. Before, she had felt full of vigour and drive. "These old men and women are simply blinded by their fanatic beliefs; encaged by thousands of years of zealot propaganda." The ideas of the Three Friends slowly lost their appeal, making space for the awareness that

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

there might indeed be gods in this world. Yet these deities were neither benevolent nor loving. After another day of purposeless wandering west, a little oasis appeared on the horizon.

***

Elah! I can hardly capture in words what I am experiencing. They have trapped me, this time in the awake-world. I found a beautiful oasis that seemed to promise relaxation and fresh water. How could I be so foolish? It was all a trick. A three-dimensional illusion created out of accumulated shadows. As soon as I was trying to dig my shaky palms into the brilliant surface, the world around me shifted once again. The whole twilight mirage deconstructed and rearranged itself. In front of me now lies a thick black well, illuminated by a bluish flame. I am surrounded by shadows that dance around me, chanting a dark chorus that I can hardly contemplate. It is only their stompy rhythm and the deep dark tone that is accessible to my human brain. My mind is like an empty scroll to this music. Every line is slowly being engraved. Out of the shadows an individual being has emerged and taken form. It is an angel, blindingly pale, shining in glorious gloomy twilight. Yet it does not look like the promised seraphs of the Old Testament. It radiates with a power far deeper and greater than you could ever imagine. As it draws closer in the dim light, it starts moving in abstract, ethereal ways. The laws of time and space seem not to apply to it. I can only describe the phenomenon as a visual echo. It drags along afterimages of itself which are neatly distributed along the wake of the movement. As the dark angel opens its mouth, the most vulgar guttural sounds come out, accompanied by beautiful angelic overtones. BLINDING PAIN strikes my head.

A mutilated, plastic mind,

Sanity gutted, blind design

Envy for them who live in bliss

Promised existence, lovely decay

As the shadows led by this unholy yet magnificent being close in on me, I can only sit still and record this blasphemic theatre. I only want to run and return into the warm womb of Jerusalem. Still, an unknown force pushes me further, forcing me to record this nightmare.

Look through the window, of pious life

A tragic heroine, necrotic inside,

Doomed to solitude, till the end of time

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

My right hand now writes this by itself. With uncompromising force, the words are being engraved on paper and soul. I am only a passive observer. Tears stream down my cheeks. Hellish screams leave my throat. I ONLY WANT TO BE WITH YOU! ELAH! TAKE ME HOME!

Fallen angel, clean at heart

Filthy product, hubris of man

Shadows surround, the innocent child

Virginity pressed into rotting flesh

OH LORD ALMIGHTY!

Oh Lord Almighty,

TAKE ME TO THE GATES!

Take me to the gates

OF YOUR SACRED LAND!

Of your sacred land,

RESERVED TO THE ANCIENT GODS!

Reserved to the ancient gods

AND SELF-RIGHTEOUS MEN!

And self-righteous men

Day 50:

A worn-out figure, reduced to a skeleton, dragged itself through the ocean of sand. Anah was now merely the shadow of a human. Her once crystal-clear blue eyes had become dim and her beautiful raven-black mane had turned grey, most of it had fallen out. The vigorous movements of her magnificent body were now irregular and forceful. Step by step she stumbled across the plains, more falling than walking. A small swarm of equally starved crows was following her, ready to feast when the last step had been taken. Thick cumulonimbus clouds gathered, darkening the sky. Flickering raindrops fell toward the earth around Anah, yet never on her. It seemed like even the basis of terrestrial life was avoiding her. "*West west west... have to go west...*" Stubbornly, she pulled herself further. "*But I do not care my friend. It simply does not matter*." Nothing that happened around her truly

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

mattered. Neither did the pixelated rain drops, nor the shadowy creatures that greedily sucked up the thick liquid right next to Anah, or the bloodthirsty birds. It was only this pilgrimage that was of any importance. Why? She did not know. Fate kept her on a tight leash. "*Elah, my dear,*" the unholy chorale of the shadows and their archangel still resonated in her mind. When she had joined in the singing, the bond was sealed. That night a deep connection with the shadows had been established. As part of their neural network, she could now hear what they heard, feel the pure obscurity. She was now a canvas that the shadows could paint on.

***

I am there Elah! I have reached the edge of the world! The dark ones have led me. I've been broken, ripped apart and put together anew. But they cannot take all from me. Finally, I really understand. This body is weak and unworthy, as is every bloated material. Here, deep in the Judean Desert, I have found wisdom, clearer and more precious than all the foul lies of our elders together. Full of indifference, I look back at Jerusalem and my foregone existence. Only the memory of you is vigorous, burning like the sun amid the eclipse that is my being. It is this deep affection towards you that has isolated my mind from the endless array of voices, which now call my brain their home. It was this affection that has kept me sane. I stand at the great waterfalls. It might be impossible for you to imagine but the world just ends out here. Only white nothingness resides on the horizon. There is a cliff that goes on endlessly to my left and to my right. From this cliff, at the edge of the desert, the purest water runs down in mighty streams, springing directly from the empty wasteland. The sight is so beautiful yet frightening that it threatens to overwhelm my broken body. Where does all this water come from? Is it drained from our small world by a higher power or is it just nature unfolding its gigantic might once again. Do you think this waterfall could encircle all that is left of our world? I am close to the end, not just geographically. My life force is fading. It's been weeks since I've eaten, and my throat has dried out completely. It seems the cruellest irony. Right in front of me unfeasible amounts of water fall into the unknown depths of nothingness, yet I cannot take a single sip. I cannot reach it. Its massive force would most likely pull me down with it anyway. But this is not of importance. My heart and soul are at peace now, Elah. I have learned from the shadows, as I have learned from you and the elders before. Again, I deem all these teachings philosophical and theological chimeras. Fabulous creations that do not matter in the grand scheme of the cosmos. Still, amidst all the wisdom that has accumulated in my mind, I cannot help but be sentimental. As I write these last words, I think about you and our unbreakable bond. Indeed, it seems that even we feeble humans are capable of such connections, sometimes even stronger ones than what their dark powers allow the shadows. Just behind me waits the archangel. With a clear and peaceful

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

expression on his face he regards my doing. His two palms show me the future. The left one is opened in a generous manner, ready to take these notes and deliver them to you. The right hand has claws with razor sharp nails that reach for about 1.5 meters and shine in the blinding light of the morning sun. These will end me and extract my soul. I shall then see what awaits me in the afterlife. Elah! Even though such emotions have almost become alien to me, I love you. Use these written remnants of my mind and save what can be saved. Connect all the souls of Jerusalem and find the core well, where all these water masses come from. Change the course of this forsaken world. After all, The Three Friends, The Daughters of Job, and The Accusers might all be right in some way. In the angle that you choose to look at the world, the world looks back at you. I still fear and so I hope.

Your Anah

Audio recording produced by Alwin Strasser.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.