Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies
edited by Piera Rossetto, Hadas Shabat Nadir, Aviad Moreno

"The Great and Mighty Body of Writing": On the Writing Body in Sami Berdugo's *All Five of Us*

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Abstract This essay examines Sami Berdugo's novel *All Five of Us* through the lens of the 'writing body'. The concept integrates narrative poetics with corporeal practices. Drawing on previous scholarship on Berdugo's engagement with Mizrahi identity, language, and embodiment, I argue that his writing body emerges as a charged site of trauma, secrecy, pleasure, and creative power. The novel's fractured structure mirrors bodily ruptures while transforming them into a mode of literary agency and resistance.

Keywords Sami Berdugo. Writing body. Mizrahi literature. Corporeality. Narrative poetics. Trauma. Language. Body. Gender.

1 No One in the World can Validate and Uplift Me Like Writing Does

In an interview published in the journal *Mikan*, author Sami Berdugo linked the act of writing with the uprightness of the self and the body:

> I mentioned that there is a sexual pleasure in it. Because alongside this difficulty that I am immersed in, in the moment of writing, there is no verdict, and I am at the heart of my own words, together

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Diaspore 23
e-ISSN 2610-9387 | ISSN 2610-8860
ISBN [ebook] 979-12-5742-004-8 | ISBN [print] 979-12-5742-005-5

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2025-04-01 | Accepted 2025-10-19 | Published 2025-12-15

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-004-8/009

> with language, with the world, and with everything that happens there. And there is a tremendous awakening, a great erectness, a very strong validation of myself, a validation that no one in life is able to give me like writing does. There is no person in the world who can, neither my mother nor my father, not my friend or my partner, no one, not even a literary critic who writes the most brilliant review about me, no one in the world can validate and uplift me like writing does, making me feel that I exist, that I am here. (Berdugo 2017, 459)

Berdugo marks, in words of desire and pleasure, the presence of his existence as a writing body. For Berdugo, writing is a space of awakening, a space where the self becomes upright and the body is stirred. The sexual connotations, "erectness", "awakening", are already embedded within the writing, charging both the body and the self with libido to the extent that the "writing self" becomes a singular space of sexual pleasure. As I will demonstrate, in his novel *All Five of Us* (2022), Berdugo constructs the writing body as a body full of life, pleasure, and desire. In this sense, Berdugo challenges conceptions of the body in both Israeli and Jewish culture, on both the Western (Ashkenazi) and Eastern (Mizrahi) sides of the spectrum.

In his book *The Zionist Body*, Michael Gluzman argues that with the rise of Jewish nationalism in the late nineteenth century and the consolidation of Zionist ideology, this ideology was also formulated through bodily terms, repeatedly declaring the necessity of constructing a new Jewish body. Until the emergence of Zionism, Hebrew literature produced an elaborate discourse on the Jewish body's deficiencies, portraying it as exilic, weak, hunched, and bent over books (Gluzman 2007, 11-13; Peleg 2000, 31-58; Boyarin 2000, 71-104). This discourse originated from the internalization of the Jewish body's image within the framework of nineteenth-century European antisemitic thought. The rise of Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was accompanied by an imaginative and ideological reconfiguration of the exilic Jewish body. According to Zionist ideology, a national, healthy life was believed to restore a degree of vitality, physicality, and material presence to Jewish existence. Thus, the Zionist male body was constructed as strong, natural, capable, beautiful, and youthful – standing in opposition to the exilic Jewish body, which Zionist consciousness sought to discard, characterizing it as diseased, defective, unnatural, ugly, and weak (Oppenheimer 2014, 104-5).

In contrast to this Western-Zionist perception, Yochai Oppenheimer argues that the conceptualization of the Mizrahi body closely resembled that of the exilic Jewish body, which had been marginalized and rejected. Israeli discourse constructed the notion of the 'Western body', a reincarnation of the 'Zionist body', as a model of sexual

normalcy, health, hygiene, and social functionality (Raz 2004, 31-62; Oppenheimer 2014, 35-6). In opposition to this, it positioned the 'Mizrahi body' as its flawed and threatening counterpart. From this perspective, Oppenheimer contends that the Mizrahi body serves as the heir to the exilic Jewish body: both were objects of rejection and subjected to corrective practices (Oppenheimer 2014, 104-6). Aziza Khazzoom, for instance, has demonstrated that the very same images once associated with the exilic Jew were later applied, in the 1950s, to Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. These immigrants were perceived as dirty, unhygienic, uneducated, and sexually aggressive. The Mizrahi body was thus cast as the Other, distinct and separate (Khazzoom 1999, 385-428).

However, Mizrahi literary discourse disengaged from Zionist discourse and its dichotomous constructs of the body. According to Oppenheimer, the rigid opposition between normative and defective masculinity is largely absent from Mizrahi literature. Instead, alternative constraints and resolutions emerge, offering a new bodily language. The Zionist discourse on the body remained foreign to second-generation Mizrahi writers, failing to evoke in them a need for its internalization that is, the notion that they must conceive of themselves as 'new Jews' whose immigration to Israel constituted a phase in the correction of their supposedly defective bodies. Oppenheimer argues that Hebrew literature presents two opposing representations of the Mizrahi body. On the one hand, it appears as an object of control and subjugation; on the other, it is fluid and decentralized, a subject that resists domination and attains an autonomous existence beyond normative boundaries and established meanings (Oppenheimer 2014, 105-11; Mishani 2006). He proposes that the Mizrahi body should be viewed as a body 'in becoming': a concept drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 9-15), emphasizing the multiple ways in which it undergoes transformation. In doing so, the Mizrahi body destabilizes and disrupts the dichotomous order of the Western-Zionist system.

Sami Berdugo is one of the most prominent and influential writers in contemporary Israeli literature, particularly within the field of Mizrahi writing. His work has received wide critical and institutional recognition, including the Sapir Prize (2011) for *Zeh ha-Dvarim* (That is to say, 2010) and the Bialik Prize for lifetime achievement (2018). Scholarly and critical discussions highlight the complexity of his writing, which oscillates between engaging with Mizrahi identity politics and persistently unsettling fixed frameworks of identity (Haver 2006, 4; Levi 2014, 227-35; Oppenheimer 2010, 282-306; Alon 2011, 4) A substantial body of research focuses on Berdugo's contribution to shaping a distinctive Mizrahi literary discourse. Yochai Oppenheimer points to the familial structures that dominate

his work: complex, castrating, and marginal systems within which the protagonists are formed. The father, and sometimes the mother, often appear as weakened, silent, and inaccessible figures embodying the 'Mizrahi past' pushed to the margins of Israeli society. The second generation seeks to construct a new identity but does so within familial and social frameworks that limit their agency and mark them as peripheral to the Zionist mainstream. Oppenheimer's reading positions Berdugo within a clear political and cultural field, where his fiction both reflects and articulates intergenerational rifts and experiences of Mizrahi exclusion.

Within this field, however, Berdugo develops narrative and poetic strategies of resistance as well as bodily practices that complicate straightforward readings through identity politics. Hanna Soker-Schwager focuses on the poetic dimension of his writing and identifies what she terms a "poetics of excess": linguistic, corporeal, and material. In his book such as *Ki Gi* [Because guy] and *Kakha Ani Medaberet im ha-Ruach* [And say to the wind], language behaves as bodily matter: overflowing, erupting, and refusing to be contained by coherent interpretation. These excess produces what she calls a "cut in the real", (Soker-Schwager 2021, 9) an attempt to reach trauma, the body, and memory through linguistic multiplicity and unrestrained exposure. Soker-Schwager argues that Berdugo does not offer a coherent identity or a fixed representational mode; rather, he writes from a vibrating space between language and body, unsettling any single interpretive paradigm including identity politics itself (Soker-Schwager 2021, 347-61). Yoni Levene (2017) highlights another dimension of this strategy. According to his reading, Berdugo exposes readers to stereotypical modes of reading often applied to Mizrahi texts, pathological, biographical approaches, while simultaneously dismantling them from within. In the short story "Shuk", [Trade] for example, the narrator leads readers from an initially judgmental perception of fraught mother–son relations to an understanding of the narrative as a sophisticated *Ars poetica*, not a straightforward confession. Levene argues that Berdugo strategically adopts the fantasy of literature for its own sake, a supposedly pure, apolitical literary space, only to expose the power relations embedded between authorial identity, readerly expectations, and artistic expression. His work thus performs a double movement: it establishes a distinct Mizrahi identity while simultaneously undermining the possibility of reading it through a single, fixed identity lens (Levene 2017, 476-506). Similarly, Yigal Schwartz (2022) emphasizes the bodily dimension of this destabilization. He reads Berdugo's writing as a sadomasochistic performance, in which the narrator's total bodily, sexual, and emotional exposure positions the reader within an ethical and aesthetic impasse. One cannot simply identify or detach: leaving the text is akin to admitting the failure of art; staying implicates the

reader in the violence of the performance. Through this mechanism, Berdugo not only reflects Mizrahi marginality but also articulates a defiant, non-compliant stance within the Hebrew literary field, simultaneously affirming the reality of social violence while resisting its smooth literary containment (Schwartz 2022).

I would like to argue that in *Kulanu ha-Hamisha* (*All Five of Us*, Berdugo 2022), Berdugo integrates both of the critical tendencies identified in previous scholarship: the narrative poetics and the corporeal dimension, into a single constellation: the writing body. At the core of his work, two interwoven narratives emerge: the question of his position as a writer within the literary field, and the personal and familial story of the narrator. Berdugo's writing draws from the raw material of lived experience: "He crafted a story from the leftover bread crumbs on the kitchen counter of our childhood home" (Berdugo 2022, 276). However, the act of writing simultaneously liberates the body from familial, national, and literary constraints. The writing body in Berdugo's work emerges as a charged site of both secret violence and intense pleasure and desire. It bears the marks of familial and social violence, while at the same time asserting itself as a source of creative power and sensual agency. Through this dynamic, Berdugo challenges national images of the weak, exilic, bookish Jewish body. Writing becomes a mode of re-inscribing the body, not merely as an object of trauma, but as an active agent of transformation. Through this embodied practice, Berdugo constructs a literary "I" that both asserts and elevates itself, distancing his work from postcolonial identity-based readings while still engaging with them.

Berdugo's 'writing body' is a body that has undergone an act of violence, one that excludes it from language and severs it from the Jewish chain of transmission between parents and children. At the heart of the novel lies the 'primordial sin' committed by the father against his children: the youngest of the five siblings is killed in a car accident, and at his funeral, the father unilaterally decides to recite the *Kaddish* alone, without including his other sons, despite the fact that they have all reached *bar mitzvah* age. This event is revealed only at the end of the novel, yet it serves as the driving force behind the entire narrative. It is the curse that lingers over them, the rupture of their bond with their deceased brother, enacted by their father. In response, the siblings vow that one day they will exhume their brother's body and recite the Kaddish together. The plot revolves around this secret, the 'primordial sin' of the father at his son's grave and the vow made by the siblings. This breach constitutes the abyss at the core of the novel:

> No one can fathom now just how deeply all four of us might be harmed, perhaps even more than that. Because if this moment has arrived, then for the first time in our lives, the four of us stand at

> the edge of an abyss. And how will each of us continue to defy it despite the abyss? (Berdugo 2022, 10)

The brothers' vow to recite Kaddish at the open grave of their younger brother serves as a rectification of the father's primordial sin. The words must be spoken in confrontation with the abyss that resides within them, to expose the secret, to reach the core of things. In doing so, the brothers seek to redress the injustice, to restore themselves to themselves, and ultimately, to return themselves to language.

The 'primordial sin' committed by the father at his son's grave creates a rupture between the parents and the siblings, and among the siblings themselves. In doing so, the father shatters the covenant that once bound the five brothers together. This fraternal bond is marked by a shared genetic defect: all five siblings suffer from a 'greenstick fracture', a break in one of the soft rib bones that, if fully fractured, could lead to paralysis. The siblings live under the constant threat that their lives could be immobilized in an instant, as the narrator confesses at the opening of the novel: "We are four children, cut apart, torn between columns and walls, carried weakly through the air, unable to grasp the hooks planted around us" (Berdugo 2022, 7). And elsewhere: "An old core of sealed loyalty" (Berdugo 2022, 47). The fracture in the rib alludes to the biblical origin of woman from Adam's rib, suggesting that the children are bound to one another, as if born from one another. The greenstick fracture thus becomes a birthmark, a scar, and a shared covenant. The father's primordial sin violently severs the bond between the four living siblings and their deceased brother, expelling them from sacred language, from the chain of transmission, and from their fraternal covenant. In doing so, he transforms them into a fragmented, shattered network:

> We are not a single cohesive unit. 'Family' is an unusable noun for us, […] That is the truth: we are four children severed from our mothers and fathers. […] Though both were with us, they did not belong to us. […] We saw, with our own eyes, our father and mother detaching themselves from us, and we, with a greenstick fracture in each of us, in our very bones discovered that our lives were not in our hands, but merely displayed before us. (Berdugo 2022, 23-4)

And elsewhere: "A tangled and conflicted network among themselves" (Berdugo 2022, 47). This network of relations between the children exists not only within their physical bodies but also within the language of the text itself. Throughout the novel, Berdugo employs the first-person plural, *Kulanu ha-Hamisha* (All Five of Us), to signify the shared consciousness that binds the siblings together. The greenstick fracture thus emerges as a motif embedded both within their bodies and at the very heart of the novel's narrative structure.

Yet, the greenstick fracture is not merely a covenant; it is also the curse imposed upon the siblings. The rupture of the bond between the living brothers and their deceased sibling, along with the looming threat of paralysis inherent in their shared condition, haunts the novel. In response to this trauma, the siblings decide to separate from one another, ceasing all communication for fourteen years. From that moment onward, they become fragmented shards, destabilizing social structures time and again.

As I argue, the poetics of the writing body, the broken body, is also the poetics of a fractured, fragmented, and repetitive text. The novel's structure mirrors its thematic concerns: divided, ruptured, wounded, and discontinuous. The abyss at the core of the narrative translates into a form of writing in which the storyline remains fractured, scarred, and digressive, resisting convergence into a single coherent novelistic form.

In his book *Bodies and Names* (2016), Galili Shahar examines the relationship between the body and writing in Agnon's stories. He proposes a reading that interweaves bodies, language, and script, arguing that in Agnon's work, bodily wounds, deformities, ruptures, decay, and discharge, are transposed into linguistic textures and stylistic registers (Shahar 2016, 150-203). Similarly, Berdugo's novel, which he explicitly defines as a 'non-novel' in its opening pages, refuses to reveal the secret at its core, instead orbiting around it, perpetually deferring resolution.

The greenstick fracture does not merely signify a familial defect; it also embodies the children's bodies within broader ideological and national frameworks of corporeal perception. The term greenstick fracture functions as a metonym for an olive branch, a symbol of peace in Jewish and Israeli culture. However, rather than signifying harmony, it marks the internal conflict between the siblings and their relationship with Israeli society. As previously discussed, Zionist ideology positioned Mizrahim as the heirs of the exilic Jewish body, attributing to them an inherent genetic defect: they were perceived as weak, fragile, and disruptive to social order. Consequently, the children deviate repeatedly from the prescribed path, challenging hegemonic structures. Berdugo subverts this imposed genetic flaw, the 'Oriental' body that designates the Mizrahi subject as the Other, as inferior within Israeli society, by transforming it into the 'writing body'. The libidinal, sexual desire, and pleasure inherent in writing render the narrator's body omnipotent and strong, countering the discourse of deficiency imposed upon it.

2 Greenstick Fracture: The Broken Body and the Fractured Narrative

The greenstick fracture is not only a physical rupture but also a rupture embedded in language:

> Our eldest brother's limbs fall asleep and tingle, his knees lock. Our sister's spine suffers from scoliosis, her feet are too flat, lacking an arch, and cause her pain. My hip joints wear down, affecting my sacroiliac joint; my fingers are inflamed. Our youngest brother has an inflamed Achilles tendon, which intensifies the pain in his heel bone; his left arm trembles, and he also has a heel spur. We do not know whether the greenstick fracture is the reason that each of us stumbles here and there, that bruises appear on our bodies and linger. Words, too, get stuck between our lips. Often, we utter them in tangled order, our pronunciation clumsy as we search for the correct sequence of speech. (Berdugo 2022, 49)

The fracture is inscribed at the very heart of language and at the core of the novel. Words resemble bruises on the novel's body, marking the wounds of its fractured narrative. The book's subtitle, *Not A Novel*, introduces an internal rupture within its literary genre. The sections of the text are not referred to as chapters but as "papers": "Who will be left with these papers I am now copying onto?" (Berdugo 2022, 57). These papers are drafts, fragments, and shards born out of rupture. They divert the novel from its own narrative trajectory, concealing it so that the secret at its core remains undisclosed, the story of the exhumed child must not be revealed. The narrative hovers at the edge of an abyss. For this reason, it is a *Not A Novel*, the hyphen functions as a boundary, a partition that must not be crossed, a barrier obstructing passage, like a final support before plunging into the chasm between words. But the hyphen may also be read as a metonym for the grave of the youngest brother, separating the siblings from their father, words from meaning. Berdugo severs the novel at its foundation, instating a fracture between the narrator and the reader.

The narrator's bodily distortions are mirrored in the distortions of the narrative, where deviation and delay disrupt the linear progression of the plot. The narrative fracture, coupled with the fear of revealing the unutterable, leads the narrator from the outset into digressions, deferrals, and detours away from the central storyline. This is a narrative that moves backward rather than advancing forward. The novel opens with a police officer summoning all the siblings to their eldest brother's home (formerly their parents' house) to prevent his suicide. Yet, the narrator does not immediately respond to this urgent call. Instead, from this moment onward, the plot veers off course,

turning backward to recount the history of the five siblings. Although the novel is structured around a single day, the narrator disrupts this temporal frame, expanding it into a retrospective gaze that unfolds the family's past. Notably, the urgent summons generates a linguistic structure in which past and future become entangled: "Here it is Thursday. Before I am about to leave here and drive to our eldest brother's locked house, reality's turning away strikes within me once more; it has never granted us, the four children, a chance to confront face-to-face who we are" (Berdugo 2022, 7). The event itself is rendered as a future-past, imagined by the narrator as if it has already occurred. If we examine the temporal framework, we might suggest that the singular day contains within it past, present, and future: an interwoven temporal fabric through which the narrator gazes with both estrangement and the detached perspective of a witness. This perception of time evokes Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' (Benjamin 1969, 257-8) whose body faces forward toward progress while his head remains turned backward, confronted with history as a series of accumulating ruins. In the "Theses on the Concept of History", Benjamin (Benjamin 1969, 253-64) breaks the chronological narrative of progress into fragments and shards, through which he seeks to create a new history. In a similar manner, the narrator dismantles the plot into broken pieces of stories. He is standing at the margins of life, observes them as a vast landscape of familial wreckage, a chain of fractures, deviations, and fragments scattered across space. However, unlike Benjamin's angel, who gazes upon history from above, the narrator, by the novel's end, is compelled to travel to his eldest brother's home. He does not merely observe the ruins from a distance, he plunges into them, becoming once again part of their shattered remains.

The fracture in the narrative is not merely a rupture within the novel itself; it also signifies the narrator's rupture with the literary community. Throughout the novel, the story of the bad advice given by a famous writer to the young narrator recurs repeatedly, his suggestion the narrator should 'wait' to publish his major works and save them for later. Just as the father severed the children's connection to language, so too does the renowned writer attempt to fracture the bond between the young narrator and literary writing. This advice operates as a form of literary castration, an internal disruption of the writing process, one that ultimately inscribes the greenstick fracture within the very act of writing. The repetition of this anecdote throughout the novel signals its profound resonance for the narrator, marking the internal wound that echoes past events, the rupture between the father and the narrator. Yet, it is precisely here that the writer refuses to abide by the misguided counsel of the established author. Instead, he reconfigures the dynamic between

the self and writing, between the body and language, transforming the fracture into an assertion of literary agency.

The absent body, the dead body of the child, leads not only to his physical erasure but also to the death of the story itself, to its points of stagnation and impasse. Berdugo recounts the death of the youngest brother, struck by an American driver. Yet, instead of checking on the child's condition, the bystanders turn their attention to the American woman, consoling and restraining her. Even at the moment of his death, the younger brother experiences estrangement and alienation; no one approaches him as he lies lifeless by the roadside: "One of the women kept asking in a pained voice: 'Who is he? Do you know him? Do you know his name? What is his name?' And all that time, the firm grip on the half-American woman's arm did not relent" (Berdugo 2022, 55). The younger brother lies abandoned on the roadside, a stranger, with no one to hold him in his final moments. He dies alone at the edge of the road, while the grip on the half-American woman remains unbroken. Something in this scene appears distorted, morally inverted, as if the story is being told from the wrong side of history.

Just as the brother dies alone, cast aside, so too does the narrative itself seem to reach moments of dead ends:

> Why am I not writing now what must and should be written? How can I come to terms with the cruel fact that in every written story there will always be something missing, something whose significance I failed to recognize, something I pushed away or relinquished? (Berdugo 2022, 30)

Further reinforcing this absence, The Narrator repeatedly laments the solitude of his writing, his lack of a literary community:

> Who will be left with these papers I am now copying onto? I think (dream?) of the many people of the Israeli nation, the millions who, justifiably, recoil from any form of art and storytelling. In the world of most people in this land, there is neither book nor painting; they do not acknowledge their existence, or they even cast them aside. A deep pain resurfaces in me, knowing that I speak only on behalf of these dear castaways. (Berdugo 2022, 57)

Literary writing reaches its point of no return, its internal castration. In this sense, the narrator inadvertently follows the misguided advice of the famous author who urged him to delay writing his most important truths. He withholds the full revelation of the father's transgression, the injustice committed at his son's grave, and in doing so, inflicts a flaw upon the narrative itself. This is a writing that is

castrated, lifeless, a narrative that erases itself, diminishes itself, and leaves itself for dead by the roadside.

3 The Upright Body and Libidinal Writing

Yet, despite the body's susceptibility to fracture and paralysis, a certain reversal occurs midway through the novel. The theme of the greenstick fracture is almost entirely abandoned, barely mentioned by the narrator. Instead, the text shifts toward manifestations of libido, pleasure, and sexuality. At a particular moment, a transformation takes place within the narrator's body: shifting from a figure that passively accepts its corporeal inferiority and the ever-present threat of fracture, to one that actively celebrates its homosexual desire, as if the narrator has discovered his escape route.

> There was also the blond-reddish-haired boy from the religious yeshiva […]. I felt that he gave himself to me entirely, without restriction. […] There were times when I moved up and down on his back, and suddenly, a sharp stab pierced one of my ribs, radiating in waves toward my pelvis. It twisted my body, and I cried out, falling with a thud onto the young man's bare back. (Berdugo 2022, 134)

This stab in the rib marks the greenstick fracture, a moment in which the body could have been paralyzed. Yet, desire and sexuality seemingly heal it, as if repairing something deeply fractured within. This moment represents Berdugo's 'becoming-body', the transformative process that unfolds at the midpoint of the novel: a transition from a broken body to one full of vitality, from the familial collective 'all of us' to the singular 'I', from the constraints of the childhood home to the private room in Mariana's apartment. The novel unfolds through a physical and cognitive movement between the natural landscape, where the narrator feels liberated and awakened, and the private room, where writing takes place. This movement constitutes the process of self-becoming, a line of escape through which the narrator liberates himself from the familial narrative, from literary criticism, and from the Israeli-Western ideological framework. Deleuze and Guattari theorize the 'body in becoming', discussing the multiple forms of becoming that are not merely acts of resistance against institutionalized writing imposed upon the body, but also alternative, fluid, and multifaceted modes of bodily experience (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 9-15). According to them, these 'becomings' generate freedom of movement and produce intensities that possess intrinsic value. Yochai Oppenheimer expands on this, arguing that such a framework allows for a departure from the dichotomous theoretical model that

positions power in opposition to resistance, as well as from the Zionist historical framework that constructs the Zionist body in contrast to the exilic body (Oppenheimer 2014, 109). Between the meadow and the private room, a movement unfolds, a movement that celebrates the freedom of the self, the body, and writing simultaneously. This is a liberation detached from the constraints of literary criticism and biographical narration.

This process of 'becoming' translates into Berdugo's 'writing body'. In an interview, Berdugo reflects on his writing process: "I can say that this is truly my absolute nakedness. It is my complete exposure in every possible aspect. […] It is so concrete, so physical, so tactile. It is aliveness" (Berdugo 2017, 458). Writing, for Berdugo, is an intimate space of selfhood, where pleasure and vitality manifest. He describes the act of writing as akin to an act of love with men:

> Was it their very maleness that, in my mind, so perfectly corresponded with the act of writing? In the morning, after my encounter with the exploitative literary woman, I dropped to the floor, pulled a blank sheet of paper from the corner, and sketched the shape of a story in lines and blocks. I thought of filling it only with women. 'Write about women,' I commanded myself, but I could not. To my dismay, I realized that every woman in my world was merely a station on the way toward one man or another. While women seemed to me a repetitive motif, the physical form and character of men appeared ever-changing, shifting before my eyes, growing in their uniqueness. (Berdugo 2022, 191)

The descent to the floor to write about men parallels an act of love with writing itself. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Roland Barthes explores the relationship between text, language, body, and desire, arguing that reading is not merely an intellectual act but also a bodily and erotic experience. Barthes employs the term *jouissance*, which in French exceeds the meaning of mere 'pleasure', suggesting an intense, even transgressive, experience. Texts of this nature generate moments of linguistic and narrative instability, leading the reader into a disorienting and sensuous engagement with the text. Barthes proposes two modes of writing, two possible movements of the "supine hand": one that "incises, carves, marks", a writing that seeks to penetrate the depth of a secret; The other is a "brushstroke", a circular, protective, enveloping mode of writing (Barthes 1975, 37). The pleasure in Berdugo's writing lies precisely in the way he 'penetrates' the text, 'incises' it, leaves a 'mark', writing things as they are. His writing is a transgressive experience, a space that is at once sacred and intensely alive, intertwining the body and the senses. Berdugo's writing penetrates the very essence of things. It is not coincidental that Yigal Schwartz (2022) and Hanna Soker-Schwager

(2008, 153-75) express discomfort in response to the homoerotic depictions in his novel. Berdugo writes what must be written. In this context, it is worth noting that a few years ago, Berdugo taught a writing course titled: "The Knife or the Blanket? How Do We Write?" Indeed, Berdugo's writing does not veil or conceal; it incises, exposes, and penetrates, leaving an indelible mark on the text.

Within the space of writing, an ongoing act of intrusion and penetration occurs into the writing process itself, into the 'writing body'. At the beginning of the novel, when Mariana offers the narrator a room in her villa, she confesses: "I have always wanted to be close to someone engaged in writing" (Berdugo 2022, 16). By the novel's end, the narrator sees Mariana invading his room, peering into his papers, and infiltrating his writing. In a parallel moment, she unexpectedly enters the bathroom while the narrator is showering. Before her, both the nakedness of writing and the nakedness of the body are exposed. It is as if Mariana seeks to penetrate the book itself, to enter the words and inhabit them as both body and presence. This intrusion into the act of writing is ultimately successful, Mariana enters the novel and becomes part of it. At the same time, the narrator penetrates her character, delving into her thoughts and motivations. In an interview, Berdugo was asked about his writing process and responded: "I hear myself through the characters, or the characters hear me. Sometimes there is no boundary; the boundary is unclear. I am the character; the character is me. It is not an easy thing" (Berdugo 2017, 458). Writing, then, is a transgressive space, borderless, unstable, and perpetually invaded. It is a space open to the narrator's consuming gaze, through which he penetrates the characters, animates them, and gives them voice. At the same time, the characters, too, penetrate him, entering the text and dissolving the boundary between self and fiction.

4 The Primordial Sin and the Law

As noted, the father's 'primordial sin' dismantled the bond between the siblings, severing them from language specifically, from sacred language and the chain of transmission. This transgression effectively cast them outside the boundaries of the law. From this moment onward, each sibling disrupts and challenges normative order. The eldest brother is unable to conform to any institutional framework, repeatedly expelled from both secular and religious settings. He aligns himself with society's margins and becomes entangled in acts of violence, brawls, and sexual assaults against young girls. The youngest brother engages in a sexual relationship with a minor, resulting in pregnancy. The sister, by walking half-naked, explicitly challenges social conventions. Even the narrator's homosexual relationship is perceived by his nephew as an act of disruption,

leading to a request that he distance himself from the family. The siblings, having been cast outside the law, become strangers both to themselves and to the normative structures of Israeli society.

Yet, this fractured network also becomes their means of salvation. The siblings take a vow: one day, they will exhume their youngest brother's body and recite the Kaddish for him. This vow is meant to restore their bond with their deceased brother and re-establish their unity. Unlike an ordinary oath, a 'vow' carries supreme status, it holds the force of law. A vow must be fulfilled, just as the biblical Yiftah[1] was bound to uphold his tragic oath. Notably, it is the eldest brother, precisely the one who has been cast out of the law, who has disrupted and defied it, who now seeks to restore familial order. In doing so, he attempts to reclaim his position as the eldest sibling, the leader of the family. He sends a text message to his siblings: "I'm taking him out" (Berdugo 2022, 41), a signal that the time has come to recite the Kaddish for their brother. At this moment, however, another reversal occurs, one that is not immediately apparent but becomes evident through a close reading of the text. Immediately after the siblings receive this message, a police officer contacts each of them, urgently summoning them to prevent their eldest brother's suicide. The novel does not explain why the officer calls these three siblings specifically, nor why they alone are expected to save him. On an initial reading, the sequence of events appears straightforward. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the eldest brother has manipulated the legal system. The siblings' gathering does not occur as an act of defiance or an illegal exhumation, which would leave them outside the law and outside language. Instead, it takes place under the auspices of the law, at the behest of a police officer. This strategic move ensures that the ritual of Kaddish does not occur as a transgressive act but rather as one conducted in the presence of all the siblings 'and' under legal authority. In doing so, the eldest brother reintegrates himself into the collective body of the siblings while simultaneously restoring them to the domain of language of the law. This manoeuvre recalls Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* (Kafka 2009, 3), in which the protagonist stands before the gate of the law, waiting indefinitely for permission to enter. However, unlike Kafka's man, who passively submits to the law's inaccessibility, Berdugo's eldest brother subverts this dynamic, actively returning the siblings to the law rather than awaiting its acceptance.

1 According to the story in the biblical Book of Judges, Yiftah (Jephthah) makes a rash vow before going to battle against the Ammonites: if he is victorious, whoever comes out first from the door of his house to greet him upon his return will be offered as a sacrifice. After his victory, the first to come out to him is his only daughter. Jephthah is torn between his vow and his love for her, and ultimately fulfils the vow. The story serves as a warning about impulsive oaths and their tragic consequences.

To a great extent, the title of the novel, *All Five of Us*, proclaims the completion of the act, the reconstitution of the siblings as a unified entity. The shared consciousness, expressed through the narrator's first-person plural voice, restores the siblings to language. Yet, this restoration is not merely linguistic; it also signals Berdugo's return to a mode of writing that emerges from the materiality of lived experience. As he states in an interview: "I am at the heart of my own words, with language and with speech" (Berdugo 2017, 459). This notion is further reinforced by the title of his third novel, *Zeh ha-Dvarim* (That is to Say, 2010), which underscores a commitment to writing grounded in the tangible, the raw, and the unembellished. Berdugo's writing does not strive for aesthetic refinement but rather embraces the remnants of existence, "the leftover bread crumbs on the kitchen counter" (Berdugo 2022, 276). His writing that emerges from the abyss, from the hidden recesses of familial secrets. Yet, it is precisely from within this abyss that Berdugo celebrates the 'writing body', revealing in the power, freedom, and creative force that writing makes possible.

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