Unfortunately, I myself am not as committed politically as Maxim, not as explicitly a political poet as Maxim was. But then, he was a very unique person, if you knew him (and I understand you did know him, Dean). Unfortunately, he is neglected because of his political activities and his poetical activities. He paid a price for his activities, a real price. Many of us who are holding the right positions, etc., are not willing to take—He was truly committed to his beliefs; not that we are not, we are. But he was willing to pay the price. He could have been a gigantic figure in literature here in Israel, and in the political arena. But he preferred to be true to his beliefs.

Fidelio: That is exactly true. There was no separation of his political from his personal life.

Eisenberg: Exactly. That is what I feel about his poetry. There is no separation between him and his poetry, and him and his political views.

Five Poems by Maxim Ghilan

One of the leading Israeli poets of the “Statehood Generation,” Maxim Ghilan was awarded the Prime Minister Levi Eshkol Prize for Literary Excellence in December 2004.

Patriotic Song

So the need is strong and steady to write down and say it all
To firm up and to have ready the completed protocol
Jogged down fast in helpless hustling on a sand dune’s shifting wall.
So it’s always good to create, to start things, and do some sowing
even when your seed is salt and from it no fruit be growing
Not just swim: a mighty geyser, a tall fountain proudly blowing.
Loving passes, always passes, writings stay as carved in stone.
All deeds of graceful love-trysts fade away and are soon gone.
So do let us, in cold stables, sadly rut, just flesh and bone.

Rumors run wild: only stronger than the organ in the wedge
is plain dying. So let’s live on, at the grave’s sharp dusty edge.
In the ways of Hebrew ancients and according to their pledge.
Stand as one. The most important of all useless fights and facts always, always are those doings drawing curtains, the last act.
Let’s be clever, never get us a black cat sold in a sack.
Let’s not blame our desire, when the deed ends and is done like a ring inside the pocket of a boy, stood up, alone.
Come, let’s go back to the battle. Let’s begin. The sword is honed.

—adapted from Hebrew by the author

Leaving

She is leaving. She is thieving away and he has not been told yet
But the cat is awake, the cat watches the threshold. Bold songs draw her away to the shadows. Her drive is the need to survive. No star, no lord alive will keep her from running away.
Yet her old master still holds mighty sway.
She runs to her savior.

Behold the hammering in her head
Instead of haven, fearful clouds.
Yet isles say yes, grey rocks
stand out from troubled seas of pain.  
Look at her nipple sticking out  
Under thin cloth. It is plain  
to see she’s on her way  
at the very last moment, on the very last day.  
She leaves behind a life and packs  
slowly a cheap canvas bag. Her hand

mindlessly strokes the small beast’s fur. She courts  
her future. Yet her thoughts  
are for him, who owned her in days past,  
She runs away and leaves. At last.  
Yes, but the cat  
blue-eyed and sad stares at the Mistress  
as she steps over her doorstep walking fast.  

—adapted from Hebrew by the author

Short Leave

An urban girl-soldier strides along the boulevard  
On her shoulder a huge rucksack full of dirty clothing  
Smiling to herself, she shifts the straps  
Cute idiot  
She whispers to herself  
Was it a love-memento?  
He came, full of pride, brought her a gift:  
The ear  
Of a man caught in battle.  
A young girl-soldier strides happily  
A huge bag full of dirty linen on her back  
On her way to her mom’s home  
To the washing machine  
Along Nordau boulevard on a Friday’s eve  
Far from him.

—adapted from Hebrew by the author, 10/15/04

Two Small Tigers

Two small tigers, sleek with living joy  
Walk along King George street  
Sharpen their claws on an African ficus tree  
Transplanted to a Tel Aviv alley.  
Traditional black stripes  
Twin green glances  
One daring, one less forward  
Softly cruel, gliding on—  
Not quite yet women, soft and fresh  
Tiptoeing high-heeled into our hearts  
Along a street in Tel Aviv.

—adapted from Hebrew by the author

Marching Through Virginia

for Jeff and Michele

In the Old Courthouse, in Virginia,  
Guests sit before white-tablecloths  
Ladies in many-ribboned lacy dresses  
Somewhat balding gentlemen, impeccably suited  
Men with aggressive beer-bellies  
And sexy women with too much make-up.  
The giants also dine here  
Six feet two, slicked-down blond hair  
Slim from obsessive running, each morning  
On the Potomac bridge  
French-style food served on huge plates  
With no particular taste, emphasis  
On quantity, not quality, to justify

Absurd high prices. Californian wines  
Too-mild mustard.  
Small talk:  
The right to bear concealed weapons  
And the duty to shoot down  
Whoever steals into your home.  
(Six rooms, garden, your dog and Mitsubishi  
but not a single magnolia blossom.)  
I have my own hand-gun  
She exults, her satisfaction wholesome.  
Me too. Me too. Me too.  
Her manicured hands hold  
Fork and knife, dangerously steady.
In the Old Courthouse, in Virginia  
A beefsteak stain on my thick napkin.  
The blood is brown, has dried  
Quickly  
With the passing of time. Talk  
Sliced up by laughter and smiles  
Self-satisfaction and hate  
For anything alien. Down-curving lips  
Hint  
At hidden contempt  
For whoever lives  
Across the sea. As for me  
My host says, I'd like them to stay  
Away  
Among themselves. Anyway  
In private, as in public  
I say: the Republic  
Is my country's cause and goal.  
I like  
To spend my time with someone  
Like myself. No doubt.  
(I do not shout, Skoal, à la santé  
De la République.)

He gets up, walks  
To the shiny restroom  
Along the walls of a past  
Covered with Mahogany, and I remember  
Bert Brecht and Kurt Weil.  

In a while:  
We're in the South. (His mouth grim.) Here it's all grass and tree. Free  
Far from New York.  
Washington's friend, Lee  
Did not commit treason  
Came back, throwing caution  
To the winds to fight for his plantation  
His family and slaves.  

Before the opulent eating-house  
That once was the Old Courthouse  
In Virginia stands a memorial:  
A brazen soldier, a volunteer  
In the Confederate army.  
Old-fashioned rifle, still-sharp bayonet  
Brazen too, well-met  
In this Southern town. A funny hat.  
Locals and visitors  
From the North throw  
Nostalgic glances at the past. At last  
They leave behind Dixie's brave soldier

Who fought and died for the right  
To own slaves.  

In the Old Courthouse, in Virginia  
You get a huge menu full of goodies  
With fancy names, all with the same taste.  
Distracted,  
I listen to far-away thunder  
Bearing on us  
From darkened skies, in Iraq  
Or just Alaska.  
The Weatherman has not decided  
Yet.

In the prestigious eating-house  
That was the Old Courthouse, in Virginia  
Time seems to have frozen  
The past for two hundred years. In the South  
As in the South. But on the second floor  
A banquet hall is named  
In honor of General Sherman  
Who invaded the state at the head  
Of the Unionist army with  
—God forbid us—Black  
Soldiers, burning and looting  
Plantations, slaughtering  
White settlers, rebels  
Against the Union. And in my brain  
Like soft rain  
The old marching song with its refrain  
*Glory, Glory Hallelujah*  
That still shatters complacent Virginia  
Confronting the South's God-given right,  
Still in good shape  
That says it is all right to own, to rape  
To kill and take  
Who is not white.  

Regardless the mess. History  
Is deep and long  
And Sherman's marching song  
Twists down in the same whirlpool  
With that of  
The little Confederate soldier  
Into the State's mixed bloodstream  
Where the only color is red  
Into Black Memory's dream  
When a former slave remembers,  
When he was master of all he saw.

*Leesburg, Virginia, February 22, 2005*

—adapted from Hebrew by the author,  
*published posthumously*