



Outwitting Destruction

Roberta Kalechofsky

So Far So Good

Karen Alkalay-Gut

Sivan

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Amos Oz, Israel's foremost novelist, once wrote that he wished he would wake up one day and find Israel on the back pages of the newspapers. But the complexities of history and, as Richard Rubinstein once wrote in a book with that title, *The Cunning of History* (1975), put Israel on the front pages day after day. Israel—and the Middle East—dominates the news, and the news and history dominate Israel. It is a wretched relationship, often strangling, certainly determining that Israel is a place where the personal is the political, and the political is psychological and personal.

Karen Alkalay-Gut, an Israeli poet and practitioner of poetry in English, captures the warp and woof of this personal/historical relationship in a colloquial rhetoric that often smoothly masks the complexity of the poem's subject. When she is good at this, she is very good, as in the title poem, "So Far So Good":

What did I learn
On Ibn Gvirol Street?
That day I walked fast
to beat the odds

stopping
at each column

to peer out
at people,

suspicious
profiles,

and whispered
so far so good.

One time I hung on
like Samson

and the column
whispered back,

"There are indeed
many of us here
to hide behind.
But you never know
where the front is."

The political, with its inevitable psychological dimensions, haunts Alkalay-Gut's poetry. As in "Suicide Sister," she weaves into the horrific problem of suicide bombers an identification with her as a woman. Even the belt bomb is conveyed as pregnancy:

Of course I think of her all the time,
walking with her belly in the streets of Jerusalem,

thinking all the time that at any minute
she might make herself give birth
to the rusted nails, shrapnel,
bullets in one big explosion
that might enter
the eye or the heart
of the baby in the stroller
wheeling towards her
at this very moment.

Or maybe she stops, suddenly
seeing a face in the Jewish crowd
that recalls her own grandmother
bent even now over shopping

And turns back

to face
whatever humiliations
that await
a living
woman.

Here as elsewhere in her poems, the line lengths become emphatic elements, and the female becomes a metaphor for a desperate condition. Then there are moments when the political situation becomes whimsical; as in "Dressing for Receptions," where the poet and an Arab woman discuss what would be best to wear to a reception:

That's when I looked at her, not as I'd seen
her before,

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an elegant Arab woman in an ivory suit,
someone talking to the cultural attaché,

but a person with whom I could share a ward-
robe.

She notes the sexual longing of old women and wishes to dignify the body's weaknesses, what women struggle with as daily reality. In "Friends," she writes:

I know women who do not sleep at night from
desire.

A fire licks at their aging thighs,
despite their wizened skin,
their thickening waists.

You can see it in their eyes.

But she has a fatal weakness, a need to extend the image, the thought, too far. Her weakness as a poet is that too often she cannot resist a final sentimental note that falls like a thud. The poem has two more lines: "If only they dared// raise their heads."

Still, she can turn domestic, ordinary situations into flights of metaphysics about reality as in "Duration and Expanse," which embroiders the epistemological question, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there

to hear it, does it make a sound?" with the difficulties of everyday life. What is reality, how do we know it? A clock, a child, the bus that disappears when you get off it, the child you gave birth to, become metaphors for this question that gnaws at her. Reality slips away from us and with it our dearest relationships. In a haunting stanza in this poem, she asks:

Let's say those loins
release a child,
with that slippery thrill
every mother recalls,
and the child grows, changes
every year, then goes off,
renounces you, disappears
into a jungle you've never been near—

do you still remain a mother?

Reality becomes a series of stories told by Sheherazade that the poet recounts to outwit destruction, to keep her head.

At her best, Alkalay-Gut can treat philosophical and political subjects in a language that is clear and smooth, and at times ironic, as in "The Eternity of Menopause," with its description of raging sexuality and night sweats, and its final couplet: "Believe me,

dear, it gets better/ from here." The dedication to Anne Sexton renders a sinister twist to the poem's irony, and Alkalay-Gut's internal rhymes, so subtle they melt into the text, give rhythmic texture to the poems.

***The political haunts
Alkalay-Gut's poetry.***

So much is so good that her histrionic stances, as in "Death is walking before me," or the nostalgia of her poem, "Brooklyn," disappoint. Elsewhere, words like "piss" and "arse" intrude and seem like an adolescent's rebellious use of four-letter words. They also raise the question of the nature of the language of a poem. One suspects the gratuitous nature of these words. More importantly, they halt the flow of the otherwise smoothness of her language and image.

But there is enough in this volume to applaud. What is good is wonderful, what is weak can be disciplined.

Roberta Kalechofsky is the author of seven works of fiction, notably a historic novel on the Black Death, Bodmin, 1349 (Micah Publications, 1988). Her work has been translated into Italian and published in Italy.