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Dahlia Ravikovitch, A Dress of Fire
Dahlia Ravikovitch, The Window: New and Selected Poems
(with Ariel Bloch)
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Criticism
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(cotranslated and coedited with Naomi Seidman)

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HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE

THE COLLECTED POETRY OF Dahlia Ravikovitch

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
CHANA BLOCH
AND
CHANA KRONFELD

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True Love Isn’t What It Seems

Everybody loved Yona,
everybody in the room loved Yona,
and whenever the talk turned to books,
they’d say: Oh that Yona, may she rest in peace,
but the memory of Yona was dwindling fast
for perhaps we didn’t truly love her.
It’s natural for memory to be gnawed to shreds
just as the earth gnaws away at a corpse.
The question is, Do we love our friends?
No, we don’t really love our friends.
But do we love our children?
Sometimes we do love our children,
but that too, by and large, only to a limited extent,
the way the orange tree loves the orange.
The rest is a range of misunderstandings
and all of these eat away at true love,
with a greedy mouth.
The question is, Do we really love ourselves
even as Jonathan loved David?
It’s best that we speak words of truth,
not like David’s lament for Jonathan.
Ourselves we love with great devotion,
attuned to ourselves with rapt attention.
And even that amounts to a real improvement,
for just a few months ago
our body was seized by a powerful yearning
to hurl itself urgently from the roof.

Issues in Contemporary Judaism

A Jewish Portrait

She
is not your sort.
She’s a Diaspora kind of Jew whose eyes dart around
in fear.
Wears an old-fashioned dress,
her hair pulled back without a bit of grace.
Doesn’t undo her bundles.
Why should she undo her bundles?
Any place she might stumble on
is a place that won’t last.
Her bed is unmade.
No sense adorning what will not last.

On the road.
Caravans pass her by,
Ukrainian peasants in their carts
and dark-skinned refugees, screaming;
babes in arms dry up in the sun,
flies clinging to their eyes.

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Line 17, with a greedy mouth. See “Like Rachel.”

Line 19, even as Jonathan loved David. “The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul
of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1–3).

Line 21, David’s lament. 2 Sam. 1:19–27, a politically expedient lament on the death
of Saul and Jonathan.

Title, A Jewish Portrait (Heb. dyikan ye’ehudi). Means both “Portrait of a Jew” and “Por-
trait in the Jewish Style”—an ambiguity, sustained throughout the poem, blurring
the distinction between Diaspora Jew and Palestinian refugee.

Line 3, a Diaspora kind of Jew (Heb. ye’ehudiya galutit). Reappropriating the derogatory
Israeli stereotype about Jews with an Eastern European “ghetto” mentality; the ad-
jective galutit can be applied to an Israeli who behaves “like a Jew from the Diaspora.”
People carry mattresses on their heads,
a clangor of pots and pans.
People curse her as she goes by:
She's slow,
slowing down the caravan.

She goes off to the side of the road and stops.
She has no baby,
can wait for dark.

Suddenly, she sees a coin in the dust—a spark.
She smiles an inward smile.
In her mind's eye
rivulets well up in the thicket.
It's wrong to think she has lost her mind.
A kernel of sun-crimson dawns in her heart.
There. She's no longer upset.

She has no use for this business, Jerusalem.
Day after day they wrangle over the Temple Mount,
each man smites and reviles his brother,
and the dead prophet shrieks,
Who hath required this at your hand, to trample My courts?

Once the caravan has crossed,
night will fall and she'll find her house.
Her feet stub against the sharp gravel-stones,
dust soils her dress.
She will bolt the inner door,
pull the shutters closed around her.
Only the soles of her feet will she bathe,
so boundless her weariness.
In the dark she knows the features of her face
as a blind man knows the feel of his temples.
Her eyes are the blue eyes of Khazars,

Line 38, Who hath required... courts? Quoting Isa. 1:12, a condemnation of empty piety that masks unethical conduct.
Line 49, Khazars. A Turkic people from Central Asia, commonly believed to have converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages.

her face a broad face,
her body the heavy body of a native woman,
third generation in the Land of Israel.

June 4, 1982

They're Freezing Up North

in memory of Baruch Kurzweil

He gets up, walks, stands still, drops dead,
the father of some other woman.
Flicks out a long tongue from a better world,
quick as an acrobat
eerie as a demon.
Most of that history
I didn't know, didn't see.

And now in winter it's very cold here,
for some other woman, not me.
Up North babies are freezing right now,
whoever wasn't thrown into the pit,
whoever the bullets didn't hit,
gets tormented some other way.
It's so cold in the North,
the Near North.

I want to tell him all about it.
He was a good man

Line 51, native (Heb. mi-bney ha-makom). Official code for Israeli Palestinians.

[Author's note:] During the first winter after the war in Lebanon broke out, tents were distributed to refugees whose houses were destroyed. Some Palestinian women set fire to the tents, which in any case provided no shelter from the rain and the chill of a Lebanese winter.

Epigraph, Baruch Kurzweil (1907-1972). Professor of Hebrew and World Literature at Bar-Ilan University; an influential literary critic during the 1950s and 1960s, Rivikovitch's mentor and one of the first to support her literary efforts; see introduction. Died by suicide.
before he died what you might call
an unnatural death.
If the earth had been given into his hand
he would've brandished an old-fashioned sword,
and just to play it safe
pressed his hand, perhaps, to his heart.
He never would've let them start.

Who was he, what was he?
A father and master, one might say.
He stands up, falls down, passes away,
chooses to collapse then and there in slo-mo
with a joke about escorting the Sabbath Queen
after Havdalah to the Feast of the Just.
Beyond all this,
appalling pain.

What do I need them all for,
thinking about them all,
remembering them all?
Babies are freezing
in the slanted lashings of the rain.
Mothers are burning
their canvas tents
to make a nice little bonfire in winter.
He stands up, passes on and he's free.
This bloody mess
is all on my head now,
all on me.

_Early November 1982_

_You Can’t Kill a Baby Twice_

By the wastewaters of Sabra and Shatila,
there you transported human beings, respectable
quantities of human beings,
from the animal kingdom
to kingdom come.

Night after night.
First they shot
then hanged the lot,
the rest they butchered with knives.
Terror-struck women scrambled up, frantic,
on a mound of earth:
"They're butchering us down there,
in Shatila."

A thin tail of newborn moon was hanging
over the camps.
Our own soldiers lit up the place with searchlights
that was bright as day.
Back to the camp. _marsch!_" the soldier commanded
the shrieking women of Sabra and Shatila.
After all, he had his orders.
And the kids were already laid out in the fetid waters,
their mouths gaping,
a peace.
No one will harm them now.
You can't kill a baby twice.

And the moon's tail grew fuller and fuller
until it turned into a talent of gold.

Line 20, _If the earth... his hand._ "The earth is given into the hand of the wicked," Psa. 9:24. An implied contrast between Kurzweil's courtly conservatism and that of Ariel Sharon, who directed the 1982 Lebanon invasion.

Line 29, _Sabbath Queen_ (Heb. _Shabbat ha-Malka_). Traditional way of referring to the Sabbath. With the final meal of the Sabbath, the _Melaveh Malka_, the Sabbath is "escorted" as she departs. Ravikovitch recalls in a 1980 essay that Kurzweil would customarily invite students to his house for the _Melaveh Malka_ meal.

Line 30, _Havdalah_. A ritual marking the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the work week, _the Feast of the Just_ (Heb. _se'udat tzadikim_). A banquet for righteous souls in Paradise.

Line 1–2, _By the wastewaters... there_. Cf. Psalm 137:1, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." See _Adloyada_ in _Manhattan_.

Line 18, _marsch_. Ravikovitch uses the German imperative verb here.

Line 27, _talent of gold_ (Heb. _kiyar zahav_). A heavy round of precious metal; a biblical treasure.
Those sweet soldiers of ours,
there was nothing in it for them.
Their one and only desire
was to come home in peace.

Get Out of Beirut

Take the knapsacks,
the clay jugs, the washtubs,
the Korans,
the battle fatigues,
the bravado, the broken soul,
and what's left in the street, a little bread or meat,
and kids running around like chickens in the heat.
How many children do you have?
How many children did you have?
It's hard to keep the children safe in times like these.

Not the way it used to be in the old country,
in the shade of the mosque, under the fig tree,
where you'd get the kids out of the house in the morning
and tuck them into bed at night.

Whatever's not fragile, gather up in those sacks:
clothing, bedding, blankets, diapers,
some memento, perhaps,
a shiny artillery shell,
or a tool that has practical value,
and the babies with pus in their eyes

and the RPG kids.
We'd love to see you afloat in the water with no place to go
no port and no shore.
You won't be welcome anywhere.
You're human beings who were thrown out the door,
you're people who don't count anymore.
You're human beings that nobody needs.
You're a bunch of lice
crawling about
that pester and bite
till we all go nuts.

Beheaded Heifer

Took another step,
then a few steps more.
His glasses dropped,
his yarmulke dropped.
Took another step
drenched in blood,
dragging his feet.
Ten steps more
and he's not a Jew
not an Arab anymore—
disembodied.

Line 31, to come home in peace. From the popular 1967 song about a decorated soldier Giwi Ha-Tachtoshet ("Ammunition Hill"), now quoted sarcastically in antiwar discourse.

Title, Get Out of Beirut. Slogan of Israeli antiwar demonstrators during the siege of Beirut and of the adjacent Palestinian refugee camps in the 1982 war.
God-awful uproar; people shrieking, Why are you murdering us?
Others scattering about,
rushing to exact revenge.

He lies gasping on the ground, a death rattle,
a body torn open,
and the blood spilling out of the flesh.
The blood spilling out of the flesh.

He died here or there
—some degree of uncertainty remains.
What do we know for a fact?
"One found slain in the field."

It is said, Suffering cleanseth sin,
man is like dust in the wind,
but who was that man
lying there lonely,
choking on his blood?
What did he see
what did he hear
in the uproar that seethed
above him?

It is also said,
If thou seest even thine enemy’s ass
lying under its burden,
thou shalt surely help.

If one be found slain in the field
if one be found slain on the ground,
let your elders go out and slaughter a heifer
and scatter its ashes in the stream.

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On the Attitude toward Children in Times of War

He who destroys thirty babies
it is as if he’d destroyed three hundred babies,
and toddlers too,
or even eight-and-a-half-year-olds;
in a year, God willing, they’d be soldiers
in the Palestine Liberation Army.

Benighted children,
their age
they don’t even have a real worldview.
And their future is shrouded too:
refugee shacks, unwashed faces,
sewage flowing in the streets,
infected eyes,
a negative outlook on life.

And thus began the flight from city to village,
from village to burrows in the hills.
As when a man did flee from a lion,
as when he did flee from a bear,
as when he did flee from a cannon,
from an airplane, from our own troops.

He who destroys thirty babies,
it is as if he’d destroyed one thousand and thirty,
or one thousand and seventy.

[Author's note.] This is a variation on a poem by Natan Zach that deals [satirically] with the question of whether there were exaggerations in the number of children reported killed in the [1982] Lebanon War.

Lines 1–2, He who destroys . . . babies. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:5: "He who destroys a single human soul . . . . is as if he had destroyed an entire world."

Lines 17–18, As when a man . . . bear. Amos 5:19, about the danger of apocalyptic yearnings.
thousand upon thousand.
And for that alone shall he find no peace.

Two Isles Hath New Zealand

Africa’s not the place to go right now.
Plagues, famine—the human body can’t bear it.
Brutality. They flog human beings with bullwhips.
Asia—it would make your hair stand on end.
Trapped in the mountains, trapped in the swamps.
The human body can’t bear it, there are limits to the life force, after all.

As for me,
He shall make me to lie down in green pastures in New Zealand.

Over there, sheep with soft wool,
the softest of wool, graze in the meadow.
Truehearted folk herd their flocks,
on Sundays they pay a visit to church dressed in sedate attire.

No point hiding it any longer:
We’re an experiment that went awry, a plan that misfired,
tied up with too much murderousness.
Why should I care about this camp or that, screaming till their throats are raw,

splitting fine hairs.
In any case, too much murderousness.
To Africa I’m not going and not to Asia, either.
I’m not going anyplace.

In New Zealand in green pastures, beside the still waters, kindhearted folk will share their bread with me.

Hamlet, Supreme Commander

My protest is not in bitterness.
It is a cat’s paw. At its tips are claws.
A puny complaint is naught but the whimper of a cooing infant, drowned out in the din.
Too long have we bemoaned the soul’s suffering with the muted meekness of the weak.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th’unworthy takes
without growing—sedulous, in secret—a nail sharp-whetted as a cat’s paw to wipe out with one swift swipe of the hand that affront.

Lines 9, 29, green pastures, still waters. Psalm 23.
Line 10, New Zealand. In contemporary Hebrew, a place of ultimate escape.
Line 14, Truehearted folk, and line 30, kindhearted folk. Ironically invoking the Christian settlers’ massacre of the aboriginal Maoris.

[Author’s note.] Lines 7–10 are quoted from Avraham Shlonsky’s [Hebrew] translation of Hamlet [III.1.71–2, 74–5; the only line omitted, tellingly, is III.1.73: “The pangs of despis’d love, the law’s delay.”]