

LEV HAKAK

Lev Hakak was born in Iraq, grew up in Israel and presently lives in Los Angeles where he teaches at the University of California. He was one of the first Oriental Jewish writers of the generation that grew up in Israel to confront the social issues facing Oriental Jews through his academic and literary activities. His *Inferiors and Superiors: Oriental Jews in the Hebrew Short Story* (1981), was a groundbreaking study of the representation of Oriental Jews in mainstream Israeli fiction. A poet and prose writer, Hakak has depicted the dilemmas facing an emigré Jewish Israeli writer with particular emotional depth and literary art. His poetry refers directly to the tradition of classical medieval Hebrew poetry while his prose attempts to interrogate and dissect stereotypes and assumptions from within the narrative structure itself.

The History of Literature: Poets

The few different and innocent
sing of the deeds of their heart
rejoicing in verbal acrobatics
sing us one of the songs of your heart

They dispatch a silent tune over the night waves
to redeem the world with poetry and song
only to pay wholeheartedly for the conflagration
for the poem to be borne to understanding and stature
a single song for a thousand violins

Their plaque is subsidized in books
as they call crumbs delicacies
gazing in awe over the tidbits of winking politicians
sifting words through thousands of facets

maybe their echo will reach a handful of the pure
in downy bearded awe at verbal acrobatics
before they're worn out by the burden of kids and taxes

Translated from the Hebrew
by Yonina Borvick

Poem contemplating poets

And Saul spear in hand
as David's hand is playing

a good fellow
and the Kingdom will be his:
he brought down the house
with his heartbreaking tunes.

And Saul heard. And Saul saw.
And an evil spirit entered him
and struck him and the wall—
and these are the generations of the masters of song
every day and every hour

behold the
corner of your cloak in my hand
and Saul saw
and David his hand playing
for I have slain you
when I cut off the corner of your cloak and did not slay you.

Is this the voice of David my son
answered Saul his voice trembling and breaking
David playing by hand
and Saul spear in hand

Translated from the Hebrew
by Yonina Borvick

Letter to Ibn Gabirol

Los Angeles, April, 1987
parted from my brother my house my coffin
I scorn those around me unsuited even to be dogs to my flock

This spring again I won't go over
I hear you Ibn Gabirol
I am coming to you Ibn Gabirol
you have been cast out from the pores of my skin
you are the one who understands, because you're my age
and the spring is bewitched and you're a wizard
of anger refined by feet and vowels

Your heart called out from the wilderness
what will be is what was
your throat was parched in calling out then
come on, let's have a Coke
I stole—but did not deny—your words:
did you take them with you to the grave
covered with clumps of your wrath?

Did the one who uncovers the depths reveal intelligence to you?

I leaf through "Editorial Announcements"
a restive young camel doubling back on her tracks
a literary journal from twenty years ago
who requested who gave who "borrowed" who replied
who demanded who confirmed who designated who lectured
and who inspected the youngsters with a wink
without failing to feast their eyes
on the young men who were playing
who was thrown out who took a cut at the end of the year
who was anointed and appointed the one to wear the seasonal crown
who whored around who jerked off who lamented who did sorcery
who looked and was terrified and trampled underfoot
who harvested who snatched who caused blight who persecuted
and what kind of odor emanated from all this
who asked to be recognized in Hebrew letters
but was finished off and ended up in convulsions
or a chamberpot

and priests of beauty and the artists' brush
who dropped out tired of lice and lamentations

Translated from the Hebrew
by Ammiel Alcalay