

# Keys to the Garden

New
Israeli
Writing

EDITED BY AMMIEL ALCALAY



CITY LIGHTS BOOKS  
SAN FRANCISCO

## LEV HAKAK

LEV HAKAK was born in Baghdad in 1944 and came to Israel with his family during the mass immigration from Iraq. He now lives in Los Angeles where he is a professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages at UCLA. Hakak



was one of the first *mizrahi* writers of the generation that grew up in Israel to confront the social issues facing *mizrahi* 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 *mizrahi* Jews in mainstream Israeli fiction. A poet and prose writer, Hakak has depicted the dilemmas facing an emigre 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. His

first book of poetry, *Still Bound in Spring*, appeared in 1962. This was followed by *My Lord, You Are Good* (1963) and *If I Forget Thee* (1981); his latest collection is *To Bequeath Hebrew Poetry in Los Angeles* (1988). Other books by Lev Hakak include two novels, *The Ingathered* (1977) and *Stranger Among Brothers* (1984), as well as the critical works *With Four Poets: Avraham Ben Yitzhak, Amir Gilboa, Natan Zakh and Shlomo Zamir* (1977), *Episodes in Oriental Jewish Literature* (1985), and *Equivocal Dreams* (1991). His latest book, *A House on the Hill*, appeared in 1994.

### 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 plague 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 and Ammiel Alcalay*

## 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 and Ammiel Alcalay*

## 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*