

Introduction: “Meager Gifts” from “Desert Islands”

American-Born Women and Hebrew Poetry

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I

This volume seeks to fill a significant gap in Jewish American literature and Hebrew literature. In 2003 Alan Mintz wrote that “the existence of a substantial body of Hebrew literature written on American shores is one of the best-kept secrets of Jewish American cultural history.”¹ A decade later it seems that the secret of Hebrew literature in America has been revealed. In the last few years, many articles and three new scholarly books on American Hebrew literature have been published.² With this renewed interest and abundance of new materials, the story of American Hebrew literature is finally getting some of the attention it truly deserves. Nevertheless, there is a substantial lacuna in this field, which has to do with the presence of women writers in this literary and cultural endeavor.

Hebrew literature in America was written and read by a small minority of Jews, and yet Daniel Persky, a prominent Hebrew writer and journalist, counted in 1927 (the height of the movement) no fewer than 110 active writers of Hebrew in America.³ So where were the women writers in this number? After all, it was precisely in the 1920s and 1930s that women began to be active in Hebrew literature,

mostly in poetry, in Europe and Palestine, as well as in Yiddish literature in America and Europe (and even Palestine). Indeed, until very recently scholars assumed that American Hebrew literature, which flourished between the 1900s and 1960s, had been the exclusive domain of East European immigrant men, as well as very few American-born writers (also men). But this common assumption is wrong. There is a small but significant body of Hebrew poetry written by American women that is yet to be read, explored, published, and studied. This volume hopes to address this lacuna and introduce two of these writers and their work.

As far as we know, Claire (Chaya) Levy was the first woman to publish a book of Hebrew poetry in America: *Kisufim (Longings)* in New York, in 1941. Levy was born in Grodno, Lithuania, in 1915. She was a rabbi's daughter who received Hebrew and Jewish education in the European *Tarbut gymnasium* in Grodno.⁴ She immigrated to America with her family in 1928. Some of her early poems were published in Vilna, but most appeared in American Hebrew publications like *Ha-Do'ar* and *Niv*, as well as in Europe and Palestine. But apart from Levy, whose work deserves some serious scholarly work, there were two American-born women who wrote and published Hebrew poetry between the mid-1930s and the early 1960s: Anne (Chana) Kleiman and Annabelle (Chana) Farmelant, whose poems and essays are published here in the original Hebrew and in English translations by Yosefa Raz and Adriana X. Jacobs.

Anne Kleiman (née Shanin), who died in 2011 at the age of 101, was the first American-born Jewish woman to publish poems in Hebrew. Kleiman was born in 1909 in St. Joseph, Missouri, to Russian immigrant parents. As a child and adolescent during the 1910s and 1920s, she received an extensive Hebrew education at the Talmud Torah, a five-days-a-week supplemental school in St. Joseph, where she proved herself an avid and gifted student. At the age of nineteen, Kleiman moved to Chicago to study both at the University of Chicago and the Hebrew Midrasha (College of Jewish Studies). With Hebrew as the exclusive language of instruction, she studied Jewish history, rabbinic thought, Bible, Hebrew language and grammar, and modern Hebrew literature. Moshe Zalesky, a prominent Hebraist teacher and later the head of Cincinnati's Bureau of Jewish Education for a quarter-century, became her first husband. In the 1930s and 1940s, Kleiman wrote and published Hebrew poems in the Midrasha's journals as well as in the journal *Niv*. Most of these poems were collected and published in 1947, by the Chicago College of Jewish Studies and the Jewish Publication Society, as a book titled *Netafim (Droplets)*. Kleiman also contributed to a 1950 Hebrew anthology for students, edited by Shlomo Marenoff and Moshe Zalesky. She created an adaptation of Hayim Nahman

Bialik's "The Legends of Three and Four," with the title *Shlomo u-vat hamelech* ("Solomon and the Princess").⁵ As far as we know, Kleiman did not publish Hebrew poetry after 1950—a few unpublished manuscripts exist—but she remained active in Hebrew education until her retirement in the 1970s. She was involved in various Jewish adult education activities for many more years.

A second American-born Hebrew poet, Annabelle Farmelant, currently lives in New York City. Farmelant was born to immigrant parents in Boston around 1926. Raised in Boston, she attended public schools as well as Prozdor, a Hebrew high school program of the Hebrew College. Farmelant studied at the Hebrew College in Boston and, like Kleiman, was inspired and encouraged by Hebraist teachers, notably Eisig Silberschlag. Since the 1940s, while she studied and worked as a Hebrew and Jewish educator (she also spent some time in Israel in the 1950s), Farmelant wrote a substantial body of Hebrew verse, which she began publishing in journals such as *Niv* in America and *Gilyonot* and *Gazit* in Israel, as well as in two volumes of verse. Farmelant's first book, *Iyyim bodedim* (*Desert Islands*), was issued by Kiryat Sefer in Jerusalem (1960), followed by a second volume, *Pirchei zebut* (*Flowers of Identity*), also published by Kiryat Sefer (1961). During the years in which these volumes were published, she lived in Tel Aviv, but soon after the publication of her second book, she moved back to America and settled in New York City. Since the mid-1960s, Farmelant has published Hebrew poetry very rarely; she wrote two plays in Hebrew and several in English that were never published or performed.

How can we contend with these virtually unknown women and their body of Hebrew writing? How can we begin to read, understand, and recover their poetic voices and worlds? In undertaking this endeavor we are confronted, once again, with some of the dilemmas feminist critics in France and in the Anglo-American world tackled in the 1970s, as well as those which scholars of gender and Jewish literature dealt with in the 1980s and 1990s.

Perhaps the most familiar but still extremely difficult dilemma is: Should we read these two poets—and their bodies of work—as different as they are from each other, under the rubric of "women's literature," assuming that their femininity makes these works distinct from the dominant literature written by male Hebrew writers, both in America and in Israel? Does their femininity immediately entail some connection to other women writers, in Hebrew as well as in other languages and literatures (American and others)?

After all, the poetry of Kleiman and Farmelant covers a large range of themes, moods, and styles. It touches in a powerful and moving way on their private lives and loves. It depicts the American world of vast, open nature (see

Kleiman's "To Lake Michigan"), as well as the urban space of metropolitan centers like Boston, New York, and Chicago (see Farmelant's "Skyscraper" and "American Trip"). Their poems deal with the Holocaust (Kleiman's "Yizkor/In Memoriam"; Farmelant's "When Europe Died"), the State of Israel, and public affairs in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. They often comment on the historical period in which they lived and wrote. Some of their poems are restless and acerbic; other are reflective and introspective. Many poems show considerable storminess (Kleiman's "Seas and Wind," "To the San Francisco Delegates"; Farmelant's "The Israeli Parrot"), in which the poets seek, and mostly do not find, a basis for idealism and stable values. And yet the gender of the two poets was surely meaningful to the way the poetry was written, read, and understood (or misunderstood).

In pondering these questions, we would do well to start with the volume *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* from 1992.⁶ In the introduction to this path-breaking volume, Anita Norich has urged us to examine "the ways in which the feminine as a social construct is rendered into the female as an articulating presence."⁷ This is an excellent vantage point for my own inquiry. Dan Miron has famously asked in the same volume: "Why was there no women's poetry in Hebrew before 1920?"⁸ Kathryn Hellerstein has examined the ways in which women who wrote Yiddish poetry struggled with, and found innovative ways to deal with, a dualism between the "Ikh" and "Zikh": the poetic "I" and the "self" in their poems.⁹

Following these and many other scholars who contributed to what is now a large body of studies on gender and Jewish literature informed by feminist theories and insights, I attempt to explain why there were so few women writing Hebrew in America, and what conditions enabled—or hindered—writing and publishing books such as the ones issued by Kleiman and Farmelant. Instead of trying to conform their works to some essential notion of "women's writing," I believe it is more productive to attend to the specific conditions of these two women writing Hebrew in mid-twentieth-century America. Thus in the following pages I will try to deal, in a necessarily succinct manner, with questions of influence, reception, and audience, as well as to explore the sexual/textual politics that are part of the poetic projects of Kleiman and Farmelant, by contextualizing a few poems from their small but significant oeuvre.

II

The first questions I would like to consider are: Why was there no published poetry written by women in Hebrew before 1936 in America, and what enabled

the appearance of the poetry of Farmelant and Kleiman? Why was there so little of it in the period between 1940 and the 1960s? How was this poetry received by the dominant literary establishment in America and elsewhere? Before I try to present some answers, it is important to note that, although only three American women—Levy, Kleiman, and Farmelant—published books of Hebrew poetry, there were a number of women who wrote and published individual poems but did not bring out books. We are still waiting for future scholars to give us a fuller picture, but my own unsystematic inquiry uncovered other forgotten women, such as Yehudit Rosenbaum, Chana Gilby, Yonina Frektor, Dvora Solomon, and Rachel Lev, who published Hebrew poetry between 1936 and the mid-1960s.¹⁰

Going back to the questions I just posed, the first crucial fact to know about Hebrew literature in America during the first half of the twentieth century is that it was, in the words of Eisig Silberschlag, “first and foremost . . . a literature of immigrants”¹¹ who came to America from Eastern Europe during the mass migrations that took place between the 1880s and the 1920s. These Jewish immigrants who wrote Hebrew poetry (and later prose as well) were also educators who taught in the Jewish schools and Hebrew colleges that many of them founded, led, and nurtured for years.¹²

American-born Jewish women like Kleiman and Farmelant could not have become Hebrew poets were they not educated in these institutions. Their Hebraic world was shaped by the often intoxicating love affair with Hebrew that was the hallmark of Hebraist poets-educators like A. H. Friedlander, Shimon Halkin, Eisig Silberschlag, Moshe Zalesky, and Shlomo Marenoff, who were the teachers of these women poets in high schools and in Boston and Chicago colleges. The depth and breadth of the Hebrew education Kleiman and Farmelant received, as well as the resolute commitment to Hebrew as a core of Jewish spiritual wellspring, were quite astonishing. This explains, at least partly, why they chose to express themselves in Hebrew (and not in English).¹³ This explains also a number of dominant elements in the poetry of Kleiman and Farmelant. Kleiman explicitly dedicated poems to the male Hebraist writer-educators. The title of Farmelant’s first book, *Iyyim bodedim* (*Desert Islands* or *Solitary Islands*), is in dialogue with Silberschlag’s first book, *Bi-shvilim bodedim* (*On Solitary Paths*, 1931), and a number of her poems establish intertextual links with poems by these American Hebraists.

However, the male-dominated Hebraic world of East European Jewish immigrants represented a double-edged sword for these women writers. The same figures who gave Farmelant, Kleiman, and other American women Hebrew education and access to its riches were also precluding them from writing and

especially from publishing Hebrew poetry. The poetry written in America by Hebrew and Jewish educators followed the models set by Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky in the early twentieth century. Bialik, in particular, was the father figure for the American Hebrew writers. In his recent book, Alan Mintz claimed that American Hebrew poets “saw themselves in the autobiographical persona developed in Bialik’s poetry: the banishment from nature, the benightedness of the *heder*, the world of faith shaken to its core, loneliness in love.”¹⁴

For Kleiman and Farmelant, Bialik was arguably both a father and grandfather figure, and thus it is fascinating to see how, for example, Kleiman adapted Bialik’s work for American Jewish students of Hebrew, as well as the ways in which both poets alluded to and wrestled with the poetry of Bialik and his American disciples. The fact that Bialik’s poetic system continued to be the dominant model in American Hebrew poetry well into the 1950s was surely a problem for the women—a force to be reckoned with (even though the second part of Kleiman’s book reckons with her foremothers).¹⁵

In his aforementioned study of the rise of Hebrew women’s poetry in Palestine during the 1920s, Miron claimed that, during the first decades of the twentieth century, Bialik’s lyrical poetics had crystalized as a system of thematic, generic, stylistic, and formal norms. Among the fundamental rules of this poetic system (which was the chief influence on American Hebrew poetry) were: (a) the poem must relay a private, personal experience as if it also contained national/universal content, and (b) the poem must present a rich, dense, multi-layered expression, springing from a literary culture of great depth and resonance. Failure to comply with both criteria assured immediate rejection. This, according to Miron, was one of the principal roots of the difficulty facing Hebrew women’s poetry at the beginning of the century in Europe and in Palestine. Of course, Hebrew poetry was familiar with classical uses of feminine figures as collective symbols: the Jewish mother as the nation, the *shekhinah*, the muse of national poetry; the daughter of Israel, innocent and modest, embodying the purity of the national psyche. The literature of the period almost entirely lacks representation of the “new Hebrew woman,” while the life of the young man is presented as a metonymy of the collective Jewish experience—a national symbolic drama par excellence.¹⁶ Here there are obvious parallels between the predicament of Hebrew women poets in America in the 1940s and 1950s and in Palestine of the 1920s and 1930s, but there are also important differences.

A good example of the complexity of this situation can be found in the poetic relationship between Silberschlag and Farmelant. I have already mentioned the fact that the title of Farmelant’s first book seems to be in dialogue with

Silberschlag's first poetry book. Silberschlag's book is a collection of ecstatic love poems, most of them focused on the romantic correspondence between nature and the female object of desire. But the book actually begins with a surprising sequence of seventeen short poems titled "*Shirei na'arah*" ("Songs of a Young Woman"), in which the speaker is the beloved of an unseen man who has dressed her in silk and installed her in a palace, where she awaits him and sings of their love. In these poems Silberschlag ventriloquizes the voice of a woman.¹⁷ This act of ventriloquizing brings to mind poems by Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Ya'akov Fichman, and Ya'akov Shteinberg, in which these male poets adopt female voices; but in fact these are no more than masculine self-images, constructed by means of the individual poet's projection onto an imagined woman.

This posed a serious problem and a clear obstacle for women who were educated in Hebrew. These women were highly dedicated to the language; moreover, as Farmelant attested in a recent interview Adriana X. Jacobs and I conducted with her, they felt not only that Hebrew was close to their hearts but that it also came to them naturally as a language of literary expression. However, when they wanted to express themselves poetically as the subjects rather than the objects of masculine desire, a metonymy for the nation, or a projection of masculine self-images, it became a difficult, if not almost impossible, task. I believe that this goes a long way to explain why American women did not write and publish in Hebrew until the mid-1930s, why there were so few of them, and also how their poetry—once written and published—was received.

When Claire (Chaya) Levy's poems were published in a book, they were recognized mainly for the singularity of the "phenomenon" of a woman writing Hebrew poetry in America. As one of the male Hebraists, H. L. Gordon, puts it in his introduction to the volume: "The volume of poems *Kisufim* is singular and unique. It contains the longing of a young American poetess. This is the first time in the history of Hebrew literature that a volume of poetry written by a woman was published in America." He writes that "*nevoney ha-shira*" (those who understand poetry) began to notice the name Chaya Levy when she published: "A special grace was spread over her poems, the reverberations of a broken heart and the yearnings of the soul."¹⁸ What was emphasized here, apart from the "astonishing" fact that a woman had mastered Hebrew, was the "grace," the "charm," and the "melancholic spirit" of her poetry,¹⁹ which shows very well how a woman in America was expected (if she was) to write Hebrew poetry.

As far as I know, Levy was the only woman published in *Ha-Do'ar* and other journals edited by American Hebraists such as Menachem Ribalow and Hillel Bavli until 1936.²⁰ The interwar years were a time of expansion and growth for

American Hebrew literature, but these were also years of conservatism and gate-keeping. Ribalow, as editor of *Ha-Do'ar*, *Sefer Hashanah* (*The American Hebrew Yearbook*), and other publications, served as the chief gatekeeper for what constituted “proper” Hebraic taste.²¹ It is little wonder that American-born Jewish women did not, and probably could not, publish in *Ha-Do'ar* during these years, and perhaps in subsequent years as well.²²

III

If there was a decisive moment of change in Hebrew literature in America, at least when it comes to women, it was in 1936, the year the journal *Niv* was established. *Niv* was created to give voice to the poetry, prose, and essays of young Hebrew writers, and was issued by Histadrut ha-Noar ha-Ivri (the Hebrew Youth Organization). It was published for twenty years, with different degrees of regularity. (The journal was resurrected in 1956 and published intermittently until 1966.) *Niv* signaled a generational shift that introduced fresh energies to Hebrew literature and culture in America, which happened just at the same time that American Jews (and American Jewish writers) were turning more and more to English. From the time of their founding, the Hebrew Youth Organization and the journal *Niv* were led by a group of American-born students who served as the journal's editors, including Moshe Davis, Gershon Cohen, Eliezer Friedland, and Haim Lifshitz. Some of the literary works that appeared in *Niv* were written by young immigrant writers such as the poet Gabriel Preil, but most were by American-born Hebrew writers. *Niv* was also the journal in which many women published their poetic work, and it was the only Hebrew venue that featured women from its first issue. It is thus hardly surprising that Kleiman published in *Niv* in 1940 and Farmelant in the 1950s.²³

This does not mean, however, that it was easy for these women to write literature or to publish a book of poetry, nor does it mean that, when a work was finally published, it was received and understood properly. This can be seen in the introduction that Shlomo Marenoff—one of Kleiman's teachers—wrote to the volume *Netafim* when it appeared in 1947:

The poetess Chana Kleiman entered the orchard [*pardes*] of Hebrew literature with no harm [*be-sshalom*; lit., in peace], and in her basket [*tene*] are these poems like first fruits [*bikkurim*], and on her lips a modest prayer, “and I am very poor.” Anyone who kept an eye on her stride on the paths of poetry in the last decade would be able to testify that

from her first steps she walked up the ladder of maturity. It is true, her rhymes are few and short, but she would create wholesome and simple tunes that are pleasing to the literary ear. . . . The poetess, who lives in Chicago, is a native of the United States, and the first one among the daughters of the Midwest who knows how to pour words of lyrical supplication [*tkhines*] in the language of the fathers, which she loves “without bounds.”²⁴

Thus even a sympathetic and encouraging figure like Marenoff assumes that, for a young woman, entering the field of Hebrew literature is a dangerous matter. Using the Mishnaic language of “entering the orchard” (Hagiga 2:2), Marenoff portrayed Kleiman’s achievement as trespassing the forbidden domain, with the author emerging out of it without being harmed. Continuing with the conceit of the orchard, he described the poems as first fruits, as “modest prayer” and “lyrical supplication” composed not in Yiddish or English but in Hebrew, “the language of the fathers.”

Of course, we see here a dynamic that is very familiar, resembling the earlier reception of Hebrew poetry written by women in Palestine—including Rachel (Bluwstein), Esther Raab, and Anda Pinkerfeld—whose poetic work was “largely overlooked, often misconstrued, and consequently, subjected to cultural forgetting.”²⁵ In a similar way the expectation was that Hebrew poetry by American women would be “modest” and “poor,” and when one looks at the titles of Kleiman’s and Farmelant’s collections (*Droplets, Desert Islands, Flowers of Identity*), one can see the “minor key” in which Hebrew women poets have written.²⁶ Indeed, it makes sense that, because Kleiman and Farmelant chose to write in “the language of the fathers,” in an American Hebrew poetic context that was hardly open to their innovations, they turned to the “mothers and sisters,” the female poets of Europe and Palestine. Kleiman in fact was particularly captivated by Rachel (Bluwstein) and Anda Pinkerfeld, the latter of whom she met during a visit to Palestine in 1937. Later on the two women corresponded, and Kleiman even wrote a pioneering essay about Pinkerfeld’s poetry (which was reconstructed from Kleiman’s fragments and is published for the first time in this volume) at a time when it was hardly recognized and badly misconstrued.

However, precisely because of this affinity, it is fascinating to see how Kleiman and Farmelant dealt with these Hebrew poetic “mothers” (and “fathers”) in their poetry. Probably the clearest example of this in Kleiman’s work appears in the poem “*Ma eten lachem?*” (“What Can I Give to You?” 1947).

WHAT CAN I GIVE TO YOU?

Anne (Chana) Kleiman
(Translated by Yosefa Raz)

What can I give to you
when I am but very meager?
I did not get my fill of learning
and the paths of the world are strange to me.
Only the forefathers' fire is kindled inside me
and I love my people boundlessly.

Yes, I can string together an easy tune,
to chase after winds,
to skip on the rocks,
to seclude myself with the shades of the night,
to pose riddles to the stars,
to put a tired sun to sleep, and greet
a smiling crescent moon.
Only these and one more:
I have made sorrow my companion.

What can I give to you
when I am but very meager?

This poem alludes to and engages with the famous 1926 poem “*El artsi*” (To My Country), by Rachel (Bluwstein):

TO MY COUNTRY

Rachel (Bluwstein)
(Translated by Robert Friend)

I have not sung you, my country,
not brought glory to your name
with the great deeds of a hero
or the spoils a battle yields.
But on the shores of the Jordan
my hands have planted a tree,

and my feet have made a pathway
through your fields.

Modest are the gifts I bring you.

I know this, mother.

Modest, I know, the offerings

of your daughter:

Only an outburst of song

on a day when the light flares up,

only a silent tear

for your poverty.²⁷

The similarity between the two poems is apparent, and it is clear that Kleiman looked to Rachel (Bluwstein) as a source of inspiration and for an alternative model of Hebrew poetry. However the two poems are also very different. As many scholars have indicated, Rachel's poem, like her other poems and many poems by women in Palestine, deals with a female subject's difficulty in articulating her relationship with the land—the Zionist territory—that was time and again depicted as a wife, beloved woman, or mother.²⁸ Thus Rachel's speaker describes herself as a daughter who cannot offer much to her mother-country, neither heroic songs nor the loot of the battlefield. What she can offer instead is the “modest” or “meager” gifts of planting a tree, and of her feet making a pathway through the motherland. But the modest gift is also the very “song” or poem that she writes, which presents an alternative modernist poetics of “poverty” or minimalism that challenges maximalist poetic trends.

Kleiman's “modest” poem is not addressed to the motherland—the Zionist territory of Palestine—because it is not very relevant to her as an American writer. Instead she speaks to unmarked, second-person-plural addressees: *lachem* (“to you”). She engages—or rather challenges—this collective, which might as well be the very community of Hebrew readers and writers in America (and beyond) who might read her but also expect her to be modest, because she did not “get [her] fill of learning” and “the paths of the world are strange” to her. Kleiman clearly marks what is *different* about herself as a woman poet. Although she had a robust Hebrew and Jewish education, she did not receive the traditional Jewish *heder* and *yeshiva* education, which was seen as required knowledge for writing Hebrew literature. She was *not* an immigrant from Eastern Europe like most Hebrew writers in America and Palestine. As an American-born woman, she claims to possess within her the “forefathers' fire,” perhaps as a

Jewish parallel to the Greek mythological story of Prometheus, who stole the fire from the father-god Zeus.

What Kleiman's speaker can offer to the community of readers is seemingly just "an easy tune," something that appears to be a subcanonical kind of poetry. However, this *zemer* is one that can "pose riddles to the stars," "put a tired sun to sleep," "greet a smiling crescent moon." This can be read as a different poetic relationship with nature, one that enables the speaker to express her joy and her sorrow but, in contradistinction to the Bialik and American Hebraists, in a non-romantic poetic system. When, after all this, we read the last two lines (which repeat the first two)—"What can I give to you? / when I am but very meager?"—this utterance acquires an ironic, subversive tone, which was completely lost on readers like Marenoff.

Almost a decade later, when Farmelant wrote and published her poetry, the situation had changed somewhat. In addition to publishing her poems in the American *Niv*, she appeared in the Israeli journals *Gazit* and *Gilyonot*, which were edited by Hebrew writers and editors (like Yitzhak Lamdan) who were interested in young American writers. But the sexual/textual politics that characterizes many of Kleiman's poems manifests itself in a different yet parallel way in Farmelant's poetry as well. A small but instructive example of this can be found in the poem "*Ha-'almah she-lo hitchatnah*" ("The Unwed Maiden"), published in the volume *Iyyim bodedim*.

"THE UNWED MAIDEN"

Annabelle (Chana) Farmelant
(Translated by Adriana X. Jacobs)

after a poem by Sappho

"On the twig above
 an apple reddens."
 The maiden's nest rests
 on the lower step;
 The women buzz
 like bees in the company of men.
 Still virgin after the vintage and oil harvest—
 Among these thousands of gatherers
 not one was able to pluck you?

What is remarkable, even strange, about this poem is that the title and the first two lines are presented as quotations, and the poem is marked as being written “after a poem by Sappho.” Anyone familiar with the fragments of Sappho’s lyrical poetry would indeed recognize the poem Farmelant evokes. But a closer reading reveals that the title is not Sappho’s title, that the quote is not exactly a quote, and that Farmelant’s intertextual dialogue in this poem is really with (at least) two poets. The poem clearly draws on fragment 105a, one of the most famous fragments attributed to Sappho:

as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch
high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—
no, not forgot: were unable to reach.²⁹

Sappho’s fragment is untitled, so Farmelant’s title—“The Unwed Maiden”—is an invented, intriguing one. Likewise, what she presents in quotation marks as what might be a Hebrew rendering of the fragment is far from a simple act of translation.³⁰ Both the title and the (mis)translation, though, show Farmelant’s creative appropriation of Sappho as an alternative “poetic mother,” mixing it with that of the Hebrew “(grand)father,” Bialik. The title might in fact “solve” a problem in reading Sappho’s fragment. As Jack Winkler tells us, archaic lyric poems, such as those composed by Sappho, were intended not for private reading but for public performance before an audience.³¹ This fragment, which describes a late-picked apple, was most likely part of a song recited at a wedding. Thus the simile of the reddened apple supposedly refers to a bride. But there is a problem in the poem: if the apple-pickers have overlooked the apple, or couldn’t reach it, then the woman who is presumably the “sweetapple” is not wed, or was not wed until this point. If the apple is “ripe” but unattainable, it might mean that, even after marriage, the maiden would remain secure from her husband’s appropriation. This is probably why Farmelant calls the poem “The Unwed Maiden,” a title with a double meaning, which mirrors the double meaning of Sappho’s fragment.

As Winkler tells us, the real “secret” of Sappho’s erotic simile of the unreachable apple on the highest tree branch is an image not only of the bride’s sexual organ but of women’s sexuality and consciousness in general. Sappho knows this “secret” in herself and in other women, and she celebrates it in her poetry, as does Farmelant in her Hebrew verse. But Farmelant’s creative (mis)translation of Sappho goes further, because she steals the language of the (grand) father and appropriates it in order to present a female subjectivity and female

sexuality in Hebrew. Like stealing the forefathers' fire? When Farmelant's speaker uses the Hebrew words *zalzal* (twig) and *ken* (nest), every Hebrew reader would identify allusions to Bialik's poetry, especially the poems "*Tzanach lo zalzal*" ("A Twig Fell," 1911) and "*Hachnisini tachat knafech*" ("Bring Me in Under Your Wing," 1905). These celebrated poems confirmed Bialik's masterful use of multiple historical layers of Hebrew and solidified his poetic system, but also exposed fissures in his subjectivity and his problematic concept of femininity and female sexuality.³² By appropriating Bialik (and his American Hebrew followers), and putting "his" words together with Sappho's exploration of female sexuality, Farmelant creates a potent and potentially subversive hybrid in Hebrew.

As Adriana X. Jacobs has suggested in a recent article about Farmelant, this poem can also be read, at least retrospectively, as "a critique of the sexual politics and problems of reception that shaped—and constrained—the development of American Hebrew poetry in general, and Farmelant's poetry in particular."³³ Farmelant's poetry (and Kleiman's as well) remained that apple that "not one was able to pluck," also because it was "unreachable," because very few wanted to or could reach it, read it, and understand it.

This volume is an invitation to readers to take the first step toward what was, for far too long, unreachable.