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**המאמרים במערכת זו מוגנים עפ"י חוק
זכויות היוצרים.**

אין לעשות כל שימוש מסחרי במאמרים

**הדפסת המאמרים אך ורק במסגרת שמוש הוגן
ביצירה, לשם לימוד עצמי, מחקר ובקורת וזאת
רק במידה הדרושה לצורך אותה מטרה בלבד.**

מתוך:

Intolerable Geographies and
Strategies for Peace in the
Paranormal: Israeli Poet,
Karen Alkalay-Gut
by Laura Fukunishi

קריאל אלכאי - גוט
היוגו פוקונישי -

Intolerable Geographies
and
Strategies for Peace in the Paranormal:
Israeli Poet, Karen Alkalay-Gut

福西 ローラ

"We live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there." ("The Necessary Angel", by Wallace Stevens)

Jerusalem¹

My right hand
has its own cunning

remembers those bones
it wants to remember
forgets the stones
it wants to forget.

Listed in the *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in U.S. Writers, Editors, and Poets*, *The World's Who's Who of Women*, *International Authors Who's Who*, and *Dictionary of International Biography*, Karen Alkalay-Gut claims citizenship in both the literary and political world of our times. She is a poet-citizen who acknowledges and honors the special public and private responsibilities of the individual. From the universal humdrum dental visit to the overwhelmingly particular violence of terrorism outside her bedroom window, she has, with poetry, raised both herself and the reader from a position of passivity to that of moral and political commitment.

In books, articles, translations of her work into Turkish, Italian, French, and Hebrew, in numerous interviews and poetry-readings, and on radio programs, conference panels and performing in mixed media concerts, the poet has consistently shown her philosophy of poetry to be imbued with a philosophy of life encompassing not only popular culture but also the "judeo-christian tradition of ethics and the politics of everyday life". She keeps the reader aware that she is risking danger of self-exposure in return for our active support: we are enjoined in a "collective activity that transcends boundaries of class, aesthetic standards", layers of relationships, and alienated national histories.

As an Israeli, a Jew, and a woman, her expression of discomfort, be it of a religious or social nature, and her evaluation of love, fear, and hunger are the unwrapped treasures of

¹ Alkalay-Gut, from "The Paranormal in Our Daily Lives", 1997

modern, anxiety-filled existence. They are ours also in various degrees of obligation or choice. Alkalay-Gut's reassessment of the common standards of loneliness, sense of community, eroticism, guilt, and joy sounds a call of encouragement and clarity to her fellow Israelis of both sexes. And to those of us who witness the world second-hand in a media-focused frame, pleasantly distant from violence and grit, she presents life starkly, but not unkindly.

In the following sections, the author has tried to trace the path that this supranational, multilingual denizen of the earth has taken. Alkalay-Gut's debts to religion have been paid. So, too, her emotional and psychological debts. The price of growth while engaging in squirmishes, wars, and alienship has been costly, but with that payment she has attained a rare reward: vision, coupled with a deep joy in all manifestations of reality.

WAR

Arma virumque cano. (Aeneid, Bk. 1, line 1)

"I sing of arms and the man." So goes the best known of Virgilian first lines. The call to battle, to history, to first causes, to valor under stress, forbearance, attention to shining armor, and the great heavenly forces at work in war has been sounded throughout recorded history. War has always been about men and their exploits, their tragedy, and their experience. The poets through the ages, the novelists, historians, and sculptors: all have tried and some have admirably and excellently carried off this fantastic deception of male glory. The fact that the number of known and published poets is a least 100:1 male to female, lends plausibility and credence to the assertion that, although necessary for the onset of war, enjoyable as its spoils, and looked to as the ever-suffering or waiting ones at the ends of disputes, battles, and calamities, women are definitely out of place as the chroniclers of such momentous deeds.

However, Alkalay-Gut, carried in utero out of Nazi territory, born in England, raised in the United States, and now living in Israel, has a special legacy and claim on the witnessing and retelling of war in its details. She states the old reality in "A Lithuanian Legacy":

The soldiers would come
into my grandmother's yard
pull the head off a chicken
and thrust it into her hand

Cook it woman

The Russian soldier the German
then
the Russian again.

and then proclaims the new role of woman-poet in *Recipes: Love Soup and Other Poems*:

Cover me

I'm going out
to write
a poem. Keep
firing
over my head.

That special danger in revealing oneself to the enemy, to the public, and to one's self is the essence of her poetry and courage. Except for the well-known Byron, and some modern, salaried, news-photographers and journalists aching to portray war's reality and their courage to themselves and their readership, there have been few western voices to come out of a war zone that were not just passing through from somewhere else and thence to safety. Alkalay-Gut's free verse, offered in honesty, spins out of the Israel she loves and will remain in, states in "To One in Beirut" or "Friend and Foe" (June 10-12, 1982) (only partially given here):

Skyhawks fly over my city
on the way to bomb yours.
We are awakened by the noise
and I fall asleep restlessly
dreaming of you and your daughters.

"If anything happens to my girls,
I hold you personally responsible."
April 25. Israel is bombing Beirut.
You and I stick to wine with our
lamb casserole in Cyprus
and discuss politics.

Minutes after the ceasefire in Beirut,
CBS photographs antiaircraft fire
from a small apartment building.
(Is that where you live? Then
who lives with you?) The Skyhawks
go down on the city again.

Friend! My husband is in civil defense,
and my sons are too small for the army. You
have daughters and are old and alcoholic.
We can't fight this war.
But both of us are in it
and responsible.

(Mechitza, p. 43)

In Alkalay-Gut's war voices we also find the feminine passive. In Israel, this passivity is supported by policy. "Women serve in the army in Israel, and the army is fond of pointing out how much women have contributed to defense in Israel." She points out in an article on "Women and War" (Kerem, 1994) however, "Women can be, for example, tank instructors in the army, or teach military tactics and other functions. But there is one truth that is incontrovertible and absolute - women do not get put into combat positions. They don't patrol active borders, they don't fight." In further explanations, she footnotes, "The reasons for women's exclusion from combat positions were founded in the treatment of women prisoners by the enemy in 1948. The horror of prolonged sexual abuse was considered reason enough to protect women from front lines..."

We find the legacy of being a woman and a mother in this chronicle: "...women have had to undergo forced passivity - my teenagers go off for three years to secure my safety, my husband leaves me alone for a month every year to work as a communications officer for civil defense, and I sit home and make sure there is food in the house and sufficient hot water for a necessary shower when they return. I bake their favorite cakes and cook a special lunch and drive down to the base on Saturday..to feed and/or exchange clean laundry for soiled." What else is possible for Alkalay-Gut to do? Write of war.

The cataclysmic quiet and wretchedness of forced alertness in the face of possible and probable attack is shown in the inability to have a normal day. The group of poems "Safe Room", "Civil Defense January 1991", "from Between Bombardments: a journal" (from I - XXXIV), and "Pardess", all echo their origins in the psychological trauma experienced by humans helpless to control their fates. Where to exonerate, where to assign blame, trying to stay alive in a perpetual earthquake of enmity and shifting alliances: these themes find recognition in all societies around the world. Alkalay-Gut pins them down and cuts them passionately fine to where the knife swifts in and out, cool and pointed as in "Herzlia Beach 12-88" (Recipes, p. 49)

Ah, love
as we lie together on the sand
in a declining summer day
the salt so sweet on your answering skin
I feel the whole of paradise upon my tongue

Further inland the earth is heaving,
Overturned by entire generations dying
for a taste of this sand.

and, in "Civil Defense" (Recipes p. 54) January 1991:

Here is your family-
gas mask kit. It will do

good only with
the right gas. Of course
with the other gas –
that infiltrates the skin –
you must stay inside
the nearest third story
flat you can seal. You
don't want to go too high,
however, in case
of conventional
bombs. Because gas
is heavy, it will invade
the lower
floors and shelters.
But if gas and bombs are used together
you have what we define as
a problem

This is the voice of government on our side. Where is the shining promise of heroic deeds or death? Where is the classic hexameter or the stylized spondees in boots? The poet has chosen reality to show reality. She ignites and joins in us the same absolute reluctance of fighting with the fear of being victim, and then adds the dread of zombie-like impotence. In "Between Bombardments" (Ibid, p. 56) she illuminates war in its trenchant private aspects:

II

We sit in the sealed kitchen with the dog,
the children all grown yet unschooled
in the blind hatred of aimed explosives.
We need each other, stroke each other,
the dog licks the rubber mask, nuzzles
the strange inhuman faces.
And then when terror ebbs,
we remember others,
reach for the phone:
are comforted
by comforting.

VI

Sleeping with a radio and a shivering dog
while my one-eyed man
scans the skies for missiles. Somehow

this is not the front I had imagined,
and all those handsome heroes
are missing.

And mesmerized and helpless in the face of malevolent, snaking bombs:

XVI
Tonight we wait for the alarm.
Who wants to get caught in the shower
or the toilet or in the middle of love?
You say, "I'll wash my hair after
the attack" and I decide to put off
lacquering my nails, read
short poems about decadence instead
into the night - And it doesn't come -
And we take off our shoes and lie down
fully clothed, alert, prepared
for the sudden race to the shelter.
Even towards morning while the radio clock
shines out 3 and 4, illuminating
the passing minutes, we wait,
remember the shock of the 7:00 a.m. surprise.

Although I try to weary us with chapters from Jeremiaah,
"I need my nightly missile," you say, "to fall asleep."

Only short poems and Biblical verses on doom can be effective soporifics. How far will the
malaise of war penetrate?

XVII
The Mother of All Wars

Oedipus tries to get to
the heart of all wombs
with 400 pound missiles
and we sit here, breathless
waiting for the next thrust

XVIII
"No, no sex," Eyal says. "What man
can compete? This missile

gives it to all of us at once.
A war with no heroes, every man
for himself, every woman
fearing her own life,
everyone divided
from the others,
and with so many faulty options –
everyone divided against themselves.

“Even jerking off
can't do it.”

The life-force is kept in abeyance for another time, which does not seem possible in the near future. When can one live again and rejoice? In the Great Hanshin earthquake, where data on all medical problems has been tabulated carefully, it has been found that the female population underwent massive menstrual deviations – erratic but transitory – a hesitation or rush to procreative preparation. Men, who customarily exhibit the affirmation of life in the face of death, such as having sex after a funeral, underwent a debilitating passivity, sexually, mentally, and economically. They found everything gone that had identified them as males. They responded in the “what can we do about it?” way, with quarreling increasing more than loving. They had been royally raped into the feminine role of inactivity without the network of support that women construct around their families and daily lives: the coping habit.

But Nature does not fail in the magic round even though imagination has. The resilience of the body is attested to here. A certain calming order can still prevail.

XXXII

The morning after a three alarm night
I smell my mother in my bath
that acrid bloody woman-smell
suddenly, sensual – a sign
the womb continues its tasks
when all outside is destruction.

In the poem, “Domestic Dinner” (Ignorant Armies, p. 14-15) the irritation of a female citizen becomes more pronounced.

1 ...The smell of onion soup and sound of nervous interviews
pervade the house.
Before the guests arrive we watch the news
angry, analytical, helpless –
neither heroes nor madmen.

2 "All the time you think somehow the ones in charge know what they're doing. Then this happens, and it's clear they don't." Muma shakes her head, "That means any one of us could run this thing better than the generals and the senators."

She seems so logical, so wise,
my gray-haired sister-in-law with shining eyes.

Why isn't she in charge?
Why not me?

And the wars go on. The poet's affirmation of the vast messiness of all existing realities has continued up-to-date with the mixture of bloods in "Tel Aviv Love Song". The shakings and heavings continue; the front comes to town in the form of terrorism. The former stresses and responses to war have here changed to painful strength of personal purpose in an act of life. The numbness has been replaced by the ability to give love. The poem is about two people dead and eleven wounded by a young Arab terrorist "brandishing two large knives" on a Tel Aviv street:

In the next flat the radio is listing the names
of victims stabbed in the latest terrorist attack
and here I am trying to strip before you slowly
removing my street clothes to the quick.
You are propped on the pillows, arms folded
behind your head, easy, knowing what you see
will always be free to you no matter what
happens outside this bedroom.

Blood on the streets mopped up by rags and paper towels
of no use to the remains already plastic-wrapped and bound
for the earth. My own blood is at worst a nuisance here
a redness on white sheets redolent of clarity, capacity
for patterns coming around again to life.

We come with the weather report -
heat predicted and unprecedented aridity.
After our showers we dress and go out.

Blood and wars, birth and death: these are the rites which the poet knows well. In "Life Goes On", (Ignorant Armies, p. 10) she writes:

"Life goes on,"
said Reagan at Bitburg.

Mine began the last day of the blitz
because my mother stopped having abortions.

My brother and I were coaxed from aging parents
so surprised they survived only birth could be proof.

What would they have been – those brothers and sisters –
that our mother, fleeing, flushed from her womb?

THE MAKING OF VISION

Adept in dealing with displacement, and with hard-won competence in war and coping, Alkalay-Gut has kept nurturing herself and the reader with kaleidoscopic variables of heart and brain, puzzle pieces that keep coming together and forming new sensitive patterns. A non-self-destructive poet with a need "to break boundaries in order to recombine on a more basic level", she has, in Dylan Thomas' words, forged "out of the inevitable conflict of images –inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war – I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem."

It is not an easy task, for quiet temptation is everywhere, as the poet says in "La Diritta Via" on life (arc9, p. 4):

"So I turn back and see
the way was very tangled

And if I want to steer straight from here
I have to unlearn the course of tortured paths.

The straight way! How honest I have to become
to swerve from my lovely self-delusion."

These delusions are dealt with in the rejection of personal, anonymic safety, and the willingness to reexamine all tenets. Her *ars poetica*, in the words of the thoughtful critic Neil Anderson, "is an acknowledgement of the power and limitations of the self". Alkalay-Gut has reworked the tangled, encoded messages of her existences in foreign times, lands, and cultures, and has unconditionally woven a philosophy of life which shines from "lines able to speak to everyone, in all layers of culture, since we all suffer alike from the same hunger". (The *Expansiveness of Poetry*, review, 1994).

Anderson says she has chosen not "to stay behind the borders, (or) go home to mother, keep herself safe (or) write of more acceptable and solitary objects." (Ibid, 1994) Her estimation

of self as 'ordinary people', in community with their fears and foibles, and also as poet with rights and duties concomitant has led her to brave all subjects which have need of inspection, rectification, or exultation.

Alkalay-Gut, teaching American poetry at Tel Aviv University, and with five books of published poetry, has this to say about the classic art in "II, The Private Story" (Mod. Lit. in Trans., 1994) which shows her attempts at poetry in times of "extreme vulnerability and complete isolation":

"Let us say you are doing something very private, something very intimate, something you do when you are alone. Maybe you are lovingly examining the pimple on your chin, or distending your nostril with your index finger for a good scratch. In any case, you are totally absorbed in this activity when suddenly you realize you are being broadcast on national television. That is what writing in English in Israel has been for me.

"For years, writing in English in Israel was a totally private, self-absorbed activity, one engaged in because there was no audience, because no one could understand me, because English was my language alone...no models but the classic poets I taught...no critics but rare friends...Or when I dared show a poem to a visiting poet or critic from the world outside, (and there was) gentle criticism, I would find myself shutting up shop for months, unable to write a single word.

"...confounded by (the problem) of a combination of dyslexia and diglossia (we spoke Yiddish at home) English outside (and now, Hebrew), it (still) takes me forever to find the words and the system I need, and I don't always feel I've succeeded. Under the influence of Hebrew, which, in the beginning, I was forced to speak (in only an) elementary form, I think my poems became simpler and sharper. The simplicity made them easier for Hebrew poets to appreciate and thus translate (so many of my poems) in the mid-seventies."

Auden once said, "Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives in the valley of its making...it survives a way of happening, a mouth." For Alkalay-Gut, however, it is that and a statement of self and of promise:

N
Five a.m. one day
I am awake
alone before the neighbors'
invasion of my space
the birds sing each to each.
Me, I sing alone

(Harmonies-Disharmonies, p.26)

Her return to the word after long absence is a reaffirmation of speaking, of improving linguistic usage to improve a life philosophy. A few words from the pen of scientist-aphorist, Lichtenberg (1742-1799) explains the great difference between still believing something and believing it again. "Still to believe that the moon affects the plants reveals stupidity and superstition, but

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to believe it again is a sign of philosophy and reflection." (The Lichtenberg Reader). The world of words is a reality which the poet once again embraces in "Wisdom of the World" (Harmonies-Disharmonies), p.7):

There is a need for wider wisdom.
I feel it every time I try to write -
the fact that poetry
is important
must
change lives

first by bringing the shards garnered
together into art

then in making the future possible

You want it too -
respond like a lover
longing for the uncovering,
the prospect of satiation

Somehow I have come back to believing in it,
the dream of changing lives

Somehow after all the years
of despair, disregard, diversion

Somehow the promise —
that words may have knowledge
and power —
returns.

In "Here and There" (Mechitza, p.47), the lilt of the old language, Yiddish, still comes through in a simpler credo:

Here a few poems,
there a few tears -
what more do you need
to give shape to your life?

Returning to the length, form, and meter of classic traditional verse, Alkalay-Gut shows

her debt to Chaucerian values and executes one of the best put-downs in literary criticism in a poem entitled "Augustan Reflections" (Ibid, p.27). Speaking through Lady Mary Wortley Montague, a poet and very lusty lady, and an exact (1689-1762) contemporary of Alexander Pope, she says:

It's the old craftsmen that make it through.
I have thought about this a lot sitting in my chamber
with my powdered wig askew - white stuff
sprinkled on my shoulders, petticoat stained,
pimples, billet doux, blotting grains
messing up the paper, the poems, the lines
while that obsessive little dwarf climbs
to the top. Each time he writes a verse - Swift sighs,
wishes it his. God, my life is such a mess,
and I have to show it - not just on my dress.
I want what's on the page to be as pungent
to the nose as I am when I can't get myself together
for the ritual of ablutions, the rites of pride.

What is all this fuss about form?
Maybe Pope's verse will outlive that little
hungering wonder of a gnome. But it won't
have a damn thing to do with him -
like when you leave fragments of your statue in the desert
so people will assume you were quite a man.

Crafty truth is an oxymoron.

Come, let's go to the bathroom -
I want to show you something.

In a last example of sauciness, here is an examination of the Muse's dual personality entwined with the Maker's. In "Crossing Legs" (Ibid. p.5) the author lets the virgin and the bitch out of the poetic bag in another attitude to poetry:

So much of poetry depends
on keeping legs crossed
at the right moment -
but whether at my knee
or your neck-
that is the question.

Don't waste time
wondering when our paths
or legs will cross.

They won't or if they do
it won't be because
of a promise
in a poem

She has the intimate knowledge that "everything is identical with itself, each part representing the whole" (Lichtenberg, p.23). And since Alkalay-Gut has also the valuable intellectual gift of common sense and a deep, emotional well-spring of warmth, she has the power to mend whatever holes have been ripped in the fabric of her own history and ours, to heal whatever sores she opens, to comfort the indignities we suffer, to heat our dreams frozen in grammar. Her poetry is wakeful and active, illuminating the truth that our only tie to the world and community is the heart rather than reason.

THE MATRIX

Before turning to the poems dealing with new lands, and new life as an adult, it would seem in order to introduce some of the poems based on formal Jewish upbringing: the child's daily life permeated by moral re-evaluations, and the arguments for or against the existence of God. These poems give some idea of the roots of the poet and her need to examine not only her Jewishness, but also her American heritage as well.

In poems concerning her childhood, there is biting humor and a bit of a nostalgic smile. Daughter of refugees and raised in a household of traditional religion, she grew up in the stormy ambience of concern about labor unions, workers' rights, responsible active citizenry, and necessity to pay jealous attention to the cultivation of civil rights for all. Being in America, she adds to this litany, participation in three disparate cultures: Yiddish-Jewish, white-collar American, and the rock-ethnic-walls-will-fall feminine power in Women's Lib.

We begin with her in the Yiddish Folk (Socialist) Shule(School) - 1952:

"Open your notebooks,"
the teacher says. "Today we learn
about sweatshops and the union."

We children smirk to each other sidelong
bending over our desks.
What is history
without George Washington?

(Ignorant Armies,p.7)

In "I Explain Darwin to the Rebbe" (Recipes, p.29), Alkalay-Gut exposes her new-world values to another newcomer to the U.S., unfamiliar with its laundered, public education:

The old man and I sit on the porch -
It is Indian summer and the weather
lures us with our books outside.
And the madness of the season
makes one stop the lesson of Bereisheit
with - "Rebbe, what do you think of Darwin?"

The rabbi of the Kippele shul knows no English -
we discuss the Bible in mamme-loshen.
And what has he read
that he should know of *The Origins of the Species*.
So he asks me to explain - and I do -
in my most grown-up eleven-year-old tone -
about apes, the jungle, survival
of the fittest.

It is eleven years since the Holocaust.
In the twilight he is silent, rocking
very slightly as he arranges his decision.
"Bobbe-mysehs," he says, and I nod.
Suddenly in revelation.
"You must learn what you must for school,
but of course no one can really
believe in such stories."

Bereisheit - Genesis
mamme-loshen - Yiddish, mother tongue
Bobbe-mysehs - old wives' tales
shul - temple

How much the little girl can absorb of several ways of life is mirrored in the adult's understanding of both the light and dark sides, here shown in "Mt. Sinai" and "History" (Ignorant Armies, p.6 and 13).

Of course it had to be a high place like this
where such simple laws were bestowed.
What a perspective! Mind your own business,

keep your nose clean, know
there is someone above
who sees much more than you
can dream.

Maybe there is no God,
I once suggested to my Rebbe.
He shrugged, "So?"

"A Jew still has to study Torah.

"Leave the absolutes for Him,
even the questions of his existence. You
have business of your own."

Rebbe - (Yiddish) rabbi

Torah - The Five Books of Moses, and, in addition, Laws,
Commentary, and how to live in the world of men.

and "History":

Who doesn't have a past in Tel Aviv?
A hairy arm, brown and strong,
turns over to reveal a numbered underside.

Stories are easily
coaxed from strangers on a bus.
From my own balcony I have heard
screams of terror shattering the night

And the whispered comfort
of an old man turning to his wife in bed:
"Only a dream."

No dream.

Blood
in blue tattoos.

As in all immigrant families in America, there was a drive to have the child succeed in the mainstream of American society where the parent could not. Success depends upon language

and education. Alkalay-Gut has a command of English, Yiddish, French, and Hebrew. She explains in (Recipes, p.27) "How I Came to These Literary Perversities":

For my father alone
I learned to read.
The teacher
discovered my illiteracy
half way through the year
when my technique of memory
by pictures became clear.
I do not recall any shame
at being discovered a crook,
Sunday mornings in my father's bed,
with only the joy of a heavy book
he wanted read.

HERE AND THERE IN DEPTHS AND LANGUAGE

She receives a new lesson in foreign language and in "female" in "Arabesque". (Ignorant Armies, p.17) here partially given:

1.
After dinner I'm alone with the grandmother,
while the men talk business
and wives feed the children
bumping each other in the hidden kitchen.

I am a guest, an English teacher new
to the Middle East, without tongue,
and I cannot play in pantomime—
like my daughter— with the children and the goats.

In this bare room
the old woman talks
as if eventually I must understand

her language

since she speaks in the feminine.

In "Yiddish", the poet muses:

1.

A body lies pierced with many swords,
still breathing, though the lifeblood
has seeped into a hungry, crying earth.

I hear the quiet rhythm in my sleep.

In Folk Shule it was the language of champions,
annihilators of the sweatshops: we sang
of the golden ring of socialism as if
it could be conceived only in Mamme loshen.
Together we wept for the death of a world
and vowed the phoenix would rise from the ashes
just like in the partisaner leid.

How could I know of Ben Gurion far away
liming the remains of immigrants' tongues
so that Hebrew could be reborn.

2.

In Yiddish everything becomes parody,
a comment on the pretensions of the modern world
from the perspective of the eternal outsider.

Explaining it in English is also strange,
a stuttering admission of sentimentality.

I ask about the new rock song
and you say, "It's in Yiddish" and suddenly
I want to believe it, imagine a world
of such idyllic irony

3.

When I grow old
will I speak it
–revert to the old tongue
in the Home –
confounding the testy nurses
with a glazed chant
of self consolation

the prayer shawl of words
from a world of wholeness

The strangeness of an alien language in a land far from home is then transformed to the poet's own feelings of real linguistic homesickness because of the constant misuse of her most native language:

Living
in Israel. English
was my private world -
America, my secret tongue:

laughing alone at flitting jokes in films
lost in the subtitles,

like a patient in the asylum playroom.

How banal to be cured
to drop from Illyria to commercials

to waste a language every way
in sales, coupons, "Have a nice day."

Take me back to the Holy Land
Where a polite word is hard won, well-deserved,
and English for reading Shakespeare,
writing
of life.

After reading such verses, what American living in a foreign land cannot but feel the tug of sweet rightness and the banality of Coca Cola democracy when thinking on the green and ordered homeland? Part of the poem "Summer Dust", alternating stanzas in "America", and "Transportation" show the superficial differences between places and the deeper feelings of alienship concerning home.

Summer Dust

Sometimes in summer you lose your way,
as if the very smell of dust in the air
blurred the fingerprints of places
and the sites you knew blindfolded

are suddenly so like their opposites
you cannot tell a wedding from a wake.

and, in

America

In America even the onions
don't make you cry
at least this was how I
remembered the world I grew up in

As I chased the desert out of the house each day
before beginning elaborate preparations for dinner.

The land of the bible is not
one for housewives – doves
crap all over the laundry
electricity stops and the meat
drips from the freezer
men go for soldiers some
come back

Here they're home each night.
You can trust them the way you trust
the water, phone company, soap powder.
News on tv proves
all is well. The bad guys
get exposed (briefly), before
the serious business (ourselves)
begins. Then comes
gossip, weather, gay
anecdotes – no
painful self incriminations,
unanesthetized
analysis of the nation's beating heart
on a talk show coffee table

Even the onion lies
gentler on the plate.

All over the world, there are inequalities of wet and dry, rich and poor. The squeaking, daily, matter-of-fact wars of coping with the weather, things, and machines that don't work have approximate correspondence in the dissonances of public and personal relationships in transition. The artist is changing from American to Israeli, from daughter to self, but still, on a deeper level, is in war.

There are always the ties of responsibility -
Try to fly, you remember you owe something
to the earth. Now we are in a plane
on that long, stuffy ride from New York
emptying our wallets of credit cards to make room
for identity cardfolders, health clinic booklets, army
releases, special permission passes for anything.

The first time I left America for Israel my mother
spurred blood all over the rug - I knew

it was because she could endure no more losses.
But she lived through it, fifteen years ago.
Today she is a new widow, with everything she loves
in the ground or in the air, and though
the pilot explains the rocking of the plane
as turbulence, I know it is that cord
pulling -

RETURN TO CENTER

Alkalay-Gut continues the idea of struggle in both physical and metaphysical squirmishes. Being Jewish in the U.S. was a self-defining experience, actually bringing safety in identity and purpose, albeit a sometimes rebellious acceptance of this state. In Israel, where the fiat is merely to be, rather than to be Jewish, i.e. different, the poet finds herself hedging the question in a short poem which reminds one of Frost's "Archer":

If only I could get the vision of the Messiah
out of my mind
I would certainly order myself cremated

But what if
at his coming
everyone has a second chance
and I
am ashes

("Disposal", *Ignorant Armies*, p.22)

In "The Keepers of My Youth", (abbreviated) she shows that there is a struggle between the ancient tenets and time:

At the Jewish Old Age Home in my hometown,
the keepers of my youth sit in wheelchairs
sunning themselves in the crisp autumn air.
Here I am still in my flower. With a gentle hand
I smooth the shawls around their shoulders,
tuck the bright wool blankets into their chairs,
and whisper encouraging farewells to my troops at the front.

LOVE AND WAR WITH SCISSORS AND GLUE

In a country most fit for the act of reconsidering, with sand suggesting the major problems of life, grittiness and shift, Alkalay-Gut has made her experience available to the reader. She has suffered, and in "Vision", (Mechitza. p.10) tells of the body, the fruit, the shame, and the truth in a poignant account of undergoing public execution of rabbinical law:

Through the plexiglas shield you
can see her quite clearly - nude body
writhing against exposure.
The chair, the bed, the toilet are all
transparent and there
are no covers, no protection
from curious eyes, from the crowd
which has come to see
the sentence carried out
for failure to fulfill
the promises of voluptuous flesh.
She shrieks
but her mouth distorts its loveliness
needlessly since we
can hear nothing not even
the fingernails that scrape
the plexiglas.

When she sleeps, her legs
wrap around each other,
yet darting movements under eyelids
reveal her secret dreams.

Mostly she shades her face

with long hair and fingers
and rocks on slender knees.

But she refuses to eat, the keeper says,
in hope that once thin
the sin of seduction will no longer
stick. The trick
is to lose all beauty
and yet remain
alive. The line
is fine: To be released
while wasted flesh still throbs.

In "Resemblances", (Ibid. p.11), there is a private execution of heredity:

My thickened ankles at this time of the month
remind me of Mother

I don't hate her anymore

A sudden secret exploded in the midst
of an argument

My child and I don't really talk

No clothes to suit her body
lengthening into my shape

Inherited flaws shame her

How long it takes
forgiveness

When the sin is within

The treacherous shifts and betrayal in marriage, in parenthood, and in self are seen in Alkalay-Gut's command of before, after, and then in recognition of self. The crimes and scars are dealt to her tree of life which although recovering, keeps them hidden inside rings:

You Always Loved Me

wrong, pushed me to the wall when
I needed soft holding,
defended yourself in the mirror
while I licked my wounds,
fucked without your mouth
your eyes – I was not wise
and thought you didn't care
now I know you loved me
unaware.

(Mechitza p.19)

In "Interferences" (Harmonies Disharmonies, p.24, l. I) "Like a Son", the bonds are straining when the poet abruptly faces herself, not as the victim but as the oppressor,

I
You withdraw as if I plague you.
I have learned to back away
wait it through and bathe a lot
as if I had open sores running.

Usually you return
with no memory no awareness
of my pain

I behave
as if it were normal
this unbalanced burden of heart

and this grows to

II
...I of all people who should know
the shame of it. the loneliness.
The masked egotism of the presumably protective parent,
a means for inducing the most evil
of all feelings for this century
– guilt

From "Voices from a House Dividing against Itself", (Harmonies Disharmonies, p.27-31)
Alkalay-Gut has captured the slippery area of trust and belief:

I

Divorce

I

You put two people face to face
You say tell the truth
One of them looks away
as if slapped.

They do not sit
face to face again

II

There must be five
ten, fifteen different things
I have forgotten to hide from you
today

III

One day he wakes and wonders
if she has any diseases
he doesn't know about
these twenty years - something
she, still asleep, may have picked up
from one of the men she may
have been loving those hours
she seemed to stray from him.

What if his own infirmities
were given to him by her health?

IV

Years

I imagine him festering
in a borrowed house
listening to music
imported from other experiences
lying on the overstuffed sofa
planning

2

Daughter

Let us examine alternative ways of family —
the home in which I grew, for example.
Imagine every one united – father, mother,
sibling – in condemnation of my sloppy disruptiveness.

I think somewhere I believed
if my father cared to counter the unity
he would have loved me

Even if you imagine
a very large man
to imitate the proper proportions
for me as a little girl
and he holds me
very tight
strokes softness into my hair
and sureness into my ear
he cannot now
be enough

Divide the house, child!
Rejoice!

The final realization of guiltlessness, and that one has been deceived into self-underestimation,
calls forth the shout of joy.

Now growth in freedom can begin. In 3. Wife (partial) she muses:

3
Wife

II
Modern Love, the poet called it, a hundred years past:
the disjoining of concentration, putting eggs
in many baskets. Not all that bad a solution
when God himself splits into many shards.

The pain at severance, and utter responsibility of the single parent scream out of “Deflections”
(I–V), III in the series (Mechitza, p.23):

III
Strange to have exotic blooms

in this tiny flat – the rented couch with faded
red roses – bare stone floors.
I sleep on a child's mattress
and dream of my wars.

Into this austerity of divorce
comes a rich suitor, the old-fashioned kind.
Tiger lillies and bird of paradise fill
this empty room. Vases and diamond
earrings, candies, and a toy horse.

When the gifts come
I tip the boy and count what's left...

Enough
for milk this week?

and in

V
"Pay attention.
Does it hurt when I hit this tooth?"
I can't tell. The pain
is somewhere else.

Picking up the scattered fragments, there is a return to the unambiguously conscious clarity of one's own identity. Alkalay-Gut has the intellectual temerity to overturn a few religious structures, and has rightfully, it seems to this author, come out with "blurring the boundaries between genres, subjects,..figure and ground", negating the eternal bifurcated inclination to mark off the I and Thou, apportioning mine and thine. In refusing the man-made catechisms, rules, and prayers to enchain her, she "seeks and finds/ big words to clear the slate,/ great sinners/ to make me pure" thus no longer a participant in unnecessary battles. One of the greatest struggles in the judaeo-christian ethic, indeed, in all systems, religious, moral, or generative, is of that between good and evil, light and dark. As a one-time contender for her own soul, Alkalay-Gut has woven something like a conversation between, Socrates, the sting, and Sappho, his light, in "Sympathy for the Devil" (Recipes, p. 21):

Even you, Prince, are sometimes blind,
living so deep in darkness as you do –
that some one like me would savor
your sort of loneliness, relishing

those seductive days, nights in empty beds.
What can I say? Yours is such a masculine way –
and when we met that night at the crossroads
I walked a piece with you, watching the twisting
of your stick, wishing I could soothe
all the writhings in your world. I thought
to cradle you, like an agonized disciple,
in my bountiful lap – didn't even hear
all the offers you made of wisdom
in exchange for my soul.
Even when you flashed the contract,
secure in my signature, I wasn't paying
attention, bedeviled by that pain
in your eyes, that need for something good –
dare I call it – love?

AS IT IS IN SEX, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

It is with the word "love" that Alkalay-Gut's poetry exemplifies the poet. A cross-section of her work, cited above, has shown the poet-warrior recounting the total war experience of life actual international wars, political and religious war, war between male and female, among family members, between God and man, dream and reality, and self and public person. The path to consciousness and becoming whole is one that she chooses deliberately, at times blatantly, harshly, rawly: the path of love.

With a reference to Karl Marx' essence of the species, N.O. Brown says that to become conscious of ourselves as body is to become conscious of mankind as one, a unity. And "politics is sex: without an understanding of the seamy side of sexuality, there is no understanding of politics." (Love's Body, p. 11). In "Dresses", a matured understanding of the political-military metaphor as seen in different societies, she says:

I
In my closet

an old Arab gown
of black silk.

When I wear it
my whole sex
alters,
I am covered —
but the embroidery
delineates my breasts,

hips, the movement
of my walk, like
a dark
archetypal
mystery
of the orient.

II
The old trunk of costumes
I loved so much
I duplicated for my children
has disappeared

The roles played
with such flourish
on the stage and off
incorporated

III
How often
standing before the wardrobe
I choose at last
the black skirt
the black sweater
the anonymous uniform
of the puppeteer.

IV
A survey of the shops
determines
I already own
everything I could dream
to wear.

This is not a good
state of affairs —
this surfeit

As if there are no more opportunities
for the hunger of creation

VII

For an hour I stand before the closet
debating the virtues of each dress
in my mind – trying nothing on–
remembering the exploits of each
piece of clothing as though
they were battle gear, breastplates,
bucklers, helmets — each with its
advantages in warfare —none
perfect for all skirmishes

In the end I put on an old
black silk Chanel
—a trusty sword
brandished
against time

In another poem showing the underpinnings of politics with the presentation of self, there is quite a reversal from the "arma virumque cano" to "Dux femina facti". (Aeneid, Bk. 1, line 364.) "The leader in the deed a woman." Or, as this author would prefer, "The leader of the make, a woman."

With high heels that place my ass
prick level – like a cat
in heat stretching out her toes
to accomodate whoever comes –
and curled hair to remind you
of what it feels like
down there I wet my lips
in labial readiness
shade my eyes for that overwhelmed
orgasmic look
and say
I dress up
to appear
presentable.

("Style", Mechitza, p. 6)

In Recycle V (Harmonies and Disharmonies, p. 13) she points out connections in metaphors:

"This is just a love song,"

someone warns me,
reading these lines—
“politics and dreams:
just figures for a known
hunger of the loins”

Perhaps it goes another way:
hunger is a metaphor

Or perhaps whole ways
of learning to touch the world
still begin in the groin

Politics is the oxymoron, the logical impossibility of “out of many, one” or the one voice representing many, acting for many, acting in society, acting as a corporation, trying for harmony – the body politic. Sexual intercourse is. Brown says, the harmony of joining opposites, or, in other words, good government. There is peace in coitus and good government. The symbolism of incorporation, or political representation is a ritual and it is also the organizing principle in religion.(Love’s Body, p.112) In fact, we have the language of government and law in the phrase “kingdom of God”. We, the people, are the proof and *raison d’etre* of the King-Father. We, the many, becoming one voice, are God’s manifestation, and we have created law as a symbol of the surrendering of our participation in wars to overthrow Him. We are cool and detached. The game can be tickled, but it has become codified into words, “frozen into concepts”. (Lichtenberg, p. 18) In “Tangents”. Alkalay-Gut expresses the separation of self from reality, from action into passivity, from a place in the real world into a boring displacement:

II
So one night I’m a character
in some man’s dream
and my part is not very big
and I don’t speak his language
so most of the time I’m backstage
waiting for the moment I get called out
and jabber a few words in French
to a dreamer’s blank face.
I don’t get the incentive –
I say to whom I think is the director.
What am I doing in this dream–
what’s my function, motivation, Stan?
The man widens his eyes

and dies, or fades away while I watch.
So there I am, behind the scenes, thinking –
don't I have something better to do
with my time

The sexual game of governmental control, tyranny with consent, is seen in "A Standard Plot"
(Harmonies Disharmonies, p.22)

I

Even his smile, warm and affectionate
and rare, was calculated. He would have made
an amazing fisherman – reeling me in
while leaving me with the illusion of freedom.
But I was no fish – I knew his wiles
understood the net, and yet
loved all his hidden calculations.

II

Such a generous soul
his shadow (or mine) tells me.
As if you didn't know who
you were or who
you are yourself
what riches you reap
from the sport
of being fished

Playing the game with a smile and knowledge of its delicate tensions is another cop-out on reality, another passive response, albeit an enjoyable one. Freud, in his General Introduction, p. 332, said that genital organization (for the layman, sex) is a "well-organized tyranny of a part over the whole", all stimulation to be recorded in a certain area and from thence to be passed conditionally to the other branches of the body and soul. It is a safe activity and keeps the people passive. The poet says, "/ The fine thing about screwing/ Is that it is always good./ Anything else/ you take a chance." It is "always good" because, as an action, it is cleanly delineated; as interaction, it depends only upon the immediate present tense and partner in play. "Taking a chance" in sex and government is commitment to another not only in the present, but also in the future. Anything less than this and it becomes the wrong war, "the war perverted. The perversion is a repression; war is sex perverted. "War is Energy Enslav'd." (Cf. Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p.262-263, and Blake, "Night". X 152 in *Brown's Love's Body*, p. 181). It is found in the psychological struggle in "Love Soup" (I - XVI)

VI

I can't get no
satis

Nothing's
better than more

Less than all
will not satisfy

When what we want
is possession

XII

Obsessions are easy:
loving someone who doesn't
love back. So pure.
Hitting ball after ball
into an empty court
you don't expect to return

Then it comes back
and the game becomes
complex
almost
impossible

moving, changing,
dangerous.

POLYMORPHOUS PERVERSITIES, TRUE WARS

Peace of mind, heart, and body is found in the true war of conciliation of opposites, the making of friendship. Quoted by Brown, William Blake said we must not abolish war, but find the true one. "Open the hidden Heart in Wars of Mutual Benevolence, Wars of Love" (Jerusalem, pl. 98, i.14).

Israel is not at peace. It is a disturbed country where hope forever lives and dies and lives again. It is a coveted country, a gazed upon country, and it would seem that this existence breeds stress continually and in many areas of life. Living through the "paranormal of our daily lives", the poet shows private acts are actually public ones in that they build up the public nature of a country. In the last two stanzas of "Summer Dust" (Recipes, p.15) she illustrates the two kinds of wars, their battlefields and place of reconciliation:

Painting our room we begin to altercate:
Covering over the dust of summers
with one white wall, one red –
we are baffled by our silence,
suspect hidden furies as if we'd
forgotten we've been best friends,
never known mute passion,
not weathered the chaos
of many summers.

Then we recall – like the couple of Ithaca
reunited – the secret of the bed, its rootedness
deep in the unchanging earth. Suddenly the room
is cool, dark as buried truth, welcome
as an unearthed treasure chest containing
personal, particular jewels.

In another domestic chore:

(Buying Furniture on Herzl Street on the Day Bibi Comes Back
to Israel from His First Enforced Meeting with Arafat)

Angry with ourselves and the world
we drive to the neighborhood where you were born
and as I keep up a steady bickering
we park right next to the stores on Herzl Street

"If you will it, it is not a dream," he said,
as if a whole people could force their will on the world;
and now I demand a piece of furniture that is not
really necessary except to hide things in.

It would be easier if we could throw everything out —
the chances we'll need old jeans and diaries
are slim at best, and all this junk just slows down
Jews that should get used to wandering again.
"Maybe someday the kids will come home, and need
to reconnect to their past." I muse.

We find the eternal quest of the human animal: the need for continuity, the search for home.
The poem ends with a deft observation of the human psyche:

As always you try to go along with me,
but when it comes to deciding where the shelves will be,
your heart suddenly grows fierce
and you come down hard, as if I'd been the one
who ruined the dream that should have been our inheritance.

Bibi – present head of State, Benjamin Netanyahu

The personal stress leaks into admission of the true state of affairs in the nation: "How our lives would be fine now, if that were all there was to talk of. But where we live we speak only of death and think of somewhere else."

BEING POET AND AWAKE

In commenting on religious and governmental conditions in Israel, the poet exemplifies Shakespeare's lines in *Julius Caesar*, (Act III, I, 232): "When love begins to sicken and decay, It useth an enforced ceremony. There are no tricks in plain and simple truth." The unadorned truth of the "Vision" poem is that Alkalay-Gut has revealed her only way out of the rabbinical, legal, social, and emotional spider-web of "you can't, you're wrong, it's not allowed". In "Duration and Expanse", the poet says in "II", "Its all a matter of breathing — inhale and all events go slowly — exhale and feel a rush / because you just want, to get through them so you can breathe in/again". And in "III", "Every night/a different story every story a different night I tell you I will beat those systems – all of them/ Like Sheherazade, keep my head." As has Israel, she has wrested the right to exist – out of her own exploited passivity. The "enforced ceremony" in the encrusted systems had almost destroyed the silent truth which is in the body itself: love. She explains in "His Neck" (Mechitza, p. 18):

I am
no longer carrion, have
pinched myself alive

Although outlawed and castigated, Alkalay-Gut continues to state the simple truth. In "Flight", taking place in paranormal times, abbreviated here, she writes of impinging values and realities in religion:

2.

All my old friends in the States are into religion.
It is their new salvation – even the most worldly
slip into midrashim when we discuss other issues.
They use Yiddish words from the ghetto I haven't heard
since I was a child, but with a postmodern twist –

and a stubborn discovery of non-ritual identity:

What do I know? I am so far away, an Israeli
who has even picked up a bit of an accent
into her twenty-two years away from the diaspora,
who slips into Hebrew unwillingly when someone asks
about whether there were familiar names
on the list of the dead in the Tel-Aviv bus-bombing,
and shakes her head and cannot even give an opinion
about what Israel should do. "My son is in the air force,"
I mumble, "I live there."

3.

"You come from an observant family,"
a friend's friend asks in wonderment.
"When did you stop keeping kosher?"
"When I had to make deals with the Rabbinat
in order to get divorced."

With a last nostalgic glance at how comfortable and warm the true religious experience is, the poet ends with a biting comment:

4.

Every portion of our lives was interspersed
with the desire for righteousness

How I loved the wholeness of it – everything meaning
something greater – how limiting it became
when reduced to ritual.

5.

How fine to be wrapped in a prayer shawl,
surrounded by holiness, making a whole world
–just you and God– in a portable tent.

7.

Righteousness should not depend
upon keeping me out, I think

This would seem to be an apt comment on both religious and governmental systems.

In a stunning poem "Lists" (Mechitza, p.13), with the lines of communication open and connecting different realities, the poet plumbs Mitty-like to converging essences: the need for order and the will to disorder. It offers us bearings in the slippery coordinates of x-y carnality, wakeful participation in a schizophrenic apprehension of unity, and a chance to laugh:

I
1. Bank - withdraw \$ 400
2. Optician - adjust lenses
3. Dentist
But the man who is known to wear
a white jacket
to cover
wild curlicues of hair
is absorbed in the cracking
of a tooth
of a woman not much older
than I
and I have read
all the English magazines
and have leafed through
the Spanish
and have thus been committed
to the whiteness of the waiting room.
And the protean lips of my mind
open suddenly and release
beckoning heat.
I shudder in the joining
with it. But let my tongue
meander through its bone
and membrane
the widening and tapering shapes
dripping
from above
forming
vaginal folds, coral
in their promise.
The white door opens.
Oh, let me enter farther...
You can
go in now
I am seated

bibbed, injected –
the rot is removed
to my ears
and
4. Fix sandal buckle
5. Buy turkey breasts.

II
Not enough
not enough they say. The list
is too short and the dreams
disproportionate. My mother
would agree, and the children
are fighting again
so that I will turn
from the window and look at them.
And there
I remember.
Lunch. Margarine
in a pan – schnitzel
and salad and the song
of the stalagmite cave
comes back – Bach
sings straight up
from the floor
and I melt
down to meet him
in the redness the spike of which
I remember
from the waiting room. Hear...
and I have poured
the juice on the floor.
My slippers will have to be
shampooed. The world
would be saved
if there were something good
on television tonight.

III
1. Order television repair service
2. Check boiler for rust

3. Shampoo slippers
Where would a poet be
without lists of things
to do? – no ideas
but in frames, lists, theories
to escape

This exciting new voice in poetry, anchored in origins around the world, calling from the desert, reveals multiple polarities of life. Alkalay-Gut's poetry makes available and immediate the imperatives of reality, fantasy, and truth, the forces woven in our existence and hers. She has accepted life, wherever she may be, and offers readers the chance to be more involved in their own. She has found that "remedies oft in ourselves do lie, which we ascribe to Heaven" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, Act 1, sc. 1, p.235); however it is stated in "i" as:

there
are no truths greater
to me than those
proven in the hay
on my own body
(Mechitza, dedication page)

It is this physicality that makes her poetry a body of real communication, directing commonly-held values towards understanding the interplay of people, the foreplay of knowledge, and the tickle of real community. She is on the front lines of what late Prime Minister Rabin called the "revolution of peace": the reconciliation of nations and people in the habit of hardness. She fights with her heart and asks, "Can you understand? Don't you feel it, too?"

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