

Hamutal Bar-Yosef's *The Miraculous Mistake*, a sequence of poems selected from a long, distinguished career, wrestles with that "self-righteous Monster Truth," wary of the venomous "coils of compliments" that can cripple or kill the poet's efforts to escape mendacity. Clear-sightedness, if not Truth, is the great gift of these poems: the surprise of what feels suddenly, shockingly spot-on. Bar-Yosef's lyrics lead us into the heart's (and history's) difficult thickets: the familial pull of a stolen bourgeois home in prewar Poland (a longing suckled at the poet's aggrieved mother's breast) or the lost communitarian belonging of an early kibbutz (supplanted by a proprietary capitalist).

Bar-Yosef's humane embrace of both the historical and the personal makes grief one of her great subjects. The early death of a brother in war, a son by suicide, and family members murdered in the Shoah color her life and choices in ways that are understood only partially and after-the-fact. Familial love and estrangement appear retrospectively as one ("What It Was About") or prospectively apart ("My Name Goes Before Me") and invariably layered and complex ("What I'll Say To My Mother," "The Cute Little Baby"). Poems celebrate a woman's desire and pleasure, registering them most sharply when lost ("Ode to Love," "Quite Suddenly"). Poems about the losses and anxieties of old age form a sequence unlike any other to be found in contemporary poetry: bracing, honest, and useful.

Hearing the voice in the poem titled "There's" that "says no more / than necessary to the blind man" getting on and off a bus, allowing him dignity and control, is akin to reaching the end of Bishop's "The Filling Station": "Somebody loves us all." Bar-Yosef's poems call to mind some of the best writers of the Twentieth Century: Elizabeth Bishop, Constantine Cavafy, Wislawa Szymborska. She allows a glimpse of holy solidarity, of a time, perhaps some 500 years in the future, where there will be no need for steel doors and bomb shelters.

In the here and now, a life of poetry offers Bar-Yosef consolations:

ARS POETICA

Would you like to sign
Your name to my poem?

Would you like to show it
To someone you love?

Would you like to post it on your refrigerator
Or on the steel door of your bomb shelter?

If so, then despite everything
I have not lived in vain.

