WEEK TWO: THE COMING OUT OF QUEER POETS

ALON BAR

Alon Bar (b. 1985) is a gay Israeli poet, editor of poetry, and art director. In 2012 he began to publish his poems in newspapers, in journals, online and in anthologies. He is the recipient of a number of prizes, including the Minister of Culture’s prize for emerging poets (2017). Bar has published two poetry collections (in Hebrew): Chicago-Kiryat Gat (2019) and Everyday Something Falls (2020), in which all of the poems appear.

Free Translation

Mom, translate for her what I’m saying
ibni alon homo
mom, tell her again –
ibni alon homo
mom, mom
how much that “gay” flows easily for you
between your lips
tell her again
ibni alon homo
tell her, mom, tell her again, again, until I
become accustomed
until I love hearing my name
not only in your eyes
until I know how to scream
myself
by way of your lips

Translated by Reuven Greenvald

1 Arabic – “my son Alon is gay.” Homo is the word used by gay men to self-identify in Israel.
When I said *gay* for the first time
I felt like God whispered
into this void
let there be light.

They say that words make us
but they never told us how
a word turns into substance, they didn’t
warn us
that it’s needed but slowly, they say that
words can
live for years in a narrow crack
and in a moment rise up like a whisper
and go

they say, a word can spread out over worlds
but they silence it
like the silence
after the thunderous-noise of a door
slamming

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*Bar* is the poet’s last name. Some people have it as a first name. As a Hebrew word, it has many meanings: *wild,* or *clean, pure.* In Aramaic, it means *son* or *outside.*

Hebrew: *tohu* as in Genesis 1:2, *tohu va-vohu* – “the earth being unformed and void.”

Genesis 1:3
If you want to speak with God, chose a dark corner on a side street here, in south Tel-Aviv. speak, don't be afraid God understands many tongues

If you want to see God come, lift up your head open your eyes and swallow here, this is the rock that he is not able to lift. Blessed are you my Lord who creates all types of men.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald

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5 In Hebrew, the proper noun Zion (tziyon) in begins with the letter tzadi. It seems there is a word-play with the Hebrew slang, zayin (spelled zayin-yod-nun) meaning penis and the English word, Zion.

6 The speaker is talking to a man.

7 Hebrew, zecharim (plural of zchar meaning male or man). Zachar can also mean penis. A homonym, the plural of zecher, means remembrances.
The shirt you wore last night is resting on an embroidered cloth chair. Water was standing in the basin, the toothbrush was dry. The polka-dotted coffee mug that I bought in Soho left behind traces of congealed milk on the black Ikea table. The red plastic chair is leaning at an angle. You tried to leave it all smooth and clean and yes, it’s possible to feel how the electric shutters were opened with faith that light would come in, that we could let in some air and how you decided to leave and the smell of scorched flesh that took your place.

happy Independence Day.

Amit.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald
Orit Potashnik

Orit Neumayer Potashnik (b. 1973, Tel-Aviv) is a lesbian physicist, teacher, poet and translator. Her first collection of poetry, *The Oracle’s Eye* (Hebrew), was published in 2019. Her poetry, translations and critical essays have appeared in many journals.

Rapunzel

“The yellow rose will turn to cinder
and New York City will fall in
before we are done so hold me,
my young dear, hold me.”
Anne Sexton, from “Rapunzel”9

I ascended by your hair to the tower.
You” were so beautiful
and you didn’t ask me to whom
I wrote my old love poems
and you didn’t show me the witch’s room,
who didn’t actually seem to be at home or at all.
The curtains were heavy on us from the inside
and you clung and whispered to my neck
embrace me my love,
embrace me.
I embraced and I heard
how my hair is growing.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald


10 This is the second of two poems about Rapunzel.

11 The Hebrew grammar that describes the person the speaker is addressing uses feminine forms. The speaker speaks in the first person singular past tense and that is genderless.
Desert

One has to swallow distances in a breath, in one kiss to cross the desert.
The two of us know, this isn’t the promised land, just a small spring, salty like a whisper.
Hold me and don’t leave anything behind.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald

Dust

I am not dust at your feet.
I’m not.
I am soft grass.
And for every drop of dewed vitality, that the years have dried in me, I know how to caress.

I am not dust.
I am soft grass
At your feet.
I will whisper to you the wind’s murmur and the warmth of the earth, until you come down to me from your heavens, until you come, until you come, your softness breathes heavily against me, your fingers in my hair.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald

12 “Two of us know” is grammatically about two women.
13 Feminine command form.
14 The speaker is talking to a woman as indicated by the grammar throughout.
15 Feminine verb form.
Avishai Huri

Avishai Huri (b. 1992) is a gay therapeutic riding guide who was previously a yeshiva student, a journalist, and a shepherd. His work has been published in newspapers and major poetry journals. Huri published his first book, *How does an abyss do*, (Hebrew) in 2018.

*Life in the closet*

To miss all these years

In a jar.

_Translated by Reuven Greenvald_

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16 Hebrew: *le-chamitz* (from the root chametz) literally means to *become sour* (like in a sourdough starter), to become *chametz, leaven*. Idiomatically, it came to mean to delay something. Used a lot in conversation like in the expression “to miss out on an opportunity.”
To Embrace the Sinners

By consent of the Omnipresent and by consent of the congregation...
we grant permission to pray with the sinners.
(the “Kol Nidre” prayer)

By consent of the omnipresent and by the consent of the dangers
I fence off the insults
a plastic collar around the neck of a wounded dog
so that I won’t be tempted to scratch myself,
so that once again whiteness won’t be poured into my face. And the blood

By the consent of the concession from forgiving, with the consent of shame.
By reason of nausea’s remnants and the rage from crawling
And by the knowledge that no man will apologize
I forgive myself, that I was easily crushed
I release myself from my vengeance, and also you

(a little child’s vengeance, daddy)
carrying unforgiveness to the wharf of your house
a shore for you to split. Guarding
angers in a safe to be paid off, now that we grant permission
to embrace sinners.

Translated by Reuven Greenvald
"There is no blade of grass below that doesn't have an appointed one above, guarding it... and saying to it grow."
(The Zohar)

You should know that each and every blade of grass has a good angel that says to it: "grow."

But know, there's an angel that falls asleep. There are fires in the forest, there's foolish grass and an angel's disappointment picking the flowerbed.

There are dry years that run through a field like scythe, jackals crouching in squashed crops. There are growing pains that yellow the green, and with the stalk growing wondrously higher: perhaps it is better to remain a bulb.

But know. There is an angel. At least there was. Someone descended like dew when the morning broke through with pre-dawn chirping, whispered to you grow.

17 See Zohar on Numbers (173a). Compare to Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav: "Know that every blade of grass has its own special song, and the song of the blades of grass become the niggun of the shepherd." (Likkutei Moharan Tenina 63) and Naomi Shemer's famous song based on this, “The Song of the Grasses” (Shirat Ha’asavim).