

SO FAR, SO GOOD poetry by Karen Alkalay-Gut



SO FAR, SO GOOD" poetry by Karen Alkalay-Gut
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Review by Barbara Bialick

Karen Alkalay-Gut is a professor of English at Tel Aviv University who came into the world on the last night of the Blitz in London. She grew up in Rochester, New York, where she completed a Ph.D. at the University of Rochester. Since 1972, she's lived in Israel, where she teaches and raised a family. The reason I give you the bio before the review is because part of what makes this book interesting is her worldly point of view. It is not encrusted with imagery and symbolism, but it is full of independence, curiosity and commentary with a little of the supernatural thrown in. As it says on the back cover, she "casts a seasoned eye over existence in our particular dangerous, stimulating moment."

The front cover shows a black and white café photograph with one mysterious figure painted orange. To me, that represents Israel, where the terrorist can suddenly appear, but didn't explode in this photo. Hence, "so far, so good" as the cover poem, dated Tel Aviv, 2002, says. Even so, after 9-11-2001, she ran for safety in Ireland, where she couldn't find anything Jewish.

One of the strong themes in this book is that aging women are often still the same inside. In "Friends" she writes "I know women who do not sleep at night from desire/a fire licks at their aging thighs/despite their wizened skin." But in the poem "54" she thinks back to when her immigrant mother was that age: "I remember my mother at my age now-/old and foreign and wholly unequipped/for the revolution of my world./...But here I am at 54/still feeling like a born orphan/wishing my mother at my age/had been able to take me as I was."

I was particularly interested in her narrative of looking for an apartment in Tel Aviv, Israel. It gave me a sense of intimacy of Israeli everyday life: "The façade is always unfathomable,/a united front of blinds closed to the street,/at least at midday when we arrive to weigh/the possibility of living on the inside, to be/part of the scene...Once inside, it is much easier. From each window we can view/a different family, busy with their lives/and ours. Friday afternoon and the mother/of the soldier is hanging his weekend fatigues/...She leans/a bit further over the clothes line than she needs to/so she can see us evaluating the empty bedroom..."

And so on goes "So Far, So Good," which one can probably find on Amazon.com.