

Review

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The Milk Underground by Ronny Someck

"I'm a pajama-Iraqi, my wife's Romanian / And our daughter the thief from Baghdad. / My mother's always boiling the Euphrates and Tigris...." Poet Ronny Someck's family emigrated from Iraq to Israel when he was a child, and for readers unfamiliar with the cultural history of twentieth century Israel, experiencing *The Milk Underground*—newly translated from Hebrew into English by Hana Inbar and Robert Manaster—may feel a bit like walking midway into Part Seven of a long-running conversation. Images are the covers on deep wells of meaning; phrases point to a thousand lines of history. But Someck's voice is so winsome, even whimsical, and his ponderings so universally human, that any reader may linger here and find delight. In the opening poems, Someck speaks as the daddy of a fiercely loved daughter, writing in "Four Pieces of Advice for a Dancing Girl": "Remember that from the moment of your birth, I'm ripping out / Tiles burning beneath your feet." Love often couples with violence; love letters surface alongside dark jokes about the guillotine; divine mischief dots an earthly mess. Someck invokes the God of the Hebrew Bible, the Holy Spirit, Buddha, and Aphrodite, at one point painting God as "the greatest erotic director" who takes pleasure in every created thing, from "whores" to the "five green flames" of cypress trees. And Someck himself seems capable of imagining himself into every kind of human life or earthly object. In one poem, he walks the daily round of an Arabic-speaking student at Tel Aviv University, a student who must carry a transparent backpack to avoid harassment by police. Elsewhere, the poet playfully claims that he himself is "Charlie Chaplin's cane, Marilyn Monroe's / panties, Gary Cooper's pistol." To read this book is to read letters from the core of human life, letters written sometimes in crayon, sometimes in soil-black ink, and sometimes in blood.

—Reviewed by Jen Hinst-White