

**Reader's Companion**  
*for*  
**FOUNTAIN AND FURNACE**  
*by* Hadara Bar-Nadav  
(Tupelo Press, 2015)

Winner of the Sunken Garden Poetry Prize



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## **Introduction and Critical Praise**

Hadara Bar-Nadav's *Fountain and Furnace* is a sensuous exploration of the inner lives of objects, which in turn reveals the inner lives of people who depend on, assign meaning to, and fetishize these things, whether a wineglass, a motel, or a thumb. We fill our days with such matter and clutter, which seem to disappear inside of their particular and often necessary functions. Do we ever really consider the bedroom door and what she has witnessed? Or the fountain with its sculpture of a naked boy standing in a city square? And what of the spine and its relentless support of our cumbersome and thankless heads?

The poems in *Fountain and Furnace* are haunted, heaving, and electrically charged, every inch sentient. Like Francis Ponge, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Neruda, and W. S. Merwin, Bar-Nadav's poetic investigation of objects illuminates the visceral and playful potential of our own lives.



“The hyper-focused intimacy of the exquisite poems in *Fountain and Furnace* shapeshift and plumb beautifully deep. The simple objects of Bar-Nadav's titles become layered with vivid shadows and sad strangeness. From “Thumb” to “Heart,” the author's exactness charges the invisible—the marvelous strata underneath the outward—with fierceness and loss and sensuality. “Caught between the eyelid / and the eye,” the liminal space of these poems is cavernous and echoes with graceful music. “The dead sing.” “Blood is your one true wish.” *Fountain and Furnace* is extraordinary and alive with dark pleasures.”

— Alex Lemon, author of *The Wish Book* and *Happy: A Memoir*

“A bracing pruning of form down to its minimalist essence, a sharp knife trimming away dead branches. The point of view is always shifting, sometimes speaking as the object, sometimes to the object, and sometimes transubstantiating, perhaps to something like the voice of a god.”

— Peter Stitt, final judge for the Sunken Garden Poetry Award, author of *The Perfect Life*, and founding editor of *The Gettysburg Review*

## On Writing “Door” and “Shadow”

### “Door”

“Door” is a poem that was inspired by Guillaume Apollinaire’s “La Porte” (“The Door”), translated by Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap. In his poem, Apollinaire *personifies*, or gives life-like qualities, to the hotel door, which “smiles terribly.” The door suffers emotions such as loss and grief. In the end, the door is cast as a hard-working, unappreciated, forgotten mother-figure who is desperate for adventure and possibly love.

In writing my poem “Door,” I decided to study a hotel door and consider what *she* had witnessed, all the people that had passed through her. I also used personification and wrote the poem in first-person point of view so that the door has a *voice*, though this sense of voice is complicated. The door is trapped (“tongueless,” “mute,” “Hung by two pins”) but is simultaneously powerful. She has the power to cast her “triangle of shadows” and recognizes that all must pass through her and her threshold to the world beyond. She owns the darkness and will make her anger known. I also empowered the door by focusing all description on her rather than describe the fantasy and adventure of other people, as Apollinaire had. In my poem, the door *is* the fantasy that others desire (“lacquered and puckering,” “her gold protuberance”), but she also seeks comfort and criticizes those who do not recognize or respect her (“No one notices my head, no one soothes / my forehead with a cool cloth”). Though at the poem’s end the door is still trapped, she is a powerful and active character who will “unleash” her shadows and haunt all those who do not honor her.

### “Shadow”

The poems in *Fountain and Furnace* feel haunted to me. That is, the objects have their own stories to tell, some of which surprised me, such as the speaker who contemplates the Holocaust in “Oven” and the erotically charged, obsessive speaker in “Nightgown.”

In writing the poem “Shadow,” I was challenging and rebelling against my own project. Instead of simply writing about tangible objects and body parts, I started writing about objects that were difficult to define, ineffable, even invisible, such as shadows and wind. In “Shadow” I considered the literal (“Splashing on the blue wind”—in painting, shadows are often cast in blue) and metaphoric (“One is ever haunted,” “A dark sea, a season / of ghosts”).

It was the line “Daughter of awnings” that became a turning point in the poem, the figure of the girl who shivers “beneath each leaf.” I imagined a daughter-ghost, someone who seemed half alive, half dead, with a self-destructive impulse (who drinks “all the scotch” and “walks into walls”). In the end, this shadowy daughter is “Caught between the eyelid / and the eye,” which suggests that the sleepless speaker has been overtaken by this strange and aggressive shadow that has a tangible presence and force (who “straddles the

bed”). I also, however, wondered about the possibility of the daughter manifesting *inside* of this speaker, much the same way that other objects in this book had: they are all somehow caught between the eyelid and the eye, between the observations of objects and the speakers’ various relationships to the objects being observed.

I do believe objects have a life of their own and can contain the essence of the person who owns or had owned them. I have a collection of beautiful mechanical pencils from my grandfather, who died when my mother was fourteen. When I look at them and hold them, I feel a warmth and kinship to this man I never knew, but who was a brilliant graphic artist. I also have the many, many newspaper articles my grandmother wrote (she died when I was fifteen) and occasionally I wear the heavy silver bracelet she wore daily. When my mother gave the bracelet to me, she said, “Who wears this bracelet wears the sweat of my mother.”

And so, through objects, I hold my family close.

## Writing Prompts and Further Questions

### **Imagery**

Write a poem about an object, specifically an object that you interact with on a daily basis. Each object has its own story to tell, as seen in the poems “Door,” “Fountain,” and “Telephone Pole.” Explore *imagery*, that is, all the potential sensory information (taste, touch, smell, sight, etc.). What does this object look like and sound like? If it had a voice, would it be scratchy, soft, booming, or high-pitched? What does it smell like or taste like (or what would it like to eat)? Try to get as specific and concrete as possible (i.e., the flower-shaped water stain on the ceiling or the cobalt vase that splashes its blue shadow against the wall). Use your answers to write your own object poem.

What kind of imagery is presented in the poem “Telephone Pole”? How does imagery add to your experience of the poem?

How does imagery in the poem “Fountain” help to reveal the sculpture’s inner and outer life?

### **Metaphor**

Write a poem about an object that explores *metaphor*, a comparison between two different entities. In the poem “Ladder,” for example, the ladder is compared to a woman. You might start your own poem by considering how an object might be like a person (i.e., how is a comb like an elegant, elderly man, or how is a glass like a woman, as in the poem “Wineglass”).

Metaphors do not have to be about people, of course, but can compare any two things. The fun of metaphor is bringing these two things into a conversation so that each illuminates some essential aspect of the other.

In the poem “Hand,” to what is the hand being compared? In what ways do these comparisons illuminate various aspects of this hand?

In the poem “Feather,” to what is the feather being compared? How do the metaphors change throughout the poem? The last several stanzas refer to writing (“point / chewed off,” “drafting / volumes,” and “audience.”). In what ways might this poem be an *ars poetica*, that is, a poem about the art of writing?

### **Persona and Personification**

Write a poem from the point of view of a body part, similar to the poems “Spine” and “Hand.” Experiment with *persona*, that is, the speaker of the poem. You might imagine this body part as a speaking, moving character. (*Personification* is a literary device whereby objects take on human qualities.) What function does this body part serve? What

is its specific history? If it told a story about its origin, where and how it was born, what would it say? What secrets does it have? How is it unique and different from other body parts or those belonging to other people (for instance, how is this knee different from all other knees)? Use your answers to write your own persona poem and perhaps start a series of poems about the body.

How would you describe the persona, or speaker, in the poem “Spine”? How is that speaker different from the speakers in “Heart” and “Hand”? What particular lines or phrases give you a sense of who the speaker is and what that speaker is like?

And how can *tone*—the attitude of a speaker toward the subject—help you create an effective persona?

### **Point of View**

Take an existing poem that you would like to revise and change its *point of view*, the perspective from which the poem is written. What happens when the perspective shifts to first person (“I”), second person (“you”), or third person (“she,” “he,” “they”) point of view? What new narratives or images open up? What new lines or stanzas are possible? How might a shift in point of view have implications for the poem’s form? That is, could the poem shift from *couplets* (two-line stanzas) to *quatrains* (four-line stanzas), or from longer lines to shorter lines?

How does first-person point of view affect the poems “Door” and “Nightgown”? What impact does second-person point of view have on the poems “Thumb,” “Motel,” and “Heart”? What about third-person point of view in poems like “Balcony” or “Shadow”? How would the poems change if they were written in a different point of view?

## **Interview**

by Linda Ashok for *Ræd Leaf Poetry—India*  
<http://rlpoetry.org/poet-hadara-bar-nadav/>

*Note: This interview, lightly edited for clarity, originally appeared in an online publication based in India, so some words are spelled according to Commonwealth style.*

**LA: How do you manage being a mother, a professor, and a poet, all together with so much candour and dedication? Does time revolt against your schedule?**

HBN: “Revolt” is probably the right word for my relationship with time right now. I’ve found that it’s particularly challenging, if not impossible, to try and do all three things—mother, professor, poet—at the same time, and, thankfully, I don’t generally have to do so. I’m getting better at dividing up my days into small increments and dedicating certain amounts of time to certain things. A supportive husband and good childcare certainly help, but I also need to be flexible. I’m experimenting with writing late at night again, which I used to do years ago. Once my son is asleep, I can relax a bit and be more present for my creative work.

**LA: Your metaphors are strong and yet they come across with willingness to be interpreted in myriad ways [although] the central thought that you try to establish is immovable. How do you make [this] possible?**

HBN: I like to think of poems as having multiple points of invitation—via metaphors, sound, imagery, form, or other literary elements. When readers feel invited to interpret metaphors in various ways, I think that is a moment of successful engagement with the poem—the reader can step inside the world of the poem and in some ways experience it for him or herself. In a poem like “The Angle of a Landscape” from my book *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*, the blackbirds might mean many things to people, but the poem is grounded in a hospital room where the speaker’s father is dying. Nevertheless, the birds and their eggs can suggest several things as metaphor, such as transformation, rebirth, or freedom, as well as an ironic counterpoint to the failure of the father’s body. The color of the blackbirds might symbolize death for some readers, though I chose the blackbird for its spark of color (the male red-winged blackbird has bright red-orange shoulder patches) amidst its dominant black plumage. The crow seemed a bit too singular, or obvious, in a poem about dying.

**LA: Do you think poetry can be taught? What do you look for in prospective students willing to study poetry with you? How are [your priorities] different from the general expectations of an MFA school?**

HBN: I absolutely believe poetry can be taught. I was a poet who was taught to write and read poetry, and I teach other students to write and read poetry on an almost daily basis.

A teacher can provide vital and practical information about craft and practice, historical reference, a range of perspectives, energy, insight, and a sense of community, among other things.

When reviewing applications for graduate students, I look for imagination, innovation, craft, promise, and a love of language, but decisions for admission to MFA programs are generally made by several committee members (not an individual faculty member) who all bring their own predilections and opinions to the table.

**LA: Do you think your poetry is an escape from your personality and emotions?**

HBN: Yes and no. Yes, because it does feel like I “travel” when I write, though I would not call it an “escape,” which suggests an attempt to avoid or run away. I go somewhere else psychically and imaginatively when I write, and sometimes this feeling is very physical, very palpable, even though I’m simply sitting on my couch. And no, poetry is not an escape because it is often lacerating and difficult, such as the poems in my . . . collection *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*, which is, for the most part, a book of elegies. I don’t see poetry as an escape (“Poetry opens the wound,” said the Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail). If you want to escape, I suggest you find another sport!

**LA: “When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees. When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest.” [How] did [your books] appear to you when you were ready to see them off?**

HBN: *A Glass of Milk to Kiss Goodnight* was an art museum because many of the poems were inspired by or in conversation with visual art. Its subjects include the body and its limitations, as well as issues related to identity, innocence, and loss.

*Show Me Yours* is a chapbook that grew to become the full-length collection *The Frame Called Ruin*. I saw it as a heaving, breathing architecture. Its themes were destruction and creation, desire, and mortality.

*Lullaby (with Exit Sign)* was an endless stack of letters that I was furiously writing to Emily Dickinson and to my father.

**LA: “If a woman is a dream / what the spine dreams of / warm balcony at the top of the tongue. . . .” A warm hug to you after such warm imagery! Where is the place of women in twenty-first century American poetry?**

HBN: Women should be and are at the forefront of poetry along with any other group of people or individuals who are rigorously exploring and interrogating poetry. Of course there is a particular history of literary imbalance, omission, even oppression that is still alive and well (see VIDA’s research on the gender divide in literary publishing), though this imbalance isn’t exclusively reserved for women.

**LA: You have said a questioning “solves no ache” in *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*. At a subliminal level, do you feel being Jewish heightens your response to the violence in the contemporary world?**



HBN: That phrase is from my poem “The World Is Not Conclusion” (a title from Emily Dickinson). In it, the speaker is sleepless, going around and around in her mind, circling her father’s death. She is unable to draw any conclusions that will console her, help her sleep, or bring her father back. It’s a gesture of hopelessness and capitulation.

I’m not sure if my being Jewish or if my being a poet heightens my response to violence in the contemporary world. I can say that the shadow of the Holocaust is still present for my family in a visceral way. I can also say that I am especially horrified by the genocides, mass killings, and persecution of peoples that have continued to take place since the Holocaust, and that I am stunned that such atrocities *against* humanity and *by* humanity repeat themselves again and again and again, though I don’t think one has to be Jewish or a poet to be deeply affected by such events. On occasion, I do write about the Holocaust and feel that current day violence makes the subject of the Holocaust eerily resonant. Poems can cross centuries and continents in a single stanza or line; the past and the present can and do collide.

**LA: Share with us with your favorite poets whose works have contributed tremendously to the shaping up of a typical Hadara Bar-Nadav poem; fierce and willowy, surreal and homebound.**

HBN: For the time being, I have claimed Lucie Brock-Broido and Charles Simic as my literary guideposts. And there are others: Emily Dickinson, Paul Celan, C. D. Wright, Claudia Rankine, Cole Swensen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Mary Ruefle, and Tomaz Salamun. More recently, Gertrude Stein, Francis Ponge, and Pablo Neruda have been keeping me company as I work on a new manuscript about the inner lives of objects. A new chapbook of these poems, *Fountain and Furnace*, will be published by Tupelo Press in 2015.

## **Biographical Note and Links**

**Hadara Bar-Nadav** is the author of *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)* (Saturnalia, 2013), awarded the Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize; *The Frame Called Ruin* (New Issues, 2012), Runner-Up for the Green Rose Prize; and *A Glass of Milk to Kiss Goodnight* (Margie/Intuit House, 2007), awarded the Margie Book Prize. Her chapbook, *Show Me Yours* (Laurel Review/Green Tower Press, 2010), was awarded the Midwest Poets Series Award, and the chapbook *Fountain and Furnace* (Tupelo Press, 2015) won the Sunken Garden Poetry Prize from the Hill-Stead Museum. She is also co-author of the best-selling textbook *Writing Poems* (Longman, now in an 8th edition). Recent awards include fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is currently Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

### **Hadara Bar-Nadav's website:**

<http://hadarabar.com/>

### **POEMS:**

#### **"The Embodied Poem: On Writing 'Palace,'" *Ploughshares***

<http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/the-embodied-poem-on-writing-palace-by-hadura-bar-nadav/>

#### **"Four Reds for Rothko," *Beloit Poetry Journal***

[http://www.bpj.org/poems/barnadav\\_fourreds.html](http://www.bpj.org/poems/barnadav_fourreds.html)

#### **"Lullaby (with Exit Sign)," *Prairie Schooner***

<http://prairieschooner.unl.edu/lullaby-exit-sign>

#### **"My Wife in All Things," *Verse Daily***

<http://www.versedaily.org/2012/mywifeinallthings.shtml>

#### **"Suicide Bombings and Poetry: On the Writing of 'Blur,'" *Poetry Society of America***

[http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/own\\_words/Hadara\\_Bar\\_Nadav/](http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/own_words/Hadara_Bar_Nadav/)

### **READING:**

#### **"Birds of Prey," at the Dodge Poetry Festival, 2010**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nv3Ozz05T-8>

### **REVIEW:**

#### **Review of *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)*, *Kenyon Review Online***

<http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2014-summer/selections/lullaby-with-exit-sign-by-hadara-bar-nadav-738439/>

### **INTERVIEWS:**

#### ***New Letters on the Air*, interview by Angela Elam**

<http://www.newletters.org/on-the-air/Bar-Nadav-2014rr>

#### **Interview by Barbara Varanka**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcQYPbn8gQ>