

KAREN ALKALAY-GUT

from **Between Bombardments**

Editor's Note: The following poems were written by a woman who remained in Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. Her husband, called to military duty, was allowed to come home for an hour a day to shower and eat. One daughter, also called up, was allowed home almost every evening. Karen Alkalay-Gut, remained at home with a daughter, a son, and a dog. Herself the child of Holocaust survivors (her parents escaping to London in time to experience the Blitz), Ms. Alkalay-Gut provided telephone interviews during the Gulf War to a Canadian radio station, and described on-the-scene reactions to the attacks by Iraqi missile forces. As a "noncombatant," she was moved to write a sequence of poems, represented here by a sampling.

V

I think of Rena in Canada,
chewing her nails and screaming
when she recognizes the neighborhood of a hit
in Tel Aviv. Somehow her heart
reaches me, even here, even
hiding under the kitchen table with a quaking dog.

XV

Some differences: we are not an army,
just a bunch of women slapping our babies
into airtight tents, racing to the stores
for masking tape and batteries, wishing—
as we pass a mirror—we didn't look
so much like our mothers

XVI

Tonight we wait for the alarm.
Who wants to get caught in the shower
or the toilet or in the middle of love?
You say, "I'll wash my hair after
the attack" and I decide to put off
lacquering my nails, read
short poems about decadence instead
into the night—And it doesn't come—
And we take off our shoes and lie down
fully clothed, alert, prepared
for the sudden race to the shelter.
Even towards morning while the radio clock
shines out 3 and 4, illuminating
the passing minutes, we wait,
remember the shock of the 7:00 a.m. surprise.

XVII

Oedipus tries to get to
the heart of all wombs
with 400-pound missiles
and we sit here, breathless
waiting for the next
thrust

XXII

Mike and his wife can't stop
fighting. Why does she leave
him every night to sleep
in some distant village?
Why can't she trust her husband
to protect her?

Our phone conversation is interrupted by a siren.
Two hours later, back in place, he calls to gloat:
the missile fell near her village.

XXIII

Instead of his leash
to remind me of his walk
the dog brings my mask.

XXVI

My sanest friend is sure a target
has been painted on her chest,
that the Iraqis with eagle vision
seek her out each night,
each missile aimed at her,
and only standard deviation
keeps her alive.

XXXII

The morning after a three-alarm night
I smell my mother in my bath
that acrid bloody woman-smell
filling the bath and becoming,
suddenly, sensual—a sign
the womb continues its tasks.

XXXIV

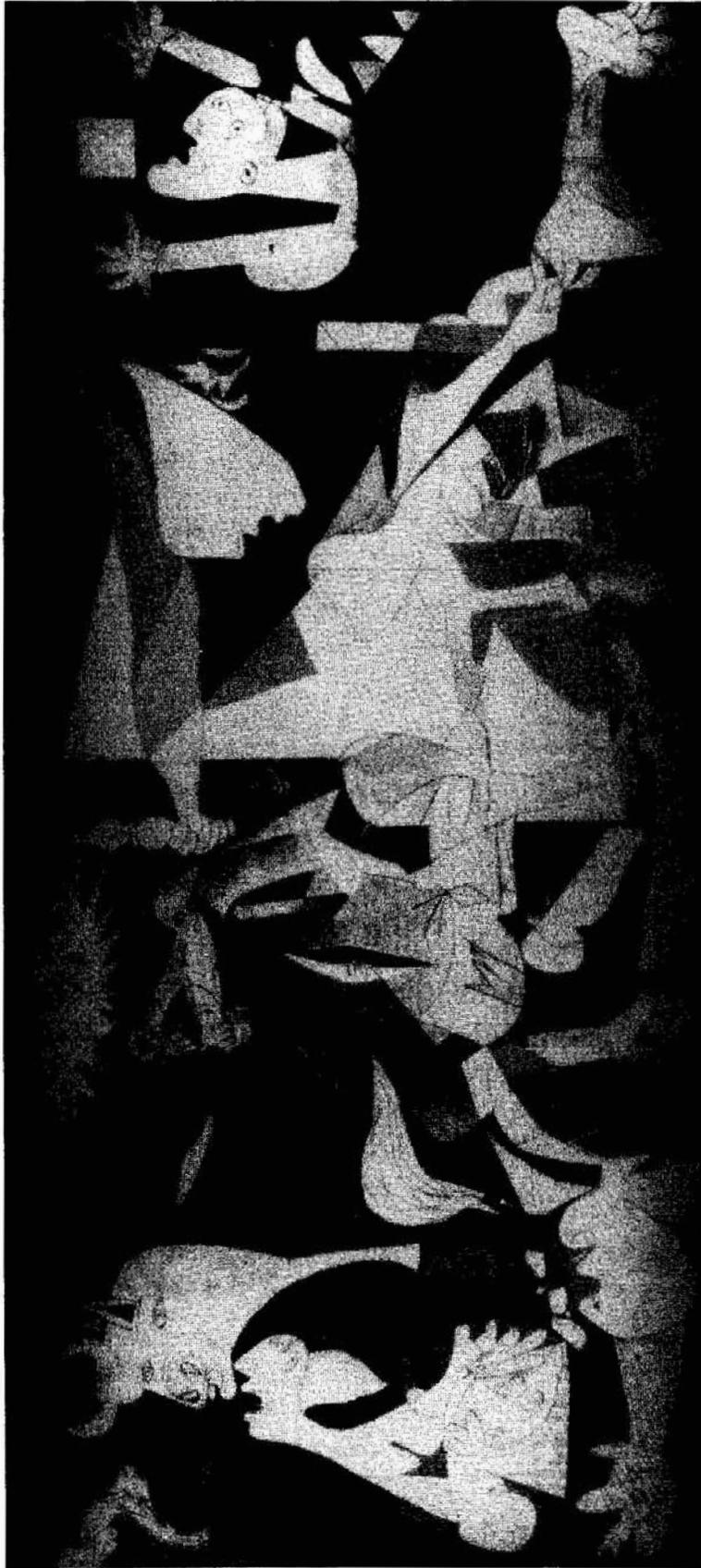
How I need to make plans for the future now!
If I were any younger, I'd be pregnant,
the way my mother was, defiantly, in the Blitz.
Just to believe that something good might emerge
from this
would be sufficient.

XXXVII

Fluttering between war and Purim,
the little fairy princess watches
the latest SCUD victims evacuated
from the Army compound in Riyadh,
takes both her masks, waves
her magic wand, and goes off
to school.

XXXIX

So we begin to plan
our adult Purim costumes
as if back into the swing of things.
Diane paints formulas on her face
to parade with me down the street
as a chemical warhead, and I can't think
of how to conceal what I have become
even though I expect to drink
until I can't distinguish



© 1992 ARS, N.Y. / SPADEM, Paris
ART RESOURCE, N.Y.