
Rippin

Aharon Shabtai, translated by Peter Cole

Biography

AHARON SHABTAI is one of the leading poets in Israel today. After studying Greek and philosophy at the Hebrew University, the Sorbonne, and Cambridge, he went on to teach Theater Studies in Jerusalem. He is widely regarded as the foremost Hebrew translator of Greek drama. He is also the author of some sixteen books of poetry, most recently *Artzenu* (Our Land). Two book-length selections of his work have appeared in English translations by Peter Cole: *Love & Selected Poems*, (Sheep Meadow Press, 1997), and *J'Accuse* (New Directions, 2003), a collection of his recent political poetry.

PETER COLE has published two collections of poetry, *Rift and Hymns & Qualms*, and several volumes of translations from medieval and contemporary Hebrew, and Arabic. He has received numerous awards for his work, including fellowships from the NEA, the NEH, the Guggenheim Foundation, and—for his *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid*—the MLA Translation Award. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* received the TLS Hebrew Translation Prize. He lives in Jerusalem.

These creatures in helmets and khakis,
I think to myself, aren't Jews,

in the truest sense of the word. A Jew
doesn't dress himself up with a weapon like jewelry,

doesn't believe in the barrel of a gun aimed at a target,
but in the thumb of the child who was shot at—

in the house through which he comes and goes,
not in the charge that blows it apart.

The coarse soul and iron fist
he scorns by nature.

He lifts his eyes not to the officer, or the soldier
with his hand on the trigger—but to justice,

and he cries out for compassion.
Therefore he won't steal land from its people

and will not starve them in camps.
The voice calling for expulsion

is heard from the hoarse throat of the oppressor—
a sure sign that the Jew has entered a foreign country

and, like Umberto Saba, gone into hiding within his own city.
Because of voices like these, father,

at age sixteen, with your family, you fled Rippin;
now here in Rippin is your son.

The title is pronounced "riPEEN." This poem was first published in *The Manhattan Review* and is reprinted here by permission of the translator and author.