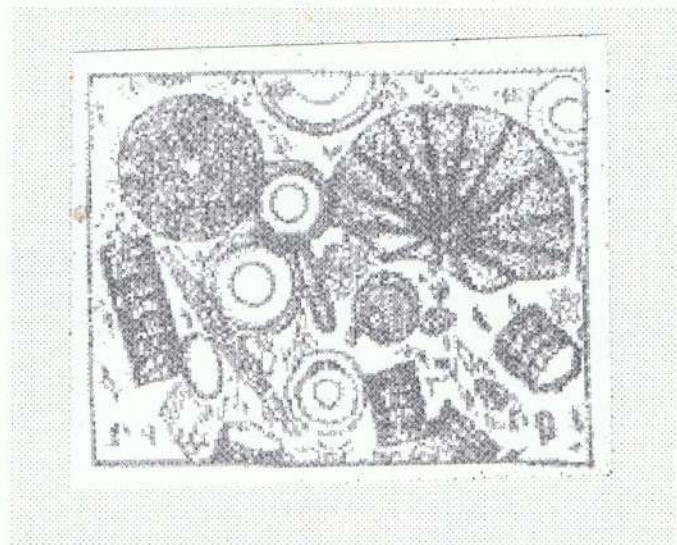


LITANY



Rachel Tzvia Back

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“so many voices ... silences” from Gustaf Sobin’s “Lineage” in *Voyaging Portraits* (New Directions, 1988).

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For Ima and Aba

Litany (I)

“ ... so many voices, there”

but not one loud enough to hear (close the door
quietly, sound travels) as more than motion:

a train passing (we'll wait here until there is
better reason to leave) or the bells' ringing

carried by rain across a city (the year's first
flooding in the flat lands) unhinged and always

preparing itself (they dressed in white for both
prayer and death) for the next siege (caves,

under the poppy fields)

while we, you and I, have been preparing ourselves
for speech (always a light on at the gate) since

first we fell silent. Not knowing what will heal
(trapped in byways, between endings) or what will

name (electrical current cut) us in the blackouts,
we look for traces in the dark of what has been

said (wear no leather when you are in mourning)
though only the chiming of the bells from the empty

church can cross the city.

He could not hear us, as children, when we came
(carry the candlesticks, wrap them in white linen)

to say goodbye before leaving the country, and he
(to heal: first name the disease) was yellow from

lung cancer and would be dead long before, and if,
we returned (echoing through the damp passageways

between caves: caverns, storage wells and dark
sanctuaries. small chambers with sloping stairs),

not tied to this or any other continent.

An illusion of belonging (we come from a long
line of women who hated themselves) and no other

longing (unhinged) but for order in the voices
that storm (the last train left weeks ago) -

we've been away longer than those markers (don't
forget the hour of candlelighting) show, languages

forgotten (in secret closets, in musty cellars)
though a memory of the source, somewhere between

heart and throat, remains.

The coffin was put on the next plane (remember her
long years of depression, hands shaking) as he had

wanted to be buried in holy dirt (at home) and when
the van pulled into the courtyard (an equidistance

between two continents), the only sound was our
old aunt (to heal: first name the disease) wailing,

running alongside the van as it slowed (among
blackcoated strangers) and stopped, she was wailing

(stone and black strokes)

and screaming at her dead brother who had never returned. She, with all the women (his body wrapped

in white, lighter than hollow bones) not allowed to go to the cemetery, but the rabbi ripped her black

blouse across its worn collar (tear your clothes in mourning, sit seven days) and she wouldn't stop

wailing. This isn't about travel: only in which strange city (Thessaloniki, Palmyra) did we, you

and I, first fall silent?

Voices from the east, (the tracks are rusted and no longer used) where meaning lies in the inflection

of the silence (seeds dried in the sun), in the strange accents we speak (wait for the third star

before you light fire) and never fully recognize (to heal: first name the disease) as our own

(sins committed with words) - only the motion of sound (her dry tongue after the shock treatment)

am I sure of.

As to the crowded litanies (she sewed snaps on half
made skirts, dime a dozen) in the places of prayer

and in the markets, I can only record: crossroads,
train whistles, letters opened in public places,

the push (wear white, no leather) of so many voices
there, but not one clear enough to hear (across

the river in Petra), so much silence in that dark
space (beside the red rock) between desire and

dying and (what will name us)

Litany (II)

“So many voices, there,
vie for the
voice...”

And leave you
silent.

Neither sand nor prayer.

I am sorry:

as daughter
understanding less

what desire *disappointed*
will not loosen

its hold, or let
sleep. 5 a.m.:

you are walking around the lake.

*Come back later and tell us
of the heron shrieking,
her wings weighted with ice.*

What no one else saw.

How you stowed away
in the dark hull of a boat
smuggling arms into Palestine.

Now only language will not travel,
across similar borders,
in black, in kefeyiah,

so you try to translate the memory.

Young man in uniform,
on the shores of a new Babel
among survivors who knew
no speech

would do

and fell silent.

Another walled city in ruins.

Not sand, not prayer.

At the British mental hospital
in Tiberias where stationed,

the mad from shellshock

screamed at night down
the green corridors, called
into the empty streets.

You walked by the water
after blackout
that jasmine

*by the rare iron gate
swinging wild across
another night.*

Always in between

countries, across oceans.

En route and arriving

at the airport

as the gate closes:

coming back to us

with ancient atlases and miniature

globes for the boys,

large dolls for the girls: we

wanted you not to leave

us behind,

were not trained for travel.

your three dark daughters

blue-eyed and green,

three solemn daughters crying.

So I cannot ask

between sand and prayer

what have you wanted,
and from whom.

In some foreign city, your heart
straying and you

collapsed by the baggage check,
black briefcase in hand.

Across an ocean and over
a phone line
black water

storming over the deep laid wire.

Later you told us you said psalms
through the night
before surgery *heard*

your dead parents praying.

I have seen you

empty your pockets
into the sea, and believe

with crumbs and lint, your sins
would sink.

Now you ask:
in the Book of Life
or Book of Death?
so many voices,

*here, come back,
your dead parents praying.*

You listen, not of one
mind, to a new moon

*three solemn daughters all in green
in three separate cities crying*

and your *new* heart *storming*

over the deep laid wire.

Litany (III)

“so many voices, there,
vie for the
voice, crowd sound with the white
pressure of
their
silence.”

1.

The scar: a bare and rocky place
*on a mountain side, or some other
steep slope.*

Where the body was divided, opened
*no longer at peace under the one
silent sky.*

What would grow *something*
on a ridge.

2.

Yisrael left Sarah alone with two children
and still refused to give her the "get"
*how the body was deserted, was bare
and would not open*

that would have freed her to remarry.
Sarah alone in her parents' house,
*a silent place that would not open
again to another*

doing the books for the rich cousins,
dying early.

Her daughter, my mother, once sent us
alone to meet Yisrael, small man
*absence of love on a steep slope, in
a rocky place*

with round glasses, in a high domed room.
Later, she kept one folded black notice
*the land yellow and sitting low
against the sky*

but would not sit the seven days
of mourning for his death.

3.

Five children of this lineage. I am one
*or another steep slope, a bare and
rocky place.*

The scar: what protects, what remains
under the one smoke coloured sky.

Litany (IV)

*As the tale is told
too much was known.*

*So, just before birth
the last angel pressed a finger
across our lips, and said: "Shh...*

*don't tell." See the mark? There,
that soft hollow over your mouth.*