What Use Is Poetry,
The Poet Is Asking
Also by Rachel Tzvia Back

POETRY
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TRANSLATIONS
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With an Iron Pen: Twenty Years of Hebrew Protest Poetry
Night, Morning: Select Poems of Hamutal Bar Yosef
Lea Goldberg: Selected Poetry & Drama

LITERARY CRITICISM
Led by Language: The Poetry & Poetics of Susan Howe
What Use Is Poetry, The Poet Is Asking

Rachel Tzvia Back

Shearsman Books
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I

What Use
SAMPLER
WHAT USE IS POETRY, THE POET IS ASKING

I
What use is poetry, the poet is asking
of the evening news
where the experts

of military affairs have been assembled,
the political analysts and politicians
amassed, ex-generals

of measured pace and phrase all
called to the ideological front,
the starched and uniformed delivered

as fact, in lieu of truth, expert and
ex-general of the demarcated
worlds, barbed-wire words

hurled across the room, the anchor
confidently moored
with her earnest nod-nodding of head

stating stately readiness
for next round of certain warfare
around the news table.
There were troops moving south
under rocket-lacerated skies, arced anger and
armoured vehicles fully unarmed by fire,

there were boys pulling other boys from
the wreckage and flames, from the tunnels or into tunnels
beneath it all, an underworld amazed

while whole buildings collapsed from above,
bombed complete to the ground, perfect aim at
entire worlds behind walls, all destroyed, until

the buried alive and the buried dead the buried and the
broken are all one in the hearts darkest undertow so
what use is poetry, the poet

wants to know.

II
They whispered  peace  in the dark corridors, as though
it were a code.

With gun thrust into his arms first time, he saluted
as trained, and shouted back

I swear to uphold
but the soldier behind him in formation heard

*green gold*

*from out of the fire’s eye and glow*

in the rhythm of

his marching boots.

When the speakers blared *red alert red alert*

across the desert base,

he saw the furred

and antlered faces

at the horizon, waiting

in watchful patience.

In the barracks at night they listened for

*home*  as one listens

for bells that toll

only in foreign cities

or for snow

falling on the already fallen

*snow*  in remotest hills

in contented and constant

quietude.
III

The mother who sent her son
To war, allowed her son to go
To war, let the years unfold

until

Her son could not avoid going
To war –

The mother
Who didn’t stop her son
From going
To war –

Was called before the High Court
Of mothers held on full moon nights
At undisclosed Celestial sites, Stars of the Light
Not yet evident on earth the only ones
In attendance.

There they argued her case in silver-tinged
Syntax, crystalline intonations, verbed
Asterisms composed wholly from the black holes
Of her heart

From when he first left,
When he first called, when he
Wept over the dark nighttime as though
Distance from life’s imagined places to frontline  
Frenzy greater than to remotest planet in space, and  

Distance from the child’s home to flare-lit fear no more  
Than the tug of a unravelling  
Cord.

The mother who sent her son to war, didn’t  
Stop her son from going to war,  
Was found to be  
Guilty.

She, and the High Court, found her  
There where lost and forever  
Guilty.

IV
Meanwhile, hating Crete, and his long exile, filled with a desire  
to stand on his native soil, the father applied his thought to new  

invention, and altered the natural order of things. He laid down lines  
of feathers, beginning with the smallest, following the shorter with longer  

ones, so that you might think they had grown like that, on a slant.  
Then he fastened the feathers together with thread at the middle,
and bees-wax at the base, then flexed each one into a gentle curve, so that they seemed like real bird’s wings. His son stood beside him, and not realising that he was handling what would be his peril, caught laughingly at the downy feathers that blew in the passing breeze, and softened the yellow bees-wax with his thumb, in his play hindering his father’s marvellous work. When last touches were put to what he had begun, the father balanced his own body between the two wings and hovered there in the moving air. He instructed the boy as well, laying down the rules of flight, as he fitted the newly created wings on the boy’s shoulders. While he worked and issued his warnings, the ageing man’s cheeks were wet with tears, and his hands trembled. No heat or sun, no delight of blue borne flight. He was carried aloft in the metal belly of the roaring beast, unleashed into the sky. His arms were bare.

His chest was weighted with vest and pack and gun. He rode the air until they landed in storming dust, into the bellowing battle. Even as his mouth cried his father’s name, he wrapped bandages around the wounded, staunched bleeding, placed morphine in ravaged mouths of pain. The sky was orphaned of birds; there were no feathers, not on land or waves. Imagined wing-span of the fallen.
V

There were the tales being woven
of others’ lives, long narratives
unfolding, crafted with devotion.

She had been told, “This is the contract
you make: you agree to believe,
you agree to care.” But she

was already otherwhere: what pretend
could hold through despair. Old
vows were now disavowed.

Shelves weighted with books, second-hand
stores sought in strange cities, her
ceaseless travelling

through storied worlds created
as though just for her, for she had agreed
to believe –

That was over now.
Henceforth the heart would disallow all tales
that weren’t true.
VI
He was only three years old.
He was four and soon to turn five.
He already knew most of the letters.

He was first born, devoted to the baby sister.
He was second born, always the younger brother.

He was killed in the evening at play in the street.
He was killed in the afternoon in the home’s shuttered peace.

The domed play tent, yellow and red, stood undisturbed also after.

In the photo, he is all little boy pride standing tall beside the colourful tower he’s built, slender and so serious.

In the photo, bundled in small denim coat, he sits by the sea, he is smiling, it must be a first evening breeze.

It was mortar fire. It was a missile.
It was or it wasn’t pre-emptive, was or wasn’t retaliatory.
The little-boy body wrapped in shrouds
is now
the single certainty.

(for Sahir Abu Namous and Daniel Tragerman, in memory)

VII

It was a sea of roaring lions, he
had said, their soft white-padded feet
are pawing at the wind.

It was a sea of small feathered things, see how they spread
their light-boned wings
not to take flight, she had offered,
but for the simple delight
of hovering on air,

over water, then touching back
down on dark and quiet
waves.

It was a sea they hadn’t seen, it was
possessed, delineated green
depths, death-silent
swimmers with explosives, barricaded
waves, grey vessels patrolling
water and wind.

It was a sea of mortar fire fired –
mistakenly, intentionally – it was
that sea, so

what use
is poetry

the poet keeps asking.