

# SAMPLER

*What Use Is Poetry,  
The Poet Is Asking*

Also by Rachel Tzvia Back

POETRY

*A Messenger Comes (Elegies)*

*On Ruins & Return: The Buffalo Poems 1999-2005*

*Azimuth*

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I

*What Use*

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## 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.

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## 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 nightline 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.

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#### 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 elsewhere: 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.

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