Chrysalis in the Desert
Also by Wendy Saloman:

Syllables and Leaves
Wendy Saloman

Chrysalis in the Desert

Shearsman Books
Exeter
In memory of my parents
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OF BEGINNINGS—

Words floating through white spaces of time
descending—to the place where fear hides
ash-words from which the phoenix may rise
words fished from waters—
rough as those that rocked the Ark
words binding sea and sky with ephemeral promises
words shaming crimes—defending the violated
words seeking healing of an angel
rose-coloured words offered to the dead
marmoreal words hewn by love
words weathered on stone
words metamorphosing on the winds
words of exile riding on nostalgia
weightless words shining as the chrysalis in the desert
words thrown to stars questioning God and the universe:
and where do they come from, these words
if not from the silence before a poem is born.
RIVERS AND REVENANTS

“only two nightingales didn’t know Yiddish”
Vytautas Bložė

1

Let me dig into a hush of this riverland
fill lacuna
with noise of the past
—speak of the dwelling-up names

amid spruce and pine
let birdsong be testament

and there in the dust
—where memory of Vytautas
offering migrants a measure of a land
long ago passed
over water gilded by autumn
let me enter a language of gods
—hear purity of sound
in libations to Žemyna
and in sanctification by a chazan of the One:

let skies, charged
by fragments of myths
—by script of wild geese
over fields and marshes
recollect a winter light
its dark intelligence
glowing between knots of otherness
between word and act
between amen and shadow.
—And slowly flows the Dabikinė
taking history
to mock eternity of the sea—
changing winds
blow music of tufted seeds across it
still flies the crane
still hovers a thrush nightingale

—with promises of the earth
it winds
through meadow, birch wood
where once there was a farmstead
where once there was the word—Jew

at the water’s edge I imagine you
hearing the word—your name in the word
and the psalms echoing through grasses

—summering-out it flows
as if in remembrance
of drifting scents of sabbaths
freshly baked challah, lit candles, breath of kiddush
while sistering trees—in effulgence
reflect to infinity—

what if there had been—no budding May Laws
no flower of poverty
no journey from east to west?

yes—the river would go on
to leaf-song, hymn of reeds, evening shadows of hatreds
and we—in time
between pine trees you praised
and the silence of old gods you refuted
would belong in a grief-flow of the murdered.

3

—There was otherness
there was snow
there was the ice-flow down-river
and thousandfold
there were pine-needles
bitten into
by insult in the air—
but here
where field empties into field
and earth smells of nostalgia
festive laughter
from Purim to Chanukah
once mingled
with joy of Kovno’s myths—
a burden of separateness
carried weightless by the air
while each blade of grass
vulnerable in the wind
hummed upward
to the sanctity of the Unnameable.
Under which constellation
did you speak your last to the river you loved—
in what dark solace
did the lamp of your name glimmer?
In field and forest—
where hawk hunts the song of thrush
you hid a Jew’s sorrow
in stone, pine-needles, heartwood of oak
—of boyhood
you hid memories in the reeds at night
but the cold of a dawn held clarity
—in both hands
you took light from your dream of Elijah
to journey to new river, new land.

And when the ash of Avaslan
gathered upward with dust
and with breath of a stork forced from its nest
some said a star looked on
—held a dialogue with the earth.

To address the river, as you did
seek exchange—
a moment of history for a currency of myth
here where autumn looks to eternity
to speak out amid grasses
of absence as presence—
a path untrodden for years by foot of a Litvak

to hear in the voices of forests
echoes of Cain
and all those conspiracies
still interrogated by the moon

to walk in remembrance of words forgotten

is to reclaim the dead, silences, leaf-fall—
the angel of the plough— unwinged by poverty

is to rename the light—
resonant once with the letters of your God.

6

Quiet the slow flow, the dark angel
the invisible letters of *thou shalt not kill*
quiet all scars on the roughland of history—
but we, the listening ones
recognise the pulse of a psalm
fragment of prayer, quiver of pines
—an hour of terror looking backward to God

with our hearing-souls
we take from earth's memory
dislocated song—
throat-up pure syllables
—voice across the river an offering to the massacred.
Winged on a ray of light
over a thread of rained-on river
over a script of copper leaf
a crow brings speech back from the dead
—it tells of a dream of fig and vine
and clod of earth— the homecoming
—of a butterfly hovering
over a word, a rose, a glow
over an archaic promise
for a land burnished over by myth.

Word— our word
grown on an angel’s wing

(and Jacob humbled and arrogant
after his midnight struggle).

Once prince amid words.
Once lamented by the prophets.

Then came snow over the word
and over centuries of footsteps—
and o the whiteness of piety
and song of yearning covering the earth.

The rose in the word
the yes and the no—
the will and the willed-for
flowering—
dividing—
thorns dispossessing
where once petals were dispossessed.

Word— and a bee
taking from a wound of the word
—bittering . . .

9

Shall I beneath this cinnamon sky
near to dusk
give ear to the enigma of ancestral roots
here by the river
where the past in its quiet lies inert:
shall I assume the wind haunts reeds
while waiting
for an instrument of remembrance:
and shall I walk
through leafage of years
commit my voice
with chirruping birds
to inexhaustible song
and ephemeral ownership—
for we are
are we not
guests on this earth
tuned by threads of light
on a moment of narrative?
Imagine, heavenward
praise for an angel wrestling with a river god
—praise of the forests
and summer’s scent
of strawberries in the undergrowth
rising to morning cumulus:
—imagine birds in full throat
chorusing
above cadences of Yiddish . . .
—a dance, an orchard
a fiddler praising a bride with music
as if she were the Shulammite:
imagine coming to market
a Jew— with fruits of the earth
praise blossoming into a poem
casting seeds
numerous as the dead:
imagine breath of faith
dazzling
when barks of yellowing birches
are utterance of dusk:
—then speak of memory
grown over by burdock
—murmurings of the Talmud
travelling graveward— here
in a landscape of rivers and revenants.