

*Chrysalis in the Desert*

*Also by Wendy Saloman:*

**Syllables and Leaves**

WENDY SALOMAN

**Chrysalis in the Desert**

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*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 Dabikine  
 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.

4

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.

5

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.

7

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.

8

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  
—bitting . . .

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 Shulammitte:  
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.