

*A selection from*

*“running <sup>לָרַץ</sup> and <sup>לָשׁוּב</sup> returning”*  
*32 poems to carry the Voice*

*by Lisa Grunberger*

*English text and ‘abstract’ Hebrew words*  
*hand-calligraphed by Izzy Pludwinski of Jerusalem*

## PROMISE

Abraham looked from north to south to east to west,  
his neck tired from looking at a sky with seeded stars.  
He tried to recruit his son to count with him,  
but he was busy underneath a car, his face dirty.  
Come wife, come count with me, for the stars  
are like you, new and old my bride, come count.  
But she too had grown tired of waiting.  
She had buried one boy in the last war  
that changed nothing but the cost of bread.  
Come to bed Abraham, I will heat the oil  
to massage your stiff neck. But Abraham  
continued to count stars, and sometimes  
swore he heard them answer in a future tense.  
On declining days, he could hear the screams  
come from as if under the ground, and then  
he counted with ligation, as if the counting  
itself was a gift of who and what, and he and why.



## JONAH'S PRIMEVAL LONGING

Home is near.  
I, in the desert, amongst the dancing cacti

try to sleep  
but it is no use,  
the stars carouse all night,  
the sky is a whale of murderous refuge.

I went down to the river  
in my dream  
and begged to die.

When I awoke  
I was covered in goat's hair.  
I spit on the ground  
and the spit was gone.

sucked up. I vomited  
cities, lovers, birds, and worms.

where my right hand was, lay my left,  
where my left hand lived, lay my sight.

I tried to grow wings,  
but it was no use.  
I was alone.



## REBEKAH: LAMAH ZEH ANOKHI?

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I do not know the path of the wind  
or the full content of the womb.  
nor the actions of God.  
I shall go: I have gone.

where he sees camels,  
I see him and fall, dizzy, I see.  
I was shaped in a hidden place.

I cover myself,  
ask, why I, why this  
inside double-kick, these  
thousands of myriads invading me?

why this blessing, that curse?  
This hidden desire stirred by camel dust?  
why this flesh of my flesh,

already something else?  
This struggle, within.  
This slippery womb-toil, births  
me, into reality -- crib, cry.

and milk. Rain is shadow  
broken. They will call me,  
I will break apart the world.

I am become inside.  
sky grows within me.  
why does the hair curl at the nape?  
why be born at all?

one death, and all the while,  
it was the other death, over there,  
where the shadow dare not tread.

For a long time, she resisted,  
why his dream,  
his nation, his life,  
these stars?



## JACOB'S PERSONAL SUNSET

allows a darkness to fall.  
shrunken earth  
beneath wandering feet, he collides  
with the place: Do not beseech me.

Like a man who crashes into his friend  
who is also moving toward him.  
The place to which he is traveling  
is traveling toward him.  
The sudden sunset births the prayer in darkness.

Altar, wood, bound limbs, a knife, an angel's  
cry - what have I passed over? Take your  
father's stones as pillow and dream what you have passed.

Angels moving up, Jacob, moving down, Esau,  
a ladder, Jacob.  
heaven, Esau, earth, Jacob. You have  
traveled far and still do not know.





## SHE GIVES THANKS TO CHILDREN IN THE PARK

Thank apples for snakes.  
thank snakes for knowledge.

Thank mirror for distortion.  
thank frame for preservation.

I thought I would keep you,  
but you fell apart, flew away.

I will not bind myself to joy  
but to Isaac's laughter,  
swinging his clasped legs  
around the branch of his favorite tree.

I will not blind myself  
to the flying kisses he casts,  
into the dark future of a girl

standing by a tunnel,  
tattooed with graffiti they can not yet read,  
where the moonlight hides within  
each inked letter still wet with shame

I will not wait for the angel either,  
but grow my own wings,  
stutter away into the appled sun.

REBE

## WHENEVER IT IS WRITTEN

whenever it is written, ein la - there is not - there essentially is. Bereshit Rabbah 36:21

I  
you are my sunshine, my only sunshine  
my mother sang to me  
in a room with a pink shag rug  
a Mickey Mouse night light,  
white curtains that would turn yellow.

outside it snowed.  
outside it rained.  
outside it sunned.  
my head became heavy in her arms.

when she told me  
I kicked a hole through the wall  
in the bathroom with the porcelain sink.  
The towels covered it  
until they too turned old and faded.

I  
in synagogue when they opened the curtains,  
took out the Torah from its hidden place,  
and processed it around the room,  
she kissed the spine of her sefer,  
grazed it first upon my head,  
her soft arm reached into the aisle,  
forward and backward.

her voice rose from her hands  
that held open the book  
as she once held my head  
and sang to me.

I am jealous of nothing,  
a genetic island  
only in a world without imagination.

3.

Tell me  
I was switched at birth.

and Darwin's monkeys  
are winged angels made of clay

eye did not know  
and sarah didn't laugh  
a muted laugh that echoes  
through the yellowed curtains

Tell me blood runs through me  
the color of oedipus' eyes.  
the laughter of rams, train cars,  
oma's screams, coral freckles, varicose veins

Tell me my father was a protestant banker  
not a clockmaker from wien with the eyes of a dove.

I would hear her crooked tone-deaf voice  
I would touch her moving lips with my sleepy eyes

in the modest room  
on top of the garage  
the damp room  
that smelled of gas and perfume.

This is a country for old women  
with endlessly thirsty loins and endless lashes  
that curl up to heaven like the Torah scrolls  
recolling in on themselves in burning Poland.

Doesn't every room smell of something foreign and familiar?  
Doesn't every room bear a song that passes and remains passing?

4.

every room is filled with the absent mother.  
go build an alibi that binds memory to imagination.  
death to laughter, barrenness to fertility.

Go sew some towels that hang over absence.  
The land that I shall show you is a glut of stars.

سورة

## GARDEN

where are you, he said, you're going too fast.  
she covered her face.

when he closed his eyes he wandered  
into her arms. she held him still as a dove.

Then they found themselves naked,  
and lost their names playing hide and seek.

she hid behind a sweet potato.  
he turned it into an apple.

There was no middle to meet in.  
he walked slowly, she walked fast.

she said i want to meet your parents.  
i have no parents he said.

i will always be one who is eaten he said.  
he said i want to take you to paris

First prepare the ground she said.  
she said i tend to confuse fantasy and desire.

he said i tend to remember the future and imagine the past.  
she said come closer, soon the sun will be taken.

i wonder what i will say, he said, and his feet followed  
walking from one place to another

until there was little choice but to arrive.  
i am hungry he stuttered.

here i am she said,  
so am i, so am i.





## NAMING

*if i could call you love  
in every language, every dialect*

*of every language, i would.  
But it would go on and on,*

*endlessly, every time someone  
greeted you hello, a string of love*

*without end, not even the poets  
could survive, and love would ruin you.*

天  
下  
無  
雙

## SECULAR JEWS

The secular Jews sang the loudest in the streets they called by numbers for they had long ago rejected names. They called man 1 and woman 2 house 3 and tree 4 they called child 5 and sky 6 and when it rained they called the rain rest and sat under rest until 8 the sun rose and 9 their lips opened and 10 their hands turned up like leaves towards the 11 moon and when the plane 12 landed on the narrow strip they cried 13, tears of joy, for they were being saved from those who chose to see them 14, as nothing but Jews, Yehudim, rootless cosmopolitans, homeless wanderers, shylocks 15 with sidelocks 16 and when they ascended to the heavens 17 after fastening their seat belts after rejecting even wonder as a substitute for faith they observed the rabbis 18 pray 19 before they ate and they looked down at the land they were forced to leave and they touched their hooked noses 20 their hearts 21 and like babies like monkeys they mouthed the words the children mouthed as they climbed and climbed they sang Shema 22 they sang Echad 23 they sang Ye'ahavta 24 and when, after a thousand years they landed on new soil they bent their tired bodies and kissed 25 the soil and their tears mixed with dirt 26 so the secular Jews sowed seeds of mercy, became trees of life, wrestled their way back to a wilderness with no trace



## THE ARRIVAL OF THE STARS

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The stars arrive but they are too small.  
And they need light to glow light.  
A flashlight is recommended.

we peel them off one by one.  
it takes time. you stand on a desk,  
1 below you. we begin. 1 apply light

to a star and 1 hand it to you.  
There is no darkness yet  
and it cannot be rushed.

we wait until dusk arrives  
to see our day's work.  
stars scatter the ceiling

we have come to call heaven.  
soon she will suckle my breast.

a star of milk.  
one day we will give each small star  
a story, we will fatten them up.

give flesh to light, however small.  
This is what we do, we wait for the stars  
to arrive and we look.

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## IF I LIVED IN JERUSALEM

if i lived in Jerusalem  
i would turn my body inside out  
i'd hear the muezzin sing and scribble  
something sweet inside my gold-leafed notebook,  
half a falafel sandwich at my sandaled feet.

i would cop a feel off a soldier's gun  
peaking through his uniform.  
if i lived in Jerusalem  
history would flow through me.  
i would wrestle with god in the flesh,  
get her in a head lock,  
tumble down a hill  
as tourists shot digital photos of this minor war.  
if i lived in Jerusalem  
my fame would stretch like a woman's womb  
from the Negev to Haifa.

i'd walk the land like Whitman walked Brooklyn.  
Are there bridges in Jerusalem? i'd walk those too.  
i'd find new words for old things:  
war, sun, mountain, man.

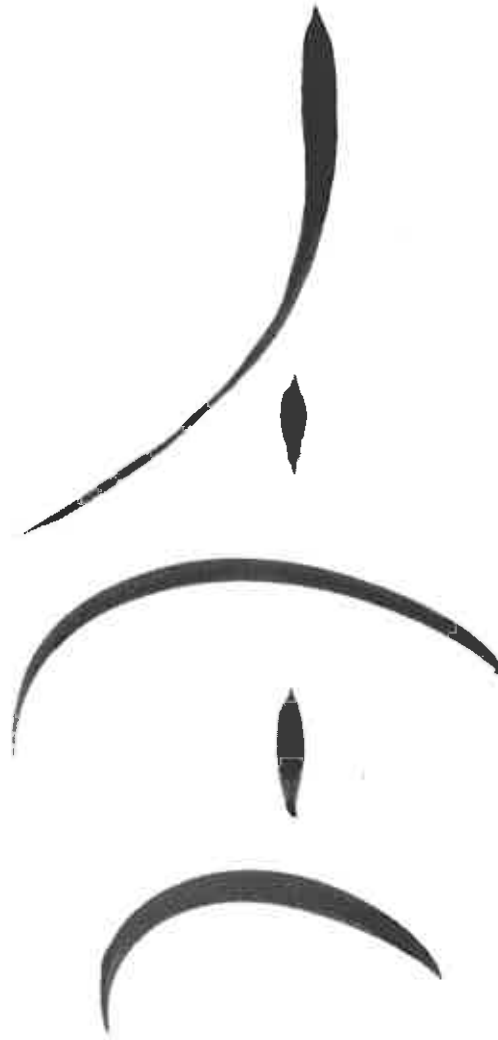
if i lived in Jerusalem  
i'd rub my body with oil  
and roll in rooster feathers and ram's hair  
i'd testify against myself and unbury  
my son again and again with dirty claws.  
i'd sew a dress out of the paper place-mats  
covered with crossword puzzles intended to distract  
restless children and lovers weary from sex and war.

if i lived in Jerusalem i'd infect the world  
with my twin desire for peace and home.  
i'd write a thousand poems  
about wanting to be left alone.  
if i lived in Jerusalem  
i'd dream of Argentina, Paris and Rome.

i'd dream of the statue of Liberty  
cloaked in a veil, her charcoal gaze  
lowered towards the groundling sea.  
i would wake with a mouthful of salt  
my eyes stony stars  
ancient shrapnel from the wailing wall.

if i lived in Jerusalem  
i'd put Abraham's knife  
to my own throat,  
kidnap a single goat  
so the seder would cycle  
and cycle with no end  
of God or Angel or coffee or tea  
until eliyahu ha-navi's wine cup never emptied  
until the afikomen's secret was forgotten  
until the children began not to care about its hiding spot  
until the house filled again with chametz  
and the shabbat challahs unbraided themselves  
inside the intestines becoming flour and water and  
yeast again i would become a wooden ornament  
hanging from a nail inside a house  
that does not separate  
this from that





## HOW TO TELL A STORY

You could start at the beginning  
with separation. You could  
pull out a man from a woman.  
You could plant a tree and stir.  
\* or you could start with emptiness.  
A voice. Add form. Letters.  
Paint them thick with black ink.  
You could start with loneliness. And  
loss. Then play with seeds and rain.  
chisel desire to the bone.  
Bury it in a mountain of snow.  
wait a thousand years. Begin  
to dig until you see a crack of light.

