

DARK ILLUMINATIONS

Tuvia Ruebner. *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems*, translated and introduced by Rachel Tzvia Back. Hebrew Union College Press / University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.

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Of the generation of Israeli poets that includes Abba Kovner (1918-87), Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), T. Carmi (1925-94), and Dan Pagis (1930-86), only Tuvia Ruebner remains; and among these extraordinary writers, Ruebner is the least known, at least in the United States. With the publication of *In the Illuminated Dark*, ably translated and introduced by Rachel Tzvia Back, that will presumably change. Ruebner's story is a remarkable and an especially tragic one. Born in Slovakia in 1924, he alone of his family was able to leave for Palestine in 1941; his father, mother, and younger sister would be murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Ruebner married his first wife, a fellow Slovakian émigré, in 1944. In 1949, a few months after their daughter was born, they were in a bus accident: she was killed and Ruebner was seriously injured. With his second wife, whom he married three years later, he had two sons. In 1981, the younger of these, having served as a reservist in the First Lebanon War, disappeared in South America and was never heard from again. As Back poignantly observes in her introduction, "The lost son and, above all, the lost little sister wander unceasingly through Ruebner's poems. Time does not distance their images or lighten the weight of their absence" (xix).

For Israeli poets, the figure of the little sister, because of its resonance with the Song of Songs, has become a trope for the Holocaust—and this, incidentally, tells us something important about how modern Hebrew poetry, written in a language that had only recently been reinvented and by poets whose first language was usually not Hebrew, immediately acquired the ballast of a continuous tradition. The little sister makes herself felt in Ruebner's poems already in the early 1950s, essentially as soon as he begins writing in Hebrew (where previously, during his first twelve years in Palestine, he wrote exclusively in German); Ruebner's little sister poems thus predate Abba Kovner's great poetic sequence, "My Little Sister," which was first published in 1968.¹ One of the extraordinary things about these poems of immense tenderness and subtlety is that just as the Shoah (Hebrew for

1. See Abba Kovner, *My Little Sister and Selected Poems*, trans. Shirley Kaufman (Oberlin, OH: Field Translation Series, 1986).

“catastrophe”) is behind every line but never actually mentioned, so the little sister is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. “[I]n the air that is dwindling between her lips,” Ruebner writes in an early untitled litany, she “lives the last minute’s / eternity” (9). And in the poem actually entitled “My Little Sister,” she is “smoke before me...burning in my eyes,” or “strewn among the flowers,” until finally, in the poem’s concluding section, she is transformed successively into a tree, a blackbird, and finally a cloud—“The cloud that covers my life” (14-15).

These early poems are so deeply inflected by an unmentionable past and by a sense of loss in quest for what it recognizes is an unattainable form (“I went to find for you a form, / tenderness with no body” [“My Sister,” 29]) that they are not actually political: they rise above the specificities of history and politics into an expressive ether of their own. Like the German Expressionists, in whose work he must have been deeply immersed as a young man, Ruebner seeks to make language express its own paradoxical inability to communicate—and it is for this reason, I believe, that as his work deepens, he turns more and more in the direction of *ekphrastic* poetry. The ekphrastic poems that Back renders are from Ruebner’s collection of 1982, *A Graven and a Molten Image*. Ruebner’s biblical title is not only ironic but rather difficult to parse. Is he accusing art—and hence his own art—of amounting to idol worship? Or, on the contrary, is he turning toward painting because in its closeness to *things* it avoids language and hence the ways in which language has been debased in our time? Here, in any event, is “The Color of Black Waters” (after Hans Hartung’s “Composition”):

The landscape is torn, as though stitched from tears,
In a voice-not-a-voice fall the broken waters.
My sister’s face among the hills flickered and disappeared.

The mornings, day after day, are like deep pits.
The eyes of childhood are stone. Don’t lift it.
The stone drips black tears. (127)

Here the little sister has become part of Hartung’s landscape. The poem is nicely translated, on the whole, but, in the first tercet, Back could just as well have put “flickered and disappeared” into the present tense so as to preserve an exact rhyme (Ruebner’s Hebrew employs rhyme in this case); and in the second, “Don’t lift it” is awkward, partly because of the near-rhyme with “pits” and partly because the pronoun would have to refer to *a* stone rather than to “stone.” The power and economy of the original is nevertheless conveyed.

In the remarkable “postcard” poems of the ‘nineties, Ruebner opens himself up to quotidian realities and becomes an important social and political voice, while forfeiting nothing of his subtlety. “A Postcard from Jerusalem” reads in its entirety:

Jerusalem took leave of Jerusalem and vanished.
There, up in the air, there’s no way that could be Jerusalem? (167)

The “Postcard from Tel Aviv” ends similarly:

Who ever imagined it would be this way?
Is Tel Aviv really Tel Aviv?
Who invented Tel Aviv anyway? (159)

The most powerful poem in the sequence, however, is the “Draft of an Impossible Postcard,” from which I quote the concluding lines:

No one talks about what
doesn’t need mentioning. What was was and there’s no need
remembering. The place looks after the local people
as much as it does. The birds have no cares:
they come and go at will. There are those among them
that sing. If you were here you would hear
their beautiful song. (171)

What doesn’t need mentioning, of course, is that the place the poet is visiting is one of the camps. This ironic gesture of not mentioning what doesn’t need mentioning (and sometimes of mentioning that it doesn’t need mentioning) is itself a central trope of Israeli literature, one that extends across genres. I am reminded in particular of Aharon Appelfeld’s brilliant novel, *The Immortal Bartfuss*, in which the fact that the book’s eponymous hero is a survivor is left to the reader to infer.

In the concluding sections of the volume, Ruebner’s engagement with history and with the immediate realities of Israeli politics becomes more and more eloquent. “It’s Been Years,” a poem written in a visionary stream, begins: “It’s been years / since the monsters started walking among us”; and ends: “how oh how to end this when / there is no end” (187). There are many magnificent poems included from the poet’s eighth and ninth decades, but I shall content myself with quoting just one, “Soldiers’ Memorial Day.” After evoking the fathers, mothers, and wives “[standing] among the stones / as though not knowing where to turn,” Ruebner writes:

Oh, beautiful country, pursuing
 us from one end of the world to the other
 in yellow and green fields in cloud shadows.
 Even with thorn and thistle, with nettle and briar, you seduce
 to enter you, to penetrate deep deep within you
 body into body to no end.

What a terrible love, year after year, this ceaseless memory
 always tearing open the wound until it blooms again and again
 in this maddening spring becoming already
 shorn summer, to the burnt expanses in the unbearable light
 and now this aroma in the air mixes with the smell
 rising from the ground and from the pallid stones.
 Oh, my son. (217)

“Seduce” is transitive and needs a direct object (in this case “us,” which we awkwardly insert), but in other respects the translation is effective. Note the conjunction of “terrible” and “tearing” in the last stanza, and how this is echoed in the phrase “unbearable light.” Here, as in so many of Ruebner’s poems, contemporary realities find their echo in the Bible: the poem’s last line, “Oh, my son,” Ruebner’s lament for his own lost son, reverberates not only against the apostrophe to the land that opens the second stanza but also against King David’s lament, “Oh, Absalom, my son, my son!” “What a terrible love!” And yet in Ruebner’s brilliantly ambivalent lines, in which history is continually reawakened by nature itself, one understands why it has “no end.”