

## RUTH, PART 1



In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out

from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to

the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.



So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'

But Ruth said,

'Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following  
you!

Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to  
me,

and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.





from

NO ANGEL

*All that thou sayest unto me I will do.*

*Ruth 3:5*

I

The story's strange. For once, God wasn't talking,  
Busy with some sacrifice or slaughter  
Somewhere else. No plague, cloud, gushing water,  
Dream, omen, whirlwind. Just two women, walking  
The dusty road from Moab to Judea,  
One, the younger, having told the other  
(Not her own, but her dead husband's mother)  
That she would never leave her. But they flee a  
Famine for what, at first, seems something worse:  
To come as widows to a crowded city,  
To men's appraising stares, and women's pity.  
Ruth, the pagan, heard Naomi curse,  
Cringed and scanned the sky. No fire or stone  
Came crashing downward. They were on their own.

-- Catherine Tufariello

## The Book of Ruth and Naomi

When you pick up the Tanakh and read the Book of Ruth, it is a shock how little it resembles memory. It's concerned with inheritance, lands, men's names, how women must wiggle and wobble to live.

Yet women have kept it dear for the beloved elder who cherished Ruth, more friend than daughter. Daughters leave. Ruth brought even the baby she made with Boaz home as a gift. Where you go, I will go too, your people shall be my people, I will be a Jew for you, for what is yours I will love as I love you, oh Naomi my mother, my sister, my heart.

Show me a woman who does not dream a double, heart's twin, a sister of the mind in whose ear she can whisper, whose hair she can braid as her life twists its pleasure and pain and shame. Show me a woman who does not hide in the locket of bone that deep eye beam of fiercely gentle love she had once from mother, daughter, sister; once like a warm moon that radiance aligned the tides of her blood into potent order.

At the season of first fruits, we recall two travellers, co-conspirators, scavengers making do with leftovers and mill ends, whose friendship was stronger than fear, stronger than hunger, who walked together, the road of shards, hands joined.

-- Marge Piercy



## RUTH, THE REST

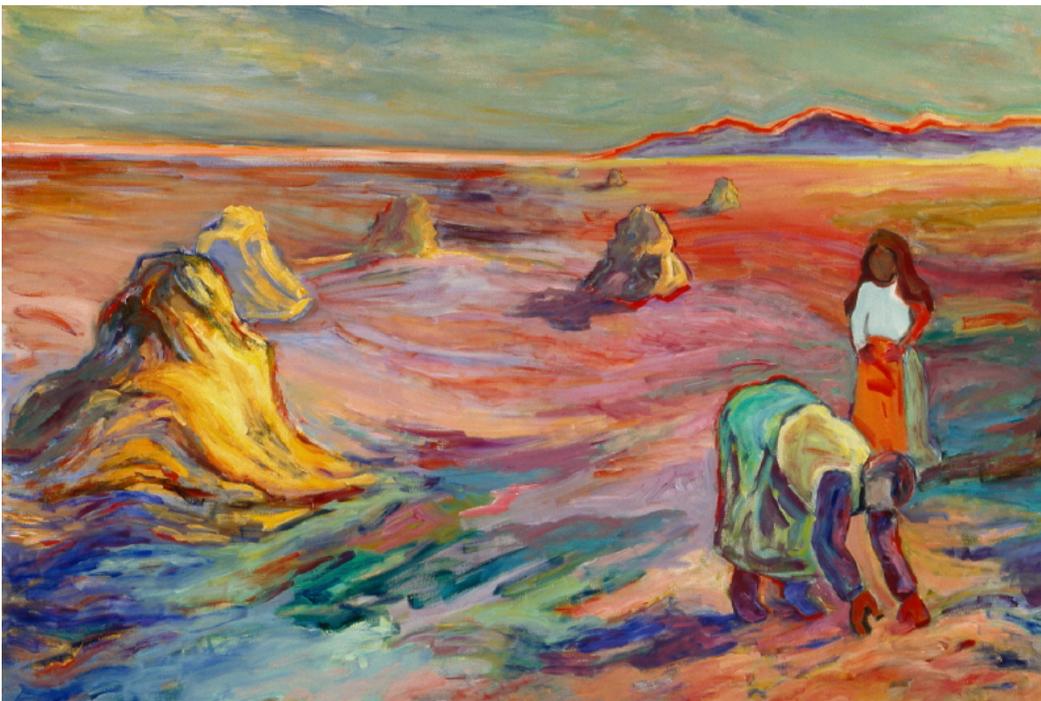
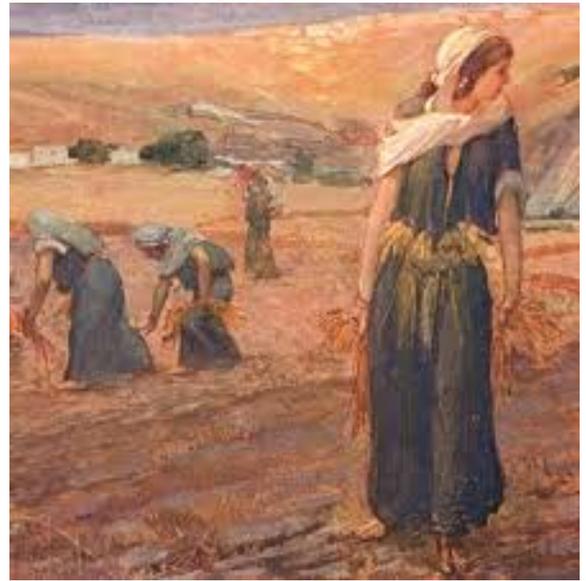


So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They

came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers.



As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The Lord be with you.' They answered, 'The Lord bless you.' Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So

she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.'



Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.' Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?' But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!' Then she said, 'May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.'

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got

up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, 'Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.' So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, 'The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.' Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' Naomi also said to her, 'The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.'

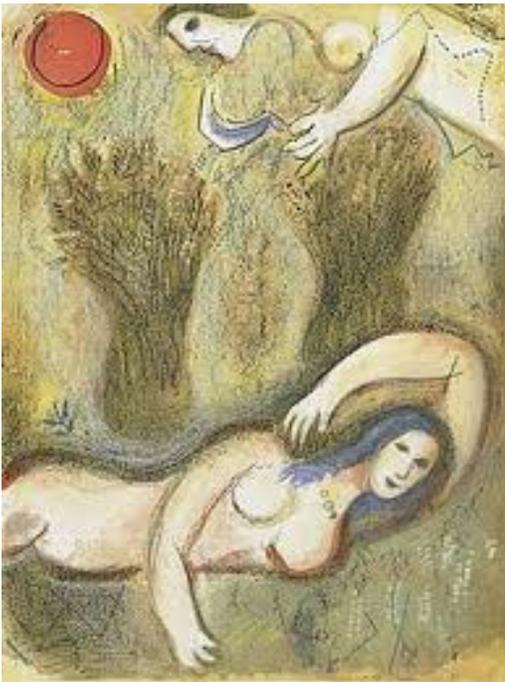




Then Ruth the Moabite said, 'He even said to me, "Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest."' Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, 'It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.' So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley

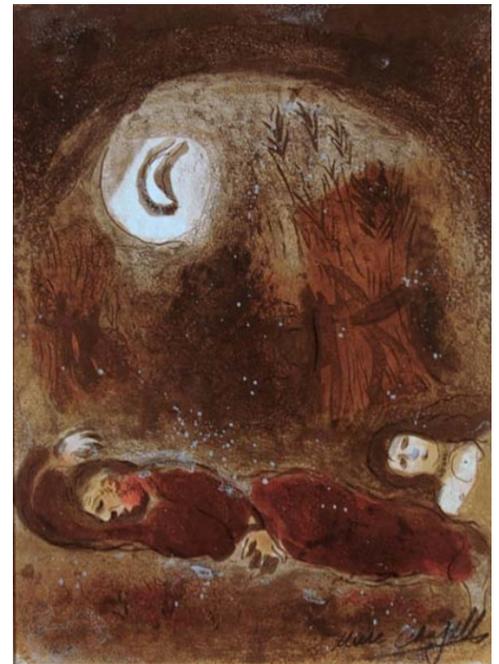
tonight at the threshing-floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.' She said to her, 'All that you tell me I will do.'



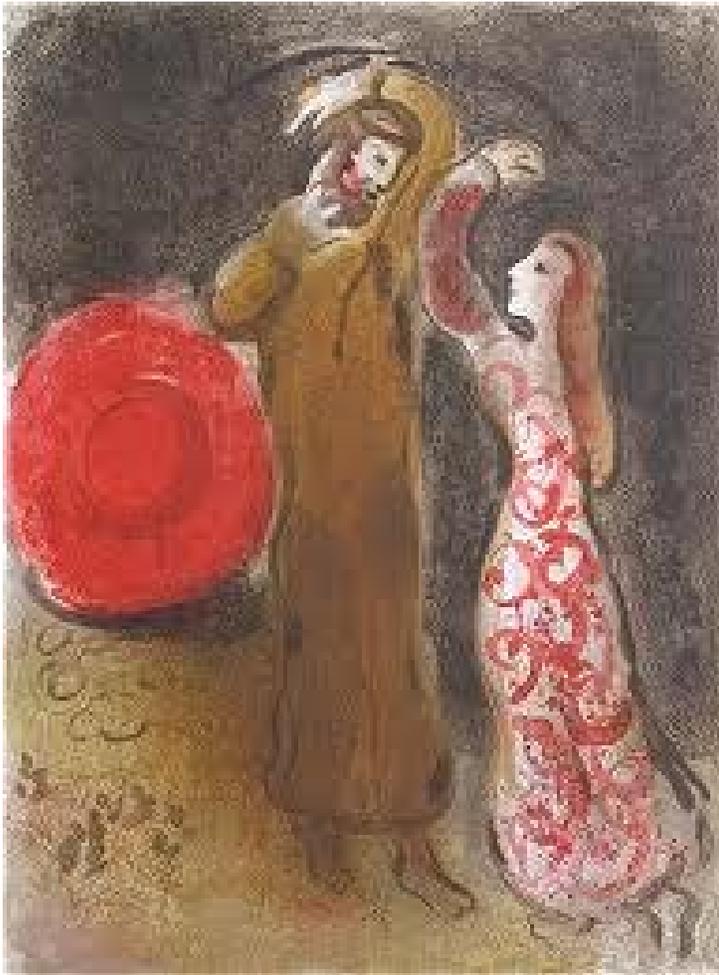
So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.' He said, 'May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another

kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.'

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, 'It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.' Then he said, 'Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.' So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. She came to her mother-in-law,



who said, 'How did things go with you, my daughter?' Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, 'He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, "Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed."' She replied, 'Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.'



No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'Sit down here'; so they sat down. He then said to the next-of-kin, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.' So he said, 'I will redeem it.' Then Boaz said, 'The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance.' At this, the next-of-kin said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.'

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when

the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself', he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.' Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.'

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

# Poems of Ruth



*woodcut by Jacob Steinhardt*

**Shavuot 5772 / 2012**

**Poems by Marge Piercy, Rachel Barenblat, Alicia Ostriker,  
Tania Runyan, Victor Hugo, Kathryn Hellerstein, Anna Kamienska,  
Catherine Tufariello**

## THE HANDMAID'S TALE (RUTH)

Time for a different kind of harvest.  
Sated with bread and beer  
Boaz and his men sleep deeply  
on the fragrant hay.  
The floor doesn't creak.

When Boaz wakes, his eyes  
gleam with unshed tears.  
He is no longer young, maybe  
forty; his face is lined  
as Mahlon's never became.

Who are you? he asks  
and I hear an echoing question:  
who is it? what is it? who speaks?  
Spread your wings over me, I reply  
and his cloak billows high.

Now he clasps my foreign hand  
and kisses the tips of my fingers  
now skin glides against skin  
and the seed of salvation grows in me  
the outsider, the forbidden

we move from lack to fullness  
we sweeten our own story  
and as my belly swells I pray  
that the day come speedily and soon  
when we won't need to distinguish

Israel from Moab  
the sun's radiance from the moon's  
Boaz's square fingers  
from my smaller olive hands  
amen, amen, selah.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

from **NO ANGEL**

*All that thou sayest unto me I will do.*

*Ruth 3:5*

I

The story's strange. For once, God wasn't talking,  
Busy with some sacrifice or slaughter  
Somewhere else. No plague, cloud, gushing water,  
Dream, omen, whirlwind. Just two women, walking  
The dusty road from Moab to Judea,  
One, the younger, having told the other  
(Not her own, but her dead husband's mother)  
That she would never leave her. But they flee a  
Famine for what, at first, seems something worse:  
To come as widows to a crowded city,  
To men's appraising stares, and women's pity.  
Ruth, the pagan, heard Naomi curse,  
Cringed and scanned the sky. No fire or stone  
Came crashing downward. They were on their own.

Catherine Tufariello

## **Ruth Speaks to Naomi**

*"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.  
Your people will be my people and your God my God."  
-- Ruth 1:16*

Really, there is not much to love  
in this world. Maybe sparrows,  
children laughing in the morning.

But—your God forgive me—  
if I knew I had to sleep forever tonight,  
my tired heart would survive it.

We are widows now, the shriveled leaves  
that blow along the rooftops.  
We are worth nothing

but the measure of loneliness  
we can remove from each other.  
Of course I must follow you,

Naomi, from Moab to Bethlehem,  
to the musty corner of our home,  
where we will boil the grain and sweep the dirt,

comb each other's hair in the evening  
and feel the coarse curls fall  
between our fingers.

Tania Runyan

## From **Boaz Asleep**

Boaz, overcome with weariness, by torchlight  
made his pallet on the threshing floor  
where all day he had worked, and now he slept  
among the bushels of threshed wheat.

The old man owned wheatfields and barley,  
and though he was rich, he was still fair-minded.  
No filth soured the sweetness of his well.  
No hot iron of torture whitened in his forge.

His beard was silver as a brook in April.  
He bound sheaves without the strain of hate  
or envy. He saw gleaners pass, and said,  
Let handfuls of the fat ears fall to them.

The man's mind, clear of untoward feeling,  
clothed itself in candor. He wore clean robes.  
His heaped granaries spilled over always  
toward the poor, no less than public fountains.

Boaz did well by his workers and by kinsmen.  
He was generous, and moderate. Women held him  
worthier than younger men, for youth is handsome,  
but to him in his old age came greatness.

An old man, nearing his first source, may find  
the timelessness beyond times of trouble.  
And though fire burned in young men's eyes,  
to Ruth the eyes of Boaz shone clear light.

Victor Hugo (translator unknown)

## **Boaz Watches Ruth in the Fields**

There is something holy in the way  
she bends to the ground  
and lifts each stalk like a child.

Her hair sweeps the soil,  
trapping chaff in its curls.  
How her fingers pierce the fields

like rays of light! I believe  
she would glean here forever.  
Even at sundown,

as the harvesters slump  
beneath the sheaves on their backs  
she steps lightly to our meal

of roasted grain. She sighs deeply  
with each bite, as if the barley  
were part of her body,

finally reunited with its home  
of sweet earth and sunlight,  
ready to smolder and burst into the sky.

Tania Runyon

## **The Book of Ruth and Naomi**

When you pick up the Tanakh and read  
the Book of Ruth, it is a shock  
how little it resembles memory.  
It's concerned with inheritance,  
lands, men's names, how women  
must wiggle and wobble to live.

Yet women have kept it dear  
for the beloved elder who  
cherished Ruth, more friend than  
daughter. Daughters leave. Ruth  
brought even the baby she made  
with Boaz home as a gift.  
Where you go, I will go too,  
your people shall be my people,  
I will be a Jew for you,  
for what is yours I will love  
as I love you, oh Naomi  
my mother, my sister, my heart.

Show me a woman who does not dream  
a double, heart's twin, a sister  
of the mind in whose ear she can whisper,  
whose hair she can braid as her life  
twists its pleasure and pain and shame.  
Show me a woman who does not hide  
in the locket of bone that deep  
eye beam of fiercely gentle love  
she had once from mother, daughter,  
sister; once like a warm moon  
that radiance aligned the tides  
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At the season of first fruits, we recall  
two travellers, co-conspirators, scavengers  
making do with leftovers and mill ends,  
whose friendship was stronger than fear,  
stronger than hunger, who walked together,  
the road of shards, hands joined.

Marge Piercy

**Naomi: "Call Me Bitter"**

Ruth: 1:19-22

The path grows stonier, the hills are steep  
and the sheep and goats graze on the prickly brush.  
On terraced plots cling olive trees, their leaves  
sigh ashy melodies of my return.  
I walked this path ten years ago, going up,  
away from Bethlehem, whose walls now glisten  
where the road dips and branches out, a maze  
of what I've lost and what my God has gained.  
Ten years ago, I had to leave behind  
this starving puzzle of the ways of God.  
I was young then. My husband, hungry for  
a better life, trudged at my side, our sons  
walked, dreaming of their suppers in Moab.  
High noon. The sun is strong. It finds my face  
although I want to hide how old I am,  
how much I've lost. I'm not alone, there's Ruth,  
but how can I without my husband, sons,  
be coming home? The women peer out from  
their market stalls, their courtyard gates,  
at Ruth concealed beside me in her foreign veil,  
and ask, "Naomi? Is that you?" I spit.  
"Do not call me Naomi, pleasant name.  
But call me bitter, Marah, for my God  
dealt bitterly with me. He emptied me  
of all my fullness. I have nothing now."

Kathryn Hellerstein

## Naomi

*And she said unto them: "Call me not Naomi [that is, pleasant], call me Marah [that is, bitter]; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." Ruth 1:20*

Naomi my sister  
everyone here knew you  
you were like a skylark  
on your husband's cheeks  
the down had barely begun to appear  
holding hands like children  
you left the town

Naomi is it you Naomi  
life really rolled over you  
and you come back alone  
as if you never had  
a husband two sons  
what weighs you down  
an empty house on your back

You are not alone  
there is after all this youngster Ruth  
who attached herself to you  
go away daughter you tell her  
there everything will be strange to you  
she persisted  
I know you said nothing and walked on in silence  
you accepted her eagerness  
in place of love

Naomi perhaps you thought  
I'm still not so old  
I still may give birth  
didn't he ask about me  
let my daughter-in-law go to him  
perhaps she'll remind him of the young Naomi

Perhaps waiting in the dark you thought  
he himself will come  
heavy-set with a golden beard  
but he only sent a measure of barley  
Naomi my sister you'll never

give birth to a son  
accept a grandson on your lap  
for the man did enter the woman  
and He through whom there flows  
the stream of life  
again caused  
a man to be born

Surely she herself is better  
than seven sons  
who'd abandon you in old age and pain

And so she brings you your grandson  
rejoice you'll be his nurse  
you'll still be useful here  
his soft little head  
tiny hands  
rosy ears  
sobs of emotion  
tug at your guts

Naomi don't cry  
O Naomi

Anna Kamienska  
*translated from the Polish by Grazyna Drabik and David Curzon*

## THE ONE WHO TURNED BACK (ORPAH)

Maybe you envisioned  
your husband's grave  
choked with weeds

maybe you knew  
the Israelites would scorn  
your foreign features

the sages say  
God gave you four sons  
because you wept as you left her

the pundits whisper  
once Naomi was gone  
you spread your legs for anyone

did the men of Moab  
grind your body  
like bruised corn

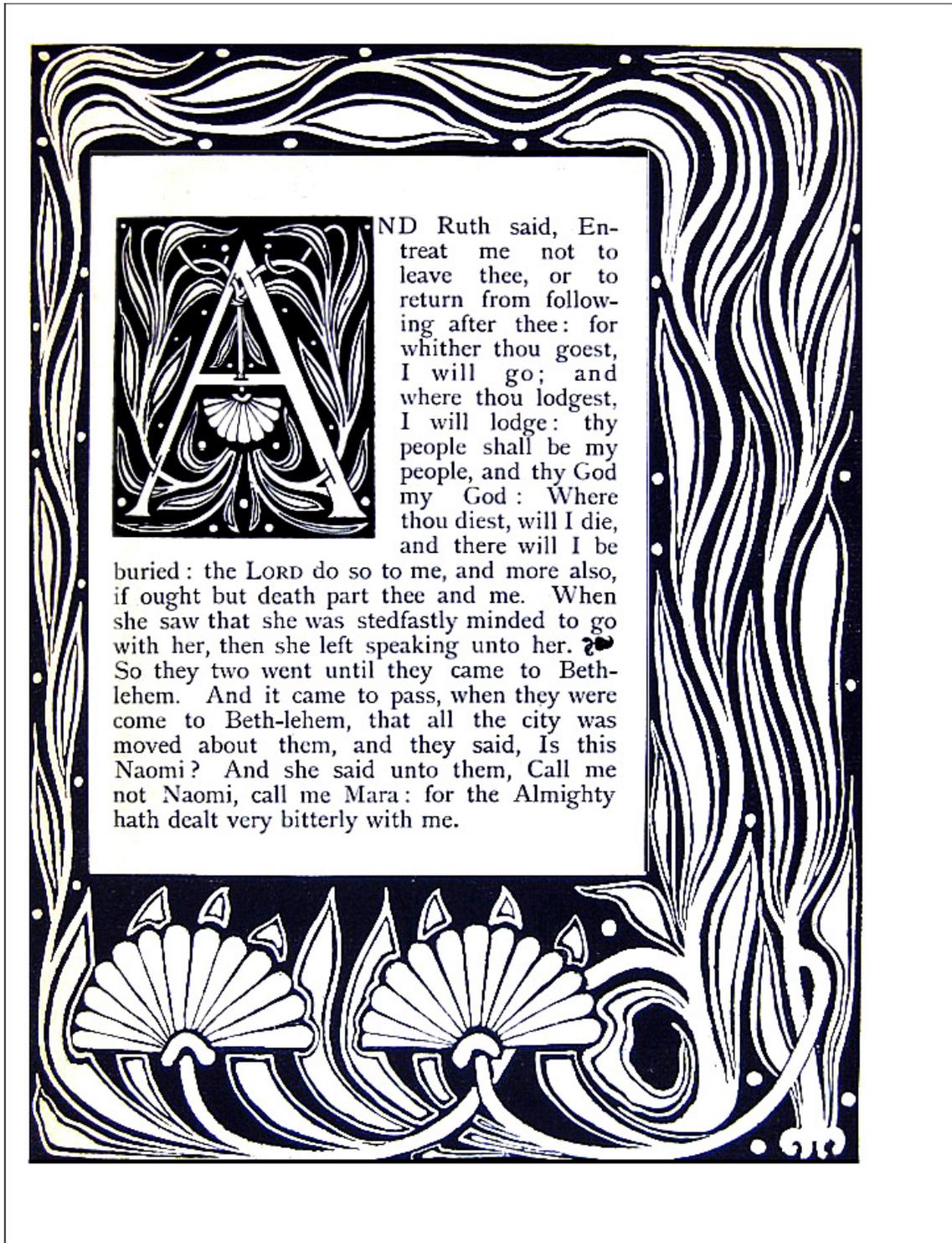
did you birth Goliath  
and rend your garments  
when you lost him too

did you live for centuries  
destined for the sword  
of one of David's men

or did you bathe  
your aging parents  
and die a quiet spinster

comforted by the scent  
of the wild rosemary  
outside your childhood home?

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat



AND Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be

buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her. So they two went until they came to Beth-lehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

Woodcut illustration from *THE BOOK OF RUTH*, published in 1896 by J. M. Dent, illustrated by W. B. MacDougall with Art Nouveau woodcut borders and vignettes.

## **Bibliography**

### **Ruth**

Marge Piercy's poem "The Book of Ruth and Naomi" first appeared in *Mars and Her Children* (Knopf, 1992, Middlemarch, Inc.)

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat's poem "The Handmaid's Tale (Ruth)" was first published on her blog *Velveteen Rabbi*.

Catherine Tufariello's sonnet sequence "No Angel" appears in *Keeping My Name* (Texas Tech UP, 2004).

Tania Runyon's "Ruth Speaks to Naomi" can be found in *A Thousand Vessels* (WordFarm)

### **Boaz**

Victor Hugo's "Boaz Asleep" was originally published in *Légends des Siècles* (1859)

Tania Runyon's "Boaz Watches Ruth in the Fields" can be found in *A Thousand Vessels* (WordFarm).

### **Naomi**

Kathryn Hellerstein's "Naomi: Call Me Bitter" is part of "Words Not Said: Four Poems After the Book of Ruth," originally published in *Reading Ruth*, ed. Twersky and Kates.

Anna Kamienska's "Naomi" can be found in *Modern Poems on the Bible*, ed. David Curzon.

### **Orpah**

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat's "The One Who Turned Back (Orpah)" was first published on her blog *Velveteen Rabbi*.