

Poems of Ruth



woodcut by Jacob Steinhardt

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

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 **The Redeeming of Ruth**

It is harvest time when they arrive in Bethlehem. A cornfield in Judah is like a cornfield in Moab. Ruth goes out to the fields to glean behind the reapers.

Poppies between cornrows. Birdsong. The mystery of how that throbbing fills the air from its tiny source, invisible -- oh my God, Ruth thinks, bending and straightening—what, anyway, is music, why so fierce, so much greater than consolation, it tears your breast open like a shirt, takes your throbbing heart out, lets the heart feel fresh air bathe it—your heart the size of a bird. And the sunball scorches it, then the song quietly returns my heart to my body, sutures the wound, and in a moment there's no scar.

Heat -- to pull my shirt off, like the men, is what I would love. I glean efficiently behind them, thinking the generosity of him whose land this is. He who tells the men: let her glean, in fact, be careless in your reaping so that the stranger will not go hungry. And I am still that stranger, wishing I might take my shirt off as I glean, to sweat like them, I don't mind the backache, bending and rising.

Words all stiff and wrong, foreign, if I could dance my body would explain. Every moment a threshold. No, an opening. The dirt road. The shack. The dome over one's head flaring, incredible, as one stands barefoot in a cornfield, an armload of sheaves, dust tickling one's nose. Rich and poor scattered over the fields. The high hot cobwebby summer morning rolling by, the afternoon a cauldron. The reapers singing at work, the Hebrew rolling like a wheel. The sky turning pale, sighing, freshness of night through which like a sickle the moon rises.

(Naomi in a narrow room in the city, to whom I bring my skirtful of barley. Wide fields all around. He who blesses his workers and also his handmaiden: he is our kinsman, he is unmarried, what a coincidence, Naomi and I discuss this. What she tells me to do, I say I will do.)

Alicia Ostriker

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
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

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

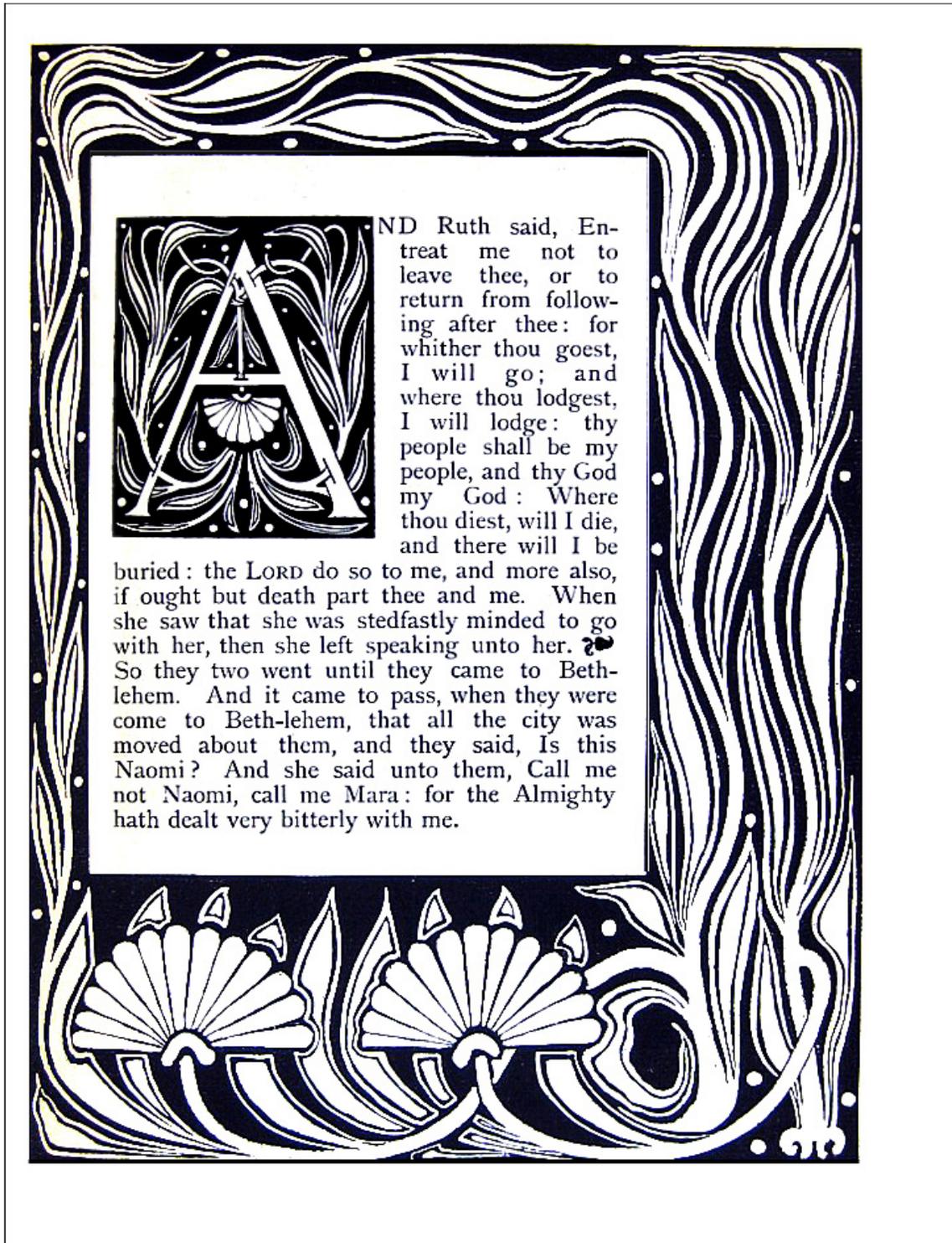
did you birth Goliath
and rend your garments
when you lost him too

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*.

Alicia Ostriker's prose meditation "The Redeeming of Ruth" can be found in *The Nakedness of the Fathers* (Rutgers University Press.)

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*.