

## Mothers

*For Helena Rapp, 1977-1992. And for all the others.*

I'm done with crying now. It's over. No more to cry for. And I wasn't there to hold her. There's no one left to hold.

*We heard them coming. My mother held me trembling against her trembling breast because she could do no more than hold me there in the cold Dutch morning. Her fingers clenched at my back, snagged in my braids. The smell of her (is that what it was?—the stench of her?—or was it the horses?) and the trickle of fear that stained the front of her blouse.*

*They dragged us from the cupboard abandoned in the barn behind the house, soldiers little older than I was then, or much older than I ever hoped to be. Their guns kept falling over. Sliding down their arms on the straps.*

*"Out," they said. "Jews out." But their hearts weren't in it.*

*My heart isn't in . . .*

*My heart isn't . . .*

*"Stand there," they said.*

*I couldn't stand. My legs were cramped with the cupboard and the cold. Mother held me. She held me.*

*I can't stand now. Shira's lying somewhere, too. Where is she? Can't I . . . hold . . . her?*

*They should have shot us. It was the law. It would have been better.*

*They told us to stand, to wait against the barn, but the truck didn't come for us.*

*It will not come here. The truck. The truck will not come here. They don't let the truck come here.*

*We stood against the wooden wall under a gray sky, cold for May in Holland and the wind coming. All morning we stood and the rain came. But the truck didn't come. They sheltered in the cowshed and the dovecote against the rain. We stood under*

*the eaves of the barn with the wind blowing the cold rain about us, the wet hem of my dress cold against my leg.*

Not here in the heat.

Not here in the sun.

Not this May.

Not now.

No.

*The truck didn't come. It was getting dark, with the rain from the gray skies, and the truck didn't come. So they left. Slowly. In groups. With their rifles slung over their drooping shoulders. They were going home, the old men and the boys. Because the truck didn't come for the Jews. They left us.*

*We ran. To another country:*

Where it never rains. Where the white sun warms the white stone beneath which my mother . . .

There's no one left.

Soon they will come for me.

I must . . .

Wash my face.

Change my dress.

Not in the bathroom.

No.

It's against the law, and I can't.

I . . . Can't.

Slowly.

So as not to wake . . .

As if there were anyone. . .

Yes, I can wash my . . .

In the kitchen.

The water was cold in Holland when I was her age. To drink. To bathe. It smelled of iron. My mother washed me in water that smelled of iron. I washed Shira in water that tastes of heat.

The smell of iron?

On the knife blade.

They should have shot us. The trucks should have come.

The large trucks came. The children piled in. One of the trucks wouldn't start. And those children had to ride with the others, crowding three and four to a pair of seats while some sat on their

backpacks in the aisle. Such laughing. Such singing. My ears hurt. Class *bar mitzvah* on Masada. All the sixth-grade classes.

We slept in Arad, and she climbed the ramp first in the morning. Shira was first of all the girls when she climbed the ramp. Shira was there with the girls waving and singing when the boys came singing with the Torah up the ramp to Masada. In the morning. Two years ago? And the hot wind ringing and the hot dust blowing through the windy stony remnant of a synagogue.

There too. Yes. It was there, too. Once.

And with knives.

Almost two o'clock.

Turn on the . . .

I know she'll be there.

"*Kol Yisrael M'Yerushalaim. Shalom Rav*—This is the Voice of Israel, speaking from Jerusalem. Good afternoon. It is now two o'clock, and here is the news. The funeral of Shira Sadka—may her memory be blessed—stabbed to death on her way to school will be held at the cemetery in Bat Yam at 2:30. The terrorist from Gaza, apprehended at the scene, is in stable condition at Ichilov Hospital!"

Yes.

They're coming for me now.

It's time to go. □