

# Naomi Replansky

## Selected Poems



# Naomi Replansky

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Replansky was born in the Bronx. Her first book, *Ring Song*, containing poems written from 1936 to 1952, was published by Scribner's in 1952 and was nominated for the National Book Award. She moved to Los Angeles for the first time in 1946 to be a translator for Bertolt Brecht; she arrived again in 1952, living in Venice and spent time with the leftist poets associated with Coastlines including Thomas McGrath, Don Gordon and Bert Meyers. Though she was never called before HUAC, her passport was revoked in 1951, probably due to her association with Brecht. She moved to San Francisco in 1959, returning to New York in 1964. Her second book, *Twenty-One Poems, Old and New*, didn't appear until 1988. Her *Collected Poems* won the Poetry Society of America's 2013 William Carlos Williams Award and was a finalist for the 2014 Poets' Prize.

*Ring Song*. Staten Island, self-published, 1962

*Twenty-One Poems: Old and New*. New York: Gingko Press, 1988

*The Dangerous World: New and Selected Poems, 1934-1994*. Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1994.

*Collected Poems*. Boston: Black Sparrow/David R. Godine, 2012

# The Refuge in the Forest

Today we have come  
A long way from home:  
From the prison camp  
To the dark swamp,  
From official words  
To the scolding of birds,  
From the rubber club  
To the spider web,  
From fiery skies  
To the buzzing of flies.

Our fingers are cold  
With the touch of the toad.  
Our story is told  
Near the snake's abode.  
Our whispers cross  
Through the hairy moss.  
The well-housed snail  
Studies our trail.  
The blind moles hear  
Our stumbling career.  
The field-mouse squints  
At our footprints.

How the human eye  
Explodes in their sky!  
Iris and white  
Shine through the night.  
The insects arm  
And hum their alarm.  
Small animals rush  
Through the underbrush.  
We laugh to see  
How big we can be.  
We are giant strangers  
Among midget dangers.

Tomorrow we cross  
The borders of loss,  
To walk a new land  
As on quicksand,  
To learn a tongue  
Strange and singsong,  
And words will waylay us  
And laws will gainsay us.

Who are midget and strange  
While the countries change,  
Let's now fool away  
This whole holiday:  
For once giant strangers  
Among midget dangers.

# Complaint of the Ignorant Wizard

Whoever gave me magic told me lies.  
This laying on of hands works otherwise.

Every whirling part of me is warm  
Yet I come down on here like a snowstorm.

I speak the word that might unlock the rock  
But hard upon that word my two jaws lock.

My sleeping power gathering to leap  
Leaps tooth and claw into a deeper sleep.

The love potion I slyly pour for one  
Is by another seized and swallowed down.

I learned the speech of birds; now every tree  
Screams out to me a baleful prophecy.

Into a statue's lungs I breathe my own.  
Sighing, it fills me with this sigh of stone.

My answer to the riddle bears with it  
A greater riddle and more desperate.

All all runs wild, all wild and uncontrolled.  
A toad hops from my mouth instead of gold.

# Foreigner

He is alone and unarmed  
And has no vessel for his vanity.  
His curse is spoken, but nothing trembles.  
His praise like rain runs down the gutters.

Laughter seizes him and he is silent.  
Grief shakes him, he hides it in a stare.  
And he can change nothing where he passes  
Though he walk barefoot through bristling events.

A room, a sea, a street, a war,  
Gather within and sinew him for speech  
Richer than this, but who will hear him out.  
O who will know him unto nakedness.

# Night Prayer for Various Trades

Machinist in the pillow's grip,  
Be clumsy and be blind  
And let the gears spin free, and turn  
No metal in your mind.

Long, long may the actress lie  
In slumber like a stone,  
The helpless words that rise from sleep  
Be no words but her own.

Laborer, drift through a dark  
Remote from clay and lime.  
O do not tunnel through the night  
In unpaid overtime.

You out-of-work, walk into sleep.  
It will not ask to see  
Your proof of skill or strength or youth  
And shows its movies free.

And may the streetcleaner float down  
A spotless avenue.  
Who red-eyed wake at morning break  
All have enough to do.

Enough to do. Now let the day  
Its own accountings keep.  
But may our dreams keep other time  
Throughout our sprawling sleep.

# Among the Gentiles

As I walked in the land of the Gentiles,  
As I walked in the land of my birth,  
Curses lay buried like landmines  
In that rich, that wheat-yielding earth.

So I watched my step with the Gentiles  
And scanned every blue-eyed face.  
My arms spread wide to keep balance  
And sometimes spread wide to embrace.

The white skin I was wearing—  
It served me, it kept me warm.  
But the dark-skinned saw me wearing  
A jailor's uniform.  
My skin, so thin, so ragged,  
A jailor's uniform!

I'd laugh, if not for crying,  
To walk in the world and see  
The false clues strewn all over,  
The barbed wire strung like tinsel,  
The signs on the prisons juggled  
With murderous irony.

# Death of the Fugitive

No cash, no passport, papers not in order,  
I crossed by chance this one unguarded border.  
Police, stop short. Soldiers, stand at ease.  
If you touch me now your hands will freeze.  
Clerks and computers, when my name goes past,  
Close my dossier. This entry is the last.

# I Met My Solitude

I met my Solitude. We two stood glaring.  
I had to tremble, meeting him face to face.  
Then he saying, and I with bent head hearing:  
“You sent me forth to exile and disgrace,

“Most faithful of your friends, then most forsaken,  
Forgotten in breast, in bath, in books, in bed.  
To someone else you gave the gifts I gave you,  
And you embraced another in my stead.

“Though we meet now, it is not of your choosing.  
I am not fooled. And I do not forgive.  
I am less kind, but did you treat me kindly?  
In armored peace from now on let us live.”

So did my poor hurt Solitude accuse me.  
Little was left of good between us two.  
And I drew back: “How can we stay together,  
You jealous of me, and I laid waste by you?”

“By you, who used to be my good provider,  
My secret nourisher, and mine alone.  
The strength you taught me I must use against you,  
And now with all my strength I wish you gone.”

Then he, my enemy, and still my angel,  
Said in that harsh voice that once was sweet:  
“I will come back, and every time less handsome,  
And I will look like Death when last we meet.”

# The Oasis

I thought I held a fruit cupped in my hand.  
Its sweetness burst  
And loosed its juice. After long travelling,  
After so long a thirst,  
    I asked myself: Is this a drought-born dream?  
    It was no dream.

I thought I slipped into a hidden room  
Out of harsh light.  
In cushioned dark, among rich furnishings,  
There I restored my sight.  
    Such luxury could never be for me!  
    It was for me.

I thought I touched a mind that fitted mine  
As bodies fit,  
Angle to curve; and my mind throbbed to feel  
The pulsing of that wit.  
    This comes too late, I said. It can't be true!  
    But it was true.

I thought the desert ended, and I felt  
The fountains leap.  
Then gratitude could answer gratitude  
Till sleep entwined with sleep.  
    Despair once cried: No passion's left inside!  
    It lied. It lied.



















































































































































































