

Dear Orpah

Greetings, my dear sister [Orpah](#), in the name of El Shaddai and of Istarte, your God and mine.

My sister, it is with a heart full of sadness and also of joy that I must tell you of the death of our beloved [Naomi](#). She went to be with our grandmothers at the brightness of the last moon. It seems right, somehow, that it was the moon's fullness that claimed her. She, who once thought herself so empty, so bitter – do you remember? Of course you do. She lived, in the end, a long and very sweet life. She died, as our writings say, “full of days.” Thanks be to God.

You would scarcely have recognized her these past years, Orpah – the juices of life were slowly taken from her body; like the fruits of our fields, baked in the sun, leathered and sparse, yet all the more nutritious for that. I fed on her presence until the end. She has been barely able to leave her chambers for moons now, and most recently, she lacked the strength even to rise from her mat. I brought her juice of the pomegranates that she loved so well, and when she refused even that, I knew the end was near. I slept on a mat by her own, and one morning I awoke to find that she had gone to our grandmothers. There was a smile on her face, Orpah – I swear by El Shaddai there was.

Many here say there is nothing beyond this life; but now I know otherwise. As I washed her, Naomi's body felt relaxed, moist, for the first time in so long, as though it remembered her youth. And my own bones ached with her presence, and for it. They still do. The body knows; the body knows.

And Orpah, I have told no one this next part. With whom but my treasured sister could I share it? Even though we have been apart these many years, you are the only one. Orpah, as I washed her and prepared that dear body for its cave, I knew the presence not only of Naomi, may she rest beneath the wings of her Creator...but my inner juices rippled with the spirits of all who have gone before. They were there with us, of this I am certain, splashing and lapping at my pain, guiding my hands and my heart as I did the last things I could do for her. And I felt you there too.

Is it possible, Orpah, that in the end, the waters of our beings flow together after all? That the rendered essence of it all is that...life is moisture, and flows freely, unbound by time and space? I cannot say for certain, but I know this; that today, when I cry, I feel the tears are from somewhere beyond me; somewhere holy, where we are one.

How long has it been since we saw one another? Too long, my heart, too long by far. And although not a finger of the moon passes that I do not think of you and hold you up to the Light of our Lady Wisdom, still, these past days have taken my soul back as though it were yesterday.

No one will ever know how hard it was to leave you that day. Even as I clung to Naomi I wanted to run back; to be with you. It seemed impossible that the three of us

would no longer be as one. A nightmare. I hadn't seen it coming; my heart was not braced for the pain. I wanted to scream; to cry out and by the force of my voice, keep the snarling separation at bay. How could this be? Life had been cruel to us, but together we had survived. *Together*. Like a three legged milking stool we were solid and stable; able to squeeze the goodness out of the beast, the breast, of life. It seemed as though nothing could throw us off balance when we had each other. Without that – what was there? How could I stand?

I need to tell you that I know you made the right choice; not only for you, but also for our own mother. Someone had to stay with her; and it was clear she was too ill to travel with us. I don't know if I could have taken her in any case. The cruelty we suffered at her hand when we were girls remains a thorn in my heart and will be forever a question hanging in the dark corners of my soul. Why? How could someone treat her own flesh that way? Still, you were the one who felt the pull to care for her. You, whose sense of daughterly responsibility rose above your suffering. I admire you for that, and I am thankful. Mother could not have survived without you. I know that. Thank you, Orpah. You did what I was not prepared to do. The hardness of my own heart toward her is something for which I feel shame. Even when I learned of her death, I felt... cold. Cold and dry inside. I tried my best to make it up by caring for Naomi in the way I should have cared for my own mother. Some day, perhaps when I at last take my place in the great sea of life, perhaps then she and I can put those waves behind us. I pray this will be so. I am tired of the weight of it all. I want to be free of it; to live – how shall I say - a buoyant life. I long to float, trusting the waters, without this betrayal sucking me downward toward the fear and mistrust that have been my companions on this long and muddy way.

I hadn't let myself feel those things for many years; it surprises me now that they are so near and strong. With Naomi's death, they have broken the surface, waterlogged and slimy with the layers time can add to pain. And somehow, Orpah, it's all mixed in together; the pain of our mother's cruelty, the pain of my separation from you, the pain of what I endured here in Bethlehem before life took the turn that led to joy. And what do I want to do with it all? More than anything I long to put it all in a basket and offer it to you – to see my pain mirrored back to me in your eyes, the way it used to be with us. I feel I can bear anything if you just hear me and by your listening, make it real. Help me find the place in myself where it fits best. There is no greater gift one can give; the emptiness inside me where our trust used to be still haunts me. There is no one to hear me now; no one who sees.

Ah well, that's what it is to grow old I suppose. And I have been blessed beyond measure by having had that gift once in my life. Now, it is my grandchildren who bring me joy. They don't know me, though. It's not the same. For them, I am "Ama" and I am delighted to be so. But there is no one for whom I am simply Ruth; someone sufficient ; someone who once was young...*someone*. Still, the grandchildren are a daily source of laughter and delight. Please tell me about your own. I lose track of how old they are and what is happening in their lives.

Whoever would have thought, when we were widows together, young and childless, that some day each of us would become great grandmothers, with babies of our babies playing at our feet? I laugh out loud sometimes at the way life turns. (My laugh is still the same, Orpah, and it sometimes frightens the littlest ones. I lift them then, into my bosom and give them honey in a rag; a fine soother for my little lambs. Remember how you all teased me about my laugh? What a blessing to have things to laugh about. It wasn't always so, as you know.)

When the war, that cursed war, took first Elimelech and then our own husbands, I thought life was over. There was no laughing for a long time. And then, to find such joy as we three became...how shall I say it...became what we were. What I *thought* we were, at least. . In spite of the bloody, bloody war. What they were fighting about, and for, not a man could tell us, but they kept right on killing.

Do you remember the reaction of the community when Naomi and Elimelech first moved to our homeland? I never had a chance to ask Elimelech what it was like for him, but often Naomi spoke with bitterness about the hunger that first drove them to Moab, and the harshness of our people toward strangers from an enemy country. They thought they were spies, or worse, when any fool could see what they really were. They were people. They were starving.

Cursed, cursed war! Thoughts, nothing more. Ideas without heart, words without flesh, and names without soul. Big empty heads without nostrils; they cannot breathe and so they die. Yes they die, taking innocent creatures with them in their aborted gasping for life where there is none As a girl, I listened to the tales of war around the campfires, and it seemed so simple then. They were fighting to defend our land. It was a holy war, a just war. The others were our enemy, and must be stopped. It made perfect sense and I was proud of our brave warriors. It was this strife between our countries, generations old by the time we were born, this which pitted Naomi's homeland against our own.

And do you remember when our parents sold us to Mahlon and Chilion? The shame of being sold was far outweighed by the sneers of our people for being married to the enemy. The names we were called – I still blush to hear them in my mind. It was the war that killed the men in our family that is true, but in some ways they were dead to the community long before. And then – then what were we to do?

In spite of all that, we clung to one another and there, we found life. Orpah, there were times, when I first left you and came here with Naomi; there were times when I thought I would die of loneliness. You know, when Naomi was telling us to stay home, to return to our mother's house, not once did it cross my mind that it may have been better for *her* if we did so. Only when we got to Bethlehem, it struck me. Naomi had been gone a long time. Some thought she and Elimelech had abandoned the land when it needed them most; many who stayed died of starvation rather than go to the land of their enemy. So when she returned, there were sideways glances, a lift of the eyebrow, a sniff, and some words as well. They seemed to say "Oh so NOW you return! Now that there is bread, you are ready to take your place with us again." And then they would see me, with

the speech and skin of their most bitter enemy, with the smell of Moab on my breath, and they would say to each other: “not only has she returned to take our bread, but she has brought THAT with her.” Sister, I had never considered that my presence with Naomi would be anything but a help to her. But you can see – I was a hindrance. An embarrassment, a burden to bear, as she fought to regain her place among her own people. I vowed even more strongly to make up for it.

She told me of the custom in Judah that forbade the harvesters to take everything that a field produced. They were to leave the edges for the poor. This is the law of the land; a law of compassion for widows and orphans. I liked the sound of that. Ah but what no law could anticipate is that, for the less compassionate of heart, this custom assures that the most vulnerable are easily found. They glean in the fields after the harvesters are finished; most often when darkness falls. You can imagine what happens when poor and hungry women are alone in the fields, gathering the remnants of food for their families. I will only tell you that the first fields I gleaned in were lessons to me of the kind I would not wish for you or any of my sisters.

But Orpah - let that time and those scavenger birds of memory roost somewhere else for now. I will not let them abide in the shelter of this, my love letter to you. These events were once unwelcome visitors in my life, and their memory now nearly strangers to my soul. Writing to you has summoned them once again, but I will give them only the hospitality that decency demands, and then bid them be gone. My house is filled with more welcome guests now.

The memories that I will spread my cloak for – pat the chair beside me and offer tea – these are the ones I want to bide with me now, and share with you.

What will I tell you? How, even in her bitterness, Naomi cared for me; and how, cunning as a jackal, she arranged my marriage to Boaz.

And how, on the birthing stool, it was your name, Orpah, that I called out. When Obed my son was born, and when the midwives brought him to me, it was your dear eyes that seemed to look back at me from his tiny face – your brow, and the same cleft in the chin...he looked so much like you that I wept in thanksgiving.

Naomi, bless her heart, Naomi chose to believe that he looked Hebrew, like her own people, like her own son. And perhaps he did, too. So much depends on what we want or need to see. I sometimes wonder, sister, if our longing gaze at one another is a blessing or a curse. Did I make you into what I needed you to be for me, to fill my own heart? Have I done that to my child as well, as I can see Naomi has? Is this the imperfect way of human sight and how we are with one another in the world?

I do know that since the birth of my son, I have been given honour here in Bethlehem. A place among them, a name. It makes me sad to think about it; that I myself would never have been enough. But still, I am not foolish enough to forgo the comfort it gives me; and I am thankful for the protection and ease this new role bestows. Isn't it

strange, Orpah, it occurs to me now... the way that Naomi gathered my newborn son to her wrinkled bosom and made him into her own.... perhaps in that way we all make one another in the image our emptiness demands...

So it is, that this community had the power to name and make me into who they needed me to be. I had been widow, foreigner, half-breed, faceless, needy, homeless and watered down. In the single turning of the moon, the attention of one man, and the birth of a boychild, I became mother, bride, welcome guest, relative, someone with a name and a face. I belonged.

I pray to the God of our Mothers and Fathers that my own gaze will create and not destroy. My own power to curse or bless by how I choose to see and name others is frightening and yet a gift. Our sister Hagar called God "the one who sees me" and may it be so for all those who were like me. And may I be a midwife to the birthing gaze of the One in whose eyes we are created and named as worthy guests on this earth; forever welcome and always home.

I remember nights at the seashore when Obed was a child. We'd camp there by the sandy rocks, and spend days collecting the water-polished stones that have anchored my soul since we were little girls together at the shore. Perhaps that's why it was important to me to take my own son to the sea. And Orpah – he took to the water so easily – as though he were born to it. I called him my little fish; watching in wonder as he entered the waves without fear even as a tiny boy. And then at night, we'd make a fire, and sit in the sand in the firelight. I'd tell him the stories of our people, and his father's people too. He loved to hear them, over and over again. After he'd fall asleep with his head against my bosom, that little fish of mine, I would sit listening to the waves against the shore. The gentle slap slap of water on rock, the in-and-out rhythm of the tide, almost like the earth breathing. At times like that, I looked out over the sea, tried to imagine how far you were from me, and I'd hear whispers, your voice carried to me over the water, like a welcome and healing humid wind from the south.

And now, our beloved Naomi has gone, her own dear self a wave upon the shore. Writing this has blessed me, my sister. With memory, and with a hope I wish I could convey to you.

There is a rumour these last days among the young people. They report a ghost-jackal in the forest just outside our village, in the hills. They squeal in the telling, and delight in exaggerating it, to make others scream as well. They say she appears in the mist, on the edge of things, in the evening. A she-jackal, they say, belly hanging and ready to give suck. They swear they can see through her; that she stands watching, then disappears into the mist.

Ah the drama of the young.

They love to frighten themselves....they are learning who they are.

But still...I wonder....

