

Nigun Poems

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Preface

This set of poems grew out of my experiences of listening and finding myself inside nigunim (pl; singular nigun or nign), Chassidic chants—mystical, usually wordless songs used as accompaniment for rituals—weddings, prayers, candle-lightings—collective beckoning of transcendence. The nigun experience is fraught with what Amiri Baraka called, referring to blues, the “re/feeling”—proximity and shape of personal history of encounters with unfathomable.

Because most of the nigunim did not have lyrics they were comprised of scat—but a somber sort of a scat: “oi-oi”, “di-dai”, “bah-bom”, etc. Musical instruments were not used to accompany them, either, since most of the singing happened on the Sabbath, when instruments were put away. Rid of accompaniment, rid of lyrics, these stripped down chants were visceral and prayer-like but washed out of content, and filled, instead, with implication—with attempts. At the climax of one of his talks, balancing at the edge of the cognitive void, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov reportedly said: “And even to this, too, there’s an answer. But that answer is necessarily a song.”

These poems attempt to reimagine the sensation of locating oneself inside a nigun.

Induction into Nigun¹

people turn into rocks
song like water
beats between them

1. This poem was originally published in the *New Vilna Review* in March 2012

Blanket Nigun

what this blanket weighs
for days, yr muscles will remember
feet land on the floor
so cold you begin to feel
a tonic sled, under another
you, under another
blanket, heavier, bigger, what
it weighs you may never
know—

 the cold—
is inside the vision
as blankness, your voice
nesting, missing feathers
lifting off

 you
 begin
 to feel

Current Musicology

Painters' Nigun

On hearing Frank London's H.W.N.

this is a song of people painting walls
walls of a shul that doesn't exist

paint rolls upwards
 pulled by other gravities

you could celebrate a bris a yontef

air thickening with paint—

inanimate painted
with breath
 breathes
 as it is said:
“living words”

painting walls on the scaffolding of a drum solo
of fists banging a table which is a real table it's really here
but the scaffolding is full of paint the scaffolding is a face
of the shul that doesn't exist

the sound rises like an animal and walks
 moving its burden
to the pit
 in the shul a pit built for the chazzan
as it is said “from the depth . . .”

this yontef commemorates what
has never happened

but the paint the paint
rolls like walls stands like sea

walls standing
 mercurially

Nigun Au Rebour

this song is not an act but erasure

the way other songs reach into you

 this one retreats,

 taking with it stuff that seemed nailed to the floor

this song is cinematic in its reel

you may find yourself humming its residue

you may wonder who you're

 feeding—

through the song's straw that ascends

to the pouting mouth

 of the vanishing point

Current Musicology

Root–Note Nigun

this nigun is about a stick figure
and the wind over canvas
that bared it—

it's about a two–bone
abstraction, a solitary root
note, resounding its stripped chorus
no aesthetics beyond instinct—

this nigun is about a scratch,
a typo, doodle of person—dropped
into an impressionist painting
amidst the ball of flesh and color

and it knows there must be a mistake
and mumbles all it ever knows to mumble
—“I exist”—“I exist”—“I exist”—
a note bent in and out of the question

this nigun is about a stick figure
imagining it could change its fate
by lifting its stick–figure hands
heavenward

Cecil's Scarecrow Nigun

for Anthony Coleman

this nigun is a scarecrow

in your old clothes
it looks a little bit like you—
a no-thanks-prophecy—

the fence: scarecrow's
 stage and metalepsis

melody lint,
 limp sleeves and run-on paint

everybody here forgets
 what they came for—

 newly unknotted,
 turn
 into congregants
 dissipating in their coats

the nigun *shuckles*, rocks
 alone
 victorious
 creaking guardian

in the field of pure color

Current Musicology

Amphibian Nigun

needle threads nothingness
hunks of it
 transparent slices of ice
a dress
good for running up and down
the stairs
 of the ancestral dream
ice quickly goes
New York
 ice always does
melting ripples around your face
it's the puddle-waltz—
for a minute you remember
there's a world at the bottom
of your stomach
peopled with memories
sad eyes, winking—
and when you raise your head and ask for a drink
someone shows you to the ocean
and says welcome to your new life
under the water