

JAY LADIN

Three Poems

Come As You Were

We are all children again.
Wives slight as celery stalks
emerge from tentlike dresses,

taller, surer than the husbands
lost in sleeves so long
they cannot fumble at their buttons.

Nothing touching in this transformation,
this second chance
to make the same mistakes again

without the glaze
of innocence or sublimation. One wife
pushes another—shorter, a little fat—

off the heels she teeters in. Husband
pours a shot of gin
over wife's blond head.

The throwing starts; the kicks;
shrieks of rage
that might have spiralled into joy

if we were truly children. Our emotions
like our clothes
snarl and expose

the bodies flailing within them. Only lust
has shrunken with us.
Rings fall off our fingers.

Holes close in our lobes.
Even our scars have disappeared.
We mean so little to each other now,

a moment of rage or laughter
before shrieks are silenced
by overwhelming desire

for hands to lift us up,
to give us something soft to clutch,
a doll we can pretend to care for,

slippers with faces, houses we tower over,
doors too small to enter,
where mothers and fathers the size of spiders

balance checkbooks, dust, playing out
the lives we played at, toys
that have outgrown us.

The Feast of the Missing Centre

“How long, O Lord, shall I cry ‘Violence,’ and You will not save?” the prophet Habakkuk demanded in 600 BCE, trying to distinguish empire from God, triumph from justice, as the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar – “the treacherous, arrogant man who has harvested all the nations” – strode across what we now call the Middle East, dragging the world behind him...

The Babylonian is approaching, is here.

Kings he holds in derision;
princes are a joke to him.
He laughs at every border
and sweeps over it like wind.

O Lord, why do You stand by

while he tramples nations? Gates
swing open to receive him,
temples throb with his hymns,
while I who know him for what he is

spin in spirals of frustration, twisted by the vision

You O Lord have cursed me with,
caught in the crack
between cause and effect
where justice gives, or fails to give,

meaning to event.

Justice gone, the chasm yawns.
Bodies jam the gap.
I can hardly tell O Lord
which of them I am.

I teeter atop my gender,

an irony with legs,
my capitulations exposed
by every shred I wear.
Thou who art of purer eyes,

how can You bear to look on men?

The Babylonian is approaching, is here.
The world, You say, is his
but You must have some life left,
a few digits, a hand,

a lid O Lord to close,

to close my eye to him.

*

I used to follow the wars, the executions

of carefully calibrated manoeuvres,
sapping of shrines, the ant-like desperation
of displaced populations, the plumes of smoke
that once were provinces.

Where he rolled, I rolled

and what I saw I recorded O Lord
in my lidless lens. Snapped and shot
dogs and diplomats

maintaining their innocence, children

chewing chocolate bars, hands of indeterminate gender

whitening blithely on batons and whips,
alleys garnished with beggars' bundles,
surgeons' pails, the gouged wine-bronze
of deserters' helmets.

The Babylonian rolled

and I rolled after him, pressing toward the centre
where his conquests began. The circling birds
sang louder and louder,
contradictory in their praise, praising contradiction.

*

The news is always good
to the Babylonian; the future
must be embraced, the triumphs of the past

point the way infallibly
to the triumphs just ahead, Time leaps forward
and doubles back, confounding

effect with cause,
murder with self-defence.
Nothing can happen to us now O Lord,

there is nothing left to happen,
but the wish to trickle back
to a time when all decisions

were in bigger, harder hands. Senators and secretaries
frolic like lambs
through corridors of power

the glamorous, winning Babylonian grazes,
horns on his gods, crook in his hands,
empire stripped to its premises,

the comfort of herds
and the loneliness of kids,
cries for help

tufted with pubic hair
that quaver between nostalgia and regret,
the Babylonian and the shadow

the setting sun casts
on the scales that shine in his net.
For a moment, it is evident O Lord

how wholly we are his.
Our innocence ripens into his gender.
His instruments wink in our pans.

The Babylonian approaches, gathering captives like sand.
Time pants between contractions.
We avoid each other's eyes.

Ready ourselves for him.

*

Leading a sheep, cradling a kid,
the garlanded, well-knit Babylonian
travels by boat to the temple.

Oiled, bronzed, laden with gold,
he's never been more attractive, catching every eye
his destiny will ravish,

lawyers and streetsweepers, mothers and merchants
poised to accept
the terrible lance of his pleasure.

He takes us singly, side by side,
in clans and confederations,
and the stones cry out from the wall

and the beams in the woodwork answer
with an almost human shudder
every liberty he takes

to satisfy his desire.

Ah, you who pile up what isn't yours,
genial, wide-eyed boy, ravisher of nations,
those who embrace you will awaken,

the cup of intoxication
will empty itself at your lips, and you too will stagger
from disaster to disaster.

Slaughter your bullocks. Kill your kids.
The Lord will flow
like blood from your throat.

Redden your wedding bed.

*

At last the Feast begins. Wineglasses brim,

generous, welcoming Babylonian hands
pile tables with breaded organs,

glacéed whale bladder, grilled wolf's breast
plattered by giggling water-bearers, girls with belts

cinched tight above their innocence.
Suits and dresses, blouses and blazers,

gracefully woven bustieres
toast one another's successes.

Bodies O Lord are not admitted:
births and deaths, mutilations,

hearts to murmur, hands
to regret. Necklines plunge,

waistlines spread, north to south, east to west.
The Babylonian

feeds on our emptiness,
a glee which breeds,

a grief without boundaries,
a gravid, wistful breath.

*

*The prophet Habakkuk's psalm
after his lamentations:*

Lord hearing your sound I cower. Lord
In rage remember compassion.

Plague walks before You; fevers fly from Your feet.
You stand, and Earth stretches;

You glance, and civilizations advance.
In rage You pace the earth; with a snort,

You trample nations. At the sight of You,
Mountains give birth,

Floodwaters gush, sun and moon
Huddle in a single house,

Light your arrows as they fly,
Ignite your glittering lance. From evil's house,

You sever the head, baring foundations
Down to the neck,

Spearing with his own spikes
The one whose delight

Devours the poor in secret.
The day of trouble comes; the people

Rush to meet it. The fig doesn't bud
And the olive fails, and the vines don't thrive,

And the fields don't yield,
But I will exult in the Lord. O Lord,

You set my feet like the ram's,
And so, beyond the heights

Of conquerors, I dance.
For the leader. With my string-music.

Blind Date with the Muse

Thought you liked girls
Boned like railroad tracks.
Not as pretty without my clothes?

There's something about my breasts...
Too small, perhaps? Too slack? More romantic
To ogle over a glass of wine

Than to find beneath your hands?
That's not what you meant? You'd like
To correct my impression

If you could get a word in,
To turn out the light and relieve the tension
By pretending you're fucking

A small, small nation
Whose borders keep squirming
As you pull out and in?

Go ahead—
Tell me you love me.
Make me understand.

Don't you dare walk out on me.
I'm the life-force,
You pig.