

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;

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.

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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.

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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.that quavets b lFo()4(ve)42Tw 9.164(t)-6(u42Tw r)-5(e)-2elo(.)JTJ(L)21(f)-5(t)

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.