

Prophet and kings: a long poem

Sarah Klassen, *Winnipeg*

The almond tree
“What do you see, Jeremiah?” Jeremiah 1:11

I
You could try pretending
you see nothing
hear nothing but the east wind
in the almond tree, nothing
touches your heart, your unwilling
lips. Try denying
those dull thundering horses' hooves
battle cries from the north
and coming closer. Cold fear
rises inside you
rises and won't subside.

Silent you wait for the words
afraid they will slide knife-sharp
through flesh and bone
driving their honed steel
straight to the heart.

Branches of the almond tree
wrenched by the wind groan
in the dark night. You pray to God
the slender walls of your resolution
will hold.

II.
Growing up with the holy
city a stone's throw
from your father's house
In the hills you'd never have guessed
your soft adolescent flesh
your throat, tongue, your innocent heart
were preparing while you played
in the dust and sun
to become the uneasy home base
for words
you never wanted to speak.

III.

What do you see?

The question is always the same
and the answer a cauldron
spilling fire from the north.

What do you hear?

God Almighty
words that outshout the wind,
A hard dry pounding in your throat.

Working woman

“Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister
Judah had no fear.” Jeremiah 3:8

You’ll do it with wood and stone
if need be
and it’s not a sword at your throat
makes you put out
but the sweet burning of desire.

You prefer to do it on top
of a naked hill
not minding the sharp grass
spreading your legs like branches
of a cedar tree. Your sister
was like that
and you’re no better
or worse. What you want
Is what they all want.

You’re fed up with covenants
words written on stone
the narrow hard
way of faithfulness. It’s only love
you keep repeating
makes the world go round.

Josiah

“Josiah was eight years old
when he became king.” 2 Chronicles 34:1

Jerusalem rings
with devout hammer strokes
of renovation
clanking chisels’ sharp litany
the whining rise and fall of the saws’ chorus.

Angels showing grime
In the fine creases of their outspread wings
are touched with gold
brickwork restored to former glory
failing walls shored up.

The king believes
that's all it takes. Imagine
his astonishment stumbling upon clues
at the festering root of things:
the whole rotten foundation
crumbling.

It will take wrecking crews
with steel axes
to smash the stones of the altar
grinding them to dust.
It will take the hungry and enraged
tongues of fire
followed by long seasons
of driving rain.

Jehoahaz
“ . . . he reigned in Jerusalem
three months.” 2 Chronicles 36:2

The king trades in his crown
for chains around the ankles.
Hard to say what's heavier
to bear.

He exchanges the temple's splendor
for the jagged shadow
of the sphinx
and dreams

the luminous, translucent
phases of the lovely moon
held fast now in a sacred river.
How quickly she grows
round and thin
round and thin once more
and again.

How soon it's all over.

Drought

Exhausted
the prophet calls it a day.
Checks in at some quiet prairie
motel with swimming pool
and sauna, the sun
beating everything to dust.

A place
where he can peel away
the rags twisted around wounds
he's been trying to hide,
gashes from which blood seeps
In thin streams nothing can stop
and nothing eradicate
the stains.

Just a few days
away from the unforgiving heat
that cracks the skin
the dust-laden west wind
searing the eyes.
Away from the eerie creaking of doors
on failed farms. The frog's chorus.
A sly rustling in the grass.

Rains may fall in the night
while he sleeps
dreaming. He will hear
a quiet trickling in ditches
and everywhere the desperate
sucking sound
hungry children make
or the parched earth
with its hard dry mouth.

In the potter's house
"So I went down to the potter's house
and I saw him working at the wheel." Jeremiah 18:3

It's not the monotonous dull
whirring of the wheel
shards scattered all over
the earthen, floor
or even the dank half-darkness
catch the imagination
of the prophet

He doesn't mind the wet smell
filling his lungs
the taste of clay on his lips.

The potter's moist palms
shape the unhardened clay
pressing it out
of its heavy earth-brown
formlessness
urging escape
from the wheel's hypnotic song.

The prophet is amazed
to see the loveliness
the potter keeps hidden
deep in his fingers
or somewhere in his heart or brain
break free. It spills

over in bowls vases cups
each curve perfect
each premeditated lip and throat
graceful. The potter
while the prophet watches
slides them with shard-
lacerated hands
into the white flame.

Real estate
"I knew that this was the word of the Lord;
so I bought the field at Anathoth.." Jeremiah 32:8,9.

Held captive in the royal courtyard
the prophet signs the binding contract
and gets a field no one else has
enough faith to buy.

Lately he hears the constant clank
of chains in the street
pictures the siege ramps and dreams of hanging
gardens in a strange city. Unhindered weeds

will overrun his field
and legions of marching feet
pound it stone-hard and so dry
grapes will refuse to grow. A prophet knows

something about the real world
of roots and soil. He knows rain and sun
are stronger than words. He believes
one day he'll find hooks and shears and try his hand
at pruning vines.

Jehoiakim

"...he reigned in Jerusalem
eleven years." 2 Chronicles 36:5

This winter the king
sits close to the fire
feeding it paper and newly-dried ink
in spite of the state
secretary's nervous frowns.
He watches the smoke curl
around the treasonous black words.
When the last fragments of the scroll
turn to ash, he's left with the paper
knife clenched like a tuft of straw
in his fist.

Fire in the pot is small comfort
for a besieged king.
He stares at the flame and dreams
death. His royal
body dumped in a bleak field
for the frost to harden
and the righteous sun
to burn black.

These days truth isn't wholesome
news for the king. Nebuchad-
nezzar leaving Egypt
ravaged, Babylonian soldiers
breathing fire at each of the sacred
city gates. The king maintains
a faint hope he can hide
the temple gold and silver
in a safe place. He believes he can still

find Jeremiah and his scribe
and make them eat their deadly words.

That summer the sky

That summer the sky turned grey-
yellow, a colour even the birds
fled from. The strange translucence
never quit concealing the sun
is what one remembers.

Stream beds filled
with nothing but stones.
All the leaves held motionless
in static air
even the restless wind
pinned down
by the sun's obsession.

Jehoiachin

"...he reigned in Jerusalem
three months." 2 Kings 24:8

Not yet twenty he knows sometimes
it's best to surrender, stop leaning
on alliances, turn in
the heavy sceptre and

lead the enemy straight
into the sacred centre of everything.
The effort of holding out
will exhaust you. Let it go

the gold inlay in carved cedar
angels, the silver vessels,
promises the prophet reminds you
the people made to God.

Might as well accept the shackles
pagan soldiers clamp to your wrists
and the wrists of the goldsmiths and carvers
for the long march to Babylon.

Who knows you may end up
getting three meals a day
half-decent clothes
and time off for good behaviour.

Ways of drowning

"They lowered Jeremiah by ropes
into the cistern." Jeremiah 38:6

There's little hope in this
black stinking silt. It lodges deep
under your fingernails
clings to damp hair, your nose
eyes mouth, pushes thick
and gritty into your lungs.

Wading is next to impossible.
If by some miracle
a strong hand reaches out for you
this jealous quagmire
won't let you go.

When drowning in mud
your whole life unfolds before you,
a diseased dream. A nightmare
where the voice calls out
reminding you of warnings
left stuck in your throat. Unspoken
messages from God you wanted to spit out
of your mouth, those hard words you abhorred.

You wanted hills and trees
and the wind wrapped warm around you. You wanted
the safe bright silence
of a holy place.

(If this were a rain-filled cistern
you could float
or tread water as long as your breath lasts
then slip under and die
a clean death.)

Zedekiah
"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord."
2 Kings 24:19

When the city walls collapsed
the crash was something Zedekiah
could have recalled from conversations
with the prophet. He saw the bronze

pillars of the temple smashed
everything looted
down to the wick-trimmers. His whole army
fled. Before they gouged his eyes out

they let him see his sons
murdered. In the end he clung to God's
promise he should not die
by the sword or be cast

naked in an open field. Before his burial
solemn as any former king's
someone should remove the bronze
shackles from his legs.

In season

The prophet is at home on the wide prairie.
Summer's long heat, the unforgiving wind
hold no surprises.

He holds the earth's four corners
always in his vision. How else
can he comprehend endlessness
of sky, iridescent wheatfields
in spring, the long thin reach of roads
that led him here.

Nights are cool as mountains
curtained sometimes with mist.
He knows the moon's flat circle, its orbit.
His oracles the stars
breathe knowledge that he needs.
He removes his shoes and listens.
Maybe a coyote howls and somewhere
branches creak. Not much
but he knows which voices he can trust.

Winters he burrows in snowdrifts
and waits out blizzard after blizzard.
The pure silence that always follows
is the time for dreaming.
Now if he opens his eyes
a silent bird
cowers in folds of blue snow
melting at the edges.
Jagged sheets of lake ice
pushed up like headstones by wind.
He grows wise and understands
that even now it is too soon
for words.

His pearly breath against the cold sky
rises like a feather.

On the banks of the Nile

“So they entered Egypt....” Jeremiah 43:7

All things begin and end
with words. The ones you now hear
jangle like chains. They are foreign
and get distorted in the desert’s
blinding sand-storms.

The ones you speak are heavy
as stone. They won’t ring out
or echo back from the slant sides
of pyramids.

It wasn’t your idea
all those threats and warnings.

Fed up with lamentations
the fugitives from Judah
imagine thy could live on bread
and fresh memories of the moon
blessing the beautiful city.

They don’t believe you
when you speak of wolves
running wild in wheat fields, foxes
skulking in the vineyards.

Last night you dreamt a mother
was eating her new-born child.

Something you learn
living this close to hunger
and death
there’s only so much you can do
with words.