

The Roman Centurion's Good Friday

i

Jerusalem, Jerusalem the turbulent in the spring,
The crack of dry thunder in the skies of its desert,
The smell of moist air in the courtyards at noon,
The streets and alleyways crowded with pilgrims,
The fields round its battlements a village of tents,
The vineyard below the rock-face of the barracks
Bursting new green from the skeleton of its twigs,
Jerusalem, Jerusalem on a Friday in spring-time
Is where I first saw him, heard him, evaded him,
An artisan in the robe and sandals of his people,
A dreamer shoved into the courts of the governor,
A priest of the fisherman, the widow and outcast,
A poet from the villages and the hills of beyond.

ii

Jerusalem, Jerusalem in the dim light of a dawn,
The priests carrying firewood to the inner temple ,
The hawkers setting out their trestles and boards,
The athletes beginning their run up Mount Olives,
A caravan from the south unpacking its panniers,
The shutters in a fortress on a rock being opened,
A threshold in the street of the exiles being swept,
Jerusalem, Jerusalem on a Friday in spring-time
Is where I first saw him, heard him, spurned him,
A friend to children and the untouchable woman,
A thinker who'd walked in the deserts of anguish,
Who spoke to people of the kingdom within them
And channelled them the spirit of love, love, love.

iii

I was still young and smiled with enthusiasms,
An officer of a legion securing Rome's margins,
Relishing the music and foods of the provinces,
Exploring their labyrinths of language and law,
Sending back plants to a philosopher in Athens
And the children of officials to a tutor in Rome,

I was green bronze in the clay mould of duties
Inspecting the records and taxes of citizenship
And measuring the hills with the road engineers,
Cajoling and snarling my slum-rats into soldiers,
Deploying them at cross-road, market and gate,
Inveigling a councillor and whisperers in hoods
To nourish me with news from temples and inns.

iv

I wrote long letters by lamplight in the evenings
To a passion in Carthage, a dalliance in Greece,
With always that ache, that edge of incompleteness
Troubling me the moment my duties were done,
Described the rugs and brass-ware in markets,
The schisms in the temple, the rebels in a cave,
The gold pomegranates in shrines to the north,
And wrote in dismay of slovenly administrators,
The boredom and loneliness of public holidays,
The dust in the mouth of the march to Caesarea,
And scratched out odes on rough-faced papyrus
To discipline that kept the strands of me plaited
And to Venus who kept the man of me still live.

v

And Rome, Rome, the ordered streets of Rome,
The sentried squares and scoured colonnades,
The smell of the stallions harnessed on parade,
The marbled porticoes of the public companies,
The roar from the stadium as the games began,
Rome scaffolded the vision of the civil servants,
The bankers and magistrate I called my friends,
The vision of a republic where law's iron ghosts
Patrolled the barbarous desires of each citizen,
Where petty sects were raised into legislatures
And banditry crushed on the passes and seas,
Where trade put bellies on merchant and farmer
And Roman governance brought peace, peace.

But that is a peace for the young to grapple with,
 For the cynics of Rome have corrupted its vision
 With the acids blistering the innards of its pipes,
 The senate's turned into a sweat-house of avarice
 That mocks our austerities and failed campaigns,
 And the cataracts of age cloud over fresh insights
 As I grope and flounder on the tracks of my farm,
 And doubt, doubt as chilling as wind off the snow,
 Doubt blows through the library of my memories
 And stirs its sheeted racks of fears and dismays,
 That the Rome of our dreams was all a carapace,
 The arches of an aqueduct in a desert of spirit,
 The trellis-work of a new estate, before the vine.

Was I, that Friday, a witness to the inevitable
 Or was I the accomplice to a sliding betrayal?
 That fear eats into the germs of stored thoughts
 As weevils make dust in the wheat of my barns,
 And troubled at night by the ache of old wounds,
 By the crack of dry thunder in the hills of Ostia,
 The smell of moist air seeping through shutters
 And spring again swelling the twigs of my farm,
 I see him shoved stumbling through an archway
 And hear myself telling the guards to arrest him,
 A stranger from the villages and hills of beyond,
 A friend to the fisherman, the widow and outcast,
 A priest of time's bursting its season of drought.

Stumbling, staggering, a wraith in my memory,
 Through plans I was shaping to visit a daughter,
 Through fears shaping me of a solitary demise,
 His shade took breath in the dim light of a dawn,
 A shade from the lake-lands with black hair awry
 Trying to look dignified in front of the governor
 With his hands tied behind him, a sandal broken
 And the mob in the street chanting for his death,
 His eyes half-closed from a night of interrogation

And dark blood drying in a trickle from his mouth,
With three years I was told of dissent behind him
And that week's march into Jerusalem to pay for,
And wrath in the temple at money-men and priest.

ix

And hearing the charges shouted against him,
Blasphemy against the religion of the temple
And sedition against the governance of Rome,
I watch him flinch as the soldiers threaten him
And close his eyes as the questions batter in,
And scenting in the wind across the courtroom
The smoke of a lamb being burnt in the temple
And the stench of sweat from the mob outside,
I watch as the governor proclaims him innocent
And orders him whipped to appease the crowd
And turn on my bed and hear a voice murmur
That wherever in Rome or its provinces I live
Jerusalem's still part of the place where I am.

x

For I was the centurion of the watch that Friday,
Had heard the cough of the sentry on the walls,
The psalms being sung in the temple next door
And the bleating of flocks from the valley below,
Had seen the torch-lights flickering in a garden
And the sting of the Scorpion rise up in the sky,
Was woken in the dark from a nightmare chaos
Of goat-legged couplings, old citadels in flames,
Apollo's smashed statue in the sewers of Rome,
Was ushered to a chamber inside the barracks
To listen to the whispers of my friends in hoods,
Then roused the legion, debriefed the governor
And summoned the clerks of the court to a trial.

xi

As acrid and lingering as the smoke of the herb
Which burns in the hallway to honour the dead
That morning's memories drift through my mind,
That we were in Jerusalem to smother disorder

Among a strange people who spat in our tracks,
That the prophet who stood alone in front of us
We'd watched for months in villages and towns,
Had called him a dissident without a bodyguard,
Tormented by guilt at the slaughter of the infants
Which rumour claimed was the price of his birth,
A moralist whom Rome would not like to martyr,
Sentenced in secret by the high-priests to death
For ridding the temple of their partners in trade.

xii

The trial was a fire-storm of furied confusions
With the outlaw at the centre the only one still,
The governor outflanked by the leaders' guile,
The soldiers in the guard-house losing control
And beating him longer than had been planned,
A nightmare in daylight of blood-streaked skin,
The crown lopsided on his head like a clown's,
The laughter of adults and children in the alley
When he stumbled with his cross to the ground,
The malice that animals the feelings of people
When Rome washes its hands of the spirited
And love's sent staggering through Jerusalem
And driven to the Golgotha mound of its death.

xiii

Was I that Friday a witness to the inevitable
Or was I accomplice to a seasonal betrayal?
Those horrors flap up and crowd my thoughts
As the ravens caw circles in Golgotha's skies,
And waking in spring in the dim light of dawn,
With an old man's desire to bring to account
His days of achievement and days of shame,
I have yet to forgive, if forgiveness were mine,
That I was the one who supervised his death,
The slow suffocation on the scaffold of Rome
Of a priest from the hills and lakes of beyond,
Who spoke to people of the world within them
And channelled the waters of love, love, love.

NOTES

This poem is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is imagined to be the Roman centurion described in the gospel who reflects on Good Friday while in retirement on his farm in the countryside near Rome.

Readers unfamiliar with oral literature may be interested in the prosody. A four-stressed line was chosen, based on the alliterated line of Anglo-Saxon oral poetry. The form of the epithets is adapted from those found in praise-poems in the Nguni and Sotho languages. Each stanza is unstopped till the end, borrowing the extended breath intervals of medieval plain-chant. The length of the poem assumes an attention span of about fifteen minutes. The repetition of certain kennings and symbols was thought necessary by the author to give them prominence in the rapid cascade of images experienced by an audience in an emotionally charged setting. These repetitions may seem forced to those who encounter the poem as a text. Readers unlike audiences however will have more time to contemplate the metaphors. Rome for example stands for a globalizing power and Jerusalem for a culture with strong religious beliefs on the periphery.

The poem was commissioned by the clergy of Grahamstown Cathedral for a Good Friday service where it was read by the author. The text was subsequently published as a booklet by the cathedral. The poem has since been performed by different people to congregations in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Oxford and Dublin.

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