

You, Who Have Tortured Me

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I

The prophet is up on high, the men on the slope below him. They are levied from among the People; they are the People.

They have circled the mountain in the night, as the queen instructed, and have ascended from the east, to deny the prophet his retreat to the Land of Moab.

The sun has risen behind them for this past hour as they approached the prophet. The prophet looks into where the sun is, does not look at the People. He is up on that ridge all on his own. If he were not blind, he would recoil from the sun. How did he even get there?

The queen has wearied of the fact of the prophet. Can there be kings and queens in a world of prophets? There can't be. And so they are here, to make an end of him.

The prophet looks straight at the sun, his eyes locking with its round shape. Blind as he may be, he must feel the warmth on his skin. It is the sweet hour of the day, when one can taste the dew in the air, and the sun dispels the worst cold of the night. It is the hour – the one hour – where Jahweh smiles upon the People.

They have their swords drawn. They have the sun at their back, so they won't have to shield their faces; so they can see who they kill. Much easier, if they could stab blindly into the light, recognise the flesh of the prophet only by plunging into it. They see him too clearly, the sunlight at play in the whiteness of his beard.

They have swords, because to carry swords is to be more certain of killing. The queen believes that if she sends out fifty men, all of whom can kill the prophet with a single blow, at least one of them will do it. The queen is mistaken. If she had sent out fifty men with just their bare hands, the prophet might be dead already. They might throw rocks, beat him, tread on him. It is their bronze swords, the weight of death in their hands, that makes them tarry.

They have been told not to speak to him. The queen believes that if they don't speak to him, he will not speak back, and they will kill him without hesitation. And so they stand there. They dare not speak amongst themselves, for fear he'll hear. He may be blind; it could be his ears are the sharper for it. Among fifty men, without language, they are, each of them, alone like grains of sand.

II

Ithobaal of Tyrus, wisest among kings, understood how to wield the weapon of marriage; but unlike other kings, he did not fear his daughter Jezebel might elope with some tender-locked harpist, upsetting his schemes. He put his faith in her: she would understand that her marriage should serve an interest of the kingdom. Indeed, he expected Jezebel to understand her own power better than he did, and allowed her to choose her husband. She could choose the younger son of the king of Byblos; a nephew of the king of Ashur; or the heir-apparent of the Kingdom of Israel, the last appearing the least promising. If something should befall the elder son of the King of Byblos, Jezebel could unite that city to Tyrus. If the King of Ashur with his invincible army would ever be done subduing the Babylonians, and would turn west because idling armies have a habit of turning on their kings, Jezebel's charms might be the salvation of Tyrus. Israel, on the other hand: a kingdom of peasants who were convinced that their half-desert valley was the most fertile land, their demon-god demanding they believe it. Ithobaal believed his daughter to be wasted on such a paltry realm. His daughter believed otherwise.

“Israel is weak, father, because its kings are weak. Israel is like Tyrus; except Tyrus had you. Let me be like you, father. Let me marry their weak prince; and I will beget strength. One day, Israel will amaze the world.”

She married Ahab - out of disdain, because he was a king she could lord over, whereas she had no hope of dominating some Assyrian prince, who would come home from the battlefield where he had lopped off limbs and chopped off heads, make cursory love to her, and beget a young prince who would one day also lop off limbs and chop off heads.

As time passes, she finds she feels tenderness for Ahab, so obviously unsuited to reign. She learns to love his weakness: she proves her love by being hard in his stead. The People call her ‘whore’, and not just in whispers. They shout it at her, if always from the safety of crowds. It made her smile at first; now, she shrugs it off. It is imperative that the king’s policy is harsh; harshness, to lead to more freedom, and greater riches. It must be she who is called ‘whore’ so that the People may still love Ahab, no matter how harsh his reign.

The peculiarity of the slight is that, yes, Tyrus is a kingdom of easier morals than Israel; and she herself has partaken in those easier morals in no way whatsoever. She will insist that worshippers of Baal be allowed into the kingdom; she concedes that the cult of his consort Astarte can be practiced only in the strictest privacy, as it already is. She accepts that this is a kingdom where men will not go to absolve themselves of their lust by going to Astarte’s temple, paying a fee, and taking a priestess. She understands that, among these simple people, any woman hailing from a kingdom where such is common practice will be considered a whore. She has encouraged Ahab to still his lust with a priestess, and was not even flattered when he refused to. She is not a jealous woman. She lords over her husband and sets his policies for him. He can take his revenge with other women, but he will not. She, in turn, has never felt desire for another man.

Those who call her whore can be left unmolested; but she must act against those who resist the cult of gold. It is no matter if the prophet Elijah says that dogs will rend her flesh. She does not

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begrudge any creature its meal. All must eat, in this land of milk and honey that is not rich in either of those victuals. It is a poor land, a land of famine. The river Jordan is but small – Nile, Euphrates, Tigris all put it to shame – but more could be done with it, and those who know how come from elsewhere. Their gods did not inspire them to single-minded devotion, but rather to the most complex mathematics. They understand water the way a god from the desert never will, and they will not come to Israel if they cannot worship their own gods. No worshipper of other gods can feel safe as long as the prophet Elijah is out there.

Ahab doubted whether he should have sent the fifty men – she insisted on it.

“The desert has given you your Lord God,” she told him. “He was found on Mount Sinai. It is a barren mountain, more barren even than the desert here. Could you not have left him there?” She chuckles, looks into his eyes from right near his face. “I didn’t mean that. Of course I didn’t. I don’t begrudge you your god. I have prayed to him often. For you. That the god you believe in might be a softer god.”

“I’m a soft man,” he says.

“There are women who long for a hard man. Fool girls are they! In this land, where the sun tans all skins to be hard like leather, softness is the more worthy. Touch me!” He cradles her face in his hands, rubbing from the cheeks to the temples. “It is a sad thing that a king needs harder hands than yours. If you had harder hands, that smelt of blood rather than myrrh, you would be a better king, and much less dear a husband.”

“Why did you not marry a harder man?”

Her Assyrian prince has slain hundreds in battle. She does not object to killing; but to be in bed with a man who has?

“In a man, I want softness. In a man, I don’t look for a king. But you have been made a king: let me help you be one. You must keep the king’s peace. Jahweh’s peace is the peace of the desert.

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Flowers bloom there hastily and briefly, and die again. The King's peace must be the peace of the sea. Merchants bring money. They bring the myrrh that you rub your hands in, and the gold to pay for that myrrh. What they want in return – to worship within your walls. To worship Baal – my Baal – and even stranger gods.”

And she whispers, so that not even the gods, Baal or Jahweh, can hear her:

“Give the order.”

III

To speak so softly, that the gods will not hear.

Speaking to himself, the prophet does not speak of Jahwe. He says ‘That God’, on days when he curses That God, prime mover of his miseries. That God, who would like nothing more than to be the one god, alone in the world and beyond. If That God is that one god, he asks – sometimes, in his sleep, mumbling to himself, when he is not praying, when That God does not pay attention and he can speak to an almost empty universe – why did he one day have to slay four hundred prophets of another god?

He suspects that That God listens to his curses, that He lets it go, because He knows that His prophet will not stand up to him. What fierceness he has, he spends doing That God's work. That God keeps him tired; and so he can't recriminate with That God, as his ancestor Jacob is thought to have done.

Even on his days of fierceness, when fifty men with swords stare up at him and dare not strike, the prophet is as cracked as the soil. He had been younger once, had herded sheep down these slopes that were now too barren, had served in the armies of more beloved kings. His beard had been thick and bristly and jet black. He had wives, too, and he could see. He did not think of the

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future, because what's in the future? He would merely be old. But his youth has turned to nothing, and in his old age, the future is all he has left.

If you want lentils, you go to market. There will be a dozen, or two dozen, or a hundred peasants there to sell the lentils they've grown. You can look at the lentils, go through them with your hand, pinch a lentil between thumb and index finger to judge its ripeness, and another, and another; find the best lentils. He is not a lentil-buyer. There are thousands of gods, but he cannot reach to touch them. No. He is a lentil, and there is a god, That God, who has picked him. He wonders if he has even been bought yet; That God might still be judging his ripeness. He may yet be discarded, and That God will never remember him.

Even back then, and from his very beginning, life had hurt. His lips would crack. There was balsam he could rub on them, but as a peasant, he could not buy more than one pot in a year. Every day and every night he would have to wonder whether it was already bad enough that he should rub some on. It taught him to extend enduring the pain, to be stronger: to feel the joy of the world straight through the pain.

He knew that the balsam came from some strange land, either born on a ship or a camel, and anyway, he had seen camels only twice – Ishmaelites coming up from the desert, he feared they might be slavers, but their camels were haughty and so were they, they did not look at him – and ships only once, in the far, far distance, on that day when he had gone all the way to the sea, looked at it beating against the sand, and decided that he found more peace looking at the desert. There was a sail in the distance, and he was aware, vaguely, that this must be a ship. It was not interesting to him. A ship could be a wonder to some, but it was nothing compared to the terror of the sea upon first beholding it. His blindness began on that day. He saw a wave, and a wave, and a wave, reproduced in each other, crashing one after another, a being of water, created and dissolving in front of him, and then another, created and dissolving in front of him. Waves rose like kings rose. And they fell – like kings. Some higher and mightier than others – but they would still fall. It was on

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that day that he began to see the world as if it was double, threefold, fourfold, sevenfold, a thousandfold. The doubling, tripling, quadrupling, quintupling of the world was when the world began to disappear. Over the years, the world became like the sea.

IV

The messenger is bowed, half in deference, half in readiness to flee. It is an animal posture, as of a sheep who yet considers running from the lion. This is not a smug messenger expecting to be covered in gold; this is a messenger who fears the wrath of his queen. She sighs. The prophet must have survived, and now the messenger expects to die in his stead.

“What news?” she asks.

She looks at the messenger and the messenger does not look back.

“There is no news?” she asks.

Moments of silence.

“You have come to tell me that there is nothing to report? The absence of news is news in and of itself. Where is the prophet Elijah?”

“Still on Mount Carmel. Or no longer. Nobody knows.”

“Who has last seen him?”

“Nobody knows.”

“I am inclined to mercy towards my messengers, provided they bring me news. So speak.”

That is how it had to be, for a ruler. Cruelty could be good, if it would bring out the truth. Cruelty that had the opposite effect could be the end of a ruler, so she would not torture or execute a messenger for telling the truth. It had been suggested to her – by her husband, of course – that a

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messenger should never be the victim of his queen's cruelty. This she had dismissed. There was too much riding upon the messages delivered to her. If she failed to make cruelty an incentive, some would be bought to give her misinformation on purpose.

"The prophet has not been seen," the messenger said. "Nor the fifty men sent to kill him."

"They were no longer on Mount Carmel?"

"They could still be. Nobody has dared to go near. A plume of smoke has been seen, and then vultures, hundreds, like after one of our great battles, from Lebanon and the Sinai and from across the land, descending on Mount Carmel."

"A plume of smoke?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Like from a campfire? Or from a forest burning?"

"There is no forest on Mount Carmel."

"I know there isn't."

"It was like a forest burning."

"And do vultures eat charred meat?" she asked.

"It is not known."

She knows Elijah is many things, but he is no kind of meal at all. The vultures are there to feed on the soldiers. All the men she sent, all of them, dead, for birds to eat.

What god would do this? What mad god would protect a servant as lowly as Elijah, and kill fifty men for his safety? She has been a good servant to Jahweh. Her policies will bring riches to Israel. She will build him a temple in Samaria next to which Salomon's temple in Jerusalem looks on Ishmaelite's tent. She will build a coalition that keeps the People safe from the greatest danger facing

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it: the endless hunger of the god Ashur and his wrathful servants. That coalition needs trade. It needs a cordial agreement between Jahweh and the other gods, Baal of Tyrus first among them. All Jahwe must do is let those gods be. She would make Jahwe a king among gods.

What a strange god he is, who would prefer the desert to the opulence of a temple; would prefer the barrenness to the riches that the sea brings; would prefer the company of a hoary old prophet, blind before his eyes ever got to see anything worth seeing, to the company of other gods. Who would see his decrepit prophet confronted by the brave and strapping flesh of fifty soldiers – and would destroy the soldiers to save the prophet. She has come to a land that has such a god? Israel is a strange land. A land of possibilities; and a land of failures, and such a land could only be made by a strange and cruel god.

And she knows that this is the god of Israel, that this is a god greater in his cruelty, greater in his violence than Baal, than Istarte, than all the thousand and one gods of her homeland. That this god will consume her, and all who are hers, and all her gods. And He is too awesome to be feared, and He is too awesome to anger her. And she lies on the floor, and she weeps, recognising the beauty of such a cruel god.

V

He had heard the fire blaze, but there was no screaming. A wall of fire had descended, to protect him. And then the fire expired. Had they fled? He might not have heard it over the blaze. He heard the vultures though. He heard the vultures and did not understand. A man that burns to death will scream, and he had heard no screams. Whence the vultures? It was not for him; vultures now ignored him. They had stalked him for long enough, but he wouldn't die, and indigence had burnt the fat of his bones. Now, they no longer took an interest. But here they were, and in numbers. The stroke of the wings, the quarrelsome cawing and hissing he did recognise.

He carefully walks down the slope, feeling his way with his stick, and comes upon the bodies. Dead. Unburned. He goes among them carefully, hears the scurrying and hissing of the vultures around him, that do not touch him. Do the vultures know there is That God to protect him? Have they seen That God, up in heaven? He feels their bodies, one after another, up from their guts. He finds their eyelids with his hands – some of their eyes are already plucked out, a delicacy to the vultures, the softness of it, like one of those exotic desserts they are alleged to have at the royal court. He tries to find the eyes of as many of them as possible; and he closes them.

The awareness rises slowly, like bile through his gut. These were men, many men; they had not done a thing to him; and if they had, they would have released an old man from his misery. They have not died for killing him, because they have not killed him. They have died because they might have killed him. They have died because of a possibility.

He stands up, walks forward, stepping and stumbling over corpses and vultures. And cries out for That God to come to him, to show himself. That God speaks to him but not when he's bid to; now he must answer. "Where are you? And why? Why?" If That God is as mighty as he'd like to be, nothing more needs to follow that why: He would be responsible for everything. The prophet utters simple screeds, one word, two words, three words. Then, having moved past the bodies, he sits down, asks the question, with more deliberation.

"Where are you, Lord? You, who shadow me without showing Your face? You are not in the thunder, are You? I listened to the thunder – You were not there. Or in the fire. You were not in the fire. I heard the fire, I smelt it, I felt the fire pull the breath out of my lungs – and you were not in it. Or in the rain. Felt it on my skin and did not feel You. Felt it soak my clothes and did not feel you.

I know where you are. You are in the silence. You are in the soft and gentle rustling. You are in the blood, as I hear it rush when I cup my hand over my ear."

He rises up again. It hurts to do so. He will not shout, but he will stand as he says it.

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“You, who have tortured me. How dare You be in the silence?”

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