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Lamentations

Betsy Bolton

Swarthmore College, bbolton1@swarthmore.edu

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1. Waters flowed over my head; I said, I am cut off.

Jeremiah 3:54

The day we arrive, the map says duck pond, but our host crosses out the words impatiently: not a duck pond—
it's a lake! It floods sometimes, enough to wash a car away. A man drowned there a few years back.

Jeremy demands proof: *How can there be a funeral with no body?*
We walk through town. The duck pond by the road is flat and calm.

Two weeks later, young Karam, brought by his father to help welcome us, retells the story. We cannot imagine. Where does the water come from? Where does it go? He tries to show us a video of rushing waters, cars submerged, but the connection fails.

Another month washes over us. Fatima comes to clean the house. We jump from one known word to another lone point of understanding. She startles us with water sluicing across the tile floors, pouring down outside the windows. Moroccan cleaning. She brings us her cookies to nibble with mint tea before she goes home to feed her family.

At dinner, our guests tell the story a third time: cars stalled, then over-run by the water; two men standing on one roof as the waters rise, jumping in opposite directions—one to safety, one washed away. Oh! they add: this is the story of Fatima's brother.

The duck pond is flat and calm; our floors, clean and dry.

We cannot imagine.

2. All her people sigh, they seek bread;

They have given their pleasant things for food to refresh the soul.

Jeremiah 1:11

Morocco: first day, first grade. *Everyone stared at me as I ate my lunch. Hummus, carrot sticks, julienned pepper. Tomorrow I want something different.*

Second day. Six and a half years old. Before supper, he sketches a still life, nature morte: seven onions in a bowl. Small onions, large bowl. Says: *Sofia told me, "What you ate yesterday looked disgusting."* He keeps his eyes on the paper, on the onions he's drawing, onions that will not sting his eyes and make them water. *I was pretty offended. But it's not your fault, for packing that lunch.* He adds a small head of garlic, peeled down to the mauve wrapping, admires the globe produced by its curving cloves.

First sketch finished, he lays out a plate of Fatima's cookies. *The boy who called me his friend, I think maybe I like him after all. But he stood on my heel, my Achilles tendon, with another boy I think, until the sports teacher made them stop.* He samples the cookies as he draws: lemon crescent, sesame scythe, gibbous coconut-almond moon. He shows me the marks on his leg between bites.

The careful oval of the plate, the circles of the cookies. *These are not the real cookies*

I'm drawing: these are cookies I imagine. He prepares water and paintbrush, mixes brown and white and yellow gouache to color the cookies.

For red onions and the small head of garlic,
he mingles purple, white, yellow, and a touch of brown.
When can it be the last day of school?

He taps me on the hip as I stand at the stove, holds out his paintings.

Turn us unto thee, O Jehovah, and we shall be turned.

3. For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water;
Because the comforter that should refresh my soul is far from me
Jeremiah 1.16

Our nights are restless: is it the cry of the muezzin that wakes Jeremy, brings him
stumbling to our bed? Or is it the undercurrent of sorrow, separation,
sundering?

I was coughing in my sleep: do you think I will survive?

Fatima tells me her name means the woman who stops breastfeeding, says, *It's enough, we're done*. Also the name of the Prophet's daughter, secondarily. But first, the boundary. She mimes expressing milk by hand, holds up her hand like a traffic cop. She who weans.

The Prophet's daughter. Fatima's hand is everywhere we look: a charm for luck,
the embodiment of her hard work.

Some say
that when her sons were about to ride into battle,
she came to embrace them though she had just cut
her hand in her work—so Fatima's farewell marked
her sons with a bloody handprint on their backs.
Those with whom they rode were killed,
but her sons, marked with her hand, survived that battle,
though not all the battles to come.

She who weans, she who works, she who warns, she who saves.

4. Certainly this is the day that we looked for; we have found, we have seen it.

Jeremiah 2:16

Friday. In the middle of my Darija lesson, I ask why the muezzin's call lasted so long at midday. Youssef tries to explain the congregational prayer: *A lot of advice. Bizaaf!*

A sermon? I ask. Youssef grins in response and sketches out the prayers: *Salat: you know salat!* He demonstrates: *Allahu akbar!* His hands at shoulder height, as I might hold mine to calm an opponent or exit a discussion. Then, hands clasped in front of the chest, right over left. *Bismillah a-rahman a-rahim:* in the name of God, the entirely merciful, the especially merciful.

He bends, he bows, he places his forehead on the ground, he sits, his index finger twirls, he nods to either side. *Salamu aleikum. Salamu aleikum.* Peace be with you. He motions to me to follow along. I have come in search of understanding. I progress no further than wishing peace to the back of my tutor's head.

5. He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces; he hath made me desolate.

He hath bent his bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow.

Jeremiah 3.11-12

When Kisa Gotami asked the Buddha to heal her dead son, the Buddha asked for a handful of mustard seed from a house in which no one had lost a child, husband, parent, or friend. Household after household replied to her request: Do not remind us of our deepest grief.

Grief, the texture of our days.
A world away,
my mother's cancer digs deep
into her ever-hospitable breast.

Jeremy's heart wells up and over;
there is no stemming the flood.

How can I live if Nana dies? I will spend the rest of my life missing her!

The intensity of his grief speaks for mine.

But still I stand apart, wondering:

How will I get this child to sleep?

How do we loosen the grip of this grief?

Says the Buddha:

He who seeks peace should draw out the arrow of lamentation, and complaint, and grief.

Kisa Gotami brings my children no consolation.

What is the task of religion: to console?

Or to heal the sick and set free the prisoners?

Grief: How deep does the arrow go?

Lamentation: Without memory, what is grief?

Complaint: Where is meaning, if not at the point of the arrow?

6. He hath walled me about, that I cannot go forth; he hath made my chain heavy.

Jeremiah, 3.7

Even at the English-
speaking university, the imams—
young men seeking mastery
in religious studies—
assert

*women put on make-up
so that men will accost them
in the street. If no one noticed them,
the women would be angry.*

The American professor, an older man, asks them:

*in all the years you've called
to women in the streets, how many times
have they responded with pleasure?*

Then the imams assert,
shifting ground:

*women cannot go to the souk alone
because they are emotional;
they will buy too much
and they are too weak
to carry it all home.*

So when my backpack,
full of flour, rice, fruit and more,
is almost too heavy to heave
to my back, and my bicycle
wavers with the extra weight,
I am embarrassed on more
than my own account and too stubborn
to call my husband for help.

On the road I pass a woman

carrying buckets in both hands
and a bag on her head
as her husband carries the weight
of the family money.

7. Ierusalem, Ierusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum

—Thomas Tallis, Lamentations of Jeremiah

1584. Late at night, a man-servant clears away
the remains of supper. Behind a closed door,
voices rise and blend in a haunting, penitential refrain:

Tallis's Lamentations, a private desolation,
marking the losses of the faithful.

Chief composer to a new Church
Of England, to which he never belonged:
surviving under four monarchs, each of whom re-tuned
the public harmonies of the One True Faith,

Tallis produced penitential polyphony: a private Latin counterpoint
haunting the silence behind the chordal clarity
with which he graced the English hymns of the new church.

The man-servant of my imagination
is himself renegade, a Barbary captive
who bought freedom by converting to Islam
and then begging his way back to the British isles
where he finds himself foreign, Mohammedan.
Tallis, another outsider, offers his only refuge.

Today, in the local market, the renegade spoke
with a blackamoor, a slave newly imported
from the Barbary coast. So tonight his mind
and senses are full of Marrakshi scents and sounds—
cinnamon, turmeric, rosewater, cumin
the chanting of the surahs, shilha phrases —
his heart overlaid, haunted by

the shipmates who would not convert
and so they died, digging under-
ground irrigation channels
to water the sultan's palms.

But for those ghosts, he might have stayed, a part
of the community of the faithful. Now he lives
amid Tallis's own haunting: *Ierusalem*,
convertere: return to the Lord your God.

8. Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow

Jeremiah 1:12

September 2013.

The room is hot, the windows closed
against the sound of squabbling children below.

The text: Luke 13:10.

Jesus healing, on the Sabbath,
the woman bent double
for eighteen years;
the Pharisee scolding.

At a hospital in nearby Fès, a man and woman mourn the death of their
two-day-old daughter, born seven weeks too soon. In Italy, Stefano's
mother's body awaits burial.

Jeremy twists and turns on my lap, worrying about death.

“What is the evil spirit bending her double?”
asks the preacher. “Outside your gates today
you see women bent double with the burdens
they carry—some of them bent over so long
they can no longer straighten up.”

Imagine: in less than a week, a fourteen-year-old girl from sub-Saharan
Africa will be gang-raped in Oujda. Trafficked by the Nigerian mafia,
she has no safe house. Already an old story, full of statistics and
abbreviations.

They ravished the women in Zion, the virgins in the city of Judah.

“Like the prophets of old,” says the woman preacher,
“Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem: in judgment.

‘You hypocrites, you treat your donkey better than this woman of your community.’”

The migrant girl: her name is Blessing.

9. Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches;

Pour out thy heart like water before the face of the Lord.

Jeremiah 2:19

The duck pond has been drained and dry for months, the piping and channels below laid bare, while officials re-engineer the water's passage beneath the road. Fatima's phone rings: "*Mushkil*," says Saeed: "There's a problem."

Waters flow around her. She is cut off.

Mushkil was her brother's disappearance. This time, it's only her bread oven on fire; three months ago, the police called her to identify her brother's body. They showed her a corpse just fifteen days dead, though three years have passed. What were they thinking?

Mushkil. Problem.

He was on his way back from Fès, buying food for the palace. The lake overflowed. The others in the car climbed out and jumped. "Go," he told them. But he stayed, seatbelt buckled, earbuds in. Listening to music.

Listening to music as the car washed away.

Along the path of the flood, they found the food; the car, doors and windows open; the money, even the coins. They found everything in the path of the flood: a chicken, a dog. Not her brother: not a shoe, not a shred of his clothing. Not the song that filled his ears above the noise of rushing water.

La vie, c'est rien, he used to tell her.

After three days, the police gave up. Then the town turned out to look: chest-deep, neck-deep in the cold, searching all the culverts of the town and beyond.

Cold, wet, shivering, the people wept for him and would not stop. The family asked, “Did he owe you money? We will pay the debt.” But no: he had given his money away on all sides, as he gave away the songs he wrote, even to famous singers. *Meshe mushkil*: no problem. *La vie, c’est rien*.

Ouildi: my son, said the old people.
This is my son who is lost. *Khuya*: my
brother.

After a month, someone found his *carte national* floating down the river: hardly damp,
the writing clear and easy to read. Where did you find this card? they demanded.

Just floating.

The earth opened up and swallowed him, then closed again. Now her mother has diabetes, her parents cannot stay in the town because they cannot sleep. They have moved to a farm, where chickens must be fed, animals cared for. They weary themselves on the farm so they can sleep in the night.

“There is no peace from this loss, except in prayer.”

10.

It is of Jehovah's lovingkindnesses that we are not consumed,
because his compassions fail not.
Jeremiah 3.22

A different Fatima teaches me to pray

Bismillah a-rahman a-rahim:
in the name of God, the compassionate,
the completely merciful.

as she has taught me
funeral traditions

the burden of the third day feast, held by the bereaved;
community schisms

the mother-in-law accusing a widow of murder by witchcraft
a teenage suicide blamed on father, mother, mobile phone;
pathways of local news

the man at the taxi-stand who had it from the baker
who had it from the man who passed the gendarme stop
on the road out of town.

"You can learn the words on youtube,"
she tells me as I stumble, repeating after her.

Al-hamdu li-Ilahi Rabbi-l 'alamin.

All praise is due to Allah, the lord of the worlds.

Fatima's piety is not blind:

in the old days, she says, the king would announce
a public fast to bring the rain, and we the people
dedicated ourselves to the common good:

Maliki yaumi-d-din.

Master of the day of requital.

now we can see how the fast is timed
by the weather report, for a day
of already impending rain.

lyya-ka na'budu wa iyya-ka nasta'in.

Thee do we serve and thee do we beseech for help.

YouTube cannot give me
the love and delight with which she glows
at the thought of my soul saved from destruction,

Ihdi-na-s-sirata-l-mu-staqim

Guide us on the right path.

her heart wide open, channeling compassion, mercy, love.
She who weans, she who works, she who warns, she who saves.

My path may be less clear than hers even when she offers me her light,
but I can see the light she offers. Fatima, my sister. *Xhuti.*