

Song of Songs 5:2-6:3

Woman:

² I slept, but my heart was awake.
Listen! my beloved is knocking.

Man:

‘Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one;
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.’

Woman:

³ I had put off my garment;
how could I put it on again?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?
⁴ My beloved thrust his hand into the
opening,
and my inmost being yearned for him.
⁵ I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
upon the handles of the bolt.
⁶ I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and was gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but did not find him;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
⁷ Making their rounds in the city
the sentinels found me;
they beat me, they wounded me,
they took away my mantle,
those sentinels of the walls.
⁸ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved,
tell him this:
I am faint with love.

Women of Jerusalem:

⁹ What is your beloved more than another
beloved,
O fairest among women?
What is your beloved more than another
beloved,
that you thus adjure us?

Woman:

¹⁰ My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
¹¹ His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
¹² His eyes are like doves
beside springs of water,
bathed in milk,
fitly set.
¹³ His cheeks are like beds of spices,
yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies,
distilling liquid myrrh.
¹⁴ His arms are rounded gold,
set with jewels.
His body is ivory work,
encrusted with sapphires.
¹⁵ His legs are alabaster columns,
set upon bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.
¹⁶ His speech is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

Women of Jerusalem:

¹Where has your beloved gone,
O fairest among women?
Which way has your beloved turned,
that we may seek him with you?

Woman

² My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to pasture his flock in the gardens,
and to gather lilies.
³ I am my beloved's and my beloved is
mine;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.

Meditation

This poem follows the pattern of a dream sequence that is similar to Chapter 3, and the woman's detailed description of her lover follows the conventions of the *wasf*, a genre of ancient Middle Eastern love poetry, like the man's description of the woman in Chapter 4. However, this poem traces more clearly a spiritual journey from desolation to faith reaffirmed. The woman's heartbreaking loss described in 5:6 is a loss of innocence: *I opened to my beloved, /but my beloved had turned and was gone. / My soul failed me when he spoke. /I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer.* In a brief moment of hesitation – whether of coyness or fear, spiritual pride or doubt--all that she had hoped for had been within reach and had disappeared. There is no betrayal deeper than this, no surer reason to question herself and to hide in shame. The violence and derision she encounters on the streets of Jerusalem signals the chaos both around her and within her as she faces her loss.

The woman demands that the Women of Jerusalem swear an oath to persuade her lover that she loves him. The Women of Jerusalem call her to the vision of her beloved that centers her again, and their offer to seek him with her is followed by the realization that he is after all nearby. The poem ends with the affirmation of love that we have heard before: *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;* [6:3]. Her love – her passion for her beloved, her trust in God – does not merely sustain her; it is an expression of her deepest personhood, affirmed by those who know her best. It is her love itself, not the object of her love, that defines her and brings her to truth and safety in a confusing and dangerous world. Despite the quicksilver changes in this life and the errors we make in folly or fear, our capacity to love – our trust in God – will be our light in darkness, our peace.

The 13th-century mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote a similar meditation on the paradox of a love for God that unites body and soul, a love in which we experience our deepest vulnerability and transcendent joy:

Mechthild of Magdeburg

*I cannot dance, O Lord,
Unless You lead me.
If You wish me to leap joyfully,
Let me see You dance and sing –*

*Then I will leap into Love
and from Love into Knowledge,
and from Knowledge into the
harvest,
That sweetest Fruit beyond human
sense.*

There I will stay with You, whirling.