

LAMENTATIONS FOR A CITY

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: November 14, 2004, Cerddorian Vocal Ensemble, conducted by Kristina Boerger
Duration: 14'
Inst: Mixed chorus (20+ voices) with soloists; English horn

The poet of the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* was witness to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. His descriptions of the details of suffering are painfully vivid, and his passionate eulogy to the wounded city takes its literary place alongside Euripides's heartbreaking verses to the fallen Troy or W.G. Sebald's searching inquiries into the rubble of Dresden.

When I wrote these *Lamentations* I was on retreat in Umbria, a valley of walled cities with ghosts at every gate. The now-serene and quaint countryside has a deep history of brutality. When we see Renaissance paintings of cities, they appear abstracted to us, little units cradled, perhaps, in a saint's hand. But in Umbria these pictures seemed not so far from the truth. There I saw cities as they had been for millennia, until relatively recently: jewels on hilltops, elegantly poised for self-defense but mercilessly vulnerable when penetrated.

Troy, Jerusalem, Perugia, Dresden, Hiroshima, New York, Baghdad, Beslan, Jerusalem again. Sometimes great poets witness the raping of great cities. But in September 2004 I turned instead to the hemorrhaging web media for crisis reports from cities all over the world. This language appears as background texture in *Lamentations for a City* to give testimony to the vitality of the human tradition of bringing cities to their knees through cruelty, treason, humiliation and destruction. – Lisa Bielawa

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Text

A reading from the Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet:

ALEPH (1:1)

How lonely sits the city
That was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
She that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the cities
Has become a vassal.

BETH (1:2)

She weeps bitterly in the night,
Tears on her cheeks;
Among all her lovers
She has none to comfort her;
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her.
They have become her enemies.

DALETH (1:4)

The roads to Zion mourn,
For none come to the appointed feasts;
All her gates are desolate,
Her priests groan;
Her maidens have been dragged away,
And she herself suffers bitterly.

ZAYIN (1:7)

Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction
and bitterness
All the precious things that were hers from days of old...

ALEPH (4:1)

How the gold has grown dim,
How the pure gold is changed!
The holy stones lie scattered
At the head of every street.

YOD (2:10)

The elders of the daughter of Zion
Sit on the ground in silence;
They have cast dust on their heads
And put on sackcloth;
The maidens of Jerusalem
Have bowed their heads to the ground.

KAPH (2:11)

My eyes are spent with weeping;
My soul is in tumult;
My heart is poured out in grief

Additional Texts: Paraphrased from web news sources around the world

(ALEPH)

no information about his condition is available
he said such meetings are commonplace
then they sent a tape that was supposed to contain their demands
even in cases where the cause was known, records sometimes don't specify
they offer moral support but no military training

he also urged national restraint
he urged them to show love and respect for foreigners
as the initial investigation showed
both buses departed from the central bus station in the city
they were also aboard the plane
higher authorities were aware of abuses

(BETH)

they observed a minute's silence
refusing to cooperate for fear of their lives
refusing for years to cooperate
have been there for months without being charged

they can be held indefinitely
they were aware of abuses
they take all necessary measures
they observed a minute's silence

(DALETH)

fighting broke out around 5
for sure there will be retaliation
found in the car
further to the South

He said such meetings are commonplace
He vowed to take revenge for Thursday's killings
He announced instead that he was firing all his ministers
He tried to return but was not allowed in

He hasn't spoken since
He visited the center
He urged them to show love and respect
Hundreds of armed fighters

(ZAYIN)

relations between the two countries are so close
they routinely share classified information
they can be held indefinitely if considered a security threat
a danger looms that he could be held responsible

heightened regional tensions
raising the specter of a raid

Because of the destruction of the daughter
of my people.

MEM (2:13)

What can I say to you, to what compare you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?
What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin;
Who can restore you?

before the woman reported him
the harsh criticism he received

(Y00)

these comments are a basis for mutiny
security forces will conduct multiple arrests
sending a huge column of smoke up into the air
a soldier must fulfill orders

security forces
sending smoke
sirens went off
soldiers escaping

(after 'my heart is poured out in grief')
because of the destruction
the soldiers felt their lives were at risk
no crime goes unpunished
I don't know why this happened to us
you traitor, stop pretending and wait
the destruction of the daughter of my people
leave them out of this ugly game
sending a huge column of smoke into the air
the retaliation will be justified
hundreds of armed fighters are ready
for sure there will be retaliation
a soldier must fulfill orders
explosives were found in the car
I don't want to describe what I saw
refusing for years to cooperate
witnesses refusing for fear of their lives
they are ready for future attacks

I don't know why this happened
I don't want to describe what I saw