LOVE STRONG AS DEATH

A new *Song of Songs*

By Barry Hill ©

1. Enchantment

Scene: Proclamations/Warnings. By the city wall, near a vineyard. The tang of a wine-press and of smoke is in the air. The city, like Carthage, could be feasting or under siege or both. The mental atmosphere is of ripeness and ruin.

Brothers

Catch us little foxes.

Woman

O let him drink me
with his kisses.
Your loving is sweeter than wine.

Brothers

Catch us little foxes
rutting in the vineyards
everything in bloom.

Daughters

Look who 'is this
coming in from the desert?

Woman

Your scent
myrrh and aloes.
Your name is perfume.

Daughters

Like a pillar of smoke
with more incense than a merchant.

Woman

No wonder
the young women want you.
Take me with you
hurry, come!
Swart I am and beautiful
groomed by the vineyard sun.

Promise me, daughters of Jerusalem,
swear by the gazelles
and stags of the wood
that you'll not rise up
or arouse love
until it's time.

Tell me my love

where do you graze at noon?
Tell me my love
where do you go to lie down?
Must I come to you now
veiled and hot?
Must I come to you
among your companion's flocks?

Man

If,
my beauty of beauties
you don't know,
follow the tracks out,
graze your goats there
near the shepherd's tents.

Brothers

Catch us little foxes
rutting in the vineyards
everything in bloom
in the vineyards.

Woman

Mandrakes exude scent in the doorway.
There are fruits,
all manner of fruits,
old and new,
I have laid up for you.

2. Looking

Scene: a closed garden, a pool, a lattice. She is looking through the lattice as he prepares to bath. Each know the other is being admired.

Woman

See –

beside a wall he stands
shows himself
glancing through the lattice.
The wine is sweet
I wait for him to speak
I wait for him to sing.

Man

Rise my love
loveliest woman come
winter is done
the rains are over
our lands are blooming
all the singing birds are here
even the turtle dove.

Woman

Like a fig by the lattice I hang
dripping with love.

Man

Your eyes
they make me tremble
don't look at me so.
Your lips crimson, the pomegranates
glow through your hair
your hair loosens and flocks
a Milky Way over me.

Woman

I ripen as he looks
and sings as I ripen.

Man

Rise loveliest woman, come
my dove in the cleft of the rock.
Rise loveliest woman, come.
Latticed let me see you
let me hear your sweet voice
your lovely shape

your sweet voice, you.

Perfect one, a dove
pure to the one who bore her.
Daughters saw her
called her blessed, yes
Queens and concubines –
praised by all the concubines.

Woman

Through the lattice he sings.
One by one the stars fall through.

3. Feasting

Scene: bed near the banquet table. A room with walls and ceiling lined by oiled cedar.

Woman

I sit in his shade desiring
its sweet crop to my taste.

Man

Beautiful you are my love
your eyes are doves
your mouth a garden
I graze on lotus.

Your hair flocks
like springy goats
your teeth, pure white
your breasts, gazelles.

Woman

I have come down
into the nut garden
among almonds and
fruits of the valley to see
if the vine is flowering
pomegranates budded.

I am trembling
I hardly know myself.

O feed me up
with raisins
plump me
with apricots
bed me among fruits
I am fevered with love.

With his left hand
he cups my head
with his right hand
he embraces me.

He brings me to his house of wine,
raises the banner of love over me.

Man

Your lips my bride drip honeycomb
your love is sweeter than wine
milk and honey under the tongue.

Woman

Bounding my love comes
leaping hills and mountains
a young stag.

Man

You are, my love
the loveliest of women
leave the lairs of leopards.
bride Come to me, come

Woman

Bounding my love comes
leaping hills and mountains
a young stag.
to mountains of myrrh
hills of frankincense I spring
before shadows go
and the day blows softly in.

Woman

My love is mine and I am his.
He grazes among the lotus
until the day blows softly in.

Man

Henna with spikenards
spikenard and saffron
calamus and cinnamon
trees of frankincense
myrrh and aloes—
all the prime spices.

A secret garden you are,
my sister, my bride
a walled garden
a sealed spring:
Everything green.

You are a fountain of gardens
a well of living waters.

Woman

Wake up,
north wind, south wind
blow through my garden.
Let my love come
into his garden to eat.

Man

I pluck myrrh
I eat my comb
with my honey

wine with my milk.

Eat, my friends, eat
slake yourselves
be drunk on love.

Woman

Love let us go into the fields
into the vineyards for the night.
Let us see if the vines have flowered
their blossoms opened
the pomegranate burst.

Before the dawn wind rises
before the shadows flee
all the harvest he presseds as one.
I am limp with love
trembling
and hardly know myself.

4. Lost

Scene: bedroom, city streets, bedroom. Lost and reunited. Now the song, I Hardly Know Myself has its dark side: no longer sung out of hedonsitc ecstasy, it registers loss, the terror of being without one's love.

Woman

At night in bed
I reach for my love
seeking and not finding him
there is nothing there.

Daughters of Jerusalem

So where did he go?
So where did
your beloved go
lovely one?

Woman

Oh promise me, daughters
if you find my love
don't tell him
I am ill with love.

Daughters

Tell us which way
he went
tell us which way
so we can find him.

Woman

I rose saying to myself:
'Get up now
go into the city, now
roam the streets and alleys
searching for the one you love.'
I looked
I searched for him
limp with fear.

Daughters

Tell us which way
so we can find him.

Brothers

Here he comes
the watchman with the night light.
But will he light the woman's call
as he lights the city walls?

Woman

Oh promise me, daughters
if you find my love

don’t tell him
I am ill with love.
I couldn't find him.
Patrolling the city
the watchman found me
and I said ‘have you seen my love
the whole harvest he can press as one
I hardly know myself.’
They had hardly left me
when I found him
held him
would not let him go.

Daughters of Jerusalem
Look.
Who's this coming
in from the desert
leaning into her love?

Woman
I took him
to my mother's house
to the room
where I was made.

Man
See loveliest one
your eyes are doves.
And The beams of our house are cedar,
cedar from the trees of Lebanon.

Woman
Clean and bronzed you are
one in ten thousand.

Man
A lotus you are
among the thorns of other women.

Woman
A lotus I am
a wild one in the valley.
He is a pillar of gold,
a mountain stand of cedars.
See the turn of his arm
inlaid with jasper
the flat of his belly is ivory
lapis lazuli his thighs.

Daughters –
such is my love.
Daughters this is him
with his mouth of nectar.

ManI say to myself now:

I will climb up
into the tree
seize its branches
and let her breasts bunchhold the stars'.

Woman

The king made the bed
from the best wood
pillars coiled in silver
uipholstered in gold
woven purple cushions
all inlaid with love.

5. Love as strong as death

We are back on the darkening plain, outside the city walls.

The feeling here moves from acute unease to a kind of blissful acceptance. The mood has changed from the ecstasy of re-union in Part 4 because a fear of loss has again rushed in. This movement resolves the anxiety when the woman reconciles herself to the swooning idea that love is as strong as death. Her unease is triggered by jealousy, the depth of her possessive surrender, the extent to which she has been 'branded' by him. She is unsettled (as she was in Part I) by his attractiveness to other women. But he sings her round, so that once the jealousy abates, she is simply accepting of the power of love, the way its celebratory surrender has a kinship with death.

Woman (as if remembering)
Mandrakes exuded scent,
in the doorway,
I had laid up fruit for you,
in the street I kissed you,
yes, and no-one scorned me.

Man (as if remembering)
Daughters of Jerusalem,
promise me,
you'll not rise up.

Daughters of Jerusalem
Who is this rising outr of the desert
her head on his shoulder?

Woman (in a trance, vaguely to the chorus)
He went down into the garden
into his beds of spices
to graze there
and to gather lotus.

I am his love and he is mine
I am his love
he feasts among the lotus.

Man
A fountain of gardens,
a well of living waters

Daughters of Jerusalem (to the man)

No wonder young women want you

While my king lay there
my senses swirled.
at his couch.

A sachet of myrrh he was
lying between my breasts.

Daughters of Jerusalem (to the man, insistently)
No wonder young women want you.

Woman

He seals me to his heart.
I am a band upon his arm.
As cruel as the grave is jealousy.

Flowers are wild by the pool
as cruel as the grave is jealousy
no wind can blow it away.

He has sealed me to his heart.
I am a band upon his arm.
Love is as strong as death.Jealousy as cruel as the grave

Man

But your eyes, my love
your eyes are doves
and your hair
its tresses hold me captive.

Lovely are your cheeks in bangles
your neck in strings of beads.
Bangles of gold we will make for you
studded with silver.

No creature was finer.
No such creature drew
even the Pharoah's chariots!
We can bury your doubts.
A fountain of gardens,
a well of living waters.

Daughters of Jerusalem

Is this our morning star?
Ripe as the moon
pure as the sun
awesome as an army with banners?

Man

Solomon had a vineyard.
Mine is my own
he leased it to the keepers
for a thousand pieces of silver.
You are my harvest, my love.
we guard each other's fruit
The crops are ours for life.

Woman

Wwith his right hand
he cups my head
with his left hand
he raises lifts a banner over me.

Man

But the vineyard is ours.

Woman (to the Daughters)

The sun will blacken the vineyard.
Love is as strong as death.

Daughters

Love is stronger than death.
The blossom returns each year.

Woman

I woke and could not find him.

Daughters

There you were in his arms.

Woman

Apricots rot on their trays.

Daughters

The fruit is sweetened by the sun.

Woman

My soul was lost on the plain.

Daughters

The wind is green from the lake.

Woman

He buries me with those kisses.

Daughters

The wine you taste is love.

Woman

I hardly, barely know myself.

Daughters

He will harvest you for good.

Woman

O love is as strong as death.

Daughters

Your sleep is the nectar of breath.

Woman

O love is as strong as death.

Daughters

Your breath is the kiss of life.

Man

My vineyard is yours
all of it ours.

Woman

Into his chambers
my king takes me.

I am my love's love
and his desire is me.

Praise to caresses,
caresses better than wine.

Praise to this life
that unites us in death.

Man

The beams of our house are cedar
our roof the Milky Way.

Woman

I am wall and garden
I am the one who finds
love is strong as death
when your desire is me
I flower in your eyes.

Man

O woman of the garden
everyone in the garden
listens for your voice.
Let me hear it now!

Woman

O Love, my love, my love
be my gazelle, my stag
my king on the mountain of spices.

Man

We are rounded and carved for wine
our cup is full of kisses
we drink until blissful sleep.

I eat my honey and
I drink my wine and my milk.
Eat, friends, and drink,
drink deep, my dearest friends.

Daughters

A flood is as strong as your love.

Woman

A band upon my arm
I hardly know myself.

Man and Woman

Rivers are what we are
O seal me to your heart.