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Oh, Lilah

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Oh, Lilah

Abstract

"Oh, Lilah" is a feminist retelling of the story of Samson and Delilah. It is a verse poem divided into five sections. It is narrated by Delilah, putting a unique, contemporary twist on the renowned Biblical tale.

Keywords

Delilah, Samson and Delilah, persona poetry, persona poem

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Creative Writing | Poetry | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for ENG-305: The Writing of Poetry: Free Verse & Form.

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Oh, Lilah

R.A. Montross

"Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah."

Judges 16:4

//

My eyes blushed his armor first,
brown, sunken-in leather
creased with the stress of battle.
I followed an invisible line up his navel, chest, neck
imagined touching his Adam's apple as he spoke,
the low vibration of his voice
an earthquake through my fingertips.
I traced the mocha outline of his cosmic blue eyes,
eyes so translucent, they caught vials of sunlight.

And then, my eyes fell on his hair.

It was a collection of countless auburn tassels,
layers upon layers of curls,
curls growing from his scalp like buds
abundant on a rose bush in May.
They kissed the sides of his olive face and neck,
they danced when he walked –

And then, my sister pinched my arm.

"Oh Lilah, keep your sights off a man like that."

"Who is that?"

"The strongest man alive."

"But his name?"

She hesitated, as if his name
would make my desire
irreversible.

"Samson. Of Zorah."

Just then, he clapped eyes on me,
and I knew by the hungry curiosity
in his brow that he was imagining

what my hair might look like
beneath my scarf.

My sister was right to hesitate.

//

When he married me he lifted me
in his arms like I was as light
as a rose petal, carried me to his bed
and in one swift motion he unraveled me
from my scarf and dress.
He let me peel back his layers, too,
until we were wholly and equally complete,
he let me lock my fingers in his hair,
he let me hold him like that.
Oh Lilah, I love you, he whispered.
And as the nights rolled on,
I became Samson's wife
over and over and over again.

On those nights when we shared his bed,
I asked him to tell me stories of his past,
and as he recited tales of violent, valiant
killings and beheadings, impalings and slaughterings,
my fingertips would travel all along
the peeks and valleys of his arms, chest, stomach,
these were the muscles that gave him his strength,
these were the muscles that killed a thousand men,
and the more I watched them twitch beneath his skin,
the more I wanted that same power.

The more stories he told, the more he started to sound
like he was bragging, and jealousy sat
in the pit of my stomach like a sickeningly satisfying meal.
I wanted to show him that underneath my scarf
was not the tender body of a lamb, but of a woman
as strong if not stronger than a man.
I was the wife of the strongest man.
And yet, my story was his to claim.

So love that was ripe now rotted,
and fell black and putrid from
the branches of God's tree.

//

The money simply fell into my palms,
a packet of bills tied with tight string,
while moonlight played with the colors in my scarf,
under the cool veil of a canopy,
I let the paper slide in stacks between my fingers,
the feeling of 3,000 in my hands.
A man from the enemy with the scent of sweet wine on his breath
leaned into my lips and gave me my instructions:
"Find out what makes your husband so strong."

Oh Lilah, what are you doing?

The first night,
I tied him up with ropes and strings
because he told me in bed
that his weakness hides in seven strings
and brand-new rope.

I felt like a fool when he ripped through them,
his body a fist through paper.

The second night,
I tried to weave his hair into my loom
while he slept, seven strands tightened in
the fist of its shuttle – but in the morning,
he slipped out of the loom,
as easily as he broke through the rope.

"Woman, why do you test me?
he whispered in my ear one night.
"I will tell you my secret. My strength is in my hair,"
his hot breath collected in beads of moisture
on my ear.

He thought I was asleep.

//

The third night,
Samson made me his wife.

I fastened him to me with auburn hair locked
between my fingers.

Oh Lilah, I love you, he told me.

His head fell in my lap, I watched his irises
crystal blue, disappear behind heavy,
descending eye lids.

When his breath grew light, like a whistle
through his nostrils, I reached behind the headboard
and pulled out a blade. I took it to his neck,
and in one swift motion,
I sliced a curl from his scalp. The sensation of the knife
was a lot like cutting soft butter or
pressing pen to paper or
feeling wine fall down the back of your throat.
I took the curl and held it to my nose.
It smelled like oil, incense, leather and pine,
it smelled like his bed, like pure Samson.

I was holding a part of him in my hands.
And there he slept, infantile. Unaware.
I wept into his hair as one by one,
each of his auburn tassels fell
to the ground.

The enemy came for him early the next morning,
he was defenseless.
They took his armor,
they took his weapons,
I watched as they gouged out his eyes, blue jewels,
gone – I watched them fall from his head.
They took him from me, and told me I'd
never see him again.
I didn't want to.
They left me with a packet of paper in my hands,
tied with a string, the feeling of 3,000
between my fingers.

Oh Lilah, what have you done now?

//

A lifetime later,
I took a trip to the temple city
to buy a rug for my home.
I arrived at the market in my finest scarves,
rings around my fingers. I wanted all eyes on me.
As I searched the vendors, I let my hand
graze the surface of each rug, the strings tied
in intricate, bold patterns, tassels dancing
with the stirring of the desert wind.
In the distance, near the temple,
a low roar arose from a barbaric crowd
and in my old age, I found it hard to understand
what they were chanting – but then, I heard it –

Samson, Samson, bring us Samson!

I couldn't breathe.
I saw him emerge from a temple of marble idols,
wrinkled and hunched over, black holes where
his eyes once were –

and from his head fell
locks upon locks of auburn curls,
as long and thick and absolutely wonderful
as the day I met him. For the first time in years,
I spoke his name. For the first time in years, I thought
about when I was his wife. Was he thinking of me now?
I watched him as the crowd laughed, as he talked to himself,
I imagined him repeating my name, like a meditation,
over and over again, like those nights we spent together.

He wedged himself between two pillars,
a hand on each,
and would you believe
that with one, swift motion,
Samson turned the temple to nothing but

a pile of rubble, turned the enemy into nothing but
a cloud of dust, growing bigger and billowing
towards me.

I pulled a carpet off a line of them hanging,
and wrapped it around my body and my face,
and I crouched in the gully of the street
until the dust settled.

I wished it would fill up my eyes.
I wished it would fill up my lungs,
so that I too, may have fallen.

*Oh, Lilah,
where did you go?*

//

*“Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people
in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.”*

Judges 16:30