

Poems for a Gender Transition Ritual

by Professor Joy Ladin

My voice is the voice of your body:

I cry out all night, but you don't listen.

You treat me like I'm dead, like I'm the grave of someone you hated,
you batter me the way waves batter the shore.

I call out to you every day, I stretch my hands –
they are your hands too – to you.

From the day we were born, I, like you, have been tormented,
teetering at the edge of the Pit.

Your fury overwhelms me; your terrors wash over me,
they surround me on every side.

(Adapted from Psalm 88)

You're ashamed of me, you deny me, you keep me out of sight.

Bring me back from exile, gather me in, all of me,
my blindness and lameness, my immaturity and my advancing age,
my pleasures and my tears.

I'm not what you want, but I am what I've always been:

your mother, your daughter, your stream of water, your home and your road beyond it.

Be patient with my clumsiness.

Lift me up like a timbrel. The women are waiting.

It's time to join the dance.

(Adapted from Psalm 88)

My voice is the voice of the man you were:

I was asleep, I was a kind of sleep,

but my heart was awake.

I heard you knocking at the door, begging me to let you in.

I was so heavy, I didn't want to move,

my head was drenched, my locks dripped sweat, or was it dew?

I heard you lift your hand from the latch,

my hands dripped myrrh as I pulled back the bolt.

When I opened the door, you weren't there.

When I called, you didn't answer.

(Adapted from Song of Songs 5:2-6)

I roamed the streets of one city, then another.

I searched but couldn't find you.

(Adapted from Song of Songs 3:1-2)

The guards who man the walls

beat me, bruised me, stripped

and left me sick with longing for you.

(Adapted from Song of Songs 5:7-8)

Now you're probably lolling among the lilies, breathing spices and perfumes,

but you were mine, and I am yours,

(Adapted from Song of Songs 6:2)

the vine that couldn't flower,

the life you wouldn't choose.

My voice is the voice of your grief:

I am your cry for the children you lost,
the rage with which you strike your thigh,
ashamed and humiliated that you let them go,
the children you dandled when they were small
who've grown beyond you now.

No matter how distant they grow, you wait to welcome them back,
to wake them in the morning, feed them when they're famished,
soothe them back to sleep. Your children are yours
and you are mine, Joy daughter of grief,
which is another name for love.

The road you travel is my road,
the land through which you travel, you and your children, is mine.

No matter how you wail or rage,
it's love that's brought you to this place,
love that summons the woman you are
out of the man you've been.

(Adapted from Jeremiah 31:15-24)

My voice is the voice of the woman you wish you were:

You keep trying to close the door, to lock yourself
between the four white walls
of what you cannot be,
you insist that I'm not there
so you can sink into the comfort of despair
you loll in like a bed, lusting after your own life's end,
sacrificing me to your favorite idols, wretchedness and dread.

I hereby pronounce judgment upon you,
I, the life you fear: death
won't save you when you cry out,
the fear you cling to will vanish like a breeze.

I know how miserable I make you, roiling your depths
like a troubled, troubling sea.

I don't care. You won't be miserable forever.

I will revive your spirit, rebuild the highway from you to me,
clear away your mud and mire, stubbornness and grief.

Yes, you feel like a lie, a facade of paint and clay.

But I am here, the breath
of the life you breathe.

No matter how utterly you fail to live,
you can't keep me out or hold me in.

I won't be turned away.

(Adapted from Isaiah 57:7-20)

My voice is the voice of your future:

Here I come, leaping over mountains, bounding over hills.

I'm standing behind your wall, parting your shades, opening your window.

Rise up, and come away!

Winter is over, the rains have passed,

green figs fatten on your branches, blossoms scent your breath.

You hide yourself away like a dove in a cranny,

a lily among thorns, a young gazelle among the cliffs.

Don't you know I'm here?

I cradle your head like a lover's hand, steady you like an arm around your waist,

feast you when you're famished.

I am the shade in which you rest,

the vineyard you thought was ruined,

the sun that shines on your face.

The time of singing has come:

I am the song that sings you,

the song you long to sing.

You're my stem and I'm your flower.

Rise up with me, above the shadows

shrinking in the dawn that reddens

your hills of spices.

(Adapted from Song of Songs 2:8-16)

My voice is the voice of becoming:

I know, I'm pushing you hard, I'm knocking you off your feet.

But my strength is your strength; it will become your deliverance.

Despair and bitterness swarm you like bees,

I hear you crying out to God

and I hear God answer, shouting the love that is your future,

prying open your narrowing lids,

sheltering and enlarging you, showering you with yesses.

It's better to wait for God than to wait for death.

God hurts you, God swarms you, God pushes you down again and again,

but God won't give you up for dead. You live,

and this life, the life you reject,

trumpets God's triumph.

This is the day that God has made.

God's right hand lifts you up, God's tents ring

with the shouts of the woman you are becoming,

shouts of victory.

God has unlocked the lies

you tell yourself you are.

They have become the gates of truth

God is leading you through.

(Adapted from Psalm 118)