

Cassandra and Tyrant

As she started up the steps
She let herself sink back in memory,
Rehearsed the reasons she had come this far,
To the dull foot of this oppressive tower,
And wondered where in what had passed the key
Lay to her disobedience
To fate, to the cold edicts of the gods,
And how that strange hope, like a secret spear,
Bolstered her, kept at bay the mad despair
That is their rightful lot who would defy
The sacred oaths that compel destiny.

Why her? This much was clear, she was alone
In seeing what must happen, how the one
She climbed to meet would slowly steal to power,
Dissolving fear in apathy with bland
Unmeaning phrases, or simply plain truth,
Which fear and apathy join to unsee.
(Why had she not enlisted help, or gone
With what she knew to the authorities?
Because she trusted in her curse,
Knew better than to openly rebel.)
And so she only saw what was to come
And only she could not pronounce the doom,
So to prevent it, only she could act.

Three steps, two, one, and she has reached the top,
Nor even seen a guard to bar her way,
Ahead, a high-roofed hall swallows her gaze;
Deep in its dim-lit throat the one she seeks
Sits at a desk, pretending not to see,
But cannot hide a grin, a soundless laugh.
She stops, stands silent, waits; there is a pause. . .

At last, Tyrant can wait no more, and crows:
"Cassandra! so, you come at last to plead,
To beg before me for your sorry life!
Helpless, you whom no-one would believe,
And now have only me to turn to! Aah..."
"I came as soon as I saw fit," she says,
"To ask you this:"

"You have a question? Ha!
What insolence! but I'll indulge you."

"Then,
I would know which is better: a small plot
With a cottage, where one may live at peace,
Or dominion over all the world's lands?"
"And you would ask me that?" scoffs Tyrant, "You,
So puny-willed, so small of heart, might find
A garden dominion enough, but I!
How could I rule less than the wide world's bounds!"
"Is nothing better than the world?" she asks,
Her lips hinting a smile Tyrant sees not,
"Nothing!"

“But is it not true also that,
A small garden is better than nothing?”

Tyrant stares at Cassandra, disbelief
Precluding speech, almost forestalling rage,
Until the effort of fist banging desk
Unblocks the voice: “Is that what you came for?
To trot out childish jokes? Begone!
Here’s not a playground, my task’s not a game!”
She answers, “I have just one question more.”
“Ask it then!”

“In a vineyard, which is best:
To labour or to own its fruits? Is not
The worker happier, who tastes
The sweet grapes first, and in abundance?”
“Fool!

Does not the owner drink first and most deep
Of the true fruits, of the vintaged wine?”
“True, but when the grapes are human bodies,
The sweet juice their blood, what then is the wine?”

Slowly, Tyrant laughs. “But blood-scented pain
Is just the wine I most desire.
Away with you and your foul sentiment!
I do not even deign to cause your death.”

And so she left; Tyrant began to rule,
And many suffered much because of it.
But the gods’ curse was not to be denied:
Unbelieved, her prophecy yet came true.
Tyrant ruled long years, but never enjoyed
The use of tyranny; a few short months
Of government’s relentless detail crushed
All pleasure out; only a slave remained.

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