

Ode to Shamash, or on The Problem of Absolutism in the Case of the Law

JAMES DOWTHWAITE

The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is the shade upon thy right hand

- Psalm 121

Lord, if it is right that you speak in the softness of morning,

Well, then it is right that you burn up the afternoon; that we should tread about in
its embers, shifting ashes with reverence.

If it is right that you dispel ghosts from the mountain path, like cobwebs dissolved in
light,

then it is right that the wheat burns in your righteousness.

If it is true that with a great sash of gold, you stride around the earth and sky,

that all of our sins are caught where light spreads like a vast net,

and you catch us in golden threads,

then it is right that we cannot speak for thirst.

If you show us our footprints, what choice do we have but to show you our feet?

If you turn our arms to bronze, then you must also turn them to mercury.

The rod and the ring are in your hands, not ours.

Yours is the sceptre, yours are the codices.

Yes, if it is right that that the laws fall from heaven,
then we know the sunlight is guiltless.

If it is right that you are the latch and key of the heavens,
then it is right that we are shut out.

If it is right that I feel you speaking on my hand, and on my arm your voice is firm,
then the drought is the fact of our skin.

If it is right that you sustain travellers and call the oil merchants and the spice
merchants to us,
then the path of the missile crosses underneath your grand auspices.

And if it is right that you incinerate lies and liars; that false judges are burnt up in
your image,

then it is right that the reeds burn, too;

it is right that the river dries,

right that the land should be bare, right that the wicked should run for exile, and
right the birds fly to far off trees.

If it is right that you divide evil, that you bring destinies out from behind the
mountains, stretching your fingers to the greater sea,

then what are we but a people of pieces of the wind?

If you reveal the escape paths when we are pursued,
do our pursuers not profit from the light too?
If that is justice, that the wicked belong in the shadows,
and that the shadows, too, are burned up in your eyeline,
then shadows are hateful to the law,
and justice is the incineration of nothings.

About the Author

James Dowthwaite teaches English literature at the Friedrich-Schiller University Jena, where he is currently working on a project on the idea of fate in aesthetic and symbolist writing. His first book, *Ezra Pound and 20th Century Theories of Language: Faith with the Word* appeared with Routledge in 2019. His poetry has appeared in *Acumen*, *Allegro*, *The Dawntreader*, *The High Window*, *The French Literary Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and elsewhere. It was also commended at the Winchester Poetry Festival. This poem is taken from a project tentatively titled *Babylonian Pieces*, a collection of original poems and loose translations from Akkadian, a sample of which was recently published at *The High Window*. James is also an associate editor at *NASJ*.



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