

Brandon Marlon

Gardens of Delight

In all the storied bastions of hedonism across the East, nothing approached the gusto of Babylonian celebrations. To satisfy the national vanity, ostentatious orgies abounded, pagan pageantry designed to make the supernal gods—Marduk, Adad, Ea, Shamash, Ishtar, Tammuz, Zarpanit, Nabu and Nergal—peer down from heaven in envy of worldly extravagance. Babylon’s revelry put rivals to shame, supplying them at once with inspiration to ever greater debauchery and despair at the impossibility of ever matching such decadence. Few peoples even in their wildest dreams could fathom the extent of licentiousness involved; none else could readily afford it. What Babylon wasted in a week could sustain the treasuries of lesser locales for years.

Brimful of youthful energies, Nebuchadrezzar wasted no time in restoring the kingdom’s opulent temples. Foremost in his plans was renovating the enormous ziggurat Etemenanki at Babylon, renowned from old as the Tower of Babel. The gigantic structure overlooking the landscape had originally been designed as a platform bridging heaven and earth, a focal point for the city symbolizing its power and that of its god. As king,

Nebuchadnezzar would soon become nominal chief priest of the national god, and his toddler heir, crown prince Amel-Marduk, chief priest to the town god. In Babylon, these deities were one and the same: Marduk, titled Bel, lord and chief of the pantheon.

Esagila, the companion temple complex to lofty Etemenanki, likewise appealed for refurbishment and so Nebuchadnezzar indulged by ordering the finest woods, most precious metals, and valuable gemstones for its glorification. Royal treasurers expostulated at this insistence on overlaying the chipped walls of the grandiose central chapel with gold, lapis, and marble, gilding the roof in addition to the golden images of Marduk.

“Everything must be without rival!” Nebuchadnezzar roared at his underlings, soon to become a familiar refrain in all his development projects.

The glory of the gods depended on the fruitfulness of their cities and townships, with each divinity possessing lands where grain was harvested, flocks and herds pastured, granaries heaped up, and storehouses stockpiled with their share of spoils. In this dynamic between deity and city it was ultimately unclear which was benefactor and which beneficiary. Babylonians considered the relationship mutually advantageous, accounting for its endurance.

Nebuchadnezzar toured his vast estates, determined to raise living standards across the country. Consulting with counselors, he realized that irrigation, arable land, and

engineering practices were essential for successful crops. Preliminary surveys were commissioned and advance plans drawn up. Land measurements were taken and graphic methods plotted on draughts. Leveling instruments were forged, and dams, levies, and embankments employed to useful effect. The crown prince saw to the maintenance of the canals he had created to enrich and drain the land, aware that these admirable waterways required continuous upkeep due to soft ground and friable banks. The age-old Apparau Canal built by Hammurabi to link the Tigris with the Euphrates at the city gates was in dire disrepair; Nebuchadrezzar now conscripted gangs of slaves and prisoners-of-war to restore its original width and shore up its banks with bitumen and imported stone. Remarkably, the Babylonian provinces were brought back to life.

Within the capital, newly-baked square bricks bonded with bitumen replaced the inferior, sun-dried variety throughout the royal palace. Polished cedar beams lined the roofs and brilliant tiles of glazed enamel adorned the walls. Skilled artisans detailed with gold, silver, and priceless jewels to accent the opulent décor. The spacious palace stood in stark contrast to the overcrowded residential quarters of attached and semi-detached rectangular houses of inferior sun-dried bricks with roofs supported by beams. With wood as an article of value sometimes offered as pledge or payment, many houses had no door at all, and all homes opened directly onto the vital passages and byways. Peasants hardly complained, for even the lowly of Babylon were envied by the lofty

elsewhere. Still, as Nebuchadnezzar breakfasted atop the palace rooftop on lime custard and buttered sourdough bread, he disdained the eyesores across the Processional Way, enjoining that lengthy avenues be widened and slum areas gentrified or demolished. Before long this was accomplished, as was a moat dug around the outer wall to further deter would-be invaders, its water resourcefully pumped in from the Euphrates. Bridges assembled now in peacetime were ingeniously designed for easy dismantling should the city be besieged.

Favoring springtime's crisp morning air, Nebuchadnezzar routinely sauntered around the city walls keeping an eye on construction progress, by turns admonishing and congratulating his architects, engineers, and foremen, observing here, critiquing there, always contributing ideas. Unhappy with the density of the copper door at Zababa Gate in the southeast, he ordered massive bronze doors installed to fortify each of Babylon's eight gates, and a third mighty wall with accompanying moat erected as a further safeguard along the eastern portion of the city. A builder at heart, the young royal relished every opportunity to sneak away from self-serving petitions of obsequious courtiers and instead personally supervise work crews, unwilling to compromise on his vision of grandeur.

More than anything else in the city, the Hanging Gardens captured the imagination of residents and visitors alike. Here urban beautification surpassed itself, and Nebuchadnezzar's aim was no less than a desert spectacle.

He tired of his homesick Median wife Amytis searching the horizon for a glimpse of the verdurous Zagros Mountains, and decided to appease her with a likeness of her native mountain landscape.

Amytis held her breath, marveling as her vicarious paradise arose upon an artificial hillside of rising tiers abundant with verdant groves. Earth-covered terraces shaded with assorted trees and shrubs gave the impression of jungle overgrowth swallowing the symmetrical constructions of men. Delighting observers from near and far, the lavish profusion of greenery hid specially built irrigation systems providing an ongoing water supply, keeping gardens fertile and lawns lush. Well-appointed waterfalls tumbled over smooth marble into willow ponds resplendent with pink flower petals, interspersed between blossoming plant vines and leaves dangling over edges. Blooming hydrangea and chrysanthemum stood out against a backdrop of greens in every tint and hue. Soft grasses, tilting palms, and arcaded courtyards completed the idyllic atmosphere of the grounds, whose illustrious repute spread throughout the region.

More than an attraction, the gardens were a nightly retreat for loving husband and wife seeking relief from the day's duties.

"The gods will envy my queen, to whom such homage is paid," Nebuchadrezzar teased.

"They're not my gods; let them seethe with desire," Amytis retorted, frolicking in moist grass. "I won't be begrudged my consolation."

Her homesickness dispelled, the crown princess regularly luxuriated in her oasis, ever soothed by its bliss.

Breathtaking in person, Amytis delighted her subjects. The mountain gods of Media were in a bountiful mood at her birth, granting her immeasurable exquisiteness. With nimble arms, supple breasts, curvaceous hips, and lissome legs, Amytis had no counterpart in elegance among native Babylonian women. Long, sable hair draped her striking face, framing hazel eyes and lips painted thistle. A tiny birthmark dotted her upper lip, adding to her unique beauty. Her auburn skin was enhanced by the gracious sun. Only the finest silk and satin fabrics imported from the port of Zaitun graced her lithe figure. At home on the palace's rooftop terrace and in the Hanging Gardens, she was always seen donning a flowing gown or lustrous robe wrapped tautly around her svelte frame. Each morn she speckled her neck with spikenard or patchouli perfume and every night she bathed in a pool covered with lilac petals, maidservants rubbing scented ointment into her armpits, genitals, and feet. A large amethyst—a present from her husband at their betrothal—hung from her neck, its oval surface absorbing the day's light and reflecting violet rays against her bosom. Garnet rings embellished her fingers, crowning her hands with radiance.

Amytis' fortunate combination of grace and sensuality opened many doors throughout her life, and she walked

through them all. Her sophisticated bearing had delivered her to the palace in Babylon, where her every move set an example for avid followers. From the beginning of their marriage Nebuchadrezzar appreciated his wife's independent strength. He admired how she cultivated pastimes every so often, indulging interests in sailing, sculpting, and dancing. He never denied her any whim or fancy, allowing her assertive personality free rein. After all, he mused, Amytis the Median was a queen of fire, and what mortal could command a flame?

One notorious haunt scrupulously avoided by the royal couple was the open-air shrine to Zarpanit, Marduk's consort, a glorified brothel of ill repute universally attended by all castes of society. Unlike the dank bordellos tucked away at the fringes of the city's odorous residential quarters, this capacious pleasure house afforded its devotees the guise of sanctity. Assiduous servants energetically scoured and scrubbed granite-tiled floors till dawn, stained as they were with the chronic stickiness of wine and menstrual blood, salty sweat and dried semen. The sundry glories of the previous eve were guaranteed to include standard orgiastic carnalities of rabid threesomes, simultaneous penetrations, group onanism, and arbitrary sodomy, but depending on the coital energies of the night's participants may well have also involved a series of pseudo-sacred acts as the gang-raping of unsuspecting vestal virgins and raunchy bestiality with unnerved animals. Revelers exulted in the random couplings of masters and slaves, strangers and acquaintances, in the

overflow of vinous concoctions, in the rhythmic drumming and gyrations of limber belly dancers.

None crept away into the night unattended to. Every man's pulsating loins met with rapturous satisfaction. Every woman's urging innards knew the repeated thrusts and releases of various accomplices. Carousing city elders found their trembling hands on the soft flesh of apprehensive young girls whose opportunistic parents urged them onward with offhanded approval. Lowly army clerks found social comeuppance in the exclaiming sighs of wealthy dowager matrons deprived of rapture by their senile husbands rotting at home. Court eunuchs avenged their pride by burrowing their starving mouths into the unfolding crotches of neglected royal concubines frequenting the lust shrine surreptitiously. Fulfillment was the orgasmic order of the night. Every nipple knew its quavering tongue, every orifice its forceful guest. Even more than politics, religion, and war, the ecstasy and relief of carnal pleasure united a riven citizenry into a cohesive whole. And so vanity and venereal disease found their nightly way into the libertine lives of a free-spirited city.

Belshazzar's Banquet

From the outset of Belshazzar's regency a policy of profligacy had been writ large across Babylon. The current Akitu festival was a surpassing affair easily outdoing his prior indulgences. Dispensing with his indoctrination into the morbid cult of Sin, the crown prince proved a loyal friend to frippery and was only too pleased to render *all* the gods their dues.

On the twelfth and last night of celebrations, Belshazzar reclined on his plush divan in the imperial palace's crowded banquet hall, sucking on the polished toes of his Nubian concubine as he oversaw mingling nobles and consorts. A thousand of his closest acquaintances joined the regent at his lavish feast, priests and prostitutes, counselors and administrators.

Doting slaves ensured delicacies of skewered locusts and crocodile liver made the rounds. Displayed on long tables were mountainous platters of roasted pig, grilled lamb, charred goat, braised duck, boiled geese, and spiced fowl. Atop multi-storey desert tables towered stacked trays of flaked pastries, heaps of almonds, pistachios, and carob chips, mounds of blueberries and blackberries, cranberries and cherries, apricots and peaches, plums and pomegranates, cantaloupe and honeydew, and sticky mounds of honey dates and fresh figs.

Mouthwatering sights inebriated oenophiles even before they touched the wine, flowing like water from sculpted fountains. Here was decadence befitting Babylon's majesty! *Had even great Nebuchadrezzar ever hosted such*

an affair?, Belshazzar wondered, eager to exceed the debaucheries of yesteryear. As belly dancers and fire-eaters blended amid courtiers and diviners, he trusted his extravagances would be a night not soon forgotten.

"Bring the golden and silver vessels," he commanded, quaffing from his chalice.

Eunuchs forwarded solid gold and unalloyed silver vessels, items long ago expropriated by Nebuchadrezzar from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and carefully preserved in Esagila's treasury. Only superstition had kept Marduk's priests from using the articles for their own god's benefit. Belshazzar flaunted immunity in the face of foreign gods, proposing a toast.

"To the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone!" he enounced, a pithy paean to the pantheon whose members he could barely enumerate while sober.

The subtle slight against custom was pardoned in the free spirit of the occasion. Draining their cups to the dregs, guests exuded all the affectations of wine-induced camaraderie. Drunken revelers bumped into each other in slipshod gaiety. Antechambers filled with the overindulgent wallowing in their vomit, keeping slaves overworked. As attendees lazed on lounges, spilling secrets hidden by sobriety, a shocking occurrence brought all carousing to a premature end: a phantasmal hand appeared in the shadows of the plastered wall near the candelabrum, just above the unsuspecting regent's head. Gasps and cries relayed throughout the vast hall. A baffled

Belshazzar finally rose and turned to see for himself the cause of the uproar.

"A genie! A demon!" some shouted as the regent lurched, astounded to view such sorcery up close. The fingers of the hand were writing in Hebraic letters a concise notation in scarlet characters. Belshazzar's countenance turned anemic. Though the obscure scribbling meant nothing to him, the stark red against the white plaster left an indelible impression on his frightened senses. Convulsions made it impossible for him to remain on his feet.

"All enchanters, magicians, and astrologers come forward!" he barked.

Hesitantly the wise men of Babylon drew close, drowsy or otherwise indisposed, petrified by the menacing writing on the wall. Seeing their foreboding visages, Belshazzar withdrew from the wall, saliva spilling from his quavering lower lip, his bulging eyes enveloped with dread.

"Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple with a gold chain placed around his neck, and will be made third ruler in the empire," he pledged.

Diviners racked their brains to learn its meaning, conferring to achieve a consensus on a plausible translation. They struggled just to pronounce the lettering looming large before all.

"Mamtus...? Nankpy...? Ealrin...?"

Most wise men could read the foreign and ancient Hebrew alphabet, but none were capable of comprehending the script's significance or interpreting its cipher.

"Is there none who can explain this to me???" Belshazzar whinged, seeing by their stupefied glances and nervous shifting that the enigma eluded them.

Belshazzar stared at the writing, swallowing hard as the scarlet dripped down the white plaster in macabre manner. Overhearing the clamor, Empress Nitokris slithered into the hall like a creeping cobra, unseen by attendees. She marveled at the message.

"Regent, live forever!" she exclaimed. "Don't be alarmed or look so pale! There's a man in your empire who has the divine spirit within. In your father's day he was found to possess insight, intelligence, and wisdom like that of the gods. Emperor Nebuchadnezzar—your father—appointed him chief of magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and diviners. This Daniel was found to have keen knowledge and understanding, and the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems. Summon Daniel, and he'll declare what the writing means."

Again the august audience was mystified. *Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's father???* *How could the empress misspeak so glaringly??* Were their drunken senses unreliable? Murmurs circulated around the room. Sourced minds spun at the tantalizing implication. More concerned by supernatural events than by his own indecent origins, Belshazzar speculated.

"Daniel, you say...?" he echoed, with a faint recollection.
"Very well, mother."

Daniel, beckoned from the modest inn where he had been staying and praying for guidance since his audience with Nabonidus, was now whisked to the palace by chariot and rushed into the banquet hall teeming with people and puzzlement. Belshazzar gazed at the elegant eighty year-old diviner with flowing white hair braided tidily and trim white beard.

"Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the emperor brought from Judah?"

Daniel nodded, withholding the standard full bow. He had no intention of making obeisance to this degenerate, nor at his advanced age would his back bend for any earthly ruler. Belshazzar uneasily sensed that Daniel looked through him, not at him, a sign of contempt.

"I've heard that the divine spirit's within you and that you possess insight, intelligence, and outstanding wisdom. All the wise men were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they failed to explain it. Now I've heard that you're able to interpret and solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you'll be clothed in purple with a gold chain placed around your neck, and will be made third ruler in the empire."

The exceptional proposition of ruling over Babylonia with Belshazzar and Nabonidus held considerably less than the expected appeal for Daniel.

“Keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to another. I’ll read the writing for the regent and tell him what it means,” Daniel volunteered before the hushed crowd. “Regent, the Most High gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness, glory and splendor. Because of the high position He gave him, all the peoples and nations of every language revered and feared him. Those the emperor wished to put to death, he put to death; those he wished to spare, he spared; those he wished to promote, he promoted; and those he wished to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his imperial throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven from humankind and given the mind of an animal; he lived with wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most High reigns sovereign over the empires of human beings and sets over them anyone He wishes.

“But you his son, Belshazzar, haven’t humbled yourself, though you knew all of this. Instead, you’ve set yourself up against the Master of Heaven and Earth. You had the vessels from His temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, wives, and concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor understand. But you didn’t honor the Lord who holds in His hands your life and fate, so He sent the hand that wrote the inscription that reads, ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uparsin.’”

Humiliated, the wise men reexamined the Hebraic characters. Though their reading was sound, they did not perceive that the text was an anagram, three lines one under the other, each consisting of one word of five letters. Reading from right to left, as per Hebrew usage, in this instance rendered gibberish. Only by reading downwards had Daniel acquired the answer.

"The literal translation is, 'A mina, a mina, a shekel, and half-shekels,'" he explained, referring to coins and weights. "But only the letters are Hebrew; each word is actually Aramaic, hiding its double meaning. This is what the words mean: Mene—the Almighty has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end; Tekel—you've been weighed in the balances, and are found wanting; Uparsin—and your empire is to be divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

Commotion arose among attendees abhorred by the dire declaration. For once Belshazzar resented Nabonidus' absence from the capital, loath to preside over the demise of their domain.

"Can the decree be averted?" Nitokris inquired, her heart pounding in her ears.

"Babylonia will be broken by Persian power," Daniel iterated.

In a gesture of friendship he bade Nitokris farewell, then turned to leave, thinking nothing of requesting permission. In his elderly state flouting authority was

natural: fear of danger to his life had long ago given way to the more harrowing frailties of old age.

"Wait," Belshazzar insisted. The crown prince signaled to servants, who forwarded a purple cloak and chain of gold, clothing Daniel with them.

"Behold, the third ruler of Babylonia!" proclaimed the regent, hoping that by keeping his promise and honoring Daniel the angered god might be appeased and accept his late contrition. Without so much as an expression of gratitude, Daniel split the thronged hall, exiting the palace.

Word of the army's defeat had meanwhile seeped into Babylon as distraught survivors recounted dramatic tales of battle and bloodshed, offering their injuries as evidence. Worse still, Cyrus was on the march. Babylonians amassed in the avenues to share their collective grief and alarm, stirring themselves into a popular panic. As Daniel emerged from the palace into the night and ambled along the Processional Way, his feet rustling fallen tinsel from the Akitu festival, a torch-bearing mob trailed him, recognizing the beloved former governor as he removed the gold chain and purple cloak, nonchalantly adorning a winged-lion statue with them by Ishtar Gate.

"Why do you forsake these precious symbols of power??" a curious merchant asked.

"Have you no respect for the glory of Babylon or its rulers???"

"I've sacrificed too much to Babylon and its rulers to be cowed by respect," Daniel enlightened. "Come, all those courageous among you, learn just what I mean!"

A zealous Daniel herded the agitated people at the city's northeast corner, beyond darkened residential quarters, traversing the bridge over the canal dividing the capital. At length they reached the dirt-strewn district with its narrow streets ending near the distinctive mound.

"Discover what foundation Babylon has, courtesy of Emperor Nabonidus, high priest of Sin!" he exhorted, clearing shrubs camouflaging the boulder's double crescent moon symbol.

Once those stouter among the crowd displaced the stone, Daniel quickly led them through the aperture, descending into the hidden dominion. One by one the people followed, spiraling down the staircase into the illuminated pool. They were awestruck by the chalk images on the bell cave walls. Amazement transformed into horror as they navigated beyond hazardous guano and stalagmites through the maze of subterranean caverns and passages, stumbling upon piled teeth, shorn hair, rotten bones, and worm-infested skulls.

A chorus of shrieks resounded as they discovered gruesome cadavers of slaves and foreigners who had outlived their usefulness, their decomposing skeletons overrun by roaches. Beside these were chambers with the heaped remains of hybrid beasts, abominable creatures consumed by necrosis. Terrified Babylonians impulsively

flung their torches at hideous sights throughout the underground lair, unleashing their revulsion and rage.

Encountering a grisly series of bloodstained apparatuses, they clung to each other in fear and fury as they roamed intricate channels, setting everything ablaze, pausing before stranded bamboo rafts stuck in the mud where formerly they floated along watery passageways. Daniel was surprised that the stream had all but dried up, but made good use of favorable fortune.

"Come quickly!" he urged, dragging with others the flammable rafts into the adjacent central chamber of worship where masks lay atop the altar. "Here this hell ends!" he avowed.

On his mark, the revolted mob flung firebrands and slurs against the stacked rafts which burst into flames, consigning the sanctuary of Sin to conflagration. Daniel steered them away from the inferno, hastening the people toward the elongated tunnel eventuating at the Euphrates.

"The water level has fallen...!" he detected, thanking heaven even as he prodded each and all onward to safety and freedom.

"The level's just right," Darius confirmed, standing in thigh-high water and staring up at Cyrus crouching on the riverbank. "The dam has done its job well...!"

"Then so must we. We've no time to lose," Cyrus whispered, signaling his army to enter the Euphrates

under his uncle's lead. "Hurry, we mustn't keep history waiting."

Splashing lightly as they stepped down into the riverbed, the Persian army trudged steadily through water and muddy earth, dousing their torches and maintaining complete silence as they crept within sight of Babylon's formidable fortifications. Darius relied on hand signals in conducting them past the northern citadel, whose surprised sentries were sniped down with little effort. Before long the perimeter had been penetrated. Darius pushed forward toward the central bridge over the Euphrates, spanning the eastern and western halves of Babylon.

He charged the vanguard with securing bridgeheads to the suburban east, then led the bulk of the army ashore on the metropolitan west side, directing them to predetermined positions atop the city walls, beneath each gate, beside every canal bridge, within the grand bazaar and central square, along the Processional Way, and outside all entrances to Esagila and Etemenanki.

While battalions fanned out across the capital, Darius headed an elite regiment against the palace, whose overwhelmed guards were disposed of by swarming commandos. They sped from room to room, down one hallway after another, ultimately reaching the packed banquet hall and startling the drunken horde from its stupor. Darius scrambled through the multitude, targeting the regally-attired regent, now half-unconscious on his

plush divan. The crown prince spotted his assailants and roused himself to his feet.

"Guards!" he shouted, his speech slurred.

Whizzing arrows from Persian bows neutralized guards attending their master. Belshazzar grabbed a hidden dagger from his robe and lunged at his foes with none of his former agility, swiping maniacally until his soft stomach met with the thrusting iron of a Median sword.

"Ah, the thief's fate," Darius glared, plunging his blade deeper into the regent's flesh. "Kashaya regrets being unable to attend, I assure you, but sends her regards," he scowled, pulling his bloodied weapon from Belshazzar's belly and watching him fall to the floor with a dull thud.

Nitokris, aware of upheaval in the streets below her window, had maidservants apply fine cosmetics to her face, coloring her eyelashes with silvery stibium and powdering her cheeks with carminic rouge. The empress would meet her conquerors as a refined matron, on her own terms.

She evaded Darius' forces inside the palace, managing to reach the secret passage leading to the Processional Way. She rushed through the concealed corridor, feeling very differently, as if a foreigner in her native land. Emerging onto the grand boulevard crawling with Persian fighters, she was seized by watchful officers who detained her at Ishtar Gate, where her attention was drawn to a winged-lion appareled with purple cloak and gold chain. Black crows needled threads with their beaks, pecking at the

shiny metal. *How the mighty have fallen*, she scoffed, sighing at the dissipation of illusion. Above the lion on the gate's curving arch hung the engraved words of her father, in posthumous defiance of changing times:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, laid the foundation of the gates down to the groundwater level and had them built out of pure blue stone. Upon the walls in the inner room of the gate are bulls and dragons and thus I adorned them with splendor for mankind to behold in awe...



Brandon Marlon is a writer from Ottawa, Canada. He received his B.A. in Drama & English from the University of Toronto and his M.A. in English from the University of Victoria. His poetry was awarded the Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry (Fall 2015), and his writing has been published in 175+ publications in 24 countries.

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