Psalms for Skeptics (101-150)

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Description
Sparked by phrases from the book of Psalms, these poems question and occasionally affirm our everyday ideas about life, mortality, the afterlife, God, family, and belief. In vigorous contemporary language—complaining, lamenting, and wisecracking on everything from Job's wife to baseball, crows to angels, circus elephants to Mary Magdalene—but in traditional form, these sonnets, or little songs, "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." [From the publisher]

Keywords
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Disciplines
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Comments
Attached is Psalm 100-106 from Kent Gramm's book Psalms for Skeptics.

This book is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/books/60
Psalm 101

O when wilt thou come unto me? (Advent)

You come, I go: one sight of the white Light
and this body drops alone, familiar bone
cold forever, an undertaker's stone
in a lake of my children's tears. All right.
What's left to want but a sign, some surprise,
kindness where the waters of memory
part, Jesus? When you do come unto me—
materialize to my lidded eyes—
what will I be? How will I see what I
don't want to see? What I am afraid of
is what I want: the unsupposed glory
that penetrates light, the postponed beauty,
the starry child of everlasting love,
the face of truth, beneficent and gory.
Psalm 102

My heart is smitten

My heart is smitten. Something happened here, inside, like a fire blown out with a bang. Fell, turned green, passed out. It wasn’t a scare: it was the real thing. The fat lady sang like a locomotive. Me, on a cart, an hour from dead. They put me on a table and Jesus ran a wire into my heart, opened a tube; stepped back into fable—but I knew. He was there. He left a sign, an artifact, a feather: I mean me. I was immortal once upon a time, bore frankincense; unique, I used to be. But now I see I am a different self. Survived for now, like everybody else.
my days are consumed like smoke

I can't hear it, but I know it is ticking.
The days go by with nothing done. Like smoke
from a wispy fire—some dust-thin poems
going out before they reach the flickering
burn. Complain, why don't I?—that would burn
still more of what is left, a paper tear
on a paper face in a paper year
in a paper space. Do they also serve
who only sit and waste? But let Indian
Summer come, the lazy childhood haze,
bracing fragrant taste of leaves in the smoke,
maples grateful to the all-gracious sun,
and remembering youth going where it goes
uncompleted, ripe, and smiling away.
I am in trouble

My heart is stricken: I will lose you all.
"Where I am going, none of you may go."
What’s worse is where that is, none of us knows;
still worse, we all know. Whatever you call
it, it smells of flowers for awhile, dust
on the face, the mortician’s after shave:
what theological word rhymes with “grave”
that doesn’t tremble on the lip of “lost”?

One night the Lord came to me in my sleep,
looking handsome like David the Great King,
O Israel, whose look, more powerful
than horses, calls the universe like sheep
from particles, Eternity in flower;
and I was saved. And I will be waiting.
But thou, O Lord, shalt endure forever.

The only comfort is the only comfort. For what is hell but life eternal—that's it; just life eternal. Live forever, enemy! Just you and your friends. Quiet. Except for an exploding star now and then, cosmos expanding like an apple a thousand miles per second, the random black hole gulping like a hollow drain, and so on and so on. You will get damn sick of your friends. Go see the fireworks every night, all night; one long night. You will all wish you were dead. That this satire of heaven would have had a Maker. That the humming in all that dark matter would mean something.
Psalm 103

Bless the Lord, O my soul

O bless the Lord, my soul, whoever you may be, you keeper of our memories: you, whom I call mine though I am yours—I, the day-to-day perception and illusion, the child of the unconscious mind, body's bedfellow, servant, and traducer, dead in a sweet dream of aphrodesia, dead in the lost cause of astronomy: me, loved?—not the clothes horse I know. But someone I don't know who knows me is loved: you the aromatic of the lotus rose, beloved of the one and only One, loved, loved—and you know what I only wound and crucify: bless the Lord, O my soul!
Psalm 104

*thou art clothed with honor and majesty*

What clothing! O Lord my God, we worship your clothes. Our God's a fashionable God; no Presbyterian. New money. Not a Catholic. Evangelical—furnished with effective praise—no make-up except will, lots of it, nothing but it, explaining things to us inerrantly on the page—a potentate to pagans. When the stepson appeared we were rightly skeptical and remain so. He was everything You are not—visible in the dark, insolvent. He walked, he loved, he ridiculed, he slept. You tried to save him from his followers, but there was nothing You could do.
Psalm 105

*sing psalms unto him* (a)

I'd like to have an audience of One—
but then again, I'm not so sure—who knows
aesthetics and appreciates a rhyme
that's just a hint in a rhythmic poem
even when the candy of its images
is metallic as blood, or when all you
get is visual assonance—ambiguity
be damned sometimes, when what the poem says
is all it says, as if Lord Tennyson
had eaten Eliot for breakfast, won—
an audience appreciative of form,
who sits up nights admiring human wit;
sly, kind, ironic, sad. [Here, warm applause
from the audience inside the poet.]
sing psalms unto him (b)

Unto whom else? Many of us have no reader but the One who hears in secret: "for I say unto you, when you pray, go alone into your room and close your door; the One who hears in secret will reward you." On the busy streets no one will know I was not good enough for anyone but myself. (I planned to write “anyone but God,” but who could be that good or bad? Is God who wants my poetry only in my head?—He and I two kindly old gents content, yea, pleased, with the mediocre; one formerly in shorts—tan, grassy lad; the other a Whirlwind of white and gold.)
seek his face

Your face is home, and nothing else we have
is ours. The universe's filigree
of fire and colors and geometry
a billion billion deep is its own grave,
a vast performance of holes and splendor
perishing: an image always leaving
its mirror in our mind, magician's sleeve,
a shimmering house with its key next door
in Grampa's overalls pocket. He sits
at his little kitchen table, coffee
in an old cup warmed up from yesterday,
sugar cube a diamond die of snow, listening
to the radio, musing memories,
begetting you and everything he sees.
Psalm 106

they soon forgot his works

The supersized blue star Rigel, sixty thousand times brighter than the sun, collapses someday soon: its heated sacrifices—
the nitrogen of sons and daughters stripped and spread across wide open spaces of wasté—
will hollow out its core like a nation sucking the blood of its poor. Thin marrow sipped from their bones, they become dry shadows circling to the bottom of a hand cupped around a black and blood-stained hole—erupting to a supernova—flambeau of gas blue, white, red—wild excess!—its shredding flower the settling shoulder of Orion's power. Heed, ye heathen!—the heavy torch is passed.
they murmured in their tents

They murmured in their tents, some centuries before they were Jews—just Joe and Susie Blow in the desert: something anybody would have done—Arabs, campers, Comanches, men, women. A tent is made for murmuring— for a muffled, airy cinnamon breeze under colored shade, warm afternoon peace— made for murmuring and for being heard— murmuring like water, murmuring like a distant caravan, murmuring like people lying looking up at the stars; and who in the world do we think we are to sleep under these stitches of glittering light?
he is good

The Lord is good, and everything is one.
I can't believe Nels Mickleson is dead,
so set my memory of him—face red,
alive. What do I care for sunken bones,
stones, or all the comfort under the sun?
Lord, let me see him on his porch again—
the one on Ninth Street—but as he was then
and not in memory. Memory's done.
The heart's done. It's just a matter of time
and it will all be done—everything one:
one old stone in the cold—or in the mind
of Mr. Mickelson, the universe
drawing in like sand down the rounding course
of his life, in that chair, in the sublime.