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Black Psalm
Dispatch from Zero Hour
Belief
Version on the Bath

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As for the tattoo
 It is slowly taking the shape
 Of two hearts on the butt of Jesus,
 One per rosy cheek,
 Which delights the crowd.

JOHN LABELLA

Black Psalm*

1.

Mother of brute grace,
 in rags of wind and rain,
 make aim of my doubt.
 Remind me of the end.
 O strike and spare me.
 Mother of lightning.

2.

Glory be to fire.
 Glory be to the flames at my feet,
 the serpents of heat
 that lick the dark hissing
 and coil to stun.

Dusk, dawn,
 from pyre to pyre,
 I sing and I thirst.
 I dance and I hunger.
 I leap and falling clatter.
 Desire unto death
 after death, I desire.

Glory be to fire.
 Glory be to the singeing
 grief and the crackling silent.
 I consent, fire: unmake me.
 Burn my horizon.

3.

Night, be praised,
 who remembers and conceals
 all your lost children,
 all our shades of nakedness.
 Lead us, Night, out
 of our labyrinth, remorse.

*Set to music for soprano by Filipino avant-garde composer Robin Estrada, "Black Psalm" premiered on 27 February 2005 at the Berkeley Art Center in California.

Dispatch from Zero Hour

Because eternity was in love
 with the productions of time,
 it brought upon us the firmament,
 toppled our tenements and towers
 till all that remained unshook
 were the sycamores in our valley,
 upon which, too, it descended
 fiery leaf by leaf while we watched
 with a panic to sing as appeal
 what we had sworn not to forget,
 envisioning in our peeling trees,
 in white pith showing forth,
 the shared soul we ever insisted
 was legible and moving as our faces;
 but eternity did not cease, reaching
 for us, even us the divinely made,
 because it could yet only surmise
 its object from our eyes, our awe,
 our hands, our gripping hope,
 and did not rest though it learned
 at the cost of our final unmaking
 that nothing yielded, least of all us,
 whatever it desired forever beyond
 itself in the images that blazed.

Belief

Why does a man, having forgotten
 the sacred phrases and the hours of the mass,
 enter an empty church and linger?
 A sparrow settles on one of the unpainted beams,
 the ribs of the ark of Noah.
 The windows gleam amber through their soot.
 A dove like a paper plane, godly bruises,
 jars and flat bread, a hill procession
 arrested in its sway between majesty
 and kitsch. What light enters pure enough
 to untangle shadows, leans in though the doors
 showing the village and the sea?
 Easy to feel the hand of Gad moving the breezes,
 lifting ruin from these stones,
 while the pilgrim's weight grows, his love
 of loneliness: there are no answers,
 no winged trumpeters, no dark horsemen.
 Purified of religion, the urge to kneel,
 he is moved enough to consider without tears
 the stir of dust and pollen on the pews.

Versions on the Bath

1.
 Like a thought with crude hair
 (as on the skins of heathen fruit)
 ripens the mind about
 a nipple. Caftan slips,
 or frayed towel, and there: nipple.

Pearl of great price,
 bare as an exegete going bald, resisting
 wave after wave of his own blush,
 his reason peeling before the radiant pink
 of a recollected mother.

2.

Architects do not plan
 the bathroom with views in mind
 for a reason now too-bruited
 alongside television:
 to observe is to be watched.
 Deprived of scenery
 the hyperconscious have-not,
 visiting, avidly reads onto the surfaces
 (tiles lined with talcum,
 buttery soap dish, teething mirror)
 all kinds of metonym,
 and delights in the unsayable.
 He notes for instance how
 the "obscene" reproduction is hung
 near the work of pale ceramic
 that enthrones him, to distract
 from the human banality
 against which the image is glassed in,
 kept dry.

Outside, the gardener below
 is lumping at the base of a tender stem
 biodegradables to retain moisture.
 To view his labor through
 the small window by the nozzle,
 the mistress of the house
 would have to stand on her toes.

3.

The third eye?
 How to exalt this power of sorts?
 No need to will deafness
 as though by rain
 or the silence of shelter from rain.
 But yes, there should be
 that quiet, short of gasping,
 as when someone
 in a darkened room strains to hear
 her lover bathing, hidden,

and divines from the sound of suds
and splashing
his flesh glistening at the corners
vision has entered.

4.

It is not so much the mirror in the painting,
illusion repeated betraying itself,
that moves the viewer
as the illusion of the body's brilliance.

Turning away from obvious sunlight,
the nude reflection bends
about to towel her toes, lift her thigh.
She forms a curve that could become eternal.

Yet might Bonnard's idea have been
less of the body's reprieve than of the eye?
It chooses to see brightly,
forgetful of shadow in comprehending light.

Intimate objects crowding the mirror
are painted like smoke,
like ghosts on the verge of redemption.
At the corner of the frame, the woman flames.

Meanwhile, orbed in the gaze
is the calmly growing consent to suffer
but not until the ultimate
darkness begins. Memory, then darkness.