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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.

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\*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, orb'd in the gaze  
is the calmly growing consent to suffer  
but not until the ultimate  
darkness begins. Memory, then darkness.