

A howl of despair: Sunday, June 24

*Psalm 42*

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

The Psalms have always functioned as a book of common prayer. But there is also a long history of turning to the Psalter as a sourcebook for poetry. It is not difficult to see why. Many of the psalms foreground the act of speech or song—the activity of utterance itself—as the chief end of everything that has breath. In this universal work of praise the poet leads the cosmic chorus in giving voice to “Kings of the earth and all peoples” and to “Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars” (Ps. 148:9, 11).

In addition to discovering the joyful noise of words and music in thanksgiving, we are confronted in the Psalter with the power of the psalmist’s “I.” The psalmist alternates between public and private worlds, and expresses a broad spectrum of emotion. He draws from a stockpile of images and metaphors that continues with astonishing vigor to “fly with the wings of the morning” even after three millennia, so that the Psalter’s ancient singing is always a “new song.”

Where better, then, to look for suitable words to speak to God than in the psalms of David, God’s preeminent artist? David is the model for anyone who would have his ten-stringed instrument soar heights and plumb depths, who adores the Almighty “enthroned upon the praises of Israel” and boldly calls God into the dock for things done or left undone. “How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” (Ps. 13:1).

Take Psalm 42, whose opening verse I will always hear in the unbeatable King James Version, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.” Footnotes suggest a scenario behind the text: an illness, an inability to make pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple, the taunt of naysayers who treat bad health as a sign of divine disfavor, the persistent hope that the soul now cast down will once again be raised up.

So much for *Sitz im leben*. What strikes me is the way the text “works” as a poem. It opens with the psalmist evoking his longing for God as a kind of animal thirst. At the beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks about an inborn need for God that only God can satisfy. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” But the psalmist locates us in our bodies, asks us to imagine something more urgent than restlessness. A single deer, driven almost mad by the heat of the sun and stumbling across a desert landscape in exhaustion, suddenly comes upon water. A trickle between the rocks would have been enough, but suddenly there are flowing streams, “living water,” in abundance. Nor can anything less than the sea convey the sheer magnitude of the blessing: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.”

At least this is the *hope* of the psalmist, who is dying of thirst, whose only sustenance has been the salt of his own sorrow: “My tears have been my food day and night.”

It was not always this way. He recalls a time when he was not alone in the desert, but was part of a crowd on its way to experience God’s proximity in the Jerusalem temple. “These things I remember,” he says, “as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.” For these words to have their effect you have to have known the ecstasy of worship—no tepid Sunday morning at 11 o’clock, but a baptism that made you weep, or an Easter vigil that brought you out of darkness and into light. The psalmist recalls times when his sense of the divine presence was so immediate and full that he felt as if he were beholding nothing less than the face of God.

But that was then. Now all that he hears is the sound of his own dereliction—“Why have you forgotten me?”— coming back to him in the relentless taunts of others: “Where is your God?” The Gospels suggest that such cries of lamentation flooded Jesus at the end of his life. The glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving became the mockery of the crowd asking him again and again, “Where is your God?” Could he say? Psalm 22’s “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” are his last words as recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

Words. The Psalter gave him a language for despair, metaphors to describe what it meant to feel poured out on the ground, melted down like a blob of wax, dried up like a broken clay fragment. The texts on his lips were already ancient when he learned them in his youth—a mother tongue shared with countless generations

before him. Nonetheless, like all true poetry, the Psalms seem to be newly minted, disarming, to be an utterance that comes straight from the gut as well as from the heart. A deer crashes through the desert's underbrush, hunting for the water that can keep it alive. "Where is your God?" echoes in the dry air. A man at the end of his rope decides to hope against all the odds, to remember the Rock when he feels himself to have been left in the dust: "For I shall again praise him, my help and my God." The Psalms give us a way to howl as well as to praise, permission to bewail the darkness, and permission to hold on to a vision of light.