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*T*RANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
MARK S. BURROWS



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99 Psalms: SAID

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for my parents
Robert and Marion Burrows
with abiding gratitude

look
i attend to things
with their quietly flowing creed
SAID

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Acknowledgments

Five of these poems first appeared in the translation issue of *Poetry* 199 (March 2012); four also appeared in *Seminary Ridge Review* 16 (Spring 2013).

Preface

The poems we need are often those that refuse to leave us unattended. They come to question and to comfort, to clarify and disturb, seeking in their own way to touch our lives and perhaps even to change us. They offer themselves as illuminations of a sort, casting their light into the shadows that cling to us and gesturing toward a path we might follow through the trials that beset us along the way.

Again and again, such poems startle us in our certainties as in our complacency. They remind us to look beyond what we know, or think we know, and, as the author of these psalms puts it, to “believe in truths / that expand beyond the field of our vision.” [11]¹ They assure us when we stumble in our doubt that “only seekers see,” [73] inviting us to embrace the whole of our lives, including our disappointments and failings, as beginnings of a new path. “[L]et us touch the darkness and / the torn flesh of love,” [69] the poet suggests, finding our way to a form of prayer that is “like a river / between two shores,” seeking “new skin / that can bear this world.” [43] Poems of this sort activate what another poet has called “the acute intelligence of the imagination,” a

transformative power representing “the sum of our faculties.”²

These psalms engage us with such an imaginative intelligence. In their unique way they bear witness to the heart’s descent into loneliness and despair, and gesture to the ascents we also know in moments of compassion and generosity. They speak words that unsettle our firmly held conventions, calling for “the strength to ponder and clarify” our lives. [53] They ask for what the poet calls “a wordless space close by” [52] so that we might make room in our lives for new ways of thinking and living. In such ways these late-modern psalms, like their ancient Hebrew antecedents, turn us with fierce honesty and authenticity toward the often difficult realities we face in our lives. They beckon us to come forth from the tombs of our grief, and rebuke us when we linger in the valleys of self-pity or resignation. Above all, they invite us to discover our own voice—and our own “self”—as we read them slowly, “chewing” their language to recall an image often found in ancient monastic literature, line by line, image by image, and even word by word. They open something within us, slowly and steadily, that can only be found in such a slow reading, leading to the insights and puzzlements we discover by means of “an incandescence of the intelligence,” one that “rescues all of us from what we have called absolute fact.”³

When I first encountered these psalms in their original German, they seemed intimately familiar to me, though I'd not known of them before then. Nor had I ever met their author, the contemporary poet who goes by the pen name SAID, an Iranian who emigrated to Germany as an engineering student in the late 1960s—but eventually gave up these studies to pursue a writing career; I tell the story of my discovery of SAID's work in the Afterword to this volume.

When I first heard the poet reading several of these psalms, some of the lines ignited that rush of energy that comes in moments of unexpected insight, while others touched a deep sensibility within me through the intimate tenderness of their language. What drew me to them from the start was the power of their allurements, and their witness to truths we can only come to know in and through our embodied lives. In such ways they seemed remarkably like some of the Hebrew Psalms, though their thought-world is unmistakably modern, even late-modern, and thus often a distant echo of the cadences of their biblical predecessors.

Over the years since, the poems found in this strange and wonderful new psalter have become trusted companions on my journey. I hope they might become such a presence for you as well. If so, they will not come offering advice or promising answers to life's great questions. They will be more like the

deep “stirrings” that unsettle us, that move us in the silent depths of our being, that “place” within us that is “boundary and center at once,” [28] as SAID puts it. But this will mean facing the anguish we know in our bodied lives and learning to “believe in the flesh / its extravagance and its incorrigibility.” [68] Such an experience is no small gift, even if often a discomfoting one. Nor will it be unfamiliar to those who have heard the cry in our own lives that resounds in the ancient Psalter:

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me. (Ps. 42:7)

Or, in the echo one hears in one of SAID’s psalms:
lord
burn
so that your light divides us
because i seek refuge with you
from my truths [77]

As you can see, these poems are distinctly—one might say peculiarly—modern in diction and voice. Yet if the function of psalms is to remind us of the complexities we face in our lives without offering answers, then SAID’s psalms are not unconventional at all. Like the “wild wood dove” of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Peace,” SAID’s psalter “comes with work to do, he does not come to coo, / He comes to

brood and sit.” This should be stated plainly at the outset as a kind of “consumer warning,” since many who turn to the biblical Psalms select the sweet and lovely ones and ignore or avoid the others—though these are probably the ones we need the most. Why? Because they insist on naming the often difficult story we encounter day by day in our lives, the one we face with all its duplicities in the shadows of our own hearts. A selective approach that would avoid such dark recesses, whether driven by fear or wishful thinking, is finally enervating because untrue—and thus unable to take account of the full range of our humanness.

A word of caution, then, at the outset: these new psalms have something of the sharp and rough edge felt in the rhetoric of the ancient Hebrew Psalter. They occasionally offer soothing words of comfort, but more often bring a measure of the prophet’s stinging critique—aimed first of all at the psalmist’s own “tribe.” None of these poems would ever be chosen to grace a modern greeting card, the kind featuring soft pastel backgrounds, luxurious floral bouquets, or idyllic sunsets over quiet harbors. No, these are psalms for a deeper and more rugged journey, one that faces the deceptions and despairs of our hearts and exposes the hypocrisy choking our public life. For this reason, they are the psalms we most need today, warning us against the dangers

of “the songs of our solemn assemblies,” in the thundering words of the prophet Amos, as well as the banalities of misguided piety.

SAID speaks courageously against the empty moralism so dominant in our culture. He turns a fearless voice against the deceit of those who judge others for the weaknesses they refuse to acknowledge in themselves—those blinding “shadows” of the psyche, in the language of psychoanalysis. He exposes the abuse of power and privilege, avoiding every trace of sentimentality and turning from the seduction of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” These poems offer a distinctively late-modern answer to the question posed by Jesus’s first disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and they dare to do so while at the same time facing the complexities of modern pluralistic societies as well as the inequities sponsored by a globalized economy. In such ways, SAID, addressing God, speaks a word in defense of those oppressed by others who “have retreated / after devouring me until they hungered no more,” such that “what’s left is a legion of hecklers / who take shelter behind your façade.” [24] A psalm like this reminds us that mercy, that most necessary of virtues, is most needed when it is not deserved. Those who have faced the fire of condemnation and survived know what SAID is speaking about; it is for them, first of all, that these psalms speak.

I am grateful to bring SAID's voice to English readers, since it is one that helps us make sense of what it means to live with passion and integrity in such times as these. They plead for the renewal that is always close to us:

lord
give me new skin
and don't ignore the murmuring of my flesh
[79]

There is another power to SAID's verse. These psalms voice a yearning for an embodied spirituality that is able to move us beyond the often narrowing boundaries of institutional religion. Simply put, SAID offers an authentic way of praying, one that is direct and unsentimental, both simple and demanding enough to voice a hope that can move us.

Yet it is just as true that these poems find their grounding in the three Abrahamic religious traditions, and surely this is another source of their allure. The choice of writing ninety-nine psalms will echo for Muslim readers the ancient tradition that Allah is known by precisely this number of names, while one—"the last / the hidden" [1]—remains ultimately beyond us and thus unknowable. Similarly, the story of Cain and Abel [95] finds a place here in a form reminiscent of the interpretive freedom of rabbinic midrash and its retelling in the Qur'an. Furthermore,

the address to the “lord” found in these poems carries a sense of both the intimacy and the distance found in the biblical Psalms, an ambivalence SAID renders in the language of longing heard throughout his psalter. And yet readers from these religious communities will be joined by many others outside their boundaries who also find themselves overcome by “a great sorrow,” whom “the word has overpowered,” and yet also know to “keep still” in order to learn how to love again. [89]

We need psalms like these in our day, psalms that can stir us like a cool night wind across a parched desert or a gentle rain after a long drought. We need poems that are perceptive and audacious enough to call upon the “lord” to “listen within [our] solitude” and “stand by those too / who stay and wait” for his coming. [10] What might we come to know if we dared to ask the “lord,” with the poet, to “bear / the brokenness / of [our] body” and not “confuse revenge with justice”? [20] And what could we discover if we followed his lead in asking for “new skin” to touch and feel this world with a child’s wonder rather than an adult’s worry? We also need a psalter that does not wait for some “still, small voice” but rather calls directly upon the “lord” to

be loud and urgent
share in my life and my passions
accompany me

all the way to your bread
so that my word might wake [22]

Poems like these encourage us in facing the hungers we feel in our lives, while also promising to lead us to the nourishment we long for, that “new language” [47] we need when we find ourselves silent—or silenced. This collection, *99 Psalms*, is suited for our times, giving us poems that speak a “word out of the silence” and provide “light out of the darkness.”



I am glad to acknowledge my gratitude to those whose assistance was indispensable over the last year, while I completed work on this translation. First and foremost, my thanks go to SAID for his generosity in inviting me to create what he called from the start “our psalms.” His encouragement over the years and the friendship that has grown in the process have been an unexpected gift; indeed, this collaboration could well stand in answer to the Romantic poet Hölderlin’s brooding question, “What use are poets in destitute times?” From the beginnings of this project several years ago, the assistance of others has shaped this book for the better. I am particularly fortunate to have had Jon M. Sweeney as my editor once again. Jon immediately recognized the value of this book when I shared the idea of it with him in a

San Francisco diner in 2011. Since that time, he has generally trusted—and often improved—my work as a translator and poet; the journey SAID’s *Psalmen* took in finding their “second life” in my translation has much to do with Jon’s editorial instincts and artistic sensibilities. It also reflects the high standards of his colleagues at Paraclete Press, Sister Mercy Minor and Sister Madeleine Cleverly, whose able stewardship of this project exemplifies all that is noble in the still venerable but increasingly fragile publishing business.

Others have offered vital encouragement and affection along the way. Among them I am glad to thank those most intimately involved in my life during the year when I completed this book: my spouse, Ute Molitor, who talked through many of the translation challenges these psalms presented, and stood by me—a favorite phrase of SAID’s in these psalms—in ways that exceed what words can say; my daughters, Emma and Madeline, constant sources of love in our lives, whose commitments to bring about positive change in our world emulate the rose which knows “to bare itself / and shine by day” [96]; my parents, Robert and Marion Burrows, and my brothers, David and John, who have always embodied the truth for me—and never more generously than during the past years—that “love is as strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6).

I am also pleased to thank Chris Wiman, who believed in these poems and my translations of them

from the start, and whose own poems—particularly those in his recent volume *Every Riven Thing*—have offered glimpses of a gritty beauty hewn from the heart of suffering when I needed them most. I am also grateful, finally, for the circle of friends whose unswerving love and support over the last year have been a gift of saving grace, above all John Ohlson, Ulrich Wippermann, Mary Catherine Bateson, Carl Scovel, Robert Jonas, and John Haule. Each knows the depth of my gratitude for the ways they embody what it means to “wait for a new light” [78] and thus tend the precious gift of friendship.

Those who write know that this work, shaped in the matrix of solitude, depends on this gift above all others. I am glad to dedicate this volume to these colleagues, family members, and friends who stand among the circle of all who still “believe in beauty” [48] and know to

. . . watch over your word
so that love be found anew
and we win back our wildness [4]

This work bears a deep measure of their affection, and is a sign of my gratitude. These psalms are theirs as well.

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1 SAID, *Psalmen* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2007), 75; all citations noted in brackets are from SAID's poems as translated and numbered in this volume. In the original German volume, they are not noted by number; since they begin on p. 7, and are never more than a single page in length, one can find the original by adding six to the numbers noted here in brackets.

2 Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in *The Necessary Angel*, in Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 681.

3 *Ibid.*, 680–81.

“for I am freeing you from cruel gods,
and we’re going to a god who belongs to us”

—GABRIELA MISTRAL

psalms

[1]

lord

you can pray to everything

that is near me

because i've given up my claim on

any privilege

so that i won't be immobilized by my own light

and i ask you o lord

reveal all your names to me

even the last

the hidden

[2]

lord
make room
for the rebellious one i am
for my angerless hands
for my selective loyalty
that betrays everything
except dreams and prayers

[3]

lord

let us take up the conversation again

after the long enforced silence

that came after you undid your creatures

in auschwitz

in hiroshima

in halabtsche

in srebrenica

do you fall to your knees before the sacrificed?

and before the perpetrators as well?

and do you believe

that we can survive the temptation of an even more

radical love

without your word?

[4]

look o lord
i don't sing your praises
but i seek you
with my limbs
which i've tamed just for you
for i want to keep watch over your word
so that love be found anew
and we win back our wildness