

Seven Psalm Octets

SUSAN STEWART

These poems were commissioned in the winter of 2020–2021 for a setting by the composer James Primosch, who died on 26 April 2021. They are dedicated to the memory of his friendship and the life of his music.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ps. 6

Why should you be angry, why these
burning words when I'm so low my bones
ache, my teeth ache, and mercy is your
power's proof? Who will sing your praises
from the grave? Who will think of you
when I am gone? All night, here in my bed,
I thrash in a sea of tears. Those are
my cries that you hear. Not my enemy's.

Ps. 32

When I was silent, when I was muzzled like
a dog or dancing bear, a roar welled up
inside me. And when I spoke, I mis-spoke.
One mistake after another, there for anyone
to see and hear. But knowing an error is knowing.
The tide showed up below me, and voices came singing
from every direction, and the roar, unbridled, turned
into a shout, and the night was my cover and cove.

Ps. 38

The book I was reading was over my head.
The morning the start of all-day mourning.
Lovers and friends stand aloof, kin
beyond the horizon. Lies in the airwaves
thick as flies. Static and snow dense
as dreams. The paranoid passes for wisdom.
The innocent slip on the stairs. I'm chasing the good
I've glimpsed. Hurry, I need your help.

Ps. 52

The little minds brag at the meeting
while the rest yawn and read their mail.
The surface wounds smart, then itch,
while the deep wounds wash away
like shale on the cliffs. I was laughing
at you, not with you. I was meant
to be a sapling, supple and green,
and waiting alone in that wind.

Ps. 102

Smoke to the south; it's the day that's burning,
like brown grass, down to the root. A sparrow
with the whole red roof to himself
chirping at the hungry squirrels below.
Nearer, the mason slowly building,
stone by stone, the fallen wall.
Mica glitters in the mud and severed
ivy. To the north, a blanket of nimbus.

Ps. 130

I was in deep when I made the call.
Stay near so you can answer.
If you're keeping track, you'll see the number.
Wherever there's fear, they say, there's
forgiveness. I'm waiting, still waiting,
for a word. The sun will come up, of course.
Each night has its end.
The sun will come again. Stay near.

Ps. 143

In a flash, a thought of the days and nights,
when we were woven together by
hands and limbs and lips, delirious
with joy and the infinite sense of the infinite
stretching before us. And now in this
posthumous time, in a loneliness so close
to the lonely dead, it's memory itself that
returns each morning, quiet as a caress.