

Ordinary Psalms

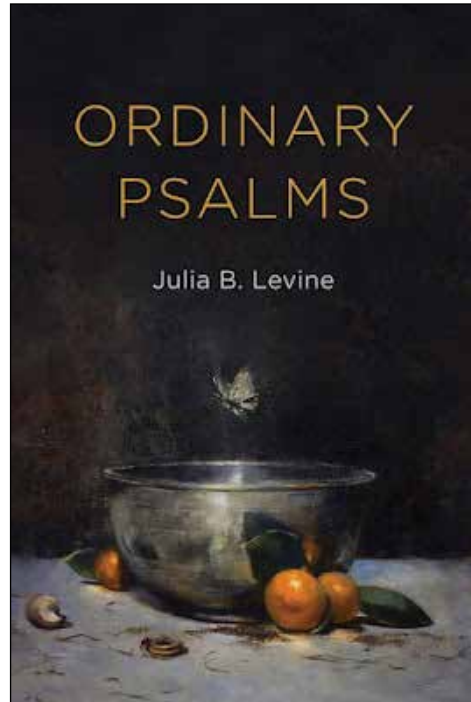
Julia B. Levine

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Reviewed by David P. Miller

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives this first definition for ordinary: "of a kind to be expected in the normal order of events." Its definition of psalm: "a sacred song or poem used in worship." The title of Julia B. Levine's book, *Ordinary Psalms*, complicates what the conjunction of these words might imply. First, because in these poems "the normal order of events" denies many of the synonyms for ordinary, such as routine, unremarkable, workaday. Second, because the sense of the sacred and the act of worship are inseparable from the experience of suffering and a questioning of the purposes served by the idea of deity.



The book's four sections center on, but do not exclusively concern, the blindness which Levine has experienced as an adult, a friend's lung cancer, and another friend's suicide. The first poem, "Psalm with Wren in Daylight Saving Time," places us immediately:

*Late afternoon, I chop onions by feel,
listening to crows cry to each other across the ridge.*

*Gone now, white recipe card on the white floor,
green sea glass found on a Humboldt beach.*

*But this hour I have been given back, carried out
of gorse, red flash of maples, finches in our cedar.*

*Meaning, today I returned for the first time
to the moment I understood I was going blind.*

In these lines, five senses are activated. The action of chopping onions connotes touch, secondarily the sense of smell, and even taste. Sound and vision are evoked even as she loses her sight. Levine sustains this intensity of presence throughout the book.

Of equal significance is the directness, in the fourth stanza, with which she describes the catastrophe. Because we can assume that this experience has been emotionally wrenching, it's unnecessary for her to tell us that. Her frankness, devoid of melodrama, allows space for us as readers to use empathetic imagination. (I am writing as someone who still possess his sight – temporarily-abled, let's say.) At the same time, we must understand

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what this requires of us: "Sometimes we must drag our grief out of the river / and put our mouth on it. Then a loosening comes." To be present for that which is still to be praised, we must keep our suffering as a living thing.

The inextricability of all seeming opposites (together comprising the ordinary) surfaces again and again in these poems. "Psalm with Violent Interruptions" chains "the TV news // with its body count, looped reels of the partly butchered and fallen" with "iris noosing cobalt blue." The might of a "A four-point buck // staring towards the Pacific, his ears like paired kites / tugged by wind" exists in the same flow as "new suicide vests / hang[ing] unexploded on hooks." These are simultaneities, not contradictions.

"Preaching to the Debris Field" concludes the book's first section. The title immediately refers to the official destruction of a shared cabin (no cause given). Though Levine, as always, refuses bromides, the remnants are still tied to their own beauty, partially via glint/girder/glittering, shards/shiners, raccoon/rubble:

*Winter now, and behind me is wreckage—
copper tangled in the glint of a girder,*

*mirror shards flashed in the hummock and slag.
Let me tell you something.*

*Long before the park service demolished our cabin,
there were whole days of glittering,*

*the raccoon and her delicate hands fishing for shiners,
the dark wick of a seal lifted up from the bay.*

*And let me remind you that beneath rubble
is bedrock, layer of origin.*

The second section begins with "Anthropocene Psalm," a longer multi-sectioned poem. Here, the poet's encroaching blindness is folded into her friend Mary's cancer. Here is another view of the inseparability of all facets of experience:

*And I'm remembering too, how once,
passing a crepe myrtle in full bloom, every leaf, every branch
crowned with fuchsia,*

*Mary stopped, gasping,
and I froze, terrified she was in sudden pain.*

*But it was beauty. The way it enters sometimes
like a knife and we both felt it then—*

This, while she declares "I can no longer see // out of one eye, and the other / vandalized, cracked, and taped so that strange shards / of light fly in."

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Lamentation poems first appear in this section of the book, as psalms persist. Perhaps these are intermingled in Levine's question: "God, I thought, are you never sorry / or always?" But it's the poem "God Speaks to Me from the Almond Orchard" that crushes a reader's easy hope of salvation. The title itself is immediately undermined: "You wanted me to say it through their flowering, / didn't you? To declare my love / with these ferocious prairies of snow?" We want so badly to believe in the natural world's reassurance through obvious metaphors, but:

*[...] when one of you lies face up under a canopy,
wind flicking petals from a branch,*

*you like to think,
This must be God's fingers touching my cheek.*

*I advise you to stop imagining the aftermath
as something you can apprehend.*

The challenge is to neither lean on the banalities we easily derive from non-human creation, nor to give way to nihilism. As in "The Anointing," the poem following "Almond Orchard," where "Stars-of-Bethlehem float over the lawn" in all their vitality. As "the dogs on the sidewalk lie down in praise," the speaker "continue[s] on, past the poppies toppled over / with radiance. Still helpless as any god // to keep my friend on the next block / from dying slowly of cancer." Yes, "god" in lower-case here as elsewhere, though not always. The upper-case "G" is sometimes granted, sometimes denied.

Poems in the third section reach back to the poet's early life through young adulthood, with confrontations and startling experiences prefiguring the wisdom she brings to bear. "Lamentation with the Detroit River" begins with innate knowledge of the eternal as it persists through damage:

*Perhaps nothing was beautiful,
but still my sister and I knelt beside
the water flushed out of factories,
poking sticks into its green syrup,
daring each other to swim.
Something true had been stolen from that river
and we wanted the wholeness of a thing,
the world before the wound.*

In this poem also, Levine imagines "my mother as a little girl / before she grows up mean." Brief but definite references to abuse appear in other poems here. In "Antidote," the child has a vision of death "as a floating into music / and happiness at the epicenter // where your mother was / no longer a broken promise, / your father setting down // his belt, / his spit-tled cussing." A crucial realization then arrives, in a heavy snowfall and a chilled body:

[...] a presence

*neither outside nor in, but both,
knelt down close
to ask if you were ready to survive.*

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What's jolting is the statement that survival requires volition. A person's survival is not simply a matter of good fortune, but involves repeated acts of will. To be at the edge of ending one's life, but to hold it at enough distance, is put another way in "Dispatch from the Forthcoming": "Listen. // It's okay to love the exit. [...] you can love the exit without leaving." In the poem "Hast Thou Not Poured Me Out like Milk and Curdled Me like Cheese?" (the title from Job 10:10), after a violent assault, the speaker "came adrift ... begged to die." Instead, she achieved the depth of the sacred as embedded in the perishing, neither reconciled nor contradicted:

*[...] Death stapled into the urge of being.
Tonight, in the darkness and light of my porch,
a nightjar calls out from under the cypress.*

*The path out of my yard glows milk white in moon.
How hard I have fought against faith. For if I surrender,
what notice will you take of me again?*

Again, the complex relationship with deity: the desire to remain in its sight, while denying an upper-case You.

The final section begins in the midst of a destructive flood: "Cache Creek Bridge at Flood Stage." The creek has "flung oaks against the bridge, torn // off limbs and crushed them to death," as the speaker recalls a phone consultation with a psychic, who supposedly conveyed a message from Gregory, "the best friend I ever had," a victim of suicide. The certainty of natural disaster and Gregory's death on the one hand, the doubtfulness of the psychic's ability on the other hand, leads to this threshold:

*[...] I'm done
second-guessing what comes next,*

*whether an oracle or charlatan ferried
something of Gregory to me
over waves, if there is a god*

waiting anywhere for anyone.

It is the call of the concrete that's undeniable, that holds fuller insights than come from wishful abstraction. In "Psalm with Errant Joy and Devastation," after a hummingbird flies through a broken window and dies, Levine's daughter "[l]ays the tiny bird in her palm // and looks close at the delicate overlay of plumage, / the iridescent rust and emerald wings, // a stippling on the throat's underside." Here as elsewhere, beauty and corruption stand together, unreconciled. We have the chance, then, "to speak clearly to the devastation // the poem calls a heart, / and the heart calls a poem."

After the radical uncertainty about the reality of the Divine, including whether its words are to be capitalized, it's significant that the final poem, simply titled "God," is rooted in the evident:

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*You know that hour in winter
when the light is salted gauze*

*and you stop a moment
in one of the last untouched fields
in this landlocked valley—*

*the new grass a rain-fattened green,
thick as uncombed hair.*

[...]

*This is the moment you need a prayer
from your animal self.*

“I turn my flashlight on. / I don’t know what else to do but witness.” These lines conclude “Cache Creek Bridge.” Gregory’s suicide, Mary’s cancer, Julia B. Levine’s blindness. The hummingbird’s iridescence, crepe myrtles in bloom, the feel of chopped onions. Lamentations cover part of this ground, but psalms include all of it. If reconciliation comes, it is only through full engagement with the gorgeous, the unbearable, and the incomprehensible.