



The **P**lague
Psalms

Joel
Allegretti



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The Plague Psalms

*To my mother,
Mildred Allegretti,
and to the memory
of my father,
John E. Allegretti
(1926-2000)*



I WOULD CHISEL
AN ALTAR...

THE MOON BETRAYED

The moon was jealous of you,
because the tide
(the rebellious, smitten tide)
renounced its sway
to lap at your feet
like a hungry spaniel;
because werewolves
ravaged branch and brier to come
and be tamed
at your knee;
because Diana
(the wild lunar huntress, Diana)
suckled you
and called you "Daughter."

And because the moon was jealous of you,
it turned away its pallid eye
and delivered to the night
a blind and stumbling earth.

And because the moon
(the despondent, selfish moon)
withholds its light,
travelers loiter at your doorstep,
like sinners at the confessional,
in search of a lantern to guide them
through the infinite darkness.

And all because the moon
was jealous of you.

MORTIFICATION

You have a disciple
who comes to you
on his knees.

He combs your hair
with his fingers,
ties it into braids
and binds his wrists.

He sweeps the dust
from your floors
and eats the leavings
from your table.

He searches the night
alone.

This is his method
of achieving sainthood
in your eyes.

DOXOLOGY

Be a cathedral
for me,
with vaulted ceilings
that house the praise-misted air
and a canticled soul
recumbent in the choirloft
amid the psalmody of flute-throated boys.

Be an unrepentant whore
for me,
a ragged baggage
whose bloated thighs
crackle with disease,
who says,
"This is my body, this is my blood,"
as the fleas rouse themselves to feast.

Be a harp of David
for me,
with prayer-plated strings
tempered in the heat of the first Breath,
which brought waves
to oceans
and orbits
to moons.

Be a creature of Hell
for me,
a baying goat-footed thing,
viper-tailed
and salmon-scaled,
whose pustulant tongue froths
with the renunciation of grace.

Be a paraclete
for me,
a Christ-eyed mercy bearer,
and plead my case in dove tones
before an eternity-scented jury
that counts my wrongdoings,
sin by measured sin,
upon an abacus of gallstones.

SONG

Whisper to me of an unclaimed Paradise
in a voice so sweet and true,
angels would fall forever silent
simply to hear you utter one solitary syllable.

Tell me of a realm of clouds and condolence
where the outcast is crowned,
the beggar is welcome to lay his head
upon a lady's pillow,
and the rents of my heart are healed
with each precious caress you offer it.

Sing me to sleep with a lullaby
about a mother who grieved
to see her son endure the degradation
wrought by mockery and shattered bones,
whose tears evaporated at last
under the unearthly light that beamed
from the body redeemed.

WHITE MADONNA

I would chisel an altar
from Carrara's finest marble,
greater than the length of the Nile,
and rest it on cedar pillars.
Then, I would spread a blue napkin,
which I would pretend was
Mary's shawl of virtue,
and on it I would lay
one strand of your hair.

I would pluck an infant robin
from its crib of twigs
and hold it until it pecked
my flesh to tatters.
Then, I would come to you
with cupped hands and offer
a blood oblation.

I would powder every inch of your body
until a mourning dove
thought of you as its mother.
Then, I would smile at heaven,
I would smile in arrogance at heaven,
and defy it to send down a whiter snow.

I would travel the merciless night
and bring the serpent of my regret
for you to crush
beneath your sandaled heel.
Then, I would curl at your ankles
to smell the honey fragrance of your hem,
as you gathered me
into the cradle of your protection.



THE AL-ANDALUS
SEQUENCE

FOREIGN LOVE

*Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi.*

Andalusian Beauty,
I see you have traveled
the foreign roads
from your father's house
to bring me apricots
and peppermint tea.

Does this mean
you will be mine?

Andalusian Beauty,
I know your father
slights me
because I praise the cross,
because my mouth
has tasted wine,
because I speak
the language of the unfaithful.

Andalusian Beauty,
say goodbye
to your father's house.
Be with me
on the banks of the Guadalquivir.
We shall move
like starlings through windows
in search of a new homeland.
We shall leave
no trace of our passage.
We shall give our hearts
to a nation of our own design.

Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi,
Yalla, Habibi.

SPANISH SONG OF MERCY

A young widow from Granada,
her sorrow hidden
within the black lace cobweb
 of her mantilla,
whose blood — I believe —
now moistens
the filigreed mosaics
 of the Alhambra,
came to me
in the kind of summer dream
that occurs when the night
seethes with the belligerence
 of fireflies
and the implication
 of storms.

At my threshold,
she lingered in her melancholy,
and I welcomed her in
to shed her sadness
 beneath my caress.

Her foot fell upon my carpet,
and lo!

it became a talon.

She placed her hand in mine,
and lo!

it became a wing.

Her mouth reached to kiss me,
and lo!

it became a beak.

She gave her voice to the *saeta*,
and lo!

it became a screech.

Her braid brushed against my cheek,
and lo!

it became a feather.

I rose from my pillow to embrace her,
and lo!

I became an arrow.

SAETA

O Virgin of the scorched clay,
bound in sky-swept muslin,
whose matchless flesh
steams with the perfumes
of Sevilla's orange blossoms,
pierce the damask curtain
of my inconsolable soul
with an arrow of devotion.

I am the mute guitar
whose dead strings
long to recover
their lost fandango.

I am the disciple
who has renounced
his teacher's treachery.
I am now the votary of desolation.

I am the restless ghost
of a Moorish astronomer
who died before he completed
his treatise on the stars.

I am the resurrected inquisitor:
My gloves are sewn from the loins
of a Sephardic Jew whom I condemned
in 1492.

Pour compassion on my shoulders
as if it were a sweet lotion.
Bathe me in a brook
that flows with paschal blood.
Teach me the benevolence
of open wounds.

I shall close my eyes
so that you may caress my lashes.
I shall give my hands over
to the composition of praise songs
and lamentations.
I shall strip my tongue naked
until it can express nothing
but the desire for penance.

O Matriarch who guides us into solitude,
May our bones ache with forgiveness,
May swallows bear your halo,
May the valley be a baptismal font
of your tears,
May the branches of olive trees
lift themselves toward heaven
like the arms of supplicants,
and may the vines of Cordoba's arbors
forever wind
into the shape of your immaculate heart.

AL'UD

*For Davey Graham,
Master of the Resounding Strings*

*Unanimities and Felicities
in Praise of the Oud*

—title of a medieval treatise on Arab musicology
by Ibn Yunus

I. INVOCATION

Praises!

Praises!

and again

Praises!

May they

and all felicitations

irrigate your heaven-drenched strings,

Wooden Seraph,

whose ruby-bright throat

secretes divine murmurs.

II. DECLARATION

From you,
Beloved Lute,
a song is a thread,
a serpentine,
flaxen thread
that binds
the thousand branches
of the lemon groves.
Your melodies are as languid
as a caterpillar.
As savory
as a houri's buttery haunches.
As primal
as the red
sun-gouged earth.
As heartbroken
as the fallen Moor,
who surrendered blood
for theology,
who, in millennia passing,
cries from his grass-laden grave
in undulant counterpoint
to each of your subtle
vibrations:

Andalucia!

III. SUPPLICATION

Blessed Oud,
O Lute
among lutes,
what inimitable waters
nursed the trees
that sired you?

Adorn
the Iberian night
with love-song braids
and tie them to the stars
that burn at the farthest corner
of the universe.

Summon away from his peace
the soul of your master.
Summon away from his grace
the soul of your finest master
and let him dwell,
and dwell happily,
within
my hungry fingertips.

IV. INCANTATION

Al'ud

Al'ud

Al'ud

Allah!

THE LAST MOOR DEPARTS FROM SPAIN AND REFUSES TO MOURN

*By the morning hours
And by the night when it is stillest,
Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee nor doth He hate
thee.*

—*The Koran*

But the night has discarded
the crescent moon,
and none but the cicadas
call me to prayer
on this morning.

The finger cymbals have ceased
to ring
for the hips of dancers.

The lutes have slackened
their strings;
Rabat has reclaimed
their courting songs.

A bewildered wind prowls
the Alhambra's barren warrens
in search of a virgin's hair
to rustle.

O Sevilla!
 O Cordoba!
 O Granada!
 Your names
 have become names,
 and names alone!

A priest strings olives
 into a rosary.
A rabbi eats
 his phylacteries.
A lamb lifts its head
 from the chopping block
 and bleats toward Rome.

My walls reflect
 the quiet flicker
 of votive candles.
I go to my knees,
 kiss the soil,
and I cut my lips
 on my grandfather's skeleton.

A ship waits in the harbor,
 rocking,
rocking,
 rocking,
 returning.

I climb to the bow,
 I close my eyes,
 and I listen.

I listen.

I listen.

I hear ...

A pig grunting in the marketplace.



THE NAME
OF THE NAME

THE SINGER

I sang for the winds,
And the winds fled sails,
Fled trees,
And carried my echo to Egypt.

I sang for the nightingales,
And the nightingales in fury
Smashed their beaks
Because their song could not compete.

I sang for the cobra,
And the cobra, with withered hood,
Bared its fangs
And dulled them against the rocks.

I sang for the beggar,
And the beggar, concealing his sores,
Overturned his cup
And offered me his alms.

I sang for the lovers,
And the lovers, hearing me sing,
Broke their embrace
And sweetened my linens at dusk.

I sang for the physician,
And the physician emptied his flasks
And showed his patients
The way to my room.

I sang for the Lord,
And the Lord singed my tongue,
Because I sang for others
Before I sang for the Lord.

THE HASHISHIN

*...slay not the life
which Allah hath made sacred,
save in the course of justice.*

—The Koran

Be guided,
Intoxicated Martyr,
by narcotic blossoms
and Gibril's recitations.

Go forth
with the sword and the surah
and the menace of your reputation.

Go forth
upon the melodies of the oud
and the santour.

Go forth
upon the ravishing smoke
that ascends like a purified soul
from the depths of the waterpipe.

Be mad with the promise
of a mountain paradise.
Fulfill your contract
and be justified
by the certainty of sainthood.
Let the most glorified of Names
echo from your lips
like a perfect love song.

Cry out the most glorified of Names,
which soothes like the shade of the date palm,
which is as merciful as rain,
which is as ruthless as a plague of flies.

Speed your enemies
on their pilgrimage
to damnation.
Proceed by night
and by night alone.
Infiltrate their dreams.
Poison their wells.
Inflame their houses.
Sacrifice their first-born.
Make them tremble before the syllables
that bind to form your terrible epithet:

Hashishin!
Assassin!

SONG OF THE GOLEM

I.

*And the Lord God formed man
of the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and man became a living soul.*

—Genesis, 2:7

*Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect;
and in thy book all my members were written,
which in continuance were fashioned,
when as yet there was none of them.*

—Psalm 139

*With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony,
I collected the instruments of life around me,
that I might infuse a spark of being
into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet.*

—Mary Shelley,
Frankenstein

II.

In the corridors of heaven
he dwells
in the radiance of the Almighty.
He is called Adam Kadmon,
The Archetype,
and we are but what he sees
when he gazes
into the mirror of the universe.

III.

Word.

It began with the Word.
The Word among words.
A syllable.
An audible breath.
An utterance,
by which the dust
united into flesh
and the clay
lengthened into bone.

What was the word
that brought the light
to the eyes of Man?
What was the word
that drew his immaculate body
from the mire?

Ask Judah Loew,
Rabbi of Prague,
whose just heart
trembled and wept
over rumors of a blood libel
and Eastertide retaliations
for the Passion of the Nazarene,
whose persecuted hands unraveled the scrolls
to prowl the margins of the lord of books.
Like a seafarer upon tempestuous
and unknown tides,
he navigated numbers and genealogies
in pursuit of the ultimate Word.

IV.

Within the Book
resides the Name.
Decipher the Book
and reveal the Name.
Speak the Name
and command an object
to Be.

What is the Name?

The Name is omnipotent.

What is the Name?

The Name is perpetual.

What is the Name?

The Name is the Name.

What is the Name?

The Name is the life-endowing Name.

What is the Name?

The Name is ...

YHWH

V.

His Eyes were the Eyes
that fired the sun.
His Arms were the Arms
that gathered the stars.
His Voice was the Voice
that sang to the sea.
His Hand was the Hand
that banished the night.
His Heart was the Heart
that beat for the world.

His Love was the Love
that pardoned our wrongs.

By the Name Eternal,
By the Name Incomparable,
By the Name Triumphant,
Awaken your granite limbs,
Ascend from the absence of life,
Arise from your earth
and condemn to impotence
the venom of malice
that boils outside our walls.

His ancient aspect
a ledger that recorded
the miseries of the ghetto Jew,
Rabbi Loew bent his troubled head
into the sculpted ear
and sent forth the divine noun
upon his desperate exhalation.

YHWH

And behold!
There upon the temple floor,
His shadow was joined by a shadow.

VI.

Ring the bells!
Ring the joyous bells!
Ring them at the break of day!
Ring them till the twilight hours!

Pluck the harps!
Bow the fiddles!
Blow the flutes
and strum the lutes!
Beat upon the drums!
Beat upon the goat-skin drums!

Let there be
an evening of psalmody,
of dreidels,
of honey cakes and wine!

Then sing in exaltation!
Oh, sing in endless exaltation!

*Honor is owed to the Father,
Honor is His alone,
For the man we have made
of prayer and of clay,
This guardian of stone.*

VII.

And the Word is
Truth.



THE PLAGUE
PSALMS

THE PLAGUE PSALMS

I.

*Ring around the rosie,
Pocketful of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
All fall down.*

So sweetly gamboling,
in guileless innocence,
from the pink lips of happy children,
this paean to a blood-greedy microbe.

II.

It began with the trader ships,
homeward bound from eastern ports,
hulls sated with cardamom and cedar
and a more insidious cargo that embarked
on the haunches of stowaway vermin.
With each nautical mile a man fell
until the deck was a salted bier,
the sail, a flag of surrender
to the pestilent buccaneer,
and the galley itself,
a mausoleum hung with barnacle garlands.
Not merely the passing of ailing men,
this was a sentence imposed by a pitiless magistrate
whose gavel was the mandibles of a parasite.

It begins when the flesh bubbles
like broiled cheddar,
and the blood gurgles in the veins
like molten lead.

And the sound that passes
for the creaking of hinges on closing doors
is the plea-bargaining of bones
seeking parole from incarceration
in condemned anatomies.

*Blood was its Avatar and its seal —
the redness and the horror of blood.*

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Masque of the Red Death*

III.

“I am wealthy,” the nobleman said
from the sick room window,
“I will give you an armful of gold
if you come to my bedside
and lift a goblet to my mouth,
for I am too feeble to slake my thirst alone.”
He announced this every hour on the hour,
day and night,
until the fever, at last, abducted his voice
Forever.

*Wind-blown we bloom,
Wind-blown decay;
With weeping we come
And so pass away.*

—Anonymous English Poet, c. 13th Century

IV.

In the Florence of Boccaccio's day,
Beneath the muslin funeral pall,
They called it *gavocciolo*,
As they tumbled, one and all.

"*Gavocciolo*," the figure chimed,
black clad and scarlet eyed.

"Pardon?"

"*Gavocciolo*."

"What is it? Something to eat?"

"Yes. It is served with the reddest
and most succulent of gravies.
It is that and more, besides."

"Is it a type of dance?"

"Yes. Such a dance as skeletons do,
keeping time with the chattering
of their bicuspid.
It is that and more, besides."

"Is it a musical direction?"

"Yes. It means to play in the style
of a man whose soul has just left him."

V.

*And they took ashes of the furnace
and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses sprinkled it
up to heaven; and it became a boil breaking forth
with blains upon man, and upon beast.*

—Exodus, 9:10

Ding dong, ding dong,
“Bring out your dead!”
Ding dong, ding dong,
“Bring out your dead!”

Below a bloodless sky,
amid the remnants of dawn,
amid the remnants of a cold, fallow dawn,
a procession creeps and crawls
like a roving centipede
through muddy streets that smolder
with the vapors of sinister incinerations.
A priest with incense and prayer book
guides his complement of sextons,
who stagger about after a night-long revelry
baptized in ale
to numb themselves for the morning’s vile labor.

“Bring out your dead!”
Ding dong, ding dong.

Rumbling along on grave-heavy wheels,
the death cart is loaded high
with merchandise for the tomb,
limbs and torsos entwined like an obscene trellis.
Look! The rich man's arm straddles
 the poor man's shoulder.
O Death!
You, the glorious integrator!
The impartial arbiter, in whose eyes
all men are spared the indignity of prejudice!
A castle and a hovel are both built of walls and floors,
and the odor of a dying man's breath
 is not any sweeter
simply because his purse weighs more.

VI.

THE PRAYER OF THE FLAGELLANTS

With these leather thongs,
O Just and Merciful Lord,
I rend the abject flesh
that encages my imperishable spirit.

(Lash!)

By their sting,
I shall flow the crimson drivel
that animates my being,
as sap nourishes the poplar tree.

(Lash!)

In this manner,
may You grant me clemency
as You visit Your wrath
upon a petty and ungrateful race.

(Lash!)

In humility and remorse,
I shall wander from town to town
clothed in rags and my own shredded hide,
like the meanest of beggars,
appealing for neither alms nor meat,
but rather, the fraternity of fellow penitents.

(Lash!)

In the Name of the Father,
the Son
and the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

(Lash!)

VII.

O wise and skilled physician,
dear progeny of Hippocrates,
see how my arteries rust and corrode?
Drain them, I implore you,
with any apparatus at your command.
Use scalpels,
leeches,
vampires.

Cleanse me and give me blood anew,
so that I may consort again with the living
and praise the miracle of creation.

VIII.

*Fire and fleet and candlelight,
And Christ receive thy soul.*

—The Lyke-Wake Dirge

*Kyrie eleison,
Christe eleison,
Kyrie eleison,
Christe eleison.*

Confiteor Deo Omnipotenti.

O Monarch of Earth and Ether,
I confess to avarice,
Sanctus
I confess to blasphemy,
Sanctus
Sanctus

I confess to lust,

Sanctus

Sanctus

Sanctus

I confess to sanctimony,

Ave Maria

I confess to iniquity,

Dominus vobiscum

I confess to hypocrisy,

et cum spiritu tuo

I confess,

I confess,

I confess ...

Hic desinunt Psalmi Pestilentiae

(Here end the Plague Psalms)



THE ARCHITECTURE
OF PENANCE

THE BASILISK

We burn,
and we yearn
and yearn
to burn
like the optic
furnace of this cruel
 and
fabled serpent,
burn to shake
an impassive universe
from its languor,
to force atoms
 to tremble
and asteroids
 to freeze
in mid-trajectory
across said universe.

AT GOLGOTHA

The road to grace,
Laid with skulls.

My father's mansion,
Built with skulls.

My father's ears,
Deaf like skulls.

My father's tongue,
Mute like skulls.

The eyes of mercy,
Blind like skulls.

My naked flesh,
White like skulls.

My drinking cup,
Dry like skulls.

The clouds, all clouds,
Shaped like skulls.

On lowly knees,
I pray with skulls.

My closing hour,
I bleed with skulls.

VESPERTILICIDE

Ves·per·til'·i·cide, n. 1. The killing of a bat. 2. One who kills bats. [< L < vespertilio bat + caedere to kill]

Le moi est haissable
(The self is hateful)

—Blaise Pascal

The folkloric agents
have no place here.
Instead, mince the garlic
to season a holiday lamb.
Drive the freshly sharpened stake
into fertile ground
and lash a sapling to it.
Nail the Crucifix three feet
above your bed
(one foot per third
of the Trinity)
and come nightfall,
pray.

You do this
because the folkloric agents
have no place here.

What you need is rage.
Let it creep,
head first,
bound in black,
down the sheer wall

of your thorax
until it reaches
the hollow of your belly
and howls
with lupine appetites.

Then, open wide
to free that rage
and watch it take to the air
on leather-webbed wings
as it transubstantiates
into a hate
whose flight pattern
spans oceans.

Understand now:
This hate will flap
and flutter and squeak
and skid across
another day's end,
propelled skyward
by the repulsion it will feel
over what it has become.

By dawn,
it will have clawed out
its incarnadine eyes,
chewed the fur
from its horrid little belly
and cracked
its vespertilian skull
against a campanile wall.

What remains
will tumble
and soil the patch of earth
where it drops,
to rot and rot
and find its destiny
in its own detestable dust.

ELEGY FOR ERIK,
ARCHITECT
OF HOPELESS DESIRE,
ANGEL OF MUSIC,
OPERA HOUSE POLTERGEIST

*You see, Christine, some music is so terrible
that it consumes everyone who approaches it.*

—Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*

What you longed for most
was a lady's lap on which to lay
the disgrace of flesh.
She did not have to be beautiful.
She did not have to possess
mansions or carriages.
Only pity
and yes,
a soul that celebrated music.
Her fingers did not require
the adornment of rings
or manicured cuticles.
They only had to be gentle
and yes, loving,
slipping backward along the contours
of your benighted skin
the way you drew the bow
across the violin to play
your sonatas of seduction.
And yes, she would have had to sing to you,
but not a Gounod aria or the *Magnificat*.

Only a lullaby
or perhaps even
(Oh Erik, how your heart would
have danced if it were so!)
a wedding song.

In Rouen,
where you fled the solace of the womb,
the song of the day was a dirge.
It rained that morning,
and your mother
(what a delightful, pretty thing
she was before you came, Erik)
your mother said so calmly
as you cried for a nourishing breast
that it was only God spitting in her eye.

In Nizhni Novgorod,
where you fled the denial of her kisses,
the song of the day was an anthem.
You created magic.
Magic, Erik,
and tales of your illusions
echoed in the desolate caravan nights
like the hooves of chamois
pounding the wild steppes.

In Persia,
where your legend teased a sovereign's fancy,
the song of the day was a *tasnif*.
You created mazes and mayhem.
Mazes and mayhem, Erik,
wicked amusements to jade
the whimsies of a bored king.

But even the monarch's favorite
must know that privilege can wither
like a petal torn from the pomegranate.
You had to flee, Erik,
flee by night.
May Allah guide and protect you.

In Paris,
where your grave patiently waited,
the song of the day was a requiem.
It was your funeral song, Erik.
Sad, wretched Erik,
a Gallic Job in a satin cape and leather mask,
dwelling in shadows and subterranean alcoves,
tutoring the ungrateful Christine,
blessing that unworthy pupil
with the full measure of your mastery.
Dreadful, devil-faced Erik,
whose nobility shriveled on his lips
when his mother turned away her delicate cheek,
whose music was the lone sobbing
of a battered, battered heart.

Who writhes in Hell, Erik?
Who is there, charred in those chaotic fires,
to match you for hopelessness?

All you wanted was a lady's lap
on which to lay the disgrace of flesh.

The evening is luminous,
luminous with larks and comets.
It resounds with sanctus bells.
There are candles.
There are angels.

Angels, Erik.
Tens upon hundreds
upon thousands of angels.
Angels with starlit wings.
Wings that scrape the planets
to make them spin.

Can you hear the angels, Erik?
Lift your tired, unhappy head
this one last moment and listen.
Listen, Erik.
The choirs sing for you.

God is good,
God is great,
God is just,
God is kind.

*Au revoir,
Monsieur l'Ange de la Musique.
Dormez bien dans le berceau de l'éternité.
Au revoir.*

(Goodbye,
Mr. Angel of Music.
Sleep well in the cradle of eternity.
Goodbye.)

MADRIGALS FOR LEPERS

Let us now proclaim
to serpents and stars
the way we salve our wounds.

Let us revel in our abnegation
before serpents and stars
over the way we dress our wounds.

Not with oil,
not with orange water.
Not with spikenard,
not with hyssop.

But with spit
and with tallow.
But with salt
and with bile.

We toast the day
with laudanum
and wear hair shirts
to the supper table.

No more do we profess
the glories of our heroes.
Their necks ache
under the weight of too many laurels.

Instead, we sing madrigals for lepers
and rounds for madmen,
they of the macerated tongue,
they of the hobbled footstep.

For we are the choir,
the choir contrite,
and we have known,
O we have known
that redemption teeters
on the tip of a thorn
and sainthood lies
at the bottom of a trough.

BELLMAN OF THE DEAD

His clanging comes
at one o'clock,
commencing at the shuttered market,
faint at first,
more a clink than a clang,
like sugar tongs against a teacup,
sweet and delicate,
a confection for the drowsy ear.
It does not intrude on us.

His clanging comes
at one o'clock.
The clanging billows
at our windowsills.
It startles rats into gutter asylums
and cats into the comfort of shadows.
It heaves against our bedroom walls
and tears at our nightshirts
to wrest us from our dreams.

His clanging comes
at one o'clock.
He moves
like a charnel-house vapor.
He reeks of a solitary piety.
We see the femurs and the tibias
woven into his shabby sleeves,
the craniums embellishing his cowl.
His shoes are fouled with muck.
Reverence has calloused his heels.

His clanging comes
at one o'clock,
and with the clanging
comes his clamor.

Awake! Awake!

Awake for the dead!

The dead implore your prayers!

Descend to your knees!

Cripple your fingers with rosaries!

Scorch your throats with Ave Marias!

Pray for the dead! Pray for the dead!

His clanging comes
at one o'clock.
He rattles our repose.
He sunders our copulations.
Our pillows are confounded
by the sudden absence of our heads.
We engrave the darkness
with paternosters and misereres:
for the admiral who eased
the hunger of the sharks,
for the blacksmith's wanton wife,
for the doctor's stillborn daughter,
for the pauper dead in paupers' fields,
for all the named and nameless dead,
for the dead,
the dead,
the dead,
the dead.

His clanging comes
at one o'clock.
We are weary of the dead.
The dead do not hear us.
The dead do not thank us.
The dead do not indulge us,
but we indulge the dead.
These prayers we pray,
these prayers we proffer
at the prodding of his din,
we submit, as well,
to our own selves,
for they remind us
and reassure us
that we are alive
and have not yet died
when his clanging comes
at one o'clock.

WE TELL OF A MORNING

Sad was the morning,
Was the moth-winged morning.
Sad and grey,
Grey as the marble marked
For our markers,
Was the morning,
Was the moth-winged,
Dew-spittled morning.
And black were our coats,
And white were our scarves,
And black was the melancholy
Which drank us down
And belched us up.
And black was the bark,
The dying, white dogwood bark,
O black was the bark
In the morning,
The moth-winged,
Dew-spittled,
Fog-blushed morning.
And black was the color
Of our true love's hair,
The hair of our true
Lamented love,
Whom we mourned
In the morning,

The moth-winged,
Dew-spittled,
Fog-blushed,
Sparrow-shorn morning.
Sad was the morning,
And grey.
Sad and grey
The morning was.



THE ROOMS
OF REDEMPTION

THE LORD OF SONGS

For Leonard Cohen

Where is the Lord of Songs,
Whose breath ripples
the membrane of the drum,
Whose fingers are the pegs
of a cedar lute,
Who issues His ballads
on the backs of thrushes?

Where is the King of Psalms,
Who danced in the sandalwood arbor,
Who tossed His rhymes
into the rosewater night,
Who taught the harpmaker
the architecture of strings
and plucked the silence
from the tongues of mutes?

Where is the Father of Canticles,
Whose heart is a scripture,
Who filled His scrolls
with words of praise,
Who forgave the defiant ear
that would not listen
to the words of praise,
Who built the towers
where His Name was preserved?

Lord of Songs,
King of Psalms,
Father of Canticles,
it has taken days to write these lines.
It is late now.
Will You accept my effort?
I wait for You to lay Your blessing
on the crescents of my eyelids.

VESPERS

A priest named Joseph
brought me a crown of sparrows
and laid it on a pinewood table
in a garden fragrant with
violets and peppermint.

The good father smiled and bowed
as he took his leave
and traced the Sign of the Cross
with his pious and generous hands.

I lifted that wreath of dead birds,
their beaks like brier thorns,
their eyes like holly berries,
their brown feathers like autumn debris,
and carried it into the house.

That evening,
I laid the sparrow ring
on the quilted altar of my bed,
adorned it with my grandmother's rosary,
and slept on the cold floor
of my kitchen.

I passed the night in peace.

REGENERATION

It is said
that for each death,
there is a birth.

And so,
now that the man
who gave me
his name
has orphaned me,
I shall go forth
into the world
to search
for a child,
a very young
male child
with an arch
in his left eyebrow,
black hair
that converges
on his forehead
in a widow's peak,
hazel eyes that gleam
with intellect
and insularity,
a mouth designed
for pronouncements,
and feet that crave
a pedestal.

When I find this child,
I shall offer
a prayer of thanks,
draw him
into my pilgrim clasp
and whisper
in his puzzled ear:
“Father!
You’ve come back!”

THE SEDUCTION

Come back to the sea,
O come back to the sea,
Embittered Mariner,
though battered
by the flattery of sirens.
The kraken is dead.
The captain repents,
and the breezes miss
the folds of your hair.

Breathe now, Mariner.
That fragrance of brine?
Your beloved, of course.
Your spurned,
but absolving, beloved,
whose wine-dark loins
invite your return.

Come back to the sea.
Forget the betrayals.
Ignore the cries of the albatross.
His malevolence is myth.
His cackle is merely —
 that.
It augurs nothing.

O come back to the sea,
back to the way of the compass.
Partake of the communion of the sails
and seek the consolation of humility
in the blistering of your hands,
as you come back to the sea.

BLOOD PILGRIMAGE

There is a ravine,
and it is deep,
deeper, even,
than the requirements of Purgatory.
It lies beyond
the scholarship of cartographers.
It lies where moonlight
can never find it.
It lies at an equal distance
between the Himalayas
and the Angel Gabriel's
left eye.

And through it
they rage.
Frothing.
Rabid.
The wild rapids,
as savage as jaguars,
chastising the barrier rocks
as they plunge
toward the sea.

They rage
like bats
scattering doves
from the treetops.

They rage
like a pair of harpies,
each shredding
the other's wings
over the last apple.

They rage
like the blood I let
as I, adrift and torn upon them,
come to thee,
O Sanctified One,
who welcomes these scarlet stains
on your unblemished feet.

BLOOD REQUIEM

And after
all my ballads
are sung,
I shall lay aside
my strings,
bless them with ashes
and walk
hand in hand
with a shadow
to board a ship of bones.

I crave passage
upon a black
and bitter sea,
where gulls will crow
my requiem.

I gaze
into the mad,
mad sky,
where infinity
batters the blue vault
like an insurrection of
chimney swifts.

And there,
I shall sing
and sing again
like the blood
that washes
the ventricles of my heart.

I shall bow
before the mercy seat
when my voice
at last is raw —

and ask the words
that linger still
to chant
the praises of the Law.

ANTHOLOGY OF HANDS

*The skeleton of the hand is subdivided
into three segments —
The Carpus, or wrist-bones; the Metacarpus,
or bones of the palm;
and the Phalanges, or bones of the digits.*
—Gray's Anatomy

I. PENELOPE

Weave and spin,
weave and spin.

A voice, once proud and fierce,
now a whisper, no stronger than a foal,
flees from Trojan chaos
to descend like a moth upon my lobe.

It lulls me, it lulls me.

It promises me:

He will come.

Then, like an ostrich plume,
it tickles the creases of my palms.

Weave and spin,
weave and spin,
fingers, fingers,
laboring like arachnids,
weave and spin,
weave and spin.

And now I hear another voice,
many voices, chattering like locusts,
defaming my hearth.
“Brave and faithful Argive wife,
your man’s blood discolors the ocean,
his flesh fattens carrion birds,
his name is now the ink
from which great and glorious epics will flow.”
Fingers, fingers,
quickly, quickly,
undo this damned embroidery.
Unravel it,
pull it, cut it,
like the Fates upon man’s mortal thread.
Enslave the loom.
Work her until she whimpers.
Weave and spin,
weave and spin.
Unravel, unravel,
weave and spin.
Unravel, unravel,
weave.

II. MICHELANGELO

The Patriarch David,
in his final psalm,
commanded mankind
to laud the Father
with psalteries
and cymbals.

I choose the hammer and chisel,
and the clang of iron against iron
and iron against rock
sings as sweetly
to my Florentine ears
as a well-tuned mandola.

For the hammer is an invocation,
the chisel, a benediction.

My hands are priests,
Thick, tired,
pious clergymen
clothed in vestments made of
marble dust
and swollen knuckles.

And how my priests can pray!
Oh, you should hear them pray.
With just an invocation
and a benediction,
they call forth
the soul within the stone.

III. A THUGGEE PRAYER

Kali, Kali,
My hands are pledged to thee,
Kali.

A noose, Kali,
A noose, Kali,
I offer the breath
of a traveler, Kali,
the blood of a merchant
for thee, Kali.

Spiteful,
Vengeful
Mother Kali.

Blessings, Kali,
Blessings, Kali,
Blessings upon these hands,
Kali,
which work to honor thee,
Kali,
which kill for love of thee,
Kali.

IV. JACK THE RIPPER

The Queen of Hearts,
She made some tarts,
All on a summer's day,
You're quite the tart,
I'll take your heart,
A whore's a pleasure to flay.

V. MANITAS DE PLATA

The guitar is a woman,
an infanta,
a Sister of Mercy,
a Moor's virgin niece,
an old widow
in a musty black shawl,
a streetwalker from Malaga,
a good wife,
a shrew.
With rosewood hips,
an ebony clitoris
and a voice of taut nylon.

I let her know that she is
a woman.
I coax her,
stroke her,
pluck her,
send her vaulting into ecstasy
with kisses made of thumb
and forefinger.
I grip her about the waist
and draw her into my pelvis.
I press her polished buttocks
against my ribs.

I encroach upon the hollow vagina,
and she resounds in harmonic climax.
I unlock her passion,
and she unlocks my passion.
She is the sacrament of marriage.
She is my giving spouse.
She brings a true union.
And this is why
the guitar is a woman.

VI. JESUS CHRIST

The blind. The deaf. The dumb. The demonic.

The lame. Lepers. Lazarus.

Water. Wine. Bread. Fishes.

A nail.

Another nail.

And then ...

The child's hand

clasps the father's hand.

Evermore.



Joel Allegretti has a multifaceted background that encompasses literature, music, journalism and business. Born and raised in New Jersey, where he still lives, he began writing poetry, stories and plays at an early age. As a teenager, he discovered music and learned to play the guitar, later extending his instrumental facility to the oud and harmonium. He continued to pursue music seriously, becoming a prolific composer in the process, and has performed publicly for more than 20 years in concert, theater and on radio.

As a poet, Allegretti has delivered numerous featured readings, often incorporating music into his performances, and has presented his poetry in colleges, high schools, theatrical productions, and on television and radio.

A graduate of New York University with a degree in journalism and English, Allegretti began his professional life as a newspaper reporter and then moved into public relations, serving national and international organizations.

The Plague Psalms is his first collection of poems.



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Books from The Poet's Press and Grim Reaper Books are made with a unique combination of high tech and Renaissance methods. This book was designed and typeset on a computer, and printed using a combination of laser, ink jet and dye sublimation printers. Premium papers are selected for quality and longevity. This book is bound by hand, and a cloth-reinforced spine assures that the binding will not fall apart like ordinary paperbacks.

The type used in this book is Aldine, based on early typefaces created by Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, one of the the great pioneering humanist printers and publishers. The headlines are set in Charlesworth, a face inspired by hand-lettering.

The book design is by Brett Rutherford, using engravings by Albrecht Durer and other artists depicting Pestilence as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

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