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# The Fertile Dark

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**The Fertile Dark**

by

Jacob M. Martin

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
Department of English  
In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the committee  
for the capstone requirement for

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in the Department of English

At the **December 2010** graduation

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Member

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for Kim, my one and only groupie,  
who (gently) reminds me of my true vocation  
and inspires in me the confidence  
to fulfill it

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## *1. It Saves to Know the Code*

The November/December 2010 issue of *Poets & Writers* features a profile of Christian Wiman, who recently published his third collection of poetry, *Every Riven Thing*. Wiman, who in 2003 became editor of *Poetry*, grew up in a “charismatic evangelical” Baptist home in Snyder, Texas, a small town southeast of Lubbock. Wiman’s family was highly religious; they attended church services three times a week, prayed before every meal, and “understood every aspect” of their lives in the context of evangelical Christianity. When he was twelve years old, Wiman underwent something of a transformation, one which he sees as not altogether positive: he was saved. His salvation must have confounded him as much as it solaced him, as he abandoned the church’s sanctuary for its basement, where, after some time, his father found him. Wiman speaks of being saved, and other episodes that he describes as “rhapsodic,” with ambivalence: “There’s no way to really integrate them into your life. They also have a lot to do with sin, a sense of having wrongness being built into your nature. But certainly if I had any experience of poetry in my youth, it was through the church, in ways both good and bad” (Nance 46). Indeed, Wiman’s first book of poetry, *The Long Home* (Story Line Press, 1998), was written in the voice of his grandmother, a pillar of faith in the Wiman household and in the community.

Wiman’s childhood fascinates me because it mirrors, in some ways, my own childhood. Although I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia and not in the relatively desolate country of dry and cactus-strewn West Texas, and although I attended mainline Protestant churches rather than a charismatic evangelical Baptist one, I can relate to Wiman’s ambivalence toward the



church and the bewildering aftermath of a salvation that comes, perhaps, prematurely. As the son of a minister, I literally grew up in the church, my home away from home, where I spent countless hours worshipping (or pretending to, as was often the case), acting in plays at Christmastime, and stuffing myself at potlucks.

At a very early age, I was obsessed with sin, how to avoid it and how to expiate it. One day, as a boy of seven or eight, I was walking home from school when I realized that bad words, the four-letter variety, had crept into my mind, and I assumed that I was at fault; I had allowed those words to enter and to linger briefly, like the notes of a forbidden music, and as a consequence, I was bound for hell. If I recall correctly, I became somewhat hysterical, even to the point of tears, and my mother had to reassure me that I was good, or at least that I was not, as I feared, an irredeemable sinner. And once, while watching *The 700 Club*, I was induced to call the show's toll-free number, a kind of salvation hotline, and, praying along with the nice stranger on the other end, ask Jesus to come into my heart. If it seemed unusual or unnecessary for a kid to seek forgiveness and salvation, the adult (was it a man or a woman?) who led me in the prayer did not say so. The prayer would fix me up, I thought, make me new, relieve me of the burden of those bad words, my wrong thoughts. When Wiman refers to having “wrongness” built into one's nature, I know precisely what he means.

I attended church nearly every Sunday—it never occurred to me that there might be reason not to go—until I entered my teenage years. At that point, whatever faith I possessed began to erode, and my interest in the church waned. Eventually, getting out of bed on a given Sunday morning became a chore, one that I had no incentive to perform because going to church would, to use the Biblical expression, bear no fruit: nothing would change. For years,

throughout my late teens and into my twenties, I was a lazy, nominal Christian, and every time I drifted toward the church, motivated by guilt or some well-intentioned proselyte, it was not long before I drifted away again. But whether I went or not, and whether I practiced an uninspired, transitory faith, the seeds of those childhood years—the verses I had memorized to earn rewards and the recognition of my parents and others, and the stories told by my Sunday School teachers—remained within me as if buried, dormant in the dark. It seems to me now that one can leave the church of his youth, but the church shadows him; he bears its imprint (as Cain, after slaying his brother, bore the sign given him by God?) and will bear it, to one extent or another, for the rest of his life.

If I share Wiman’s ambivalence, I share, too, his awareness that the church may be fertile soil. To his credit, Wiman recognizes that, despite the church’s many flaws, which, in the case of a charismatic evangelical Baptist church might include speaking in tongues and performing so-called healings, it offers much that a young poet can draw on later in life. After all, although the influence of the secular world has altered worship profoundly in the past two decades, it is still the case that, in many churches, *the word takes precedence*. Especially in mainline Protestant churches, in which the sermon, which often involves the explication of a given story or passage, comprises the heart of the worship experience, *the text is all*, even if it is no longer accepted as the infallible word of God. And throughout the Bible, one finds exhortations to “meditate” on the text—to engage in study and contemplation, to devote oneself to it as completely as one would devote himself to a love—such as, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night...” (*New International Version*, Jo 1:8) Immersing oneself in the Bible, delving into it “day and night,” results in an intimacy with the text, of course, but that is not all. In my opinion, a careful study of the Bible results in a greater

appreciation for the written word in general, so that when one encounters other texts, both sacred and secular, he has the ability to read them closely, to gain “wisdom and instruction” and understand “words of insight,” to quote the writer of Proverbs. I myself do not keep the Bible always on my lips—I am more inclined to read the poetry of modern and post-modern Jews (Bialik, Reznikoff, Radnoti, Ginsberg, Pinsky) than that of their Biblical counterparts—but I return to it every so often, especially the Psalms, those praise-poems that served as models for aspiring poets during the English Renaissance, when Milton, among others, wrote metrical versions of the Psalms.

In addition to the Bible, the church hymnal serves as a reservoir of poetry, especially metrical poetry, as well as imagery. Although it was not the hymnal that introduced me to the metrical poem—my father made that introduction when he sat me on his lap and read to me from Mother Goose (“Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye...”)—it certainly enabled me to become better acquainted. During worship services at my father’s church, my friends and I would huddle in one of the pews in the rear of the sanctuary, whispering and teasing and drawing on envelopes designated for the offering, but when the congregation rose to sing, then our games and chatter would cease. I would hold a hymnal up and do my best to follow the music, trying, by setting an example, to convince my friends to do likewise. Over the course of years, I absorbed the metrical poetry of hymns like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and carols like “Joy to the World.” I say *absorbed* because it happened gradually, subconsciously: Without intending to, without desiring to, I developed an ear for language married to a certain meter, not to mention a predilection for rhyme. (I wonder sometimes why I have bothered trying to write rhyming poetry at a time when it tends to be ignored or derided, and it must be because I read so much of it in the pages of the church’s hymnal.) Before I knew what an iambic foot was, I knew

what it sounded like, as I had heard it move unwaveringly through literally dozens of hymns. The meter I heard most often was common meter, which, as the name suggests, was the meter most frequently employed by writers of hymns. The relationship between common meter and poetry is an interesting one: Isaac Watts adopted common meter from Scottish and English folk poems and ballads. Perhaps as a result of her exposure to Watts's hymns, which the congregants of First Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, sang regularly, Emily Dickinson wrote the bulk of her poems using a variant of common meter called ballad meter. The stanzas of Dickinson's poems resemble those of Watts's hymns (and could easily be set to music); compare the first stanza of "Because I Could not Stop for Death" to the first verse of Watts's "Joy to the World":

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,

I mentioned that the church hymnal contains a wealth of imagery, and that is equally true of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, from the spirit of God hovering over the waters to the figure of the infamous whore of Babylon. The prophetic books, in particular, contain images that endure despite having been appropriated by various writers, many of them poets, over the centuries. The writing and editing of the prophetic books transpired hundreds of years ago, and yet they remain relevant, their language as powerful, evocative, and unsettling as it was in the days of the Second Temple. Consider the following excerpt from Lamentations, in which the writer describes the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, comparing the city to a widow, a queen enslaved:

How deserted lies the city,  
once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,

who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
has now become a slave.

Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears are on her cheeks.  
Among all her lovers  
there is no one to comfort her.  
All her friends have betrayed her;  
they have become her enemies.

Just as I absorbed the metrical poetry of hymns, I assimilated, to some extent, imagery like that above, which abounds not only in the prophetic books but in the Psalms.

The church brought me to poetry at an early age, as it did Wiman. Through its emphasis on the word, its use of metrical hymns, and its rich fields of imagery, the church nurtured whatever impulse I was born with (or inherited from my father during those readings of nursery rhymes) to write poetry. Can the church foster the young poet as effectually as the academy? I think so. And I think that I have been as thoroughly influenced by Isaiah as I have by, say, Robert Frost, instructed as completely by the hymns of Isaac Watts as by Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*.

But I do not want to idealize the church as an institution. Like all institutions, the academy included, it has problems of a severe nature, and these problems, which are all too clear to me, become obstacles that keep me from attempting to return. Take the church's exclusivity, for example. It is no secret that the church classifies certain groups of people as sinners—and effectively excludes them from joining in worship. This exclusivity offends me and is, I think, unchristian (I cannot envision Christ turning anyone away from his church). In a poem titled "It Saves to Know the Code," I tried to explore the peculiarity of living in a gated community—a contradiction in terms, in my opinion—and, inadvertently or not, equated such a community with the church. The exclusivity practiced by many churches, whether intentionally or

unintentionally, mirrors the exclusivity practiced by the affluent in America, who, out of fear, congregate in exurban developments, “swim and tennis” communities where alarm systems give the illusion of security. For the upper-middle class, particularly since 9/11, salvation has become external rather than internal, something to be obtained rather than lived into; it lies not in surrender or in transformation, but in the safety found within the confines of a sealed Eden, an artificial garden (often carved from a farm’s fields) beyond the reach of the rest of humanity. Is it merely coincidental that megachurches, which are, in some cases, predominantly upper-middle class, blossom near gated communities? Affluence breeds both the gated community and the megachurch, and the air of exclusivity characteristic of both attracts the upper-middle class. Ironically, I myself live in a gated apartment complex, but it was not the gate—and the safety it represents, which is more imagined than real—that appealed to me; in fact, I deplore the exclusivity it symbolizes. One day, after inputting my special, four-digit code, and hearing the security system’s robotic voice say “Access granted,” like a priest bestowing a blessing, it occurred to me that those who belong, who find in safety a pseudo-salvation, are those who know the code—and who are willing to sequester themselves in an unreal, earthly paradise:

It saves to know the code,  
to have a haven closed  
to others (so I hope),  
a garden—far removed  
from poor humanity—  
no Satan penetrates.

My twitchy fingers dance,  
perform the steps they must  
to make the wooden arm  
rise, the iron gates,  
like great church doors, swing wide,  
the metal voice intone.

At twilight, shadows slip,  
and steal, and saunter up  
to rob me of my sight;  
how very good it is,

with night around the corner,  
to live among the blessed.

## 2. YRSELF, YR THINGS

Initially, I wrote “It Saves to Know the Code” in second person, perhaps because I wanted to distinguish myself from the typical resident of a gated community, to whom I was saying, in effect, *you* retreat from the world, not *I*. I had no one specific in mind, but the poem read as an accusation; I was pointing the finger at an imagined member of the upper-middle class, or the upper-middle class as a whole, while ignoring my own complicity. To paraphrase Jesus in Matthew, I was preoccupied with the speck in my brother’s eye and completely unaware of the splinter in my own. The shift to first person, then, may have been an attempt to be more honest with myself and with the reader. Who is the poem’s nervous, fearful speaker? Me. And by shifting to first person, I eliminate the vagueness of *you*. (If I do not know who I am addressing, how is the reader to know?)

This shift raises the question of the extent to which one should write about herself. One of the charges leveled at writers—and poets stand accused more often than novelists, I think—is that of navel-gazing. Of all the things one could write about, the argument goes, why choose yourself? Why restrict yourself to yourself? Because I write about myself with great frequency, I have to wonder if I am guilty of navel-gazing. Instead of looking outward, focusing my attention on the world, its problems (which are many) and its beauty (equally abundant), I look inward. Yes, I am guilty.

But should it be otherwise for the American poet? Perhaps not. Since July 4, 1855, when Walt Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the great subject of the American

poet has been her own self—and the inseparability of that self from the selves that surround it: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman 28)

In *Novices: A Study of Poetic Apprenticeship* (Mercer & Aitchison, 1989), written by Clayton Eshleman, one finds support for the idea of the American poet beginning not with the cosmic, not with the grand and the expansive, but with her small and simple self. The first chapter opens with an excerpt from a letter—dated January 26, 1953, that is, nearly one hundred years after the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—written to Cid Corman by Charles Olson (to the best of my ability, I have reproduced the unusual formatting of Olson’s letter):

You must cease to think of a poem as anything but an expression of THAT WHICH YOU ARE A SPECIALIST—which has to be, if it is a poem, YRSELF, YR THINGS, no one else’s, nothing else but that which you are SURE of...CLEARLY, you are writing abt what you think are the proper subjects of writing—not at all abt one, CID CORMAN:

present. It’s yrself. please *hear* me. I am giving you a

We Americans have nothing but our personal details. Don’t let anyone fool you, any poet, any body. There is nothing but all the details, sensations, facts which are solely known to Cid Corman. And you must stick to them—get them straight—even if (AS IT DAMN WELL IS) NOTHING. Understand? (Eshleman 1)

One can almost hear the frustration in Olson’s voice, and his question at the end is, in fact, a command. *Understand*, he says, that you must write about that which you fully understand—that which you are “SURE of”—and that is, if anything, “YRSELF, YR THINGS.” What does Olson mean by “YR THINGS”? I would guess that he means the particular and the unique components of the self, the emotions and (as we Americans like to say) *issues* that only the poet herself experiences and confronts. At the risk of conjuring scenes from *Jersey Shore* or another equally vacuous reality show, I will use the word *drama*. Surely, every life is a drama,



and, according to Olson, it would be a mistake for the poet to grope for “proper subjects” when he or she has within her enough material for a lifetime.

The purpose of the poet’s self-singing is not to aggrandize the self, to give it a false size or a false aspect—America’s politicians and celebrities do that well enough—but to present it as it is: flawed, in need of healing, searching for an answer that more than likely does not exist, unsatisfied with the easy answers of others, their tidy conclusions, rhetoric, cant and, if I may speak with Olson’s frankness, bullshit. As Olson says, the poet must get the “details, sensations, facts” of her life right in order to avoid distortion. The end result, Olson assures, is “NOTHING”; later in his letter to Corman, he writes that “we begin with ZERO—are 0.” All of the poet’s pain, whether physical or psychic, all of her thoughts, intimations, realizations, visions and dreams, which seem paramount to her as they present themselves, all of these amount, in the end, to nothing—and yet there is nothing for the poet to do but to express them with the utmost clarity and care.

When I was in my early to mid-twenties, I admired the poet Charles Bukowski. I had never read poems about drunkenness, going to the track to bet on horses, and relationships that ended with the finality and fire of a plane crash. Bukowski’s poems were a catalog of the bad decisions he had made, and if they contained a moral, it was this: When you’re down, stay down. Seemingly unconcerned with making a favorable impression on the reader (which, of course, impressed me), he wrote about himself as he was: a dissolute, womanizing nobody who wanted to be somebody but whose chances were a hundred to one at best. Stephen Kessler, writing in the *San Francisco Review of Books*, said of Bukowski, “Without trying to make himself look good, much less heroic, Bukowski writes with a nothing-to-lose truthfulness which

sets him apart from most other ‘autobiographical’ novelists and poets.” Of course, Bukowski went on to enjoy the kind of fame reserved for only the most hard-working and lucky of American poets, and he was extremely prolific, publishing dozens of books of poetry in addition to short story collections, novels, and a few works of nonfiction. Although I no longer admire Bukowski as I did in my twenties—the same quality that makes his poems appealing, an unsophisticated rawness, also makes them read like journal entries in need of paring and shaping—I continue to appreciate the fearless honesty of poems like “As the Poems Go,” the first stanza of which confirms Olson’s assertion that it is all NOTHING (or, as Bukowski puts it, “very little”):

As the poems go into the thousands you  
realize that you’ve created very  
little

As poets, Olson and Bukowski were makers—the words *poem* and *poet* derive from the Greek word *poein*, meaning “to make”—and both of them knew that the things they made, their word-objects, were, like all things, subject to the forces of disintegration and oblivion. William Carlos Williams defined a poem as “a small (or large) machine made out of words,” and as machines obsolesce and rust, so language breaks down, so poems collapse. There are, of course, those works that enter the canon of Western literature, the masterpieces that withstand criticism and neglect, but they are exceptions, and it remains to be seen whether they will continue to be read or whether, as the written word declines further, they too will become obsolete. Nearly every poet writes with the hope that her machines will survive, preserved in the pages of textbooks and anthologies, and nearly every poet knows that this hope is ridiculous—and should not be her primary motivation. Christian Wiman calls the wish for worldly fame an “illness,”

and I agree; not only does it distort the poet as a poet but it distorts her as a person, as a self moving among other selves. It gives her the sense, illusory, that she is somehow set apart and therefore not a cell within the collective, democratic body.

### *3. But How Do I Remove God?*

Writing about the self—trying, as Olson urged Corman to do, to capture as sincerely as possible one’s idiosyncratic vision—does not mean that one leaves no room for others in her poems, or that those others must be reduced to two-dimensional figures. Indeed, it would be impossible, not to mention unadvisable, for a poet to keep others out, to be so focused on the self as to avoid the territory of others’ emotional and psychological lives. Sometimes, I think, others let themselves into a poem, and the poet either accepts their presence (and, in some cases, their voice) or ignores it, choosing instead to trudge on in the mode that makes her comfortable.

As ridiculous as it sounds, I find that God sneaks into my poems like a parishioner who, a few minutes late for worship, squeezes through the door of a sanctuary and slips into the last pew. Or does God *seep* into my poems? My wife, Kim, has advised me, on several occasions, to remove God from certain poems; she accuses me of trying to give the poems a gravity that they would lack otherwise, and she may be right—I may be guilty of using God to impress the reader, to lend my words and thoughts greater import. But how do I remove God? And should I remove God in every case, or are there moments when God belongs, such as this one (from the first stanza of “Wasting,” a poem in which I address the issue of being perpetually underweight):

Who holds the knife that whittles me away?  
A sliver, I grow slimmer by the day.  
God, I’m almost done. And shall thy work decay?  
Repair me: put on me a blessed pound.

Is my inclusion of God in the poem gratuitous? I think not. “Wasting,” which I consider to be a successful poem from a technical standpoint—without resorting to overly clunky syntax, I adhered to a form that presented challenges at every turn—resembles a psalm in that the speaker, like the psalmist, cries out in pain, seeking an answer to the question he poses in the first line. I would never argue that a psalm must address God—certainly, in many contemporary psalms, God is absent or veiled—but this one needs God, I believe, if only because it echoes, in addition to the Psalms, the first of John Donne’s Holy Sonnets, in which Donne confronts God and then implores God to draw him upward, rescue him. In fact—and now would be a good time to confess—I lifted the wonderfully accusative query, “And shall thy work decay?” directly from Donne’s sonnet, as well as the phrase, “Repair me.” Could I liberate God from this poem, and so secularize my struggle, without harming the poem? Perhaps, but I have no interest in doing so. The struggle is a spiritual one, and if God does not belong in such a poem, then God does not belong in poetry at all.

In “A Common Prayer,” which is also reminiscent of a psalm, the speaker entreats God seemingly against his will; unemployed, and beginning to bend under the burden of debt, which represents to him a real threat to his marriage, he feels he has no choice but to ask God to help him find work. Like “Wasting,” “A Common Prayer” succeeds technically, if not on an emotional level: the meter, iambic trimeter, is fairly consistent throughout, although there are a number of anomalies (“a child in an ugly mood,” for example), as is the use of slant rhyme, which was not a conscious choice but which seems appropriate for a poem about a flawed man trying to negotiate in a world equally flawed. Employing slant rhyme can be as difficult as employing true rhyme, if not more so, and one has to guard against using a word not because it expresses, better than any other, the desired meaning but simply because it meets the demand of

the ear. In nearly every case, I avoided being driven to awkwardness or imprecision by rhyme, which is not to say that I was not instructed by the ear; on the contrary, in lines six through thirteen, sound shapes the poem:

...Last night, my wife  
and I lay snug in bed,  
and why we chose to fight  
instead of making love...  
It must have been the weight  
and shape of debt, enough  
to drive a wedge of doubt  
between us; we split in two.

Within the slant rhyme scheme, one hears true rhyme—*night* and *fight*, *bed* and *instead*—along with the assonance of *weight* and *shape*, *debt* and *wedge*. Often, I allow myself to be led by the ear rather than the intellect or the compulsion to conduct some experiment in language, and sometimes, as in this excerpt, the result pleases both the ear and the mind, that is, it makes music and makes sense; at other times, however, it pleases neither. Overall, I am not as satisfied with this poem as I am with “Wasting,” probably because the latter is more ambitious. I wonder if there is some way to enlarge “A Common Prayer,” to give it the emotional heft it lacks, without sacrificing its essential simplicity.

As God makes sporadic appearances in my poems, so do themes from the Bible. As a boy, my study of the Bible was motivated, again, by the potential for approbation rather than by the desire to know God’s word (as if, as an eight- or nine-year-old, I could have come to a full understanding and appreciation of, say, John 3:16). I memorized verses not to win eternal life but to win jewels for my crown, literally: when my parents enrolled me in Awana, an organization that endeavors to “develop spiritually strong children and youth who follow Jesus Christ,” I filled the plastic crowns pinned to my uniform with colored plastic gems, each of

which represented a successful recitation of one Bible verse or another. Over the years, I buried these verses deep in my subconscious. But the great themes of the Bible, not to mention an unhealthily large deposit of guilt, continue to influence my thought, worldview, and work.

Light is one of these themes, as is darkness (and the interplay between them). This semester, in addition to writing and revising the poems that comprise my portfolio, I began a study of Biblical Hebrew, which enabled me to see with new eyes a familiar story: the first of the creation accounts, in which God speaks the world and all living things into being. I have read this story, or heard it read by others, dozens of times, but after reading it in Hebrew, which requires me to slow, to scrutinize each word, I gained an insight that escaped me for years, namely, that *darkness preceded light*:

**ב** וְהָאָרֶץ, הַהֵיטֵת תְּהוּ וְבַהּ הוּ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

2 And the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

**ג** וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר.

3 And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.<sup>1</sup>

Before light, there was darkness, and God did not speak this darkness into existence (unless one associates darkness with the earth, which God created, along with the heavens, in verse one). Why is this consequential? In my mind, *darkness* connotes evil, underhandedness, stealth, sin, and death, whereas *light* connotes goodness, kindness, openness, virtue, and life. But here, darkness is not something to be feared, mitigated, or controlled; as a precursor to light, it is essential: it is the source of the impulse to create light. I am inclined to see in it a kind of

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew-English Bible in which these verses appear can be found on the Web at <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0101.htm>. The translation is that of the Jewish Publication Society's *The Holy Scriptures*.

fertility; this darkness is the darkness of the womb, of the night in which our dreams take form, of the uncertainty out of which clarity comes, and it is this notion of darkness as life-giving rather than life-taking that emerges in “The Fertile Dark”:

In winter, in the furrows  
of the fields, nothing  
grows but cover crops.

The farmer, unconcerned  
with yield, allows the land  
its apportioned rest.

So you should slow  
to a stop, be inert  
for a season:

as still and silent as  
sunflowers tilled into  
the black earth.

Let nothing part your lips  
but breath, food, love.  
Dare not to move;

dare not to look  
at the clock, counting  
the minutes lost.

I dare you not to  
measure, make, or  
fear the fertile dark.

This poem strikes me as reminiscent of the work of Wendell Berry, the poet-farmer of Kentucky who extols the Sabbath, the period of rest that returns to things their fertility. “The Fertile Dark” serves as a reminder that I have to enter into stillness—retreat from the customary, hectic moving and doing of my daily life—from time to time, “for a season.” For the past two-and-a-half years, I have been making poems, writing nearly every day in an attempt to advance toward an undefined, indefinable future, one that, although hazy, has this single, integral feature: recognition. Now, maybe it is time to “be inert” and let myself rest in the darkness of not

knowing, not making, not wanting—*needing*—acknowledgment. Maybe, by allowing myself to dwell in a fertile darkness, I will emerge a more creative maker, one whose poems succeed not only technically but emotionally. Christian Wiman says, “I think you write the poems that God has given you to write” (Nance 48). If I have not written them yet, I will one day.



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## **The Fertile Dark**

# **1. The Fertile Dark**

## **After the Madman of Chu**

In your doing, do not do.  
Make not true what is untrue.  
Straighten not what is askew.

In your doing, do not do.  
Go along instead of through.  
Have no point, no point of view.

In your doing, do not do.  
Who is great among us? Who?  
Teach no virtue, it is you.

## **Though He Equips Himself with Light**

Like Saul, his voice the voice of one possessed,  
he says I sin because I dare to be  
myself, to love whom I please. Pharisee!  
He calls me wicked, thinking himself blessed.

If ever Satan put me to the test,  
then it's right now, this viper's striking me.  
He veils, with righteousness, hypocrisy;  
his own misdeeds, of course, go unconfessed.

Though he equips himself with light, the Word  
that was and is, he is a shadowed room  
that teems with demons, spider-like, who live  
in every corner of his being. Spurred  
to damning me, his gospel one of doom  
instead of love, what good news can he give?

## **It Saves to Know the Code**

It saves to know the code,  
to have a haven closed  
to others (so I hope),  
a garden—far removed  
from poor humanity—  
no Satan penetrates.

My twitchy fingers dance,  
perform the steps they must  
to make the wooden arm  
rise, the iron gates,  
like great church doors, swing wide,  
the metal voice intone.

At twilight, shadows slip,  
and steal, and saunter up  
to rob me of my sight;  
how very good it is,  
with night around the corner,  
to live among the blessed.

## Imagine Paradise

Here, no smokestack rises up,  
no factory reminds us  
that once we made asbestos;  
for years it was our manna.  
The mounds of waste we buried  
beside the Wissahickon.

Here, no hell-deep quarry gapes,  
no mason's hands are busy:  
he raises no cathedral  
that fires and burns, collapses,  
its blackened beams protruding  
like bones from heaps of rubble.

Here, no neighbors ache to fight,  
no husbands try manhandling  
their wives, no wives dismantle  
their husbands as in attics  
the children sample whiskey,  
each other's budding bodies.

Here, the church is made of light,  
and each of us, connected,  
is like a paper angel;  
we form unlikely choirs,  
our songs as snowflakes falling,  
failing to solace the earth.

## **Jacob/Israel**

My struggles are no different than your own.  
You want a pillow; rest your head on stone.  
And wrestle with that being dark, divine,  
and build, where you were maimed and blessed, a shrine  
so that you may, whenever you return,  
relive the terror, feel once more the burn.



## **Sleep, Come, Wake**

We court sleep, as the man,  
grown, tired of himself, courts  
death. We know the body  
knows it; we know it sleeps  
within us; all we have  
to do to wake it is  
lie down. Up it seeps  
from the bones, bringing dreams,  
each one a gift we see  
unwrapped before us. It  
comes like a spring, and we  
drink a water dark and  
sweet that moves us into  
motionlessness. Sleep, come,  
wake us from our waking.

## How Perfectly Goddamned Delightful It All Is, to Be Sure

after watching the documentary *Crumb*

Charles crams his room with paperbacks, the tales  
of men who lived, and slowly, slowly fails.  
He has not held a job since 1969,  
but Mother seems to think that things are fine, just fine,  
as long as Charles agrees to keep the dark  
and feed the cats. We see a dying spark  
in him, some evidence of fire, which he, for years,  
has practiced dampening (while fueling countless fears).

He sits like Buddha on his bed: detached,  
sequestered in his mind, unsexed, unmatched  
but not “unhinged,” for which he thanks his priceless pills.  
His laughter, like a geyser, bubbles up and spills  
from him when he recalls the urges—gone,  
he says—to murder with an axe, which spawned  
in pools of narcissism, he believes. He tried  
some years ago to kill himself, but suicide  
requires resolve, a kind of courage he  
has not acquired, at least to the degree  
he must. His “overbearing tyrant” of a father,  
an ex-Marine, tormented him, as well as Mother.  
One can imagine how they must have fought.  
Did Charles protect Mother, shield her, or not?

The last thing we see him do: squelch a window’s light  
by lowering a shade, restoring untimely night.  
And when the final credits roll, we read  
he has succeeded, killed himself indeed.

## Leviathan

Approaching seventy, he rises up  
to break the mirror of a surface  
where two or more worlds meet. There, death could be  
waiting with its guns, its crew and its equipment,  
to drag him—scarred, belly-up—to a far port.  
He knows, and yet he lets his body keep  
to the path it chooses, shed the shadows  
of the depths to which he used to dive.  
It is all he can do:

The body wants to seize the sky, to breach  
and breathe, gain the air, collect the emptiness  
of clouds, and fill its ways and spaces with  
the gases of the heavens, thus become  
a holy ghost, perhaps. The eye desires  
to cast a glance on all it cannot see.  
The light, the sudden light—it must be like  
a birth after all this time, a life spent  
hunting in the darkness.

## The Mind

Mine rouses me as if to fight.  
I wonder, does it take delight  
in robbing me of rest, the kind  
the body loves? Must I remind  
it that I need to sleep each night?

With great and convoluted might  
(think tubas blown by Israelites),  
it looses, puts me in its bind,  
and winds me only to unwind,  
and runs me, reels me like a kite.

*Cogito ergo sum?* Not quite,  
Rene. You got it nearly right.  
Your maxim, though, could be refined,  
your Latin with English combined:  
*Cogito ergo sum* uptight.

It could be true one's thoughts are white  
and weightless clouds that, in their flight,  
dissolve, leave nothing behind,  
as one *Zen roshi* once opined.  
Or was that just a sound sound bite?

All that I know is that despite  
its reputation—erudite,  
a scholar to his rooms confined—  
the mind torments, and fails to find  
the answer to itself, my plight.

## A Bit o' Honeyed Fun

Unable to sleep, unwilling to dream,  
I rise. Concupiscent, I spoon ice cream,  
my sweet, who loves me better with each bite.  
She deeply satisfies, and yet tonight  
I am a worm: all gut, all appetite.  
Enough is not enough. But where, so late,  
am I to get a morsel that will sate?  
The glowing Golden Arches beckon me;  
they hold the promise of satiety.

I cruise across the void suburban streets  
to order sizzling dollar-menu eats—  
and find, in patties gussied up with cheese,  
the partial pleasure offered by a tease.  
A conjured flavor animates this food,  
which serves to elevate, improve the mood,  
but cannot finish what it starts.  
I might as well be popping bitty tarts.

And so the search for even more, the coup  
de grace, begins. As lonesome drifters do,  
I roam the aisles of corner quickie marts,  
my eye on all convenience imparts:  
a choice dark-chocolate palliative  
that melts in the mouth, makes me want to live,  
and buns drizzled with cinnamony ooze,  
and cupcakes coming, like twins, in twos!

Although a philistine, what Herrick knew,  
I know: my time is short. If pearls of dew  
evaporate as quickly as they came,  
despite their being free of any blame—  
if they, as pure as sky, must disappear—  
then so must I, and soon. That day is near.  
But first, a feast, a bit o' honeyed fun  
before my spring is ended, my race run.

## High Desert

after receiving a Christmas card from inmate V06031

No signal star illuminates the sky  
above a humble Bethlehem, and so  
no wise men traverse afar; no shepherd comes  
to pay homage on bended knee. Where is  
the newborn king, the babe asleep on the hay,  
and where the hallowed words, the gilded words  
that once a year we sing, *Rejoice, rejoice?*

Is this a holy scene? There is no telling  
the season, time of day, direction  
one is facing. The sun, hidden from the eye,  
rises or sets; it is dawn now, or dusk;  
things begin or else wrap up. All one knows  
is that he is in a desert. But which one?

A river tries to run, to carve a canyon,  
but the country's parched hard. What little happens:  
the light changes; at the feet of high rocks,  
puffs of brush grow hairy; a lone, slender  
cactus stands erect. In the distance climbs

a tower of stone, and if a god can live  
and breathe within this desolation,  
there he resides. He peers down  
from his aerie, scans the floor  
for signs of movement, decides whom,  
among those he sees below, shall be next.

## About the Author

The poet looks sincerely troubled  
despite the light behind her, sun  
seeming to signal Earth, *All is well*.

Is it something she sees or  
something she has not seen yet?  
Is it animal, splayed, or rising spirit?

Is it being fully alive or coming closer  
to the door that death—all courtesy,  
all grace—gladly holds?

And Earth, we know, responds:  
in many tongues, pronounces *purple*,  
in many places opens, strews and sows.

That may be bougainvillea exceeding  
in the background, or it may be a tree  
that spring enters all at once, violently,

lovingly. Would the poet know?  
Does she understand Earth, those flying  
gestures, that generous chaos? Does she know

why sadness climbs, with anger by its side,  
like vines into her eyes? Why now,  
when the sky is an unblemished body?

It must be this: she is made to sit like a child  
while the photographer frames her pain,  
which radiates in waves so everyone can see.

## The Fertile Dark

In winter, in the furrows  
of the fields, nothing  
grows but cover crops.

The farmer, unconcerned  
with yield, allows the land  
its apportioned rest.

So you should slow  
to a stop, be inert  
for a season:

as still and silent as  
sunflowers tilled into  
the black earth.

Let nothing part your lips  
but breath, food, love.  
Dare not to move;

dare not to look  
at the clock, counting  
the minutes lost.

I dare you not to  
measure, make, or  
fear the fertile dark.



## **All that Lives, May It Live**

May these lots lie empty;

may this road go nowhere.

Here, where houses could be,

may none be: no stair

climbing to its door, no door

finding its frame, no frame

defining space. May the floor

be this red native clay.

May these pine seedlings thrive

and rise to scratch the sky.

All that lives, may it live,

and all that does not, die.

## **Produce, Produce, Produce...**

Today I cut down no trees,  
sold no gasoline,  
convinced no one of the need for insurance;

I delivered nothing, not a single pizza,  
tore the redwood siding from no houses,  
made no copies of a memo no one would read before a meeting;

I eavesdropped on no enemy,  
wrote no one a ticket he could not afford,  
punctuated nothing but this poem.

Send me to a camp on the steppes of Wyoming;  
make me make a mess of something:  
dig a hole or fill a hole,  
punch a cow, shoot a wolf,  
pour concrete on the belly of the prairie.

Beneath a sky that will not quit, its always-burning stars,  
keep me close within a fence;  
install a hunter in a tower  
overlooking me, and maybe then I will  
produce, produce, produce...

## **2. Wasting**

## Wasting

Who holds the knife that whittles me away?  
A sliver, I grow slimmer by the day.  
God, I'm almost done. And shall thy work decay?  
Repair me: put on me a blessed pound.

My body is a tree attacked by blight.  
And friends recoil at me, the sickly sight  
of limbs as thin as twigs, a trunk so slight  
they think the whole of me must be unsound.

I understand the psalmist's hefty grief—  
like his, my bones project in high relief—  
his sighing, yes, but not his great belief,  
which I have tried but failed to swallow whole.

*O taste and see!* he sings, *the Lord is good.*  
I would agree with him if only food  
agreed with me, enlarged me, as it should.  
I have no weight to lose or to control.

But why? No doctor knows, no test reveals,  
and if nothing is wrong, then nothing heals.  
But something eats within me, something steals  
inside and pilfers all that I ingest:

Its fingers weave a basket in my throat,  
collect each slice of bread, each bowl of oats,  
each bite of apple that I sugarcoat.  
And so I envy those who swell their chests,

who look as though they have consumed the corn  
in every Kansas silo, as though born—  
in a locker room, perhaps—to adorn  
their tattooed frames with abs, pecs, buns of steel,

while I remain as paper-thin as Proust.  
How long before my bed becomes a roost

I cannot leave, and death, hunger-induced,  
mouths me, grinds me, makes me his next meal?

## The White Oak, Lightning-Struck

The white oak, lightning-struck,  
looks live, its leaves all green  
above the tree men's truck,  
which has an arm-like crane  
that holds the limbs, secures  
them while a climber cuts.  
The overseer assures  
me it is "hazardous"  
despite its seeming health:  
it houses a desire  
to harm us with itself,  
to fall or else catch fire.

I ask, "How old's the tree?"  
although I think I know  
(it is as if I see  
how deep the great roots go).  
"Fifty, maybe sixty years,"  
he says. I would have said  
the same. He knows I care,  
so adds, "A shame it's dead."  
We watch as his men mulch  
the fingers of the oak;  
the rest of it, the bulk,  
will be firewood and smoke.

Two days pass; I return.  
A hole has opened where  
the oak received the burn  
of lightning from the air.  
I stand above the stump  
and bend to count the rings  
that fused to form its trunk,  
and by my reckoning,  
the oak was twice as old,  
its long life twice as long

as I thought, and was told.  
We were wrong, very wrong.

## **I Was There**

when the hawk eased in the air  
and the architect designed his greatest eyesore and the pear  
lost its petals to the wind and the newspaper  
died in the drive unread and the pine trees  
spilled their cones without apology and the owner  
of the pond warned against trespassing and the swallows  
ignored his warning and the ground  
was broken for the amphitheatre where  
we would hear our name announced for the last time  
while the hawk eased in the air.



## Things Get Done

I will go, I will do,  
do until things get done:  
comb my hair and tie my shoes  
and scoff my toast on the run,  
from muscle, fashion smiles,  
from worry, fashion doubt;  
I will eat like bread the miles  
and scramble, scurry about,  
clean and cook what I can,  
make a small meal of love,  
pray *Lord, have mercy on Man*  
to the emptiness above,  
and be always polite  
and parrot *How are you?*  
and wide, wide awake at night  
think of all I did not do.

## Desire

So much seems out of reach,  
as distant as the leaves one loves  
through the eyes of a window.

If the window were not there,  
if it dissolved itself and left  
no imprint on the air,  
then one could lean across

and out, her face and body closer  
to the leaves and to a cluster  
of flowers, almost close enough  
to wear their plum perfume.

But the window, which she praises  
for letting her see the world,  
alive and shimmering, remains  
set in its frame, unchanged by

desire, and nothing can dissolve it,  
neither light nor darkness,  
neither sun nor storm.

## Psalm One

Do you remember when, untempted by a plot  
of greener grass, you last let moss  
grow, inch through wet darks, the cracks  
between your toes, until it clung, a cool carpet,  
to your feet? For years, your home has been the home  
of others, your getting lost—on streets  
that bear the names of families that cleaved, *Holtzclaw*,  
*Castleberry*—routine, a habit as innocuous and dangerous  
as smoking. Your church has been the church  
of the smiling stranger: visited, investigated, finally found  
wanting—the choir a band of aged angels,  
the preacher busy, in your eyes, withholding grace,  
as if saving it for later—as everything is wanting  
in the world you understand (and full in that world  
you do not understand). You dwell in the waste  
of semi-permanence, extended-stay apartments, vinyl  
siding, vinyl railings, kitchens overrun by roaches,  
beds that creak at three a.m., the raucous interstate  
a block away, the only birds the beat-up,  
black-blue crows...

The question is: Can rootlessness be routed?  
Can rootedness put you at ease? Can you be happy being  
planted, leafing, flowering and, in due season, bearing fruit,  
or are you bound to blow on through, to know and love  
each town just long enough to learn a song  
and, when the song is over, break a heart again, again your own?

## Red and Long As Love

At night, a vampire bat's  
tongue extends to touch  
a round and open wound,  
a well in the desert  
of the dusty, hairy  
hide of a calf, who sleeps  
despite being the host.  
Housed beneath the nose leaf,  
the tongue excites the eye  
and later on the mind,  
which travels back to it,  
the sight of muscle long  
and firm as the heart, deft  
as a thieving hand,  
and red as strawberries  
crushed in a bowl, leaking.  
A bridge, the tongue ties the two  
bodies together so  
they may learn of each other.  
The bat laps the blood  
as if the blood were water,  
as if, rather than hungry,  
thirsty. Water passes  
into water, matter:  
The bat drinks. And the calf?  
It sleeps; perhaps it sees  
in a dream that it is  
dying as it gives life,  
the essence of itself,  
to the bat, the tongue, blood-  
red and long as love.

## In Spring

A rain as light as rumors,  
the chattering of birds,  
the sun in conversation with the earth—  
and near the entrance to the interstate,  
two cops, whose cruisers beam blue light,  
stop a small man on a scooter.  
He wears a sweatshirt the color of new leaves  
and a pair of soiled jeans,  
and with every word his mouth forms  
and every gesture his hands make,  
he claims innocence. The bigger, butcher  
cop, whose massive, black-booted foot  
presses on a curb as if pressing on the neck  
of one resisting, has heard enough.

The small man's shoulders erode;  
his head bows, as if he has learned  
that his mother is dead  
and he has missed her funeral.  
The leaner one slaps on metal cuffs  
(and seems to take some pleasure),  
then plucks, like a plum from a tree,  
a wallet from the man's rear left pocket,  
rifles through it, looking for something,  
a sign I cannot see.

## The Day May Come

The prophets on the streets—are they still screeching?  
Still crying out, *The end is near!*  
*Repent! Repent!* Who listens to their preaching?  
Shall you and I repent, my dear?

Oh, pardon me; I see that you are reading,  
your eyes like mouths inhaling words.  
Is evil, in your fantasy, retreating  
while heroes soar, borne up by birds?

I read that birds are swiftly disappearing.  
Imagine if we lost their song:  
imagine listening but never hearing,  
or hearing only to hear wrong.

Each morning, we enjoy the sun's slow rising,  
its easing up and into sight.  
The day may come (and this I find surprising)  
when we hate both its heat and light.

## The Dream that Came during Last Night's Thunderstorm

Some remnant of our life,  
our darling house, which plummets from the heavens  
(as if it has been pushed  
like cargo from the tail end of a plane)  
and has no parachute—  
or if it has, the chute will not open—  
some remnant will survive,  
but not the walls or what hung there, and not  
the roof we labored at,  
thinking, when we were done, “How beautiful!  
Surely this will keep out  
the rain.” None of the furnishings, neither  
the sofa nor the clock,  
the grandfather that keeps time precisely  
and beams when the sun strikes  
its face—none of the things we collected  
and intended to give  
to our children, to give to their children...  
But something else, something  
living: our turtle, Terrena, somehow  
finds her way off the porch  
just as the house meets the earth and explodes  
into shards and slivers  
of wood, just as the windows spew their glass  
and the doors shoot away  
from their hinges, Terrena wanders off  
and finds water, a pond  
where she will mate and raise her young, and she  
will not remember us  
when the sun sets, and the stars and the moon  
ascend, and the crickets  
who used to sing us off to sleep instead  
sing for our Terrena.

## It Is Not Us, Not Us

It's too damn hot, so when a cloud stands still  
and, for a moment, blocks the raving sun,  
we say a silent thanks, as if the will  
of weather, ever-changing, has been done—  
and we are spared for now, to some degree.  
But with its re-emergence comes our blame:  
*It's not the heat, it's the humidity,*  
we chime. And thus the culprit has a name.  
How neatly we divest ourselves of guilt  
and choose something invisible to bear  
the stain of all that we have bought and built;  
it is not us, not us, it is the air,  
its dampness, how it hangs and weighs—*it* harms,  
not us. No need to sound such loud alarms.



## A Burning

Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings.

Heinrich Heine

To silence volumes, voices, you need fire.  
You need a firebug, a ringleader who  
incites the crowd: he stokes its strange desire  
by making lies ring true, truths ring untrue.  
You need police who will not interfere  
when someone soaks the books, and strikes a match,  
and cheers go up like flames. You need old fears,  
a frenzy, or else the words will not catch.  
A burning is a lynching, of a sort:  
The eyeless, earless mob dispenses its  
injustice, makes of it a pleasure, sport;  
it titillates itself, itself acquits  
of murdering our voices—living words  
that speak, in death, new warnings, but unheard.

## Wilderness

Our bodies know us through our pain:

they tell us: the teeth you needed,  
you have gained. And you have lost, lost

what was best: the succor of suckling  
at your mothers' breasts. They tell us:

keep crying or keep quiet but keep breathing:  
this is a beginning, there is more to come,

more: we are wilderness into which  
you are born, within which you must stay,

and out of which you must find a way.

### **3. A Teller's Prayer**

## A Teller's Prayer

Jesus, I want you to walk in and find me,  
a sleepy check changer, here in this gray temple,  
where fluorescents bring to light the carcasses  
of cockroaches, a wastebasket catching aborted  
deposit slips, and a calendar reminding  
everyone that his days are numbered.

Wake me with a wink, a cough too close  
to my face, an angry eye in which I see  
the coming of a rage as great  
as that of Moses when he descended  
the slopes of Mount Sinai to find  
the children prancing round the golden bull.

Jesus, be my robber: Take me for all  
I am worth! Clean me out, empty my vault,  
snatch the hefty rolls of quarters,  
the straps of dirty, dog-eared ones;  
I shall render unto you what is Caesar's,  
all but the bait, the recorded money.

Then flee on foot and disappear  
into a cloud in the folds of heaven,  
where you exalt the souls who, in their  
earthly accounts, had not enough  
for bus fare. I, too, will flee the scene  
after telling the cops what I know:

how in your beard were flakes of manna,  
how your eyes were the color of raw honey,  
how your unwashed hair held desert dust,  
how your muscled hand passed me a note that read,  
"Give me what you have, withhold nothing, and I will give you life,"  
how you laughed as you flew out the door.

Like a barren fig tree, I have labored  
for three years to yield good fruit  
but in the end have yielded nothing. Free me, Jesus,  
and I, possessed by joy instead of well-fed demons,  
will shed my shirt and tie, sing a new song,  
thread myself like light through the eye of the needle.

## When Comes the Word

It comes from the air!

It comes from the tea you drink.

It comes from your hands,  
which, a moment ago, culled  
the dead roses from the green vase  
and left three—one yellow, one white, one pink—  
holding their heads expectantly aloft,  
as if to lick the dew out of the sky.

It comes from knowing that the air  
warms as the year expands,  
and pine trees delight in the warming air,  
and it will be a long time before their limbs  
must bear the weight of snow and ice again.

It comes from being aware,  
from looking so that you see  
and seeing that you look.

It comes from the book you found  
on a library shelf, from the words  
you read aloud, which the poet,  
when he wrote them, thought would make no difference  
but which make the difference now, even now,  
as if they linger in the air.

## The Elephant

Excuse me, but I could not help noticing the elephant  
on your back, and how belabored is your walking:  
how you must bend at the waist to bear his weight  
and trudge like a beggar with legs shortened  
by disease. Why not loosen one or more of your straps,  
relax and breathe, and let the elephant go his way?

Oh, he may follow you for a time, nudge you  
with his trunk as if to say, *I prefer being carried.*  
But he has four good legs, and he will learn to carry  
himself, as you will learn to carry yourself, and no more.

## Social Maladjustment without Apparent Mental Health Disorder

It may have begun on the day of my birth:  
The doctor fumbled me like a slippery question,  
or let me dangle longer than was necessary to draw  
the first of many wordless protestations from my mouth,  
or a nurse with manly fingers studded with black, wiry hairs  
wrenched me away from Mama, who was, naturally, exhausted,  
too weary to shoo her away. Or I, no bodhisattva shimmering  
with compassion, was a grunt returning to the world  
after a sudden shower of hot metal  
in southern Vietnam, and—knowing what I was capable of,  
what others could do when threatened by me—  
I wanted nothing more than to retreat  
into the womb, and there fall asleep.

I have filled the hands of my life with grief,  
the hands of others' lives. I want to say, *It is karma—*  
sum it all up in a word that neat, as if tying a bow.  
I want to say, *I am a train, freighted,*  
*kissing the tracks I know I cannot jump;*  
*I can slow myself down, but sooner or later*  
*I must arrive, and someone or something*  
*unload me car by car.*

On that day, I will talk to you  
as one human being should talk to another.  
My mouth will not distort itself,  
undo a smile, adopt a sneer. I will not snarl  
if you ask me to move or change in small ways.  
And we will celebrate when, with your help,  
I make a slight improvement, which is to say,  
a miracle occurs: I continue to see the glass as half-empty,  
but I no longer wish to knock it to the floor.  
I will realize, finally, the greatest of realizations:  
The only thing that makes sense is to be kind.

## Walking

is a poem that anyone can write.

Just go outside, as the sun elopes, and  
find a sidewalk—

or, if you cannot find a sidewalk,  
grass:

Let your feet take your mind  
where your mind seldom goes.

The days you spent crammed  
into a corner, wearing a leaden  
suit of expectation,

the days will drift away from your body

like ghosts that never  
intended to live there.

Look for spiders the size of quarters  
who anchor their webs to bushes,  
lampposts, their tensile  
traps defying wind;

lift the hem of a fence to allow  
a turtle to return to its home  
on the dappled bank of the stream  
it strayed a little far from;

spy like a boy on the wormy  
thing, its head fan-shaped,  
that snakes across a desert  
patch of concrete.

The moon is your dessert;  
the sight of it, high above  
the clouds that blush like summer's peaches,  
will feed the dreams you have

now you are alive,  
now you have written a poem.



## News All Flesh Brings

We love the sway of supple cheeks, which ease  
from side to side and softly knock upon  
each other's door, like sisters who are also  
neighbors. We wish to know them well;

our hands are hungry for the news  
all flesh brings. The news is good:  
We have yet to disappear inside  
our magic, revolutionary machines,

the hidden teeth of which shall grind us  
into nothing, but we love in the light  
each day affords. Our lips search for lips  
alike or unlike; our hands reach for what is just

beyond their grasp; we tousle the grass  
with bodies growing heavy with age  
except in that moment when they suddenly  
depart as if for another planet, then feather

back to Earth, where if any of us is a poet, it is desire.

## Eros

Why make our bed?  
I am dying.

Why wrangle with the comforter  
and quilt, why separate the blanket  
and the sheet?

Why start over?  
I am dying.

Why move the pillows slightly,  
as if it matters to the head,  
and pluck from them the two small,  
white feathers that came free  
in the night? Why bother  
getting it right—centering the sheet,  
the blanket, quilt and comforter—  
and wondering if you will have  
as much of each as I?

Why fairness?  
I am dying.

Why revel in what is left  
of my body, its ability to lift  
and cause a thing to spread itself  
and fall where it should fall?  
Why smooth away the wrinkles when  
tomorrow they will be there again?

Why prepare a place  
where you and I may find  
love like a bird nesting,  
keeping warm its egg,  
when I am dying?

## Laudamus

after Charles Reznikoff and Mary Oliver

My favorite poems sing  
a hymn of praise I seem  
unable to compose.

As simple as a stream of light,  
they fall to me from lips  
I should like to kiss.

What angels live among us!  
They bring us tidings of the sun.  
They tell us of the fish they ate

and then became, of breezes.  
We are reminded that we need—  
more than power, more than things

that rust—air, warmth, pines  
in summer, needles everywhere,  
laden cones like those our hands explored

when we were young and green  
as the seas of grass we sailed across  
in search of what we later learned was love.

## **Come Cut in Me**

I am an earth, as great, as small,  
a universe, a child's ball.  
I have my ways, my fields, my soil,  
and I invite you now: come, toil.  
But in this work, let there be play  
and love enough to last the day.  
I give myself to you, your plow;  
come cut in me row after row.

## As Children Say

I like every freckle of you,  
and every starry scar of you,  
and every stand of stubborn fat,  
and every length of your long feet,  
and every dent in your big cheeks,  
and every flake your dry scalp flecks,  
and every word your mind invents,  
and every dollar you misspend,  
and every curse your mouth lets fly  
to counter every curse of mine:  
I like your foibles, all your flaws  
because, as children say, *Because*.

## A Cadence

We have a cadence to our kissing,  
a rhythm when all is right,  
a music we know to be missing  
at times, although not tonight:  
away from the world and its hissing,  
composing by candlelight,  
you call, I respond, no rehearsing—  
but yearning, and then delight.

## A Common Prayer

Lord, please, enable me  
to find some work today.  
I am not one to plead,  
solicit you for aid,  
but things have gone from bad  
to worse. Last night, my wife  
and I lay snug in bed,  
and why we chose to fight  
instead of making love...  
It must have been the weight  
and shape of debt, enough  
to drive a wedge of doubt  
between us, split us in two.  
I admit I was a beast,  
a child in an ugly mood:  
I nearly put my fist  
right through our bedroom door.  
I guess you saw it all,  
the many blows we scored,  
and heard the names we called  
each other while possessed.

Oh, I would like to be  
a channel of your peace,  
but you must intercede,  
as any mighty god might.  
I have shaved and donned a shirt  
a manager could like.  
Secure for me some work,  
a paycheck, however small,  
a hint of benefits,  
and I will seek to quell  
my anger, still my fist,  
and quiet the concerns  
disquieting my wife.  
Lord, let me labor, earn

her trust, dilute her spite,  
and pay the debts I have  
amassed. Lord, if you hear—  
and if, in fact, you save—  
hear this, a common prayer:  
Enable me today.



## A Green Flame Rising

The morning after Seder, the world  
I walk through burns: Green flames  
rise from the fingers of trees, green

tongues seem to voice *chaos*, as though  
speaking it into being. But if I listen closer,  
as a deer might, I hear them whisper

*order*: first, the flower with its  
five petals, a white star that falls  
when the wind says its name, and then

the leaf—along its edges, on its underside,  
light hairs, like those on the temples  
of newborns, sprout—and finally, like a prophecy,

the fruit, the cherry. Now I remember  
sweetness from the days my mother  
canned what we had picked together,

and I sat, spitting pits into the puddle of syrup  
at the bottom of my bowl, slurping  
the syrup, as pleased as Little Jack Horner

with his Christmas pie; and later, charged  
with that sweetness, I climbed into the arms  
of the maple in the front yard, which kept all

from blowing away: trusting the intention  
of each limb, I sought the wide silence  
of the sky, my bare arms brushing the green

flames, I myself a green flame rising  
all the way to the crown, the refuge  
of harried birds; and resting there, I let spread

through my body a fire like that  
filling the trees now, which nothing  
extinguishes, neither death nor time.

## In Orpheus' Footsteps

I write on, and live in the heart of this crazy world like  
the oak in the forest

Miklos Radnoti

The war is almost over. We are bound  
to be among the last whom Death selects.  
Our guards, who smoke while telling dirty jokes  
and cleaning guns, will shoot us, then return,  
in time, to waltzes, trysts and dalliances.  
But I will never taste your sweet plum jam  
again, nor hear you whisper, *Here I am*.

They forced us, half-alive, to march until  
we reached this sad, strange wood, where we must kneel  
at the feet of some trees we never climbed,  
beneath the boughs of which we kissed no one,  
nor sinned, nor gave names to the shapes of clouds.  
The rivers of our blood will feed the roots,  
our buried bones become their springtime shoots.

Like Orpheus, I now descend to Hades,  
but I precede you, my Eurydice,  
because the world is crazy, widdershins.  
Fanni, do not follow, nor mourn the loss:  
A brute can murder me but not my voice.  
My poems will escape, and live above,  
while I, a root, nourish them with love.

## Meditations on a Flame

How does it burn, this simple being, being nothing,  
burn within the temple of the night?

A pillar, it supports the weight of darkness,  
the dome above, in which one's dreams must find  
a fissure so they may fly.

As though called upon by far-off suns,  
it grows, becomes itself a small sun, and now it is the center  
of my system, an almost-empty circle.

My pen pushes on a line solely because this star  
fell into the candle's crater.

What was it the Creator said? *Let there be light*, or  
*Let there be more of what light there is*.

We make what we can by what light there is.

What light! Enough to sate my famished eyes.

How it clings like a bird to its branch, holds on before the breath,  
the wind of my lungs blowing, forcing it to shudder, shy away.

The lone flower in the garden, it comes out of nothing,  
and into nothing it folds.

## **Free the Minotaur**

Let it roam the stony countryside,  
gobble, bones and all, a gaggle of hens,  
grind a goat content in his meadow,  
digest the several stomachs of a black bull,  
crush, in the press of its jaws, a grape-grower  
abandoned by fortune. Let panic spread  
like a plague from house to house,  
and you find a sword.

## Note

I might become a footnote  
in some history text, or worse:  
nothing, no one, no name  
until the next young man  
decides to die by fire,  
one set by his own hand.  
Then someone will remember  
that I took a stand.

Before he died, the Buddha said,  
*Make of yourself a light,*

as if there were some goodness  
in the self, as if the sun  
were not the only thing that burns  
through fog and darkness,  
as if the body would, too,  
if one had the will to let it go  
like smoke—if one could live  
the last words dying Buddha spoke.