

**‘a patch of wild grace’:
Commentaries on Poetry and Scripture**

Introduction

These commentaries on pairings of poetry and Scripture were prepared for a group of Christians in Singapore involved in the arts. They were written with the intention of inspiring thought, reflection, and a deepening sense of communion with God. Some of the poets featured are Christians and others are not. My hope is that each poem, aided by an accompanying scriptural counterpart and my own observations, will shed light on the complexity and texture of Christian belief.

Jonathan Chan

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The Peace of Wild Things

Wendell Berry (b. 1934)

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

(1985)

Matthew 6:26-34 (ESV)

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Wendell Berry, a writer from Kentucky in the United States, is known for his life in farming, his activism against environmental degradation, and his deep and abiding love for the natural world.

Much of this stems from the ethos of environmental stewardship, one that arises fundamentally from the meditative space accorded by reflecting on the things of this earth.

“The Peace of Wild Things” is a poem I return to in moments of stress or anxiety, for in his verse Berry paraphrases much of what I believe Jesus illustrates in his Sermon of the Mount. Just as He reminds us that our Father feeds the ‘birds of the air’, so does Berry remind us that ‘wild things’ do not ‘tax their lives with forethought / of grief’. Berry once opined that no places are unsacred, but that there are only places that are sacred or desecrated.

In “The Peace of Wild Things”, Berry presents a narrative of what it means to retreat from the things of this world, the pattern of anxiety over the things beyond our control, and to remember that God’s providence is revealed in His care for the natural world, the fluency of the natural world in accordance with the Father’s will.

What is making you anxious today? What are the material concerns that threaten to flood your mind? And what helps us to return to the embrace of the Father, knowing that our task is to seek His kingdom first and His righteousness, knowing that He will give us enough for each day?

God's Grandeur

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

(1877)

Psalm 148:8-14 (NIV)

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
Praise the LORD from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,
kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women,
old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a poet and priest of the Victorian era, widely regarded to be one of its most preeminent, especially for his radical and anachronistic style. Upon entering the Jesuit novitiate in 1868 at the age of 24, he burned most of his poems as a display of piety, though, thankfully, he did not stop writing poetry thereafter.

Many of his poems were published posthumously, establishing him as a particularly innovative manipulator of prosody. 'God's Grandeur' is a marvellous example of his 'sprung rhythm', an ebullient rhythm that is meant to mimic human speech. Much of it takes reference from alliterative medieval verse and English folk songs. The orality of Hopkins' poems complements the jubilation of his subject matter well: Hopkins uses a blend of visual and tactile images to draw on the ubiquity of God's presence, '[flaming] out' like 'shining from shook foil,' '[gathering] to greatness' like 'the ooze of oil'.

The poem's turn to the incessantness of human conflict continues on in his playful prosody, replete with assonance, alliteration, and rhyme, before setting up a diametric contrast with the fact that 'nature is never spent', the 'dearest freshness deep down things'. The sunrise, to Hopkins, 'springs', and the Holy Spirit, envisioned as a dove, 'broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.'

Hopkins was a proponent of the notion that the book of Nature and book of Revelation (the Bible) are to be read alongside one another, an explicit recovery of the divine presence of God in His creation. As a hymn of creation, 'God's Grandeur' is a response to Psalm 148, a procession of praise from the earth and the ocean depths, the lightning and hail, the mountains and hills, all

the way to His animals and His people. Where Hopkins transforms this Psalm is in his effusive manipulation of prosody, one that results in the joyous burst of elation when read aloud.

In thinking of the totality of God's creation, and as created things, how can we remember what it is to praise the Lord?

The Bright Field

R. S. Thomas (1913-2000)

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

(1975)

Exodus 3:1-10 (NIV)

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

R. S. Thomas, a preeminent poet of the 20th-century, served as an Anglican priest in Wales. Thomas’ works have been a source of great solace to me if anything because his work displays an uncompromising willingness to articulate what it feels to be abandoned by God, or as a friend has described it, the sensation of God having just left a room you’ve entered. Thomas’s poem ‘Sea-Watching’ articulates this well: “There were days, / so beautiful the emptiness / it might have filled, / its absence was its presence’.

More than any other poet I know, Thomas grapples with the question of doubt that arises from this perception of absence, a similar sense of anguished yearning expressed by St. John of the Cross in his writing on the Dark Night of the Soul. It is of particular comfort given that Thomas is a priest, deeply ensconced in the work of making piety comprehensible to his parish every Sabbath, and yet that he wrestles as candidly as he does with God in his observations of prayer, landscape, and his flock. Compounding Thomas’s sense of anguish is the puncturing of any romanticism he may have carried with him to his rural congregation in Wales, the realisation that there is nothing inherently praiseworthy about desolation or inherently wise about shepherds, as was detailed in his poem ‘Welsh Landscape’. Thomas also experienced a linguistic estrangement from his Welsh identity, having only learned to speak it late in life. One detects these disgruntlements expressed in his poetry time and again.

In the light of this, his poem 'The Bright Field' holds a kind of epiphanic power, a moment where the presence of God is so unequivocal that it breaks through to the weary believer. The speaker begins with the forgetting of beauty, the sun breaking through 'to illuminate a small field / for a while', and the eventual realisation that it is 'the / pearl of great price', that which 'I must give all that I have / to possess it.' The metaphorical language Thomas employs is biblical, the glimpse of beauty a reflection of one's salvation in Christ. It is the remembrance of this effulgent beauty that drives the speaker to articulate that 'Life is not hurrying / on to a receding future, nor hankering after / an imagined past', the thousand little anxieties that consign us to worrying about the passage of time.

It is at the poem's apex that Thomas invokes Moses, 'turning aside' to 'the miracle of the lit bush'. It is the climactic, irreversible, unassailable declaration of presence that Moses encounters in Exodus, the 'flames of fire from within a bush' where God calls him to deliver his people from slavery. This 'strange sight' is one that sanctifies all that is around it, as God commands Moses to remove his sandals at holy ground, ready to be anointed for the task of bringing the Israelites to a 'land flowing with milk and honey'. Moses' appointment as deliverer places him in the continuum of servants who came before him – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And so it is with Thomas that the presence and instruction of God make themselves so clear, so unavoidable, that he cannot help but embrace 'a brightness / that seemed as transitory as your youth', one that itself embodies 'the eternity that awaits you'.

Thomas's poem is one to be read slowly. Just as Thomas' speaker is suddenly made aware of the presence of God, what may be done out of our present yearnings and strivings to seek His face? And how can the memory of such encounters with God grant us strength and comfort when He suddenly feels silent, absent, or far away?

Thank You

Ross Gay (b. 1974)

If you find yourself half naked
and barefoot in the frosty grass, hearing,
again, the earth's great, sonorous moan that says
you are the air of the now and gone, that says
all you love will turn to dust,
and will meet you there, do not
raise your fist. Do not raise
your small voice against it. And do not
take cover. Instead, curl your toes
into the grass, watch the cloud
ascending from your lips. Walk
through the garden's dormant splendor.
Say only, thank you.
Thank you.

(2006)

1 Thessalonians 5:14-18 (NIV)

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Ross Gay is a poet and academic who teaches creative writing and literature at Indiana University and Drew University. His recent collection of essays, *The Book of Delights* (2019), brought me a great deal of joy in the months just after lockdown in Singapore, with each piece functioning as a journal-type entry cataloguing a moment of delight or elation that Gay felt in a specific day. This undercurrent of joyfulness runs throughout his work, such as in his award-winning poetry

collection *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (2015), a humming commitment to the question of how, as he describes, ‘we attend to the ways that we make each other possible.’

‘Thank You’, taken from his first collection *Against Which* (2006), is a stunning example of this. In place of anger, frustration, violence, or vindictiveness, it insists on attentiveness, awe, and gratitude. It is atmospheric and evocative, particularly as a poem written in the conditional and the second person, addressing a ‘you’ that is ‘half naked / and barefoot in the frosty grass’, reminded of the ephemerality of being ‘the air of the now and gone’ and the voice of the earth that ‘says all that you love will turn to dust’. This recognition of our transitory existence is one to be met not with the raising of ‘your fist’ or your ‘small voice’, nor with the act of taking ‘cover’.

The turn in the poem is seamless, syllogistic. The speaker continues with a litany of quick, sensory delights, brief moments of great pleasure: the tactility of curling ‘your toes into the grass’, the visibility of evaporated breath as a ‘cloud / ascending from your lips’, and the deliberateness of walking through ‘the garden’s dormant splendor’. Gay’s poem is one that sees despair and brings it to rest, quiet before the calm of gratitude. It reminds me of the scriptural injunction of 1 Thessalonians to ‘give thanks in all circumstances’, a corollary of doing ‘what is good for each other and for everyone else.’ Most reassuringly, this is done because ‘this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.’

What brings us back to a place of gratitude?

Language

Camille T. Dungy (b. 1972)

Silence is one part of speech, the war cry
of wind down a mountain pass another.
A stranger's voice echoing through lonely
valleys, a lover's voice rising so close
it's your own tongue: these are keys to cipher,
the way the high hawk's key unlocks the throat
of the sky and the coyote's yip knows
it shut, the way that aspens' bells conform
to the breeze while the rapid's drum defines
resistance. Sage speaks with one voice, pinyon
with another. Rock, wind her hand, water
her brush, spells and then scatters her demands.
Some notes tear and pebble our paths. Some notes
gather: the bank we map our lives around.

(2006)

Lamentations 3:28-33 (NIV)

Let him sit alone in silence,
for the LORD has laid it on him.
Let him bury his face in the dust—
there may yet be hope.
Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him,
and let him be filled with disgrace.

For no one is cast off
by the Lord forever.
Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,
so great is his unfailing love.
For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to anyone.

'Language', is by Camille T. Dungy, an African American poet and professor of English at Colorado State University. She has done marvellous work in her seminal anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), which sought to provide alternative ways of perceiving and engaging with nature through the lenses of African American poets and writers. In doing so, part of her project was to broaden the bounds of her readership's understanding of nature, shifted away from the sometimes cloying romanticism so often featured in the Anglo-American canon of poetry.

Her poem 'Language' is one of the poems featured in her anthology. Her first clause is evocative: 'Silence is one part of speech', ascribing the absence of sound a significance in how we may understand articulation and soundscapes. She draws our attention then to that which we may think of as ambient noise – 'the war cry / of wind down a mountain pass', a 'stranger's voice echoing through lonely / valleys', 'the high hawk's key', and 'the coyote's yip'. These bursts of noise are hermeneutic – 'keys to cipher' – understanding that our silence enlivens the possibilities of listening to that which cascades naturally across an area of land. The sonic rhythms of that which is inanimate, the 'Sage' and 'the breeze', the 'rapid' and the 'pinyon', take on an animacy because of their capacity to produce sounds. They are anthropomorphised artistically as the 'Rock' becomes a painter, the 'wind her hand, water / her brush'. The poem ends anaphorically, 'Some notes gather: the bank we map our lives around'.

There is perhaps something to be said about how silence gathers the possibility of remembering how God is revealed in His creation, as is the subject of Psalm 66: 'All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing the praises of your name'. Yet, for Dungy, ambience yields a different kind of reorientation, an auditory cartography in which every created

thing has its own rhythm, pace, and place. Just as these sounds threaten to tear down, they also help to restore order.

In this respect, this notion of silence reminded me of Lamentations. In chapter 3, the writer implores of the mourner, ‘Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope.’ Silence brings the ability to reorient ourselves, to be faced with the recognition of a kind of terror that our inner lives are patterned with sin, and to listen to how our yearning for the presence of God becomes amplified. Out of silence breathes hope, for ‘no one is cast off / by the Lord forever’. In a similar fashion, silence brings Dungy’s speaker back to the possibilities of order, a reminder of the coordinates by which a life can be structured, a recollection not only of a place in a broader scheme of things but also of what it is to learn to speak once again.

What is the place of silence in your life? Where do you often find yourself silent, and in the cradle of God’s hand, where does that silence bring you to?

Ice Storm

Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Unable to sleep, or pray, I stand
by the window looking out
at moonstruck trees a December storm
has bowed with ice.
Maple and mountain ash bend
under its glassy weight,
their cracked branches falling upon
the frozen snow.
The trees themselves, as in winters past,
will survive their burdening,
broken thrive. And am I less to You,
my God, than they?

(1966)

Job 38:22-30 (NIV)

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow
or seen the storehouses of the hail,
which I reserve for times of trouble,
for days of war and battle?
What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed,
or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?
Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a path for the thunderstorm,
to water a land where no one lives,
an uninhabited desert,
to satisfy a desolate wasteland
and make it sprout with grass?
Does the rain have a father?
Who fathers the drops of dew?
From whose womb comes the ice?
Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens
when the waters become hard as stone,
when the surface of the deep is frozen?

Robert Hayden was an American poet, essayist, and educator who served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1976 to 1978, a role known today as Poet Laureate of the United States. He was the first African-American writer to hold the office. Hayden's idea of poetry has always been of it as an artistic frame rather than a polemical demonstration, addressing qualities shared by mankind such as social justice. And yet, this extended to how he perceived himself, preferring to identify as an American rather than Black poet, inciting controversy for supposedly abandoning his racial heritage to conform to the standards of a white literary establishment. Nevertheless, Hayden is known for the exactness of his language in his craft, as well as his command of poetic structures and techniques. This is evident in his poem 'Ice Storm'.

The poem's language is sparse and precise, evocative and simple. It begins, 'Unable to sleep, or pray, I stand / by the window looking out'. That which he sees forms the visual anchor of the poem: the word 'moonstruck' vividly draws to mind the tree bathed in moonlight, 'bowed with ice' yields an image of a tree bent by the pressures of winter. The 'Maple and mountain ash bend / under its glassy weight' until 'cracked branches' fall. This vision of unrelenting turmoil, that which bends a resilient organism to the point of breaking, made me think of the climactic conclusion of Job where God reveals himself.

In response to the bitterness of Job's protestations, God declares in chapter 38, 'Have you entered the storehouses of snow / or seen the storehouses of the hail / which I reserve for times of trouble?' God is the originator of all that is fearsome and moving about the extremity of winter, He who 'gives birth to the frost from the heavens'. This grand sweep of creation that God presents,

extending beyond the bitterness of cold to deserts, wasteland, and grass, is meant to humble Job and remind him of God's divine sovereignty.

And in Hayden's poem, confronted by the relentlessness of the storm, he too is reminded of a kind of divinity. Hayden subscribed to the Baha'i faith, so I do not want to conflate his conception of God with ours, but the final line nevertheless bears some resonance for us. Seeing the trees that will 'survive their burdening', the speaker asks, 'am I less to You / my God, than they?' The trees are symbols of persistence and renewal, and though they bend and they break, they survive. Hayden's poetic vision reminds of similar ends to suffering, of bearing the presence of God in the midst of difficulty, while also remembering that we are not any less than the rest of what God has created. Confronted with the tremendous force of nature, the speaker is reminded of a kind of divine faithfulness and provision, one that is not too distant from Job's reminder of divine sovereignty.

What reminds you of God's power? What reminds you that He cares for you?

Lack Of Faith

Anna Kamińska (1920-1986)

Yes
even when I don't believe
there is a place in me
inaccessible to unbelief
a patch of wild grace
a stubborn preserve
impenetrable
pain untouched sleeping in the body
music that builds its nest in silence

(2007)

Psalm 63:6-8 (NIV)

On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Anna Kamińska is a Polish poet. She lived through the Nazi occupation of Poland and the subsequent difficult years under Poland's communist regime. Poet D. S. Martin writes that her poetry doesn't describe the inhumanity of those times, but concentrates on essential, lasting things. Her husband — the poet Jan Śpiewak — died prematurely of cancer in 1967, and left Kamińska in search of answers. In 1970 she wrote in her notebook, 'I was looking for the dead, and I found God.' During the 1970s, the Polish government tried to silence her and suppress her work because they saw her as part of the democratic movement. Even so, she has written twenty books of poetry and many biblical commentaries.

In her poem 'Lack of Faith', I was reminded of that sensation that comes with dancing at the razor edge of faith and doubt, one nurtured through the relentlessness of dialogue and questioning. Kamińska's poem is sparse, thoughtful, considered, and yet cognisant of what it is to yield to the persistence of that secret place where we are known most intimately by God. Her use of avian imagery draws to mind the process by which faith is nurtured in the shadows of God's wings. This is the image featured in Psalm 63: the psalmist remembers God while in bed, seeking help, singing praises, upheld by the right hand of God.

How do we experience the dance between faith and doubt? What would it look like for us to return to the 'patch of wild grace'?

In a Green Night

Derek Walcott (1930-2017)

The orange tree, in varying light,
Proclaims her fable perfect now
That her last season's summer height
Bends from each overburdened bough.

She has her winters and her spring,
Her moult of leaves, which, in their fall
Reveal, as with each living thing,
Zones truer than the tropical.

For if at night each orange sun
Burns with a comfortable creed,
By noon harsh fires have begun
To quail those splendours which they feed;

Or mixtures of the dew and dust
That early shone her orbs of brass
Mottle her splendor with the rust
She seemed all summer to surpass.

By such strange, cyclic chemistry
Which dooms and glories her at once
As green yet ageing orange tree
The mind enspheres all circumstance.

No Florida, loud with citron leaves,
Nor crystal falls to heal an age
Shall calm our natural fear which grieves
The loss of visionary rage.

Yet neither shall despairing blight
The nature ripening into art,
Nor the fierce noon or lampless night
Wither the comprehending heart.

The orange tree, in varying light
Proclaims her fable perfect now
That her last season's summer height
Bends from each overburdened bough.

(1960)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9 (NIV)

What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Derek Walcott was a noted Anglophone poet from the Caribbean, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, an essayist, and a teacher. Of mixed African, Dutch, and English heritage, Walcott's writing practice was enlivened by the intertwining threads of his ancestry, as well as the immediacy of bringing a new culture out of the detritus of indigenous genocide in the Caribbean. In shaping the English language to the islands in which he was raised, Walcott sought to write 'Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight / Cold as the curled wave, ordinary / As a tumbler of island water', a style that suits its environs.

Raised as part of Saint Lucia's Methodist minority against a 'prejudiced, medieval, almost hounding kind of Catholicism', Walcott saw poetry as a kind of priesthood to be pursued, anointed with a kind of divine import, a religious vocation dedicated to inscribing 'a sense of gratitude both for what you feel is a gift and for the beauty of the earth'. Yet, in his poem 'In a Green Night', the kind of beauty that Walcott captures is engaged in a fraught tussle with the reality of decay.

The poem depicts an orange tree in the midst of deterioration and hardship. The tree, far from 'last season's summer height', instead 'Bends from each overburdened bough. There is a heaviness to Walcott's description, one that echoes and resists the bounteous harvest of John Keats' 'To Autumn' (1820). Walcott articulates this through 'Her moult of leaves' that reveal 'Zones truer than the tropical', addressing the shocks experienced by the tree under the harsh Caribbean climate.

This contradictory sense of an environment that nourishes and punishes is further shown through the 'dew and dust' that '[mottles]' her 'splendor with the rust', dismantling the false hope of shining oranges, or 'orbs of brass.' Walcott describes this contradiction as 'strange, cyclic chemistry / That dooms and glories her at once', a set of redemptive, reconciliatory possibilities.

The cyclical nature of flourishing and suffering, ripening and pressure, described in Walcott's poem invariably reminded me of the book of Ecclesiastes. There are echoes of toiling 'under the sun' in Walcott's image of each 'overburdened bough', as are there echoes of the passage of day and night, season by season. The cynicism of the wise man in Ecclesiastes is expressed toward the banality and repetitiveness of earthly experience: 'What has been will be again [...] there is nothing new under the sun'. Such reminders are not necessarily just of the mundanity of that which we experience on earth, but perhaps the slight comfort in knowing that the constancy

of the old hurts of earthly experience are mirrored in the constancy of God's salvific, gracious character.

In moments where we may feel burdened, overwhelmed, or weary because of the things of the world, what draws us back into remembering the active, consistent presence of God?

Gethsemane

Ronan Williams (b. 1950)

Who said that trees grow easily
compared with us? What if the bright
bare load that pushes down on them
insisted that they spread and bowed
and pleated back on themselves and cracked
and hunched? Light dropping like a palm
levelling the ground, backwards and forwards?

Across the valley are the other witnesses
of two millennia, the broad stones
packed by the hand of God, bristling
with little messages to fill the cracks.
As the light falls and flattens what grows
on these hills, the fault lines dart and spread,
there is room to say something, quick and tight.

Into the trees' clefts, then, do we push
our folded words, thick as thumbs?
somewhere inside the ancient bark, a voice
has been before us, pushed the densest word
of all, abba, and left it to be collected by
whoever happens to be passing, bent down
the same way by the hot unreadable palms.

(2002)

Matthew 26:36-46 (NIV)

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came

and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

From 2002 to 2012, Rowan Williams served at the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, the symbolic head of the global Anglican Communion. A Welsh Anglican bishop, theologian, and academic, Williams demonstrated a wide range of interests in social and political matters such as denuclearisation, the climate crisis, terrorism, and homosexuality. At the time of his appointment as Archbishop, he was regarded as a figure who could make Christianity credible to the intelligent unbeliever. Less known, perhaps, is his career as a literary writer, having composed both plays and poetry. His poem ‘Gethsemane’ takes reference from the garden where Jesus made agonising prayers to the Father prior to His crucifixion.

‘Gethsemane’ begins with a line of rhetorical, ecological questioning, a growing procession of uncertainties: ‘Who said that trees grow easily / compared with us? What if the bright bare load that pushes down on them / insisted that they spread and bowed / and pleaded back on themselves and cracked / and hunched?’ Invariably, these questions anthropomorphise trees as faithful believers, forced into a place of prostration and supplication. The ‘Light’ drops ‘like a palm, / levelling the ground’, perhaps an allusion to Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

This sense of certain symbolic meanings being impressed upon the garden continues, with the ‘other witnesses / of two millennia’, the ‘broad stones [...] bristling with little messages to fill the cracks’. There is an anxiety to saturate every bit of minutiae with metaphorical weight as the ‘fault lines dart and spread’, with ‘room to say something, quick and tight’. The density of meaning feels forced, imprinted by the speaker upon the valley he is placed in.

These meanings, however, bare no futility, as Williams draws us back to the recognition that at a moment in history, ‘inside the ancient bark, a voice has been before us’. Our ‘folded words’, perhaps prayers or explanatory phrases, are pushed into ‘the trees’ clefts’, just as the ‘densest word of all, abba’ was placed in the bark when Jesus prayed. Williams alludes to the posterity of this scene – how the word is ‘left’ to be ‘collected’ by whoever is passing, ‘bent down / the same way by the hot unreadable palms.’ Williams’ poem is at once a meditation on the historic significance of the garden against the seeming insignificance of its environs, but in his witness the garden is burdened by the density of the prayers it has burdened, where Jesus prayed and beads of blood formed on his temple. We remember his words:

‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’

What is it that we see each day that reminds us of the sacrifice that Jesus made?

The Age of Second Chances

Leonard Yip (b. 1995)

Coming back was to this:
taking the flowers from their windowsill
where they had died and the green
long faded, leaves crumbling
like broken bread.

The turning aside of the vase
must not be an apology. I will not
say sorry for my graceless striving,
for the withered petals,
for in the brambles and thorns
I have seen the patient crown of a bleeding God
who has promised the mourning
and then the dancing.

I am understanding this now,
in this age of second chances.
In my short hour of living,
the language I am still learning over
and over is the spill of water
roping uncertain into dry soil,
the flower in it racing
again to the light by the windowsill.

(2018)

Matthew 28:3-10 (NIV)

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Leonard Yip is a Chinese Singaporean poet and a good friend of mine. He read for undergraduate and graduate degrees in English literature at the University of Cambridge before, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, he returned hurriedly to Singapore. His academic and creative writing reveals deep and sustained engagements with ecology, observation, and spirituality, especially the thin areas that find themselves between nature and urbanity. This is in turn furnished by a love of walking and hiking, often reflected in the rhythms of his creative prose. Characteristic of his writing is a sparse, economic style, one belied by profound experiences of spiritual yearning and struggle.

His poem ‘The Age of Second Chances’ reflects many of these elements. The mise-en-scene of his poem is a ‘windowsill’, accompanied by the act of ‘taking the flowers’ with ‘green / long faded’ and ‘leaves crumbling / like broken bread’. The Eucharistic image he employs intuits the poem’s engagement with the figure of Christ, the breaking of bread itself a symbol for the body to be broken on the Cross. Here, the death of his flowers is yoked to the despair laid at the feet of the crucifixion.

And yet, as the speaker ‘[turns] aside’ the ‘vase’, he knows that such an act ‘must not be an apology’ – perhaps to the flowers, or to himself – and that there is no space to seek forgiveness for ‘my graceless striving’. The anaphora of ‘for the withered petals, / for in the bramble and thorns’ provides a gentle segue to the image of Christ, ‘the patient crown of a bleeding God’, itself between life and death, hope and grief, promising ‘the mourning / and then the dancing’ as in the book of Revelations.

Leonard’s poem comes to a close with a recognition of learning about the slow draw of ‘the age of second chances’, how ‘In my short hour of living’ that ‘the language I am still learning

/ over and over', is that of a kind of resilience. Perhaps this second chance is the life granted in the knowledge of who Christ is, one that must be lived with the compulsion of a daily, quotidian faith. It is one that presses on just as how in midst of 'the spill of water / roping uncertain into dry soil', the flower races 'again to the light by the windowsill', the graceless striving toward grace.

It is the difficulty in remembering that the death of Christ brings hope and relief, not the finality of despair, that every day we must struggle to bring ourselves back to that place of faith and recognition, of knowing that He has risen, and that there is a 'fear and great joy' that accompanies that.

As we continue to return from doubt to faith, despair to hope, gracelessness to grace each day, how have we struggled to remember what a life lived in the light of the cross looks like?

Homecoming

Gwyneth Lewis (b. 1959)

Two rivers deepening into one;
less said, more meant; a field of corn
adjusting to harvest; a battle won
by yielding; days emptied to their brim;
an autumn; a wedding; a logarithm;
self-evidence earned, a coming home
to something brand new but always known;
not doing, but being – a single noun;
now in infinity; a fortune found
in all that's disposable; not out there, but in,
the ceremonials of light in the rain;
the power of being nothing, but sane.

(1995)

Psalm 139:1-6 (NIV)

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3 (NIV)

We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God.

Gwyneth Lewis is the former Poet Laureate of Wales, a bilingual writer of Welsh and English, and is known for writing the words that adorn the front of the Wales Millennium Centre. The stained-glass letters of the poem stand at six feet tall and it is rumoured that her poem is, literally speaking, the biggest in the world. Her poetry has been described by scholar Ruth McElroy as having ‘a loving, fluent yet jittery relationship with its language, one that pushes and pulls against the traditional forms she employs’. The dexterity of her writing and expansiveness of her metaphorical imagination is evident in her poem ‘Homecoming’, which is in itself an exercise in teasing out the similarities between seemingly disparate symbols.

The effect of reading ‘Homecoming’ is to feel suddenly attentive to her itemised style of listing, with its opening lines setting up the poem’s conceit: ‘Two rivers deepening into one; less said, more meant’. The intertwining rivers she describes sets up a sense of convergence that accompanies the feeling of coming home, before she implores us as readers to see through to the semantics of her imagery. Coming home is like ‘a field of corn adjusting to harvest’, the gentle incidence of violence that bears fruit, ‘a battle won by yielding’, itself an image of mercy and humility, and a quick succession of delights that read like non-sequiturs: ‘an autumn’ (because of the splendour of changing colours?), ‘a wedding’ (because of the delight of communities coming together?) and ‘a logarithm’ (because of its ability to express quantities in tiny scopes?).

Perhaps coming home is summed up best by the speaker describing it as ‘self-evidence earned, a coming home / to something brand new but always known’. The agglomeration of delights that Lewis describes gives way to the simplicity of something that is ‘known’, which reminded me of the sentiments expressed in both 1 Corinthians and the Psalms that to be known by God is to be loved by God and equally, to love God in return. It is a simplicity that portends

the possibility of delighting in ‘not doing, but being’ and ‘the power of being nothing, but sane’.
And perhaps it is this ephemerality that is the ‘fortune found / in all that’s disposable’: the
realisation that the transience of our being and a recognition of it make us at once more acutely
aware of the joy that populates our loves and equally, makes us feel as if we have come home.

What makes you feel at home?

Autobiography

Alfian Sa'at (b. 1977)

Like most of us, I can't remember how
I was separated from my first love.
(Did it die, did I break it, was it stolen
Or did it fly out through the open window?)
I didn't have radio-tuning parents
Who filled the house with music
Or instilled in me "a love of the cinema".
I never recalled my mother coming home
From the hairdressers' with a new hairdo
Or father teaching me fishing, or
Staying up to watch football on TV.
He did once bring a kite home but hung it
On my bedroom wall (he turned it into
A portrait, it wasn't his fault the wall
Never became more of a sky). Meanwhile
Cousins came for visits wearing braces

And chattering about comics, bicycle scars,
And camping out, ghost stories (don't tell
That one, tell the one where Daddy used
The torchlight and Mummy screamed and dropped
Her things and laughed like a hyena). We drank
Boiled water in the house, and sometimes
Waking up from a nap I would wander the rooms
To find mother copying cross-stitch designs
From a book or father watching a subtitled
Chinese re-run. So I slept again, dreaming
Of playing toys away from the sunlight
That leaked in between hawk-eyed curtains
Gold-plating afternoon dust to shining pollen.
When I awoke I was twenty, being asked
If I had a happy childhood. Yes, the one
We all have: filled to the brim
With the love of absent things.

(2001)

James 4:1-3 (NIV)

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Alfian Sa'at is a Malay Singaporean writer who has worked prolifically in drama, poetry, and prose. He has been regarded as Singapore's most preeminent contemporary writer in the English language operating across all three genres. Often described as Singapore's *enfant terrible* for his critical positions toward the government, Alfian's work is most effective in its capacity to evoke melancholy, tenderness, and the fallout coming from feelings of loss.

His poem 'Autobiography' is a powerful example of this: it begins with a simple conceit as the speaker remarks, 'I can't remember how / I was separated from my first love', like 'most of us'. This sense of a collective separation is drawn out steadily, even if this 'first love' is left ambiguous. The speaker ruminates on the absence of 'radio-tuning parents' and 'music', a 'love of the cinema', or his mother having 'a new hairdo' or his father 'teaching me fishing' or watching 'football on TV'. These images all point to conspicuous markers of class in Singapore, whether in the form of cultural capital or material goods. The closest the speaker comes to this is a kite his father hangs on 'My bedroom wall', turned into 'A portrait', hanging listlessly for the speaker's gaze rather than actually being flown in the sky. A hobby, too, is something that is absent from the speaker's upbringing.

The stanza that follows folds from depictions of material absence to material presence. A contrast is established between the speaker's cousins, 'chattering about comics, bicycle scars, / And camping out', and the speaker, drinking 'Boiled water in the house', finding his mother 'copying cross-stitch designs', or his father 'watching a subtitled / Chinese re-run'. All this speaks into the sense of a middle-class ordinariness, marked by reminders of thrift and frugality through the reception of publicly-available or second-hand goods. The speaker '[dreams] / Of playing toys away from the sunlight', itself depicted in lavish terms, 'Gold-plating afternoon dust to shining pollen', a sudden gloss of beauty that adorns mundanity. And as the poem comes to its conclusion, and the speaker reflects at twenty if he 'had a happy childhood', the poem's main conceit is laid out clearly: his was a childhood we all have, 'filled to the brim / With the love of absent things.'

Alfian's poem is powerful in its depiction of the sly mechanisms of envy: how capitalism and materialism steadily cultivate a sense of insecurity for the absence of material and cultural goods. It is something recognisable to many of us, having grown up in a culture saturated with aspirationalism, the invariable reflection of a country obsessed with economic development and survival. In some ways, one wonders if Alfian's 'Autobiography' can be said to be the autobiography of many growing up in Singapore in the 1990s and 2000s.

In coming to terms with some of these powerful cultural forces, I was reminded of James 4, in which James writes: 'You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.' The act of guarding our hearts serves as a way of warding off all manner of temptation, for the cultivation of want and desire obscures our ability to recognise that which we have and that which is desired by the Lord. The grip of aspiration and mobility is the promise of meritocracy; its flip side is a feeling of entitlement to certain cultural and material markers, the cultivation of which draws us away from a contentment in Christ.

When we are confronted by our desires for that which we do not have, the ‘love of absent things’, what helps us return to the contentment we have in what God provides?

going home

Jonathan Chan (b. 1996)

i run in the enfolding of sunset. street
lamps burst into electric luminosity, just
as pink seeps through the cracks of cloud
cover. the darkness does not overcome
the light, though it envelops the cradling
of hope. absence yields the breath of
possibility, however long the stretch of
dusk. the streets begin to hollow, craters
filled, drains cleared, and craftsmen ferried
home. my feet carry me into the evening.
each room's sliver of light goes off: the
aunties' video chats at the sharp corner
of our staircase, the blue blade beneath my
father's room, and the rush of my own
vanishing bulbs. away in tuas, shrouded
in the dark by towels draped on metal
frames, brothers pray by the glow of
smartphone screens.
and so do i.

(2020)

John 1:1-5 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

I wrote this poem several months ago in Singapore. I was out for a run late in the evening and found myself caught in the moment between day and night as the sun was setting and the sky was painted over in a brilliant swathe of colours: blue, pink, and orange. As I ran my usual route around my neighbourhood, I listened to an interview with Rebecca Solnit on the *On Being* podcast. Solnit

has written widely about reconciliation and grief in the aftermath of disaster, and her conversation with Krista Tippett touched on her experience documenting the fallout of Hurricane Katrina as well as how disasters clarify a sense of attention to the present. She mentioned that it gives people ‘this supersaturated immediacy that also includes a deep sense of connection.’ At the time, I had just completed an internship with HealthServe, a non-profit providing casework and medical assistance to migrant workers, and as a consequence was also beginning to pay attention to the migrant brothers in my neighbourhood, ferried in and out by lorries each day to work on new homes.

All of this – the sunset, the podcast, the roadworks that bore the absence of the workers – began to coalesce in a poem when Solnit and Tippett began to speak about her book, *Hope in the Dark*. In Solnit’s own words, she wrote the book, ‘to rescue darkness from the pejoratives, because it’s also associated with dark-skinned people, and those pejoratives often become racial in ways that I find problematic.’ She elaborated that this hope is where darkness is ‘the future’ and where

the present and past are daylight, and the future is night. But in that darkness is a kind of mysterious, erotic, enveloping sense of possibility and communion. Love is made in the dark as often as not. And then to recognize that unknowability as fertile, as rich as the womb rather than the tomb in some sense. And so much for me of hope is, as I was saying, not optimism that everything will be fine, but that we don’t know what will happen.

There was a particularly biblical bend to her language as she spoke of darkness as the crucible of hope and possibility, an enveloping sensation that stirs new imaginings and yearnings.

I thought of St. John of the Cross and the periods of lament and estrangement from God we are all wont to experience, but also of the simplicity of the beginning of John’s Gospel: that in

Christ was life, that this life was the light of all mankind, and that the light has overcome the darkness. It hummed in my mind like a mantra as I thought of the darkness that envelops us as we go home, whether for myself, my family, the domestic helpers who live with us, the migrant workers living in dorms, and how it augurs not despair, but hope, resilience, and possibility.

When we dwell in the darkness and remember who God has been and will be, does it help us to find hope?

O Holy Night

Marjorie Stelmach (b. 1948)

*Ephesians 4:31 – Let all bitterness and wrath
and anger...be put away from you...*

In the easement,
stripped trees daven apathetically
under a skull-cap sky.

Oh, Child,
are you sure? This world?
This bleak winter?
These unconscionable times?

The last of the day's feeble sun
steeps the holly,
staining its berries a rich
 crimson
as bright and slick
as a seasoned trickster, then
slips off the edge of the earth,

leaving to us this night,
first among too many nights
we've marked

 and mean,
every year, to find holy.
It's getting old, this act.
Or maybe it's me. Lately,

I'm all lapse and misstep.
And yet, love's tiny fist seeks out
my heart with the old entreaty,
 and yearly

I somehow let in love enough
to try again: to call our people
decent, our planet worthy.

(2019)

Luke 2:1-7 (NIV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Marjorie Stelmach is an American poet who has served as a high school English teacher for over 30 years. She previously served as director of a writing scholars programme at Washington University and as a visiting poet at the University of Missouri. Her poems have been awarded the Chad Walsh Prize and the Marianne Moore Prize and have been anthologised in various collections of Christian poetry. Amidst the season of Advent, I thought it apt to take a look at her poem 'O Holy Night', itself prefaced by a verse from Ephesians 4: 'Let all bitterness and wrath / and anger... be put away from you.'

Stelmach's poem opens with a vivid depiction of winter, 'stripped trees daven apathetically', making unenthusied prayers, under a 'skull-cap sky'. Stelmach weaves visual and tactile imagery to give a sense of winter's barrenness and the protections needed to withstand it. Her poem continues

in lines of rhetorical questioning: ‘Oh, Child, are you sure? This world? [...] These unconscionable times?’ There is a universality embedded in this particularity, for the question of present evil is one that is unlikely to dissolve in any epoch of human existence. I was reminded of Robert Southwell’s poem ‘The Burning Babe’, itself expressing a similar ambivalence to the notion that a child would be born, condemned to suffer for an often-ungrateful world.

The poem continues with an image of curious metaphysics, how the ‘last of the day’s feeble sun’ stains the holly’s ‘berries a rich / crimson / as bright and slick / as a seasoned trickster.’ The personification of the berries and the holly, recognisable images of Yuletide in the Euro-American world, is unflattering – almost deceitful in its aesthetic appeal. The passage of day to night, described as slipping ‘off the edge of the earth’, intuits a sudden, jarring fold to ‘night’. The speaker’s voice is imbued with a certain cynicism toward nights that ‘we’ve marked / and mean, / every year, to find holy’, an act that is ‘getting old’. The interjections of the spaced lines help to foreground this sense of a stilted procession of thought, not unlike the contemplative poems of Thomas Traherne.

The poem’s return to a kind of hopefulness arrives in its last stanza. From the speaker’s remark that ‘I’m all lapse and misstep’, the poem moves toward addressing the stubbornness of ‘love’s tiny fist’ seeking out ‘my heart with the old entreaty’. The injunction of Christmas is to remember the humility and sacrifice of God taking on flesh and mortal vulnerability, or as the singer Bono describes it:

if there is a force of love and logic behind the universe, then how amazing would it be if that incomprehensible power chose to express itself as a child born in shit and straw poverty.

It is in the utter incomprehensibility of the nativity in which its power resides. It is just enough to stir the speaker's heart as she remarks, 'yearly / I somehow let in love enough to try again: to call our people / decent, our planet worthy.' To consider the marvel, the wonder, and the mystery of the nativity is to be brought back to the immediacy of God's love. It is expressed in his indwelling in the flesh, a cosmic, transcendent love that chose to make itself immanent and physical.

As we look toward Christmas and the mystery of the birth of Jesus Christ, how can we remember what it is to hold to faith, hope, and love in our broken world?