



A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997

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Berry's Sabbath poems embrace much that is elemental to human life--beauty, death, peace, and hope. In his preface to the collection, Berry writes about the growing audience for public poetry readings. While he sees poetry in the public eye as a good thing, Berry asks us to recognize the private life of the poem. These Sabbath poems were written "in silence, in solitude, and mainly out of doors," and tell us about "moments when heart and mind are open and aware." Many years of writing have won Wendell Berry the affection of a broad public. He is beloved for his quiet, steady explorations of nature, his emphasis on finding good work to do in the world, and his faith in the solace of family, memory, and community. His poetry is assured and unceasingly spiritual; its power lies in the strength of the truths revealed.

A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997 Details

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Ben DeVries says

This collection of poetry really grew on me as I read through it. Many poignant reflections in it, which call my heart back to a simpler and more noble way of life ...

Gary Grimes says

A very good read that allowed me to relax as I read it. I am t usually a fan of poetry but very much enjoyed reading this book. Let me look at divine in a different way.

Josh says

I first discovered Wendell Berry when as an undergraduate at Southeastern University I recieved his poem "How to Be A Poet (to remind myself)" in my school mailbox as a gift from my advisor's wife, as I had recently presented Billy Collins to her freshmen composition class. The poem has been on my bathroom mirror ever since, reminding me every morning of the virtues of silence, meditation, tranquility, and being present to ones surroundings. His poems seem to reflect his quest to practice these virtues in all that he does. As a person of faith, I've found his poetry to be highly edifying and uplifting, challenging me to practice peace through the worship of contemplation.

Heidi says

I don't always "get" poetry, but many of these spoke to me. Here is one that I read over and over again:

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and calls it good.

And this one still runs through my head periodically:

Best of any song
is bird song
in the quiet, but first
you must have the quiet.

Reading these poems is like taking a deep cleansing breath.

Suzanne says

salt of the earth, spirit of the sky

Heather says

Leslie Norris said he wished he could write a Sabbath poem akin to Berry. Hear, hear! Heart and soul and earth and sky words to be savored under blankets of stars, smell of pine, babbling of brook and feel of red rock warmth. Oh so pretty and oh so keen personal journey of all the soul faces in surrendering to simplicity as well as cultural commentary on how the west was "won". Decades of inspiration and change one Sunday at a time. Both uplifting and slightly angry making at unwise land use planning. Of course, being the gent WB is, handled with true feeling of grace. Yet no mincing words. Kudos, Wendell. Let's love our pristine sanctuaries with continued joy and reverence.

"the whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing." (isaiah 14:7)

"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...i come into the presence of still water. and i feel above me the day-blind stars waiting for their light. for a time i rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

--mr. berry, from "the peace of wild things"

Lindsey says

Wendell Berry makes me proud to be from KY.

Stephen Hicks says

This is the first of Berry's poetry that I have picked up. I was very pleased with what I found. I don't feel that I can rant and rave about this book not because what I found was of poor quality, but because Berry installs a sense of peace and tearfulness that epitomizes the meaning of the Sabbath. His poems are never fast-moving or action-packed; they are appreciative, observant, transcendent, and loving. I was very pleased with this collection. Mostly set around his life in nature and farm work, some allusions were lost on this city-dweller,

but the emotive response still rang true. Highly recommended.

Alena Guggemos says

What can I say about Wendell Berry? His writing, along with that of Thoreau, is about as close as I come to reading the bible. This books sits on my night stand and I often turn to it in the evening to quiet my mind or in the morning to provide perspective. Every poem is a prayer.

Cheryl says

I read somewhere that Wendell Berry thinks of himself as an “amateur poet.” I haven’t heard anything so ridiculously funny in a while. And I am afraid his politics and decision to be a full time farmer instead of a university professor might have suppressed the best poetry that was ever written. Where are the accolades? This poetry is so beautiful, accessible, important, spiritual, realistic, holy, religious, non religious, lyrical, everything. The poems are technically and lyrically brilliant, and they can bring tears and laughter in the same poem. How can we ask anything more of art than to make us feel deeply? This volume collects all his quiet, personal Sabbath poems, and it is a phenomenal sweep of his life.

He has won a Poetry prize and a National Humanities Medal; I want more. I want the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, the Nobel Peace Prize, and let’s throw in a Grammy while we are at it. He is the definition of an American hero, as defined other than militarily. He has resisted modernity, and remained true to the land and small farm ownership, and I think those who judge literary prizes trivialize his contribution. It isn’t dark or angsty or pessimistic enough to impress the powers that be. His voice is powerful though, and you will be changed by even a few of these poems.

Commence the beauty:

1979-I

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,

**mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.**

1979-II

**The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways it cannot intend;
is borne, preserved, and comprehended
by what it cannot comprehend.**

1980-IV

The frog with lichened back and golden thigh
Sits still, almost invisible
On leafed and lichened stem,
Invisibility
Its sign of being at home
There in its given place, and well.
The warbler with its quivering striped throat
Would live almost beyond my sight,
Almost beyond belief,
But for its double note-
Among high leaves a leaf,
At ease, at home in air and light.
**And I, though woods and fields, through fallen days
Am passing to where I belong:
At home, at ease, and well.
In Sabbaths of this place
Almost invisible,
Toward which I go from song to song.**

1982-I

Here where the dark-sourced stream brims up,
Reflecting daylight, making sound
In its stepped fall from cup to cup
Of tumbled rocks, singing its round

From cloud to sea to cloud, I climb
The deer road through the leafless trees
Under a wind that batters limb
On limb, still roaring as it has

Two nights and days, cold in slow spring.
But ancient song in a wild throat
Recalls itself and starts to sing
In storm-cleared light; and the bloodroot,

Twinleaf, the rue anemone
Among bare shadows rise, keep faith
With what they have been and will be
Again: frail stem and leaf, mere breath

Of white and starry bloom, each form
Recalling itself to its place
And time. Give thanks, for no windstorm

Or human wrong has altered this,

The forfeit Garden that recalls
Itself here, where both we and it
Belong; no act or thought rebels
In this brief Sabbath now, time fit

To be eternal. Such a bliss
Of bloom's no ornament, but root
And light, a saving loveliness,
Starred firmament here underfoot

1982 – IV

Thrush song, stream song, holy love
That flows through earthly forms and folds,
The song of Heaven's Sabbath fleshed
In throat and ear, in stream and stone,
A grace living here as we live,
Move my mind now to that which holds
Things as they change.

The warmth has come.

The doors have opened. Flower and song
Embroider ground and air, lead me
Beside the healing field that waits;
Growth, death, and a restoring form
Of human use will make it well.

But I go on, beyond, higher
In the hill's fold, forget the time
I come from and go to, recall
This grove left out of all account,
A place enclosed in song.

Design

Now falls from thought. I go amazed
Into the maze of a design
That mind can follow but not know,
Apparent, plain, and yet unknown,
The outline lost in earth and sky.
What form wakens and rumples this?
Be still. A man who seems to be
A gardener rises out of the ground,
Stands like a tree, shakes off the dark,
The bluebells opening at his feet,
The light a figured cloth of song.

1982-VI

Out of disorder, then,
A little coherence, a pattern
Comes, like the steadying
Of a rhythm on a drum, melody
Coming to it from time
To time, waking over it,
As from a bird at dawn
Or nightfall, the long outline
Emerging through the momentary,
As the hill's hard shoulder

Shows through trees
When the leaves fall.

The field finds its source
In the old forest, in the thicket
That returned to cover it,
In the dark wilderness of its soil,
In the dispensations of the sky,
In our time, in our minds—
The righting of what was done wrong.

Wrong was easy; gravity helped it.
Right is difficult and long.
In choosing what is difficult
We are free, the mind too
Making its little flight
Out from the shadow into the clear
In time between work and sleep.

There are two healings: nature's,
And ours and nature's. Nature's
Will come in spite of us, after us,
Over the graves of its wasters, as it comes
To the forsaken fields. The healing
That is ours and nature's will come
If we are willing, if we are patient,
If we know the way, if we will do the work.
My father's father, whose namesake
You are, told my father this, he told me,
And I am telling you: we make
This healing, the land's and ours:
It is our possibility. We may keep
This place, and be kept by it.
There is a mind of such an artistry
That grass will follow it,
And heal and hold, feed beasts
Who will feed us and feed the soil.

Though we invite, this healing comes
In answer to another voice than ours:
A strength not ours returns
Out of death beginning in our work.

Though the spring is late and cold,
Though uproar of greed
And malice shudders in the sky,
Pond, stream, and treetop raise
Their ancient songs;

The robin molds her mud nest
With her breast; the air
Is bright with breath
Of bloom, wise loveliness that asks
Nothing of the season but to be.

1982- VII

Our household for the time made right,
All right around us on the hill
For time and for this time, tonight,
Two kernels folded in one shell,

We're joined in sleep beyond desire
To one another and to time,
Whatever time will take or spare,
Forest, field, house, and hollow room

All joined to us, to darkness joined,
All barriers down, and we are borne
Darkly, by thoroughfares unsigned
Toward light we come in time to learn,

In faith no better sighted yet
Than when we plighted first by hope,
By vows more solemn than we thought
Ourselves to this combining sleep

A quarter century ago,
Lives given to each other and
To time, to lives we did not know
Already given, heart and hand.

Would I come to this time this way
Again, now that I know, confess
So much, knowing I cannot say
More now than then what will be? Yes.

1984-V

Estranged by distance, he relearns
The way to quiet not his own,
The light at rest on tree and stone,
The high leaves falling their turns,

**Spiraling through the air made gold
By their slow fall. Bright on the ground,
They wait their darkening, commend
To coming light the light they hold.**

His own long comedown from the air
Complete, safe home again, absence
Withdrawing from him tense by tense
In presence of the resting year.

Blessing and blessed in this result
Of times not blessed, now he has risen.
He walks in quiet beyond division
In surcease of his own tumult.

1985-I

Not again in this flesh will I see
the old trees stand here as they did,

weighty creatures made of light, delight
of their making straight in them and well,
whatever blight our blindness was or made,
however thought or act might fail.

The burden of absence grows, and I pay
daily the grief I owe to love
for women and men, days and trees
I will not know again. Pray
for the world's light thus borne away.
Pray for the little songs that wake and move.

For comfort as these lights depart,
recall again the angels of the thicket,
columbine aerial in the whelming tangle,
song drifting down, light rain, day
returning in song, the lordly Art
piecing out its humble way.

Though blindness may yet detonate in light,
ruining all, after all the years, great right
subsumed finally in paltry wrong,
what do we know? Still
the Presence that we come into with song
is here, shaping the seasons of His wild will.

1985-V

**How long does it take to make the woods?
As long as it takes to make the world.
The woods is present as the world is, the presence
of all its past and of all its time to come.
It is always finished, it is always being made, the act
of its making forever greater than the act of its destruction.
It is a part of eternity for its end and beginning
belong to the end and beginning of all things,
the beginning lost in the end, the end in the beginning.**

What is the way to the woods, how do you go there?
By climbing up through the six days' field,
kept in all the body's years, the body's
sorrow, weariness, and joy. By passing through
the narrow gate on the far side of that field
where the pasture grass of the body's life gives way
to the high, original standing of the trees.
By coming into the shadow, the shadow
of the grace of the strait way's ending,
the shadow of the mercy of light.

Why must the gate be narrow?
Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.
To come into the woods you must leave behind
the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.
You must come without weapon or tool, alone,
expecting nothing, remembering nothing,
into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf

1986-I

Slowly, slowly, they return
To the small woodland let alone:
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place.

They stand in waiting all around,
Uprisings of their native ground,
Downcomings of the distant light;
They are the advent they await.

Receiving sun and giving shade,
Their life's a benefaction made,
And is a benediction said
Over the living and the dead.

In fall their brightened leaves, released,
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed.
O light come down to earth, be praised!

1987-III

**And now the lowland grove is down, the trees
Fallen that had unearthly power to please
The earthly eye, and gave unearthly solace
To minds grown quiet in that quiet place.
To see them standing was to know a prayer
Prayed to the Holly Spirit in the air
By that same Spirit dwelling in the ground.
The wind in their high branches gave the sound
Of air replying to that prayer. The rayed
Imperial light sang in the leaves it made.**

To live as mourner of a human friend
Is but to understand the common end
Told by the steady counting in the wrist.
For though the absent friend is mourned and missed
As every pulse, it is a human loss
In human time made well; our grief will bless
At last the dear lost flesh and breath; it will
Grow quiet as the body in the hill.

**To live to mourn an ancient woodland, known
Always, loved with an old love handed down,
That is a grief that will outlast the griever,
Grief as landmark, grief as a wearing river
That in its passing stays, biding in rhyme
Of year with year, time with returning time,
As though beyond the grave the soul will wait
In long unrest the shaping of the light**

In branch and bole through centuries that prepare
This ground to pray again its finest prayer

1990- V

Sleep is the prayer the body prays,
Breathing in unthought faith the Breath
That throughout our worry-wearied days
Preserves our rest, and is our truth.

1991-X

Loving you has taught me the infinite
longing of the self to be given away
and the great difficulty of that entire
giving, for in love to give is to receive
and then there is yet more to give;
and others have been born of our giving
to whom the self, greatened by gifts,
must be given, and by that giving
be increased, until, self-burdened,
the self, staggering upward in years,
in fear, hope, love, and sorrow,
imagines, rising like a moon,
a pale moon risen in daylight
over the dark woods, the Self
whose gift we and all others are,
the self that is by definition given

1993-IV

Hate has no world.
The people of hate must try
To possess the world of love,
For it is the only world;
It is Heaven and Earth.
But as lonely, eager hate
Possesses it, it disappears;
It never did exist,
And hate must seek another
World that love has made.

1994-II

Finally will it not be enough,
After much living, after
Much love, after much dying
Of those you have loved,
To sit on the porch near sundown
With your eyes simply open,
Watching the wind shape the clouds
Into the shape of clouds?

Even then you will remember
The history of love, shaped
In the shapes of flesh, everchanging
As the clouds that pass, the blessed
Yearning of body for body,
Unending light.

You will remember, watching
The clouds, the future of love.

1994-VII

I would not have been a poet
except that I have been in love
alive in this mortal world,
or an essayist except that I
have been bewildered and afraid,
or a storyteller had I not heard
stories passing to me through the air,
or a writer at all except
I have been wakeful at night
and words have come to me
out of their deep caves
needing to be remembered.
But on the days I am lucky
or blessed, I am silent.
I go into the one body
that two make in making marriage
that for all our trying, all
our deaf-and-dumb of speech,
has no tongue. Or I give myself
to gravity, light, and air
and am carried back
to solitary work in fields
and woods, where my hands
rest upon a world unnamed,
complete, unanswerable, and final
as our daily bread and meat.
The way of love leads all ways
to life beyond words, silent
and secret. To serve that triumph
I have done all the rest.

1997-IV

"You see," my mother said, and laughed,
knowing I knew the passage
she was remembering, "finally you lose
everything." She had lost
parents, husband, and friends, youth,
health, most comforts, many hopes.

Deaf, asleep in her chair, awakened
by a hand's touch, she would look up
and smile in welcome as quiet
as if she had seen us coming.

She watched, curious and affectionate,
the sparrows, titmice, and chickadees
she fed at her kitchen window-
where did they come from, where
did they go? No matter.
They came and went as freely as

in the time of her old age
her children came and went,
uncaptured, but fed.

And I, walking in the first spring
of her absence, know again
her inextinguishable delight:
the wild bluebells, the yellow
celandine, violets purple
and white, twinleaf, bloodroot,
larkspur, the rue anemone
light, light under the big trees,
and overhead the redbud blooming,
the redbird singing,
the oak leaves like flowers still
unfolding, and the blue sky."

1997 VII

**There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.**

Ruth says

This is the last volume of poetry I discussed with my father before he died. I wish I could call him on the phone to discuss it now. When I went home for the funeral, I claimed his copy from one of his many bookshelves. It will sit next to mine now. There are few better legacies a father could leave to his child than the love of books and poetry in particular.

Bethany says

Beautiful! I could always be reading this book, circling back to the beginning as soon as I finished the last page, and continue to find surprises in the words and images and rhythms.

Aaron says

Berry's poems are fraught with the imagery of a planet and a livelihood under siege by modern society. However, they are also filled with moments of light and love for others and for the divine. Some of these poems leap from the page into your heart and mind, others require a deeper introspection but are worthy of it. If you can't find something to like, try reading it again.

Joshua says

I agree with others here who have commented that Berry's poems in this collection feel like deep breathing. Most provoked for me a deep cleansing breath after reading. Berry inspires in me greater appreciation for the places and work that are mine, even if they aren't farms and farm work or woods and woodwork. In total, I like these poems best when they celebrate or savor a moment or a season; I like them least when they complain and condemn. Yes, there is much to condemn, and Berry clearly feels deeply the tragedy of idolatrous progress (e.g. the untitled poem w/ recurring reference to "the objective"). However valid Berry's grousing, it doesn't sing like his praise of the moment or his luxuriating in rest and work sings. These seem to come much more naturally to him - or at least to resonate much more for me.

Mary Lee says

I liked more of the poems in the second half than the first.
