

Wendell Berry

SABBATHS 2005

I.

I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind.

II.

They gather like an ancestry
in the centuries behind us:
the killed by violence, the dead
in war, the “acceptable losses” —
killed by custom in self-defense,
by way of correction, as revenge,
for love of God, for the glory
of the world, for peace; killed
for pride, lust, envy, anger,
covetousness, gluttony, sloth,
and fun. The strewn carcasses
cease to feed even the flies,
the stench passes from them,
the earth folds in the bones
like salt in a batter.

And we have learned
nothing. “Love your enemies,
bless them that curse you,
do good to them that hate you” —

it goes on regardless, reasonably:
the always uncompleted
symmetry of just reprisal,
the angry word, the boast
of superior righteousness,
hate in Christ's name,
scorn for the dead, lies
for the honor of the nation,
centuries bloodied and dismembered
for ideas, for ideals,
for the love of God!

III.

"Are you back to normal?" asks
my old friend, ill himself, after I,
who have been ill, am well. "Yes,
the gradient of normality now
being downward." For when I walk
now from rock to rock in the tumble
of Camp Branch, under the trees,
the singing stream, the stream
of light that all my life
has drawn me as it has drawn
the ever-renewing waters, I clamber
where I used to leap, where once I could
have been a ghost for all the care
I paid to flesh and bone until
some hunger turned me home.

IV.

We were standing by the road,
seven of us and a small boy.
We had just rescued a yellow swallowtail
disabled on the pavement when a car

approached too fast. I turned to make sure
of the boy, and my old border collie
Nell, too slow coming across,
was hit, broken all to pieces, and died
at once, while the car sped on.
And I cried, not thinking what
I meant, "God damn!" And I did wish
all automobiles in Hell,
where perhaps they already are.

V.

Nell's small grave, opening
at the garden's edge to receive her
out of this world's sight forever,
reopens many graves. Digging,
the old man grieves for his old dog
with all the grief he knows,
which seems again to be approaching
enough, though he knows there is more.

VI.

How simple to be dead! — the only
simplification there is, in fact, Thoreau
to the contrary notwithstanding.
Nell lay in her grave utterly still
under the falling earth, the world
all astir above, a million leaves
alive in the wind, and what do we know?

VII.

I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities. Time is neither

young nor old, but simply new, always
counting, the only apocalypse. And the clouds
— no mere measure or geometry, no cubism,
can account for clouds or, satisfactorily, for bodies.
There is no science for this, or art either.
Even the old body is new — who has known it
before? — and no sooner new than gone, to be
replaced by a body yet older and again new.
The clouds are rarely absent from our sky
over this humid valley, and there is a sycamore
that I watch as, growing on the river bank,
it forecloses the horizon, like the years
of an old man. And you, who are as old
almost as I am, I love as I loved you
young, except that, old, I am astonished
at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.

VIII.

I tremble with gratitude
for my children and their children
who take pleasure in one another.

At our dinners together, the dead
enter and pass among us
in living love and in memory.

And so the young are taught.

IX.

Here in the woods near
the road where the public lives
the birds are at their daily work,
singing, feeding, feeding
the young, as if the road
does not exist.

Here
by the loud road, populous
and vacant, there is quiet
where birds are singing.
The birds
are waiting to sing in the trees
that will grow in the quiet
that will come when the last
of the dire machines has passed,
burning the world, and the burning
has ceased.
And so am I.

X.

Mowing the hillside pasture — where
the flowers of Queen Anne's lace

float above the grass, the milkweeds
flare and bee balm, cut, spices

the air, the butterflies light and fly
from bloom to bloom, the hot

sun dazes the sky, the wood thrushes
sound their flutes from the deep shade

of the woods nearby — these iron teeth
chattering along the slope astound

the vole in her low run and bring down
the field sparrow's nest cunningly hung

between two stems, the young long flown.
The mower moves between the beauty

SHENANDOAH

of the half-wild growth and the beauty
of growth reduced, smooth as a lawn,

revealing again the slope shaped of old
by the wearing of water and, later, the wear

of human will, hoof and share and wheel
hastening the rain's work, so that the shape

revealed is the shape of wounds healed,
covered with grass and clover and the blessed

flowers. The mower's work too is beautiful,
granting rest and health to his mind.

He drives the long traverses of the healed
and healing slant. He sweats and gives thanks.

XI.

My young grandson rides with me
as I mow the day's first swath
of the hillside pasture,
and then he rambles the woods beyond
the field's edge, emerging
from the trees to wave, and I wave back,

remembering that I too once
played at a field's edge and waved
to an old workman who went mowing by,
waving back to me as he passed.

XII.

If we have become a people incapable
of thought, then the brute-thought

of mere power and mere greed
will think for us.

If we have become incapable
of denying ourselves anything,
then all that we have
will be taken from us.

If we have no compassion,
we will suffer alone, we will suffer
alone the destruction of ourselves.

These are merely the laws of this world
as known to Shakespeare:

When we cease from human thought,
a low and effective cunning
stirs in the most inhuman minds.

XIII.

Eternity is not infinity.
It is not a long time.
It does not begin at the end of time.
It does not run parallel to time.
In its entirety it always was.
In its entirety it will always be.
It is entirely present always.

XIV.

God, how I hate the names
of the body's chemicals and anatomy,
the frore and glum department
of its parts, each alone in the scattering
of the experts of Babel.

The body
is a single creature, whole,
its life is one, never less than one, or more,
so is its world, and so
are two bodies in their love for one another
one. In ignorance of this
we are talking ourselves to death.

XV.

The painter Harlan Hubbard said
That he was painting Heaven when
The places he painted merely were
The Campbell or the Trimble County
Banks of the Ohio, or farms
And hills where he had worked or roamed:
A house's gable and roofline
Rising from a fold in the hills,
Trees bearing snow, two shanty boats
At dawn, immortal light upon
The flowing river in its bends.
And these were Heavenly because
He never saw them clear enough
To satisfy his love, his need
To see them all again, again.

XVI.

I am hardly an ornithologist,
nevertheless I live among the birds
and on the best days my mind
is with them, partaking of their nature
which is earthly and airy.

I live with the heavenly swallows
who fly for joy (to live, yes, but also for joy)

as they pass again and again over
the river, feeding, drinking, bathing
joyfully as they fly.

Sometimes my thoughts are up there
with the yellow-throated warbler, high
among the white branches and gray-green
foliage of the sycamores, singing
as he feeds among the lights and shadows.

A ringing in my ears from hearing
too many of the wrong things
surrounds my head some days
like a helmet, and yet I hear the birds
singing: the song sparrow by the water,
the mockingbird, the ecstasy of whose song
flings him into the air.

Song comes from a source unseen
as if from a stirring leaf, but I know
the note before I see the bird.
It is a Carolina wren whose goodcheer
never falters all year long.

Into the heat, into the smells
of horse sweat, man sweat, wilting
foliage, stirred earth,
the song of the wood thrush flows
cool from the deep shade.

I hear the sounds of wings.
What man can abide the rule
of “the market” when he hears,
in his waking, in his sleep,
the sound of wings?

SHENANDOAH

In the night I hear the owls
trilling near and far;
it is my dream that calls,
my dream that answers.

Sometimes as I sit quiet
on my porch above the river
a warbler will present himself,
parula or yellow-throated or prothonotary,
perfect beauty in finest detail,
seemingly as unaware
of me as I am aware of him.

Or, one never knows quite when,
the waxwings suddenly appear,
numerous and quiet, not there
it seems until one looks,
as though called forth, like angels,
by one's willingness for them to be.

Or it has come to be September
and the blackbirds are flocking.
They pass through the riverbank trees
in one direction erratically
like leaves in the wind.

Or it is June. The martins are nesting.
The he-bird has the fiercest
countenance I have ever seen. He drops
out of the sky as a stone falls
and then he breaks his fall and alights
light on the housetop
as though gravity were not.

Think of it! To fly
by mere gift, without the clamor
and stain of our inert metal,
in perfect trust.

It is the Sabbath of the birds
that so moves me. They belong
in their ever-returning song, in their flight,
in their faith in the upholding air,
to the Original World. They are above us
and yet of us, for those who fly
fall, like those who walk.

In all the millennia of their flight
from which every one finally
has fallen, not one has complained.

XVII.

Hardly escaping the limitless machines
that balk his thoughts and torment his dreams,
the old man goes to his own
small place of peace, a patch of trees
he has lived from many years,
its gifts of a few fence posts and boards,
firewood for winter, some stillness
in which to know and wait. Used
and yet whole this dear place is, whole
by its own nature and by his need.
While he lives it will be whole,
and after him, God willing, another
will follow in that membership
that craves the wholeness of the world
despite all human loss and blame.

In the lengthening shadow he has climbed
again to the ridgetop and across
to the westward slope to see the ripe
light of autumn in the turning trees,
the twilight he must go by now
that only grace could give. Thus far
he keeps the old sectarian piety:
By grace we live. But he can go
no further. Having known the grace
that for so long has kept this world,
haggard as it is, as we have made it,
we cannot rest, we must be stirring
to keep that gift dwelling among us,
eternally alive in time. This
is the great work, no other, none harder,
none nearer rest or more beautiful.

XVIII.

A hawk in flight
The clearing sky
A young man's thought
An old man's cry

XIX.

Born by our birth
Here on the earth
Our flesh to wear
Our death to bear