

Marked by Ashes

Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933)

Ruler of the Night, Guarantor of the day . . .

This day — a gift from you.

This day — like none other you have ever given, or we have ever received.

This Wednesday dazzles us with gift and newness and possibility.

This Wednesday burdens us with the tasks of the day, for we are already halfway home

halfway back to committees and memos,
halfway back to calls and appointments,
halfway on to next Sunday,
halfway back, half frazzled, half expectant,
half turned toward you, half rather not.

This Wednesday is a long way from Ash Wednesday,

but all our Wednesdays are marked by ashes —
we begin this day with that taste of ash in our mouth:
of failed hope and broken promises,
of forgotten children and frightened women,
we ourselves are ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
we can taste our mortality as we roll the ash around on our tongues.

We are able to ponder our ashness with

some confidence, only because our every Wednesday of ashes
anticipates your Easter victory over that dry, flaky taste of death.

On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you —
you Easter parade of newness.

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,
Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;
Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with
mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.

Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Down through the tomb's inward arch
He has shouldered out into Limbo
to gather them, dazed, from dreamless slumber:
the merciful dead, the prophets,
the innocents just His own age and those
unnumbered others waiting here
unaware, in an endless void He is ending
now, stooping to tug at their hands,
to pull them from their sarcophagi,
dazzled, almost unwilling. Didmas,
neighbor in death, Golgotha dust
still streaked on the dried sweat of his body
no one had washed and anointed, is here,
for sequence is not known in Limbo;
the promise, given from cross to cross
at noon, arches beyond sunset and dawn.
All these He will swiftly lead
to the Paradise road: they are safe.
That done, there must take place that struggle
no human presumes to picture:
living, dying, descending to rescue the just
from shadow, were lesser travails
than this: to break
through earth and stone of the faithless world
back to the cold sepulchre, tearstained
stifling shroud; to break from them
back into breath and heartbeat, and walk
the world again, closed into days and weeks again,
wounds of His anguish open, and Spirit
streaming through every cell of flesh
so that if mortal sight could bear
to perceive it, it would be seen
His mortal flesh was lit from within, now,
and aching for home. He must return,
first, in Divine patience, and know
hunger again, and give
to humble friends the joy
of giving Him food—fish and a honeycomb.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

Wendell Berry (born 1934)

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a
card
and shut away in a little drawer.

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.

Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Idiot Psalm X

Scott Cairns (b. 1954)

A psalm of Isaak, hoarsely sung.

And yet again the wicked in his arrogance,
in his acutely hemmed and tapered sense
of self has found
sufficient opportunity to hound
the lowly.

And yet again, Great Enabler, the lowly,
draped in their accustomed modesty
and threadbare suits bereft
have seized the chance to suffer quietly, stage left.

Therefore, now again, I puzzle why,
O Holy Silence, why
do You appear to bide unheeding
some great distance hence?

Why, O Blithely *Um*apparent, do you remain
serenely imperceptible, even to our thinning
crew who stand here blinking at the sky?

I have no stomach for the newspapers, no heart
for the brilliant, flat-screen lit catalog
of woes, though every item flickers,
one admits, wondrously produced
and duly sponsored.

See here. The wicked boasts about his late
successes, the grasping man complains
that he is cheated of his share, while all
the while the self-concerned continue
banking largely on Your accustomed reticence,
and must needs let out their trousers still
several measures more, having wagered well.

Pinched beneath their spinning machinations
and all their neat machines,
we grind our teeth,
yea, even as we sleep.

Christ Has No Body

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.