

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 29, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



To the Unseeable Animal

*My Daughter: "I hope there's an animal
somewhere that nobody has ever seen.
And I hope nobody ever sees it."*

Being, whose flesh dissolves
at our glance, knower
of the secret sums and measures,
you are always here,
dwelling in the oldest sycamores,
visiting the faithful springs
when they are dark and the foxes
have crept to their edges.
I have come upon pools
in streams, places overgrown
with the woods' shadow,
where I knew you had rested,
watching the little fish
hang still in the flow;
as I approached they seemed
particles of your clear mind
disappearing among the rocks.
I have walked deep in the woods
in the early morning, sure
that while I slept
your gaze passed over me.
That we do not know you
is your perfection
and our hope. The darkness
keeps us near you.

Wendell Berry¹

¹ "To the Unseeable Animal" by Wendell Berry from *Farming: A Hand Book*, Counterpoint. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

This is not the first time *Wellspring* has explored one of Wendell Berry's poems and I doubt it will be the last. I find his work nourishing, reverent, and interestingly reflective—able to look both outward and inward at once. When Berry delivered the 2012 Jefferson Lecture in Humanities—the highest honor the federal government can confer for distinguished intellectual achievement in the arts—he spoke about his work's most fundamental theme: we are too often too careless to love the world and each other as we should. Perhaps I am drawn to that theme, too, and find it a rewarding pursuit to understand how poetry might help us all to behave better, to calm down, to be less afraid.

As I find more and more frequently to be the case, real wisdom comes from children; in this case, it is Berry's young daughter who inspires the epigraph for the poem. What begins as possibly whimsy becomes the poet's serious prayer, addressed to "Being"—not a particular creature, I don't think, but all the possibilities therein—a Presence, perhaps, known but unseen. I love the idea of reverencing the elusive and invisible, the truer desire to protect the "knower / of the secret sums and measures" rather than to witness it.

And it is a counter-cultural desire, too, to not know, not see, not prove—and to delight in that numinous mystery. In a world that more often values evidence, corroboration, and certainty, Berry's poem is a contrary example, an exercise in conviction and a quieting and non-anxious illustration of how one might believe what he's always believed, but believe it deeper or more completely. What a balm, what a lovely consideration to think that it is in "places overgrown / with the wood's shadow" that the Being, ever near, rests and that in darkness its gaze alights on us.

☞ About the poet

Wendell Berry (b. 1934) is the author of more than 40 books of poetry, novels, and essays. Farmer, activist, naturalist, and cultural critic, Berry celebrates the holiness of life and its ordinary miracles. Known for his unwavering message—that humans must learn to live in harmony with the natural rhythms of the earth or perish—he has been described as a 21st century Henry David Thoreau and has spent his career meditating on our relationship and responsibility to the land and community. He lives in Port Royal, Kentucky, near his birthplace, where he has maintained a working farm for nearly 50 years.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church © 2018