

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 10, 2016

A weekly poetry resource

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



from *Sancta*

Tonight I will leave the cabin. The stars begin to gnarl  
in the corners of the sky. I've had enough of nursing my  
senses awake: they are keened to any vestige of God.  
When I say God I mean any way of navigating the radiant  
aftermath of loss. And what I mean by radiance is what  
the lake is doing, marbled by the moonlight and shaking  
like a lost man.

Andrew Grace<sup>1</sup>

## ✧ Reflections

*Sancta* is a book-length poem and the offering here is one of my favorite vignettes. On each page of Andrew Grace's collection is a prose poem, an interesting hybrid form that straddles both genres. The prose poem appears as prose but reads as poetry, with attention to compression, intensity, and fragmentation. This one is the very last in the collection and it ends a book-length journey of a man who brings his desperation and sorrow to a cabin in the woods and becomes, as one critic writes, "a naturalist...for whom the landscape's particulars offers a glimpse of salvation."

*Sancta* is the plural of *sanctum*, a sacred and often completely private place. (The word *sanctuary* is of this root, meaning a holy place.) In this excerpt from Grace's work, there is an interesting tension between the speaker's solitude and privacy and the reader's invitation to witness it, (thereby making the experience *not* private.) Often when we study poetry, we talk about the audience and to whom the poem might be addressed. In this case, it's as if the reader is glimpsing what would otherwise be unavailable, as though she is let in on something inviolably innermost, invited to experience the speaker's "navigati[on of] the radiant aftermath of loss." Even if we do not know exactly what "the loss" is, even if we cannot name it, we are a part of this experience *in essence* because we have all had to navigate something difficult—loss or sadness or terror or anxiety. Poetry is able to do that kind of transcendent work.

I'm especially drawn to the phrase "vestige of God." It could be that in private places, when we retreat from the world and are able to exist in solitude, God feels nearer, or we feel closer if not to God, than to *something*—to the earth, to our own selves, to the spirit. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *Sancta* by Andrew Grace, Ahsahta Press. Used by permission.

moment, the poet has “had enough of nursing [his] senses awake” and I appreciate this association between breastfeeding and awakening—after all, what is in the breast of each of us might be symbolic for the soul. The speaker is able to nourish his senses with what is already *inside of him*. Of course, to nurse also means to heal.

But remember that the speaker has “had enough” and is “keened to any vestige of God.” If a “vestige” is a trace of something, a remnant of what has already disappeared or *is disappearing*, it suggests that God has ceased, or else God’s existence is in question. We further read that God “mean[s] any way of navigating...” and so God becomes a direction, a mercy, a hope that somehow this loss can be understood.

The final image of the lake, marbled and shaking like a lost man, is an incredibly rich metaphor. I had a teacher once who used to say that the most effective images were those in which the literal blurred with the metaphoric so that there was no way to tell where one ended and another began. I’m particularly interested in the way water—which can both reflect and *be reflected*—is personified, shaking. Considering that this is the final image of the entire book, there is something haunting in realizing that this man is, over the course of a journey into the wilderness of both nature and the soul, reacquainted with God even if he has not reconciled the distance between them. And yet, a lasting impression is that the lake, in its moonlit radiance, is just as lost as he. In this way, man and nature have become intimate and alike in their suffering *and* in their beauty.

### ✂ Other questions to consider

1. The poet Rodney Jones writes, “We live in a dim inkling or a rapt afterness” and whenever I hear the word “aftermath” I think of that line. The “radiant aftermath” in this poem is, in many ways, a mystery to us. But, if we zoom out, one could argue that our entire existence is lived in aftermath. (Our lives are in “rapt afterness” since the fall of man, one might say.) What do you think about Rodney Jones’s claim? What might be an alternative to either “dim inkling” or “rapt afterness”? Where does it leave us? It might suggest that clarity is fleeting, that once we *realize* our ecstasy, the ecstasy is no longer.
2. One reviewer writes of *Sancta* that it is an “ode to undivided attention.” There are many ways to enjoy a poem, of course, but one exercise that enriches my understanding is a hyper-concentrated close reading of one particular element. One suggestion for this poem is to meditate on a single word, such as “keened.” If the speaker’s “senses are keened” they might be sharpened, highly developed, or awakened. But, a lesser-known definition is from an Irish word meaning “I wail” and would have “keen” mean a funeral song, a lamentation for the lost or the dead. How does the relationship between the two words illuminate your understanding?
3. In studying this collection, one reviewer writes that the poet “begins to think less in terms of redemption and more to cling to the pleasures of the given.” For me, this speaks to our understanding of—and questions about—time: are we living for the now or for the life to come? How much does our present existence inform what happens in the “radiant

aftermath” of it? It might point to the poem articulating an extended question. But, to whom? Who do you think is the intended audience? To whom or what (literal and concrete or figurative and abstract) is the poem being addressed?

2. What is something you have had to navigate? The word implies journeying, piloting, guiding. Who or what helped you navigate or did you travel alone? Perhaps it is helpful to recall the differences in feeling when voyaging alone or navigating *with*.

### ✧ Writing in response

1. Each of the pieces in this collection is exactly 70 words. Grace admits to being an obsessive formalist this way. When I have tried to write in form, some interesting things open up; it's as if by being given boundaries, limits, and rules to follow, we are better able to condense what we wish to say as we pay closer attention to what each word offers. Try writing 70 words, or perhaps revising something you already have—a longer piece—and re-imagining it with this kind of restriction.
2. There is evidence that a “third place” is essential to creative interaction and spiritual regeneration. For most of us, the home is a “first place,” and a work environment a “second place.” Consider what your “third place” might be—a place separate from your ordinary life, but still distinctly yours—church, a yoga studio, the beach, a writing group. If you don't think you have one, think about a space you might occupy where you could begin to feel rooted, a place that might foster reflection, writing, community.
3. I encourage you to practice the kind of undivided attention that Andrew Grace is capable of holding. Meditate and write on a single object—something usually ignored, something small, something invisible. Force yourself to keep writing even when you feel you have reached the end of all you know to say. Keep writing, knowing that often your audience is forever unseen and unknown.

### ✧ About the Poet

Andrew Grace grew up on a farm outside of Urbana, Illinois, as part of a third-generation farming family. He is the author of *Sancta, Shadeland, A Belonging Field* and the forthcoming *The Last Will and Testament of Said Gun*.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,  
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