

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



## *Firefly*

In summer, when the bullfrogs open  
their elastic throats to song  
and dusk purples the sallow field,  
they appear:

                    their first blink  
is as winter's last fleck of snow.

Even those the boys (in their Freudian rage)  
have swatted die in a tiny halo,  
the naked bulb of the abdomen.

Soon the earth is constellated with flies  
—satellites in a sex-struck orbit—  
beaconing to the wingless females below.

It is as we have imagined in our ecstasies.  
The body is filled with light.

Dave Lucas<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

This poem appears in a collection of poetry titled *Weather* and there are two epigraphs for the book I pay close attention to. The first is from William Butler Yeats and it reads, “for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.” Not only does it fuse sound and image but it awakens in me what I often forget to be true: that the world's rhythms are inherent, constant, and indwelling whether we pay attention to them or not. Just as we may not be conscious of our own heart beating or our own breath, the rhythm of our very bodies exists inside of a rhythmic world, a patterned, structured, and breathing world. So this idea that the water laps the shore both night and day, and even when we are not there to see it, is a great comfort to me. I love to think of the ocean's waves still crashing though I am miles and miles from the sea. Nature is supremely indifferent to our daily lives and sometimes that idea fills me with a strange relief remembering that the sun will rise tomorrow whether I've had a bad day today or not.

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<sup>1</sup> “Firefly” by Dave Lucas from *Weather*, University of Georgia Press. Used by permission.

I spend time looking at this epigraph because it informs so many of the poems in this book, and especially “Firefly.” Fireflies are especially *rhythmic* little creatures! Their family name, *Lampyridae*, comes from the Greek *lampein* meaning to shine (like a lamp!) and they emit light in often undetectable-to-us patterns, whether as warning and alarm against predators, or as seduction and firefly-courtship. They are visible most often in twilight—time of two lights, that mysterious in-between time—and so there’s something symbolic about the way they literally light up the darkness. If you’ve ever seen a vastness of them, you know how magical it is, like a field of stars.

All this to say, the firefly certainly deserves a poem in its honor. This is one of those poems, too, that if we did not have the title instructing us, we would not necessarily know how to read it. When I teach poetry, we always first read the poem aloud. And I emphasize that the title is very much a part of it. To read the poem without also reading the title is like studying a body without the head.

It is the final stanza of this poem that really sings to me. Those last two lines are, to my mind, some of the most exquisitely ecstatic I have ever read.

“Ecstatic poetry” constitutes an entire sub-genre of poetry in which there is concentrated attention—or, sometimes, a lightning-bolt moment of clarity—on experiences of the divine, of awe, rapture, abundance, pleasure, and love. You might think of it as “visionary poetry” or poetry in which the self dissolves to its essence, reduced to *feeling*. Rumi, the great Sufi poet Hafiz, Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Allen Ginsberg are some of the better known ecstatic poets, and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis, St. Catherine of Siena are also usually included in any discussion concerning ecstasy.

The ending of “Firefly” feels ecstatic to me; it is the kind of lightning-clarity Emily Dickinson calls “the soul at the white heat,” a moment that feels so wholly and fully True that it is difficult to believe we have not realized the truth before. How is it that a single image—a body filled with light in ecstasy—can feel like an image I have known my entire life but did not have the words to describe? That is exactly what poetry does; it teaches us (again) what we already know.

### ✂ Other questions to consider

1. The image of “the wingless females below” is an interesting one. And there is some loaded metaphoric value here: I have learned in my study of this poem that many female fireflies stay grounded, or clamber around on twigs, and court the flying males by luring them in with their glow-patterns. Interesting, too, that the boys in this poem are imagined as rather barbaric characters, “in their Freudian rage” swatting and killing that which is easy to destroy. The females are “beaconing”—an interesting word as beacon generally assumes a signal from a high place, or from a distant place—at sea, for instance. But here, the beacon—sometimes used also to mean the inspiration, the hope—comes from *on* or *within* the earth, rather than from above.

We might think of God, a higher power the divine, as something beaconing to us from on high or from a great distance. What are some beacons that are *around* us, or *beside* us, here on earth?

2. There is a curious juxtaposition in the stanza where the boys are swatting at fireflies “in their Freudian rage”—a careless, if not violent moment—and yet the insects are described as dying in “tiny halo[es]/ the naked bulb of the abdomen.” I appreciate the tenderness of this moment, the poet’s awareness of the delicate line between destruction and death. “Swatting” seems to me a rather mild verb, and yet to think of the fragility of the firefly, it’s downright murderous. Some might say it is morbid to think of the body—of *any* body, insect or human—at its last moment, but there is a poignancy in realizing the cause of death, however brutal, results still in that “tiny halo.” What does this moment in the poem ignite in you? What does it generate, or get you thinking about?

3. Moments of ecstasy are sometimes described as “human beings in their best moments.” They often attempt to put into words an experience that is essentially wordless. Are you able to name a divine moment? A startling moment of clarity? An ecstasy?

### ✧ Writing in response

1. Honor a creature that doesn’t get a lot of glory. Pay attention to its name and if you want to really go down the rabbit hole, start looking into the elaborate courtship behaviors of insects—the damselfly, for example, and the praying mantis, are really worth reading about!

2. This book has a second epigraph I haven’t discussed here. It’s by the poet Wallace Stevens and reads, “the gods grow out of the weather” and is from a poem called “Loneliness in New Jersey.” I’ll excerpt the stanza in which this phrase appears:

“Well, the gods grow out of the weather. / The people grow out of the weather; / the gods grow out of the people. / Encore, encore, encore...”

Take some time to think about how this might work, how it could be that gods grow *out of* weather, and people grow *out of* weather too. It’s a bit bewildering... but you might surprise yourself if you let your imagination take its course. (If you think you don’t have time for meandering reflection like this, that response alone underscores the value of doing this very thing!)

3. One common writing prompt is to use a line of someone else’s as the first line of *your* poem. Try that with Lucas’s poem. That is, write a poem using the following words as the opening line: “In summer, when the bullfrogs open.” Of course, you can do this with any poem you admire and with any line (and sometimes this is where poets get their epigraphs!). A similarly-themed exercise using variations on imitation and modeling was called “American Sentences” by Allen Ginsberg as a response to Japanese haiku. The idea is to write one grammatically correct sentence consisting of exactly 17 syllables.

## ✧ About the poet

Dave Lucas is the author of *Weather* (Georgia, 2011), which received the 2012 Ohioana Book Award for Poetry. Named by Rita Dove as one of 13 “young poets to watch,” he has also received a Discovery/The Nation Prize and a Cleveland Arts Prize. He lives in Cleveland and teaches at Case Western Reserve University. He will read at Saint Stephen’s on Thursday, November 3, at 7 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.



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