

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 9, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

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



## *Essentials of Spraying and Dusting*

Lee's putting poison on his corn.  
Though I'd never raise the issue, I try  
not to think what else is in his creek  
besides the chapel light of high

morning sun and hoof prints from the deer  
and jailbreak cows and my dogs, lost  
in the wildness of wild water. Lee  
is putting poison on maybe his last

year of corn—he told me he can't  
farm it alone anymore, one man  
on a tractor not antagonist  
enough to manage this greening canvas.

Lee's putting poison on his corn,  
his daddy put poison on the corn.  
And it grew! So many things, so many  
things in us when we are born.

Nathaniel Perry<sup>1</sup>

## ✧ Reflections

It was difficult for me to choose a single poem from Nathaniel Perry's collection, *Nine Acres*, mostly because I admire all 52 of them; I also think that in this case especially there is a certain sacrifice in singling out one poem from the rest: I miss the narrative and emotional sense of accrual. The book reads more like a long poem, a sustained and self-contained compendium with an arc that feels a year long—seasonal, cyclical, patient.

The poems in *Nine Acres* borrow their titles from a 1935 primer on small-farm management by horticulturalist Maurice G. Kains, *Five Acres and Independence*. Besides "Essentials of Spraying and Dusting," there is also "Essential Factors of Production," "Re-making a Neglected Orchard," "Functions of Water," "Tried and True Ways to Fail," and "How to Avoid Nursery Stock Losses" among the table of contents. It's a brilliant repurposing of Kains' work as Perry invites all of us into a larger and more expansive meditation on the art of tending to things—the earth, the animals, the interior life; it's a book that reckons with the soil as much as it does the soul, with growing as much as being. As a preface to his

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<sup>1</sup> "Essentials of Spraying and Dusting" by Nathaniel Perry from *Nine Acres*, The American Poetry Review. Used by permission.

poems, Perry excerpts the following passage from Kains' book and indeed it sets a tone rich in nuance, fertile in metaphor: "Here is not only the best farm school in which to learn the duties you owe your dependents (plants and animals) and yourself for your own best interests," Kain writes, "but in which to enjoy the most delightful compensations of farm life; for it gives the thinking observer mastery over his business, brings him *en rapport* with his environment and in tune with The Infinite."<sup>2</sup> How's that for inspiration and muse!

The poem printed here shares an identical form with the others in the book, a hymn-like structure Perry describes as "like a sonnet...but with a little more loose dirt between its toes": four four-line stanzas, rhyming, and with four beats per line—a nod, perhaps, to furrows in a field, an orderly system by which to organize the land, to till and hoe, to sow and reap. Perry's quatrains become containers that mimic, perhaps, the constraints not only of farming and acreage, but the constraints of domestic life as well, as husband and father. Present in "Essentials of Spraying and Dusting" is an emotional tension between past, present, and future: each informs the other and history—its curses and its blessings—cannot be undone, those "many / things in us when we are born."

This poem artfully balances what all of Perry's poems seem to manage: the celebration of beauty without losing sight of a responsibility to protect it and a careful attention to the sustainability of both habitat and habitant. To honor the earth is to tend to the earth, and to tend to the earth is to tend to the spirit, the "greening canvas" of both. Though there may indeed be poison in the creek, the speaker instead is drawn to the "chapel light / of high morning sun"—a lovely image that equates the corn landscape, even one chemically marred, to the divine. I dare say that to be "lost / in the wildness of wild water" is as much a spiritual journey as it is an adventure for "jailbreak cows" and straying dogs.

The poems in *Nine Acres* are tender without being overly sentimental, and though they carry news of some approaching darkness, some subtle dread, they are hopeful, alive, and intimately connected to questions about what it means to care for what we love, what it means to  *dwell* in a place, and how it is we are to be faithful stewards of creation, that gift we cannot fully know or control. I love the way the poet Maurice Manning commends Perry's book: "The music and steady rhythm of these poems echo work—hand work—and move forward to arrive, like hymns, at the complexity of faith." It is that marriage of head and hand that speaks to me of devotion; the speaker of these poems is as faithful to what is visible and tangible as he is to what is unseen, mysterious and veiled.

Nathaniel Perry visits this week and I couldn't be more excited to welcome him to St. Stephen's. Not only does his visit occur during National Poetry Month, but it falls during Eastertide, which for me provides an all too serendipitous liturgical lens through which to read these poems; as we celebrate newness of life, we are also tasked with drawing *nearer* to life—to its weather, its soil, its sun and moon—and nearer still to all those creatures—plant, human, and animal—with which we share our blessed existence.

### ✪ About the poet

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice G. Kains, *Five Acres and Independence*, 1935.

**Nathaniel Perry** lives with his family on nine acres in rural Southside Virginia. He is Associate Professor of English at Hampden-Sydney College and editor of The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review. In its Winter 2010 issue, Perry writes that “the modern world has grown out of touch with nature and most everything else important, and poetry. . . can provide a needed and often urgent reminder that the world is more than the world we make. Poems traffic in mystery, and the world (especially the natural world) is mysterious.”

*Please join us on Thursday, April 12, at 7 p.m. in the small fellowship hall to hear Nathaniel Perry read from his work. Read more at [ststephensRVA.org/poets](http://ststephensRVA.org/poets).*



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