

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Prayer at Winter Solstice

Blessed is the road that keeps us homeless.

Blessed is the mountain that blocks our way.

Blessed are hunger and thirst, loneliness and all forms of desire.

Blessed is the labor that exhausts us without end.

Blessed are the night and the darkness that blinds us.

Blessed is the cold that teaches us to feel.

Blessed are the cat, the child, the cricket, and the crow.

Blessed is the hawk devouring the hare.

Blessed are the saint and the sinner who redeem each other.

Blessed are the dead, calm in their perfection.

Blessed is the pain that humbles us.

Blessed is the distance that bars our joy.

Blessed is this shortest day that makes us long for light.

Blessed is the love that in losing we discover.

Dana Gioia¹

Reflections

In short, “Prayer at Winter Solstice” is a poem in praise of suffering though it is not nearly so simple as that. Here the poet offers these beatitudes as a way of celebrating the redemptive nature of pain, that hard reality of our humanity, and the way it ultimately awakens us to beauty and to mercy. It is a poem of unexpected blessings—absences and obstacles, afflictions and longings, desolation and deprivation—that works as a kind of counter-spell, undoing or transforming into beauty what was first an agony.

Gioia is credited with a kind of contemporary renaissance; a practicing Roman Catholic, he speaks often about the ways that the church and the arts need one another and challenges those that work on behalf of the good of each to refine, renew, and reinvigorate the necessity of beauty which, he says, “is not a luxury.” Rather, “it is humanity’s natural

¹ “Prayer at Winter Solstice” by Dana Gioia from *Pity the Beautiful*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

response to the splendor and mystery of creation.” In his words, “I feel very strongly that the church needs the arts, and also that the arts need the profound traditions of spiritual awareness and practice offered by the church...the worldview, the sacramental use of symbols, the redemptive role of suffering, the interpenetration of the sacred and the mundane.”

I second. As the church enters Advent, reminded again of the coming of God incarnate, the whole world is spinning, entering and exiting its seasons of darkness and of light while humans in their private orbits navigate their own shadows and illuminations in the blessed cold that “teaches us to feel.”

Wellspring takes a break until after the new year. Until then I wish you unexpected blessings of beauty upon unexpected blessings of beauty.

✚ About the poet

Dana Gioia is an influential critic, essayist, poet, and editor. His controversial volume, *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992), which challenged academic writing programs to connect to a broader public and return to deeper and more eternal questions, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award and is credited with helping to revive the role of poetry in American public culture. His work appears regularly in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. As chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (2003–2009), he created the largest programs in the endowment’s history, several of which continue as major presences in American cultural life. He currently serves on the faculty at the University of Southern California, dividing his time between Los Angeles and Sonoma County where he writes from the daily particulars of real life: “You shouldn’t have to visit the Vatican,” he says, “to sense the divine. It is everywhere if you know how to look.”



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