

Sabbaths 1979

by Wendell Berry

I

I go among trees and sit still.
 All my stirring becomes quiet
 around me like circles on water.
 My tasks lie in their places
 where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
 and lives a while in my sight.
 What it fears in me leaves me,
 and the fear of me leaves it.
 It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
 I live for a while in its sight.
 What I fear in it leaves it,
 and the fear of it leaves me.
 It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,
 mute in my consternations,
 I hear my song at last,
 and I sing it. As we sing,
 the day turns, the trees move.

II

Another Sunday morning comes
 And I resume the standing Sabbath
 Of the woods, where the finest blooms
 Of time return, and where no path

Is worn but wears its makers out
 At last, and disappears in leaves
 Of fallen seasons. The tracked rut
 Fills and levels; here nothing grieves

In the risen season. Past life
 Lives in the living. Resurrection
 Is in the way each maple leaf
 Commemorates its kind, by connection

Outreaching understanding. What rises
 Rises into comprehension

And beyond. Even falling raises
In praise of light. What is begun

Is unfinished. And so the mind
That comes to rest among the bluebells
Comes to rest in motion, refined
By alteration. The bud swells,

Opens, makes seed, falls, is well,
Being becoming what it is:
Miracle and parable
Exceeding thought, because it is

Immeasurable; the understander
Encloses understanding, thus
Darkens the light. We can stand under
No ray that is not dimmed by us.

The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.

Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.

III

To sit and look at light-filled leaves
May let us see, or seem to see,
Far backward as through clearer eyes
To what unsighted hope believes:
The blessed conviviality
That sang Creation's seventh sunrise,

Time when the Maker's radiant sight
Made radiant every thing He saw,
And every thing He saw was filled
With perfect joy and life and light.
His perfect pleasure was sole law;
No pleasure had become self-willed.

For all His creatures were His pleasures
And their whole pleasure was to be
What He made them; they sought no gain
Or growth beyond their proper measures,
Nor longed for change or novelty.
The only new thing could be pain.

IV

The bell calls in the town
 Where forebears cleared the shaded land
 And brought high daylight down
 To shine on field and trodden road.
 I hear, but understand
 Contrarily, and walk into the woods.
 I leave labor and load,
 Take up a different story.
 I keep an inventory
 Of wonders and of uncommercial goods.

I climb up through the field
 That my long labor has kept clear.
 Projects, plans unfulfilled
 Waylay and snatch at me like briars,
 For there is no rest here
 Where ceaseless effort seems to be required,
 Yet fails, and spirit tires
 With flesh, because failure
 And weariness are sure
 In all that mortal wishing has inspired.

I go in pilgrimage
 Across an old fenced boundary
 To wildness without age
 Where, in their long dominion,
 The trees have been left free.
 They call the soil here "Eden"—slants and steeps
 Hard to stand straight up on
 Even without a burden.
 No more a perfect garden,
 There's an immortal memory that it keeps.

I leave work's daily rule
 And come here to this restful place
 Where music stirs the pool
 And from high stations of the air
 Fall notes of wordless grace,
 Strewn remnants of the primal Sabbath's hymn.
 And I remember here
 A tale of evil twined
 With good, serpent and vine,
 And innocence as evil's stratagem.

I let that go a while,
 For it is hopeless to correct
 By generations' toil,

And I let go my hopes and plans
 That no toil can perfect.
 There is no vision here but what is seen:
 White bloom nothing explains
 But a mute blessedness
 Exceeding all distress,
 The fresh light stained a hundred shades of green.

Uproar of wheel and fire
 That has contained us like a cell
 Opens and lets us hear
 A stillness longer than all time
 Where leaf and song fulfill
 The passing light, pass with the light, return,
 Renewed, as in a rhyme.
 This is no human vision
 Subject to our revision;
 God's eye holds every leaf as light is worn.

Ruin is in place here:
 The dead leaves rotting on the ground,
 The live leaves in the air
 Are gathered in a single dance
 That turns them round and round.
 The fox cub trots his almost pathless path
 As silent as his absence.
 These passings resurrect
 A joy without defect,
 The life that steps and sings in ways of death.

V

How many have relinquished
 Breath, in grief or rage,
 The victor and the vanquished
 Named on the bitter page

Alike, or indifferently
 Forgot—all that they did
 Undone entirely.
 The dust they stirred has hid

Their faces and their works,
 Has settled, and lies still.
 Nobody rests or shirks
 Who must turn in time's mill.

They wind the turns of the mill
 In house and field and town;
 As grist is ground to meal
 The grinders are ground down.

VI

What stood will stand, though all be fallen,
 The good return that time has stolen.
 Though creatures groan in misery,
 Their flesh prefigures liberty
 To end travail and bring to birth
 Their new perfection in new earth.
 At word of that enlivening
 Let the trees of the woods all sing
 And every field rejoice, let praise
 Rise up out of the ground like grass.
 What stood, whole in every piecemeal
 Thing that stood, will stand though all
 Fall—field and woods and all in them
 Rejoin the primal Sabbath's hymn.

VII

What if, in the high, restful sanctuary
 That keeps the memory of Paradise,
 We're followed by the drone of history
 And greed's poisonous fumes still burn our eyes?

Disharmony recalls us to our work.
 From Heavenly work of light and wind and leaf
 We must turn back into the peopled dark
 Of our unraveling century, the grief

Of waste, the agony of haste and noise.
 It is a hard return from Sabbath rest
 To lifework of the fields, yet we rejoice,
 Returning, less condemned in being blessed

By vision of what human work can make:
 A harmony between forest and field,
 The world as it was given for love's sake,
 The world by love and loving work revealed

As given to our children and our Maker.
 In that healed harmony the world is used
 But not destroyed, the Giver and the taker
 Joined, the taker blessed, in the unabused

Gift that nurtures and protects. Then workday
 And Sabbath live together in one place.
 Though mortal, incomplete, that harmony
 Is our one possibility of peace.

When field and woods agree, they make a rhyme
 That stirs in distant memory the whole

First Sabbath's song that no largess of time
Or hope or sorrow wholly can recall.

But harmony of earth is Heaven-made,
Heaven-making, is promise and is prayer,
A little song to keep us unafraid,
An earthly music magnified in air.

VIII

I go from the woods into the cleared field:
A place no human made, a place unmade
By human greed, and to be made again.
Where centuries of leaves once built by dying
A deathless potency of light and stone
And mold of all that grew and fell, the timeless
Fell into time. The earth fled with the rain,
The growth of fifty thousand years undone
In a few careless seasons, stripped to rock
And clay—a "new land," truly, that no race
Was ever native to, but hungry mice
And sparrows and the circling hawks, dry thorns
And thistles sent by generosity
Of new beginning. No Eden, this was
A garden once, a good and perfect gift;
Its possible abundance stood in it
As it then stood. But now what it might be
Must be foreseen, darkly, through many lives—
Thousands of years to make it what it was,
Beginning now, in our few troubled days.

IX

Enclosing the field within bounds
sets it apart from the boundless
of which it was, and is, a part,
and places it within care.
The bounds of the field bind
the mind to it. A bride
adorned, the field now wears
the green veil of a season's
abounding. Open the gate!
Open it wide, that time
and hunger may come in.

X

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark

By our ten thousand days of work.
 Harvest will fill the barn; for that
 The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
 By work of ours; the field is tilled
 And left to grace. That we may reap,
 Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
 Rests on our day, and finds it good.

XI

To long for what can be fulfilled in time
 Foredooms the body to the use of light,
 Light into light returning, as the stream

Of days flows downward through us into night,
 And into light and life and time to come.
 This is the way of death: loss of what might

Have been in what must come to be, light's sum
 Lost in the having, having to forego.
 The year drives on toward what it will become.

In answer to their names called long ago
 The creatures all have risen and replied
 Year after year, each toward the distant glow

Of its perfection in all, glorified;
 Have failed. Year after year they all disperse
 As the leaves fall, and not to be denied

The frost falls on the grass as by a curse.
 The leaves flame, fall, and carry down their light
 By a hard justice in the universe

Against all fragmentary things. Their flight
 Sends them downward into the dark, unseen
 Empowerment of a universal right

That brings them back to air and light again,
 One grand motion, implacable, sublime.
 The calling of all creatures is design.

We long for what can be fulfilled in time,
 Though death is in the cost. There is a craving
 As in delayed completion of a rhyme

To know what may be had by loss of having,
 To see what loss of time will make of seed
 In earth or womb, dark come to light, the saving

Of what was lost in what will come—repaid
 In the invisible pattern that will mark
 Whatever of the passing light is made.

Choosing the light in which the sun is dark,
 The stars dark, and all mortal vision blind—
 That puts us out of thought and out of work,

And dark by day, in heart dark, dark in mind,
 Mistaking for a song our lonely cry,
 We turn in wrongs of love against our kind;

The fall returns. Our deeds and days gone by
 Take root, bear fruit, are carried on, in faith
 Or fault, through deaths all mortal things must die,

The deaths of time and pain, and death's own death
 In full-filled light and song, final Sabbath.

XII

To long for what eternity fulfills
 Is to forsake the light one has, or wills
 To have, and go into the dark, to wait
 What light may come—no light perhaps, the dark
 Insinuates. And yet the dark conceals
 All possibilities: thought, word, and light,
 Air, water, earth, motion, and song, the arc
 Of lives through light, eyesight, hope, rest, and work—

And death, the narrow gate each one must pass
 Alone, as some have gone past every guess
 Into the woods by a path lost to all
 Who look back, gone past light and sound of day
 Into grief's wordless catalogue of loss.
 As the known life is given up, birdcall
 Become the only language of the way,
 The leaves all shine with sudden light, and stay.

[This “series” of poems was first published in a slightly different form in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* (Volume 1, Issue 1, 1984). It was then published in its current form in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (CounterPoint, Berkeley, CA). It is reprinted here with permission of the author. ED.]