

# LENTEN POETRY COMPANION

## *An Invitation into the Wilderness*

### Ash Wednesday

#### Opening Words

by Denise Levertov

I believe the earth  
exists, and  
in each minim mote  
of its dust the holy  
glow of thy candle.  
Thou  
unknown I know,  
thou spirit,  
giver,  
lover of making, of the  
wrought letter,  
wrought flower,  
iron, deed, dream.  
Dust of the earth,  
help thou my  
unbelief. Drift  
gray become gold, in the beam of  
vision. I believe with  
doubt. I doubt and  
interrupt my doubt with belief. Be,  
beloved, threatened world.  
Each minim  
mote.  
Not the poisonous  
luminescence forced  
out of its privacy,  
The sacred lock of its cell  
broken. No,  
the ordinary glow  
of common dust in ancient sunlight.  
Be, that I may believe. Amen.

#### Journaling:

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### Thursday

#### but for sorrow

by Rob Suarez

I might never have asked  
what could be

but for sorrow.

I might never have opened  
to the terrible  
vulnerability of love

but for tears.

I might never have begun  
this treacherous path to  
God

but for emptiness.

Source: "but for sorrow" by Rob Suarez from *America Magazine*, Vol. 184 No. 10 (3/26/2001).

#### Journaling:

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## *An Invitation into the Wilderness*

### Friday

#### Late Results

by Scott Cairns

*We wanted to confess our sins but there were no takers.*  
—Milosz

And the few willing to listen demanded that we confess on television.  
So we kept our sins to ourselves, and they became less troubling.

The halt and the lame arranged to have their hips replaced.  
Lepers coated their sores with a neutral foundation, avoided strong  
light.

The hungry ate at grand buffets and grew huge, though they remained  
hungry.  
Prisoners became indistinguishable from the few who visited them.

Widows remarried and became strangers to their kin.  
The orphans finally grew up and learned to fend for themselves.

Even the prophets suspected they were mad, and kept their mouths  
shut.  
Only the poor—who are with us always—only they continued in the  
hope.

Source: "Late Results" from *Philokalia: New and Selected Poems*, by Scott  
Cairns. Lincoln, Nebraska: Zoo Press, 2002.

#### Journaling:

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### Saturday

#### Prayer: A Progression

by Jessica Powers

You came by night, harsh with the need of grace,  
into the dubious presence of your Maker.  
You combed a small and pre-elected acre  
for some bright word of Him, or any trace.  
Past the great judgment growths of thistle and thorn  
and past the thicket of self you bore your yearning  
till lo, you saw a pure white blossom burning  
in glimmer, then, light, then unimpeded more!

Now the flower God-is-love gives ceaseless glow;  
now all your thoughts feast on its mystery,  
but when love mounts through knowledge and goes free,  
then will the sated thinker arise and go  
and brave the deserts of the soul to give  
the flower he found to the contemplative.

Source: "Prayer: A Progression" from *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*,  
edited by Regina Siegfried, ASC, and Robert F. Morneau. Kansas City, MO:  
Sheed & Ward, 1989.

#### Journaling:

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# LENTEN POETRY COMPANION

## Week One: An Invitation to be Bread for Others

### Monday

#### Possible Answers to Prayer

by Scott Cairns

Your petitions—though they continue to bear  
just the one signature—have been duly recorded.  
Your anxieties—despite their constant,

relatively narrow scope and inadvertent  
entertainment value—nonetheless serve  
to bring your person vividly to mind.

Your repentance—all but obscured beneath  
a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more  
conspicuous resentment—is sufficient.

Your intermittent concern for the sick,  
the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes  
recognizable to me, if not to them.

Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly  
righteous indignation toward the many  
whose habits and sympathies offend you—

these must burn away before you'll apprehend  
how near I am, with what fervor I adore  
precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.

Source: "Possible Answers to Prayer" from *Philokalia: New and Selected Poems*, by Scott Cairns. Lincoln, Nebraska: Zoo Press, 2002.

#### Journaling:

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### Tuesday

#### Beginners

by Denise Levertov

*-Dedicated to the memory of Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla*

*"From too much love of living, Hope and desire set free,  
Even the weariest river winds somewhere to the sea—"*

But we have only begun  
To love the earth.

We have only begun  
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?  
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?  
—we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision

how it might be  
to live as siblings with beast and flower,  
not as oppressors.

Surely our river  
cannot already be hastening  
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot  
drag, in the silt,  
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—  
there is too much broken  
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other  
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must  
complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud.

Source: "Beginners" from *Candles in Babylon*, by Denise Levertov. New York: New Directions, 1982.

# LENTEN POETRY COMPANION

## Week One: An Invitation to be Bread for Others

### Wednesday

#### We Wear the Mask

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!

*Source: "We Wear the Mask" from The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1913.*

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### Thursday

#### Night Thoughts

by William F. Bell

*It is our emptiness and lowliness that God needs, and not our plenitude. —Mother Teresa*

Somehow by day, no matter what,  
I patch myself together whole,  
But all my effort can't offset  
The nightly nakedness of soul  
When angels in a dark descent  
Strip off my integument.

I am a cornered rebel pinched  
Between night's armies and my lack,  
And when inside the bedclothes hunched  
I feel the force of their attack,  
I hardly know what I can do,  
Exposed to God at half-past two.

I once believed my being full,  
But night thoughts prove that it is not.  
Waking scared and miserable,  
I scrape the bottom of the pot  
And then must bow down and confess  
Totality of emptiness.

Kings once ventured, it is said,  
To offer gold and frankincense,  
But I send nothing from my bed  
Except a tattered penitence,  
So very little has accrued  
From years of doubtful plenitude.

God who tear away my cover,  
Oh, pour your Spirit into me  
Until my emptiness runs over  
With golden superfluity,  
And I bow down and offer up  
Yourself within my earthen cup.

*Source: "Night Thoughts" by William Bell from America Magazine, Vol. 187 No. 18 (12/2/2002).*

# LENTEN POETRY COMPANION

## Week One: An Invitation to be Bread for Others

### **Friday**

#### **The Uses of Sorrow**

by Mary Oliver

Someone I loved once gave me  
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand  
that this, too, was a gift.

Source: "The Uses of Sorrow" from *Thirst*, by Mary Oliver. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

#### **Journaling:**

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### **Saturday**

#### **What I Pray For**

by Dennis O'Donnell

Sacks of rocks  
I have gathered from the beach,  
some of which I used to toss  
my own I Ching, stones representing  
fire, water, wind, and the rest,  
some of them with strange,  
man-like markings, like circles,  
probably formed by little pools of sea water,  
dried by the sun, leaving behind  
a round stain of salt.

Stacks of poems, sacks of rocks,  
milk crates full of books  
full of baloney:  
I can't let them go, not yet,  
but I lie in bed and plead with God  
to empty out my past, all of it,  
at least all of the bad,  
set me free, flush out  
all the shame and rage and heartache,  
but please, not the finger-paints,  
not baseball and my best friends.

Deal, He says,  
but all the rocks must go.  
No tarot cards, and no metaphysical bull.

Fine, I say.  
I have a look at my bookcase.  
I see Rumi, Suzuki, Lao Tzu,  
and two Bibles. So:  
who will throw the first stone?

Source: "What I Pray For" by Dennis O'Donnell from *America Magazine*, Vol. 190 No. 6 (2/23/2004).

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