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—Thomasita Homan, OSB
Oblate Director at Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison,
Kansas, and professor emerita at Benedictine College

Twenty Poems to Pray

Gary M. Bouchard



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Prayer (I)

Prayer, the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

—*George Herbert*

Contents

Introduction	ix
I. When Yellow Leaves or None or Few	
<i>Pied Beauty</i> , Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ	2
<i>September, the First Day of School</i> , Howard Nemerov	7
<i>Sonnet 73</i> , William Shakespeare	12
II. A Small Thing Always Near	
<i>Hope</i> , Emily Dickinson and Kevin Hadduck	20
<i>Stray Moments</i> , William Stafford	26
<i>The Song Opens</i> , Fr. Karol Wojtyła— St. Pope John Paul II	31
III. Gift to This Gift	
<i>A Christmas Carol</i> , Christina Rossetti	38
<i>The Nativity of Christ</i> , St. Robert Southwell	44
<i>Ring Out, Wild Bells</i> , Alfred Lord Tennyson	49
IV. To Earth and Ashes	
<i>Sonnet 4, O My Black Soul</i> , John Donne	56
<i>Hogs and Salvation</i> , Fr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB	60
<i>The Litany</i> , Dana Gioia	65
<i>All Creation Wept</i> , Melissa Range	70

V. To Carry Him With Us

Emmaus: Christ Between, Rev. Rowan Williams 76

St. Peter and the Angel, Denise Levertov 81

Love III, George Herbert 86

VI. Let the Day Come In

A Prayer in Spring, Robert Frost 92

Bicycling to Heaven, Claire Nicolas White 97

Dear World, Sister Mary Faith Schuster, OSB 101

Genesis 1:1, Gary Bouchard 106

Acknowledgments 111

Notes 113

Introduction

Poetry and prayer are close cousins, if not siblings. We can be certain, I think, that long before David took up his lyre to intone his psalms of protest, penance, and praise to the Hebrew God, the human breath that first gave shape to words had already knitted together these two oral expressions. The longings of those of us who yearn to know and feel and express our connection with the divine are, like the winged horse-sense of Pegasus, always trying with the unsteady wings of words to ascend upward.

It's true that most poetry is not prayer and that many prayers make for pretty mediocre poetry, but both the earnest petitioner and the determined poet may each be said to achieve their highest aim when they deploy language with such grace and inspiration that their expressions transcend language itself. Sometimes, as with most of the selections in this volume, poems are prayers. In the case of other poems offered here, they contain a longing of a kind that allows them to serve as a sort of prayer.

Before proceeding in an attempt to derive earnest prayer from poems, though, it seems reasonable to have some agreement upon what is meant by "a sort of prayer." And given the nature of this small book, what better way to do so than in a poem?

The reluctant seventeenth-century Anglican priest, George Herbert, consciously made all of his poems prayers,

and many of them, like the one included in the fifth section of this book are astonishing. In a remarkable poem entitled simply “Prayer,” which I have placed as this book’s epigraph, Herbert—without explanation, commentary, or argument—artfully assembles in English sonnet form what amounts to a list of twenty-seven metaphorical descriptions of what prayer is and what prayer does. To best appreciate the range and power of the descriptions he offers us, I forsake, with some reluctance, the intricately rhymed construction of the poet’s fourteen lines, and simply list here in order of occurrence the possibilities he provides:

1. the church’s banquet
2. angel’s age
3. God’s breath in man returning to his birth
4. the soul in paraphrase
5. heart in pilgrimage
6. the Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth
7. engine against th’ Almighty
8. sinner’s tow’r
9. reversed thunder
10. Christ-side-piercing spear
11. the six-days world transposing in an hour
12. a kind of tune, which all things hear and fear
13. softness
14. peace
15. joy
16. love
17. bliss
18. exalted manna
19. gladness at the best
20. heaven in ordinary
21. man well-dressed
22. the milky way

23. the bird of Paradise
24. Church-bells beyond the stars heard
25. the soul's blood
26. the land of spices
27. something understood

A few of these descriptions are certainly predictable, and others may be somewhat parochial. But most are provocative, and a few are, to my mind, just plain combustible. Some people, I suppose, might want to remove a few of Herbert's descriptions from the list or add one or two of their own. My aim in providing it is not to hold it up for its orthodox theological correctness, nor to engender an academic or any other kind of debate about the nature of prayer, of which I am, at best, a practiced amateur.

I offer this list simply as a reasonable and inspiring invitation to prayer. If one or more of the twenty-seven resonates with you, pocket it and proceed forward into the pages ahead.

The endeavor of this small book is not to offer analysis, but to prompt meditation. I have tried to offer just enough words of my own by way of explanation and context to help readers apprehend, appreciate, reflect upon, and ultimately somehow pray these poets' verses on their own.

I invite and encourage you in the pages and seasons ahead to use the words of poets as vehicles to express "heaven in ordinary" or to praise like "exalted manna"; to find the right "paraphrase" for your own soul or maybe sense your "soul's blood"; to muster up from your grief or anger "reversed thunder" or dare to articulate from your own personal anguish "Christ-side-piercing spear." To voice "something understood." If peace, joy, love, or bliss are engendered in any form or quantity for any reader, then my effort has been more than worth its while.



Part I

**When Yellow Leaves
or None or Few**



Pied Beauty

Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ (1844–1889)

It would be hard to find a more universal prayer than the simple, laudatory declaratives: “Glory be to God . . . Praise him.”

These are the first and last words of a poem that speaks with all of the earnestness of a child beholding the wonders of God’s creation for the first time. The nine lines of verse in between these two familiar declaratives, though playful in their childlike expressions, are as extravagant in their auditory, visual, and tactile imagery, and as intricate in their poetic construction as any passage of verse from the Psalms.

The first poem I offer here to pray is the work of England’s most famous modern Catholic poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ. It is helpful to those unacquainted with Fr. Hopkins, and prudent for those who are, to qualify those four descriptors of his person. He was certainly *English*, as English as his Oxford pedigree and the Victorian bowler and muttonchops he sported in early photographs. *Fame* was something he certainly did not know during his short and often lonely life, and *modern* is a designation that would only make sense decades later when critics began to perceive how his ingenious experimentations with form and syntax and meter—like those of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman on the American continent—anticipated so much of

the poetry that came after him in the twentieth century. *Roman Catholic* was something Hopkins became by conversion under the guidance of Bl. Cardinal John Henry Newman during the Oxford movement.

And as though being an English Catholic did not estrange him enough from his family and his proper Victorian upbringing, Gerard took the further step of joining what he and others perceived to be the most severe religious order, and eventually was ordained a Jesuit priest. This vocation, to which he remained unflaggingly faithful, was an unlikely and clumsy path for an aspiring poet, and especially one with the eccentricities that accompany an especially keen sensitivity to and admiration of the natural world.

Finding him kneeling on a walkway studying insects or rapt in meditation as he stared in the sky admiring a bird's flight, his superiors would seek a more suitable assignment for him. When, in a homily at the Farm Street Church in London's dowdy Mayfair district, the young Hopkins shocked the pious ladies by comparing the extravagant love of God to the abundant milk from a cow's udders, he was quickly transferred again so that he would come to refer to himself as "fortune's football."

A scholar of classical languages, Hopkins would eventually find himself assigned to teach Greek at University College Dublin, the Catholic alternative to Trinity that Cardinal Newman had founded on St. Stephen's Green. There he contracted typhoid fever and died at the age of forty-four, after which his Jesuit colleagues burned his belongings—including all of his papers—after burying him in a collective anonymous grave in Dublin's suburbs.

The final years of Hopkins's life in Dublin have always been perceived as ones of despondency because of his perceived exile from his family and his beloved England, and

because of the so-called dark sonnets he wrote during those years. But a recent and important corrective by the contemporary poet and critic Desmond Egan called “Hopeful Hopkins” illustrates the humor and levity that marked much of Hopkins’s time in Dublin.

Hopeful Hopkins, the poet of such masterpieces as “God’s Grandeur” and “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” is the poet whose words you are invited to pray here in a poem called simply and descriptively “Pied Beauty.” Before I offer any words of explanation or guidance that may infect your experience of this poem, I urge you to imagine yourself as a child of six or eight years old, find a place where you can be uninterrupted and without any restraint or embarrassment, just pray the words:

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and
plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.
Praise him.¹

Amen. As purely fun as these words are to speak, there are words here that our eight-year-old selves may not apprehend at first speaking. “Pied” seems to suggest piety, but in

fact it means is multicolored, preparing us for “dappled,” spotted; “brinded,” patchy colored; and “rose moles all in stipple,” which may be read as red dots painted on. “Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls”—an expression typical of the compound nouns, adjectives, and verbs that Hopkins loved to construct—can be understood by anyone fortunate enough to have seen an abundance of fresh-fallen chestnuts beneath a tree and willing to share Hopkins’ notion that they resemble coals in a fire. “Fallow” is ploughed but unsown earth and “adazzle” is an “invented” adjective of Hopkins that is, well, self-explanatory.

So the poet would have us see, with him, a variety of speckled and spotted things in nature, starting with the way clouds resemble the spots on cows, then red-spotted trout, fallen chestnuts, the wings of finches, and the turned-up earth itself. He then has us meditate briefly on the strangeness and dazzling pleasure of it all, embedding as he does so the questions that we often ask ourselves when looking at bright fall foliage, a striking sunset, an ocean scape, or the intricately “painted” back of a small insect: How? Who?

Evolutionary science offers one answer and Hopkins was living when Darwin’s natural selection was electric in the air of England. The poet-priest, however, opts for divine selection in a brilliant compound verb comprised of the two most important words in the poem before the final two: “fathers-forth.” The grand cloud shapes and tiny dots on fish and finches are “fathered-forth” by the extravagant affection of one whose beauty is constant and unchangeable.

There is for Hopkins but one possible response to this recognition, and his own awe abruptly interrupts his own rhyming pattern in order to make this response. The rhyme scheme of the first stanza is abc, abc. The second stanza starts repeating this pattern with a small variation: dbc. Then, the

second “d” (“change”) is interrupted when the speaker leaps beyond the expected “b” right to “c” in a truncated final line that springs forth, in almost breathless, near-speechless words we did not hear coming: “Praise him.” He thus stops, not ends, where he began.

Now, with perhaps a clearer understanding and appreciation of the effusive invitation to prayer that Fr. Hopkins offers us, go back and pray the words again—out loud and out louder!—with even greater surety and enthusiasm.

If you have prayed this prayer aloud you have felt the poet’s expressions on your tongue and tonsils. Hopkins has tickled your lips and made them smile. May this smile be our very own prayer of gratitude for our very own plotted and still uncultivated lives. And as one more act of praise, I encourage you, if you can, to find a child to whom you can speak these speckled words of Fr. Hopkins. In her face, and in the speckled landscape about you, and in fallen chestnuts and cracked acorns of autumn, may you see and hear this poem again, and pray it often with hopeful Fr. Hopkins.