

PILGRIMAGE

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Abstract:

The poems in this collection represent, at least generally, the process of working through my experiences with spirituality. I wanted each poem to reach toward something mysterious and, happily, I came away from each one with knowledge that I did not know I had. While the poems are not necessarily chronological, they do contain a sense of progression from my younger, more fragile view of the spiritual, to a kind of mature deliverance, a renunciation. But the poems are much more than just religious. They are personal. My hope is that they speak to you on a personal level as well, that you can find in them both something familiar and something that unsettles you, that at least some part of this work can startle you the way great poets startle me.

**The Work of Astonishment:
An Introduction to my Poems**

The sun just hitting the edge of Texas hills on an afternoon bike ride. The sincerity of my father's voice as he told me I must decide what I believe. The hush of the highway as I wrote the first poem in my first apartment away from home. They are moments that shape me, that become more complex with age and scrutiny, that I have trouble thinking about without working through a poem, each time with reward. And when I write about such moments, I write to discover what is not apparent. I write for the same reason I pray, to lie down at night humbled and a little astonished at the world. For what more should a poem accomplish than to let us into, at least briefly, the experience of someone else? To let us stand in awe of a language which has brought us somewhere we did not know existed. And while a majority of these poems deal with my own spirituality, I scarcely mean for this essay to be a comprehensive review of spirituality in poetry; nor do I here offer a complete explanation of my poems. Rather, I wish to express the sensibilities that led me to develop this work, also offering insight into what drives me as a poet and what I believe gives poetry its power. So I will start where the poems do: from my experience.

One of my oldest memories was of Sunday school, repeating the mantra of acceptance that goes something like, "Lord, I repent for my sins. I accept your son Jesus into my heart." It was the second time that week I had said it. I remember thinking I had to say it again because I couldn't recall whether I was awake or dreaming the first time I recited the prayer. The intensity of the prayer was so surreal that I had convinced myself it was a dream. I was about four. When I was in high school, I slowly began to regard the memory as my first step toward indoctrination. Of course, I was more cynical then. I thought that I must have falsely embellished the memory with a sense of the supernatural, and perhaps I was right. Nevertheless, I had the pleasure of

revisiting the dreamlike state I had entered while praying as a child and repeatedly experienced throughout my young life, even in high school. Each time I got on my bike to ride through our neighborhood, or, in middle school, when I first put pen to paper in hope of writing a poem, as my teacher was want to do, it experienced the same trance. Thus, while I no longer adhere to the specifics of Christianity, the so-called indoctrination helped instil a sense of spirituality that has since followed me, now more delightfully than ever. The feeling approaches the sentiment of Paul Eluard's utterance, "there's another world and it is in this one" (Dunn). Even—in fact, especially—as a child, I was able to enter that other world, what I'll call the spiritual world, by prayer and devotion to God. Now I get there through poetry.

Not surprisingly, the church became the setting, if not the subject, of many of my poems. Throughout years of living with my parents, Sunday-morning church was an event to which we had to drag ourselves—that is, if we failed to find a way out. I remember the way we'd sit to hear one man's take on Bible passages. Not until I read poems like Donald Revell's "The Children's Undercroft" did I realize that these experiences could become poems. And why not? It suddenly seemed so obvious that the church was a perfect subject. In Revell's poem we hear how

In rooms beneath the church we stood up singing.
We marched behind our little cross in time
to the yellow keys of someone's cast-off spinet,
wishing we were upstairs under the big cross.

Revell reveals a child's experience in church: his being led through basic worship ceremonies, his singing and dancing when told to do so, and, finally, his wishing to enter the adult's service, into true understanding. But as the child matures, superannuated ritual makes what was once exciting a tedious affair:

Our easy hymns would become dull or silly,
over rehearsed. We would at last
enter the real kingdom

unmoved, and not sing.

The very customs which were meant to engross the children in the church were the catalysts for the children's spiritual withdrawal. The speaker in Revell's poem seemed to mirror my own experiences within the church. I was able, through his voice, to think objectively about my loss of faith. I realized I could write about those experiences, that they were shared by many. Indeed, the first few poems of this collection speak to my "inheritance" from parents and church alike. In these poems, the setting of the church, particularly during a sermon, becomes a place for conflict between the speaker of the poem and the words of the preacher. This conflict can nonetheless lead to new understanding, as in my poem "Primogeniture," when the speaker initially argues "The story of where I come from is a lie," which we learn is a denial of Pastor Wickwire's teaching. But toward the end of the poem, the speaker realizes that the stories he so vehemently rejected actually had a profound influence on his life. He apprehends that those stories were "true" insofar as he can claim them as his own.

The poems in my collection thus turn away from ruminations of the church and its effect on spirituality, referencing, on the whole, my experiences of spirituality in the secular world—that is, in my everyday interaction with lovers and family and the material (hasn't this word come to describe most of America?) culture. In "Desire," the speaker uses the extended metaphor of monks who have taken a vow of silence to relate to his experience in communicating with his lover. "Desire" ends with the speaker's realization that he cannot find the "intimate language" he wishes to use because, like the silent monks, he has "forgotten" it with disuse. Although I was not conscious of it at the time, this poem reminds me of Philip Larkin's "Talking in Bed," in which the speaker muses, "Talking in bed ought to be easiest," referencing, as well the lovers

“Lying together.” The image of the lovers lying in bed is so familiar, and yet “ought” gives the impression that there is an obstacle to intimacy. Indeed, the end of the poem suggests that

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Despite their “unique distance from isolation,” the lovers struggle to find something to say to one another.

“Sanctuary,” the final poem of the second section of my collection, also conveys the impression of something important being lost. Initially,

The sky, with its stars bleached out
by city lights, begs no questions.

Man-made buildings negate the mystery that comes from nature. We are left only with “concrete heavens” that demand our attention, and in some ways enslave us. The poem speaks to the loss of spirituality in an increasingly material world:

They want to be sure
that when you step into wonder,
into its abrupt fragility,
it is seldom and without astonishment,
that necessary sense of salvation.

True salvation, the poem argues, arrives when we let ourselves become vulnerable to the mysteries around us, not drown them out with fake lights, manufactured pleasures, and false security. In Alan Dugan’s “On Being a Householder,” the speaker despairs at living “inside of a machine / of machines” (lines 1-2). Dugan’s speaker is confined by his inability to escape the dull materialism surrounding him. He is “scared of the open night,” (line 6) trapped by a false security that comes with the familiar. He thinks, perhaps erroneously, that

...anything that money
can build or buy is better than
the nothing of the sky at night,

the stars being the visible past (lines 17-20).

Because we are trained to fear the unknown, to avoid the nakedness of our intimate thoughts, poetry appears off-limits. But it is in the face of such opposition that poetry becomes essential.

Sometimes, I find it simple to apprehend the need to write poems—for example, when reading the first part of Mary Oliver’s wonderfully simple spiritual poem, “Messenger.”

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –
 equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished (lines 1-11).

Still again we encounter the word “astonished.” Is it coincidental that one of the most overused words of my generation is “awesome?” And yet how often do we truly allow ourselves to be in awe? I want my poems to bring me and the reader to somewhere to which we are unaccustomed. I encounter difficulty in thinking of my “work” as “standing still and learning to be / astonished.” And, yet, this activity is missing from many of our lives. The final poem of the collection, “Late Night, Old Moonlight,” speaks to this dilemma. The man is “not moved” by God’s desperate calls, for “he has seen it all.” Initially, I felt sorry for the man in the poem. Still, despite his lack of astonishment, he continues his work as a gardener, gathering tomatoes. What else can he do? I am as yet unsure about my stance on the gardener: on the one hand, his lack of divine awe seems depressing, but his pity for the “agelessness” of humanity’ and God’s creation seems mature. And it doesn’t stop his impulse to do his work.

I find it difficult to identify the source of poetic impulse. I'll be sitting in my car, alone, at dusk as Texas plains roll the dark blanket of themselves around me. With the moon high above, the sky everywhere around me, a line will well up like a wave. Often, the line has nothing to do with anything surrounding me; my mind was somehow taken somewhere, seemingly without my knowledge. I usually experience such inspiration when my mind is in a comfortable place where I can think freely. The world is in need of such places. I am need of them. This is why I write poetry. But a poem isn't simply a place to sit comfortably. It often presents us with difficulties, and it is wrestling with these difficulties that creates the best, most astonishing poems. As Carl Philips argues, "poetry is the result of a generative restlessness of imagination. Such an imagination experiences uncertainty not as adversary but as opportunity" (para. 4).

I've had a lot of trouble, as I'm sure many sons do, when thinking about father-son relationship. The poems "Sin" and "Complications and Control" speak to this struggle. Working through these poems has helped me view my father differently. In "Sin," I realized how much I compared my father to my faith, or perhaps I should say how much I blamed him for it. The speaker sees his father in bed "like our Lord / when nailed to rest." His father takes on the painful religious symbols that he associates with punishment, which eventually leads to a kind of blame:

...I cried
to my father in renunciation:
take these nails
from my wrists and wrap
me in your wings.

The father here takes on the complicated relationship of both executioner and savior. The boy feels both the pain of punishment that his father distributes and the possibility of a kind of salvation. The relationship resembles God's covenant with Jesus while his son was being

crucified. Without writing this poem, I would have never realized that I sometimes thought of my own father in these terms. Exploring the unknown, whether within the greater society or within ourselves, can be terrifying, but it can also lead us to illumination. It can save us.

During the course of this semester, Dr. B. H. Fairchild has been indispensable in helping me shape this work. The project seemed daunting, as I had never submitted more than six pages of my own poetry. One of the first pieces of advice Dr. Fairchild provided has stuck with me: not to let anything get in the way of running my poetic machinery. Working on this project has imparted a feel for what he meant by poetic machinery—something kindred to what Valéry notes: “A poem is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words” (Mason and Nims). I started to give my poems more space than ever before, tried to create a “sacred” place where the machine in my mind would turn its cogs. I would sit there, occasionally pulling some levers. I don’t mean to say I was absent—the poem won’t write itself. Someone has to be there moving the pen. Nor do I think that the poem necessarily derives from some outside “spirit” or “divine influence” (although of course a poem is in constant dialogue with other poems). It all comes from the mind of the writer. I just think the powers of the mind, of imagination, fail to receive due credit. They are far more capable and mysterious than we care to admit.

When I play football or soccer with my friends, moments exist when the mind and the body control themselves—that is, when I hit a certain rhythm in which all my actions are fluid. This is when I play my best. I believe my best poems emerge from my similarly surrendering a certain amount of control. I do not mean to imply that I write without thinking. The mind and the body have to be fully present, engaged and focused in a dialogue the way echoes bounce along the walls of a cave. To surrender control requires practice and devotion. If you don’t play for a

while, any sport is difficult. You can't find your rhythm. You think so much you can't focus. You have to oil the machine, let it run a little before you can let it go on its own, unsupervised.

When that happens, I have learned to listen, to remove anything that prevents me from writing. When appropriate, I let myself go and am willing to be vulnerable. I therefore liken the experience to religious prayer, one of the few rituals which is still practiced almost universally by Christians, Jews, Muslims, and followers of other religions. It is sad that our culture rejects the efficacy of such ritual. We think that a society is backwards, unenlightened because it performs a ritual, such as a rain dance. To apprehend the ritual literally misconceives the nature of ritual. We daily perform and witness rituals, such as prayer, a morning bath, or even the inauguration of a president. on a daily basis. In northern India they have a brilliant word for ritual, "Devakarya," or, "the work of the gods" (Sax, Quack and Wiehold). The rituals we deride in Western society are simply work to many cultures of the world. The power of prayer, indeed of most ritual, resides in the state it creates in the mind. Prayer, like poetry, or any other form of meditation, leaves us vulnerable to things that are seemingly beyond your control. Prayer requires the simple act of faith and is also an affirmation of that faith. Likewise, poetry: it requires a connection with the inner, complicated being, what some call a soul; it also helps create that connection within a state of mind. As Phillips writes, "I write poetry for the same reason that I read it, both as a way of being alive and as a way of trying to understand what it means—how it feels—to be alive" (para. 4). In "Happily Married," I intended for the speaker's imagination about his lover and friend to hint, admittedly in a depressing circumstance, at the power of creativity:

the sky opening up, the yellow leaves
spiraling around his wife and new lover
strolling through their yard. He even smiled,
imagining them twisting the key, opening the door

into the new life he had suddenly made for them.

Sometimes we lie, we invent
only to reveal our most intimate secrets.

Poetry can be a dangerous thing. It can take us—whether in our own being or in the external world—somewhere we feel uncomfortable going or that we did not wish to know exists. Were I to shun writing about things dangerous and unsettling, I would never find those moments when, albeit briefly, the desire to understand life and the fervor to live it coincide.

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POEMS

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I

INHERITANCE

Sin

The room is white:
my father sits
his legs stretched to the edge
of the bed like our Lord
when nailed to rest;
his arms scrunched
to his giant body
like the folded wings
of Gabriel as he explained
this is your weight
and your salvation
the white light of the lily
in his hands.

My father's granite hands fall from above
then around me
as he lifts
and I rise
like the light
spraying from white wings,
the light they say stretches
from God's mouth
if we could see him speak.

I don't remember what my father
explained to me then—lifting
me above the white sea
of his body, caught
in between the clarity
of a lit room
and the limbo of guilt,
not knowing how I had sinned.

I was four
and I had lied
to my father.

I don't remember what
I had said, just as he placed
me down and the paddle
rested upon me it stung
like failure, like the last gasp
of innocence jettisoned from Mary's
body, *it is finished.*

Pain leads to regret
as suffering to salvation:
the light as it hits
the scar and glints momentarily, spilling
words like blood and I cried
to my father in renunciation:
*take these nails
from my wrists and wrap
me in your wings.*

Primogeniture

The story of where I come from is a lie.
I was not borne along the Nile
in a wicker basket. I was not pushed
along the canals of the red sea.
I didn't drive away the priests of Baal
with a sacrificial fire. I am not
God's servant.

It's what I couldn't help but think
about Pastor Wickwire's sermon,
the words dribbling from his lips like rain.
I watched them without the awe
of prophesy. Soon, a storm approached
and they heard *the sky tremble*
and the stars shake
and everyone exited
the church back into the storm
of their own lives. And soon even I
was back home
reading Shakespeare for class,
watching King Lear scream
to the tumultuous heavens
in animal ecstasy and madness.

It was only after I began writing
a poem about the God that is missing
from that terrifying play,
that I realized
Pastor Wickwire was right: those stories
were true, they were mine.
I could find authority
always in the fathers that stood above
and before me, that only a few years earlier
I had praised the pastor as I praised my own father,
that I had drunk his words
like holy wine, their power
drowning me in what I thought
was holding me up,
convinced the pastor's theatre
could equal the savior's.

The Sermon at Church Today was about Suffering

They are removing *In God We Trust*
from our money, taking The Ten Commandments
from our classrooms, and a boy was even suspended,
they heard, just for prayer.
This was persecution.

No I kept thinking, an image sinking deep in my mind:
Nagasaki, 1636, the emperor's pit filled with feces and maggots,
where Portuguese missionaries were slowly lowered
till they recanted or died. Yes,
this was persecution.

But I knew, listening to the pastor
instruct on the ways to display faith
in the face of adversity, that the congregation
would be delighted by the story of the pit.
How easy to feel sorry for yourself.
How apparent the Bible's message
of Christian derision in the Pagan world.
How immediate faith must seem
when standing before the pit!

Instead, they nail themselves
to tiny crosses, feel the sting
of distant, inconsequential choices,
push their crown of thorns
steadily deeper.
They want to be sure
the blood of Christ
always covers their eyes.

Shadow

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven..."
- Mathew 7:21 (New International Version)

By the time my mother was my age
she had already met God in a dark forest
in Colorado. *Please*, she had prayed
show me something I can believe.

And as she told me this story,
I imagined Christ in Gethsemane looking up
into heaven, his body heavy with sweat,
his mind so suddenly human,
olive trees shining gauntly in the dim moonlight,
their shadows covering his ghostly face.
Please he would whisper
let it pass.

But instead of agony I imagined only serenity
settling in my mother as she witnessed
God place his shadowy outline along the forest floor,
a voice welling up inside her
this is all your mind can bear to see.

Sitting in the dark of my apartment,
I can't decide which side to choose.
The streetlamps are making shadows
like skeletons across the trees and I want
to be filled with peace, want the cup
of doubt to pass from me. But Lord,
I can't for the life of me
believe in shadows.

Sermon

Yes, I replied, *I've heard it before,*
to the strange man
standing outside the gas station preaching
Christ's blood, the sacrifice, the flesh caking
around his nail wounds. How violence
can be attractive

precisely because of its repulsiveness;
and how, when dwelt upon long enough,
even blood can seem like salvation
rather than simple addiction.

When you think of forgiveness,
he said, *remember what pierces*
is also what holds,

holding, as example, his scarred palms in praise,
dried blood settled in rivers on his arm.
What is there not to believe?

II. DISTURBANCES

Grandmother

As she looks at me, her eyes
pivot along the coding of my face.
Caleb. I answer to her repeated question,
and she smiles at the novelty of my voice,
my name. Her world is unstable
so she gropes backwards
to North Carolina, 1935, when her father
is building a school. *Isn't it beautiful?*
she asks me, eyes lighting up
deep in their sockets. I look around
her small room at the hospital
and what can I do but nod?
*He's buiding it for me—
for when I grow up,
I want to be a teacher
just like Mrs. Mayfield!*

A man comes in with her meds
and she blinks, her eyes suddenly smaller
where's lunch? she asks
and the man says only, soon.
Her eyes grow wider and as the man leaves
she turns to me and explains
*It's not me that's hungry, but these kids—
they really are great kids—
they act up when they're hungry.*

And so, throughout the day,
the strange ghosts of her former selves
keep welling up into her wrinkled face.
First, I am confused. Then I realize
I am much like her,
with my ghosts kept contained, categorized
in the many chapters of my life.
She slouches and I am gone. The past swirls
around her. She grins and closes her eyes,
then opens them wide at me,
what is your name?

Oh Winetka, the libraries of your mind

are burning.

Grandfather

I can close my eyes and enter my old garden.
I can almost touch the corn husks, the strawberry plants,
the tomatoes. But they grow smaller every day. The wind
pushes the leaves off the trees,
but bleached walls consume each direction
I turn. Everyday a new face with the same features.
Everyday a new voice with the same tenor.
Everyday I pray for forgiveness from sins I can't remember.
I pray God will grant me speech, but
my voice travels only blank walls of the mind. It bounces
about in confusion. It searches:
for an opening, for those places of freedom, ecstasy, cold walls
far behind and the wind—warm and comforting—where I would sit
telling Cheryll how to choose the best strawberries, which seed
will bear the sweetest corn.
But the wires won't fire, the body crawls forward
just to lie still. The stroke has buried my words
and my memory. I am a leaf
in a trash bag as Autumn fades;
a strawberry discarded, its sweetest parts in rot.

Winter

“If we don’t share, say a religion, we do share an essential strangeness.”
-Stephen Dunn, “Walking Light”

You look out the bedroom window
where last night’s rain
burrows into the ground
and late November trees
drip with the last of Fall’s dried leaves.

You look inside yourself and the rain
keeps pouring. A small violence
grows within you, a quiet tree
of anger, the twisting vines of despair.

Your dog has died, for example,
or maybe just the fraying
of a friendship that had once
sheltered you from the rain.
Nonetheless, it is winter
and death is everywhere.

In your room you sink
slowly into the storm of your body.
A wintery numbness slowly envelops
your soul like a first snow. You remember
your razorblade.
It slices your wrist like nails,
carving your blood
out of winter, a holy burn,
out of the death
around you.

But like any cheap
salvation, it carries you out
of your body,
out your window
into the faceless world,
as you cover your wrist, holding it
like something revered,
something hidden,
something that only happens to us.

Desire

All night long the monks in the abbey are silent.
They have been silent so long they have forgotten
how it feels to speak. When they hear
the small bird singing in the summer garden,
they do not say, “how beautiful,
that song bird singing in the garden.”
They hear only the chants of God waking,
the morning and the sun opening to reveal it.

They are as quiet and brilliant as the tide,
as broken and quiet as dead leaves.
I can't help but imaging them—
lying with her, each night,
while peering deeper into the darkness
between us, between the usual words
I know I could say
and an intimate language that—
it's been so long—I've forgotten.

Sanctuary

The sky, with its stars bleached out
by city lights, begs no questions.
It only suggests you lower your gaze
toward JCPenny's, for example, or Walmart,
or any of the other lit kingdoms
that are innumerable and endless as the stars.

These concrete heavens will blaze
in your eyes for hours.
You wander towards them. You enter
to have your questions silenced. You are
told you are only money
and nothing like the stardust,
and you believe.

Drawing you the same way you were dragged
by your parents to church
or to school each morning,
eyes to the ground, being told how
it was for your own good, *sit still*
and you will be saved.

And, yes, the same way
your parents were dragged into debt
to credit cards as they were promised
building credit is like building a temple
to sleep in peacefully.

You have been prepared for this, bred
to regard what's familiar as what is safe,
yes, but also sanctuary—what is holy.

They want to be sure
that when you step into wonder,
into its abrupt fragility,
it is seldom and without astonishment,
that necessary sense of salvation.

III. Renunciation

The Rose

You place my hands on the places I wish
them to be. Your body opens,
slow, like a rose at first hint of summer,

when budding becomes bloom,
longing resolved, thirst quenched.

*The tree nearest the stream bears the most fruit
you say. Here, eat of this one, its skin is soft
as early morning rain. God, how often flesh
can mean so much more than just skin:*

those reactions I had cultivated,
like two vines of the same stem: the aversions
of my parents, the desires of my body,
salvation, damnation—by whatever name—
here I am, holding it in my hands.

I eat the fruit and am banished.
I have set myself free.

Happily Married

He thought it was betrayal
when she packed up and moved
six hours away to live with his friend,
though he knew he'd had his hand in it.

The way he would rehearse the story he'd tell her
about his day when she'd return from work.
The trees were beautiful and dying.
How to tell her of his sadness?

Instead, he would tell her of how the dog
rolled in the sand—the tan, autumn light
sliding across his fur. How for a moment
it looked so gentle
it pushed him backward
a bit, into the trance of vision
that accompanies realization:
the sky opening up, the yellow leaves
spiraling around his wife and new lover
strolling through their yard. He even smiled,
imagining them twisting the key, opening the door
into the new life he had suddenly made for them.

Sometimes we lie, we invent
only to reveal our most intimate secrets.

Complications and Control

When I was young,
like the Puritans I believed an outward
display of guilt evidenced
an inward saintliness.

Like my father, I would walk
with my head held slightly down,
my face turned shyly away,
knowing this was piety's posture.

What I miss most about that
kind of faith was the clarity of strictness:
a simple *no* for everything attractive,
a certain way to stand,
the blessed angle of my chin.

Now, I watch the bent heads
on the bus as they watch
tiny computers, entrusting the intimacies
of their lives to an invisible world
that constantly surrounds them.
They sit silently with scrunched faces
as if in prayer.
Their eyes dart about with so much dread,
how could they not be serving
a merciless God?

Sometimes I think they are wrong,
in their lives, on their computers,
mistaking complications for complexity,
brevity for wit.
Sometimes I recognize only my own addictions.

But now I just look out the bus window
across the Texas plains where
a new city is being lit up, where
nostalgia, sadness, loneliness
and a strange longing
takes me. The great bowl of the sky
closes over my mind. And right now, I wouldn't care
if its only the small, uncontrollable parts
of our lives
that matter,

Late Night, Old Moonlight

Late night, even the stars
have dwindled. Not with anger,
but with an unusual urgency,
God's voice cries out
His own praise, as if the man
in the garden was useless.
The man stoops down to trim
an overgrown bush. He hears
Hallelujah echo down the mountains
into his small valley. He is not moved.
Old moonlight. He has seen it all.
The word seeps down into his garden
like an hourglass' sand. He watches as God weeps
trying in vain to make the mountains
bow down or the birds sing, but
they have all gone to sleep—
only the man is awake
and even he is tired.
In the silver light he plucks
tomatoes and places them in baskets.
He looks up, his eyes meeting
the Lord's, but there is none
of the expected awe—only, perhaps,
a little pity—pity not for God Himself
but for the wide world that made Him
and the agelessness of that toil.