

A Writer's Litany

by [Ken Craven](#) (September 2020)



River Landscape with Two Trees, Egon Schiele, 1913

Lord, that we may pray like brooks and books,

Our words and wishes clear and wild,
That we may pray in Spirit and in Truth
In pebbles cracking down in streams
In words in tongues in improbable shouts
Lord, have mercy upon us
A serpentine tribe of Dan mingled with your people,
Poets whose vindictive hearts long for thee
Poets who need thy lightning and thy terrible silence.

That we may kneel down in the street in the rain
Mad and prayerful as Kit Smart
(Lord bless his cat Geoffrey and his whisking)
Doomed Doctor Johnson at our side
Dour and holy in his written prayers
Surprising in love with the chained madness he feared
My we kneel with them, doctors of raging hope,
Streams of cool grace running down our faces
Lord we pray for simplicity of mind

That we may chirp tune like Cary-Joyce—
Rejoicing in the foolishness of literary crickets
That we may worry less about small sins

Like Gulley Jimson, genius and good thief,
Hot for new canvas and for her
And pray hard running from the Law
Laughing in flight from Pharisees
For the forgiveness of the large sins
Of art its presumption and pride
Lord we pray for merriness of heart

That we may listen hard for angels
Clinking in tea things and engraver's tools
Like Bill Blake mad hungry for vision
For a gift God will not give
Prophetic freedom from the law
(Lord, bless his hubris and his delight)

That we may listen for the grace of tiger roar
That we may establish Jerusalem green and free
That we may speak with angels in our living rooms
And watch for devils in the streets and malls
Lord we pray for poems acid-deep on copper plates
Lord we pray for poems sure as swords of iron

That we may sit on florid streets and watch

For the right license plate
The right true sign before we turn and amble
In our white linen suit up the steamed verandah
To write of power and glory and dark Scobied hearts
And tangled vines of sin and grace
Greene, generous green in knowledge of the cross
Where he wrote and watched
Men rage into the Jesus arms outstretched
In unimagined ways and wretched jokes
Where he saw men scheme destruction
Like boys after wars, hungry for evil
In the falling towers and bombed streets
Lord we pray for the heart of the matter

That we may sling stones and curves
At death, carve firm letters spelling
Out our graceful doom in holy prayer
One eye cocked at sex in eternal joy
Fixed in stone, fecund words,
Dominic preaching in Eric Gill
Rough street man from Nazareth
Whence comes nothing smarmy good

But only necessary rules and few

Lord we pray for poems that stand and prophesy like tombs

That we may sweep forth on swing

With Hopkins priest, his lilting hope and loss—

Hang heavy hard hammers on cynghanned and crack

Unstopped unEnglish lines like rattling Welshland wagon
tongues,

Unleash all-colored all-efflorescent prayers that

Open buds and hearts and greyveiled storms where

Dying nuns affirm their King, Hope-hefting,

Storm walking on all-apocalyptic waves

Saving each soul, each, with words wrung hard

From saw and awl and awe-struck pins

In a small shop, at dawn, in a poor town.

That we may follow Lord in fallow days

Lord let us pray for words that buckle like diving birds.

That we may pound tables in the dining halls

And settle, unsettle Manichees and monks

With sentences that spell doom and resurrection

That we may be wholly one in tongue and mind

Deep as the water that pours out the words of wave

Hot as the iron brand that Thomas burnt into the door
Spurning all enticements to turn and write
Of worship small or meretricious
That we may always measure by the Monstrance
And test our tiny offerings against
The words that make us kneel and sing
O Salutaris Hostia, Tantum Ergo, Panis Angelicus
Golden honeyed eternal poems
That we may write such and sing such
Lord let us learn speech in silence let us learn

That we may in heart and soul hear the
Sagas of Undset, wry tales of O'Connor
Know the endless turnings of the demons' ways
And feel them turning in subtle coils
In every move we make, in every prayer
We dare to offer: that in tales of Olaf and
Kristin and Lavrans and Hazel and Tarwater
We see ourselves, good country people of
The fjords and backwaters of kudzu and lime,
And know the first country, the slithering
Come-ons of the first serpent, the taste

Of fruit that concealed the blade of razor bite
The ringing of the axe of revenge
The wilderness of the South and North
The Nazis come to Sweden, Sherman to Georgia
Lord, that we may pray not to be taken by surprise.

That we may learn heart from connatural men
Who trusted in the line, the word, the taste and touch
Of time, who held sentences like guns and rods
And felt the pull of old men and the sea, of tigers
And rhinoceri, of the tough wrenching of sails and rope,
Of the big guns and dazzled eyes and red dawns
That we may learn from Hemingway and Campbell
From Pound and Kipling, Buchan and Faulkner,
Conrad and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Melville
And miners and sailors and cowboys and men of steel who
Left letters or journals or scrawls on underground walls
All who wrangled with dust or felt the thwart of wind
Whose forbears axed the tree that made the cross
And were loved by the carpenter who graced the tree
That we may know the earthly sacraments
Of tried and true and plank roads to the fort

Prophetic emptiness in gated openings for grace

The astonishment of loss, the fields of rotting soldiers

That we may know the love of sentences like taut wire

Lord, we pray for honesty like men lost on rafts at sea

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Ken Craven describes himself as a scholar in exile. He has taught for over thirty years in colleges and universities—from the University of Kansas to the Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, and last taught English and Honors at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, Tennessee. His short story, “Paying Attention,” won first place in the *Mississippi Review’s* Short Fiction competition in 1985. He lives in Sparta, Tennessee.

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