

ON BEING A CHRISTIAN, EARTH-CARING POET IN DARK TIMES

Poet Nancy Corson Carter takes us on a journey through five earth-caring poems ranging in mood from praising to elegiac to playful.

By Nancy Corson Carter, Ph.D.

There is no doubt that we now live on a severely threatened planet, and I feel the sadness and anger of this. As a poet and as a disciple of Christ, then, I am called to live in and to address the tensions of the central Christian mystery: the inevitability of suffering and loss, and the power of redeeming grace.

One example of this tension: one third of our national birds are endangered, threatened, or in decline due to development, climate change, and invasive species, and yet birds in my poems are often messengers of the Holy Spirit.

In this sampling of my poems of Earth-caring, I begin with one of praise. The owl in this poem is a suddenly seen/seeing neighbor as all may be within Christ's sight.

EPIPHANY IN ORDINARY TIME

Mira que te mira. (See that you are seen.)
-Teresa of Ávila

In autumn woods
a flare of
grey-white wings
surprised the air
then folded—if
in fact they'd *been*—
without a trace.

I scanned
dense tangled boughs
for form or meaning
until at last
from blurry depths
the woods stared back:

Uncanny eyes within
a face of feathers
focused all—
and so I met
the great Barred Owl,
my neighbor.

I count it gift to see
 and *be seen* in this way . . .
 by rabbits nesting in the yard,
 by treefrogs clinging to my door,
 by friends I hadn't met before . . .

Et incarnatus est:
 Christ is born anew
 in sight that sees
 Creation as a holy icon:
 in sun and soil, water, moon,
 in fins and petals, flesh and fur,
 we are most lovingly
 and humbly seen.

from THE SOURDOUGH DREAM KIT
 (Bellowing Ark Press: Seattle WA, 2003).

In another poem of a transformative moment in nature, the controlling image is of light—from sunrise and from the speaker's recognition of standing in holiness.

SANCTUARY OF THE MOUNTAIN SUNRISE

*"O Lord, God, You are very great; You are clothed in glory and majesty,
 wrapped in a robe of light...." -Psalm 104: 1-2*

Chipmunks, a wary rabbit,
 chickadees, Stellar's jays,
 Oregon juncos, and
 other birds I cannot name—
 all scavenge among
 piney outcroppings
 while the world brightens.

I think of Hopi elders,
 of monks, yogis, and mystics
 rising daily to witness the dawn.

At my left, in the north,
 11,000 foot Mount Meeker,
 highest point in this horizon circle,
 snags warming rays
 as they settle, inch by inch,
 yard by yard, into the valley.

Like a gown being lowered
 over heads and shoulders,
 light slips down nearby pines.

Aspens turning gold
 cluster in a small ravine;
 their burnished tongues
 whisper God's words to
 Moses at the burning bush:
 "Put off your sandals,
 for you stand on holy ground."

I peel off socks and shoes,
 stand, arms raised high,
 on cold rock rough with lichen:

"Holy One, I lift my thanks this day
 for clothing me and all creation
 in raiment of your light."

The listing/litany of this next poem is a lament ending with a few words of hopeful reclamation. The image of "spill" is powerful in our lexicon of ecology—can we make it redemptive?

READING DOWNSTREAM

for Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream:
 A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*

Upstream's a dictionary spill;
 its tangled torrents
 of muddied language
 flood islands, cave banks.

Words like
 mercury, acetone,
 toluene, lead,
 chlordane, and greed

Drown out once common
 salmon, crayfish,
 mussels, plover,
 trout, and integrity.

Stray letters form
 misshapen clumps:
 DDT, DDE, DEHP,
 DDD, PAH, PCB . . .

I screen and scan this
 soupy disorder,
 anxious to restore
 some salutary entries,

Perhaps a few rare
 and legible pearls
 like potable, pure,
 wild, and holy.

In the last year, I've gone to D.C. to protest the Keystone XL Pipeline, spoken at a North Carolina Department of Natural Resources public meeting, and been active as moderator of our church's Earth Care Committee. But, as a poet, I am grateful to have the resources of imagery from the natural world and from the world of art to offer words of compassion and recognition to the young martyr in this poem. The image of the flowering iris functions as an offering and a promise—I trust God will guard and guide all of us to action centered in love.

MADONNA AND CHILD SHELTERING SUPPLICANTS UNDER HER CLOAK

from a sculpture attributed to Petr Koellin, German, c. 1470, lindenwood, paint, gold & silver leaf

Topaz iris petals
 flutter fragrance in the breeze;
 a bluebird flies to feed
 its chicks nearby

while underneath Her gilded cloak
 persons whose rank and
 privilege allowed them
 to savor such beauty daily

are joined with the poor and
 lame, saints and martyrs

like this young woman:

Marla Ruzicka,
28-year-old American,
car bomb victim in Baghdad,
who died as senselessly
as the civilians
she served as advocate.

At her funeral mass
the great crowd included,
surely, the hovering host of
dead whose names and numbers
she determined would
not be forgotten.

The stench of brokenness,
agony, and absurdity
rises around us;
we are complicit
even if far away.

Mary, Mother of God,
mercifully bend our
hearts toward the work
of reconciliation, of peace.

Hold Marla and those she loved
forever in Your sheltering care.

I lay a sheaf of iris at Your feet.

I am sure that sometimes God smiles, so I offer this playful poem. It gives thanks for the gift of avocados and a friend who shares them, even in the midst of a world so tempting for evil and despair.

AVOCADO PICKING ON THE SABBATH

in honor of Bill Wilbur, one of the saints

How lucky to have a friend
who, after church, invited us
to glean avocados

wind-fallen from his trees.

With childish glee,
we filled grocery bags
with green, glossy fruit;
we imagined grand feasting.

Sinuuous shadows
curved over our backs
as we bent in noon heat
to the sumptuous task

until the sun-laced idyll
took an unexpected turn:
the shadows began to
multiply and *move*.

Sharp silhouettes
overhead swashed
the blue satin sky
with scimitar wings.

Magnificent Frigate Birds!
rare Swallow-Tailed Kites!
Regal black and white bodies
created a vortex

of stroboscoped sunlight
hypnotically glittering.
Our minds went whirling
to giddily envision:

alleluias from angels
as we rise upward, all
sins forgiven, and—yes!—
guacamole in heaven.

END

After a career as a college Professor of Humanities, **Nancy Corson Carter** continues to pursue her vocation as teacher-writer-pilgrim. She was Moderator of Presbyterians for Earth Care from 1999-2005 and is an active elder. Her latest projects are a memoir, *Making Up For Lost Time: A WWII Daughter's Letters to Her Father*, and another book of poems.

