

After *Prayer*: a response to George Herbert
By Malcolm Guite

***Prayer* George Herbert**

*PRAYER the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods 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' Almightye, sinner's towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six daies world-transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.*

1) The Church's Banquet

Not some strict modicum, exact allowance,
Precise prescription, rigid regimen,
But beauty and gratuitous abundance,
Capacious grace, beyond comparison.
Not something hasty, always snatched alone;
Junkets of junk food, fuelling our dis-ease,
Not little snacklets eaten on the run,
But peace and plenty, taken at our ease.
Not to be worked for, not another task,
But love that's lavished on us, full and free,
Course after course of hospitality,
And rich wine flowing from an unstopped flask.
He paid the price before we reached the inn,
And all He asks of us is to begin.

2) Angel's Age

How might my prayer partake the *angels' age*?
Theirs is no age at all, but all in one;
My moments pass, as steps in pilgrimage,
But they begin where my dark journey's done.
They see all things at once: each point in time
For them is radiant with eternity.
Mine are the twists and turns, the long road home,
Theirs is the over-view, and flying free
They brush me with their feathers, with the rumour
Of their flight, and something in me sings
Into their passing light, till my prayer-murmur,
Circled in the slipstream of their wings,
Is lifted up in grace to join with theirs,
Who sing a *Sanctus* into all our prayers.

3) God's breath in man returning to his birth

Breathe in and in that breathing be created,
Wake from the dust, be conscious, and inhale,
Fresh from the Word and Light of God, delighted,
You find you have become a living soul.
But soon you must breathe out. What's to be done?
Who will be with you then? And will you dare
To trust the breath of life back to the one
Who breathed it into you? Christ comes to share
Your letting go; you hear him sigh and say
Father into your hands receive my spirit
And find that he has opened up the way
For you as well, he takes your breath to bear it
Deep into heaven with him in his death,
That you might be reborn with every breath.

4) The Soul in Paraphrase

A fledgling hidden in an ancient tree,
Singing unseen and darkling to the stars,
The fount and spring of meaning, just upstream
Of every utterance, unsullied, free,
A prisoner who sees beyond her bars,
The one who begs to differ, dares to dream,
A wild child playing in a grown-up's heart,
A pattern, personal as all the swirls
In fingerprints on hands that hands have held,
Wholeness that knows itself within each part,
A flag whose emblem every breath unfurls,
A chasm bridged, and an old heart-ache healed,
A new day at the end of all our days,
A mystery we'll never paraphrase.

5) Heart In Pilgrimage

I start with Dante in a darkened wood
Well past the middle of my mazy way,
My beating heart sustains this flesh and blood,

A sounding drum that will not let me stay
Stuck in the sluggishness of middle age,
For here are April showers, and a new day,

As Chaucer joins me in my pilgrimage;
The mottled glory of his company,
With all their tales to tell, gives me new courage.

And now a Bedford tinker comes to me
And sings: *Here little, and hereafter bliss,
Death where's thy sting, where grave thy victory?*

So, pilgrim heart, keep beating, fierce and free,
Your last beat brings me where I long to be.

6) The Christian Plummet

Down into the icy depths you plunge,
The cold dark undertow of your depression,
Even your memories of light made strange,
As you fall further from all comprehension.
You feel as though they've thrown you overboard,
Your fellow Christians on the sunlit deck,
A stone cold Jonah on whom scorn is poured,
A sacrifice to save them from the wreck.

But someone has their hands on your long line,
You sound for them the depths they sail above,
One who takes Jonah as his only sign
Sinks lower still to hold you in his love,
And though you cannot see, or speak, or breathe,
The everlasting arms are underneath.

7) Engine Against Th'Almightie

Here in this shadowed valley, dark and bleak,
We lay a bitter siege against the one
Who was our heart's desire, but now withdraws
Behind his battlements. Our prayers just break
Against what seem like walls of silent stone.
We make an engine of our injuries,
And vault at God a volley of our sorrows:
All the despair and anger that we feel.
The catapult of our catastrophes
Hurls up its heavy load, and flights of arrows
Clatter against his walls, fall back and fail.
How can we make him feel our miseries?
We fling back famine at him, torture, cancer,
Is he almighty then? Has he no answer?

8) Sinners Tower

Exhausted by my own siege engine's roar,
The clatter and the rattle of my prayer,
I drop, defeated, at his bolted door,
And sink awhile in silence and despair.
Is there another way to come at him,
Who seems so distant in his might and power?
I have no wings to rise like seraphim
So I begin to build the sinners tower,
Returning to that folly back in Babel.
Effort and elevation are my aim,
As though by my own powers I were able
To overwrite the nameless with my name.
But just before the summit and the crown
I hear a voice say 'Come let us go down'.

9) Reversed Thunder

This light is muffled, muted, murky, dense,
Thick with a threat of thunder unreleased.
The clouds are darkening, the air grows tense,
The coming storm is lowering in the east
Something within me trembles too, and pales,
Though no one sees the brooding darkness there,
Or feels the tension building between poles
Of faith and doubt, of vision and despair.

Everything deepens, gathers to a head:
Anguish and anger at my absent God
Until the charge of all that's left unsaid
Leaps out at last to find its lightening rod.
But even as the skies are rent and riven
I find that lightening rod is earthed in heaven.

10) Christ's side-piercing spear

For all the while I hurl my hurts at heaven,
Believing I besiege the battlement,
Of God's invulnerable heart and haven,
I strike at emptiness, at my own bafflement,
I shake my fist in fury at a shadow.
For he is not like us nor are his ways
Like ours. He left that heaven's haven long ago
And broke our siege. A voice behind me says:

*Why do you weep and rage at heaven above?
I have come down to die here in the dirt,
Your wounds have wounded me, for I am Love
And in my heart I hold your deepest hurt.
Oh turn around, return, and face me here
Your slightest prayer will pierce me like a spear.*

11) The six days world transposing in an hour

Twenty-four seven in 'the six days world',
In endless cycles of unnerving news,
Relentlessly our restless hurts are hurled
Through empty cyber-space. Is there no muse
To make of all that pain an elegy,
Or in those waves of white noise to discern
Christ's inner *cantus firmus*, that deep tone
That might give rise at last to harmony?

We may not seal it off or drown it out,
Nor close our hearts down in the hour of prayer,
But listening through dissonance and doubt,
Wait in the space between, until we hear
A change of key, a secret chord disclosed,
A kind of tune, and all the world transposed.

12) A Kind Of Tune

A kind of tune, a music everywhere
And nowhere. Love's long lovely undersong,
A trace in time, a grace-note in the air,
Borne to us from the place where we belong
On every passing breeze and in the breath
Of every creature. *All things hear and fear,*
For faintly, through our fall, we too may hear
The strong song of the Son that undoes death.

And one day we will hear it unimpaired:
The joy of all the sorrowful, the song
Of all the saints who cry 'how long',
The hidden hope of all who have despaired.
He sang it to his mother in the womb
And now it echoes from his empty tomb.

13) Softness

Softness and peace and joy and love and bliss,
They rise like steps ascending to his throne,
Each step a blessing and a power to bless
A strength in knowing and in being known
In Christ's strong love. Softness is first: a grace
That sets aside our strife, undoes our stress,
As hard lines soften in a kindly face
And hard toil softens into real rest,
As when, on days all strewn with broken glass,
Days we have borne with bleakness all alone,
We turn at last to take the hard road home
And someone greets us with a soft caress,
Lifting the veil of sorrow from our sight,
Soothing the down of darkness into light.

14) Peace

Not as the world gives, not the victor's peace,
Not to be fought for, hard-won, or achieved,
Just grace and mercy, gratefully received:
An undeserved and unforeseen release,
As the cold chains of memory and wrath,
Fall from our hearts before we are aware,
Their rusty locks all picked by patient prayer,
Till closed doors open, and we see a path
Descending from a source we cannot see;
A path that must be taken, hand in hand,
Only by those, forgiving and forgiven,
Who see their saviour in their enemy.
So reach for me. We'll cross our broken land,
And make each other bridges back to Heaven.

15) Joy

How does she come, my joy, when she comes walking
Over the wasteland and the empty waves?
She comes unbidden between sleep and waking,
She comes like winter jasmine on cold graves,
But sometimes, a swift wind, she fills my sails,
And on we surge, cresting the wine-dark sea,
The fine prow lifting, as my vessel heels,
The tiller tugs and quivers, and I'm free
Of all the land's long cares. As this brisk breeze
Sings in the thrill and tremor of taut stays,
So my heart's rigging, tuned and taut as these,
Sings with the wind that freshens into praise.
For when Joy comes, however brief her stay,
She parts my lips, and I know how to pray.

16) Love

Love took George Herbert's hand and now takes mine,
The same quick eyes, the same wry, welcome smile,
The same spear-pierced and always-healing heart.
He turns to me and, taking bread and wine,
He spreads a table in the desert, while
I hesitate and draw back, stand apart,
Afraid, as always, of committed love.
But I have come too far to turn away,
Though Joy has vanished, she has led me here.
'So come', says Love, 'there's nothing left to prove,
And nothing that you need to do or say,
I am that perfect love that casts out fear,
Sit with George Herbert here, then taste and see
And find that all your loves are found in me.'

17) Bliss

Softness and peace and joy and love and bliss,
Love made this way, and lifts us up each stair,
Our maker knows that we were made for this:
The utter bliss that Heaven loves to share.
We glimpse it sometimes in another's eyes,
We taste it sometimes on the tongues of prayer
It takes us wholly, takes us by surprise,
But grasping it, our arms clasp empty air.

Our bliss has vanished with a word of promise,
A sweet come-hither wave that offers more,
Each ecstasy has been a farewell kiss
That left us weeping on the hither shore.
But every passing moment whispers this:
Eternity shall love us into bliss.

18) Exalted Manna

I love to lift you in the Eucharist,
For you descended to the depth for me,
You stooped beneath the whole weight of the world,
And held it as the nails drove through each wrist,
You Held us all through your long agony,
Held all the taunts and curses that we hurled
Held all our hurts deep in your heart for healing
And when we lifted you onto your cross
You lifted all of us up to the Father
And made your outspread arms a sign, revealing
God's all-sustaining love, that bears our loss,
Becomes our daily bread, calls as to gather,
All love, as manna in the wilderness.
So lift me as I lift you, lift and bless.

19) Gladness of the best

If prayer itself is gladness of the best,
Then all the best in everything is prayer.
Everything excellent, from east to west,
The best of sacred, best of secular,
The Beatles sing *you know you should be glad*
And that glad song is gladness of the best,
You know you're loved, *you know that can't be bad*,
Your once-lost love is found and you are blessed.

From that exultant sound in Abbey Road
To jubilation in the Albert Hall,
From well-honed phrases, to a well-wrought ode,
Whatsoever things are lovely, all
Brought to the source of every excellence,
That God might give them back as sacraments.

20) Heaven in Ordinary

Because high heaven made itself so low
That I might glimpse it through a stable door,
Or hear it bless me through a hammer blow,
And call me through the voices of the poor,
Unbidden now, its hidden light breaks through
Amidst the clutter of the every day,
Illuminating things I thought I knew,
Whose dark glass brightens, even as I pray.

Then this world's walls no longer stay my eyes,
A veil is lifted likewise from my heart,
The moment holds me in its strange surprise,
The gates of paradise are drawn apart,
I see his tree, with blossom on its bough,
And nothing can be ordinary now.

21) Man Well Dressed

That old voice from the past: *I was afraid,*
For I was naked; and I hid myself.
And somehow I'm still there, lost in that glade,
Feeling exposed, ashamed, and, in my stealth
Still holding the fell fruit. He finds me as
My withered fig leaves fall away, and still
He clothes me, for the way of heaven is
Always to give and give to those who steal.

But now the skin I'm clothed in is his own,
He makes himself a garment for us all,
At once the bridegroom and the wedding gown.
I step forth from the thicket of my fall
Already dressed in every gift he gave,
Gathered and girdled in his circling love.

22) The Milky Way

It's always there, but when our lights are low,
Or altogether out, we see it shine;
Only when things are darkest here below
Do we discern its soft pearlescent sheen,
Gracefully traced across the midnight sky,
In whose light Herbert saw the path of prayer.
Though pale and milky to the naked eye,
The view from Hubble, far above the air,
Shows us a star-field rich with many colours
'Patines of bright gold' and blue and red,
Abundance of a hundred billion stars
Whose centre lies in Sagittarius,
Darting their glory, like the myriad
Of saints and angels who all pray for us.

23) The Bird of Paradise

Poor bird of paradise: she finds nowhere
To rest or settle on her long flight home,
But circles the blue heavens endlessly,
Or so we once believed, and she became
A perfect emblem of unceasing prayer:
Born out of paradise and restlessly
Seeking return, pressing on steady wings,
Beating perpetual blessing through the air,
Which parts to give her passage, and still brings
Us echoes of the haunting song she sings.
I find in her a fitting emblem too,
She sings in me, but now she is the one
In Dylan's song, who keeps on keeping on,
Like all of us, still tangled up in blue.

24) Church bells beyond the stars heard

Is it our bells they hear beyond the stars,
Or theirs whose echo sounds to us below?
Or is it both? The music of the spheres
Which we imagine, and yet cannot know,
Whose ringing joy we hear and do not hear,
Elicits a response, and our church bells,
Whose steepled peals still ring in each New Year,
All cry and clamour for the time that tells
Us time itself is over, the dark veil
Is lifted, and we see the radiant face
Of Love in everything; the mournful bell
That tolled for all our funerals gives place
To Heaven's music truly heard at last,
Our last change rung on earth, our last pain past.

25) The Soul's Blood

Oh unacknowledged, rich and living stream,
Dark river in each vein and artery,
You pulse within us, even as we dream:
Our lifeblood, our salvation's mystery,
We all ignore you till we bruise and bleed,
And you bloom red and reach the upper air,
And then we know and see you in our need
And every heartbeat is our body's prayer,

As every pulse of prayer is our soul's blood:
Some coursing through us all unconsciously,
Some owned and known and spoken out for good,
All given and returned, all flowing free
From heaven to earth and back to heaven, where
The heart of Jesus beats in every prayer.

26) The Land Of Spices

The land of spices is not far away
But planted close and gathered in one place
Ready to loose its perfume as we pray
And ravish us with its enticing grace.
My prayer is set as incense in thy sight,
So Herbert and the whole church prayed their psalm,
His Prayer Book was a garden of delight,
Of many herbs and spices, myrrh and balm,
A fountain sealed, an orchard of rare trees
Of frankincense and aloes, cinnamon,
Whose scents, all summoned by a southern breeze,
Roused him to love and loving, stirred him on.
My soul too yearns to be where it belongs:
The fragrant garden of The Song of Songs.

27) Something Understood

And so the spell of *Prayer* comes to an end,
An end that offers us a place to start,
An invitation from a loving friend,
A colloquy where 'heart speaks unto heart'.
These twenty-six attempts to say the Name,
The simple letters of prayer's alphabet,
Bring us a little way, but end the same
Just on the brink of what's not spoken yet.

With each new understanding we begin,
Again, and turn from text to mystery,
To prayer itself, that draws us deeper in,
Where knowledge ends, but love has mastery.
Still on that brink, I share, as pilgrims should,
Some of the somethings I have understood.