

# 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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