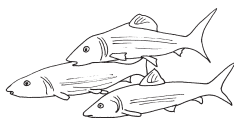


The Yearning Life

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POEMS

REGINA WALTON



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

2016 First Printing

The Yearning Life: Poems

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ISBN 978-1-61261-863-0

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walton, Regina, author.

Title: The yearning life : poems / Regina Walton.

Description: Brewster MA : Paraclete Press Inc., 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031369 | ISBN 9781612618630 (trade paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Spirituality--Poetry. | Religious poetry, American.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A4548 A6 2016 | DDC 811/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031369>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

for Chris

. . . so God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious. Let us desire therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled. This is our life, that by longing we should be exercised.

—Augustine of Hippo (354–430),
Homily 4 on the First Epistle of John

Thus one creates a readiness and a disposition for receiving the inward, yearning life. When the vessel is ready, noble liquor is poured into it. There is no vessel more noble than the loving soul, nor drink more beneficial than the grace of God.

—Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381),
The Spiritual Espousals

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EXEMPLUM

A fly lands
On my open book,
And rubs its fingerless palms together
Over the word *askesis*.

Thank you, little black-robed fly,
For showing me
How to be an ascetic.

You see everything,
But own nothing.

To you, no difference
Between paradise and dung,
The father's banquet and the pigsty.

And every still moment finds you
Ceaselessly caressing
Invisible beads.

THE MIRACULOUS CATCH OF FISH

Luke 5:1-11

What led them all, shimmering net of a mind,
To pivot their arrowhead bodies
In startled unison
Toward the boat's empty underbelly,
The flaccid snare submerged?

What glint was caught
By each lidless eye
Compelling them *en masse*—
Their sleek iridescence pressed together,
Longing to be drawn up?

How did the striated sun look,
Wave-woven on the water's surface,
As they beheld it breathlessly from above—
Suffocating object lesson
Of abundant life?

SLEIGHT

Before it was a card trick, a disappeared
Quarter reborn from unsuspecting ear,
Sleight meant skill—
Not the magician's sticky fingers but
The steady hand of the archer
Bracing, drawing, releasing
The slender body with its
Barbed tongue, killing shank,
Its fletching, man-made wing
In measured flight, gentle arc reenacting
The intimacy of bow and arrow—
How the bow, over years,
Bends towards the string, spine
Curved in to its beloved,
Loosed and lost, again and again—
Sometimes retrieved unbroke and bloody,
Sometimes settling in the forest's gullet.
The practice of sighting right—
Dexterous harmony of tensions,
Silent music of the hand and eye.
True aim, water-clear, the pulse of it,
Distance encapsuled, speed matching speed.
But the years are freighted with human suspicion:
Craft turns crafty, art sours
To artifice, tricks and cleverness,
To beguiled applause instead of
A shaft through the heart.

LOOKING AT MEMLING

Today he does not want to read *The Runaway Bunny*
Or *Blueberries for Sal*, but drags over
The heavy art book with the sloe-eyed
Angel on the cover.
He sits in my lap as we flip past
Three-quarter profiles of men with pageboys and embroidered
collars
Until we arrive at the mother lode—
Painting after painting of the Madonna and Child.

He is delighted that Jesus, like him, is strawberry-blond
And round-bellied, leaning in to nurse
From a pale, grapefruit-sized orb
Protruding from the yards and yards
Of the BVM's drapery.
But the proportions are off—the long-awaited one
Is neither baby nor child,
More like a homunculus, who could,
After suckling, raise an elfin finger
And start sorting sheep from goats then and there.
Mary, amid her shining tresses and upholstery,
Wears the same languid expression in each pose.

THE YEARNING LIFE

Wax tablet and stylus in hand beneath the trees,
The hermit priest van Ruusbroec
Parsed the soul's progress into thirds:
Lives Active, Contemplative, and

Between them, the Yearning Life,
Where you rest in constant restlessness
Having made a decent start, but not yet
Streaming from abandoned self
Into the heart of light.

*For a created vessel
Cannot contain an uncreated good;
That is why there is an eternal
Hungry avidity here.*

Each holy favor, eagerly awaited, consumed,
Only melts into more craving.

And satiety is the missing dish.

NYINJ

A tile in the Lincoln Tunnel: squint
Your eyes and pay attention from your high
Seat on the bus bench for the whole ride through,
And you will see it for an instant, lit
By tiny lines of lanterns, glowing white
Above the untrod sidewalk that we'd use
If we were stranded underground, under
Water, crossing over.

Icon like the
Whale suspended, life-sized, breathless, hung by
Cables in the cavernous museum,
NY|NJ: *oikoumene*, earliest
Boundary, like the whale's eye, witness to ceaseless
Tides of humans, carnal motion,
Still point fixed in unseen ocean.

VII

O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster, expectatio gentium, et Salvator earum: veni ad salvandum nos, Domine Deus noster.

O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Desire of all nations, and their Salvation: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

O EMMANUEL

You came to put on the yoke
Of perishing,
To live under the hourglass dome,
To be the choking bone
In Death's throat.

Translated to flesh,
Spoken into human.
What is it to dwell, Emmanuel?
Mostly longing on both sides.

You gave away immortality
At cost, wrung from your pores,
Sinews stretched
From one end to the other.
You embraced to the point of breaking,
Embraced away yourself,
Lost on myriad hungry mouths.

Come Emmanuel: you who ate and wept and walked,
You who spat and healed.
You who chose, who spoke in figures,
Who slipped away.
You who lay down and got up.
Given, you cannot be unspoken.