GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Seascape, 2010
oil on canvas, 16 x 18 in.

courtesy: Winfield gallery

WENDELL BERRY

Sabbaths

XVII 2012

After the long weeks
when the heat curled the leaves
and the air thirsted, comes
a morning after rain, cool
and bright. The leaves uncurl,
the pastures begin again
to grow, the animals and the birds
rejoice. If tonight the world ends,
we'll have had this day.

GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Interior (fig. 69), 1998
oil on canvas, 24 x 26 in

courtesy: the artist

WENDELL BERRY

This Day:
Collected & New Sabbath Poems

The idea of the sabbath in these poems comes from Genesis 2:2: "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day . . ." The sense of this day is transferred to humankind (by the fourth of the Ten Commandments) in Exodus 20:8–11: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work . . ."

On Sunday mornings I often attend a church in which I sometimes sat with my grandfather, in which I sometimes sit with my grandchildren, and in which my wife plays the piano. But I am a bad-weather churchgoer. When the weather is good, sometimes when it is only tolerable, I am drawn to the woods on the local hillsides or along the streams. The woodlands here are not "the forest primeval" or "wilderness areas." Nearly all are reforested old tobacco patches abandoned a lifetime or more ago, where you can still see the marks of cropland erosion now mostly healed or healing.

In such places, on the best of these sabbath days, I experience a lovely freedom from expectations—other people's and also my own. I go free from the tasks and intentions of my workdays, and so my mind becomes hospitable to unintended thoughts: to what I am very willing to call inspiration. The poems come incidentally or they do not come at all. If the Muse leaves me alone, I leave her alone. To be quiet, even wordless, in a good place is a better gift than poetry.

On those days, and other days also, the idea of the sabbath has been on my mind. It is as rich and demanding an idea as any I know. The sabbath is the day, and the successive days honoring the day, when God rested after finishing the work of creation. This work was not finished, I think, in the sense of once and for all. It was finished by being given the power to exist and to continue, even to repair itself as it is now doing on the reforested hillsides of my home country.

We are to rest on the sabbath also, I have supposed, in order to understand that the providence or the productivity of the living world, the most essential work, continues while we rest. This work is entirely independent of our work, and is far more complex and wonderful than any work we have ever done or will ever do. It is more complex and wonderful than we will ever understand.

The fundamental conflict of our time is that between the creaturely life of Nature's world and the increasingly mechanical life of modern humans.

From the biblical point of view, the earth and our earthly livelihood are conditional gifts. We may possess the land given to us, that we are given to, only by remembering our intimate kinship with it. The condition of the people is indistinguishable ultimately from the condition of the land. Work that destroys the land, diminishing its ability to support life, is a great evil for which sooner or later the punishment is homelessness, hunger, and thirst. For some, the context of this thinking has shifted from religion to science, but the understanding of the land as a conditional gift has not changed.

The idea of the sabbath gains in meaning as it is brought out of doors and into a place where nature's principles of self-sustaining wholeness and health are still evident. In such a place—as never, for me, under a roof—the natural and the supernatural, the heavenly and the earthly, the soul and the body, the wondrous and the ordinary, all appear to occur together in the one fabric of creation. All stand both upon the earth and upon the fundamental miracle that where once was nothing now we have these creatures in this place on this day. In such a place one might expectably come to rest, with trust renewed in the creation's power to exist and to continue.

But how is a human being to come to rest in the presence of time, error, and mortality, in the midst of the demands of livelihood and civic responsibility, in knowing all that human beings have done and are doing to damage the given world, and in knowing one's own complicity in that damage?

Nature of course includes damage as a part of her wholeness. Her creatures live by the deaths of other creatures. Wind, flood, and fire are as much her means of world-making as birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay. She destroys and she heals. Her ways are cyclic, but she is absolutely original. She never exactly repeats herself, and this is the source equally of our grief and our delight. But Nature's damages are followed by her healings, though not necessarily on a human schedule or in human time. The "creative destruction" of industrialism, by contrast, implies no repayment of what we have taken, no healing, but is in effect a repudiation of our membership in the land-community.

The fundamental conflict of our time is that between the creaturely life of Nature's world and the increasingly mechanical life of modern humans. Among the poets of the twentieth century none was more aware of this contradiction than T. S. Eliot, who believed that "religion … implies a life in conformity to nature. It may be observed that the natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with the mechanistic life …" (*Christianity and Culture*, 48).

As for coming to rest, Eliot wrote:

> The endless cycle of idea and action,
> Endless invention, endless experiment,
> Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness …
> ("Choruses from 'The Rock,'" lines 6–8.)

This quantitative endlessness, including also the idea of endless economic "growth," is clearly different from the inexhaustibility of Nature on her terms, and of goodness, beauty, and truth on ours. To rest, we must accept Nature's limits and our own. When we come to our limit, we must be still.

For anybody conscious of the history of the collision between the living world and the purposes of mechanistic humans, and of the marks and scars almost everywhere of that collision, heartbreak comes easy and rest comes hard. All rest partakes, consciously or not, of the sabbath. But the idea of sabbath rest, consciously understood and accepted, becomes an unexcusing standard by which to judge our history, our lives, and our work. And so the unintended thought on a Sunday walk, the thought invoked by the sabbath theme, does not dependably lead to rest. By disfigurements that our time imposes upon consciousness, by scars of bad history that mark the land, by sounds of machinery dominating the air, the mind may be returned to themes of loss, estrangement, and sorrow. That one is sometimes able, among the disturbances of the present world, to wander into some good and beautiful whereabouts of the woods, grow quiet, and come to rest is a gift, a wonder, and a kind of grace. Though associated with a particular day, this is a possibility that may present itself at any time.

The practical circumstance of these poems has been the mostly sloping farm in the Kentucky River valley where my wife and I have lived for nearly fifty years, where we brought up our children and helped to bring up our grandchildren, where for many years we raised most of our food and still are raising much of it, where we have gathered heating fuel from the woods and lately much of our electricity from solar collectors. My worrying about the ecological overdraft of the industrial economy has been repeatedly brought home by my efforts to care properly for pastures and woodlands on steep land that is quickly hurt and slow to heal.

My work as a writer is thus intimately related to my work as a marginal farmer. Because the two are connected and ongoing, this relationship has never been fixed. As these poems have accumulated over the years, their subjects have remained liable to disturbance and to change. As I have read through the pages of this new collection, I have been surprised by the sense they convey (at least to me) of my struggle to know what I have been doing in my work, my dwelling place, and this world.

I see also that my language has changed. In the earlier poems, I used the words *spirit* and *wild* conventionally and complacently. Later I became unhappy with both. I resolved, first, to avoid *spirit*. This was not because I think the word itself is without meaning, but because I could no longer tolerate the culture's dualism, often construed in sermons and such, as a contest of spirit and matter. I saw that once this division was made, spirit invariably triumphed to the detriment, to the actual and often irreparable damage, of matter and the material world. Dispensing with the word *spirit* clears the way to imagine a live continuity, in fact and value, between what we call "spiritual" and what we call "material."

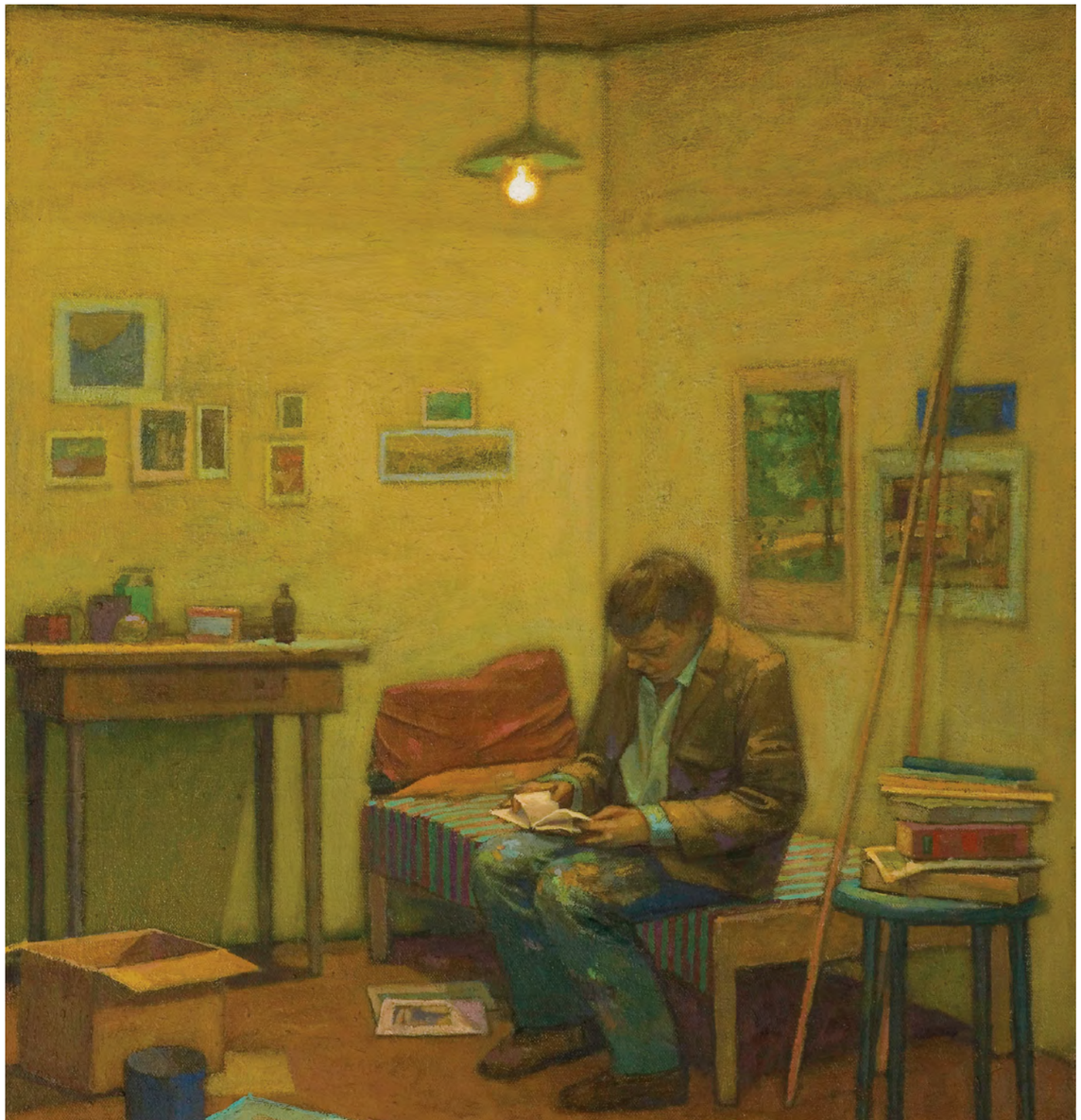
As for *wild*, I now think the word is misused. The longer I have lived and worked here among the noncommercial creatures of the woods and fields, the less I have been able to conceive of them as "wild." They plainly are going about their own domestic lives, finding or making shelter, gathering food, minding their health, raising their young, always well-adapted to their places. They are far better at domesticity than we industrial humans are. It became clear to me also that they think of us as wild, and that they are right. We are the ones who are undomesticated, barbarous, unrestrained, disorderly, extravagant, and out of control. They are our natural teachers, and we have learned too little from them. The woods itself, conventionally thought of as "wild," in fact is thought of and used as *home* by the creatures who are domesticated within it.

Adapted from This Day: Sabbath Poems, Collected and New, 1979–2013 *(Counterpoint Press, October 2013).*

The author of more than fifty works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, **Wendell Berry** has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors. Most recently, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama, and he gave the 2012 Jefferson Lecture at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. His books include the novel *Hannah Coulter* (2004), the essay collections *Imagination in Place* (2010) and *What Matters?* (2010), and *Leavings: Poems* (2010). His *New Collected Poems* was published in 2012, along with *A Place in Time,* the latest volume in his Port William series of novels. He lives and works with his wife, Tanya Berry, on their farm in Port Royal, Kentucky. *This Day: Sabbath Poems, Collected and New, 1979–2013* will be published October 2013 by Counterpoint Press.

GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Painter's Diary, 2008
oil on canvas, 18 x 18 in.



courtesy: the artist

WENDELL BERRY

Sabbaths, 1994

In Memory: William Stafford

I

I leave the warmth of the stove,
my chair and book, and go out
into the cold night. My little lamp
that shows the way and leaves me dark
is swinging in my hand.
The house windows shine above me,
and below a single light gleams
in the barn where an hour ago
I left a ewe in labor. Beyond
is the grand sweep of Heaven's stars.
As I walk between them in the deep night,
the lights of house and barn
also are stars;
my own small light
is an unsteady star.
I come to earth on the barn floor
where the ewe's lambs have been born
and now, wet and bloody, breathing
at last the air of this wintry world,
struggle to rise, while the ewe
mutters and licks. Unknowing,
they have the knack of their becoming:
heartbeat and breath,
the hunger that will lead them
to the tit, and thence to the sunlit
grass. I perform the ancient acts
of comfort and safety, making sure.
I linger a moment in the pleasure
of their coming and my welcome,
and then go, for I must comfort myself
and sleep. While I worked
the world turned half an hour,
carrying us on toward morning
and spring, the dark and the cold again,
the births and then the deaths
of many things, the end of time.
I close the door and walk back,
homeward, among the stars.