

Jerome W. Berryman, the Poet

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Jerome W. Berryman is widely known as a theologian and storyteller, especially for his work in shaping the spiritual lives of children through narrative and reflection. Yet this description is incomplete without acknowledging another, quieter dimension of his creative life: Jerome W. Berryman was also a poet. His poetry carries the same attentiveness, simplicity, and depth that mark his theological work, inviting readers into moments of stillness, wonder, and discovery. What follows is a sampling of his poetry.

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It is my feeling that the proper language of theology is not prose but poetry. This is because theology is not analytical and objective, describing things, but it is conveying an experience. The farther the words get from poetry, the farther the experience becomes lost.

A Sacramental Symmetry

Silence.

A windless winter night

Filled with crusty snow and icy air.

Beyond a sky blue beyond blue

It races in the invisible distance.

Bach.

Echoing in unplayed organ pipes

Transparent notes

Fill space without spaces

to its extant and eons of light arc.

Surprise.
I laugh, being a stranger,
As it breaks,
A sacrament to be felt
In a light step and woder eyes.

• January 20, 1975

ASH TUESDAY¹

DUST
Ancient ashes.
Enacted By two flashes.

THOU ART
Charred paper
Raining down,
A ticker tape parade
To fear, not fame.

AND TO DUST
Smoky words
Can barely say
What it's like To run for life.

THOU SHALT RETURN
Proud towers
And hopeful pride
No longer vaporized.
Creativity turned
To soot, now wise
Again
Takes root.

PERSONAL PEACE

Gasping for air
Burning bodies
Leaped from pain,
But they can't fly.

¹ On 9/11 Jerome Berryman was at Trinity Wall Street. When the first plane hit the towers, they evacuated the space and joined the throng of people running away from the area. Here are two poems he wrote as a sought to make meaning of that horrible day.

They fall, fall, fall
Screaming for life
Not some bloated
Obese abstract peace

Peace does not bleed.
While we do, freely,
From every misdeed.

Easy peace collapsed
That day with the Towers
And it was buried
In ash, and steel, still hot.

Abstractions
Are not alive
But they lure,
As surely as when
People catch fish
By artificial flies

You and I
Must not
Generalize

The Child Who Is Coming

An excerpt from a sermon written by Jerome W. Berryman for the First Sunday in Advent.

Look up
Raise your heads
Your redemption is drawing near
All the summer and winter of our days is circled about by its possibility

And where is this greatness to be found
It is to be found in smallness
It is to be found in the Child

The Child who is coming has no words yet
The Child is silent
So let us approach in silence, deep silence

The Child who is coming sells us no plan,
he merely is and his being draws us into the plan of creation

The Child who is coming is curious
His eyes are open wide
He is delighted with everything, even us

There is a force there, an energy, a discovery
Let us draw near in wonder

The child who is coming holds out his arms, and we are somehow
empowered
Let us draw near and embrace such power

The Child who is coming sees a mother and a father and us, in the newness
of being
Discovered we become new, we become parents, even if we have no children
Let us draw near as co-creators

The Child who is coming is a King
He rules from the wooden court of a crib to the wood of the cross
And makes all things new
Let us draw near with openness to be received in the vastness of such warmth

The Child who is coming is all children, and yet only one
This Child is so vivid and unique and yet so transparent
He is love itself
Let us draw near with love.

The Child who is coming was born so long ago and so far away
and yet right here and now
Let us draw near with curiosity to see how this can be

The Child who is coming, like all of us, was born to die
And yet his death was somehow a gate
Let us draw near with honest fear and yet with hope

The Child who is coming is you, and you, and you, and even me
This is the Child who can make us free
Let us draw near and discover who we really are

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