

Evensong



Ingrid Wendt

Evensong

Even song

Ingrid Wendt



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To cherished friends Dorothy and the late William Stafford,
for showing me the ways

To my grandchildren Gemma and Gavino Goette, bright lights

To Ralph, my dearest love for more than forty years

This book is for you

*All nature speaks and sings and is musical...
and all animal sounds are a prayer. So is the human voice.
That is why contemplative monks are silent.
They have dedicated their voices to sing only in choir,
because they have understood that the voice is a prayer.*

—Ernesto Cardenal

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Ms.: “On the Nature of Touch”

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Oregon Quarterly: “Tiramisù”

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Prairie Schooner: “Benediction”

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“Sanctuary” was a finalist in the 2006 *Runes* Award competition, and appeared in *Runes* 2007.

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I.

*So are we knit together
By force of opposites,
The daughter that unravels
The skein the mother knots.*

*One must be divided
So that one be whole,
And this is the duplicity
Alleged of woman's soul.*

Ursula K. Le Guin
from "Song for Elisabeth"

Poem at Forty-Five

Summer. July. Hot. And the daredevil spiders,
like an eruption of mushrooms, nightly string the whole of their
faith between the same doomed places:

Volkswagen to Datsun;
picnic table to movable bench; bushes
each side of the front porch step. Look!

These spiders are everywhere. Shiny gold peas,
they'd spin the whole house up if they could.

We'd sleep the ritual hundred years,
we'd have to hack our way out. And yet

each morning I find them
beautiful, go
out of my way to lift, lightly, at least

one nearly invisible polar thread to another,
safer, anchor: each
shimmering, flat, before-Columbus plate of the world

adrift: wheels
within wheels
and the motionless sun at the center,

a solstice
poised in its own
readiness: silent

as some days my own words dissolve
in my hands, middle-aged and amazed
at where they have come from,

where they are going. My daughter,
eighteen, on her own, but connected;

my mother, seventy-eight, on her own,
still, connected; and I

in the knowledge there is no morning
I cannot wake up and find the world
forever changed.

On the Nature of Touch

My daughter's cat in the morning, before he'll eat,
needs to be picked up and petted, cradled (as I used to
carry my daughter) on one hip from pantry to counter
and back to the dish of food that was fresh the first
time he sniffed it, but not good enough.

This cat can be roaming all night, returning ravenous.
This cat can be let outside at first light and stand, moon-
patient, at the door, in rain, until we rise again. His fur
can be six soggy layers of needles and moss on the floor of the Oregon
Coast Range and still the Salmon Supreme we spoon into his dish
holds that scrupulous tongue only an instant before his voice
stalks our slippers, our wonder again at such
hunger for touch that goes beyond all bodily need.

So we stroke him between the ears, stirring up the same food.
And we rub his nose just over the spot where the whiskers sprout,
run our hands repeatedly down the long rapids of his spine
until dander and fur rise like spume, drift in the imperceptible
breath of the furnace, saying Good cat, Good Pillow, Eat.

And my daughter, who hardly could wait to be out on her own,
phones from her student apartment once, maybe twice a day, to ask for my
stroganoff recipe, or if vinegar will, in the absence of cleanser,
clean a greasy sink. She reads me the funnies.
Will I give her a ride to the store? Each day, this

delicate sniffing the ground called *home*; the words we speak
a ritual independent of meaning: thin fingers sifting the rich
humus of memory: bright
splashes of hair dye she left behind
on the downstairs hall carpet, each color a different
year of her life: stones scattered by Gretel to find the way back.

There is no returning to where she has been. How can I
not cradle her; each time she calls, one more blessed

delay on the long, slow road from touching each of us took
for granted those years I held her in my arms at least once a day
and she held me in a gaze that knew nothing but trust: water
disappearing through cracks in my fingers I myself tried, as a child,
over and over to cup and drink clear in my small, close hands.

The Keeper of Secrets

By fair means or foul, they track you down:
those escaped from the lips of strangers

those handed to you on a leash, as though
your ears were cages, secure.

Here's the dirt on a good friend's mother.
How can this good friend still

not know? And Gossip, now yours to release
or lock up forever, tugs, tugs: Tell!

Here's the pride of another
mother: You'll never know what I

put up with, all those years. And three years
after her death, without being called, Sudden

Insight, snarling, sidles
into the pack.

What to do when a foreigner tells you what
she told another: if he's abusive, and law

won't let you divorce, this method:
so easy and safe, it leaves no trace?

Bad dogs, bad dogs, I never
asked to own you and now

must keep you from harm
the rest of my life.

The Fisherman's Wife

You know my story: the flounder my husband
caught, buying his freedom with magic.
Neat trick! True, I'd always wanted
a newer cottage, who among us doesn't
like an easier life? And I was ecstatic,
really, until my husband sauntered

in, smug, and demanded a kiss. More,
if the worst be told. As though
like the flounder, my freedom could be
had at a price; that I should adore
material things so much I'd show
my thanks between my grateful knees.

No matter if the heart was in it.
So why not ask for a bigger house?
A mansion? Palace? Kingdom? I
got everything, knowing of course this
is not what we live for. And of course
I knew I couldn't be God. But try

as I would, until that point no one
would challenge me, no one saw
anything wrong in asking for more than
I needed, in fact they urged me on.
What's protest without an audience?
Why not end it, be truly alone?

Last week walking the beach I found
a glass fishing float. Seven
years it took to travel from Japan.
Fierce, the storm that ripped it out

of the parallel current, sent it
to lie robin's-egg fragile on sand.

Seven years back I never
had heard of a flounder. Three
fishermen lost last week in the storm
were at home in all kinds of weather.
Three wives never could have dreamed of me,
jealous, with no clear right to mourn.

Valse Triste

He, bless him, is trying his everyday best to live,
Stepping right over prognoses. His wife. Her will.
She, God bless her, wants him alive

And he won't wear his jacket. Connives
To watch the sunset without it. Won't take his pills.
Bless him, this man is trying his best each day to live,

To its own conclusion, every *encore* his heart delivers.
You know where he'd be if words could kill,
But do we blame her? She says she wants him alive.

There's nothing she wouldn't deprive
Him of if it helped. His truant feet. His will.
And he, she knows it, does not try his best. He lives

To spite her, to leave her with nothing to give.
She can lay down her life and he'll
Bless God, not she-who-wants-him-alive.

If this goes on she'll never survive.
Nor he. Whose fault? Whose will
Be done? He, trying with every blessed step to die
Without her. She, wanting to want him alive.

Notes

“*Valse Triste*” (Sad Waltz) is the title given to several well-known musical compositions, including one for solo piano by Frédéric Chopin (Waltz No. 3 in A Minor, Opus 34, No. 2); an orchestral piece by Jean Sibelius (Opus 44, originally composed for strings); and one for piano and violin by Franz von Vecsey.

“*Tiramisù*” is in memory of Professor Emmanuel Hazantonis, professor of Italian at the University of Oregon and director of the University of Oregon Summer Program in Perugia, Italy.

“After a Class in Seaweed” owes everything to the great knowledge and pioneer spirit of Evelyn McConnaughey, author of *Sea Vegetables Harvesting Guide and Cookbook*, whose wonderful class I took through the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport, Oregon.

“In the Tradition of Good Intentions.” *Springerle* are traditional, cream-colored, lemon- and anise-flavored German Christmas cookies, rectangular and/or square, with intricate, raised designs made by pressing a carved, wooden mold onto rolled dough.

Several sections in “Doors” refer to the old house my husband, Ralph Salisbury, and I purchased from a MacDonald’s hamburger restaurant, and moved several miles across Eugene, Oregon, to an empty lot, making way for a parking lot. We lived in, landscaped, and worked on it for eight years.

“On the Nature of Bach’s B Minor Mass” is dedicated to the Eugene Concert Choir.

“Synchronicity” is for Douglas Lawder.

“Reserve” is dedicated to Alice Schlegel, who has seen this poem.

“Split Couplets for John” was written while sharing a residency with my husband, Ralph Salisbury, at the Rockefeller Conference and Study Center, Bellagio, Italy.

“To a German Painter Who Asked about Poetry’s Open Forms” is for Traude Linhardt, of Munich, with whom I worked on a collaborative art-poetry project at the Villa Waldberta, Feldafing, Germany.

“Requiem for a Soprano” is in memory of Sue Williford of the Motet Singers, Eugene, Oregon.

“With Ninety-Eight Friends.” *Was soll ich mich trösten*: What comfort have I?

“Numbers.” The next-to-last section, which begins “Imagine life is a great big see-saw,” is a paraphrase of words spoken in concert by folksinger Pete Seeger. The last lines of “Numbers,” words by poet William Stafford, are from his journal entry of 29 June 1993, which appears in the posthumously published book *Every War Has Two Losers: William Stafford on Peace and War*, edited by Kim Robert Stafford.

About the Author

Born of German-Chilean and German-American parents in Aurora, Illinois, Ingrid Wendt began playing the piano at age five and the organ at eleven. A statewide award winner in high school and a church organist, she studied with Frances Sherwood of the Aurora Conservatory of Music, and with Dr. Rudolph Ganz, president of Chicago Music College. Her books of poems have won the Oregon Book Award (for *Singing the Mozart Requiem*), the Yellowglenn Award (for *The Angle of Sharpest Ascending*), and the Editions Prize (for *Surgeonfish*). Her first book, *Moving the House*, was chosen for BOA Editions by William Stafford, who also wrote the introduction. A chapbook, *Blow the Candle Out*, was published by Pecan Grove Press. She is the co-editor of two anthologies: *From Here We Speak: An Anthology of Oregon Poetry* and *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*, and the author of the book-length teaching guide, *Starting with Little Things: A Guide to Writing Poetry in the Classroom*, now in its sixth printing. Other awards include the D. H. Lawrence Award, the Carolyn Kizer Award, and the Distinguished Achievement Award from her alma mater, Cornell College. She has taught in the MFA program of Antioch University Los Angeles and, as a Senior Fulbright Professor and Fulbright Senior Specialist, in Frankfurt am Main and Freiburg, Germany. A popular keynote speaker and a consultant with the National Council of Teachers of English, she has been a visiting poet at colleges and universities and in hundreds of classrooms, grades K–12, and has conducted teacher workshops in the United States and abroad. She currently performs with The Motet Singers, a semi-professional thirteen-voice women's cappella ensemble in Eugene, Oregon, where she lives with her husband, poet and writer Ralph Salisbury.



Ralph Salisbury

This fine gathering of poems shows Ingrid Wendt's genius for bringing her readers into a world that becomes theirs. Finely crafted lyric narratives and meditations offer a host of small epiphanies arising from everyday life: turning points in relationships, insights into our troubled world, and coming to terms with loss. Wendt is a master of metaphor who turns the mundane into poems that heal. A classical musician by training, she makes poems sing.



THESE POEMS, full of feeling, reward the reader with their musicality and wit. Wendt seems equally at home in form and free verse. There's a well-wrought villanelle, a poem in unrhymed couplets that turns on a perfect metaphor, a retelling in skilled sestets of the old story of the fisherman's wife. The first and last poems are capstones of a rich collection.

— MAXINE KUMIN

author of *Up Country*, *The Long Marriage*, and *Where I Live*

IN THIS COLLECTION Ingrid Wendt sounds the depths of everyday experience and sings the mysteries she finds stirring there, bearing witness to the things that matter most—love, spirit, memory, mortality, the ache and wonder of being alive. The poems of *Evensong* are the true testaments of an ongoing lifetime of cultivated attention. They are ambitious in the highest sense, "defining maybe / more than we know, what we are too busy living / to say."

— JOHN DANIEL

author of *The Far Corner* and *All Things Touched by Wind*

"WHAT IS PRAYER if not these measures / in which the heart / can pour itself out, out, out?" and pour it does, in poem after powerful poem, with subjects ranging from the Bach's Mass in B Minor to Titian's *Annunciation* to Salmon Supreme cat food. Here are poems that are fully engaged in the news of the world, oil spills, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars (and their aftermath), yet there's also "Benediction," a poem so good it alone is reason enough to buy this book. Ingrid Wendt has "some words to toss your direction," and she throws them out like a lifeline.

— BARBARA CROOKER

author of *Radiance*, *Line Dance*, and *More*

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