

# Dark and Like a Web

*Brief Notes On and To the Divine*

by Nic Sebastian

edited by Beth Adams

*Broiled Fish & Honeycomb Nanopress*

when I lean over the chasm of myself  
it seems my God is dark  
and like a web

*-Rainer Maria Rilke*

## Foreword

These poems were mostly written during NaPoWriMo this year. I started the month out rather flippantly, deciding I would write 'prayers and charms' in April. But the poems overtook me and within a week I knew they were neither prayers nor charms, but distilled questions that had been forming over the past year. A hectic year. In addition to several professional and personal watershed events, those months witnessed the hard work and excitement of founding *Whale Sound* and *Voice Alpha* and the culmination of my long collaboration with Jill Alexander Essbaum, who so generously edited my first collection under the nanopress model. Busy, productive, whirling months. Months that had no silence or stillness in them. As I wrote these poems, I knew I was sick for silence and stillness. I knew I had to slow down and go inward. Responding, the poems wrote themselves, almost; ordered themselves, almost. Not providing answers, but asking questions, and sketching out the beginnings of a map for the way ahead.

When they were done – and I knew just when they were done – I felt I must ask Beth Adams before anyone else to consider editing these poems, for a number of connected reasons. I was familiar with Beth's fine editing work as co-editor of *qarrtsiluni* and as publisher and editor at Phoenicia Publishing. But I know the work of many fine editors and that wasn't enough in itself. I had been posting the poems to a public blog I had created for NaPo, but after about a week I switched the blog to 'private', because I just wasn't sure where the poems were going and I felt way too involved. Beth had seen a few of the early drafts and emailed me asking how to access the now-private blog. I explained to her what happened and why I had closed the blog. She knew *exactly* what I meant and said: "Yes, that happens sometimes, doesn't it, and the journey turns out to be more important than what we thought we were creating." This was all happening in the Easter season and all the lovely roiling tension of that season was breaking out all over the blogosphere. Beth then wrote two Easter posts at her *Cassandra Pages* blog that seemed to incorporate everything I was feeling just then. Her worldview struck me as doctrinally expert and focused, while embracing much much more than doctrine – widening to the social, the political, the cultural, to definitions of beauty and deep appreciation of other doctrine. Her perspective saw the importance of identifying the patterns and common goals that unite religious impulses and allow them both to transcend and return to themselves, the richer for it. I loved the generosity of her vision and was frankly elated when she said 'yes.'

Our editing process was every bit as serious and productive and as *mutual* as Beth describes. I can't say enough about the value to a poet of being competently edited. It's an intensive learning experience, as much about actively listening – to yourself, to the editor – as it is about you being serious about clearly articulating and defending your own poetics and your own vision. The *Dark And Like A Web* manuscript was immeasurably improved and made *more itself* by Beth's editing. I'll forever be grateful to Beth for her patience, sensitivity and her superlative editor's sense - for really making me think seriously and creatively about what I am doing as a poet, and why.

I have written extensively about the nanopress model elsewhere. I continue to believe it is a logical and viable next step for poetry publication in our age. I wanted, with this project, to show that it can work as well for a chapbook length manuscript as it can for a full-length manuscript.

As for the press name - why *Broiled Fish & Honeycomb Nanopress*? Everything I have written about here – the poems, Beth, me, the editing process and Easter – constitute this nanopress, and we had to find a name that encompassed the whole adventure. Given our common Anglican experience, I had the idea of going through the Collects, Epistles and Gospels in the 1662 version of the *Book of Common Prayer* to find a name. There are myriad wonderful potential names in that text, but it didn't take us long to agree on *Broiled Fish & Honeycomb Nanopress*, from Luke 24:42 - one of the Easter readings.

*Nic Sebastian*

*June 2011*

## Note from the Editor

I was surprised when Nic Sebastian asked me to consider editing this collection of poems because we were fairly recent online acquaintances who didn't have a long familiarity with one another's work. Most of our prior exchanges hadn't even been about poems, specifically, but about various models of poetry publishing.

Nic's request, though, mentioned that she'd been reading the blog posts I had written during Lent and Holy Week of 2011, and that she felt I might be the right person to edit her new collection, "Dark and Like a Web: Brief Notes On and To the Divine." I told her I'd be glad to take a look at the manuscript. She sent it, and after the first reading I understood why she had sensed we might be a good fit. I admired the poems and liked the chapbook as she had conceived it, and felt an immediate affinity both with the voice behind the poems and the *via negativa* approach to spirituality they expressed. I wrote back and said yes, telling Nic I wished I could publish the chapbook myself at Phoenicia! Now it remained to see how we could work together.

Nic's poems were, I felt, very close to being finished. I went through the manuscript and jotted down notes in the margins, noting weak words and phrases, endings I felt could be improved, a few structural changes. We arranged a time for a phone conference, and I suggested that we go through one poem together and see how it felt before tackling the whole manuscript. Nic was not only receptive to my approach but grateful for this level of engagement and completely serious about working further. We ended up going through the entire manuscript in detail during that session.

In a few days she sent back a revised manuscript; she had responded to almost all the suggestions, and, on reflection, held firm in a few places -- which was fine. After reading her revisions to one poem we had discussed at length, I decided I had been wrong and that the original version was stronger, so we reinstated it. One poem was dropped after attempts at revision, and a new one added -- a poem that ended up being one of the strongest in the collection. We went through one more round of small revisions, and were done. It was a remarkably efficient process, marked by seriousness and mutual respect.

I was impressed throughout by how well Nic knew her work and herself. When I asked, "why this particular word," or "what exactly were you trying to express here" or "I'm not sure about this repetition, what do you think?" she had an answer; she knew what she was doing and reaching for. I also tried to give clear reasons for my own reservations and suggestions. Because of this, it became quite easy to make decisions about improvements. Some were obvious. Others, much more subjective. But because neither one of us was digging in, we never got to an impasse; we listened, knowing that the shared goal was to make the chapbook as good as it could be. I strongly believe that the editor's role should, in the end, appear as transparent as possible, and that a successful project is one which not only reflects the author's original vision and voice, but concentrates it.

But that's only one side of the story.

When we create, I think we all long for the close reading, the deeply attentive listener or viewer. Making our work public is an act of courage, risking not only dismissal or rejection, but also intimacy. Editing, by its very nature, requires an intimate engagement with the text, closer perhaps than anyone's but the author. I see that intimacy as both a responsibility and a great privilege.

I'm changed each time I enter deeply into the words and world of other writers who have asked me to edit their work. Certain phrases and ideas enter me, and they stay. In one of my favorite poems in this collection, Nic asks, "how have you sharpened/into this thin bright hook/pulling me after you still/as though you were some great moon and I/some helpless tide." This stunning image speaks equally to me about the pull of the divine, and the pull of the creative impulse, two forces not so separate as they may seem.

*Beth Adams*

*Montreal, June 2011*

## CONTENTS

1. my days are flocks of starlings
2. there are howling wolves
3. the boy and the plain
4. containing prayer beads and Bangkok
5. the girl and the hours
6. containing prayer beads and Villa de Leyva
7. I live at the foot of tall mountains
8. containing prayer beads and Muscat
9. on escaping your toils
10. on the face of loneliness
11. antiphony on the plain
12. on being constantly civil towards death
13. antiphony in the hills
14. the names of my breath
15. when you come to me in the dark of night

**my days are flocks of starlings**

my days are flocks of starlings  
wheeling dark waves  
of loud chatter

inside them I grope  
for the memory of you

I think you are  
a small flame embedded  
in silence

**there are howling wolves**

there are howling wolves  
among the poplars  
their voices tessellate the night  
and we vibrate

the moon is off course  
sliding mercury drunk above us  
in some blunt mistaken arc

who will rescue  
the shattered constellations  
who will pick up the pieces  
of this night

who will tell the wolves  
we are not coming  
we never were

## the boy and the plain

in a land of pouring cloud  
a boy rides alone  
over a wide plain  
and finds one tree

lying spread-eagled  
on pricking grass beneath it  
he feels the thick soil  
humming deeply

he remembers  
a white stone monastery  
on the edge of a chasm  
under black mountains  
and wheeling falcon

he remembers gleaming marshes  
lit by dead suns  
watched over by headless  
stone lions

*I am the golden snake  
gliding into you, my inside  
is wider by far  
than my outside*

eyes closed  
he feeds this perfect thought  
slowly into the brown earth

his horse shifts restlessly  
beneath the tree

## containing prayer beads and Bangkok

two thirds of people use prayer beads  
for counting or reciting  
prayers and incantations

Jao who has been mine lectures me  
on the Chao Phraya river  
sitting cross-legged, gesticulating  
in the prow of the long boat  
his yellow shirt and black hair  
kicking in the wind

as we reach Wat Arun the temple  
I who crave him  
and oh crave him cannot speak  
from the gold-shot pain  
of sunset on the river on  
his long fingers  
and cinnamon eyes

in the temple Jao buys me  
a *japa mala* from a prayer bead vendor  
it has one hundred and eight  
beads of orange jade and warm bone

we leave Wat Arun  
when the river runs black  
in pearl moonlight  
and at the Tha Tien pier  
Jao whispers his last thing  
he tells me to find  
my own mantra

a year later in deep Seattle  
winter I pull the *japa mala*  
from my prayer bag  
and cannot speak

## **the girl and the hours**

the girl lives in an iron shack  
her homeland is red  
it is dry

the passing of the first hour is rich  
blue salt, the second  
emerald oboe

the girl pulls up  
a rough wooden chair  
in hot wind

she observes the sleek hours  
passing in single file before her  
on a catwalk

one is smoking vermillion  
another dream black and muscled  
dark whale song

the striding hours are elegant  
they have a fine sense of color  
and they are not afraid

the girl watches deeply  
under constant sun, never feels  
she is alone

## containing prayer beads and Villa de Leyva

it looks fragile in the sunlight  
a thin chain of red garnets with a cross  
linked in delicate silver

a rosary, says Luis Fernando  
someone has dropped it  
on the cobbles of the Plaza Mayor

a *vallenato* band plays in the crowded square  
and the tall hills of Villa de Leyva  
hulk blue all around us

Luis Fernando and I contemplate  
the fallen rosary at our feet  
its terrible adventure

then my tall love who tomorrow  
will break my heart  
bends in his lithe handsome way

and gathers up the rosary  
he winds fifty-nine dainty  
blood beads around my wrist

Luis Fernando turns my hand  
and kisses it (why does he close  
his silver eyes)

a *vallenato* band is playing  
Luis Fernando is pulling me close  
in the shadow of tall blue hills

and the prayer beads on my wrist  
twisted tight red and beautiful  
glint in sinking sun

**I live at the foot of tall mountains**

I live at the foot of tall mountains  
where music is the wind  
and a boy flies a red kite  
on the tableland

but when the sea comes  
onto the land like spouting whales  
when it roars forcing  
through narrow rock-face  
seeking its shore

*how like earth  
are our skulls, I will say  
how we resemble each other  
in our cruelty*

## containing prayer beads and Muscat

when I kneel before her so she may know me  
in a dusky backroom inside the *souq* at Muttrah  
the fingers of Hassan's blind grandmother  
are cobweb breath and leaf fall

I offer my face  
to her small grandmother's hands  
which are gold brown and as light  
as any small bird singing  
in any far-off tree

sit with me, she says, behold  
foreign girl, this is *misbaha*  
she shows me a glowing string of ninety-nine  
amber beads which, she says, are for being mindful  
of God

her thin fingers click the beads thirty-three times  
for the greatness of God; thirty-three more  
deep brown in his praise; and another thirty-three  
bright amber clicks with her bird-song fingers  
for his glory

now the names of your God  
she orders Hassan, who drives a fast car  
drinks whisky and is oh  
lustful and Hassan obeys  
his grandmother

*the Compassionate, the Merciful*, he begins  
his voice deep and easy and suddenly  
new to me

the hot Muscat afternoon falls away  
in swirling amber silence  
into a great gold clicking  
and the unknown voice of Hassan  
reciting all the names of God

*the Compeller, the Shaper of Beauty*  
*the Forgiver and Hider of Faults*  
*the Constrictor, the Expander*  
*the Watchful One*  
*the Finder*

and we are neither sleeping  
nor awake by the time he gets  
to *the Timeless, the Patient*  
to ninety-nine

Hassan and I stumble out into the bright  
afternoon into his fast car  
and speed back to downtown Muscat  
but for many hours

I feel cobweb breath and leaf fall  
on my face, hear brown  
birds singing all the names  
of God and finger lightly  
my new amber *misbaha*  
curled gifted and gold  
long asking and holy  
in my pocket

**on escaping your toils**

of all things  
I would be a church bell

I would be cast in bronze  
and copper and tuned

for tenor I would be hung high  
inside a church tower

and the seasons would march  
over the land

under my indifferent eye  
and I would not notice the fuss

of nesting swallows in the belfry  
or lovers and murderers

enacting old stories  
in my ringing chamber

I would hang high and be tuned for tenor  
to ring birth death danger

and love  
quite indifferently

**on the face of loneliness**

the door of my heart opens today  
on blasted forest

I walk into the emptiness  
of myself in cold starlight  
and crunching footsteps

you flit thinly up ahead  
through dying trees  
all pale charcoal  
and dark silver  
disappearing

when I turn my back on you  
you should fall empty  
you should fall spreading  
in ashen dust  
so how have you sharpened

into this thin bright hook  
pulling me after you still  
as though you  
were some great moon and I  
some helpless tide

all washed up again  
inside this blasted forest

**antiphony on the plain**

*my love has left me*

across a plain at noon  
the curve of giraffe neck  
or distant blue volcano

*sickness is upon me*

the white flowering  
of coffee trees  
after rain

*how the world vexes me*

the olive sheen of mamba  
noiseless in the acacia  
stalking the nightjar

**on being constantly civil towards death**

deep underground  
in great black stillness  
she lights a small candle hoping

to see the rich colors  
of darkness  
and hear its breath

## antiphony in the hills

bruise-dark over the mountain pass  
thunder rolls down to us at dusk  
as hot embrace

*I have changed my name  
I am a great unwinding*

the clouds are gargoyle  
the hills swollen black  
with promised rain

*enter the rooms of me  
they are your rooms*

the Angelus bell weaves  
its copper web  
across the valley

*your step is like a small flame  
and a song unfurling*

## **the names of my breath**

*pathmaker*

because I follow  
my breath which is an orange beacon  
lighting all of my country  
from singing moor  
to murderous coast

*mustang*

because I ride  
my breath which is wild  
and owns the geography  
of the plains, answering in detail  
the winter sky

*healer*

because my breath enters  
the rooms of pain  
with a light step  
and bows to pain, calling it  
by its name

*home*

because my breath ends  
in silver plainchant  
and woven silence  
in you

**when you come to me in the dark of night**

when you come to me in the dark of night  
and bid me rise up and disrobe  
I drop my garments like skin

and step into you as into a warm pool  
ringed with birch trees and linnet song

you receive me as battered nerve  
as troubled blood and muscle

but when I have stilled myself in you  
when I have readied myself

I rise whole from the pool at sunrise  
and step onto you as onto a straight road  
lined with cypress trees and warbler song

### **About the author**

Nic Sebastian hails from Arlington, Virginia and travels widely. Her first collection *Forever Will End On Thursday* was published by Lordly Dish Nanopress in 2011. Her work has appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Anti-*, *MiPOesias*, *Salt River Review*, *Mannequin Envy*, *Avatar Review* and elsewhere. Nic blogs at *Very Like A Whale*. She is the founder and voice behind the audio poetry journal *Whale Sound* and founder of *Voice Alpha*, a group blog dedicated to the discussion of anything related to reading poetry aloud for an audience. An earlier version of 'the boy and the plain' from this chapbook first appeared at *Coachella Review*.

### **About the editor**

Elizabeth Adams is a writer, editor, publisher, and graphic designer. She is a founder and co-managing editor of *qarrtsiluni* online literary magazine, and the founder, editor and publisher at Phoenicia Publishing. Beth's blog, *The Cassandra Pages*, has considered questions of culture, arts&letters, nature, and spirit since 2003. Her writing about spirituality has appeared in venues from *The Witness* to *Tikkun*, and in 2006 her book, *Going to Heaven: The Life and Election of Bishop Gene Robinson*, was published by Soft Skull Press (Brooklyn, NY.) A graduate of Cornell University and longtime resident of Vermont, Beth now lives in Montreal.

### **About the artist**

Steven DaLuz is a versatile artist who is compelled to do work that conjures up a sense of mystery and ethereal light, whether figurative or abstract. His interests are evenly split between the two. While identified with abstract works that are often landscape-referential—employing a process he devised using metal leaf, oil, and mixed media, he is also known for figurative works that are poetic and introspective. He used the term, "Neo-Luminsim" in 2009 to classify his work using this process. His paintings often reflect upon primal questions about origins, the expressive beauty of the human figure, and the sublime.

His work is represented by Mill Fine Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, AnArte Gallery in San Antonio, Texas, Laura Rathe Fine Art in Houston, Texas, and Monarch Gallery in La Jolla, California.

### **Cover art**

Title: "Odyssey (After Bierstadt)"

Medium: Oil/Mixed Media on Panel

Size: 48" x 48"

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