

A CALENDAR OF LIGHT | LIBRETTO

Barbara Crooker, poet

PRELUDE

Is it impossible to plant change?
 Let us believe in the resurrection of the earth.
 Look how the light is beginning to dim.
 There's so much to love in this undoing.
 I will not be silent.

1. JANUARY

Mornings come slowly, the sun reluctant,
 its pale face scarcely warming.
 We linger at coffee, watch birds at the feeder.
 Their foliage is dull, muted.
 The sky is barely blue.
 We wrap ourselves in layers of wool, withdraw.
 January's not the season of love.
 Up on the hill, each black tree is etched,
 clean and sharp, whittled down
 to limb, branch, twig.
 Glass ferns cover the windows,
 their fronds blur the thin light.
 And here we are, poised on the rim of the year,
 every breath visible,
 this icy globe turning.
 The silence between us deepens,
 blue as the shadows in snow.

2. LATE FEBRUARY

and light begins to soften
 around the edges. Snow's flannel
 sheets recede, fold back, and look,
 the grass is still there,
 a fresh green quilt waiting
 to be hung on the line.
 Crocus cut their teeth
 in perennial beds.
 Spring holds her breath.
 White-throated sparrows whistle up the sun.
 Every day, another cup of light.

3. LET US BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION
OF THE EARTH

Let us believe in the resurrection
 of the earth. Forgive us now
 our unbelief.

4. MARCH

There is no color anywhere,
 in the fields, in the woods,
 only the monotony
 of buff and brown,
 fawn and dun,
 smoke, slate, steel,
 and now, coming into March,
 the coldest nights of the year.
 But each day, we climb
 a few more inches
 up the ladder of light,
 and grackles and redwings
 return, bringing postcards
 of tropical sun.

The eye of the pond widens,
 and geese scribble messages
 across the grey sky:
 "Hold on. Hold on.
 It's coming."

5. THE STEADY RAIN

Amidst the horror, the steady rain
 of bad news, the worry over climate change,
 coastlines drowned
 as ice caps melt, oceans rise, the only thing
 I know how to do is tend my garden, turn over the
 dirt
 in even rows, drill in the seed, pat it down,
let the spade sink into gravelly ground.

6. IS IT IMPOSSIBLE TO PLANT CHANGE?

Is it impossible to plant change?

7. APRIL

[April slips on her green silk dress]
 a soft lilac shawl across her arms,
 and dances to the small fine music of the rain.
 I was away for a week, writing, happy to be alone
 and working again, but then home began to tug
 at me, the way the earth pulls the rain
 down to meet it. And I love the road,
 the journey, the whole difficult trip of it,
 the long slow uphill climbs, the unexpected
 bends, the side roads, the false starts,
 every wrong turning. Dogwoods fill the woods
 with their white light, kid gloves worn at a ball.
 I'm going down the road, singing the radio.
 And my heart is as green as the rain.

8. MAY

How many times
 have I forgotten to give thanks? The late day sun
 shines
 through the pink wisteria with its green and white
 leaves
 as if it were stained glass, there's an old cherry
 tree
 that one lucky Sunday bloomed with a rainbow:
 cardinals, orioles, goldfinches, blue jays, indigo
 buntings,
 and my garden has tiny lettuces just coming up,
 so perfect they could make you cry: Green
 Towers,
 Red Sails, Oak Leaf. For this is May, and the
 whole world
 sings, gleams.

9. JUNE

It is one of those soft
 summer nights, after a day of bake oven heat,
 the air playing with the hair on your neck,
 the bare skin of your arms and legs.
 In the grass, fireflies rise in their sultry dance,
 little love notes that flicker, that burn.

10. THIS ORDINARY SUMMER AFTERNOON

And I love *this* ordinary summer afternoon,
 sitting under my cherry tree full of overripe fruit,
 too much for us to pick, an abbondanza of a tree,
 I love this dark grey catbird singing its awkward
 song,
 and the charcoal clouds promising rain they don't
 deliver.
 I love the poem I've been trying to write for
 months,
 but can't; I love the way it's going nowhere at all.
 I love the dried grass that crackles when you walk
 on it,
 leached of color, its own kind of fire.
 Way off in the hedgerow, the musical olio of
 dozens of birds,
 each singing its own song, each beating its own
 measure.
 This is all there is: the red cherries, the green
 leaves,
 sky like a pale silk dress, and the rise and fall
 of the sweet breeze. Sometimes, just what you
 have
 manages to be enough.

11. HOW CAN WE LET IT ALL SLIP THROUGH
OUR FINGERS?

How can we let it all slip through our fingers?

12. JULY

It's still summer, and the breeze is full
 of sweetness spilled from a million petals;
 it wraps around your arms, lifts the hair
 from the back of your neck.
 The salvia, coreopsis, roses
 have set the borders on fire,
 and the peaches waiting to be picked
 are heavy with juice. We are still ripening
 into our bodies, still in the act of becoming.

13. WE GIVE WHAT WE CAN

We give what we can,
but not so much it hurts.

14. AUGUST

Summer sings its long song, and all the notes
are green.
But there's a click, somewhere in the middle
of the month, as we reach the turning point, the
apex,
a Ferris wheel, cars tipping and tilting over the top,
and we see September up ahead, school and
schedules
returning. And there's the first night you step
outside
and hear the katydids arguing, six more weeks
to frost, and you know you can make it through to
fall.
Dark now at eight, nights finally cooling off for
sleep,
no more twisting in damp sheets, hearing
mosquitoes'
thirsty whines. Lakes of chicory and Queen Anne's
lace
mirror the sky's high cirrus. Evenings grow chilly,
time for old sweaters and sweatpants, lying in the
hammock
squinting to read in the quick-coming dusk.
A few fireflies punctuate the night's black text,
and the moonlight is so thick, you could swim in it
until you reach the other side.

15. O SEPTEMBER (RASPBERRIES)

O September!
When the rest of the garden
dwindles to meager,
when the trees begin
their strip to the bones,
you come to fruit
bearing rubies on your canes,
and we're on our knees,
stained in crimson,
our garnet fingers
praising the earth.

16. SOME OCTOBER

Some October, when the leaves turn gold, ask
me if I've done enough to deserve this life
I've been given. A pile of sorrows, yes, but joy
enough to unbalance the equation.

When the sky turns blue as the robes of heaven,
ask me if I've made a difference.
The road winds through the copper-colored
woods;
no one sees around the bend.

Today, the wind poured out of Canada,
a river in flood, bringing down the brilliant leaves,
broken sticks and twigs, deserted nests.
Go where the current takes you.

Some twilight, when the clouds stream in from
the west
like the breath of God, ask me again.

17. HOW CAN WE BELIEVE THESE DAYS
WILL END

How can we believe these days will end,
that cold winds will blow, that snow will fall?

18. THIS BLUE MORNING

[It's Monday morning]
mid-November, the world turned golden,
preserved in amber. I should be doing more
to save the planet – plant a tree, raise
a turbine, put solar panels on the roof
to grab the sun and bring it inside. Instead,
I'm sitting here scribbling, sitting on a wrought
iron chair, the air cold from last night's frost,
the thin sunlight sinking into the ruined
Appalachians of my spine. I know it's all
about to fall apart; the signs are everywhere.
But on this blue morning, the air bristling
with crickets and birdsong, I do the only thing
I can: put one word in front of the other,
and see what happens when they rub up against
each other. It might become something
that will burst into flame.

19. LIGHT OF LATE NOVEMBER

Praise the light of late November,
 the thin sunlight that goes deep in the bones.
 Praise the crows chattering in the oak trees;
 though they are clothed in night, they do not
 despair. Praise what little there's left:
 the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls,
 shells, the architecture of trees. Praise the
 meadow
 of dried weeds: yarrow, goldenrod, chicory,
 the remains of summer. Praise the blue sky
 that hasn't cracked yet. Praise the sun slipping
 down
 behind the beechnuts, praise the quilt of leaves
 that covers the grass: Scarlet Oak, Sweet Gum,
 Sugar Maple. Though darkness gathers, praise
 our crazy
 fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never
 enough.

20. WINTER WILL RETURN

Winter will return.
 Will we see another spring?

21. DECEMBER LIGHT

In this icy light, the ghostly fronds
 of ice ferns cover the glass,
 as the sky descends,
 erasing first the far blue hills,
 the cornfield hatchmarked with stubble,
 coming to our street
 the sky flinging itself
 down to the ground.

These winter nights
 are never black and dense,
 but white, starlight
 dancing off the land.
 And then the luminous dawns,
 the pearled skies full of hope
 no matter what else we know.

22. THE LIGHT GIVES UP TOO EARLY

The light gives up too early.
 We light candles in the coming dark.

POSTLUDE

Is it impossible to plant change?
 Let us believe in the resurrection of the earth.
 Look, how the light is beginning to dim.
 There's so much to love in this undoing.
 I will not be silent.

Barbara Crooker

POEM CREDITS

“Prelude” excerpts lines from four poems:

“Is it impossible to plant change?” is excerpted from “It’s May.”

“Let us believe in the resurrection of the earth” is excerpted from “Liturgy for March.”

“Look how the light is beginning to dim” and “There’s so much to love in this undoing” are excerpted from “Late September.”

“I will not be silent” is excerpted from “Sonnet from Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes 1:9.”

1. “January” sets a poem of the same name.
 2. “Late February” sets a poem of the same name.
 3. “Let us believe in the resurrection of the earth” excerpts “Liturgy for March.”
 4. “March” sets the poem “Almost, But Not Quite Spring.”
 5. “The steady rain” excerpts the poem “Planting.” The last line of this poem references Seamus Heaney’s poem “Digging.”
 6. “Is it impossible to plant change?” excerpts the poem “It’s May.”
 7. “April” sets the poem “April slips on her green silk dress.”
 8. “May” excerpts the poem “Gratitude.”
 9. “June” excerpts the poem “Red.”
 10. “This ordinary summer afternoon” sets the poem “Happiness.”
 11. “How can we let it all slip through our fingers?” excerpts “Sonnet from Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes 1:9.”
 12. “July” excerpts “This Summer Day.”
 13. “We give what we can” excerpts the poem “Catalog.”
 14. “August” sets a poem of the same name.
 15. “O September” excerpts “Raspberries.”
 16. “Some October” sets a poem of the same name.
 17. “How can we believe these days will end?” excerpts “October Light.”
 18. “This blue morning” sets a poem titled “It’s Monday Morning.”
 19. “Light of late November” sets a poem titled “Praise Song.”
 20. “Winter will return” excerpts “Sonnet from Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes 1:9.”
 21. “December light” features two excerpts from “Winter Light.”
 22. “The light gives up too early” is excerpted from “Snow at Solstice.”
- “Postlude” excerpts the same poems referenced in the Prelude.
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PROGRAMMING INSTRUCTIONS

A Calendar of Light takes the shape of a cyclical calendar year and features multiple starting points, allowing the piece to begin or end in the same month as the piece is performed. In each performance, the piece should begin with the Prelude and end with the Postlude. In all performances except those taking place in December or January, the piece will cycle from movement 22, “The light gives up too early,” around to movement 1, “January.”

If programming in December or January: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 1. January.

If programming in February or March: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 4. March.

If programming in April: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 7. April.

If programming in May: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 8. May.

If programming in June or July: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 12. July.

If programming in August: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 14. August.

If programming in September: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 16. Some October.

If programming in October or November: following the Prelude, begin the cycle with 18. This blue morning.