

I YET WILL RISE^{*}

*For Daniel, falsely accused,
wrongly convicted, unjustly imprisoned*

Stephen Wentworth Arndt

I

Do you think that I shall lie here
For my teeth to bite the dust?
Do you hope that I shall die here
On this barren, sun-baked crust,
Where I've been thrust?

You can raise your sticks and beat me
Like a worn-out, dusty rug;
Do you think you will defeat me
If you crush me like a bug?
Are you so smug?

Can you listen and not hear it?
Can you look within my eyes
And not see my burning spirit,
Which in screaming silence cries:
"I yet will rise!"?

^{*} With apologies to Maya Angelou.

II

You can see that I have risen
From the sterile, rain-starved ground
Inside your pen.
Did you think there was a prison
That could hold my spirit bound
With conquered men?
Well, think again!

I am rooted deep and growing
Towards the sky, with leafy fronds—
A desert palm,
Which, when searing winds come blowing
And dry up the shallow ponds,
Remains in calm,
Without a qualm.

Though I feel the sun burn hotter
And my forehead bears its mark,
Its blistering brand,
Do you think that I shall totter
Just to fall, face down, on stark,
Foot-scorching sand?
No, I will stand!

III

I am standing ever stronger
On my cracked and bleeding feet,
Which yet shall heal,
Though *you* may feel
I won't stay afloat much longer
In these tidal waves of heat
Before I keel.

There, the road of my existence
Stretches out from shore to shore,
As wide and free
As is the sea.
Where it fades into the distance
And the eye can see no more,
It summons me.

Should I fear to cross this ocean
That is but a bowl of dust
As dry as chalk,
So that I balk?
Do you entertain the notion?
Do you think I surely must?
Just watch me walk!

IV

I am walking one direction,
Like a pointing weather vane,
My face held fast,
With its tough, sun-dried complexion,
As I trudge through this terrain,
Both bleak and vast.

Do you think that I am leaving
All the past I cannot mend,
And so have spurned,
And that now I go forth grieving?
No, I take it as a friend
From whom I've learned.

Do you think that I am fleeing
Out of fear beyond control,
Like one undone?
You don't know what you are seeing—
I am straining towards a goal,
And thus I run!

V

Yes, I run towards an oasis
Where the cool breeze is sublime
And the water's sparkling graces
Wash away the dust of time,
The grit and grime.

So, you thought that you could strike me,
Keep me down, and hold me back.
Did you know that it's just like me
To rise up from each attack
And stay on track?

As my running turns to leaping
And I twirl till near a trance,
I forget my wounds and weeping,
And the farther I advance,
The more I dance!

VI

There is wisdom in this dancing
That is tutored by the road,
Its twists and bends.
It is more than merely chancing
Just beyond where others strode,
For foot now tends
Where heart ascends.

And the footsteps by their spinning
Come to hold as in one view
The stretch of ground
They have covered, are now winning,
And have shortly to pursue,
For every bound
Sees all around.

Do you think my feet will falter
When they step outside the rut
That you devise?
Even though their patterns alter
—For each dance is nothing but
A fresh surprise—
I will be wise!

VII

Wordless wisdom speaks in justice,
Like a deaf-mute with her hands,
To ask me, “Why
Take eye for eye?”
Though you’ve slandered, cursed, and cussed us,
You can loose these gagging bands,
I will not lie.

And my face’s bloody gashes
Will demand no tooth-for-tooth—
Untie my arm,
Without alarm.
Though I’ve felt your stinging lashes,
Which have flailed me and the truth,
I’ll do no harm.

With his balm, the wise physician
Salves my wounds just as he should,
To fill his trust
As each one must.
So, I take it for my mission
To pay evil back with good.
I will be just!

VIII

Justice arms itself with courage
Like a knight with shield and lance
Who mounts his steed,
But a fight it would discourage
With the man, though not his stance,
When there is need.

You may charge against my body,
You may break my flesh and bone,
I will endure.
With a spirit nothing haughty,
I shall wrestle with your own
And grow more pure.

Do you think that I shall cower
If you make the death knell toll
And dig my grave?
I shall match your body's power
With the muscle of my soul.
I will be brave!

IX

But the knight must curb his charger:
Who can rein a bitless horse,
Which, like rivers swelling larger
In their proud and wanton force,
Will break its course?

Do you think that you can tempt me
With a siren's luring call?
Do you think you will preempt me
If you snare me in her thrall
And make me fall?

No. The golden moderation
Of desire is not fool's gold,
Nor is righteous indignation
But blind rage—I will be bold
But self-controlled!

X

I have seen a beacon shining,
 Though its distant light appears
 As but a point
When life's planets, misaligning,
 Turn the music of my spheres
 To counterpoint
 Played out of joint.

Shall I now forget that beacon,
 Like a candle when its flame
 Has been snuffed out?
You may think that I shall weaken,
 But my faith will burn the same,
 Though you may flout
 Belief with doubt.

For the light that I saw burning
 And the music I once heard
 Do not deceive.
When the dark creeps in, returning,
 And dead silence has recurred,
 I shall not grieve,
 I will believe!

XI

Are this darkness and this stillness
Like a shut or open door,
A loss or win,
A grace or sin?
Are they signs of health or illness,
And of what lies yet in store
Or what has been?

Do you think you know the answer?
Would you bloat me with mere air,
Or make me choke
On toxic smoke?
Tell me, is there any cancer
Like presumption and despair,
Or fiercer stroke?

I shall poise between them, steady,
Like a nimble acrobat
Upon the rope.
Though hands must grope,
Both the eye and ear stand ready
In dark silence—and with that
I yet will hope!

XII

Let me imitate soft sunlight
And the music of the rain
As it will fall,
For I know that they have done right
When they give without disdain
To one and all.

Are you still my adversary?
Only I can make you such,
And I refuse.
Would you be a solitary,
One without a friend to touch?
Here *you* must choose.

Just like lions at the cattle,
And a wolf pack at the lamb,
Or hawks the dove,
You may pick your lonely battle;
I have chosen who I am,
And I will love!