

Nocturnes

**prayerful offerings
when life is dimmed by affliction**

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Introduction

Dear friend in Christ, thank you for considering these Nocturnes. These prayers were written in response to this request: *develop a set of prayers which a Christian might read when alone, perhaps sleepless in the small hours, when life is very difficult.*

The heart goes out to those who deal with anxiety and stress. We are strong and fragile; resilient and wearied. Strong and hurtful forces are at work in this world over which we have little control. All this is challenging enough, but when the sun goes down these hurts can be magnified. Still worse, those who suffer sometimes feel that an *inner darkness* has risen up, a *nocturnal time*, when the happiness of life is dimmed.

Understandably, it is tempting to run from such a moment. However, these Nocturnes ask readers to be true to their state and hold fast to their beliefs.

- First, even in that darkened place we remain children of God, loved and dear. We are God's now and eternally. We are indeed loved.
- Even so, darkness takes its toll. This is also true. Not even the companionship of the God of Light can fully eliminate harsh shadows once affliction has set in.
- And more, perhaps there can be a special grace rise up to meet us as we face the shadows head on.

New ways of seeing might be found in times of darkness.

In its mystery, sometimes darkness might be a strangely fruitful place.

Readers might come to understand themselves better, and taste the presence of God.

*At the close of each prayer is a piece of art from the **Cat Jeffry** Church School Curriculum prepared by Boarding Homes Ministry (please visit our web page for more details). The curriculum illustrates a poem c1760 by Christopher Smart, **For I Will Consider My Cat Jeffry**. It is a loving, mystical offering which pays tribute to Smart's cat. Jeffry came to live with him when Smart was consigned among the rats and chains of a madhouse. Jeffry is presented as a worshipful cat, the ideal caregiver, who brings comfort and battles for justice. Our hope is that these original works of art will help the reader towards a new vision of self and God.*

The first three Nocturnes promote a time of stillness in the midst of the dark. But they aren't about *giving up*. They are not a sign of cowardice. They are certainly not self-indulgent sulking. Rather, these prayers encourage people to draw on their bravery, summon their belief in the presence of the Divine, and, on that foundation, engage the shadows.

In speaking of Whistler's nocturnes (which were the inspiration for this style of prayer) Frances Spalding (*Whistler* Phaedon Press, 1979) points out that James Whistler was "attracted to dusk and night because the absence of light caused forms to be simplified..." p. 18. Whistler himself spoke of how "the evening mist clothes the riverside in poetry." p. 18. Such is the power of dusk and its new, more lyrical, more focused vision – less cluttered, more alive – in which Nocturnes "achieve their effect by omission." P. 23

Can prayers also achieve their effect by omission of joy and requests for deliverance?

The first four nocturnal prayers strive to prune away the distractions of life.

They want to keep the language focused and simple, and afford the afflicted person ***a moment: in God, honest about the darkness, and the reader's personal poetry.***

Language in the prayers is simple. Images are pulled back into simplified forms. (As with black and white prints, angels and lines stand out more clearly.) The prayers repeatedly invite a reader to be '*in the moment*', to settle '*just this time now*', for '*we only have this time here and now*'. Therefore, a nocturnal moment might strangely assist readers to see their existence more clearly.

The prayers go on to present images for darkness. Stay with these images. Claim them. And, importantly, use these prayers only as a model. Develop your own. Invent your own. Find your own words. Express your *personal darkness* in *personal images* that fit just your life.

A prayer is your time of self-expression in the company
of the God who delights in you. Find your own words.

Each prayer has a space . . . an open moment, for your own words.

The language in the prayers does not describe particular hardships.

The wording is more general so that each person who prays
can take that image and insert their own details into it.

Therefore, take your time with each prayer, allow it to
percolate in the mind and become intensely personal.

Be encouraged. You are indeed God's child, adored, supported, rejoiced over by God, and held in eternity's hand. What lies ahead in life is unclear. What does exist is *just the moment now* in which you and your Maker are gathered in nocturnal concern.

And as you spend time with these opening four prayers, be sparing with them. Sprinkle them out in small portions, only one at a time, and one per day. No one should read through these first four nocturnes straight through. That would be overload. Their imagery needs time to mix with the life of the reader. Please use them in moderation.

To slow things down, perhaps read a paragraph or two, and then sit with the thoughts. Make them yours. Reshape them. Cross out words and be cross with words. Take your time, you are worth it.

*If this nocturnal landscape is especially difficult for you,
consider reading the prayers in the company of a good friend.*

The closing four Nocturnes, numbers four through seven, explore the language of release. The reader has tasted what it is to be confined in place of darkness. *Oddly, that manner of confinement might be an essential step in pilgrimage.* However, people naturally long for something new and more free. These prayers contain a plea for release. They desire to lift the corner of the veil that has drooped over a life. They dare to insist on hope.

In these closing nocturnes the prayers draw on (in bolded print) the qualities of God: **love, justice, kindness, healing, peace, joy and freedom.** They plead that these qualities of God's character will surge through life and bring light. They urgently demand that God's character not be some abstract thing, but be alive, and pulse in each day to make it better.

They dare to expose life to the belief that God will move among us and in measure, even in this fragile and contorted world, might restore joy and light.

This is a brave belief. Hold to your faith.
Rely on God and friends.
Trust your courage.
Grace attends you.

You are God's adored child.

Nocturne Number One *A Prayer For Opening Up To The Settling Darkness*

My God of bright, unsurpassed glory – you are here. In love, and in kindness, you are present with me. In faithfulness, you have hunkered down in the flaking gold leaf and poverty of my spirit.

My God of unfailing love, in just the *here and now*, even here, I open myself to your loving gaze. I praise you. I am blessed. I have been immersed in baptism, and drowned into life. I have been fashioned by your careful hands and in this nocturnal moment I incline before you in all my frailty and worth. I bend in worship; I also bend under the weight of my days.

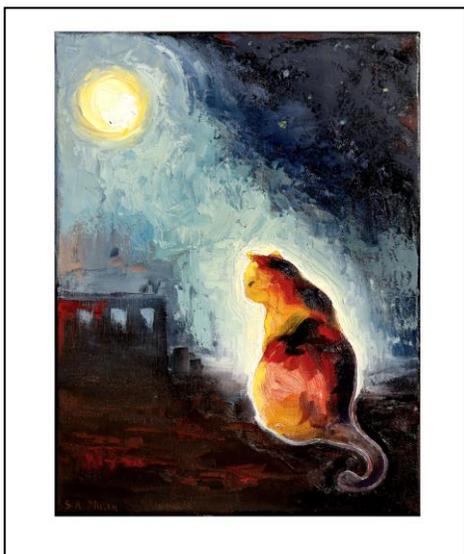
Darkness has come. Should this darkness cause me to shiver: wrap arms around me. Should these fears and their shadows cause me to curl beneath a blanket: be gracious to your child. Great is your name.

In this darkened time, kindly God, spare me from people who flash ready smiles. My God, keep me safe from all those who would make me find lessons in my hurt. I am already hammered thin. My God, keep me clear of people who offer tidy, foolish remedies and quick answers. Keep me from those who try to cheer me and say “It is always darkest before the dawn”; because I know it, in truth, my God, it was darkest when it dawned upon me that shadows were part of life.

Hear me Lord, as I bring before you this nocturnal time . . .

So, dearest Lord, before I take up acts of rebellion against the dark, prepare me to face honestly this dimmed place. The dark has crept in. It has taken up residence. Help me to call it my own, for it is – and Lord in some way now – the darkness owns me.

Hear my prayer. Attend me in grace, even as I sit now at an angle, bent in free worship – and bent also under the weight of this life. Still, great is your name through Jesus Christ. Amen.



In this painting by Sue Miller, Jeffry sits outside that tragic home of poor care and human hurt. The landscape is grim. The house is ill-defined as affliction darkens the scene. Jeffry will live here, in a mix of light: from God and the courage and beauty of residents. And, live in harsh shadows born of trauma. To prepare him, Jeffry is bathed in God's presence which encourages him, defines him, and equips him for loving ministry in the dark.

Nocturne Number Two *Sifting The Darkness*

In this pressing present time, my loving God, I come before you. The two of us are entwined. We are curled in mutual love. I bless you for loving intimacy. And Lord, I pray before you. My life is troubled. Help me face the shadows. Great is your name.

Merciful God, in this darkened moment many things burden my mind. Move your Spirit. Move your Spirit gently through all my thoughts. Sift my memories, and my fears. Give me courage to taste their sooty darkness. My God, ease your Holy Spirit through all the fretting of my anxious mind. Love me. And now, just here and now in the worries and shadows, breathe alongside me.

Colours have mostly drained from life, leaving charcoal smudges. The darkness, Lord, is nuanced and persistent. Vibrancy is gone. I have trouble *wanting* life. I have trouble *seeing* my life clearly. My Lord, the geometry of this nocturnal space is hard to discern. Is this good or bad?

In the strength of your loving Spirit help me touch the shadows, and feel their shape. In this small hour, so pregnant, and so sparse, help me see in the dark.

I lay before you the innermost voices of my heart . . .

As life presses hard, Lord, your love presses strongly. I worship you. You are creator; you are the artist and have crafted me from dust. Even so, my God, the hurts of today also shape me. If my heart is contorted, if affliction warps my joys, if my confidence buckles in the dark: remember me.

My loving God, in this nocturnal moment my senses are dulled. Help me now to see through spirit and love. Cradle my heart in Jesus. Amen.



Jeffrey lies at rest in this painting by Erika Baempfer. It is no small spiritual and physical challenge to lie still when so much of life may cause us to pace and squirm. There will come a time for action. But now in the realm of shadows stillness allows reflection.

Nocturne Number Three *A Prayer Concerning Personal Identity*

My God, I set apart this time for prayer. Hear me.

I sit here alone. The open light of day has left. Lord, life has pressed in on me. Images bend and deflate. Shadows pile up. In this nocturnal time, Lord, it seems the shadows rule. And so, my God, in this moment now, in just this moment together with you, as life is pared back, I wonder, who am I?

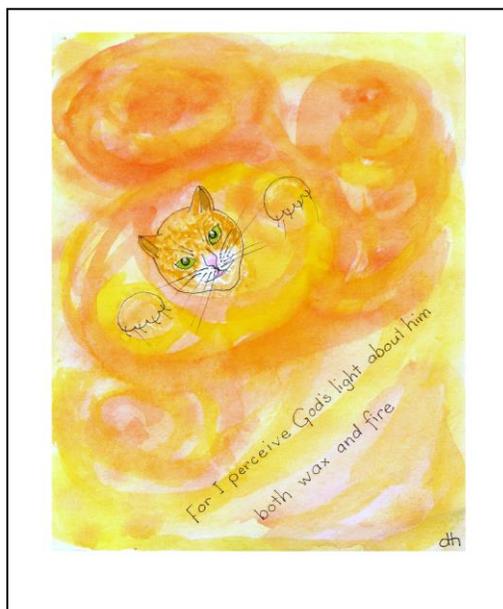
Dearest God, who on this wild earth am I . . . wincing, curled, and still beautiful in your eye . . . who am I?

Promises are dust, most of them. This place is flint. Friends can drift, and well might. Carefully laid out plans are lost in the fog. When so much of me is darkened, my God, who am I?

I pray before you. Hear the concerns of my heart . . .

Lord, you know that hardships have dropped me here. Among puzzling outlines, my very nature seems up for grabs. Many events in this **hard** world try to define me. I am chained and liberated, spirit and flesh, here and eternal, confined and maybe someday soaring in praise. Lord, I am a living prayer of bundled fears, hanging on in mere seconds, and eternity's child.

So, my God, tired and dimmed, I lift what prayer I can. Be praised. Be adored. Be with me. And I offer this prayer in the name of Jesus, the One who trekked long hours, and longed for sleep, and came to hunger, and dreamed loving dreams for this world, and even at the cross dripped out life for my salvation. Amen.



Jeoffry bounds forward out of a swirl of the fire and the energy of God's presence. Diane Hutchings captures the vigor of Smart's poem when it speaks of the fire of God surrounding cats and people. Much of our identity hinges on being able to *mystically see* and *strongly cling to* this loving fire that surrounds us even when almost everything else in life is dimmed.

Nocturne Number Four *Prayers From A Place Of Confinement*

Loving God, even as light fades around me, the great constellation of your blessings rises. Loving God, you are good. I bless you for the countless enrichments of my life. I delight in redemption's bright eternal gift. As your thankful child I bend in praise.

Hear me as I plead for this world, both wonderful, and twisted. Dear God, this earth lives free and hemmed in. And even as my own shadows clamp down around me, help me lift a prayer.

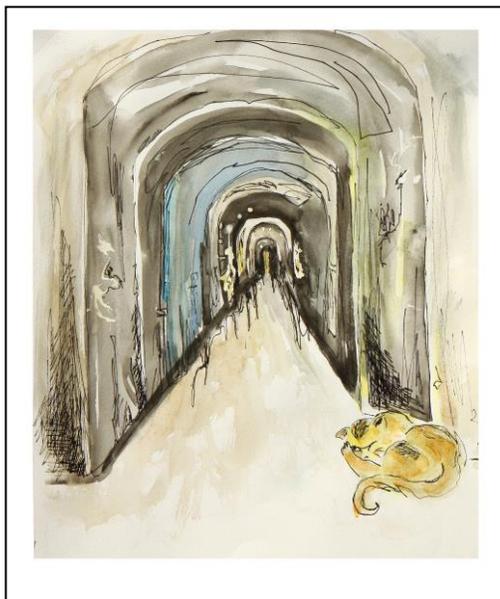
This nocturnal time builds a prison yard. My mind paces. Walls are high. Teach me Lord to *move* even within my constraints. I'm not sure I see an end to my troubles. Life is pinched.

Great is your name. I lay my innermost thoughts before you . . .

God of freedom, in this narrow moment, is there any way for me to be, strangely, free in your Spirit? The now and the forever are close. Can I be huddled and infinite? Can my weakness and strength both rest in your hands? Life presses down on my chest. Can you teach my soul to breathe? My God, together we are shackled and free.

God of light, God of dazzling beauty, God of **joy** and **freedom**, God of bright glory who gathers stars at your feet, can you lift the shadows? Lord, can you?

Love me. Love me faithfully my God, for a tomorrow of some kind will rise. Amen.



The corridor stretches out bleakly in this rendering by Lindsay A. Veh. Jeffrey keeps an eye. He is guardian. But sometimes all he can do is peer down a corridor as the very walls drip affliction. Can there ever be new light? Will the nocturne ever lift? Children of God plead and ask. Indeed, the God of freedom might shove back the walls. But until that happens, maybe, in paradox, light could come on a person even while walking brute corridors. All of us move in a mix of freedom and confinement; brightness and shadow. May grace accompany those who dare to plead and pray for new freedom in the dark corridors of pilgrimage.

Nocturne Number Five *A Prayer For Reaching Towards God*

In this nocturnal setting, Lord of half-formed ideas, half-realized fears, in this darkened moment I lift a prayer. Merciful God, some of my words will be strong, some buckled. Darkness makes my prayer uneven. In this dense nocturne, there seems no escape. Lord, this darkness has talons. My God, as the darkness grips, hold me tighter.

Still, here in the glad company of your Spirit, I bring what prayer I can. Open me to your presence. Open me even to the charcoaled shapes in this shuttered place. Lord this nocturnal realm slumps on the back of my neck. Raise my head in hopeful prayer.

I pry out the cares of my soul . . .

Lord, if I waste time rewriting history, be patient with me. I mutter in the darkness. And, Lord, if I wear circles in the carpet, in kindness, show your beloved child a way forward.

Stretch my spirit's imagination. Help me ease forward into your **love** and **healing**. Let me believe again in creativity, and the dance of life. Turn my longings into new life. You are the God of love. *In love*, break the darkness. Let divine love move strongly and reshape my world. Lord, I crave new horizons, and new shapes, sunrises, new welcomes and new outcomes. *My God of healing*, touch my life. Heal rifts. Heal the scrapes. Heal my heart. Heal my wandering.

Merciful God, in my nocturnal hutch, trowel back in the colour. And this night, should sleep be difficult, reassure me tenderly. I am still yours – your child, your delight. I am your creation and joy.

My God, this earth spins toward an uncertain future. Help me stretch upwards and outwards towards a new day through Jesus. Amen.



At the start of his day
Jeffrey prays, worships
and dedicates all of his
little cat activities to
God. Here he stretches.
All cats do. But in this
painting by William Ho
and in the poem by
Christopher Smart, this
stretching takes on new
meaning. In a tight
space, crowded by
affliction and neglect,
Jeffrey reaches for God.

Nocturne Number Six *When Light And Darkness Are Tightly Bound Together*

My loving God, I dedicate this moment to your love, and I come before you. You have fashioned me. Remarkably, you love me even though the world can seem cold, and you bind yourself closely to all my wanderings. Let your Holy Spirit roam among all my stress. In this nocturnal time I praise.

Outside my room life goes on. Lord of **kindness**, the world has not put on more lights because my own world is dim. The world has not slowed to limp beside me. Lord of great kindness, send me kindness. Send me people who will sit here with me stilled in the shadows where no exits signs are lit. Lord, send kindness into my life. Still, I bless you for happy memories. Light and shadows spin in my mind: laughter, green pastures, afflictions and wounds, triumphs and joys.

Lord look, I spread out the credits and debits of my heart. Dark and light vie for my attention . . .

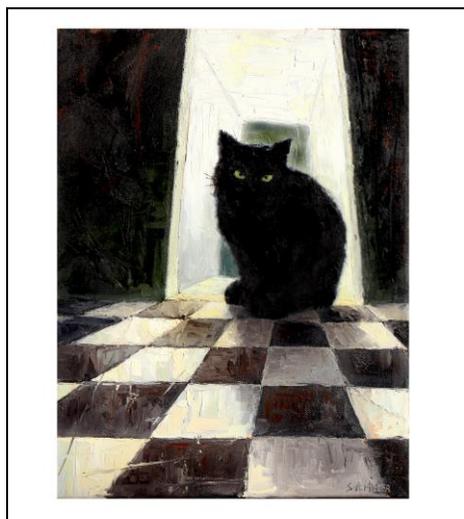
My God, will I find you best in the dark or in the light? In this numbing nocturnal haze what should I even ask for? I believe I need light. Can there ever be only just light?

My God, I believe that one day heaven's bliss will be mine; Lord, I could use some now.

Merciful God, I am squeezed in a place where no pilgrim should settle. I could really use some easy breaths. God of **peace**, take off some of the burden. Lord, you are the high God of radical peace. Your peace can change the world. In truth, in all honesty my God . . . in all pleading sincerity . . . I could use some peace right now

Lord, down the years you have spun with me as I lurched through light and dark. Lord of transforming kindness and peace, give me the wit and courage to pray and work for more light.

My God of liberation, help me breathe. Amen.



Jeoffry is in a harsh space. In this painting by Sue Miller, light and dark define the room. They even complement each other. There is little breathing space here. Surely there won't be any easy answers. Is Jeoffry friend or foe? Is the harsh light more welcoming than the dark? Both are compressed together. Nocturnal lighting is never simple. Neither is the life of someone who suffers.

Nocturne Number Seven *Leaning Into The Future*

My God, here I am. Here, just right here, I am, in this vast universe.

At the close of this day, as the pace and obligations of a cluttered life give way to a richer, slower time, remind me of your love. Sway with me, and be my God of **joy** and **freedom**.

Grant me a light spirit. In grace Lord, allow your child the freedom of self-jesting and self-mockery. I am not the core. I am not. I am not the centre of all things, neither is my suffering. Lord, I don't make headlines. I don't even make headway. So let your gritty freedom season the stew of my heaviness and foolishness. Lord, I rattle about in your vast universe.

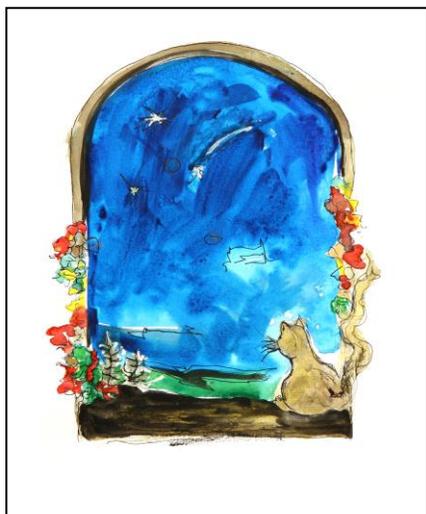
And so here it is again, Lord, my *little life*. These small hours are filled with no small things.

Even as this darkness soots my face, hear the private prayer of my soul . . .

Lord, give me the strength to receive joy. Even as this darkness snips off parts of my life, give me courage to believe in joy. God of freedom, there are teeth in this darkness. Help me believe that I might really be free. Lord, in this nocturnal cul-de-sac of diminished futures, old cherished dreams are winding down. My God of clear-eyed **justice**, can you reshape my world? Injustice has my number. Liberating God, give me a heart brave enough to believe in a true and just world.

As best I could Lord, I have tried to be a child of your love. On good days, I tried to die so as to live; I tried to happily throw away my life so as to find it better. And still here I am before you, afflicted and a child of eternity's banquet. I worship. You are today's God, and tomorrow's. In whatever lies ahead, in whatever ways I might caress this wild universe, let me glorify your name.

Joyfully, you are with me. You love me. I love you in turn. Amen.



Jeffrey looks out on the garden. The long day winds down. There have been blossoms and traumas, and now the quiet of evening restores the soul. In this painting by Lindsay Veh this cat, this servant of God, has battled for justice. He has danced and entertained his fragile friend Christopher. He has worshiped and prayed and now as evening settles he delights in the garden and takes his rest. May God's peaceful rest sweep over you.