

A bug on a branch  
swept away down the river  
still singing her song.

*Issa (1763-1823)*



## COMPASSION WITHOUT BORDERS

We at Starcross are very fond of the poet and conservation activist Wendell Berry (1934- ). For many years he has taken solitary Sunday walks around his Kentucky farm and from there writes his "*Sabbath Poems*." His first Sabbath Poem written in 1991 contained a powerful couple of lines that have always remained with me.

*This is a nation where  
No lovely thing can last.*

1991 — I had just turned 60. Many people around me now had not been born

yet. Perhaps this was also the year, as Berry prophesied, when we ceased



protecting lovely things. George Herbert Walker Bush (1924–2018) was president. I was in Romania helping to establish a program to care for hundreds of children infected with HIV/AIDS and left to die by a dictator who had no interest in human rights but a great deal of concern about bringing money into his country for himself and his supporters. These children did not have to die and with the help of a courageous group of American volunteers, and Romanian friends, we proved that. What we were doing later became the model for UNICEF's recommended care protocol for children living with AIDS.

A television producer woke me early one morning in Romania to announce that the United States was bombing Iraq in a campaign labeled "Desert Storm". When I gathered our people together the collective question was, "Why are we doing this?" Well, some politicians thought Iraqis had something to do with the attack on 9/11 — they didn't. Well, perhaps they have weapons of mass destruction — they didn't. Could it possibly have something to do with oil? It sure did. That was the time when some Americans learned that for certain powerful people in our government, foreign policy was a matter of profit not principle.

And during this campaign 249,344 Iraqis died. 194,202 Americans also gave their lives, and a much larger number were injured in body and soul. Some have spent time here at Starcross. Acts of torture and humiliation were committed that I never thought possible for our country. Look up *Abu Ghraib* if you have forgotten or had not been born yet. Then came Afghanistan and other ventures.



Many of our “lovely things” have been lost since 1991. Probably this is not something which is discussed when our present officials are having a pleasant tea with the leaders of a nation that a UN report concludes is responsible for the savage butchering of a journalist from *The Washington Post*. These fellows in their pretty flowing robes will be our allies if our next venture is to go to war with Iran — a country which in its long Persian history has met leaders like them, and leaders like ours, many times in the past.



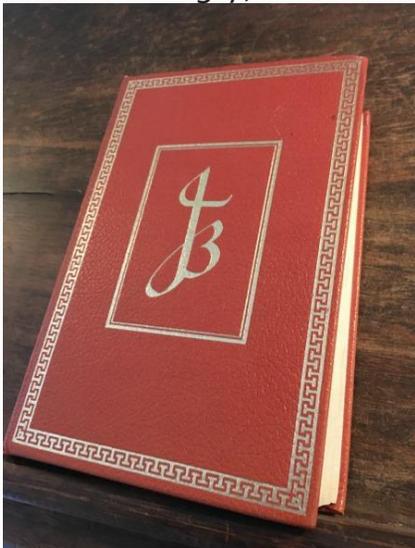
There are many interesting courtroom battles going on about the “lovely things” we have cast aside. One was in a nearby federal court. A lawyer for Mr. Trump’s administration was attempting to point out that the government really had no responsibility to provide migrant children who are being housed by Customs and Border Protection with such trivial things as toothbrushes and soap. Unfortunately for the lawyer, one of the judges on the bench had spent his childhood in the forced internment camp for Japanese during World War II, despite the fact that he, his siblings and his parents were American citizens. The judge very forcefully explained to the lawyer the significance of a toothbrush and soap. I had several college friends who had been in those camps. One, a nurse, told me, “When you wanted to go to the bathroom the line was so long you would forget why you were there!” At least there was a bathroom. I was told recently in one current camp holding undocumented minors, there wasn’t!

You probably know what they're doing on the southern border in your name and my name. There is no need to dwell on it but, for example, one facility has 350 children in a warehouse without windows, many sleeping on concrete floors. The kids are hungry and filthy. They have had no showers for a long time. Older children are being given younger children to care for. They have no diapers, etc., etc., etc. Texas Congress Woman Veronica Escobar rightly pointed out that if we discovered American parents doing this, they would be

arrested for serious neglect and maltreatment. But we have people in power who have lost their moral compass. Are we headed toward a populace that is more interested in greed and power than compassion? Only time will tell, but I can say with certainty we're not there yet! There are a large number of ordinary people who are trying to make up for the actions of this administration.



Why am I so angry now? Remember that line from Shakespeare's Henry V, *"I was not angry since I came to France until this instant."* Well, truth be told I have been angry, but not this angry! It had to do with a picture — THE picture.



I'm not going to show it to you. You've probably already seen it.

A father fleeing from the horrible situation in El Salvador had come to our southern border with his wife and two-year-old daughter in hope of a better and safer life. Turn time back a couple of centuries and he would have been the citizen and we the migrants. When it was his ancestor's land they very possibly would have acted like the divine spirit in Jesus' parable (Matthew 25:35),

*"I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me ..."*

These three human beings did not receive such a welcome from our government.

Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, his wife Tania Vanessa Ávalos, and their 23 month old daughter Valeria traveled over 1000 miles to escape violence and poverty. They planned to make a legal entry at a bridge between Matamoros,

Mexico and Brownsville, Texas. But they were turned away and told to come back another day. This was because of a draconian “metering policy” introduced by the Trump administration. The family came the next day and the bridge was closed. They came the day after that and the line was hundreds long. They were told they would not be allowed to go across. Woodson Martin who travels every day to hand out water to migrants said the direct cause of the tragedy that followed, “is the metering policy at the bridge ... and we as a people are culpable in this.”

Desperate and within sight of the United States, the family decided to cross the Rio Grande River. The father put his daughter on his back, protected her as best he could and started across the Rio Grande River. Óscar Alberto told Valeria to hang tight to his neck and waded in. Tania followed but got tired and went back to the Mexican side until her husband could return and help her. I am told there is a very strong current at this time of year. Óscar Alberto and Valeria did not make it, as Tania watched in horror.



In a way, the river was more gentle with the father and little girl than were our politicians. It conveyed Óscar Alberto’s and Valeria’s lifeless bodies to the other shore, close to the bridge they were forbidden to use. Valeria was still holding tight to her father. Their picture is now all over the world — a trusting daughter and a father doing the best he could, and out of sight a mother screaming in agony

I want to leave the damning and shameful politics of this administration and open my spirit to our little sister Valeria and our brother and sister Óscar Alberto and Tania.



Óscar Alberto and Valeria are very much in my heart and I think of something I wrote many years ago,



*You are like drops of rain. There has come a time when like raindrops you merged into a pool of water. All that is you has come into a great stillness. Nothing of you is lost. You are now part of life's force. Once again there is the strength of complete stillness.*

The names of Óscar Alberto and his daughter Valeria will be entered into the memorial books at Starcross. May they never be forgotten!

Óscar Alberto, Tania, and Valeria have made me realize as never before that we are in a great moral struggle in this country. Let us each do what we can to reclaim what has been lost!

***Brother Toby***