



On Earth As It Is

---

2011

## Two Poems

Anthony A. Lee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/onearth>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lee, Anthony A., "Two Poems" (2011). *On Earth As It Is*. 11.  
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/onearth/11>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Earth As It Is by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

# on earth as it is

*prayer as story, story as prayer*

HOME

ABOUT

AUTHORS

CONTACT



*photo by matthew simmons*

## *Two Poems*

*Anthony A. Lee*

### **The Sermon**

---

*(there were two of them, interrupted by a moment of contemplation)*

was on the impossibility  
of imagining death or anything  
after that—only  
hotel rooms and penthouse windows,  
shoes empty on the floor,  
the private pool below the balcony  
blue in its shininess,  
the lapping of the ocean tide  
on the rocky shoreline, its pleasant whisper—  
which obviously is not enough.

A hundred thousand years of human consciousness  
and we still have no words for spirit.

Our language for death conceals it  
and everything beyond  
is fragile, vulnerable, breakable—the preacher  
despaired, taking refuge in God,  
but said he doesn't mourn at funerals,  
as dying is physical,  
like eating pastry, drinking coffee,  
stretching for yoga, growing bigger,  
standing for a bus, playing soccer, coming home,  
hearing piano music in a concert hall (Chopin),  
catching your breath before a stand  
of green forest along the mountain road

or a painting in the corridor of the Chicago  
art museum, like feeling the slippery thrusts  
of love, the sweaty joy of dancing,  
the crunch of tempura, the saltiness of pesto,  
the heat of the tea, the sweetness of strawberries,  
the coldness of the stone floor on my forehead,  
the masculine warmth of the handshakes after,  
nervous smiles: my only hope of salvation.

The dead do not tell us their secrets.

### **Notre Dame/Our Lady**

---

I pick up a candle in the cathedral  
near the niche of the Virgin of Guadalupe.  
I don't want anything to do with her,  
so I move down two pillars to the place  
of St. Charles, whoever he is.  
I get down on my knees, tourists crowds behind,  
not thinking that it will make any  
difference. Still, Charles is a good name—  
as good as any other—and it never hurts  
to ask. I don't care what they all think.  
I turn my back on the mass  
(singing *qui tolis* to the Lamb  
of God who takes away sins of the world)  
drop two euros in the box, light my flame  
to pray for someone else. Charles is my lady.  
The grey stone of the church floor  
is worn and damp. Medieval. Gothic arches  
reach halfway to the sky. Stained glass,  
white, yellow, red, green, blue,  
painted with black. Sooty statues,  
souvenir shops, winking candles.

In Bangladesh, there are a few Hindus.  
Once, I put my forehead to the ground  
before the white, graven image  
of a goddess there—I forget her name.  
No euros, no candles, one  
flower was enough. I took off  
my shoes, repeated Sanskrit the priest spoke,  
but didn't drink the white holy water  
he dribbled in my hands.  
Sometimes, I say Hail Marys naked  
in the steam room at my gym. I pray  
towards Mecca with Muslims when I can.  
Maybe I have a chance.

Anthony A. Lee teaches African American history at UCLA. His poems have been published in various journals, including *ONTHEBUS*, *The Homestead Review*, *Härter*, and *New Plains Review*. He is the winner of the Nat Turner Poetry Prize for 2003 (Cross Keys Press). His first book, *This Poem Means*, won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award for 2005 (Lotus Press). His translations have been published in *Táhirih: A Portrait in Poetry: Selected Poems of Qurratu'l-'Ayn* (Kalimát Press, 2004). He conducts a poetry workshop in Manhattan Beach, California.

<---Next Previous--->