

Praise for James Matthew Wilson

“Of our living poets—to my mind—no greater one exists than James Matthew Wilson.”

—**Bradley J. Birzer**, Russell Amos Kirk Chair in
American Studies at Hillsdale College

“James Matthew Wilson is the most conspicuously talented young poet-critic in American Catholic letters.”

—**Dana Gioia**, former California Poet Laureate and
Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts

Praise for *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*

“It was a delight to be absorbed by every one of these stunning poems. Each one is a work of exquisite depth, observation, complexity, and form. In each one, the poet touches on the biggest questions that face humanity, and gazes deep and long enough at his subject to thrill the reader with his sense of truth and meaning. Reading this book is an emotional and intellectual experience.”

—**Sally Read**, editor of *100 Great Catholic Poems*

“It’s been said that a poet is a man who, in a lifetime, manages to be struck by lightning five or six times. James Matthew Wilson has managed that in this one book. These poems are formally beautiful, humanly rich, intellectually strong, surprising and varied—even wise. All things we need just now in great abundance.”

—**Robert Royal**, Editor-in-Chief of *The Catholic Thing*

“‘The darkness’ is coming for us—the darkness of sin, of loss and of forgetfulness, of who we are and who God is. And yet, just when you want to shut the darkness out, James Matthew Wilson invites us to crack open our hearts ‘so truth may not die in the ear / But, suitably disguised, appear.’ Just when you think you know something—a lilac, a garden, the Church, a tow-truck driver—Wilson entices us to look closer. Within every created thing, person, or place dwells a mystery to behold, a surprise for us if we can stay attentive and humble. In *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*, Wilson offers us a holy resistance to the darkness coming—to swap our narrow and limited vision for eyes infused with grace.”

—**Colleen Hutt**, Director of Vision and Outreach,
Well-Read Mom

“James Matthew Wilson is a treasure. Without making demands, his sublime poetry beckons us softly to remember who we are: children of God in a miraculous world. In a harried age of forever ‘becoming,’ Wilson’s words invite us to rest awhile in the healing moments of simply ‘being.’ That is quite a balm for a reeling, uncertain world.”

—**Tod Worner**, Managing Editor of *Evangelization
& Culture*

Saint Thomas
AND THE
Forbidden Birds

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JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

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*For Hilary
Once Again*

Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer—
The vital union of necessity
With all that we desire, all that we suffer.

—Adrienne Rich

The Son of man, when he cometh, shall he find, think you,
faith on earth?

—Luke 18:8 (Douay-Rheims)

Contents

To an Unborn Child	1
PART I	
Self-Possession	5
The Garden	7
M.A.C.	9
Return to Saint Thomas	10
Lilacs	11
Twilight	12
Cracks	13
Ambition	15
Incense on the Air	18
O, Tamar	21
A Withered Tree	23
The Fishing Camp	24
The Darkness Coming	27
Teele Square Sunday Morning, Summer 2001	28
From <i>The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk</i>	30
Waking in Dresden	32
PART II	
Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds	37
The Wisdom of Old Men	39
A Wedding Night	40
First Light	41
The Death of Cicero	42

Register	44
Elegy for a Tow Truck Driver	46
The Great State of Alaska	48
In the Fullness of Rhyme	55
The Prow of the House	56
Remember	58
In the Holding Cell	60
The Weakness of Men	61
The Kitchen Stove	64
Fire Light	66
Sloth	67
 PART III 	
James' Book	73
For Russell Kirk	75
First Words	76
After a Line by Maurice Scève	78
Australia	79
Elizabeth to Her Cousin	82
Sunlight	84
An Encounter	85
For Martha	87
Seeds	88
By That Heart Known	90
At Season's End	92

High Seriousness	93
The Love of God	97
Snowfall	98
Vanished Fire	99

PART IV

Farewell to Berwyn	107
About the Author	109
Acknowledgments	110

To an Unborn Child

Storm clouds move in and darken all the house,
The morning paper on the kitchen table dim,
Where I've been reading some reporter's grouse
At things already bad, now growing grim.
Most of the prodigies agree with him.

I rise to light a lamp, and hear the thunder,
And watch the first drops thudding on the lawn.
Your mother joins me. Here we stand, in wonder,
Between the hour that marks your life's first dawn
And that one, still obscure, we're counting on.

I

We are not in the same place after all.
The only evidence of the disaster,
Mapping out across the bedroom wall.

—A.E. Stallings

When the second raid came at sunset, I was holding
a glass of burgundy with strawberries floating in it.
The city, with its red towers and domes, was a place
of stupendous beauty, like a calyx that they fly over to
accomplish their deadly act of pollination.

—Ernst Jünger

Self-Possession

This girl in heels walks by a mirror
And stops to sweep hair from her shoulder,
Then turns and goes, as if it's clear her
Fate is to be her own beholder,
And that glass in the hall grows clearer
With her approach, and dimmed and older
Deprived and emptied of the face
Whose visitation was its grace.

With a firm setting of his jaw,
And straightened back, the youth may steel
Himself against the threat of awe
To loose his flabby soul and peel
Away composure, lest some raw
Sensation rob him of what's real.
Thus armed and solid, he'd appear
To her whose beauty wanders near.

Others may call it all deceit:
The buoyant body, air of grace,
The mannered greeting, slow retreat
Of hands, the raised repose of face;
Those frail and viscous hearts that greet
The world lie hidden in a case,
Losing what life they seek to gain
Immured from all such honest pain.

But, heart, who wait in cloistral dark,
 And strive to beat in measured tune,
You lend the decent form its spark
 While it sustains you when you swoon,
Gives to thought's flight its well-aimed arc,
 And writes what from sense fades too soon,
So truth may not die in the ear
But, suitably disguised, appear.

The Garden

The grass beneath my step is dry and sifts
To ash as I trudge back to check the garden
For new growth. Far above, the sky's blank blue
Retreats before the fiery eye that rules it.
I know what all this is a symbol of;
My brother's lands are burning in the West.

But in the ordered bed of cedar ties
I built, then planted with an amateur's
Stupidity a dozen kinds of seeds,
All is grown wild and winding in profusion.
Tomato leaves overwhelm their rounded trellis
And trace on hand and lip a rich tobacco.
Cucumber vines, hollow and bristly, wind
Among the spreading pumpkins, back and forth,
Them both a mess of orange flower and fat leaf.
Their curling tendrils latch on any stem
In reach, and draw the anaheims and bells
Beneath a canopy to starve in shade.
They'd throttle everything, till, when they've grown
Too far from their first root, the ants will come
And nimbly trot the stiff and moldering veins
To suck the pestilential milk of aphids.

I clip them back, uncovering carrot fronds
Sprayed from their bald tops crowning in the soil.
I see dark melons spill their seedy guts.

Oh, yes, we lower our eyes from brilliant things,
When they stand glowering in their airy strangeness,
And think that little order we have made

Will shelter us—will do for all we need.
But what's sown from our hand grows well beyond
Such well-trimmed plotting and, in this, it tells
That every order—though the roots be slow,
And though leaves curl and wither in the noon—
Is rooted in a broader spread profusion
Than any easy measure we may make;
And which we don't defy or much improve
But stand, uncomprehending parts, within.

M.A.C.

East Lansing, Michigan

On either side, the highway's barren stretch
Is dwarfed by sweeping wastes of prairie grass,
Its pale dry leaves beneath dark heads of vetch
And clumps of sumac shimmering like glass.

To look on this, you'd think man had just come,
Bloomed with the Queen Anne's lace, and will not last;
What little he set down as soon succumb
To stands of pine and maple or wind's blast.

But, if you see the little streets erupt
On ancient marsh, the pool hall and brick church,
Where we boys grew both conscious and corrupt
Dispelling boredom, entering on the search

For just what sort of men we should become,
You'll learn the place is thick with ghosts, is haunted
By faces kissed, fists thrown, and words that drum
Through time, as we sought what it was we wanted.

Return to Saint Thomas

Here we are, with five children we've amassed,
The nave a bloated hull of tin, the cross
Dangling from double chains, its weight of loss
Moored in midair as listing decades passed.
A few gray heads, behind, recall a past
When that bright-sharded window cast a gloss
On pews packed full: however time's waves toss
The Church, it bears its people to the last.

That's not the obvious lesson it once seemed,
As I turn toward strange faces offering peace,
And fail to find those who were borne with me
Through all the sacraments, those taught to see,
In every fall, a chance to be redeemed,
Never suspecting prayer might simply cease.

Lilacs

You stand beneath the lilac bush at night
And smell her heavy blossoms, think, *ah, right,*
I've caught this scent a thousand times before,
Which, subtle though it is, you can't ignore.
It fills the mind and yet escapes it too,
As every mystery worth the name will do.
Perhaps that's why, like baby faces, ants,
The curious innards of a marshland's plants;
Like love songs or the neighbor's lab you pet,
No matter how familiar, we still get
A pulse of wonder and a hint of fear
That some ethereal visitant draws near.

Twilight

Raw and naïve, I was once told,
As a friend quietly marked her birthday,
She felt relief at growing old.

In youth, the weight of what's unknown
Overloads the pan and wrecks the scale,
Till life seems anxiousness alone.

No matter how much we may savor,
Writes Hobbes, still more lies round to fear:
War, want, or losing some god's favor.

Around her ever briefer rest,
The early autumn twilight fell
And time stood by in darkness dressed.

Cracks

I

The heads of maples filling in above,
She sets out on her daylight wanderings,
Some tarnished pennies stored in one old glove
She grips to feel its weight as her arm swings.

A jealous grip perhaps—and yet she's skipping
And humming notes that spread beyond all tune,
Her dress like floating clouds through green fields
slipping,
And eyes as brightened as a summer moon.

Along her way, she stops, from time to time,
To draw a penny from its woolen sack;
As if to plant the earth with what's sublime
She'll press it down within a sidewalk crack.

II

The guests expected and the kitchen warm
With ham and bubbling green bean casserole,
The woman turned and, taking up his arm,
Reminded him the table would be full.

She pressed the near end firmly to her side,
While he took hold and pulled upon the far,
To spread the surface outward on its slide
And make room for the leaf with inlaid star.

But as the cherry top was drawn apart,
They saw the grime of ancient apple sauce
And other seeping things, whose cunning art
Had hid their moldering as a grove does moss.

111

All fissures that run through our sunlit visions;
All chips in polished marble, nicks in paint;
All hints our logic covers up elisions
And every perfect surface is a feint;

All places out of reach beneath the stove,
Where ballpoint pens or uncooked rice have rolled;
Each pause in speech that opens like a cove
Between the easily said and the untold;

All darkness that's as painful as the light
To see and not see with the pulsing eye;
We feel your presences beyond our sight
And hear your breath beneath the May wind's cry.

Ambition

Halfway along in reading a new life
Of Dante, I'm still marveling at the man's
Conviction he's been set apart for greatness,
 Though of its form

He's still unsure. So far, in fact, he's marred
Most that he's tried and left the rest unfinished,
Promising nonetheless some lasting work
 Not yet begun.

I bend still closer to the page, my mind
Halting before a pride it can't quite fathom.
So it was with the climbing Dante, stopped,
 Hunched down, to speak

With the famed illustrator he found crawling
Beneath a marble tablet on the route
To purification. How he lingered there,
 Seeing his future.

He knew the punishment that he would suffer,
And suffer the more harshly for a vice
That strengthened him in flinty solitude and
 Humiliation.

However true it may be that his poem
Would never have been written had he not
Sealed off his soul from all discouragements,
 It's still a failing.

After all, time will show the difference
Between the soldier of true courage and
The one whose brazen recklessness would lead
 Men to their deaths.

The woman whom we think a connoisseur
Will soon enough be pegged as one that ooo's
At everything which sounds like foreign chocolate
 Or cellared wine.

Yes, there's a reason that Aquinas said
That all ambition is a sin. We can't,
While stiffened by that certitude it brings,
 See the cause clearly.

For, in the genius plotting intricate rhymes
To execrate the avarice and envy
Of those who burned his home and cast him out
 In wooded darkness,

Who passed a sentence on his children's heads,
And, in the gangly dancer without rhythm,
The politician with a taste for fame,
 It's all the same.

It's terrible that way, like power and beauty.
The mind can hover over its abyss,
Can hear the cataract roaring from below,
 And see its force

Shaping the rough stone of the world about us.
But there's no prior assurance; just the late
Judgment, once we're past change and stooped to read
 Our life's spread book.