

LA FLORA

## Beauty and Grace

A letter to the listener

*Before you begin — The meditations were written to be met without explanation. If you have not yet listened to the album, you may want to do that first. The letter will be here when you want to know more. But there is no wrong order — some find the meditations deeper once they trust where the album is taking them.*

“Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.” This is what Annie Dillard recognized in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Even when no one is looking, the world keeps doing beautiful things. The flower opens. The wind moves the leaves. The moon shines. None of it stops just because nobody is watching — and none of it began because anybody wished for it.

The word *will*, here, is a verb: to want, to summon by desire. Dillard is closing both doors at once. Beauty and grace don't need our wishing, and they don't need our witnessing. They are performed anyway.

The album takes its title — and its whole argument — from Dillard. Beauty and grace are not produced by our noticing. They were not waiting for us to be ready. They are performed — by the world, by the body, by what arrives, by love — and they have been arriving for the whole of a life. The meditations are seven invitations to be there, more often, for what has been performed.

The album came to me through a song.

There are voices a person carries through every chapter of their life. Sinéad O'Connor is one of mine. Her song *Thank You for Hearing Me* closed the seventh meditation of *The Sublime*, the album before this one. When I sat with what would follow that close, the song I kept returning to was a different one of hers — *This Is to Mother You*. Sinéad performing the mothering she names — doing the holding, not pointing at it from a distance. I wanted to write meditations that would do, for the listener's body, what that song does for mine.

*Beauty and Grace* is the finding of that. An attempt to gravitate toward the feeling of being held without conditions and entirely — from seven angles, in seven different voices, none of them Sinéad's and none of them quoting her. Sinéad's sentiment is the album's center of gravity. Dillard's sentence is its spine. Between them, the album walks the listener through what has been performing the whole time.

*A brief note for those arriving here without context: La Flora is a contemplative practice — a library of guided meditations, organized into albums, and a newsletter called Field Notes. Beauty and Grace is the fourth album. The letter you are reading or listening to is its companion.*

One more thing to name before the meditations begin. The album opens and closes inside the same six clauses, written in 1373 by an English anchoress called Julian of Norwich. The mantra reads:

*All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

Julian received the mantra after a near-death illness in which she had what she called showings — visions she then spent decades of her life meditating on and writing down. The mantra was the deepest of them. Six centuries later, T.S. Eliot received the mantra into *Little Gidding*, the closing poem of his *Four Quartets*, written from inside the London Blitz.

The Blitz was Germany's sustained bombing campaign against Britain in World War II — London was bombed for 57 nights in a row at the start. This is the context Eliot was inside when he wrote *Little Gidding*, the poem

that lifts Julian's mantra. He was serving as an air raid warden in London — walking the streets at night during the raids, helping people, watching the fires. That a man on those streets, in that hour, reached back six centuries to Julian's mantra — *all shall be well* — and meant it, is part of what gives the mantra the weight it carries in the album.

### *Track 1*

*All Shall Be Well* draws entirely from Julian. The meditation strips the explicit Christian framing — God, Lord, Christ — and keeps the single agent Julian named: love. Tender love. The love that does the holding.

The mantra returns five times across the meditation in its standard three-line form, then a sixth time at the close. Between the mantras, four interludes from Julian's chapters. The hazelnut in the palm of a hand, which is the whole world, lasting because it is loved. The wrapping that is closer than clothing and closer than the air. The three properties of the hazelnut — made, loved, kept — applied to the listener. The least thing, which has not been forgotten.

The deep promise the mantra makes is not the familiar consolation, “this too shall pass”. It is something different: *this is held even while it lasts*. A listener in grief hearing the mantra — *all shall be well* — is not being promised restoration. It is a reminder that something has been carrying them inside the loss. The pain is real and so is what holds it.

The meditation closes without a blessing. The mantra is the closing. The listener stays inside it and returns to the world on their own time.

### *Track 2*

*Into Your Presence* sits inside two voices. Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic, wrote in 1942 a letter to the paralyzed poet Joë Bousquet that contained this line: “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”. Weil spent her short life arguing that attention — full, non-grasping, undefended — is the highest form of love, and that taken to its deep-

est degree, it is the same thing as prayer.

The Irish poet John O'Donohue, in *Anam Cara*, wrote: “the senses are generous pathways that can bring you home”. The meditation’s title comes from the same passage.

What the meditation does is to name what the body has been doing all along. Receiving the world — through breath, through skin, through hearing — without effort. That receiving has a name. Attention. Looked at more carefully, it is also a form of love. Looked at further still, prayer. None of these names is invented. They have only been waiting for the body to be told what it has been doing.

### *Track 3*

*Moments Time Cannot Erase* turns the recognition outward. After two meditations of being received, the third asks the listener to recall a moment when they received another — when, for once, they saw the person past their own version of them.

Iris Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good*, wrote of “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality”. The meditation walks the listener into the kind of moment she means — when the version we carry of someone slips, and they are simply there. Weil returns inside the meditation’s deepest landing: “the capacity to give attention to another person”, she wrote, “is almost a miracle”. Nick Cave, in *The Red Hand Files*, added a contemporary voice to the same recognition: “love enacts a kind of vigilant perception”.

What the meditation names is that the looking and the love were the same act. The listener has done this — perhaps once, perhaps many times — and what arrived in their looking was, all along, love.

### *Track 4*

*A rose is a rose is a rose* lifts its title from Gertrude Stein. The meditation’s

center, though, is Clarice Lispector. In the book *Água Viva*, Lispector wrote of the rose: “her perfume is a crazy mystery; when inhaled deeply it touches the intimate depth of the heart and leaves the inside of the entire body perfumed”. For Lispector the rose is not a symbol. She is herself. She gives herself wholly, asks nothing in return, and is the same rose whether the listener arrives or doesn’t.

The meditation walks the listener through remembered gifts — a peach somewhere, water cool on hot skin, light at a particular hour, the scent of a rose they have, at some point, leaned toward — and lands at the recognition that the world has been giving itself to their body, through the senses, for the whole of their life. The meditation’s deepest sentence arrives late and quietly: *you have been receiving grace all your life*. The word *grace* — which gives the album its title — surfaces here for the first time. After the body has felt the accumulation.

### *Track 5*

*The Grace of the World* lifts its title from Wendell Berry’s book *The Peace of Wild Things*. The meditation’s structural source is Mary Oliver — the closing of her *Wild Geese* poem, which ends: “over and over announcing your place in the family of things”.

The meditation works through five wild things the listener has known from above. A bird’s call they could not see. Wind in high leaves. Rain in the leaves before it reached their face. Light through branches. A star, waiting. Each was alive. Each was overhead. Each, without telling them, was speaking their name. They have, their whole life, been one of the things the world addresses. They have always had a place.

Berry’s phrase — “grace of the world” — is not given as reward. It is the state the body rests inside once it recognizes the addressing has been happening the whole time.

## Track 6

*From the Shimmering Leaves* is the meditation Sinéad's song made possible. The whole album was reaching toward what this meditation says.

The song *This Is to Mother You*, from her *Gospel Oak* EP, does not appear inside the meditation. Sinéad's voice is not quoted. Her title is not lifted. What I tried to take from her was the felt quality of her voice doing the mothering — performing the holding it names, not gesturing at it from a distance. The song's verses that name the wound — lines like “what your own mother didn't do” — are kept out. The album's principle is no naming of the lack. The mothering simply is, has been, all along.

The meditation opens inside Sappho's Fragment 2, *written more than two and a half thousand years ago* — a sacred grove with apple trees, frankincense, roses shadowing the ground, and the line that gives the meditation its title: “from the shimmering leaves the sleep of enchantment comes down”. Inside the grove, the meditation moves into the body's first remembering of being held — the blanket pulled over you in some long-ago bed, the arms that closed around you once, the pillow last night. Then an accumulation of mothering across the listener's life, most of it not from people. The sun. The wind. The rain. Bath water. Steam from a cup. Bread. A dream. An animal. A hand on their hair.

At the meditation's center, the recognition: *This has all been mothering. You have been mothered.* Hildegard of Bingen, twelfth-century visionary, arrives in a single line — “love abounds in all things”. Julian returns through the no-blame texture: nothing in the listener has ever been blamed; nothing they did or didn't do has stopped what holds them. And the meditation lands its deepest sentiment: *you are inside something that has no name but love.*

## Track 7

*And Know the Place for the First Time* closes the album. The title is lifted from T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*. He received Julian's mantra into his poem — folding six centuries of her words into his own catastrophe.

The meditation walks the listener back to the ordinary place they began the album in. Their own breath. Their own surface beneath them. Their own ordinary day. There is no grove, no flower, no external image. Four ordinary particulars the body has known — the arms that closed around you once, the voice you could not see but heard, the hand on your hair, the light through a window on an ordinary morning — quietly echo the album without naming any earlier meditation.

And then, late in the meditation, the recognition the whole album has been reaching toward: *the love that has been with you all along did not leave when the burning came*. The fire — what burned, what took, what grieved — and the rose — what bloomed, what opened, what arrived — came from the same source. The same love that mothered was inside what hurt as well. It did not leave.

Annie Dillard arrives, finally, in her own words at the meditation's *Field Note* — the sentence that has been underneath the album from the beginning: “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them”.

And the mantra returns. Julian's mantra, carried by Eliot. The same six clauses the album opened in. The listener is back in the same words. The walk is what has changed.

*That is the album.*

I want to say something about what it refuses, because the refusals are as much a part of the work as the writing.

The meditations do not give instructions for posture, breath, or attention. They do not tell the listener what to feel. They do not promise transformation. They do not use the worn vocabulary of contemporary mindfulness — no *letting go*, no *presence as practice*, no *noticing without judgment* — not because those phrases are wrong, but because they have been worn so smooth they no longer touch anything. They do not name the wound.

They do not compare what is happening with what was missing. The mothering simply has been. No contrast. No instruction.

And the meditations stay quiet about themselves. The listener is not told what each one is about, what tradition it descends from, or what they should take away. This letter is the one place where the explanation happens. The meditations have to stay quiet. The explanations are what would prevent the recognition from landing in the body.

The seven meditations gather seven angles of the same recognition. Held. Attending. Seeing. Received. Addressed. Mothered. Recognized. The verbs migrate; the recognition deepens; the source — what has been performing the whole time — is the same.

I want to name two debts at the close of this letter.

The first is to Sinéad O'Connor. The song *This Is to Mother You* gave the album its emotional center. She closed the album before this one. She seeded the album after it.

The second is to Annie Dillard, for the sentence that named what the album knew before it began: “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them”.

The album closes the way it opens. Inside Julian’s mantra. The listener may have learned, in the walking, that the mantra was never a promise of restoration. It was a recognition of what has been holding the whole time.

You may stay.

— Iara

[ Listen ]

— All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well —

