

# To Build a Trail

ESSAYS ON CURIOSITY, LOVE & WONDER

Paul J. Willis

**WordFarm**  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

WordFarm  
334 Lakeside Ave S, #207  
Seattle, WA 98144  
[www.wordfarm.net](http://www.wordfarm.net)

Copyright © 2018 by Paul J. Willis

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of WordFarm. All rights reserved with these exceptions:

The poem "Salvatore" (p. 29), is from *Getting to Gardisky Lake* by Paul J. Willis (Nacogdoches, TX: Stephen F. Austin State University Press). Copyright © 2016 by Paul J. Willis. Used by permission.

The poems "Assessment" (p. 105), "Lost and Found" (p. 82), "FDNY" (p. 123), and On the 225th Year of Mission Santa Barbara" (p. 125) are from *Say This Prayer into the Past* by Paul J. Willis (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books). Copyright © 2013 by Paul J. Willis. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

The excerpt from "A Going" (p. 152) is from *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me, and Other Poems* by Ghassan Zaqtan, translated by Fady Joudah (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). Copyright © 2012 by Yale University Press. Translation copyright © 2012 by Fady Joudah. Originally published in *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me* (Beirut, Lebanon: Riad El-Rayyes Books). Copyright © 2008 by Ghassan Zaqtan. Used by permission.

The excerpt from "Atlas" (p. 153) is from *The Earth in the Attic* by Fady Joudah (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). Copyright © 2008 by Fady Joudah. Used by permission.

USA ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-020-7

USA ISBN-10: 1-60226-020-6

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: 2018

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Willis, Paul J., 1955-

Title: To build a trail : essays on curiosity, love, and wonder / Paul J. Willis.

Other titles: Essays on curiosity, love, and wonder

Description: Seattle, WA : WordFarm, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017058292 (print) | LCCN 2018001529 (ebook) | ISBN 9781602260207 (pbk.) | ISBN 1602260206 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781602264274 (ebook) | ISBN 1602264279 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Willis, Paul J., 1955- | Life cycle, Human. | Life change events. | Self-realization. | College teachers--United States--Biography. | Poets, American--California--Biography.

Classification: LCC PS3573.I456555 Z46 2018 (ebook) | LCC PS3573.I456555 (print) | DDC 818/.5409 [B]--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018001529>

---

P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Y 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

# Contents

Into the Wilderness .....	13
I. CURIOSITY	
Gumdrops .....	19
The Shirt on Our Backs .....	25
Remembering Those We Forget .....	29
Piano Lessons .....	33
Here, Mr. Hoerth .....	37
Hitchin' a Ride .....	43
Can't You See Lear? .....	49
Epiphany at Patsy Clark's .....	55
II. LOVE	
To Build a Trail .....	59
Trail Maintenance .....	69
A Meditation for Ash Wednesday .....	75
Poems Lost, Poems Found .....	79
By Any Other Name .....	85
How Are You, My Friend? .....	89
III. WONDER	
The Place .....	95

Assessment .....	105
A Letter to the Faculty .....	107
The Sixth Chapter of Acts.....	111
The Garrison Keillor Koan.....	115
What's a Laureate to Do? .....	119

#### IV. GRATITUDE

My First Summer in the Sierra .....	129
Three Old Ones .....	133
A Meditation for Good Friday .....	141
A Century Past "The Soldier" .....	145
An Evening with the Palestinian Poets .....	151
My Date with Mary Oliver.....	157
Notes .....	163
Acknowledgments .....	169
Thanks .....	171
About the Author .....	173

We get no good  
By being ungenerous, even to a book,  
And calculating profits—so much help  
By so much reading. It is rather when  
We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge  
Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound,  
Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth—  
'Tis then we get the right good from a book.

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

# Into the Wilderness

**IN THE COLLEGE WHERE I TEACH** there is now an Office of Educational Effectiveness—which, to increase its Orwellian elegance, may as well be called the Office of Efficacious Educational Effectiveness. I have suggested we ban the term *educational effectiveness* and replace it with the word *learning*.

But what do I know?

The administrators in this office are dead set on measuring student learning outcomes, as they call them. As far as I can tell, measurable student learning outcomes are a figment of the utilitarian imagination. But the federal government and our accrediting agency believe in them—they very much believe in them—so we are told that we must believe in them as well. It so happens that the abbreviation for student learning outcome, SLO, is the same as that for a neighboring town, San Luis Obispo. I do believe in San Luis Obispo, so that is a start, I suppose.

I have a tendency to stand up in faculty meetings and start and stammer and blush and say that we are in danger of unweaving the rainbow—that, for all our efforts to quantify them, teaching and learning remain a mysterious art, not an exact science. “I am not data!” I once announced. “My students are not data! I am so tired of hearing about data!” Then there was a long silence, and I was

conscious of having said something overwrought and maybe even very stupid.

But this is an issue that does not go away for me. I lie in bed making up speeches to the faculty and administration. One of them goes like this: “Do we want to be a college? Do we want to be a liberal arts college? Do we want to be a Christian liberal arts college? Or do we want to be some junior varsity version of IBM!” (*Thunderous applause.*)

Just recently I had a full year off from teaching, perhaps my last sabbatical before I retire. For several months I served as an artist-in-residence in North Cascades National Park. My whole job there was to hike around and write poems about what I saw—which I did, with abandon. (Your tax dollars at work!) But I also found myself, in between poems, writing and recovering essays that seemed to be about learning—the kinds of learning I have done over a now lengthening lifetime. Some of this learning has happened in the official capacity of student or teacher; some of it on the sly.

None of this learning can tolerate the confines of San Luis Obispo. In some cases it has taken thirty, forty, or fifty years to arrive at a kernel or narrative of halfway decent reflection. I found myself noting in one particular essay that curiosity, love, and wonder always take circuitous paths toward understanding. I have made those circuitous paths quite literal in a Byzantine system of trails that I have built in the wilder parts of our California campus. And curiosity, love, and wonder have become convenient guides on the wandering path of this manuscript. And gratitude appears on the horizon as well—gratitude for new and immeasurable understandings.

David Warren, President of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, recently said, “Why are we letting the data geeks determine how we value an education? It’s not a quantifiable product.” I copied that quote in an email to our administration and heard back, at length and within thirty minutes, from our president, provost, and associate provost. I must have hit

a tender spot.

Where do I come by these convictions? It may not be an accident that I planned this collection of essays while living in a national park. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to the presence of mountains and forests. My childhood home in Corvallis, Oregon, was built on the city limits. From our backyard, we looked across a dip of pasture to a tall ridge of Douglas fir in the Coast Range. On summer evenings, fresh winds from the ocean blew through those Doug firs, and I took this as an invitation, sometimes hiking alone for a day or two just to see what was there in the university-owned forest.

In high school my older brother and I began climbing the volcanic peaks of the Cascades, which we could also see from our house, east across the Willamette Valley. Then, in college, we began guiding wilderness trips together in the Sierra Nevada, the Trinity Alps, the Wallowa Mountains—as well as in the Cascade Range. And, eventually, we both became involved in grueling, on-the-ground political efforts to save and preserve wilderness (he to a much greater degree, but I have had a taste of it).

All this must have informed my teaching. I think of a poem, a play, a class as a wilderness area full of unanticipated delights. Recently a friend and I went on a two-week backpack trip without a map, and this suited us just fine. “The freshness, the freedom, the farness,” writes Robert Service—“O God! how I’m stuck on it all.”

If a classroom is like a wilderness area, I do not want to presume that I know what we will find there together. So I do not like to over-script my syllabi. I especially do not want to be in the fraudulent business of predicting measurable student learning outcomes. The classroom is not a factory—it’s a wilderness area. That is the metaphor I carry within me. You can calculate the number of board feet of timber in a forest, but once you have done that, it’s no longer a forest—it’s a pile of lumber on the ground. We need to step lightly on the path, be alert to what lies in wait beyond every switchback,



TO BUILD A TRAIL

every silent turn of the page, every hand that is not quite raised.

“Well,” I say as a teacher. “Will you look at that . . .”

But to all of you data geeks in the Offices of Efficacious Educational Effectiveness Everywhere, let me say that I am grateful even for you. Were it not for the irritations you daily provide, I might never have ventured quite so consciously upon these musings. (And were it not for the irritations I daily provide to you as well, your own lives would perhaps be much less interesting.) Also, it is just possible that in your feeble heart of hearts you do want people to learn, and that in my febrile heart of hearts I want people to learn too, so we might still have something in common. So, though I refuse to fill out your surveys and chart your charts and graph your graphs, I hope you will accept the outcome of these meandering essays.

In other words, peace be with you.

But also with me.

# I. Curiosity

*Stories are not multiplication tables, and we relish them for  
their diverse and unpredictable effects.*

— DANIEL TAYLOR

# Gumdrops

**ONE DAY, IN THE WINTER** of my sixth-grade year, our old and discontented teacher, Miss Weir, informed us we would now take out our pencils and each write a story for the *Corvallis Gazette-Times* George Washington's Birthday Tall Tale Contest—though the tales could not be all that tall, given the fact that they had to be fifty words or less. We all knew the one about the cherry tree—but that was true, wasn't it? So we scratched our heads and went to work. Because, according to Miss Weir, there was money to be had if we won. How much, she didn't say.

This is what I wrote:

One night, a Tory at Yorktown filled American guns with black gumdrops. In the morning, when Washington ordered his men to charge and fire, gumdrops emerged instead of bullets. Greedy British soldiers gobbled them up and fell to the ground with bellyaches. Cornwallis thought his men were dead and surrendered.

It is not hard to guess where this story came from. In grade school I liked to read about the Revolutionary War, and I also liked to eat gumdrops, and they must have given me stomachaches from time to time. So with great imaginative flair I connected these

experiences—at the same time finding a way to make the father of our country an accidental pacifist.

So we turned in our stories, and Miss Weir delivered them to the *Gazette-Times*, and we all promptly forgot about them. Until, just before Washington's birthday, Miss Weir announced to the class right after lunch that I had won the contest. I was filled with amazement and pride, and several days later my prize-winning fiction was published in the newspaper under the title "A Sweet Way to Win a War." Then the United Press International scooped it up and splashed it around the country as filler. And then, according to several neighbors, Paul Harvey himself ended his midday news broadcast with the tale—no doubt adding at the end, as he always did, "And now you know . . . the rest of the story."

This was 1967. The war in Vietnam was of course well underway. I had only the vaguest ideas about this—or, perhaps, none at all. But our country needed every distraction it could lay its hands on. And I happened to be one of them.

It wasn't the injustice of the Vietnam War that eventually got my attention, however; it was an injustice that emerged in our very classroom. A few days after my brush with literary fame, I put up my hand and asked Miss Weir, "Isn't there some sort of prize money I'm supposed to be getting?"

Miss Weir pursed her gravely over-lipsticked lips and said, "The prize for the contest is five dollars. But since your story was part of a class project, I am keeping that money in my desk on behalf of the entire class."

Then she opened her desk drawer, removed a five-dollar bill, and held it aloft for all to see. And then she put it back. And gave me a glassy stare.

The classroom got very quiet.

But out on the playground, the verdict was given. "Miss Weir is being Miss Weird. You got robbed, man."

Which is how I felt myself. But out of some high-mindedness,

gained perhaps in Sunday School at the First Baptist Church, I decided not to complain.

But that didn't make things any better. From that day on, for reasons I have never fathomed, Miss Weir declared war on me. And she wasn't using black gumdrops. No, she used big, fat, red *F*s on my assignments, whenever she could manage them. Outline for a report? *F*. Snowflake design? *F*. Notebook organization? *F*. She couldn't get away with it on spelling tests and math quizzes, since I got most every word and problem right and naturally could prove it. But give her a little wiggle room and she became wicked.

I remember trying to tell my mother that Miss Weir did not like me.

"It can't be that bad," she said.

And then, one day, Miss Weir reported to the class after lunch that someone—and here she paused and looked at me—*someone* had stolen the five-dollar bill from her desk. "Now who might that someone be?" she asked.

Out on the playground, everyone said, "The five dollars is yours to begin with. It wasn't really stealing."

But I hadn't taken it, and said so. Face flaming. Hardly anyone believed me. Least of all, Miss Weir.

How the spring played out I can't recall. Miss Weir must have eventually stopped doling out those *F*s, perhaps because of a clandestine parent-teacher conference. Deep down, my mother may have believed me and done what she could to put a stop to bad behavior.

But the more I thought about Miss Weir, the more I hated her in my heart. I nursed my grudge for a long time. And, finally, vengeance was mine.

My opportunity came almost a year later, when I was in the seventh grade. I had come back to the elementary school on a Saturday morning to watch my younger brother play in a basketball game. The game, I suppose, was not all that interesting—or, perhaps,

I was not all that interested. For, halfway through, I slipped away from the shouts in the gym and tiptoed down a hallway to the classrooms of the upper grades. It was very quiet. I told myself I was just looking, just visiting old haunts. I was so much older now. How interesting to reflect back on former days.

Then I came to the door of Miss Weir's sixth-grade classroom. I turned the knob. It opened. And I went inside. And then I knew why I had come. Holding my breath, I walked to the main blackboard, lifted a piece of chalk from the tray, and proceeded to scrawl, in letters as large as I could manage, WE HATE MISS WEIR. Then, for a stereo effect, I did the same on a second blackboard on the other side of the room. And then, for the *coup de grace*, I opened the door to her private closet behind her desk and took out a soft pair of slippers—the ones she put on at the end of the day when she thought we were not looking. The ones to ease the aches and pains and corns and bunions on her elderly, swollen feet. Then I opened the top drawer of her desk, the drawer that had once held the contested five-dollar bill, and found a box of straight pins for posting bulletin-board displays. I dumped half of the box into the toe of her right slipper and half of the box into the toe of her left—where they couldn't be seen, only felt. Then I put the slippers back in her closet. And snuck back out of the room.

I never heard how Miss Weir took it when she got to her classroom that Monday, so there wasn't much triumph to my private act of vandalism. I could imagine, of course, her astonishment and anger upon seeing those messages on the blackboards. And the sudden pain of merging her toes with all those straight pins later on in the afternoon. But for some reason I didn't like thinking about it. My perfect hate crime gave me very little pleasure. I had told myself I was getting even. But all I got was ashamed.

Now that I am as old as Miss Weir was when she was my teacher, and now that I am a teacher as well, I know how little it takes to become locked in conflict with a colleague or a student for reasons



GUMDROPS

that deepen and multiply in the imagination. I know the twinge of envy that I sometimes feel when a younger friend or protégé wins a prize or writes a poem that surpasses any I might win or write myself. And was that it? Was Miss Weir jealous? Had she entered the contest herself? Had she nurtured aspirations as a writer for many a year—aspirations that never met with recognition?

I will never know, of course. But I do know, finally, like Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, that there is no real pleasure in meanness. At a school in which I used to teach, I once expressed myself in a way that so upset one of our administrators that she checked herself into the hospital for two days.

Maybe she found Miss Weir there too.

In my next life, my better life, I will go and visit them there, and bring them flowers. And gumdrops.

# The Shirt on Our Backs

## Common Ground

Today I dug an orange tree out of the damp, black earth.  
My grandfather bought a grove near Anaheim  
at just my age. Like me, he didn't know much.  
*How'd you learn to grow oranges, Bill?*  
friends said. *Well, he said, I look at what*

*my neighbor does, and I just do the opposite.*

Up in Oregon, he and his brother discovered  
the Willamette River. They were both asleep  
on the front of the wagon, the horses stopped,  
his brother woke up. *Will, he said, am it a river?*

My grandfather, he cooked for the army during the war,  
the first one. He flipped the pancakes up the chimney,  
they came right back through the window onto the griddle.  
In the Depression he worked in a laundry during the night,  
struck it rich in pocketknives. My grandfather,



he liked to smoke in his orange grove, as far away  
on the property as he could get from my grandmother,  
who didn't approve of life in general, him in particular.  
Smoking gave him something to feel disapproved for,  
set the world back to rights. Like everyone else,

my grandfather sold his grove to make room  
for Disneyland. He laughed all the way to the bank,  
bought in town, lived to see his grandsons born  
and died of cancer before anyone wanted him to, absent  
now in the rootless presence of damp, black earth.

Growing up, my brothers and I shared and thus fought over an  
olive-green wool shirt with clumsy buttons. It was our grandfather's,  
from the First World War, and thus a prize. But it was also very  
scratchy, and so more often admired than worn. Also, it was too  
big for any of us.

Our grandfather was a Fleischman whose parents came from  
East Prussia, where many of his fifteen brothers and sisters had been  
born. They emigrated in part to avoid the draft under Bismarck, and  
now here they were, farming in the Willamette Valley of Oregon,  
and called up to fight against the speakers of their native tongue. I  
don't believe our grandfather made it past Fort Lewis, in Washington,  
mustered in and mustered out before he could be shipped overseas.

Still, the olive-green shirt held a kind of romance for all of us.  
We put it on to play army in the woods, and later on to backpack in  
the rain and snow of the Cascades. By the time we were through  
with it, oversized and scratchy as it may have been, the shirt had  
become a tattered rag.

I think the shirt also attracted us because we had not really  
known our grandfather—he died when the oldest of us was not yet  
five years old. Even so, my earliest memory, before even the age of  
two, concerns him. In the living room of our grandparents' home

in Anaheim, California, our grandfather had a favorite chair—a green stuffed rocker. Dark-green, as I recall, and not over-stuffed but lean and scuffed, with a worn, white doily at the head. During one particular family gathering, he left the room briefly, and I crawled up into the dark-green chair by myself. When he came back, he made a generous to-do about my being in his place, and I became the center not only of his attention but also of the entire room's.

I wonder now if my climbing into my grandfather's chair and my wearing of my grandfather's shirt were each an attempt to become this person who must have been so kind to us all. In her most recent birthday card to me, my 89-year-old aunt wrote that a few days after her father had died, I walked over to that green chair and looked at its emptiness in confusion—and that the sight of this made everyone else very sad.

Knowing him in my bones, then, but not really knowing him, I have been an eager collector of stories about my grandfather. Some of these I put in the poem "Common Ground." The poem begins with an anecdote about his moving to Anaheim to cultivate an orange grove: "*How'd you learn to grow oranges, Bill?* / friends said. *Well,* he said, *I look at what // my neighbor does, and I just do the opposite.*" So matter-of-fact. So self-effacing. And yet there is a definite self, being asserted.

Long after I wrote this poem, my aunt told me another story. Soon after they had arrived in Anaheim, one Sunday, when the morning service had just let out and people were talking amiably on the steps of the church, a man happened to say he'd heard that up in Portland, they rolled up the sidewalks every evening at six o'clock. "I wouldn't know," my grandfather said. "I was always in bed by then."

Our grandfather had moved to Anaheim because he had married a girl from there, an Urbigkeit, and she had nagged him until he agreed to bring their family out of the rain in Oregon and back to southern California. This was during the Depression, and once they got there the ten-acre orange grove wasn't enough to support them.

So he worked for a laundry during the nights and, in his optimistic way, “struck it rich in pocket knives.”

But they didn’t completely escape the rain. One winter, the torrents came and the house flooded, and he carried his children, one at a time, waist-deep through the orange grove to higher ground. Perhaps that is the image I like best—a little like those nineteenth-century paintings of Jesus, carrying the lambs in his bosom.

Is it possible that our parents and grandparents still carry us, still enfold us in their arms, long after they’re dead and gone? My mother, who made that trip across the brown floodwaters in his embrace, has now crossed that final flood by herself, and sometimes I feel that my brothers and I are left here in the rapids alone, trying to carry the ones who have in turn been entrusted to us. But that grim feeling ignores the fact that in having been carried we still are carried, in memory if not in actual, tangible presence. The olive-green shirt, though worn to rags, still rests upon our shoulders, and the dark-green chair, though empty, is full.

# Remembering Those We Forget

## Salvatore

It was the mile we ran together.  
I had some grace in the way I did it,  
or so I imagined, but you  
were the angular plodder, always staring  
down the lane to where you would be,  
following me across the line.

Afterward, nobody spoke to you on the bus—  
your thick black hair, your stony face,  
your dark shoes big as a circus.  
On a back road, we watched you disappear  
into an unpainted house with walls  
made of rain and blackberry vines.

Senior year, you moved  
into an old hotel down by the river.

With some girl. The carpet in the hallway  
there was stained with sourness and smoke.  
On Christmas Day, I left a red  
Swiss Army knife beside your door.

Sal, did I know you? I remember  
your hard breathing, just behind  
my right shoulder, the inexorable  
slap of your feet in those flat  
and broken tennis shoes as they cut  
at my heels around each bend.

I began the poem “Salvatore” in a California ranger station at the suggestion of Paulann Petersen, the former poet laureate of Oregon. I had invited her down to Santa Barbara to lead a couple of writing workshops, to give a reading, and to participate in a memorial observance of the poet William Stafford. Stafford served from 1942–46 in a variety of civilian public service camps as a conscientious objector, and two of those years were spent at a camp in the mountains behind Santa Barbara. Every winter, around the time of his birthday, a few of us gather to read some of his poems there, and this time Paulann joined us.

Bill Stafford was a good friend of hers, and in one of her workshops she used his poems to get us writing our own. The Stafford poem that got mine started was called “At Liberty School.” It’s a memory poem from his boyhood in Kansas, about a girl in one of his classes that nobody knew very well: “Girl in the front row who had no mother / and went home every day to get supper, / the class became silent when you left early.”

Paulann asked us to think about someone from childhood who essentially went unnoticed, and the person who came to my mind was an awkward Italian boy named Salvatore. I can’t remember his last name. I believe his father was a brilliant but poverty-stricken

professor at the local university in the Oregon town where I grew up. Salvatore was the opposite of excitable; he was quiet, brooding, and deliberate. We ran track together in high school, and though I was a little bit faster, he was usually right on my shoulder, and we developed a silent sort of companionship. As I look back, however, I wonder, of course, how well I really knew him. My father also taught at the university, but we were not poor, and all of us in our family experienced a basic level of social confidence and social acceptance. For me, it was probably hard to imagine what it was like to be without these gifts of fortune.

William Stafford was also poor (or close to it) when growing up, and moved enough from town to town to often be the new kid on the block. He might have had a greater sensitivity to outcasts than I did. From early on he developed a habit and ethic of “standing with” a person who was bullied or ignored, whether that person was the black elevator man in his poem “Serving with Gideon” or simply a taunted child on the playground. I’m not sure I had that habit, but I think of the poem that I have written about Salvatore as a kind of “standing with” across time. The gesture—or act, if you will—is belated, to be sure, but I hope it is no less genuine, and perhaps, even, in the way that prayer might be, efficacious.

# Piano Lessons

**I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL**, a sophomore maybe, and had briefly revived an interest in learning to play the piano. Or perhaps my mother had revived it for me—I don't recall. In any case, this was my last grasp at the keyboard. In grade school I had tried and quit, disheartened by a thin, ever-vigilant woman who, when I did not play up to her standards, made me stay after the lesson in a corner of her living room and copy out notes from the masters onto a blank set of staves. Her masters were people like Mozart, Bach, and Bartók. My mother wanted me to learn to play hymns by Fanny Crosby; she and the teacher not so subtly fought about this.

But now, in high school, a young and lovely pastor's daughter from a neighboring town had moved to ours with her curly-haired Adonis husband. They lived in a falling-down two-story rental across from the church, and every Sunday afternoon I would ride my bike down the hill, knock on their rusted screen door, and repair with her to the sanctuary, where I would practice psalms and hymns and spiritual songs while she sat patiently beside me on the polished wooden bench.

One afternoon—it must have been spring, the warm air laden with blossoms—I banged my bike over curb, mounted the decaying steps, and knocked on the screen door. No one came. But the

wooden door behind the screen was wide open, and floating out of the upstairs window over the porch came murmuring, commingled sounds.

“*Oooh*,” said the Adonis husband.

“Darling,” said she.

I should have left, of course, but this was my appointed hour. People have obligations to meet, I told myself, and I didn’t want to pedal my bike back up the hill without a lesson to show for it. So I knocked again—louder this time.

The murmuring from the window ceased.

“Darling, someone’s at the door.”

“*Oooh*,” said her husband.

“Oh, no,” said she. “I forgot! The lesson!”

“*Oooh*,” said her husband.

“I will come back, I promise,” said she. “Darling, I will.”

And then she came slipping down the stairs and appeared at the door in all of her raven-haired, disheveled glory, full of the promise of fruition, and I—I had no words at all for the shifting chords beneath my belly. But the pastor’s daughter accompanied me that golden, flowery afternoon across the street to the sanctuary, where we sat in the gloom at the dark piano while I stumbled through my thousand tongues, her ripening thigh resting inches from my own, her gaze directed into the far corners of that cavernous room.

I believe that I quit again soon after that, lured away by science and football and snow-capped mountains and the many other things of this world. And was it worth it, the time that I spent with my hands on those keys, the time that I stole from that beautiful couple, so young and so fresh in the bloom of their marriage?

A year or so later, a friend and I found the pastor’s daughter completely alone in a backcountry meadow at the foot of Mt. Jefferson. Her husband had ventured onto the peak all by himself, and she was starting to worry about him. “Don’t,” we said. But I already knew from experience that Mt. Jefferson was a very





PIANO LESSONS

dangerous peak indeed. He must have made it down safely, though, for we never heard otherwise. But that, I think, was the last time I saw her, a damsel slightly in distress, still lovely as ever, and in need of someone other than me.

# About the Author

**PAUL J. WILLIS** is a professor of English at Westmont College and a former poet laureate of Santa Barbara, California. He is the author of *Bright Shoots of Everlastingness: Essays on Faith and the American Wild*, named by *Foreword* magazine as the best essay collection of the year from an independent press. He has also published five volumes of poetry, most recently *Getting to Gardisky Lake* and *Deer at Twilight: Poems from the North Cascades*. Also set in the Cascades—or at least a mythic version of them—is his eco-fantasy novel *The Alpine Tales*. Learn more at [pauljwillis.com](http://pauljwillis.com).