



*p o e m s*

# Almost Entirely

JENNIFER WALLACE



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## *praise for Almost Entirely*

In this collection of deeply, intimate conversations, addresses, and meditations, Jennifer Wallace follows the most fearsome states of being into realms of tender beauty. In her sight, nothing is to be turned away from—not the granite of human loneliness, the unexpectedly bright hues of loss, the vitality of grief, or the sharp challenges born of authentic spiritual striving. Wallace’s eye and heart roam freely among the mysteries (without, as Keats wrote, any “irritable reaching after fact or reason”) and in roaming, find that abundant field where we might touch again “those whose light made us more visible.”

—LIA PURPURA, author of *It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful*

Jennifer Wallace writes, “I have a softness in me that I want / to be closer to.” These poems, one after the next, labor toward something like that softness—laboring which is not only elegant, but clumsy and craving and scared and utterly human. Which makes this book a good guide, a good companion, toward our own softness. To which I, too, more than just about anything, want to be closer.

—ROSS GAY, author of *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*

In poem after poem, Jennifer Wallace strives to capture the experience of being alive in the context of particular experiences in which she both memorializes and praises at the same time. Admirably comfortable with deceptively quotidian subject matter, no matter how small or seemingly negligible, Wallace conjures shining details that convey the deeply evocative pathos of ordinary things through the lens of memory and perspicacity. Indeed, her poems appear to come to her—in John Keats’s phrase—“as naturally as leaves to a tree.”

In her poem “Miracle,” Wallace writes her own memorable *ars poetica* with admirable balance between telling and showing: “Miracle means also: / not to shy away from, but to become / awesome, like light through the branches / ushering into existence / each tip of insignificant grass.” These are refreshingly mature lyrical poems reminding us of who we are anew in our most familiar settings.

—CHARD DENIORD, Vermont Poet Laureate

The poet walks me from one pause to another and yet another. In the pauses, picture-phrases and lean, clear emotions lift me and set me down, sing to me and fall silent. What a lovely walk. And how lightly does the wisdom rest on me and wait for my recognition. Wallace helps us identify what the soul has already learned.

—VINITA HAMPTON WRIGHT,  
author of *The St. Teresa of Avila Prayer Book*

Religious or spiritual writing tends to fall into the trap of being either willfully obscure, or too quickly cutting to “God” as the general answer to all particular vexations. In the religious poems in this collection, Wallace strikes a lovely balance. With no attempt to tame or pin down the divine, she names with confidence where God is, or well could be, in this world. Her poems wade into the shadows of life, without being proud of their own gloom. They are unafraid to be wise; to not only describe reality but make wise assertions about what life does to us.

Here, Catholic images are rendered fresh. Candles blessing a throat on the Memorial of St. Blaise unspool into an image where, “It might take another 50 years until something triggers the silky comfort against our throats . . . the scissor-shaped pressure.”

“We know the number of the gene / but not the day the strand will break.” Lines like this make short work of the native human condition: awe at our stunning progress, at all we have come to know, and an even deeper awe at what we ultimately cannot know.

The lines ring with simple and pitch perfect phrasing: “Tell me, someone: / with the spade of days remaining, / how to turn the soil / and where.” These lines are accessible, but not in a way where “accessible” is code for: there’s not much going on here. It means rather the words are put together in a way that makes you want to get to the end of the poem and see just what this author is up to. In short, they are compelling.

—BR. JOE HOOVER, SJ, poetry editor at *America Magazine*

Jennifer Wallace’s poems, clear and measured in their language, while incandescent in their vision, show what happens when the ordinary is ennobled: we are souls, rather than mere selves, and the world we inhabit, while prey to tragedy and indifference at every turn, is still a world fit for wonder and grace. This is a marvelous work that stands with Cairns and Oliver, Wiman and Glück, reclaiming the sacred in the steady rumor of its eclipse.

—DAVID RIGSBEE, author of *Not Alone in My Dancing: Essays and Reviews*



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*It sure is hard work: governing  
my Western mind. Faith/Reason. Reason/  
Faith. Borges said, "The writer  
must not destroy by human reasonings  
the faith that art requires of us."*

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## Carruth

Carruth, my first-loved poet, said  
in his “Testament”: Now I am  
almost entirely love. He  
imagined his ego’s heaviness  
sifting through the hourglass’s narrowness  
and settling on a gathering  
cone of love below.

He didn’t know, then —  
that when I lift his book from the shelf,  
the love he has become spills  
like galaxies in my hands.