

# Poems

Zachary C. Wooten, West Chester University

## Before

Wiping off a dusty desk –  
“Good morning, class.”  
Like those before me,  
I stand before you,  
with hope, fear,  
and an invitation.

I switch on the lights –  
“Welcome to Moral Choice...”  
You are invited  
to major in mystery  
to minor in meaning,  
to behold the world  
before us!

A step to the center –  
“What matters, and why?”  
One student closes their  
computer  
Another opens a tab  
asking Chat to sign

their academic  
integrity form.

My words catch on my breath  
–  
I peer beyond the confines,  
remembering lessons from  
wily boyhood climbs  
in the branches of my  
family tree,  
I wobble on weary shoulders  
wondering if wisdom means  
letting go.

A missed spot on the desk –  
“Artifice or equanimity?”  
Will we choose  
to create, to sing, to play,  
to wonder, to question, to be,  
before we are dust on  
a desk?



Photo by Héctor J. Rivas on Unsplash

## After

After the bell rings and  
the dust settles

and I believe I am alive again,  
I wonder what we will make  
of all this precarity.

There is a certain fragility  
of climbing and falling,  
or was it jumping?  
I grip the grief loaned for  
safekeeping,  
wondering if it could help  
if the ashes were still warm.  
“Hush, now’s not the time.”  
There are always before,  
and if we’re left to pick up  
the pieces,  
there are just as many  
afters –

shards of unspoken  
unknowns,  
and the ache of what slips  
away in being made new.  
“Come, it’s time to begin.”  
I follow, because it appears  
the options are fading.  
I think I can improvise a  
new beginning  
and play a new song.

Breathing in  
I cough on the dust  
praying you might tell me,  
someday –  
what do I do  
if I miss before?

## Climbing and Falling

Outside the dusty classroom window,  
I see the blurred remnants of a familiar tree.  
And I remember when I was seven or maybe eight,  
I had a burst of courage and a bad idea:  
I would climb the tree – the big one in the yard next  
to the garden. After playing teacher again, I had  
vowed to my stuffed animals that I would do it,  
and despite their doubts, today was the day.

I marched to the tree with clarity of purpose and  
began to climb.  
My heart sang a song of possibility.  
As long as I just kept climbing, I didn't have time to  
be afraid.  
I had not asked for permission or approval –  
this matter need not concern the grown-ups and  
their trepidations.

Eventually I ascended to the top, out of branches,  
footing, and courage.  
Suddenly I had a view unlike anything I had ever  
known,  
and from this great height I realized this tree must  
be the tree of knowledge and fear.  
Do those two always go together?

My schedule had been cleared to ponder such  
questions,  
as I knew not how to climb down,  
and I was terrified of the place I had once dreamed  
of being.  
I waited for minutes or hours – all the same to a  
little boy stranded in the sky, and then his car pulled  
into the driveway.

I called to my father as the door closed,  
and he ran to me as purposefully as I had marched  
to the site of my peril.  
He coached me as I climbed down, as much as my  
accelerating heartbeat would permit before I froze  
– a statue of my own making – a monument to my  
own lapse of judgment.  
I was a worrier who had momentarily convinced  
himself he was a warrior, only to be found stuck in  
paralyzed self-deception.  
“Jump!” said Dad.

I gripped tight, heart pounding –  
wondering if the fall would break me to dust,  
and if God would breathe life into the scattered  
pieces of my broken bones and spirit.  
I was not wise, wily, nor willing, but letting go  
seemed to be the next step.  
I released my grip and any hope of saving face when  
I looked my stuffed animals in the eyes that night,  
and I fell, like plenty of statues before me.  
He caught me and held me.  
He lauded my courage and placed a crown on my  
head to grow into.

That tree is gone now, and the crown still doesn't  
quite fit,  
but I will plant a new tree and look for the bad idea  
to sprout all over again.  
I could wait for them to grow, as long as it takes,  
if I could relive the day I learned life was more about  
falling than climbing –  
and when spirit met bone, safe and held by my  
greatest teacher.

## Mr. Wise and Prof. Wily

In the final hours of seventh grade  
I marched down the familiar hallway  
to interrupt the stern white-haired man,  
whose eyes always gleamed with hope:  
“I want to play the saxophone.”

He raised his eyebrows  
but did not roll his eyes.  
Silently opening the top right drawer,  
he retrieved a key,  
and began walking down the hall.

Unsure and undeterred,  
we stood before a dusty locker,  
bigger than the both of us.  
He unlocked my spirit,  
and introduced me to myself.  
“What is that?”

My voice squeaked and cracked.  
Silence and sound, the music of life.  
A pause, a look, a return to the theme:  
“You want to play the saxophone.”

We maneuvered the beast out of its cage,  
and examined its neck and scales –  
I’d never seen a baritone saxophone.  
It rhymed and it growled.  
Even the dents made it shine.

Fumbling, focused, fearful, and free,  
I spent that summer and all of my teens,  
learning to compose a life marked tenuto.  
My friend took me to eighth grade, the airport, and  
college.  
We went where our best prayers took us.

During the third movement,  
I met Professor Wily.  
He promised me hope  
but never finished the verse.  
He locked my music in his drawer.

He was a small man,  
with papers all over his office,  
his eyes, hollow with resignation, until he met them  
in the mirror.  
I fruitlessly begged for directions to dinner,  
so I gnawed at the crumbs, savoring possibility.

In the final hours of the semester,  
I sought his counsel, his advice, his mercy.  
He looked through me and struck –  
the page marked attacca:  
“You sound like you’ve never heard music before.”

Each teacher before gifted me a thread,  
and I tied them together with precision and care.  
Then I went to the tailor, the best in the biz,  
and with one pair of scissors  
He cut me to pieces – frayed beyond recognition.

I was out of breath,  
and I lost my place.  
Fumbling, focused, fearful, and fine.  
Dispirited, disillusioned,  
I forgot how to pray.

I picked up the pieces  
of what was left of my heart  
and decided to D.C. al Coda.  
I stopped playing, stopped singing, stopped  
marching around.

I planted what I had left in the scorched earth.

I did not rise like a phoenix,  
nor was I burnt to a crisp.  
I nursed my own wounds,  
and I tried to forget.

I left my spirit alone in its case, collecting  
dust once again.

Years later I returned  
to the scene of the crime,  
and he'd already run out of town.  
One piece of evidence, left behind:  
I picked up the spool of thread.

Slowly and methodically,  
my hands didn't forget,  
who I was when I knew how to pray.  
I used those same scissors that cut me to shreds,  
and vowed to make beauty again.

I opened the case,  
the dents shining brighter,  
the beast again descaled.  
I remembered Mr. Wise and my spirited  
interruptions.

I walked down the hallway again, improvising  
a prayer.

He had taken me down with a swing of his axe,  
but I am dust remade.  
I've made my own desk,  
with my own music drawer, singing,  
Yes, I want to play the saxophone.

I pray never to be the teacher  
who wields an axe and  
splinters spirits  
chopping down saplings  
stretching toward sun.

I will keep climbing and falling,

co-creating in the dust,  
shaping fallen trees into desks  
steady enough for climbing,  
for falling,  
for trying again.

And in the final hours of my life,  
should I pass a familiar hallway,  
I'd interrupt that stern white-haired man.  
I'll tell him thanks again, eyes gleaming with hope,  
for kindness extended to a spirited child

**Rev. Dr. Zachary C. Wooten** is a bivocational leader, serving as a tenured Associate Professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU) and as an ordained American Baptist pastor serving in a United Church of Christ Congregation. With over eight years of experience in higher education, and twelve in professional ministry, he is an award-winning, student-centered educator known for transformative, experiential, community-engaged, and dialogical pedagogy. He directs the WCU Interfaith, Meaning-Making, and Spirituality Project and the WCU Leadership and the Good Life Hub within Yale Center for Faith and Culture's Life Worth Living Network, seeking to encourage communities of practice committed to building trust across enduring differences while engaging questions of human flourishing. His scholarship spans ethics, leadership, digital culture, pedagogy, and grief, including peer-reviewed publications and published creative work in poetry. Committed to collaborative leadership, Dr. Wooten bridges academic rigor and compassionate care to cultivate purpose, flourishing, and belonging as a teacher, scholar and leader.



**Rev. Dr. Zachary C. Wooten,**  
*West Chester University*