

**GILLIAN
PEDERSON-KRAG**

Interior (fig. 69), 1998
oil on canvas, 24 x 26 in



courtesy: the artist

WENDELL BERRY

**This Day:
Collected & New
Sabbath Poems**

The idea of the sabbath in these poems comes from Genesis 2:2: “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day . . .” The sense of this day is transferred to humankind (by the fourth of the Ten Commandments) in Exodus 20:8–11: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work . . .”

On Sunday mornings I often attend a church in which I sometimes sat with my grandfather, in which I sometimes sit with my grandchildren, and in which my wife plays the piano. But I am a bad-weather churchgoer. When the weather is good, sometimes when it is only tolerable, I am drawn to the woods on the local hillsides or along the streams. The woodlands here are not “the forest primeval” or “wilderness areas.” Nearly all are reforested old tobacco patches abandoned a lifetime or more ago, where you can still see the marks of cropland erosion now mostly healed or healing.

In such places, on the best of these sabbath days, I experience a lovely freedom from expectations—other people’s and also my own. I go free from the tasks and intentions of my workdays, and so my mind becomes hospitable to unintended thoughts: to what I am very willing to call inspiration. The poems come incidentally or they do not come at all. If the Muse leaves me alone, I leave her alone. To be quiet, even wordless, in a good place is a better gift than poetry.

On those days, and other days also, the idea of the sabbath has been on my mind. It is as rich and demanding an idea as any I know. The sabbath is the day, and the successive days honoring the day, when God rested after finishing the work of creation. This work was not finished, I think, in the sense of once and for all. It was finished by being given the power to exist and to continue, even to repair itself as it is now doing on the reforested hillsides of my home country.

We are to rest on the sabbath also, I have supposed, in order to understand that the providence or the productivity of the living world, the most essential work, continues while we rest. This work is entirely independent of our work, and is far more complex and wonderful than any work we have ever done or will ever do. It is more complex and wonderful than we will ever understand.