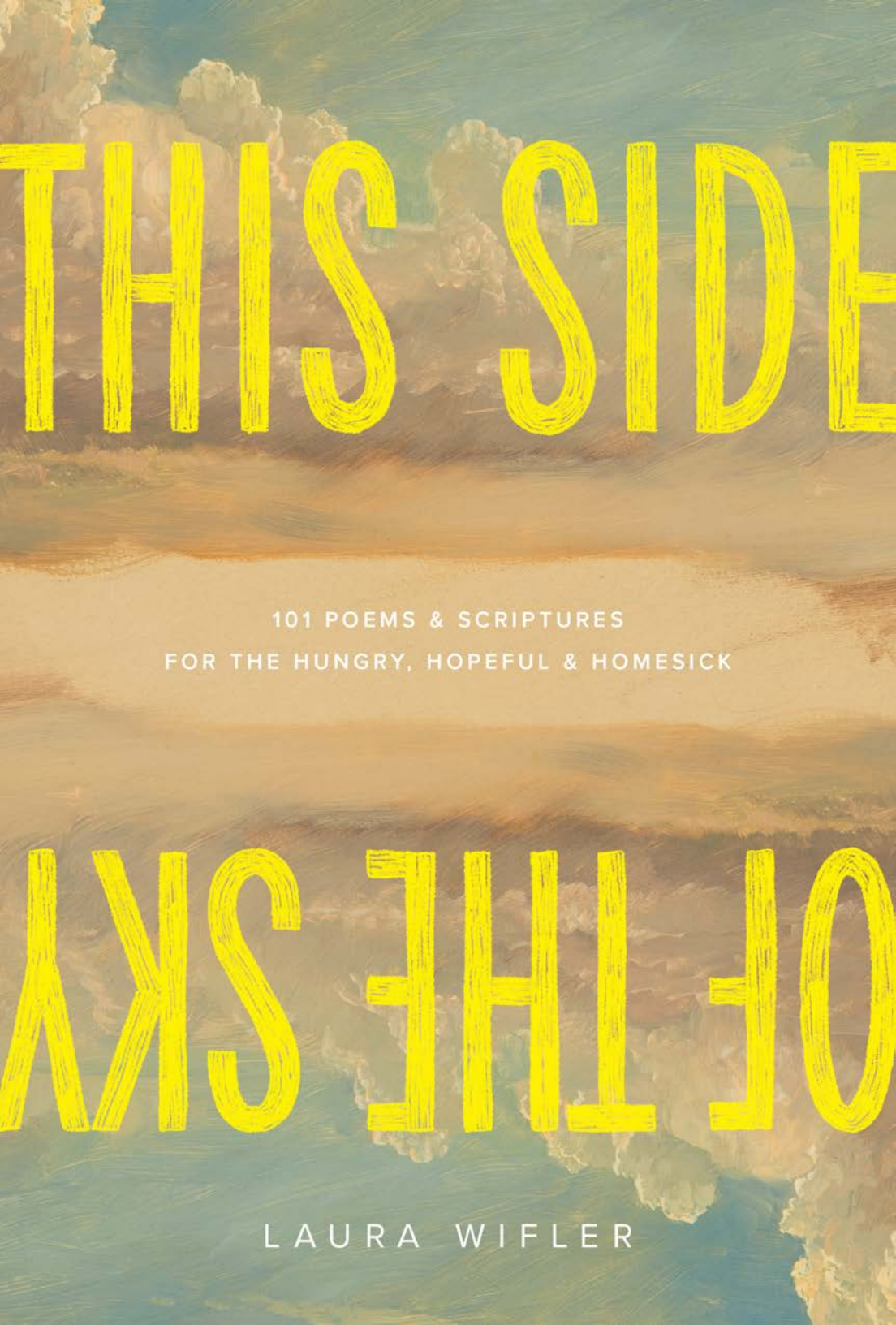




THIS SIDE

101 POEMS & SCRIPTURES
FOR THE HUNGRY, HOPEFUL & HOMESICK

OF THE SKY

LAURA WIFLER

God is a poet, and so is Laura Wifler. With theological steadiness and lyrical beauty, Laura's words remind us that poetry speaks most profoundly when it is anchored in what is true. Her poems do not merely move us; they disciple us into confession, worship, hope, and the interplay between the mundane and the transcendent that we so often miss. In a world parched for poetry, here is water for the thirsty.

JEN WILKIN

Author and Bible teacher

This Side of the Sky will both upend your expectations and mend your weary heart with gospel hope. Laura's poetry startles the slumbering soul awake. Her poignant words offer a glass of cold lemonade on a sweltering summer day and a warm blanket to wrap up in when life feels too fragile to hold your ache. More than poetry or prose, this book is a beautiful weaving of longing, lament, and praise. Laura invites you to pull up a chair, pour a cup of coffee, and as she says, "unbutton your heart" to the faithful, freeing life before you—this side of the sky.

GRETCHEN SAFFLES

Bestselling author of *The Well-Watered Woman* and *Word Before World*

No writer describes the feeling of motherhood and the unbearable joy and grief of change as our children grow up the way Laura Wifler does. I closed this book feeling understood, as if she spoke for me too.

ERIN NAPIER

Star of HGTV's *Home Town* and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Heirloom Rooms* and *The Lantern House*

Poetry is paying attention to the griefs, glories, grit, and gifts of this beautiful, broken world. In this collection, Laura helps us do just that: pay attention. Few things are harder to do; few things more important to practice.

KYLE WORLEY

Pastor and author of *Home with God: Our Union with Christ*

I came to poetry later in my life because, in all honesty, I was intimidated by it. Then I met Robert Frost as he told me about “Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening,” and something unlocked that gave me an insatiable appetite for the economy of words that could unpack such a vast expression of meaning. In my search for more, I discovered lots of wonderful poetry on social media—of all places—and I found myself following poets I wanted to read more from. That’s how I found Laura Wifler’s poetry, and I am thrilled for this collection in book form. Read it not just for the insightful poetry she offers but for the familiarity her words will cultivate in you for the larger, necessary world of poetry itself.

RUSS RAMSEY

Author of *Van Gogh Has a Broken Heart: What Art Teaches Us*
About the Wonder and Struggle of Being Alive

Reading *This Side of the Sky* feels like a pause with a dear friend. It’s a hug, a reset in the middle of a chaotic day, a deeply needed sigh. The short reflections carry weighty truth, reaching straight to the soul, like marrow to the bones you didn’t realize were aching. And you know it’s a wonderful read when you’re sad it’s over.

GWEN HEFNER

The Makerista

Laura is a noticer and a wonderer, and her poems invite us into that same sacred attentiveness. *This Side of the Sky* awakens us to God’s presence in the present moment, even when our lives feel small or ordinary. The poems on these pages help us name both the ache and the joy of being human as we move through life’s winding seasons. In a weary world that often prizes tidy answers over honest connection and reflection, I’m so grateful for faithful art like this—words rooted in tenderness and anchored in Christ-centered hope.

KAYLA CRAIG

Author of *Our Daily Breath*, *To Light Their Way*, and *Every Season Sacred*;
creator of Liturgies for Parents

THIS SIDE OF THE SKY

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FOR THE HUNGRY, HOPEFUL, AND HOMESICK

LAURA WIFLER



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CONTENTS

Let These Words Do
the Good Work They Can *ix*

ACT I Acknowledge the Ache *3*

ACT II Listen for the Hymns of Promise *43*

ACT III Unbutton Your Heart *77*

INTERMISSION A Moment to Address the Body in the Room 111

ACT IV Wear the Crown of Creation 135

ACT V Bury It in Your Bones 179

Benediction 219

Acknowledgments 221

About the Author 223

LET THESE WORDS DO THE GOOD WORK THEY CAN

*I am so coarse, the things the poets see
Are obstinately invisible to me.*

C. S. LEWIS, "A CONFESSION"

FOR MOST OF MY LIFE, I believed I was too obtuse to understand poetry. I was a student of English and journalism in college, so it wasn't that I didn't try. Book after book stumbled onto my nightstand, both required reading and random library pickups, as I tried desperately to love it. I wanted to cradle a word, to feel time suspend while I chewed on a turn of phrase, to sigh after I clearly understood what meaning lay beyond a line.

But I never could. It wasn't that I didn't love it. It was that I didn't even like it. I swore off poetry the same way I did glitter craft

projects in the house, hanging my own wallpaper, or drinking oat milk. Poetry wasn't for me.

Until the year—the one and only year—I homeschooled my two oldest children. That spring, the world went fragile and everyone was baking sourdough in sweatpants and opening neighborhood barber shops on their back decks. Normal life was a distant fog, and being in our own four walls for months on end made us all a little weird. But also a little bit brave. Including me.

Our homeschooling curriculum included a unit on poetry. My kids and I read selected passages aloud together, and we chose several of our favorites to memorize. Contrary to every experience I'd had with poetry in the past, I loved it. These poems were straightforward but resonant, like a lemon cake or my favorite red lipstick. They said something in a way I could easily understand while being beautiful enough that I never wanted to forget.

Eventually, the curriculum had my children writing their own poetry, so I gathered my courage and started writing with them. Almost at once, I felt like I had come home. I was spellbound by the practice, finally alive in my writing. As silly as it sounds, through a unit designed for kindergartners and second graders, I learned that I had a lot of misconceptions about poetry. It doesn't have to rhyme or follow a strict pattern of syllables or be laid out in a specific meter or be hard to understand.

And perhaps my biggest lightbulb: Poetry has no true rules.

After that year, homeschooling didn't stick, but poetry did. As someone who had been freely offering her writing on the internet for more than 12 years, I unabashedly started to share some of my

work online. I preferred to label it “emotive microblogs,” still groping for the confidence to label my poetry what it was and scared that I might just like—and now be writing—poetry.

But readers could tell. Previously, most of my writing centered on nonfiction pieces, through microblogs, essays, articles, and traditional books. But as my writing changed, my readers left notes using the *p*-word.

“Thanks for this poem!”

“I shared this poem with my friend.”

I was surprised by their declarations. It was lyrical! Heartfelt! Not actually poetry. I claimed it was just “tiny musical musings.” Joke’s on me—because being “musical” is exactly one of the defining traits of poetry. But eventually, the term stacked up often enough from my readers that I had to admit I had become the very thing I thought wasn’t for me: I was a poet.

Over the years, I’ve heard hundreds of stories about people’s perceptions of poetry. Some love it. They regularly savor it, discuss it, and share it. Others, like the old me, feel that poetry is confusing, intimidating, or reserved for someone else—someone more intellectual or sophisticated. And some have never really given it much thought. It’s a literary category they’re not into, and that’s about it.

No matter where you’re coming from with poetry, I’m so thankful you’ve opened this book.

Since poetry can be such a polarizing genre, I wanted to offer a few thoughts as you read. One of the biggest rules of poetry is that there are no rules, but I think it can help to engage with this art form by bearing a few things in mind and allowing poetry to do its best work in our hearts.

First, know that the poems and meditations included in this book are wide and varied. The thread that strings them together is the subject of my life, I suppose. A woman in her late thirties, living in rural America with her husband, three kids, and one adorable goldendoodle. I shared the joys and griefs I could, but there are many more that shape my story, ones I cannot or will not share publicly in a book. Ultimately, know that these are the poems and meditations of a woman, probably very much like you, searching for hope and meaning in a life that, while it has many glimmers of beauty, is also often filled with confusion, difficulty, and pain. It is a life that is good, but also hard.

Now, I realize this sounds obvious, but when reading, remember that you and I are not exactly the same. I am married. You might not be. I have a child with intellectual disabilities. It's possible you've never had a close relationship with someone who has a significant disability. And that's okay. But know that I have not nuanced my writing to acknowledge every situation (as is common in nonfiction writing); instead, I am trusting you, dear reader, to find something of value even if the particulars of our two lives don't align. Our specific joys, sufferings, celebrations, and griefs might be different, but I have come to find these experiences share a pulse and you may find the rhythm familiar, if you have ears to hear.

Take what you need and leave the rest.

Second, I write from the perspective of a Christian. This means that I believe God made the world and everything in it. He made man and woman in His image, yet they rebelled in the garden, rejecting God's good plan for their lives. This severed humanity's relationship with God and brought sin and death into the world. But God, in His love, sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to willingly die in our place on the cross—yet He didn't stay dead. Jesus rose from the grave three days later, showing Himself to His disciples and hundreds of other witnesses. Then He ascended into Heaven and now sits at the right hand of God. But God didn't leave us here alone. Those who trust in Christ receive the Holy Spirit to help us walk in obedience to God's will and ways in this life. We also have the promise of a home in Heaven to look forward to, where there will be no more pain, no more sorrow, no more tears. It is there we will spend eternity with our God and Savior, forever.

I believe this down to my trembling bones. It is a truth and hope that leads my life like a beckoning hand and presses its thumb into every part of my being.

This means that all the writing you'll find here is informed and shaped by the gospel. In some of the poetry, you'll see that I have taken liberties to imagine the lifestyles and thoughts of biblical characters, as well as used metaphors and similes from Scripture and woven in common Christian colloquialisms to offer further meaning. I am not claiming to have additional revelations; I'm simply shading in the yearnings and contours of my art.

I've laid out the book in five acts, loosely following the typical Christian experience. If you appreciate a clear roadmap, here's where we're headed:

- **ACT 1: *Acknowledge the Ache***
We realize this life is very hard, due to both our own sin and the brokenness of the world.
- **ACT II: *Listen for the Hymns of Promise***
We see glimmers of what might be hope and healing for our pain.
- **ACT III: *Unbutton Your Heart***
We lay down our cares and wrongdoings at the Savior's feet and receive salvation.
- **INTERMISSION: *A Moment to Address the Body in the Room***
If you are a woman, this needs no explanation.
- **ACT IV: *Wear the Crown of Creation***
We fight the good fight with Christ by our side.
- **ACT V: *Bury It in Your Bones***
We cling to the hope of Heaven with a white-knuckle grip until this life takes us to the next.

Not every poem or meditation fits neatly into a category, but I've given careful consideration to the placement of each one. I've tied each entry to a Scripture excerpt to help ground it and offer more spiritual depth—but as I mentioned before, in the end, it's not about my particular meaning; it's about how the verses and entries speak to you and how God uses them in your life.

So once again, take what's helpful and leave the rest.

My prayer is that these poems rightly reckon with the realities of the world you and I live in while also testifying to a believer's divine home and the transcendent promises we have access to right

now in Christ. This is what poetry, at its best, can do. It not only listens and names, but it also points us to the greater reality that sometimes feels just beyond reach. Like there is a veil or shroud, and for a moment, you see the edges flutter or a corner shimmer. Holy mystery haunts every surface of our lives, if we only know how to look.

As time has gone on, I've become more comfortable with the title *poet*. Though even now, it sometimes feels like it doesn't quite fit—like wearing a fancy dress on a night out. A bit formal and tight for a woman who prefers sneakers and ponytails, even if it matches the dress code.

I think what finally made me a believer was realizing that poetry isn't meant to be perfectly understood from every direction; it's simply meant to be received with a grace-filled heart. So come with your whole self. Aching. Soft. Open. Let these words do the good work they can. Let them pump you full.

The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. GENESIS 3:6

Good

I want to know how Eve felt, knowing
nothing but the tending of light. I want to
know how it felt to be full and heavy
with good, pulsing with the strange
creature of perfection. I want to know
the unmarred pleasure of a day,
to have stood by the sea
next to the Word that formed it.

I want to know how Eve felt, grasping
Hope's hand. Maybe she got goosebumps.
Maybe she shivered. I want to know
how it felt to wake up under
the moon and look into Joy's
face. Love, I would guess,
is a pleasant companion.

I wonder if Eve's hand touched
a tree, a rock, a flower, to say, *Hello,*
it's nice to meet you. I wonder
if they leaned in to say hello back.

It's too bad, then, that Eve
felt it was too good to be true.

ACT I

ACKNOWLEDGE THE ACHE

*The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in,
but you cannot forever fence it out.*

J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER. At least nothing of form and physicality. There's a concept in thermodynamics called *entropy*, which is the measure of disorder or chaos in a system. It captures the way that over time, without careful attention, governments bloat, your refrigerator moans and warms, and makeup tubes and hairbrushes stack up on your bathroom counter. Entropy wants to happen anywhere there is supposed to be structure, energy, or order, reminding us that without considerable effort, everything in the universe (from gardens to friendships to our galaxy) is naturally barreling toward decay and chaos.

If you have lived long enough, you don't need a scientist to label this for you. You sense entropy all around you. Life is hard, and it's only getting harder. Adam and Eve launched us into a post-fall world, and ever since, life has been riddled with pain, sorrow, and grief. This is due to both humanity's sin and the curse on the earth, causing endless toil, brokenness, and the now-diagnosed entropy.

In the wake of any grief, the first step toward healing is to acknowledge what happened. To be honest about the flat notes of this life and to listen fully to their deafening tone. It is owning that you are not perfect and there are many things you have done wrong—against others and against the God of the universe. It is also admitting that there are many ways people have wronged you. You have been treated unfairly, and that's not okay. And finally, it is recognizing the countless ways this world has gone sideways. The things that happen don't make sense—and they shouldn't! Because this is not the way this world was meant to be.

So acknowledge the ache of this life. Swallow, roll, rage, and roar. Feel fully the throb in your chest and the pounding in your heart. Wail, if you need to. This world has gone wild, and you with it. There will be time to sort it all out, but that time is not right now.

*From the rising of the sun to its setting,
let the name of the LORD be praised.* PSALM 113:3

Peel

Each morning I make yellow eggs for the kids
then wake them with back rubs
and don't stop the dog
from licking their cheeks.
I do hair, change diapers,
put shoes on feet.
I find drumsticks for band
and am a volunteer
for a "quick magic trick
I just made up."
(I act surprised.)
And this is only in the first
twenty minutes of a morning.
Each night I peel away
the day, sometimes crying
in the shower, sometimes
on the floor in prayer, sometimes
frenetic on the couch,
sometimes (most times)
memorizing the velvet curves
of the moon in the dark mouth
of the night before I slip
beneath the sheets.

He said to them all, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." LUKE 9:23

Sometimes It Is the Littlest Things

1.

What I know is sometimes, it is the little things that are heaviest for me to carry for Christ. The big things—the disability, the chronic pain, the deaths, the family skeleton that walked out of the closet—I have a track record of handing them off to God the way a barista hands you coffee. I know where they go. Right there. No, no, a little to the left, so the shadow of the cross covers them in full.

2.

I want to blame the car seat, because it is always the car seat. I know this. I know it will never be welcome at 3 p.m., but as I tell her, it is required by law. This, for some reason, seems to make no difference to her. Most days I am patient. *How about a snack? How about a drink? I know it is hard, honey, I know it is awful, I know this is not the way you want to wake up.* But other days, I am short and cold, and I don't want to admit it but there, I said it.

3.

I stare at the fire and wonder how I would respond if someone said I must renounce Christ or they will give me a one-way ticket to Heaven.

4.

I disagree with the turn the conversation has taken in the group of women I am with. I share a different opinion. “Why?” they ask. “Science,” I tell them. I do not mention the God-factor.

5.

I wonder if we all have it mixed up. We seek God when our mothers are sick and our headaches are chronic and when we need a job, a dollar, a cure. We put them all in a big basket and shove them across the table with one eye closed—*You take them God, You be sovereign, You do what You do.*

Do not hear me wrong, this is good and right.

But what about when you said, *Enough!* but you didn’t say it like honey? What about when you felt like you should have hung back and talked to that person who usually goes unseen, but you shoved it down so you could talk to someone more fun? What about when you decided your perfectly good dishes are suddenly good for nothing, and yes they are only dishes but they are aiming an arrow straight at your covetous heart?

6.

What about the car seat? What about the science?

Sometimes it is the little things that are heaviest to carry for Christ.