



THE MAP YOU MAKE YOURSELF

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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PRELUDE

The Map You Make Yourself *A Blessing for Women's Christmas*

You have looked
at so many doors
with longing,
wondering if your life
lay on the other side.

For today,
choose the door
that opens
to the inside.

Travel the most ancient way
of all:
the path that leads you
to the center
of your life.

No map
but the one
you make yourself.

No provision
but what you already carry
and the grace that comes
to those who walk
the pilgrim's way.

Speak this blessing
as you set out
and watch how
your rhythm slows,
the cadence of the road
drawing you into the pace
that is your own.

Eat when hungry.
Rest when tired.
Listen to your dreaming.
Welcome detours
as doors deeper in.

Pray for protection.
Ask for the guidance you need.
Offer gladness
for the gifts that come
and then
let them go.

Do not expect
to return
by the same road.
Home is always
by another way
and you will know it
not by the light
that waits for you

but by the star
that blazes inside you
telling you
where you are
is holy
and you are welcome
here.

THE MAP YOU MAKE YOURSELF

An Introduction

There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Particularly celebrated in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a resurgence.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers a timely opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season comes to a close, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into the responsibilities of this new year.

This retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey. As we look at the landscape of our life, where and how do we want to travel in the coming year?

WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

Years ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and the journey has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still. How do we travel? What signs do we follow? What inspires us to set out into unfamiliar terrain in our life? How do we know what gifts to offer and where to offer them? Whose company do we travel in? Where do we find sustenance along the way?

The readings and images in the following pages are designed to help you ponder these questions and pay attention to others that surface as you reflect on where you are in your journey. Think of these pages as a pilgrimage in miniature, an invitation to travel along the sacred way that is your own life. As you engage and explore these pages, what doors open to you? What do you notice about where you have been? What do you see in the place you are now? What do you dream for the road ahead?

NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to engage these reflections. You can set aside a day—on or near Women’s Christmas, or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend near or far, a family member, a small group. You could get together with friends for a cup of tea or a meal on Women’s Christmas—or, again, whenever it fits for you—and select just one or two reflections as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these readings, you may find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk as you engage the questions. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage. Or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages may prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those that you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your map as you go?

BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

Whenever I lead a retreat in person, I always talk about how I hope to offer a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. I hope you will find this kind of space within these pages. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I pray that you will find something here that provides comfort and Sabbath rest. At the same time, I pray that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that invites you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into some uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who ever waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar and comfortable and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus’ birth, shepherds arrive at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who hear the tale of the shepherds are amazed. “But Mary,” Luke writes—Mary, who has journeyed so very far beyond her familiar terrain—“treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, NRSV).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart, and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and travel with wisdom through the year ahead. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



Wisdom's Path

SETTING OUT

In her book *The Road to Canterbury*, Shirley du Boulay tells of the pilgrimage she made to Canterbury Cathedral in England. In the opening chapter, she describes the beginnings of her desire to travel the medieval Pilgrims' Road from Winchester to Canterbury, and how a friend first suggested the idea of a pilgrimage two years after the death of du Boulay's husband.

“It was one of those moments of illumination that can appear when life is at its bleakest,” du Boulay writes. “After months and months of apathy and indifference I was immediately excited, curious, expectant. It was as if a light had been switched on. . . . There was, if I dared admit it, a surging of hope.”

In the course of planning her pilgrimage and setting out on it, du Boulay explored the longing for such a journey that countless people have experienced across the centuries. “A desire to stand on holy ground, to be in a place where the veil between heaven and earth has grown thin, seems to be a deep human instinct,” she writes.

I like the way that great scholar of comparative religion Professor Mircea Eliade put it when he wrote that “every pilgrimage shrine is an archetype of the sacred centre”. In a sacred place we may experience the transcendent, the “timeless moment”, a universal God, above the differences of religion or denomination. It is paradoxical that we should claim that God is everywhere and yet seek him in special places, yet it is a paradox which we, having created, need to accept. I wondered whether we are drawn to holy places because we need to externalize the sacred centre within us all. The thought that God is within us is too frightening; we need to locate him somewhere else. There is also the argument that we may need to find God in a particular place before we can realize that he is everywhere.¹

Have you ever taken a trip that began as a dream, an imagining, a moment of illumination? What inspired you to set out? Is there a pilgrimage you long to make? What would it take for you to go?

Blessing

May you set out on the road
that begins in your heart,
your soul.

May the path
that starts as a dream
become real beneath your feet.

May you walk
in the way of blessing
and stand in the spaces
where earth and heaven meet.



The Wise Ones

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE FAR TO TRAVEL

An Epiphany Blessing

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

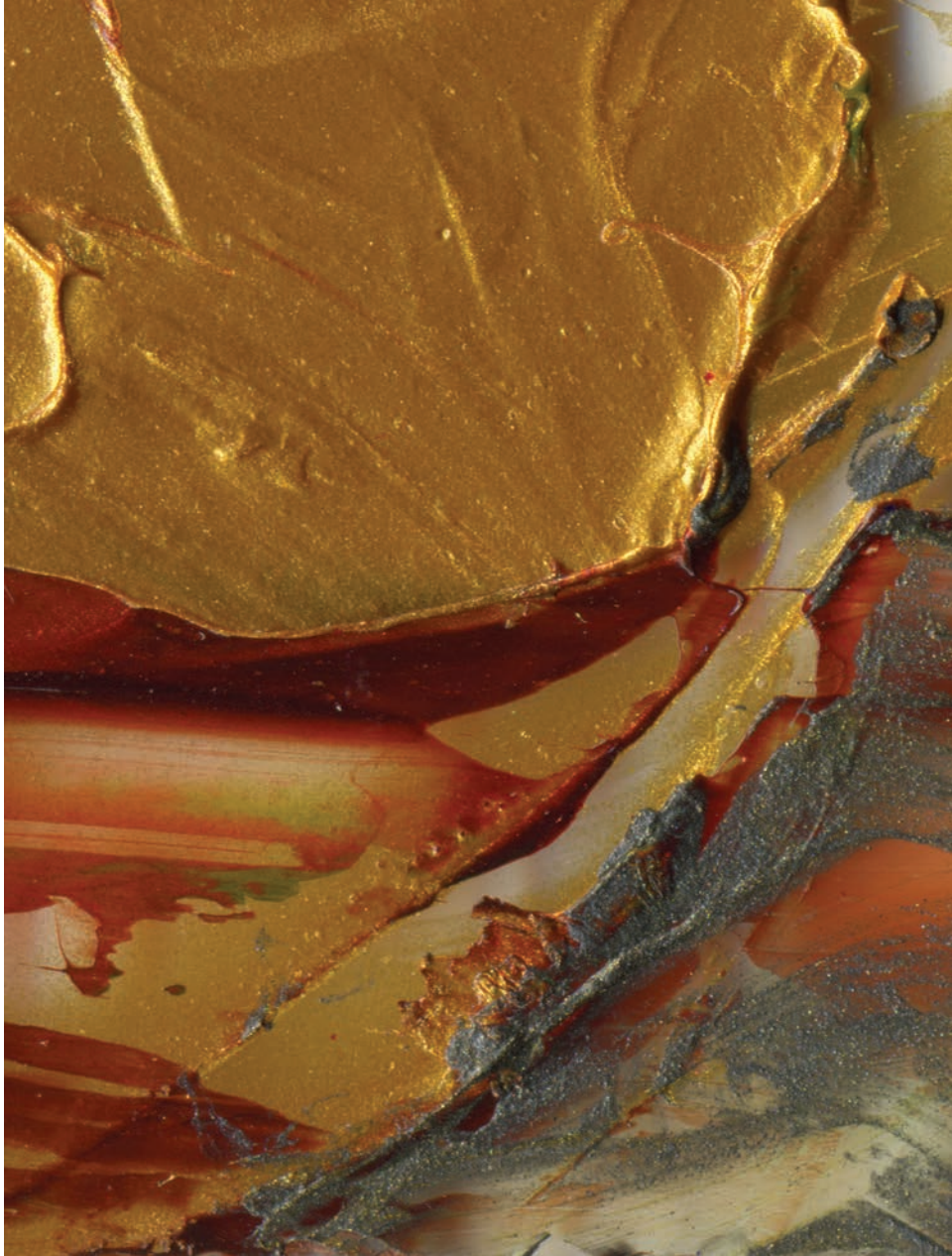
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.



Prepare

MAPS

I love maps. I don't always read them incredibly well, mind you. Just last night I spent a great deal of time traveling the unfamiliar streets of Nashville because I was feeling more game for adventure than for dealing with the map. But I like to look at maps, especially the really old ones. The ones made by people who understood map-making as an art. The ones made before all the corners of the earth had been charted, and adventurous souls approaching the boundaries of the known world were warned by the cartographer's hand, "Beyond here be dragons."

I like maps for their notion of order, for their presupposition that the lines, directions, and paths they offer will show us the way if properly read. It is a heartening thought that if we study a piece of paper long enough, it will show us the way to our destination. Most of us these days live, I think, with a sense that we've wandered beyond the known world, that we're making the path as we go, with the breath of dragons hot on our necks.

I also think, though, that we come into the world with a scrap, a shred of some cosmic map in our grasp. It's lined onto the palms of our hands that emerged with us, fisted, from our mother's ocean. There are days when I believe that if we touch enough hands, place them side by side, we'll finally see the map. Across the landscape of our palms, across the terrain of our hands that come in different sizes and colors and have wrinkles or scars and are smooth or leathery with work and are missing fingers or are twisted with illness, across their flesh lie the lines that if we look closely enough are connected and will tell us which way to go.

As you look at your own hands, what do they tell you of where you have been? What stories do your hands hold? How are these stories part of the map of your life so far? As you ponder the edges of your map, what line would you like to follow; what new terrain do you dream of exploring?

Prayer

At the edges of our borders
you wait,
and at our territorial lines
you linger,
because the place where
we touch
beyond our boundaries
is where you take
your delight.

And when we learn to read
the landscape of our fears,
and when we come to know
the terrain of every sorrow,
then will we turn
our fences into bridges
and our borders
into paths of peace.



Blessing the Way

WAITING TO BE FOUND

A recurring dream began to visit me a couple of years ago. Some of the details change, but the essence remains the same: I am wandering through shops—not a mall, but a series of connected stores. They are stores of the sort I love to browse through, the kind I find in communities that value artistry. I savor what I see as I wander through the stores: richly hued artwork, finely crafted jewelry, beautiful pottery that calls out for me to touch and hold it.

I always find a bookstore in the dream. One time it was a used bookstore, crammed with volumes and with more shelves around every turn. Another time it contained a case of gorgeous hand-bound books, displayed like artwork. I marveled at the colors, textures, and designs, knowing as I touched the books, *I want to do this, to create volumes like these.*

One of the things that intrigues me about the recurring dream is that it almost always begins with my walking down a familiar street. I turn a corner and suddenly find myself at the shops, thinking to myself, *Of course—that's where they were!* They lay in my neighborhood the whole time, waiting to be found.

Are there images, motifs, story lines that recur in your dreams? What invitation might this hold for you? Is there a journey waiting for you in your own neighborhood—the place where you are right now; some treasure that waits to be found by entering the familiar in a new way?

Prayer

Giver of the dream,
this I ask:

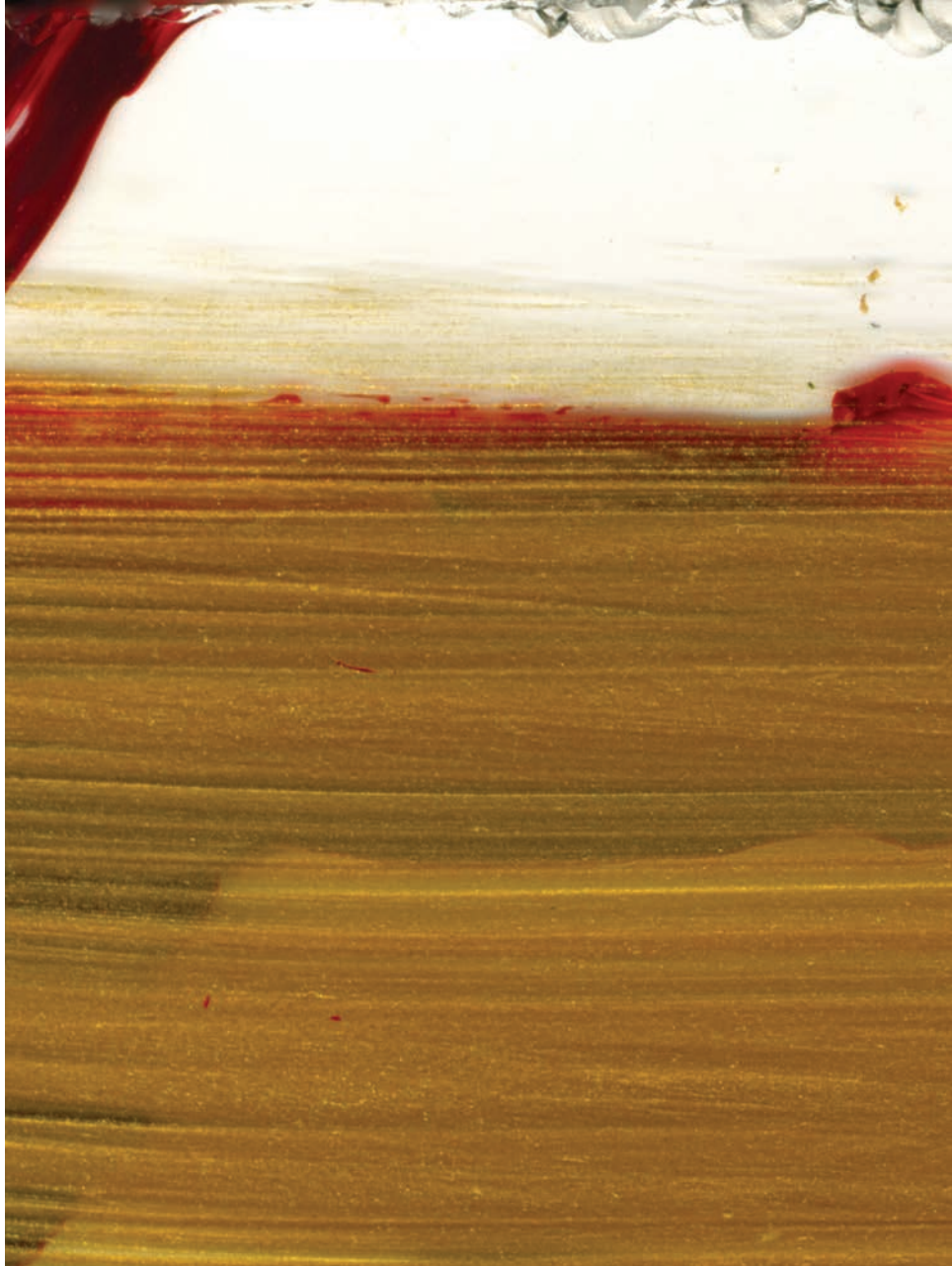
for courage
to take the paths
the feet of my soul
have always known;

for vision
to see the wonders
the eyes of my longing
would never forget;

for stillness
to hear the song
the ear of my spirit
will ever remember;

for daring
to taste the delights
the tongue of my heart
forever recalls;

for wisdom
to touch the depths
the hands of my desire
could never erase.



Come Away and Rest

REST

Before I wrote this blessing I took a nap. Spent time with a novel. Lay on the couch and looked out on the sunlit street. Made a cup of tea. Breathed.

I do not know what restores you, where you take your rest, how you find the sustenance that enables you to meet those who wait for you with their insistent hungers. But whatever it is, whatever soothes you and brings you solace, may you find it in the rhythm of this day, as close as the beating of your heart, as quiet as the space between the beats.

Blessing of Rest

Curl this blessing
beneath your head
for a pillow.
Wrap it about yourself
for a blanket.
Lay it across your eyes
and for this moment
cease thinking about
what comes next,
what you will do
when you rise.

Let this blessing
gather itself to you
like the stillness
that descends
between your heartbeats,
the silence that comes
so briefly
but with a constancy
on which
your life depends.

Settle yourself
into the quiet
this blessing brings,
the hand it lays
upon your brow,
the whispered word
it breathes into
your ear
telling you
all shall be well
all shall be well
and you can rest
now.



Saint Catherine's Labyrinth

SAINT CATHERINE'S LABYRINTH

One day a friend handed me a quote from Saint Catherine of Siena, the fourteenth-century Italian nun and mystic who was widely known and sought out for her wisdom and miraculous gifts. "I want a piece of artwork that contains these words," my friend told me. "Can you do this?"

I pondered the quote for months, tried various artful approaches, set it aside, took it up again. Finally, as I contemplated the words at my drafting table one day, more than a year after the quote had come into my hands, the idea of a labyrinth arrived, its path made up of Saint Catherine's words. More days, more weeks, more discerning and experimenting; but this time with focus and vision. Finally I took up the materials that had presented themselves as fitting. Midnight black paper. Calligraphy pen. Shimmering gold gouache paint.

On the expanse of midnight black, I laid out a golden labyrinth, its path not a continuous line but rather dots shouldered close to one another. Tiny dots. Hundreds of dots. Within the path of the labyrinth, letter by letter, word by word, I wrote the quote from Saint Catherine that my friend had tucked into my hand all those months ago. And at last, in the center of the labyrinth that I had traveled toward for so long, I placed a collage, a circle filled with leaves of painted paper. Leaf after leaf after leaf.

Shortened so that it wouldn't spill over the borders, this is the passage that leads to the center of the labyrinth:

Imagine a circle traced on the ground, and in its center a tree sprouting with a shoot grafted into its side. The tree finds its nourishment in the soil within the expanse of the circle, but uprooted from the soil it would die fruitless. So think of the soul as a tree made for love and living only by love. . . . The circle in which this tree's root, the soul's love, must grow is true knowledge of herself, knowledge that is joined to me, who like the circle have neither beginning nor end. You can go round and round within this circle, finding neither end nor beginning, yet never leaving the circle. . . .

So the tree of charity is nurtured in humility and branches out in true discernment. . . .

. . . To me this tree yields the fragrance of glory and praise to my name, and so it does what I created it for and comes at last to its goal, to me, everlasting Life.²

When have words taken you on a journey—not into a physical space but into your own soul? What did you find there?

Blessing

May you sink
the roots of your soul
deep and deeper still
into the love of God,
who encompasses and encircles you
without beginning, without end.

INTERLUDE

Wise Women Also Came

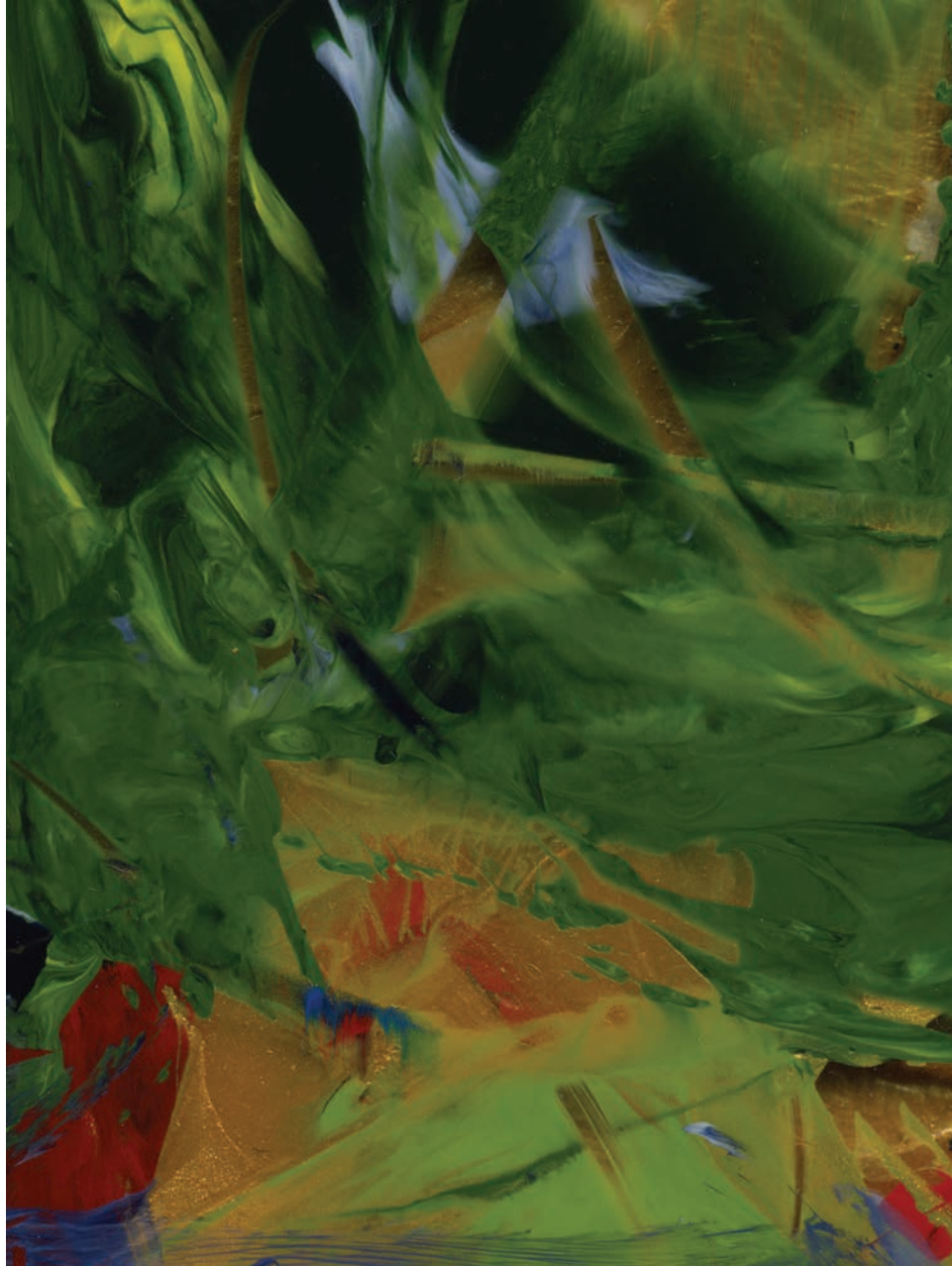
Wise women also came.
The fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king.
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.
They came in quiet,
spreading no rumors,
sparkling no fears
to lead
to innocents' slaughter,
to their sister Rachel's
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor's washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.



Ways of the Story

DETOURS

It's been another day of detours. I am not where I thought I would be but am amazed by the stars I am finding in my skies lately. In the liner notes to her compact disc *The Book of Secrets*, Loreena McKennitt writes, "In the end, I wonder if one of the most important steps on our journey is the one in which we throw away the map. In jettisoning the grids and brambles of our own preconceptions, perhaps we are better able to find the real secrets of each place."

What maps do you live by? How do you know where to go—in the course of a day, in the course of your life? Have you ever loosened your grip on your map—your literal one, or the figurative map of your plans, your habits, your routines—and let yourself simply wander? What did you find?

Blessing

God beyond borders,
may I wander
with wanting enough
to unlearn my path,
with wonder enough
to receive the secrets of each place,
with wisdom enough
to allow them to whisper me
home a different way.



The Pilgrim's Coat

THE PILGRIM'S COAT

It is always a happy day when a new issue of *Selvedge* arrives. Published in England, *Selvedge* is a wondrous magazine devoted to textiles from around the world. Though I'm not a textile artist, this magazine has become a source of enchantment and inspiration.

Savoring my way through the pages of the latest issue, I lighted on a picture of a garment that seized my imagination. The caption identified it as a Japanese pilgrim's coat from the early twentieth

century. Painted with Buddhist mantras in flowing Japanese calligraphy, a simple coat such as this would have been worn by someone traveling from temple to temple on a spiritual journey. Each temple had its own stamp, and a typical pilgrim's coat is laden with vivid cinnabar imprints gathered from the temples. The coat of a pilgrim who had been traveling for some time would have looked something like a cross between a passport and prayer book, with the cinnabar stamps and calligraphic mantras mingling together to enfold the wearer.

A web search for "pilgrims' coats" turned up the intriguing Sri Threads site, which specializes in antique textiles and has a section devoted to what they describe as "Buddhist Pilgrim's Accoutrements." In describing the pilgrims' coats, the folks at Sri comment that the temples that the pilgrims visit "are situated on a single holy mountain, and getting on foot from temple to shrine to temple is an act of faith and bravery. These pilgrims' coats," they go on to observe, "are an outward manifestation of the faith of the wearer, who endured much hardship and showed much fortitude in pursuit of perfecting his faith."³

With my love of fabric and calligraphy and tales of pilgrimage, I could hardly fail to be enchanted by the imagery of these artful, sacred garments. So my imagination and I got busy and headed into the studio, taking along this wondering, *What would my pilgrim's coat look like?*

It was the season of Advent, and as I pondered this question in my studio, I found myself thinking of a passage from Isaiah. It was among the readings for Advent that year, and one that the gospel writers drew from in describing that way-maker, John the Baptist. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God," the text begins. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term." The writer of Isaiah 40 goes on to describe a voice that cries out,

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (3-5, NRSV)

Writing to a people in exile, this author promises a pathway that will lead to redemption and return. The transformation of creation that he describes with such vivid imagery will envelop the people as well: within the community, within the individual, the interior landscape will change utterly, and through it will appear a road for the God who will come to redeem and restore.

It is a passage about wilderness, about making a sacred way, about transformation that happens within and without. These are classic images of pilgrimage, that sacred journey in which we become more than tourists, more than bodies merely moving through a place. The ancient practice of pilgrimage beckons us to find the places of connection between the terrain inside us and the topography around us, whether it's the landscape of the natural world, or of a story, or of a season. Pilgrimage calls us to give ourselves to a terrain that we may find foreign and unsettling and to open ourselves to the sacred and surprising places that it holds. Altered by our engagement with these places, we are able to reenter the familiar territory of our lives and to see it with different and deeper vision.

So, there at my drafting table, I made myself a pilgrim's coat for the season of Advent. In it I embedded a portion of the passage from Isaiah, taking his wilderness words as a blessing, a prayer for the Advent journey. Pondering this image now, in a new season, I wonder what sacred places God has in store for me on the path ahead, and whether I'll be open to seeing them, and how they will change me.

What kind of pilgrimage might the coming season invite you to make? What would your pilgrim's coat look like? What prayers would you paint upon it, to bless you on your way? What are the names of the temples, the holy places—within or without—that you long to visit in this season, and what kind of imprint would they leave on your coat; how would they mark you? How open are you to the surprises that God might have in store on your pilgrim's path?

Blessing

In every step
may grace enfold you
may peace envelop you
may love embrace you.



Making Way

MAKING A WAY

Some years ago I went on a silent retreat during Holy Week. The retreat fell during a time when my life had become particularly complicated. One evening, as I was trying to pray with some of the most difficult pieces of the complexity, I asked God, *What are you trying to teach me here?* With more clarity and immediacy than I usually experience from God, an answer rose to the surface: *I'm not trying to teach you anything. I am trying to make a way for you.*

Ah; that's something else entirely.

The response didn't change anything about the situation, but it changed the way I looked at where I was in my life. It helped me recognize that the pieces I was struggling with didn't have to keep me stuck; God was somehow using them to build a pathway to a new place.

My life looks a good deal different than it did on that silent retreat years ago. Although it is no less complicated, the pieces fit together much better these days. Still, the road isn't complete, and I find myself wondering, *Are there pieces I needed to release or look at differently, so that the way may become more clear?*

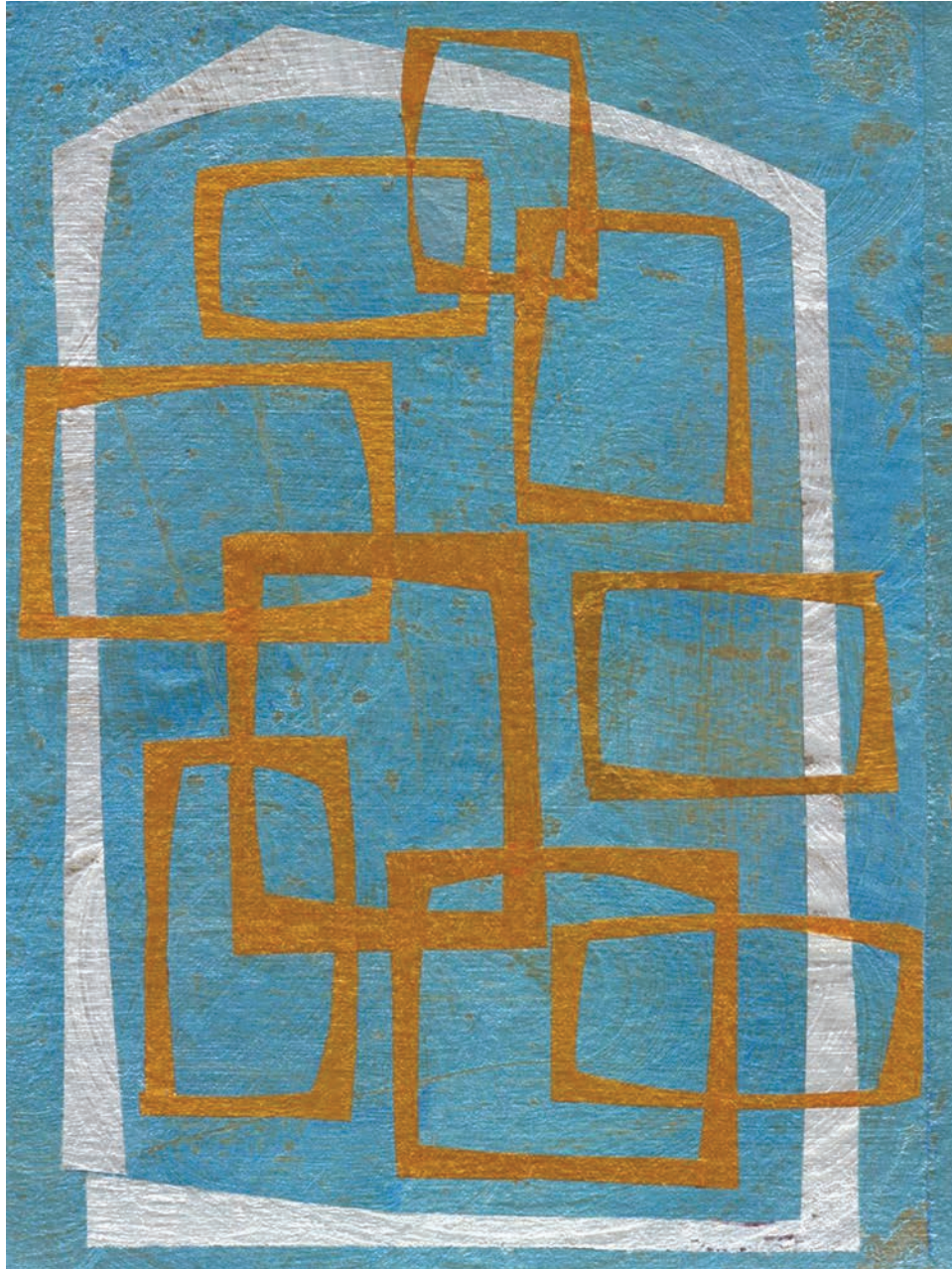
And you, what way is God making in your life, and with your life, and through your life? What path is God fashioning in you and with you in this season?

Blessing

That you will see
the pieces of your life
with clarity.

That they will meet
in ways you hardly
dared imagine.

That they will make
a way better still
than you ever dreamed
to go.



Many Rooms

ADVENTURE

What of bodies that cannot be in motion, at least not in the sustained fashion that a pilgrimage to an actual, distant, physical place often calls for? What of those who cannot undertake a pilgrimage because their bodies, their finances, their schedules cannot bear it? Is holy travel closed to them?

In her book *Plaintext*, Nancy Mairs writes of how having multiple sclerosis has greatly reduced her physical mobility but not her spirit of adventure. She has seen the world through books, traveling with John McPhee to Alaska, with Annie Dillard all around Tinker Creek, and with Edward Abbey

down the Colorado River. “I’ve ridden on the back of Robert Pirsig’s motorcycle,” she writes, “climbed ninety-five feet to George Dyson’s tree house, grown coffee in Kenya with Isak Dinesen. With wonder I contemplate the actions of these rugged and courageous figures, who can strike out on trips of miles—two, two hundred and fifty, three thousand—ready to endure cold, fatigue, human and natural hostility, ready not just to endure but to celebrate.”

Yet in admiring and entering into what she calls the “grand adventures of others,” Mairs is careful to explain that she has not given up the possibility of having adventures of her own. Her understanding of adventure has changed over time, as she has learned new ways to move through her world with spirit and intention.

“As for me, I can no longer walk very far from the armchair in which I read,” Mairs writes.

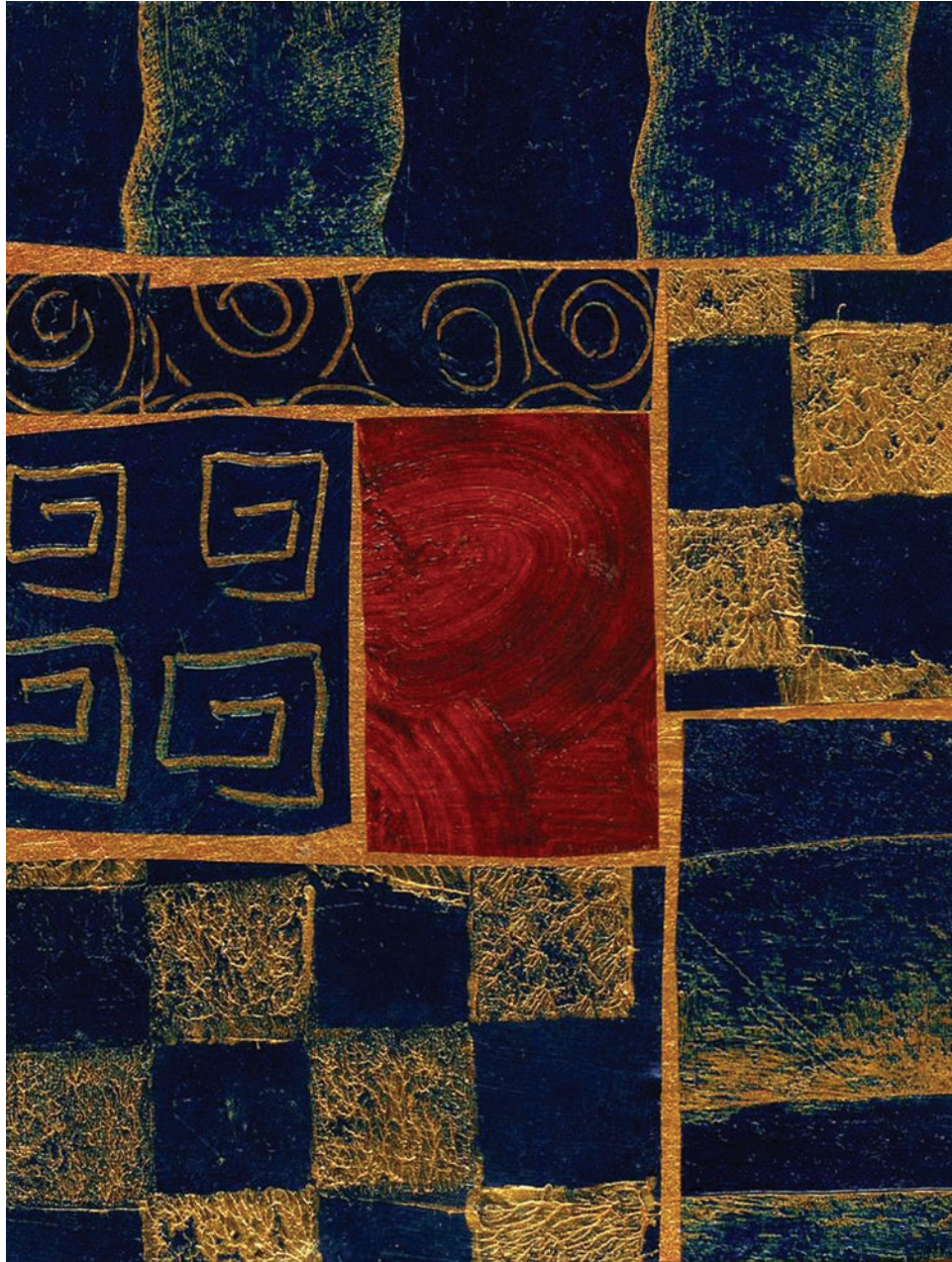
I’ll never make it to Tibet. Maybe not even to Albuquerque. Some days I don’t even make it to the back yard. And yet I’m unwilling to forgo the adventurous life: the difficulty of it, even the pain, the suspense and fear, and the sudden brief lift of spirit that graces—unexpectedly, inexplicably—the pilgrimage. If I am to have it too, then I must change the terms by which it is lived. And so I do. I refine adventure, make it smaller and smaller, until it fits into this little toad that struggles through the jungle of clover under my bare feet. And now, whether I am feeding fish flakes to my betas or crawling across the dining room helping Burton [the cat] look for his blind snake, lying wide-eyed in the dark battling yet another bout of depression, cooking a chicken, gathering flowers from the garden at the Farm, meeting a friend for lunch at The Blue Willow, I am always having the adventures that are mine to have.⁴

What travels have you taken that didn’t require setting out on a literal road? Where has that road taken you, and what gifts has it offered? Is there a place you can’t get to physically, but to which you might journey by some other way? What adventures might still be yours to have?

Blessing

May you find
grand adventures
in the smallest spaces.

May worlds open to you
in the place
where you are.



The Secret Room

THE SECRET ROOM

On the day I arrive in Rome, I am met at Fiumicino Airport by a careful of men. Eric, friend since college, journalist who has lived in the Eternal City for five years. His friend Tom, university professor from the United States, in the city to do some research and whose plane arrived just before mine. Tom's stepson Ricardo, artist, art history student, and resident of Rome. On the way into the city we stop at the Janiculum and from the overlook I have my first view of the sweep of Rome, the trio of men pointing out the sights I will see up close in the days to come.

Ricardo, who lives in Trastevere, has invited us to his place for a luncheon. After a stop at Eric's—brief, I haven't slept in more than twenty-four hours and am determined to keep going until I can go to bed at a normal Roman time—we hop on Eric's *motorino* and head out. On the way Eric tells me to close my eyes. When I open them we are in front of the Pantheon, built nearly two thousand years ago as a temple to all the gods and later converted to a Christian church by Constantine. Among all the monuments I will meet in the coming days, this one will remain the most impressive: the remarkable dome culminating in the central oculus, open to the sky; the tomb of Raphael; the ancient presence unmarred by the young men who pace outside in gladiator costumes, calling “Ciao, bella” to the young women who walk past, hoping to snare them into paying a few euros for a photo with a faux warrior.

Wonders abound in this timeless city. Alone on foot, or with Eric on the back of his *motorino*, or with my sister after she arrives on her birthday, or with the rest of the pilgrim group when they finally land, I soak them in: Vatican, Forum, Castelgandolfo, St. Paul's Outside the Walls, the Spanish Steps, the Borghese Park, the Capitoline Museum, Santa Prassede, and the litany of churches built in honor of the Virgin Mary: Santa Maria in Trastevere, Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Santa Maria del Popolo, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, and Santa Maria della Concezione, the Capuchin church where centuries ago the friars dug up their brothers and decorated the crypt with their bones.

In his book *The Art of Pilgrimage*, Phil Cousineau writes that in every sacred journey, there is a hidden space we must find, a place along the path where we will begin to understand the deep mystery of our journey. Cousineau calls it the secret room.

Everywhere you go, there is a secret room. To discover it, you must knock on walls, as the detective does in mystery houses, and listen for the echo that portends the secret passage. You must pull books off shelves to see if the library shelf swings open to reveal the hidden room.

I'll say it again: Everywhere has a secret room. You must find your own, in a small chapel, a tiny café, a quiet park, the home of a new friend, the pew where the morning light strikes the rose window just so.

As a pilgrim you must find it or you will never understand the hidden reasons why you really left home.⁵

Here is a secret room I found in Rome.

At a long table outside a *taverna* in Trastevere, I sit with a remarkable gathering of people: my sister, the rest of our pilgrim band, Eric, and a group of his fellow expatriate friends. A brilliant Irish woman sits next to me and between bites of our exquisite meal and sips of our exquisite wine she is telling me she is lost. Two months ago she was pregnant and planning to move in with her boyfriend. Then she lost the baby, and with it, something in both her body and her soul broke. It is taking all her strength to wade through the medical maze, let alone to figure out what her life will look like from here. She speaks of consuming darkness.

In a city of wonders, this night will linger with me as being among the greatest marvels. Amidst the enduring monuments to the sacred, a holy moment slips in at a table where one woman says the truth of her life, and one listens and bears witness to the telling.

I carry her back to the States with me, her words echoing in the beating chamber of my heart where secrets are kept. I light candles for the lost woman who wanders through the streets of the Eternal City. I pray that the light that dances in the ancient mosaics and stained glass and marble and stone will find her, will illuminate her path, will open a way through the dark.

Have you ever found a secret room along your path, a space that prompted a moment of insight or inspiration, of wisdom or connection or delight? What did it help you understand about why you had set out on that journey? What gift did it offer for the path ahead?

Blessing

May a secret room
welcome you
along your way.

May it give you
a glimpse
of why you have come.

May it illumine
the path ahead
and draw you deeper still
into the mystery
of the road.



A Road Runs Through It

A BAG OF MANY COLORS

Brenda went to Peru last fall to visit a friend of ours. At Christmastime she gave me a bag she had brought back. Woven of brilliantly dyed thread into a bold Peruvian pattern, the bag is small enough to carry around my neck under a sweater when I travel or to put in a knapsack. At home I leave it on my dresser mirror, hanging by its long strap of braided yarn.

As I cross the threshold into a new season and a new year, the bag prompts questions. What do I need for the journey ahead? What would I put in the bag to take with me? What objects, words, blessings, hopes, charms would I keep within its colors against my chest as I meet the coming days?

How will my actions in the year ahead stretch my own thresholds, my own boundaries, and bring me closer to others—to ones such as those who fashioned this very bag? Or do I need to leave it empty, to wait and see what will fill it this year?

Finally the bag is so full of questions that no space remains for anything else. Some say it will grow lighter with the journey, but though the contents may shift in handling, I think this bag will never be empty.

What do you need to let go of as you enter this new year? What do you need to take with you for the path ahead? What questions are you carrying across the threshold?

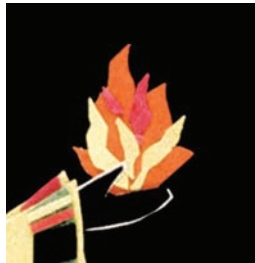
Prayer

I cannot release the questions;
with every step they multiply,
and yet
they carry a wisdom
of their own.

God of mystery,
help me
to hold the questions,
lead me
to live them,
bless me
to bless them
for disturbing
my path.

WALKING BLESSING

That each step
may be a shedding.
That you will let yourself
become lost.
That when it looks
like you're going backwards,
you may be making progress.
That progress is not the goal anyway,
but presence
to the feel of the path on your skin,
to the way it reshapes you
in each place it makes contact,
to the way you cannot see it
until the moment you have stepped out.



NOTES

1. Shirley du Boulay, *The Road to Canterbury: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), 5-7.
2. Suzanne Noffke, trans., *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 41-42.
3. <http://www.srithreads.com>. The webpage about Buddhist Pilgrim's Accoutrements is no longer on the Sri Threads site.
4. Nancy Mairs, *Plaintext* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), 6-7.
5. Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: A Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1998), 126.

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Women's Christmas Retreat 2013

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Cover artwork: *Wise Women Also Came* © Jan L. Richardson. Originally appeared on the cover of Jan's book *Sacred Journeys: A Woman's Book of Daily Prayer* and also in *Night Visions*.



ABOUT JAN

Jan L. Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. She serves as director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC, and travels as a retreat leader and conference speaker. Widely known for such books as *In the Sanctuary of Women* and *Night Visions*, Jan lives in Florida with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles.

You can find Jan's distinctive books, artwork, and more at her blogs and websites:

The Advent Door
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