



# THE SHIMMERING HOURS

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*A Retreat for Women's Christmas*

JAN L. RICHARDSON

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## PRELUDE

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### The Shimmering Hours *A Blessing for Women's Christmas*

There is so much  
I want to say,  
as if the saying  
could prepare you  
for this path,  
as if there were anything  
I could offer  
that would make your way  
less circuitous,  
more smooth.

Once you step out  
you will see for yourself  
how nothing could have  
made you ready for this road  
that will take you  
from what you know now  
to what you cannot perceive  
except, perhaps,  
in your dreaming  
or as it gives a glimpse  
in prayer.

But I can tell you  
this journey is not  
about miles.  
It is not about how far  
you can walk  
or how fast.

It is about what you will do  
with this moment, this star  
that blazes in your sky  
though no one else  
might see.

So open your heart  
to these shimmering hours  
by which your path  
is made.

Open your eyes  
to the light that shines  
on what you will need  
to see.

Open your hands  
to those who go with you,  
those seen  
and those known only  
by their blessing, their benediction  
of the road that is  
your own.

# THE SHIMMERING HOURS

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## *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 revival.

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.

The Women's Christmas 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.

## 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.

This year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with time. How will I enter time? What do I do with my time? In the press of each day, how will I make choices that allow me to feel some freedom about time—that it is spacious, that I will have enough?

My questions about time took a new and heartbreaking turn when, six weeks ago, my husband went into the hospital for what we had anticipated would be fairly routine surgery. There were complications during the surgery, and Gary never regained consciousness. Nearly three weeks later, after a vigil in which time unfolded in ways both graceful and terrible, Gary died.

As I carry startling new questions about how I will move through my days, I am grateful for your company. Within the pages of this Women's Christmas Retreat you will find an invitation to contemplate time, to pause in the pace of your life and ask yourself how you desire to travel through your days. I pray that this retreat will, in itself, become a pocket in time: a thin place where you can experience the fullness of time and the freedom of it, and where you will know the gift and the grace of each moment.

## 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 path as you go?

## BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

Whenever I lead a retreat, I often 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!



*Night into Day into Night*

## NIGHT INTO DAY INTO NIGHT

In monastic communities around the world, the hours are kept sacred. The ebb and flow of darkness is marked by the daily offices, the times when the community gathers to pray, to contemplate Scripture, to chant the psalms. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline: although some communities abbreviate the schedule, these prayer offices make up the ancient rhythm of prayer known as the Liturgy of the Hours. In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris observes that liturgical time “is essentially poetic time, oriented toward process rather than productivity, willing to wait attentively in stillness rather than always pushing to ‘get the job done.’”

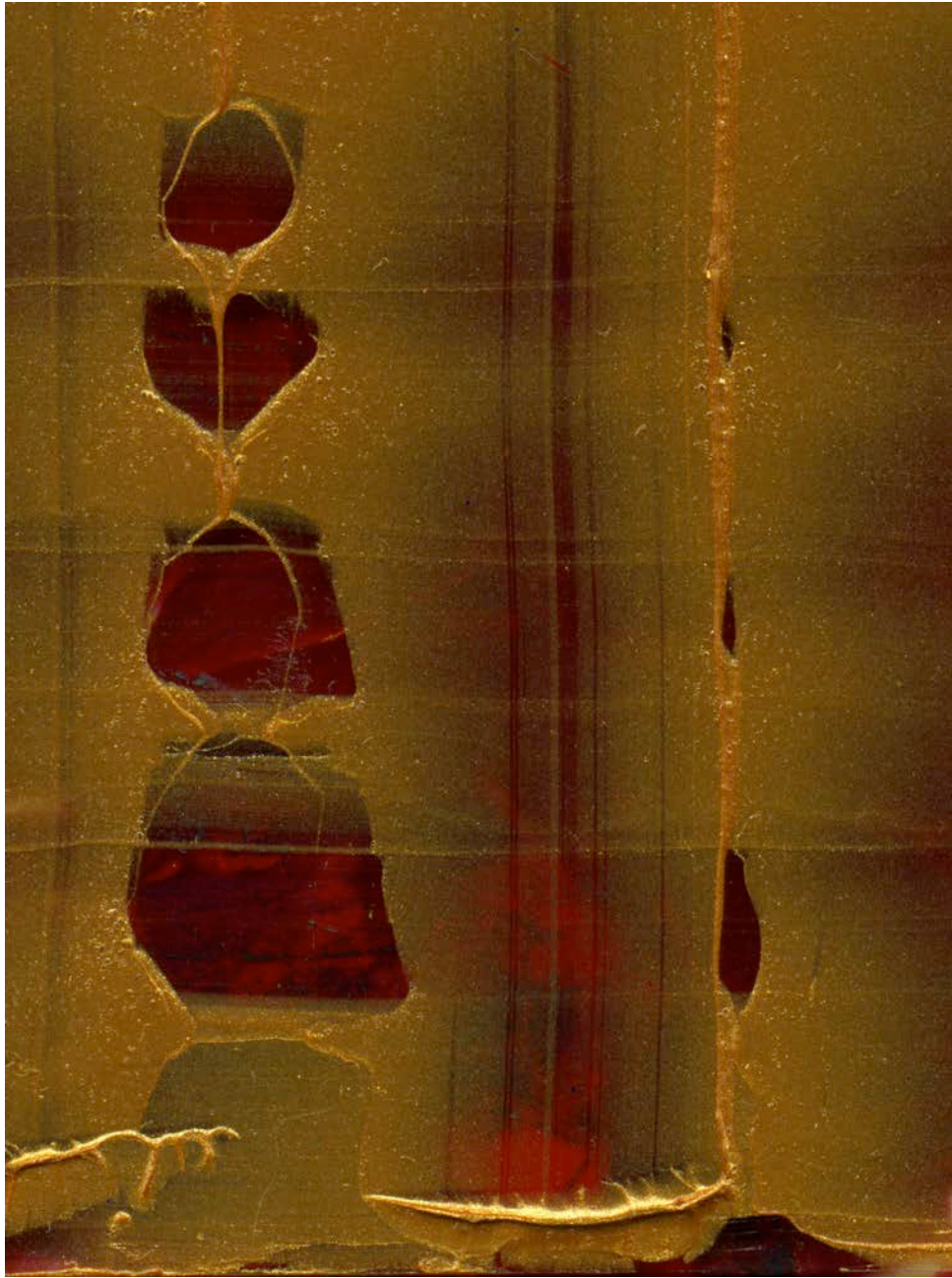
During my stay in Tucson I spent a night at the house of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. I joined the sisters for their night prayer and then talked over tea with the newly-chosen prioress far into the night. After getting ready for bed, I walked through the door that connected the guest quarters to a small balcony overlooking the chapel. Candles still burned, and the fragrance of incense lingered in the air. I sat in the balcony, keenly aware of the prayers spiraling around the chapel, enfolding me in their rhythm of night into day into night.

*How do you keep time? Do you have a practice that helps you enter your day and your hours mindfully? Is there a practice you would like to take up that would help you do this? What would it look like for you to feel at peace with time?*

### BLESSING

God of the ages,  
to whom the hours  
are nothing  
and everything:

may I know each moment  
as a sacred guest  
to be welcomed,  
to be savored,  
to be sent  
with a blessing.



*Heartbeat Liturgy*



## HEARTBEAT LITURGY

*One of the reasons I believe in jazz is that the oneness of man can come through the rhythm of your heart. It's the same anyplace in the world, that heartbeat. It's the first thing you hear when you're born—or before you're born—and it's the last thing you hear.*

—Dave Brubeck

In the beginning was rhythm. The beating of the heart. The intake and release of breath. Waking and sleeping and waking again. Cycles of minutes and hours, seasons and eras.

In our bones, in the beating of our heart, we carry the sacred cadence that brought us into being. Within each one of us is a rhythm that enables us to thrive when we are keeping time to it. Moment by moment, in the doing of daily life, we are either aligned with the fundamental pulse and pace by which we thrive, or we are working against it.

There are times, of course, when it's not possible to keep the rhythm that our souls and bodies crave; seasons when our commitments require us to live outside our natural groove. In those times, the rhythms we have established in the past echo and reverberate through the present. If we have known the sensation of living in a rhythm that sustains us, it becomes possible to improvise when we enter into times of stress and chaos and weariness, and to find glimpses of the sacred in the press of daily life.

Etty Hillesum, who began to keep a diary after Nazi troops invaded her homeland of Holland, and who persisted, with such defiance and grace, in paying attention to the beating of her own heart in the midst of the horrors around her, once wrote, “Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes.”

Having a sacred rhythm to our days, a way of moving in the world that aligns us with the heartbeat of God, is not the same as having an unbroken, stultifying sameness. Part of what I love about my vocation is that no two days are quite alike. As I move among being an artist and writer and minister and retreat leader, I experience seasons of full-on intensity, interspersed with times that are, well, slightly less intense. I gave up striving for balance long ago. But I do need an underlying rhythm to my days, some beats that help restore me and return me to my life. Walking. Sharing meals with my husband. Stopping for tea and chocolate in the afternoon. Reading before bed and praying when I arise.

I continually carry questions about how to enter sabbath and rest, where to put my energy, how to say no even to invitations that are attractive in order to say yes to what I am most meant to do—those parts of my vocation and my being where my heart beats the strongest. And I wonder: how this is for you?

*What questions do you carry about how you move through your days? What is the cadence that is most comfortable and life-giving for you; are you keeping time with it right now? What helps or hinders you in living a sacred rhythm, a pace that feels whole and holy, and your heart beats in time with the heartbeat of God?*

### BLESSING

Each moment. Each breath.  
Each heartbeat and every hour:  
may the rhythm of your life  
restore and renew you this day.



*Sticks and Stars*

## STICKS AND STARS

*The Sahara is an impossible place. All the trails are erased with each wind. . . .*

*You are modern and think your compass and your GPS will keep you from trouble. But the batteries will give out in your GPS, or the sand will ruin it. Your compass may break or become lost as you try to put away your bedding one morning in a hard sandstorm. So you will want to know the ways that have worked for thousands of years.*

*If you are good, like my father and brothers, you will put a line of sticks in the sand at night, using the stars to mark your next morning's direction of travel.*

—Daoud Hari, a native of the Darfur region in Sudan, from his book *The Translator*

I hand Gary the above lines from Hari's book. Yes, he says, handing them back to me. *Leaving yourself a message reminding you of what you learned in the dark, so that you can use it to find your way in the daylight.*

### NIGHT MAP

All this time  
you have spent  
in the dark:  
did you think it  
wasted?

I tell you  
the dark is where  
the map begins.

This night  
that feels so endless:  
this is simply  
the season for  
gathering sticks.

Soon enough—  
wait for it—  
the hour will come  
when your eyes  
cannot help being drawn  
toward the stars  
and you will know  
what to do.

Every twig and scrap  
you clutched to yourself  
in your bewilderment:  
now you know  
its precise place  
beneath the heavens  
for the making of the path  
that will lead you  
from here.

In the morning,  
when you find  
the trail you had known  
blown away:  
no matter.

The road you now walk  
follows the stars,  
their shimmering  
lighting the way  
that opens beneath your feet,  
and their blazing  
a message  
from yourself  
to yourself  
delivered into day.

*What have you found in times of darkness that you carried with you into daylight? How did what you found help you discover or create the map that led you from there? What were the sticks that helped you find the stars, and your new path?*

#### BLESSING

That in the night  
you will find  
the path, the stars  
that will draw you  
into the day.



*Back through the Veil*

## THIN PLACES IN TIME

In Celtic spiritual traditions, there is a lively sense of the fluidity of time. We find this fluidity in the notion of thin places: spaces where the veil between worlds becomes transparent, and heaven and earth meet. In Ireland and elsewhere, the physical landscape offers such places in the form of holy wells, sacred ruins, stone circles, and in the architecture of nature: in forests, fields, seacoasts, hills—places where the lay of the land evokes an awareness of the sacred. These spaces are haunted by the holy. Time runs differently here, and the presence and prayers of generations of visitors have made the veil ever more thin.

This thinning between worlds happens not only in the physical terrain but also in the landscape of time, in the turning of the wheel of the year. The ancient Celts believed that at certain festival times, the gates to the otherworld opened. The living developed practices designed either to entice the spirits or—depending on the spirit—to keep them at bay. This awareness of those who have gone before us persists in the Christian tradition—as, for example, in the Feast of All Saints, which we celebrate on November 1, the traditional new year of the Celtic calendar, when the veil was at its thinnest.

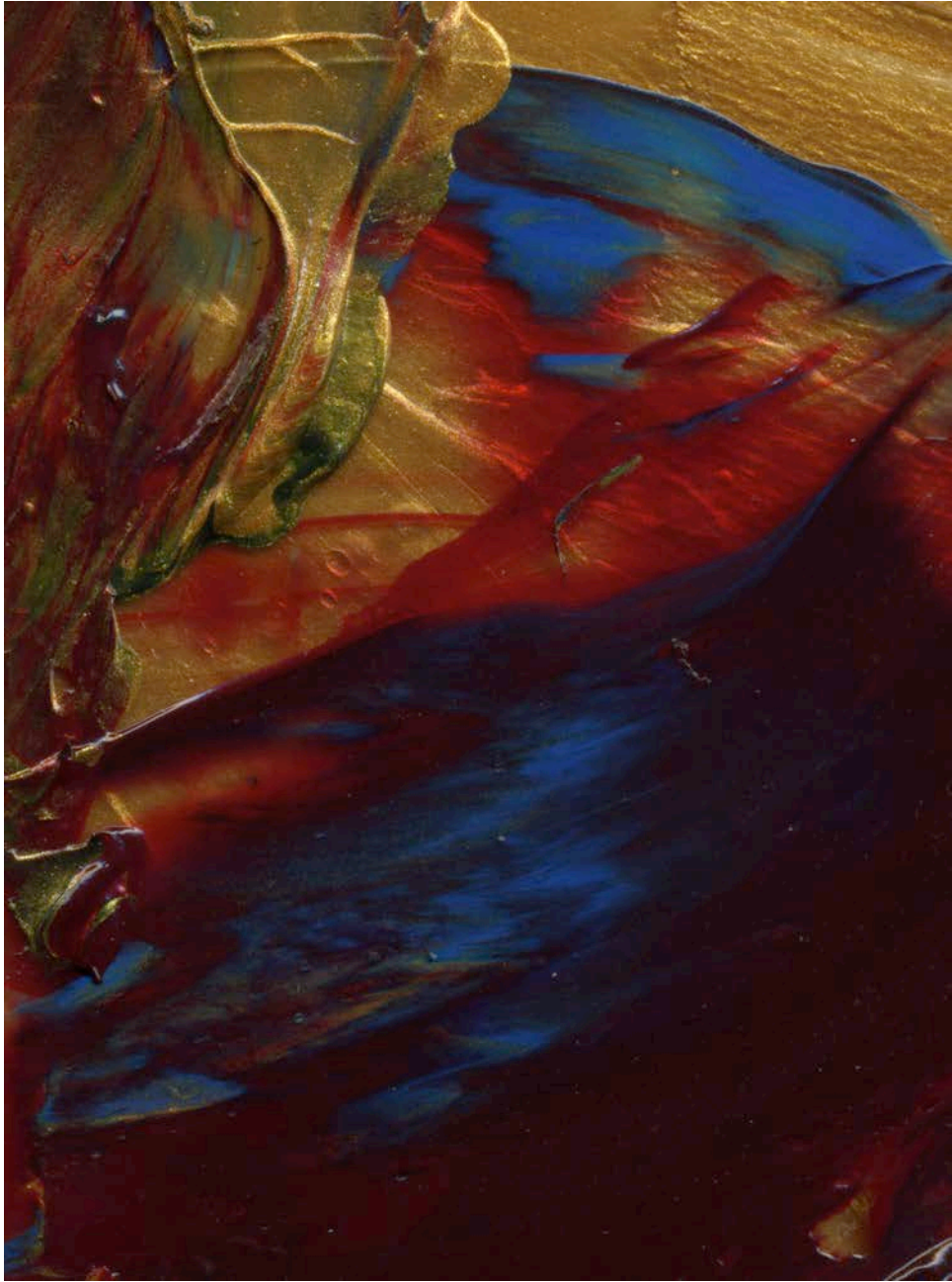
The rhythm of the Christian year offers its own thresholds, inviting us to enter into a deeper awareness of the God who dwells both within and beyond chronological time. As we spiral again and again through the liturgical seasons and holy days, we are called to move more deeply into the story of God, to notice how this story has unfolded in the lives of those who have gone before us, and in our own lives. As we move deeper into the story, it moves deeper into us.

Thin places remind us that we travel in the presence of the communion of saints and in the company of the God who, in the person of Jesus, intersected and inhabited time. In taking flesh, God opened wide to time, to the effects of its passing, to the weight of chronology. Yet this God dwells also beyond time. It is a mystery, this simultaneous entering and shedding that God does with time. In the thin places, we are given a glimpse.

*In the rhythm of the year, are there particular days that are “thin” for you? Have you been in a place or a moment where time seemed to run differently, and you found a spaciousness in the midst of chronology? Did this shift your sense of time after that; did it alter how you entered your daily life?*

### BLESSING

May your journey through this day  
offer a thin, thin place  
where heaven and earth meet  
and time falls away.



*The Present Moment*

SAVANNAH  
*for Gary*

We have spent three days  
wandering the squares  
of this Southern city:  
Telfair, Chatham,  
Washington and Franklin,  
Lafayette and Liberty  
and all their shaded kin.

Time and again  
the trolley for the ghost tour  
has rattled past us,  
the guide pointing out  
here a hotel where a Union soldier  
wanders, carrying his severed arm,  
and there a house  
where spectral handprints  
shimmer on the walls.

We two,  
who began keeping company  
on All Hallows' Eve,  
know something of spirits.  
We could give a tour  
to make a body shiver  
with delight and torment  
by turns.

*On your left,  
ladies and gentlemen,  
you could say,  
the house where I lived  
with my former wife.*

*If you'll look to your right, folks,  
I could tell them,  
this is where the boy  
I loved in childhood  
would break my heart  
a lifetime later.  
And look, over there  
is where a monk  
told me of his desire.*



But here and now,  
despite ghosts and shadows,  
despite oaks dripping grey  
with Spanish moss,  
despite gardens  
of good and evil,  
I am feeling blissfully  
less than gothic.

We are sitting in a café  
on Chippewa Square,  
you with coffee  
and a book I have bought  
for you,  
I with jasmine tea  
and a book you have bought  
for me.

Two years from now  
in this same city  
you will ask me  
to marry you.

We do not know this yet.  
What we know is now,  
the blessed enchantments  
of the present:

tea, coffee,  
books, quiet,  
the companionable charms  
of bodies  
enfleshed and  
familiar and  
real.

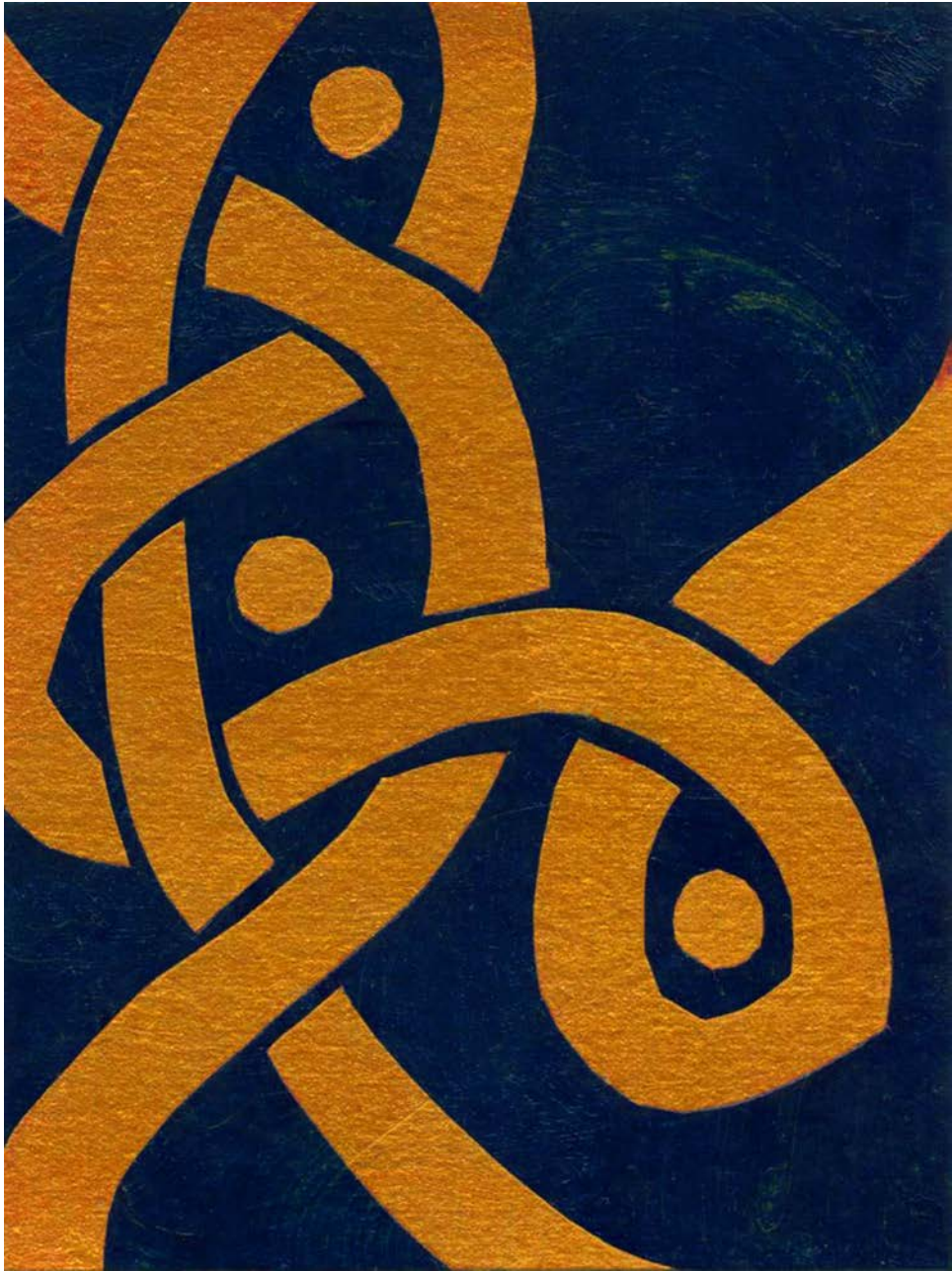
Somewhere in the distance,  
the ghost trolley  
is spiring its passengers  
down the road  
while here,  
turning a page,  
touching your solid,  
beloved hand,

I am, for a moment,  
utterly unhaunted  
and content  
down to my bones.

*What place do your memories have in your experience of time? Do your memories draw you away from the present, or deeper into it? In the unfolding of a day, how do you open yourself to the moment in front of you?*

### BLESSING

Amid the spirits  
of loves past  
and memories  
that linger,  
may you find  
the blessed enchantments  
of the present  
and love  
that welcomes you wholly  
here and  
now.



*Tangled Up in You*

## INTERTWINED

We learn something—one hopes—with the accumulation of years, not because the years always proceed in an orderly fashion but because they spiral us back around the same questions, lead us past familiar landscapes from other angles, encourage us to think again about what has gone before, confront us with patterns of repetition and return.

The curious way that past, present, and future intertwine—much like the intricate designs of Celtic art—doesn't always make sense to me; in fact, thinking about the mysteries of time tends to give me a headache. Yet it does lend a certain grace when I'm feeling burdened by thinking it moves only in a linear, orderly fashion. Like when I find myself dogged by regret about the times I didn't accomplish what I thought I should have accomplished or have given my energy to something that didn't pan out as hoped, or when I'm not as far along as I would like to be at this point in my life.

Sometimes, when vexed by the weight of time that seems wasted, I have found myself the fortunate recipient of the generosity of folks who ask me to think otherwise. These people help me remember there are seeds in these times. And I find the kernels, sometimes so tiny. I gather them up and fling them—is it ahead or behind? Wherever they go, it is an act of prayer, of redemption, of grace.

*Are there questions you find yourself spiraling around again as seasons and years pass? What do you notice as you return to them? Do you have memories, hopes, regrets, dreams, or patterns that persist, showing up repeatedly? What seeds might these repetitions hold; what new doorways might they offer to you?*

## BLESSING

May time spiral well for you,  
leading you around  
and around yet again  
to the landscapes where remembering  
offers redemption and grace.

## INTERLUDE

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### *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,  
sparking 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.



*Holy Absence*

## HOLY ABSENCE

But there is this too. Respite. Rest. Letting the desert be the desert, without feeling compelled to bulldoze our way through it. I think of a long stretch when I found myself in a soul struggle that had caught me entirely by surprise. Consumed by the wrestling and working and searching, I felt exhausted. After a time, my spiritual director, Maru, gave me this phrase: *holy absence*.

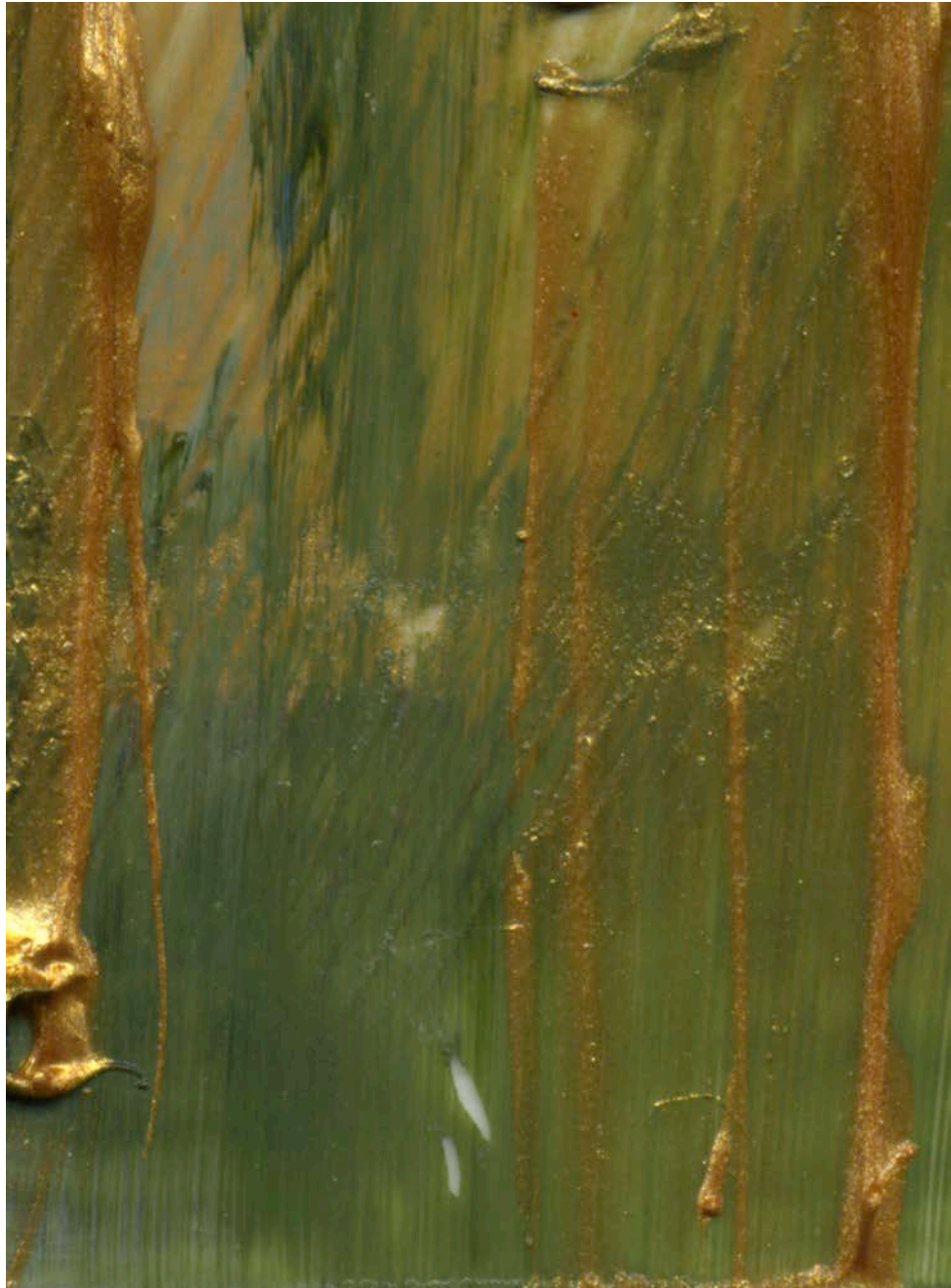
*There are times, she said, sometimes seasons, for removing ourselves from the struggle. Time for sabbath. Time for rest.*

*Where do you find rest in the rhythm of your days? Is there some space in your life, your soul, that is in need of holy absence? What might this look like? Do you know someone in need of sabbath whom you might be able to help find it?*

## BLESSING

Even in the desert,  
even in the wilderness,  
sabbath comes.  
May you keep it.  
Light the candles,  
say the prayers:

Welcome, sabbath.  
Welcome, rest.  
Enter in  
and be our guest.



*Slow Rain*



## SLOW RAIN

After Gary's first surgery.

After eleven hours of keeping vigil with our family in the waiting room.

After the neurosurgeon finally emerges at four o'clock in the morning and says to us, "It did not go as we had hoped."

After the stroke.

After the news that numbs even as it pierces.

After going to the hospital room where my husband now rests in an induced coma from which he will never waken.

After the world turns inside out.

After this, I finally come home from the nearby hospital to try to get some rest. I lie awake for a long time. At some point I reach that place that lies between waking and sleeping. And in that place, words float to the surface.

*slow rain*

*slow rain*

After a few minutes it occurs to me to wonder if this is something of what Gary is experiencing. A place of slow rain; a space where time has altered, has slowed, has become unbound by chronology.

I enter into the longest vigil I have ever kept. Gary is in the hospital for eighteen days. It is a lifetime.

It is a moment.

All I know is being present to him. Everywhere else is too scary; every other place my brain leaps to is full of fear. Anything beyond this moment is too hard to bear.

I breathe with my husband. I read to him. I play music: Louis Armstrong, Tony Bennett, Jacques Brel, Rosemary Clooney. Songs he used to savor. Songs we used to dance to.

I have to skip to the next song when Satchmo sings, "Ain't love a kick in the head."

I think about Advent, fast approaching; how nothing I have read and nothing I have written about this season of waiting and anticipation and finding God in the dark has prepared me for this longest vigil, this most shadowed time of our life.

I think of how Advent tugs us toward the past, stirring our memory; how it draws us toward the future,

quicken our hope; how it beckons us finally to be present to what is, to enter the still point between all we have known and all that lies ahead of us: the unseen and unknowable future that somehow keeps vigil for us.

All there is to do is wait. And breathe. And pray. And wait still more, fiercely present in the still point, leaning into the slow, slow rain.

*And you, on this day, I ask you: What are you waiting for? How are you waiting? For what are you keeping vigil? Even as past and future pull at you, how do you remain present to the life that is unfolding in front of you—the life that has been waiting for you?*

### BLESSING

In the still point  
may we know the One  
who keeps vigil with us  
who waits with us  
within time  
beyond time  
in the slow  
and steady rain.



*Between the Worlds*

## FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

Brenda, Debby, Alice, and I landed in Christchurch, New Zealand, on November 1. We had completely missed Halloween; we left Orlando on October 30 and passed it somewhere in the air as we winged our way through many time zones. We arrived sleepy and bleary-eyed after nearly twenty-four hours of travel, which included sharing a plane with Queen Elizabeth II as we flew from Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand. We never saw her, though we have complimentary pens, menus, and stationery emblazoned with the words “The Royal Flight.”

I thought that in a city named Christchurch we would surely find at least one church celebrating All Saints’ Day. Our hosts at the bed and breakfast located an Anglican congregation holding a service, and after letting us lose ourselves in slumber for several hours, Monty drove us, with breathtaking speed, down the hill into the city and dropped us off at the church. I remember little of the service, but the smell of incense settled deep into my memory.

As we remembered those who had died, I thought of my friend Edward, whose ashes now rest at a church called All Saints’. Several months after his death, I spent the night in the home he had shared with Ray. During the dark night, I dreamed of Edward. We talked again, each of us knowing he had died, yet somehow conversing in that netherworld of dreams where encounters happen beyond the bounds of time and logic. Waking beneath my quilt the next morning, I remembered Edward’s palpable presence during the night, then walked upstairs to the rooms still heavy with his absence.

*Who lingers with you in memory, in dream, continuing to go with you even as they have become unbound by time?*

### BLESSING

For those  
who walked with us,  
this is a prayer.

For those  
who have gone ahead,  
this is a blessing.

For those  
who touched and tended us,  
who lingered with us  
while they lived,  
this is a thanksgiving.

For those  
who journey still with us  
in the shadows of awareness,  
in the crevices of memory,  
in the landscape of our dreams,  
this is a benediction.



*Holding the Light*

## MEDICINE WOMAN

All during the dark year you kept the vigil light burning. When I lost track of the turning of seasons, you reminded me of the passage of time and that all had not remained idle beneath the terrain of my life. You might as well have been in another country for all the distance between our two coasts. But some things I held close, like memories of tables once shared and offerings that arrived from your far reach: native wine on my doorstep, a book in the mail, cards on which you inscribed words that helped tell me who I was on the days I had trouble remembering.

Three time zones to the east of you, I could call you in the middle of my night when the ghosts kept sleep at bay. Still awake, you uttered the charms that settled their troubled souls long enough to let me rest. *Use your voice*, you told me. *Know your anger*, you reminded me. *Anticipate resurrection*. Your words were a potent bundle I would place under my pillow. I'm hoping someday to give it back to you, my medicine woman.

*When you are feeling the weight of time, when you are feeling lost or unmoored from a sense of time, who helps you? Do you have someone who will remind you, when life seems at a standstill, that something is stirring beneath? Who keeps vigil with you during the difficult times?*

### BLESSING

For all that enfolds us  
for each word of grace  
and every act of care;

for those who offer refuge  
for each shelter given  
and every welcome space;

for the healing of our souls  
for balm and rest  
for soothing and sleep;

for vigils kept  
and for lights kept burning;

blessed be.



*Stories Move in Circles*

## STORIES AND CIRCLES

One of my favorite passages in all of scripture is to be found in Mark 5:21-43. I love this passage, which Matthew and Luke also include in some fashion in their Gospels. I particularly love it for the way it intertwines the story of the healing of the long-bleeding woman with the story of a young girl, the daughter of a leader of the synagogue, whom Jesus is on his way to heal.

The story of the woman occurs in the middle of the story of the young girl. It's possible to read the woman's tale as something of an interruption of the girl's, but there is such resonance between them that it makes much more sense to read them as the intertwined tales they are. Many scholars have written about the connections between these stories, teasing out the details of the literary structure and Jesus' work of healing and restoration in both cases. These commentators have noted the detail that Matthew omits but that Mark and Luke include in their tellings: The girl, they say, is about twelve years old—the same number of years that the woman has been bleeding. It's a detail that underscores the links between these stories.

Pondering this passage, I have found myself reflecting in particular about how the story of the woman is contained within the story of the girl. The girl's story holds the woman's story, not only in terms of literary structure, but also in the mysterious way that happens in the realm of story. Their healing is bound together.

Recently I began doing some focused work with a gifted listener. In our first meeting I told her I wasn't in the midst of a crisis, and I didn't sense there was anything huge that was waiting to be unearthed. I was there, I said, because I needed to tell some stories. I am at a point in my life where I've accumulated a few. Some of these stories are particularly present with me these days, and I'm curious to look more closely at how they connect, what they hold, and what they have to tell me as I discern the path ahead. In talking with this listener, I have found myself deeply aware of how each story I tell her contains another story, and another. Stories that may have happened years apart in chronological time are near neighbors in the space of the soul. The stories of the girl I was contain the stories of the woman. And the stories of the woman hold the stories of the girl.

In her book *Writing for Your Life*, Deena Metzger offers this quote about stories:

Stories move in circles. They don't move in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and listen. (From the production *Coming from a Great Distance* by A Traveling Jewish Theatre.)

*How do your stories move in circles? What are the stories that are most present to you? How do the stories of your past and present contain one another? How do those stories pull you into the path ahead? Is there anyone who hears your stories, someone who helps you look around and listen?*

## BLESSING

In every circling,  
in each story,  
may you be blessed.



## POSTSCRIPT: THE VIGIL

“Just in case the days have blurred together, it’s Saturday,” Peg writes to me. “I thought you might not know that.”

On the day that I receive her message, I have been keeping vigil in the hospital with my husband for nine days. We came here in mid-November to address an aneurysm that had been discovered in Gary’s brain during the summer. Gary had experienced no symptoms of the aneurysm; it was spotted in the process of checking out something else that proved not to be a problem. *How fortunate*, we thought. *How providential*. It had been found; it could be treated; life could return to normal, all the more graced for knowing what a potential disaster we had dodged.

During an eleven-hour surgery, Gary suffered a stroke. The following days would bring further complications, two more surgeries, and the longest vigil of my life. I learned again, this time with a vengeance, how strangely time moves in hospitals. It both expands and compresses, stretching out even as it speeds past.

Years earlier, I had decided I wanted to be someone in whom time moved differently. I wanted to live unhurried by time, to resist the press and the weight of it. I wanted a sense of spaciousness about it, and to move at a pace that didn’t leave me breathless.

This comes back to me in the hospital as I keep vigil with my husband, breathing with him, inhabiting each moment. I feel time bend and turn, feel the thin places that open, feel the ache that comes as time finally runs out and my beloved breathes his last.



Chronologically, a month has passed since Gary died. Time continues to move curiously as I enter this world and this life where my husband no longer lives. Liturgically, we have just finished Advent, the season that calls us both to look back and to look forward as we celebrate Christ’s birth and anticipate his return. Personally, it has become hard for me to know where to land in time; Gary’s death has left a wound that cuts deep across past, present, and future alike. They all seem foreign to me now, nearly unrecognizable in how changed they have become by the loss of my husband. Memories, hopes, the painful present: no corner of time is unmarked by his vivid absence. So I keep breathing, planning about ten minutes at a time, trusting that the wound will become a doorway and that I will learn again how to make a home in the unfolding moments.

I had decided, earlier this year, that time would be the theme for this Women’s Christmas Retreat, not knowing how time would shift and change for me in these past weeks. Now, as I navigate my journey with time, negotiating these new turns posed to me, I find myself wondering where you are in your own relationship with time: how you are making your home in the moments given to you, whether time is feeling spacious or scarce for you, what choices you are making about the way you will enter your days.

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives,” writes Annie Dillard in her book *The Writing Life*. As we enter the year that waits for us, as we step into each shimmering hour that will make our path as we go, may your days and your lives be wonderfully spent, and may Christ our Light meet you in every moment.

*New Year’s Day, 2014*

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