



HOME BY ANOTHER WAY

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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*In gratitude for Brenda and Catherine,
who graced my home as I was preparing
this year's retreat;*

*in thanks for the family and friends
who help me know where home is;*

*and in prayer for all
who are searching for shelter.*



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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 guidance.
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.

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY

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. Celebrated particularly 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 ends, 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, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child, and who returned home by another way, 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. I named the piece *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 *home*. At the beginning of Advent 2013, my husband and partner in ministry, Garrison Doles, died unexpectedly, several weeks after experiencing complications during what we had anticipated would be routine surgery. In the wake of his death, I had an acute sense of not knowing where home was. Home was what Gary and I had made together. It was what we had found in each other. Now that he was gone, where on earth was home? The un-homing that grief brought was excruciating. It also propelled me into a search for what home might begin to look like now.

Within the pages of this Women's Christmas Retreat you will find an invitation to contemplate home. With readings and images inspired by some places that have been home for me, and by my search for home, the pages of this retreat offer a welcoming space for you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you ponder home in your own life—where you find it, what questions it stirs, how you imagine it, what memories and dreams it evokes.

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 fits for you—and select just one or two reflections as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these readings, you will likely 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.

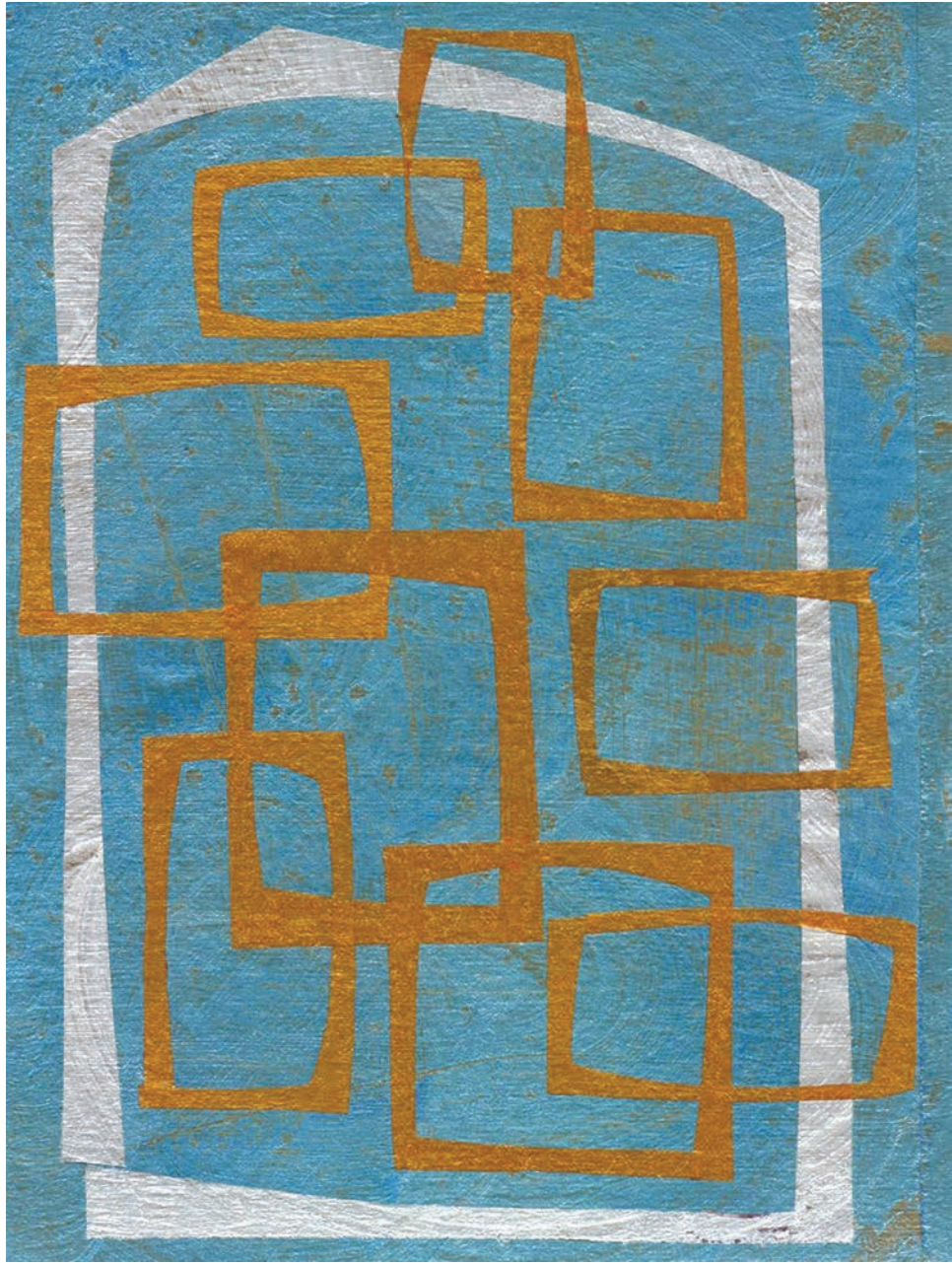
With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful 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 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, 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 from home—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19).

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!



Many Rooms

MANY ROOMS

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

—John 14:1–3

Many years ago, a recurring dream began to take hold of my nighttime brain. The details shift and change each time it visits, but the essence of the dream remains the same: I am wandering through shops—not a mall, but a series of connected stores. The stores are the kind that I love to browse through, the sort that I find in communities that value artistry. As I wander among the stores that spill into one another, I savor what I see: richly hued artwork, finely crafted jewelry, beautiful pottery that calls out for me to touch it.

In the dream, no matter the changing details, I always find a bookstore. Often it’s a used bookstore, crammed with volumes and with more shelves around each turn. Once the bookstore 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 books like these.*

Along with the persistent presence of a bookstore, one other detail of the dream never changes: it always begins with my walking down a familiar street. I turn a corner and suddenly find myself among the shops, thinking, *Of course—that’s where they were!* These treasures were in my neighborhood the whole time, waiting for me to find them.

I think of this recurring dream, with its landscape so unfamiliar but so known, as I ponder John 14:1–14.

You know the way to the place where I am going, Jesus says to his disciples on the night before his death. Here at the table where they share their final meal before his crucifixion, there are many things Jesus wants to tell them. His hunger for them to *know* becomes particularly acute as Jesus gathers with them just hours before his death. And so he will go on to tell them about the Holy Spirit whom he will send, and how this Spirit will be in them. Jesus will tell them that he is the true vine in which they will abide. He will tell them—command them—to love one another, and how the world will hate them. He will tell them that their sorrow will turn to joy. Jesus is desperate for them to know these things, and more.

But when he tells them, before all this, of the place he is preparing for them—the house with many dwelling places—Jesus tells them that they already know the way. When Thomas—ever the good questioner—asks him how they can know the way, Jesus reminds them that he himself is the way. If they know him, they know the way, and the One who sent him to prepare the way for them.

This text has me wondering if following in this way has less to do with striving and working at it, in the frenetic fashion we sometimes do, than with letting ourselves recognize what we already know; less to do with wrapping our brains around points of belief that grow so contentious than with opening our eyes to the door that has always been there in our soul, our heart, waiting for us to see it and walk through it and find the spacious dwelling place that has been there all along. To be sure, following Christ our Way takes work and effort and focus and sacrifice. Yet I find myself thinking of the poem by the Sufi poet Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks, in which he writes of how he has been living on the

“lip of insanity,” as he puts it, knocking incessantly on a door. Finally the door opens, and he realizes, *I’ve been knocking from the inside!*

Here at the table, Jesus wants to make clear that although the place he describes is a someday place, a promised home that he is preparing, it is at the same time a dwelling that his followers can have a glimpse of in this world, a space that even now takes form in our midst. An abiding-place fashioned by—and fashioned of—the Christ who dwells in God, and is a dwelling place for God, and offers his own self to us as both a habitation and a way. A way that we find by opening the door that is already within us.

In this season, where are you making your home? Is there a place in your life where you are pouring out your energy, pushing hard to get to the other side, when the way might lie instead in releasing, in finding the doorway that appears in letting go—a door that might have been there all along?

BLESSING WITH MANY ROOMS

As you step inside
this blessing
we wish to tell you
it is large enough
for you to lie down in.

Or
(though it may not look it,
small as it is upon this page)
you can curl up
in this blessing
with a cup of tea
and a good book
beside the window—
here, just behind you—
that faces east.

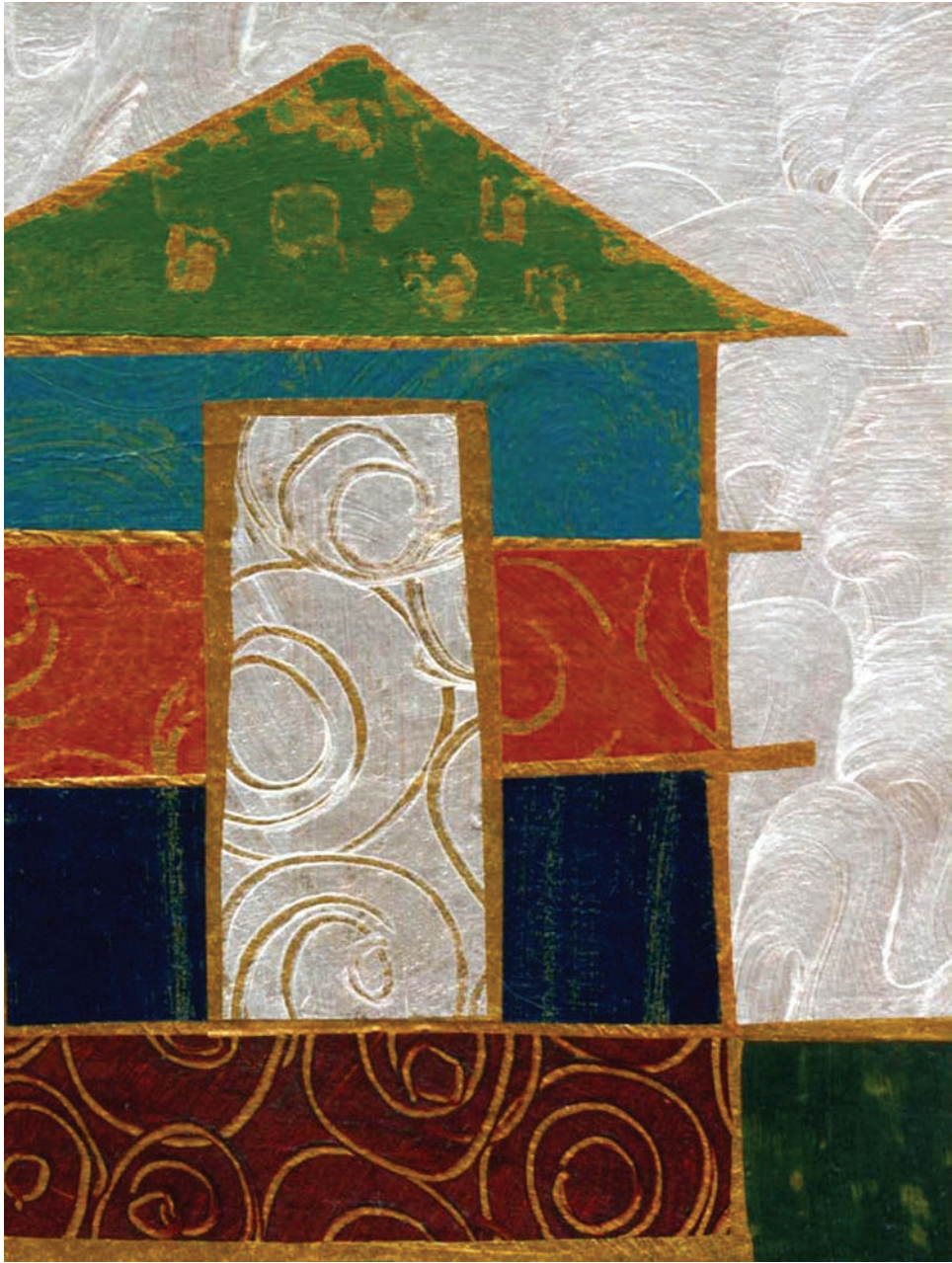
Likewise it is true,
though you might not have
paused long enough
to notice,
that this blessing
is big enough
for a table—
quite a sizeable one
can be accommodated—
where your guests
will want to linger
far into the night.

And if they desire to stay,
you will find that
through this door—
you did not see it before?—
there are rooms in plenty
where they can
lay their heads
and stretch out with abandon
in their dreaming sleep.

One room,
many rooms—
in this blessing
it is all the same.
The point is that
there is space
enough.

Enough to make
a life, a home;
enough to make
a world.

Enough to make
your way toward
the One who has made
this way for you.



House Dreaming

HOUSE DREAMING

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”

—Matthew 7:24–25

When a friend of mine was ready to build a house on the land he had purchased in eastern Kentucky, he sent out a request to some friends. Scott invited us to offer an object, a tangible blessing that he would bury in the ground upon which he would build the house. He later wrote to me, “Folks were amazingly thoughtful—some of the items included tea, LEGO and puzzle pieces from my childhood sent by my mother, guitar strings, a bit of climbing rope, a bit of granite from my hometown (Lithonia meaning roughly ‘rock place’), a wine chalice from my potter friends, shells from our childhood vacation spot, herbs, bits of plants and dirt from various parts of the country, and chocolate.” After all the gifts arrived, Scott gathered with some friends for a ceremony on his property. Placing the gifts in the ground, they offered a blessing for what would take root in that place. Married now and with young children, Scott flourishes with his family in the house built atop the buried blessings.

Jesus has some things to say about houses. In John 14, where he speaks of the dwelling place he is preparing, we saw how houses are places not only of personal but also collective memory and imagination. Jesus’ words in that passage underscore the fact that throughout the scriptures, a house is rarely just a physical building. Rather, it evokes a constellation of meanings. A house may refer to a place of worship, the people of Israel, the members of a particular ancestral lineage (as in the house of Jacob), or a group of people who dwell together (a household). Jesus sometimes uses houses to describe the kingdom of God, as in the parable of the woman who sweeps her entire house, looking for her lost coin.

Houses also contain a deeply individual meaning, as we see in Matthew 7:21–29. Here the image of the house is thoroughly personal, in that it refers to the house that we build with our own particular life, yet it resonates with nearly all the other meanings that house holds. The house that we construct with our life, the house that *is* our life, is intimately involved with the entire household of God.

In this parable about the wise man who built his house on rock and the foolish man who built his house on sand, Jesus urges us to dig deeper, as it were, into this homely imagery. He challenges us to recognize how the health of a house (and its inhabitants) depends on what we build it upon. The wholeness of the house, he tells us, rests on its foundation. And for Jesus, our tangible response to him forms the foundation of our dwelling with him. Our practices, our searching, our work to live out his call: these acts are blessings that sustain the structure and help its inhabitants flourish.

Jesus makes clear that we cannot cut corners in this kind of house building. There is no shortcut to the kingdom, no substitute for doing the work that’s involved. We are saved by grace alone, but we are called to respond to that grace, to give flesh to our understanding that hospitality is not only something we receive in Christ but that we offer as well. Many gospel passages speak specifically, and sometimes uncomfortably, to the kind of work that Christ beckons us to do. He emphasizes that it’s not work just for the sake of work (and it’s not constant work, either; rest is one of the ways that we respond to Christ). Rather, our response is for the purpose of relationship. As Jesus highlights in the opening verses of this passage from Mark, it’s possible to do really impressive work, work that seems holy on the surface, but is empty because it’s focused on results—on a show of power—rather than on

relationship with the one who is the source of true power. *I never knew you* is the lament that Jesus, in Matthew 7:23, predicts he will utter to those who hear but do not respond.

The solidly built house in Jesus' parable has, like the kingdom of God, a now-and-not-yet quality. The house that he describes is something of a mystical house that stands complete and inhabited, yet which we are also in the process of building. Living together in a house that we are still working on sometimes seems daunting. We can get to feeling like Sisyphus in our perpetual practicing, particularly in those times when we start focusing more on the practices themselves and less on the relationship the practices are designed to cultivate. Too, we don't always know precisely how the structure will take shape and what it will look like. Our call, however, is not always to finish the house but rather to be faithful in laying the groundwork, to discerning and doing the work that's in front of us, the work that is ours to do.

And here's a cool thing: we don't have to do it alone. *Aren't* meant, in fact, to do it alone. I think again of my housebuilding friend, and how he asked for help and invited others to share in blessing and building the foundation. How might we do this in our own life this year?

What are you building your life on? What are the practices that give wholeness to the house of your life? Are there any places in the foundation that feel shaky? Is there someone you could ask for help as you build? What does the dream house of your soul look like?

BLESSING

God of making
and unmaking,
of tearing down
and re-creating,
you are my home
and habitation,
my refuge
and place of dwelling.

In your hollows
I am re-formed,
given welcome
and benediction,
beckoned to rest
and rise again,
made ready
and sent forth.



Mystery of Migration

THE MYSTERY OF MIGRATION

In the small, rural community in north central Florida where I grew up, there is a resident community of sandhill cranes. For a girl who wanted to become an ornithologist when she grew up, the cranes were a source of fascination. I still love them—their elegant flight, their haunting call.

The sandhills of my hometown are year-round residents, but in the wintertime they are joined by snowbird sandhills who migrate south for a few months of warmer weather. It was at the end of one of these winters, as spring was beginning to show forth, that I returned to my parents' home for a visit. From inside the house I heard that haunting crane-cry, and rushed out to see who was overhead. Turning my face skyward, I saw one of the most stunning scenes I have ever witnessed: flock after flock of the snowbird cranes heading back north. I marveled as hundreds of cranes passed over me, their long procession of V's streaking the sky, their haunting call proclaiming their journey home.

Migration is a mystery to me. But I know there is something in their brains, their bones, that tells them it is the season for home-going, and points them toward the path of return.

Return to me with all your heart, God proclaims through the prophet Joel (2:12). But how do we return? How do we know the time, the place, the path for our own home-going that draws us deeper into the heart of God?

There is something in us that knows the way. We may become distracted, we may be pulled off course, we may get lost or stalled, but some part of us knows the path of return. This new year holds out the invitation to us to find this way, to seek it out again, to pay attention to this moment and to ask, *Where am I? How is God here? Is this a place that will draw me deeper into God, or is the Spirit stirring me toward another place?*

The coming year might not involve moving toward a different physical space, but it is sure to beckon us into some new place in our path, in our soul: to move closer, to go deeper, to recognize and reckon with what may hinder us, and to find our way toward what frees us.

Here at the outset of this year, I do not know just what this returning will look like, what particular shape it will take for you, for me. But I am stretching my arms wide as we begin, offering blessings as we wing our way into this landscape that has been waiting for us.

So where are you? How is God there? Is this a place that will draw you deeper into God, or might the Spirit be stirring you toward another place—a place that might lie within the place you are now?

RETURN

A Blessing

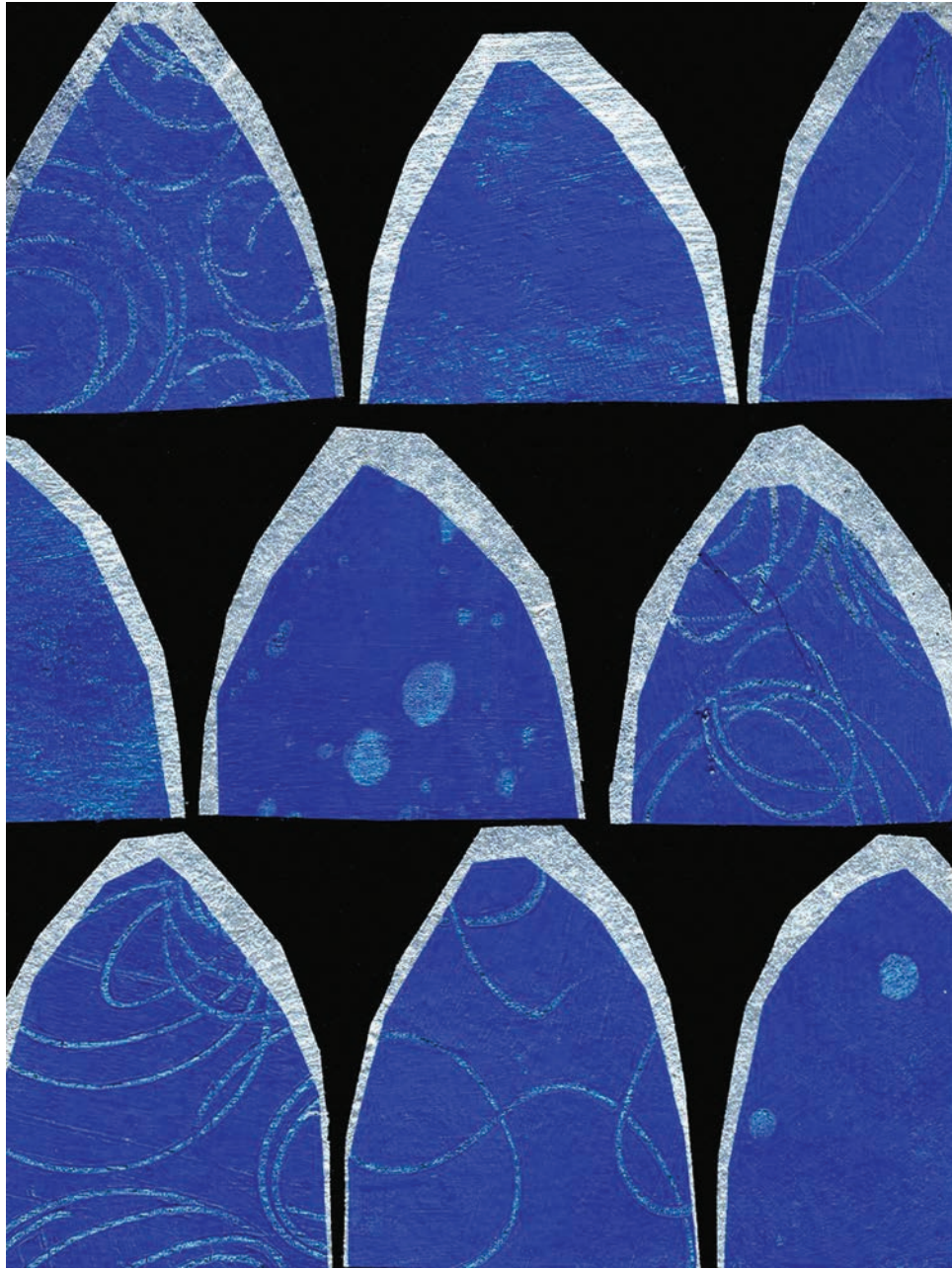
Remember.
You were built for this,
the ancient path
inscribed upon your bones,
the persistent pattern
echoing in your heartbeat.

Let this be the season
you turn your face

toward the One
who calls to you:

Return, return.

Let this be the day
you open wide your arms
to the wind that knows
how to bear you
home.



A Place to Dwell

THE YEAR AS A HOUSE

A Blessing

Think of the year
as a house:
door flung wide
in welcome,
threshold swept
and waiting,
a graced spaciousness
opening and offering itself
to you.

Let it be blessed
in every room.
Let it be hallowed
in every corner.
Let every nook
be a refuge
and every object
set to holy use.

Let it be here
that safety will rest.
Let it be here
that health will make its home.
Let it be here
that peace will show its face.
Let it be here
that love will find its way.

Here
let the weary come
let the aching come
let the lost come
let the sorrowing come.

Here
let them find their rest
and let them find their soothing
and let them find their place
and let them find their delight.

And may it be
in this house of a year

that the seasons will spin in beauty,
and may it be
in these turning days
that time will spiral with joy.
And may it be
that its rooms will fill
with ordinary grace
and light spill from every window
to welcome the stranger home.

How might it be to imagine this year as a house—a space in time that is opening itself to you? How will you enter it with mindfulness and intention? What rooms do you want to inhabit in this house-of-a-year? To whom will you offer a welcome?



A Circle of Quiet

IN THE MARY, MOTHER OF GOD CHAPEL

From the moment I stepped into this chapel, it felt like home. Wood, stone, glass, and flame together breathed a silent welcome. I come here for its quiet, for its enveloping of my soul, for the way it has settled here amidst the green. I walk in and know I join the unbroken worship of those who have passed through here: the Franciscan friars who hallow this space with their prayers morning and evening, as well as the persons, like me, who come with often unnameable longings. I have been grateful for the unseen hands that tend this space, that change the wall hanging with each season, that place the icon in the corner, that care for the perpetual flame.

On this day, after the quiet, I encounter Brother David as I leave the chapel. I have caught him pulling the trappings of Advent from the storage closet. He is looking slightly frazzled and uses phrases like “If Advent happens” as we talk. I know what he means. We both know Advent will happen, with or without us. But as people who work for religious institutions, our sacred seasons are usually the most frenzied. For us the trick, the challenge, lies in finding ways to savor the season in the midst of the rush instead of winding up exhausted, having missed it as we sought to make it meaningful for others.

On this day, heading into the season, I am grateful for the grace of our encounter. After this ragged year gone, I gladly take our visit as an omen, a talisman to carry through the holy days ahead. Now I know who prepares this space, in season and out. The unseen hands have taken flesh, intimating incarnation, pointing the way to the coming Christ.

Have you had the experience of entering a space and sensing that it felt like home? Where was this? What did you notice in this place, and in yourself? Was there a gift you carried with you from there, one that has made a difference in the space of your life?

BLESSING

For all the generations
that have prepared the way;
for all the unseen hands
that have made ready
every space;
for those who light
the fires of welcome
and who tend
to every resting place,
O God of every pilgrim,
we bless you with our thanks.



Testimony

BLESSING THE BODY

*They said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years,
and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of
the temple of his body.*

—John 2:20–21

Years later, Jesus' words will echo in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. *Do you not know*, the apostle will ask them—and us—*that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* (1 Corinthians 3:16). We are the body of Christ, both broken and beautiful; in us God's Spirit makes its home.

How is it for you to consider your body as a dwelling, a home—and not just a home, but a temple, a sacred space, a place where God lives? Do you feel at home in your body? What kind of "house blessing" might your body need?

BLESSING THE BODY

This blessing takes
one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.
Holy face.
Holy feet.
Holy everything
in between.

Holy even in pain.
Holy even when weary.
In brokenness, holy.
In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.
Holy in distress.
Holy when being born.
Holy when we lay it down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,
open your eyes
(holy eyes).
For one moment
see what this blessing sees,
this blessing that knows
how you have been formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you:
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

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,
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.



The Sanctuary Between Us

THE SANCTUARY THEY MAKE IN MEETING

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town
in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.*

—Luke 1:39–40

Here's one way that I imagine it: having received her courageous *yes*, Gabriel turns and takes his angelic leave of Mary. A shimmering rush of wind, and he is gone. The light returns to normal, the objects in the room resume their familiar shapes. And Mary—young Mary, unmarried Mary, pregnant Mary—looks around. Finds herself quite alone. Places her head in her two hands and thinks, *It seemed like a good idea at the time . . .*

Luke tells us that after Gabriel's departure, Mary goes "with haste" to visit Elizabeth. She knows, for Gabriel has told her, that her kinswoman is experiencing an unusual pregnancy of her own. Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home, enters, and a scene unfolds that is among my favorites in all of scripture. Elizabeth no more than hears Mary's words of greeting, and she knows what has happened. Luke tells us that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she cries out, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* (Luke 1: 42–45).

I love how artists across the centuries have depicted this scene that is known as the Visitation: Elizabeth reaches out to Mary, places her hands on Mary's belly, speaks her words of welcome and blessing. Mary reaches out in turn, her hands on Elizabeth's arms or on her kinswoman's belly that is swollen with the miracle child she has carried for six months now: the child, Elizabeth says, that leaps for joy in her womb. It is a dramatic scene, intense with the intimacy of the reaching out of these two women toward one another, holding onto each other for dear life.

Jane Schaberg writes of how Elizabeth, in this moment, appears as a prophet, though that title is not given to her.¹ Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth recognizes the One whom Mary carries, much as Anna the prophet will do in the temple in a few months' time. Yet Elizabeth is not only a prophet here; she engages also in a priestly act as she speaks her words of blessing and places her hands upon the vessel that contains the Christ.

I have often pondered this scene in terms of the way in which Elizabeth extends her hospitality to Mary, how her welcome is wondrous not merely for its complete absence of judgment of the pregnant, unmarried Mary but especially for her deep delight in what her cousin has done. As I revisit this passage now, what strikes me most is not only how Mary finds a refuge in Elizabeth, but also how Elizabeth must find something of a refuge in her young cousin. There are few things more powerful than finding ourselves in a situation beyond our imagining, and encountering someone who knows, from the inside of it, something of what it is to be in that place; someone who can meet us there.

Pregnant in strange and wondrous circumstances, Mary and Elizabeth each find perhaps the only other person who could possibly understand what's happening to them. With one another, they find not just understanding (though that would be gift enough), not just hospitality (though that would be mercy enough); in one another, they find a shelter; in their meeting, they make a sanctuary.

1 Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 282.

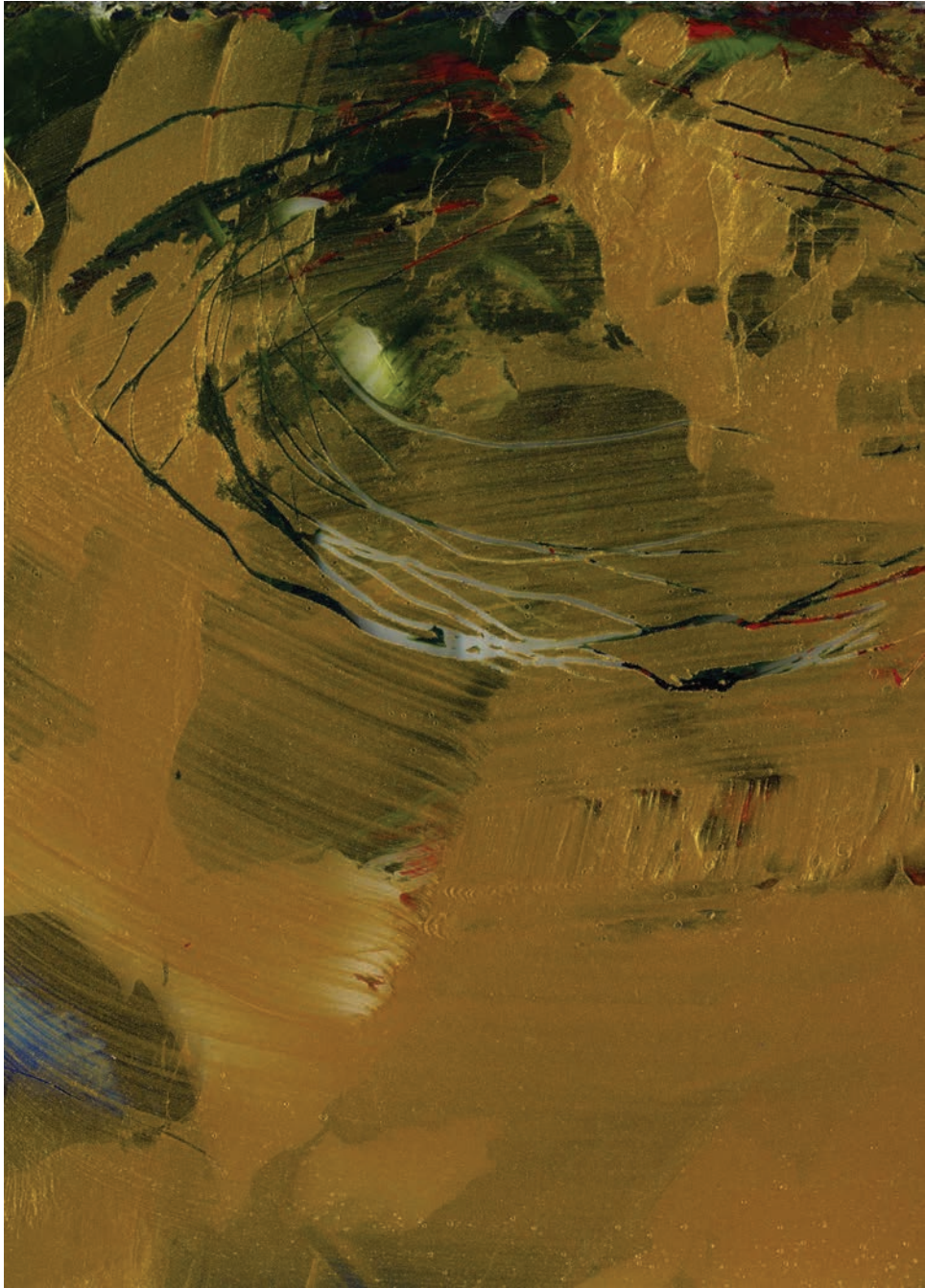
In moments, Mary will raise her voice in an ancient song. Singing, after all, is part of what a sanctuary is for. In the relief and release she finds in Elizabeth's welcome, Mary is freed to let loose with her words about the Word that is within her, and to pour forth her poetic proclamation of what God has wrought in her and in the world.

Ah, but that's another reflection for another time. For now, we linger in the sanctuary, this sacred space that Mary and Elizabeth have made with their meeting, their embrace, their welcome, their knowing.

Where are you finding sanctuary in this season? Are you Mary, needing to make a journey—literal or otherwise—to find the refuge you need? Are you Elizabeth, extending hospitality to another and, in doing this, finding a shelter you needed for yourself? Are you longing for a sacred space that hasn't yet appeared? What might it take to begin to find it, to fashion it? Who can help?

BLESSING

Openness of hand
tenderness of embrace
spaciousness of heart
graciousness of home
blessedness of earth
vastness of sky:
for all the spaces
that bid me welcome
I give you thanks.



A Nest on Your Altar

A NEST ON YOUR ALTAR

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts.*
—Psalm 84:1–2

Psalm 84 has been a favorite scripture for Gary and me. For our wedding—which we celebrated so recently, on a bright spring day three years ago—we asked my longtime friend and seminary roommate, Brenda Lewis, to read this psalm. At Gary’s service eleven days ago, Brenda read it once again.

Psalm 84 was also a favorite among the early Irish monks, many of whom spent their lives in perpetual *peregrinatio* (a Latin word for the act of pilgrimage). This practice of continual pilgrimage was, for the monks, an expression of their complete devotion to God, and a sign of their utter love. I can imagine how the hearts of these perpetual pilgrims must have been drawn to the psalmist’s words about longing for home; they knew what it meant to yearn for God like the sparrow who makes its nest on God’s altar.

When Brenda read this psalm at Gary’s service, I was struck this time not only by the psalmist’s deep desire for home, but also by his assurance that those who follow the way of God—those people *in whose hearts are the highways to Zion*—will find wellsprings along the path. *As they go through the valley of Baca*, the psalmist writes, *they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.*

Some versions translate the Valley of Baca as the Valley of Weeping.

The psalmist wants us to know that if we persist in traveling, and if we seek to turn our face continually toward God—even when, like the early Irish monks who often traveled in rudderless boats called coracles, we seem to be adrift—our places of keenest sorrow will, in time, become places of deep sustenance that draw us ever closer to God, in whom we find our home. This is a cause for joy, the psalmist tells us; this is a reason to sing.

On the day of Gary’s service, we began by listening to one of his songs. Inspired by Psalm 84, “I Will Be a Sparrow” beautifully captures the longing for home that the psalmist evokes. I have many favorites among Gary’s songs; this is a favorite among my favorites. As we listened to it that day, we entered the Valley of Weeping. But we celebrated, too, the one whose heart and flesh sang with such joy to the living God, and whose remarkable gift gave us a glimpse of the dwelling that God offers to us with such love and delight.

I would love to share this song with you. Gary included it in his CD *Draw Us Closer*, and as of this writing, you can listen to the song online at this link:

soundcloud.com/garrisondoles/i-will-be-a-sparrow

As you listen, may you lean into that place of longing captured so beautifully by my beloved, who has followed the sparrow home.

How does your longing for home become something of a home in itself? In your journey with the God who is our home, where have you found wellsprings and sanctuary on the path?

BLESSING

Like the sparrow,
like the swallow,
may we find our shelter
in the heart of God:
our sanctuary
on the journey
and our home
at journey's end.



Mother Root

AFTER EDEN

The ancient texts tell
that my husband accumulated
nine hundred and thirty years
before he died.

They do not tell
that I survived him,
nothing but sinew
and muscle and bone
shed of everything.

Mother of All Living,
my mate had named me,
but what of my sons
dead or gone?
Abel in the ground
long ages now
and Cain forever wandering.

After we buried Adam
(dust to dust)
I returned to the borders of Eden.

The cherubim at the gate
looked tired
and the sword, once flaming,
now gave a dull glow.

A snakeskin
twisted in the breeze
rasping and hollow
an empty thing.

A hundred years from now
if they unearth my bones
they will see
the imprint of leaves
along every one,
testimony to the secret
that even Adam
(bone of my bone,
flesh of my flesh)
did not know:

I took the tree with me
the day I left Eden,
the day I decided not to die,
the day I chose instead
to sink my roots in the soil
of this terrible, stunning world.

Has there been a time when you returned to a place that was once home? What did you notice there? Were there things that felt familiar, and things that felt strange? Was there something you took with you from your home there—something tangible or otherwise—that became a significant part of your next home, and of your own self?

BLESSING

May the Holy One,
who created you from words and dust
and called you good,
inhabit your every hunger,
dwell in each desire,
and encompass you
in all the choosing that lies ahead.



Gather Your Longings

FROM PASSION TO PASSION

As she tells me goodnight, she says the birds might wake me in the morning. I tell her this is no problem; it's been ages since I've been awakened by birds. It's not that we don't have them in the suburbs of Orlando. It's just that I wouldn't leave my windows open through the night the way that I do here in this house on the side of a mountain in North Carolina.

I fall asleep thinking about birds and how, as a young child, I wanted to become an ornithologist when I grew up. "Oh, you want to study fish!" one of my elementary school teachers said when I told the class. "No," I said patiently. "Birds."

When I was seven I wrote to the Jacksonville Zoo and asked if they would send me some bird feathers. Soon after that, a large manila envelope arrived for me in the mail. It was filled with beautiful feathers of all sizes and colors. It had been sent by a man who said he was the bird curator, and I still imagine him walking around the cages at the zoo, looking for feathers to send to a seven-year-old girl who loved birds. His name was John True. I still remember that and wonder what became of him.

I cannot remember what gave rise so long ago to that seven-year-old girl's consuming fascination with birds, or exactly when it was that her drawings of birds that she hung on the walls gave way to pictures of Shaun Cassidy. I have wanted to be many things since dreaming of becoming an ornithologist, but the intense focus with which I pursued that interest shaped every intention that would follow.

The next morning, there in North Carolina, I wake early to the sound of birds through the open window. I lie for a long time in the bed and think about how in my life I have moved from passion to passion, but at least two abide: my longing for nesting, my yearning for flight.

Are there interests, fascinations, or passions that have, in themselves, provided a place of belonging for you? How have these been a shelter for you, a home? How have they helped open the door to the next place of belonging, and the next?

BLESSING

God of the open window,
the star-drenched sky,
the gathering dawn;

God of every creature
that takes flesh
and form
from your own desire;

when night is at its deepest,
may I know
the comfort of home
beneath

your welcoming wing,

that when day
comes to the window,
I may gather up my dreams
and fly.



Wandering in Time

SUKKAHVILLE

In the fall of 2014, I took to the highway. I had, by grace, made it through the winter, spring, and summer following Gary's death. As autumn approached, I knew it was time for leaving, and for a longer stretch than the trips I had taken earlier in the year. I did not much care where I went; I just knew I needed to go, and to give myself to the road. I needed a *peregrinatio* of my own. I planned some of the places I would travel and the people I would be with—Toronto, Canada, to see my sister and her husband, North Carolina and Virginia to visit friends—but I did not know my whole itinerary, or just how long I would be gone.

When I left, I was carrying many questions about home—what it is, how it happens, where I was being invited to find it and create it anew, piece by piece, in the wake of Gary's death. The questions were painful, and they were pressing. Even as I craved home, I could not imagine when or how I would ever have a sense of feeling at home again.

During that road trip, I spent three weeks in Toronto, savoring the gift of being in the home of my sister and brother-in-law. One day, my niece Caroline and I met up with my nephew Scott, who is working on his Master of Architecture degree and had invited us to meet him in one of the squares in downtown Toronto. All we knew was that he was there for a design event.

When we arrived, we found ourselves in Sukkahville. I learned that Sukkahville (sukkahville.com) is an international design competition that invites participants to reimagine the sukkah (plural *sukkot*). The sukkah is a temporary structure in the tradition of the ones built by the people of Israel during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. It's part of the Jewish festival of Sukkot, which had just begun. The sukkot on display in Toronto had been built by those selected as finalists in the Sukkahville competition, whose aim is to draw attention to issues of affordable housing in Toronto.

Wandering through the square, we took in the exquisite, imaginative sukkot. One, titled "Cloud and Light," used wood beams, sheets of translucent Tyvek, and LED lights to evoke the pillar that led the Israelites through the wilderness—the pillar that appeared as a cloud by day and a fire by night. A sukkah titled "Spiral Sukkah"—a winning entry from the previous year that had been brought back for display—used wood, canvas, and twine to create a curving, spiraling structure that enfolded its occupants while also drawing their eyes toward the sky visible through the open circle that the spiraling panels formed at the top of the sukkah.

One of my favorite sukkot, designed by Troy Fawcett, was the one my nephew helped construct. Titled "Megillahs" (*megillah* is the Hebrew word for scroll), this sukkah used steel rods and natural fiber mesh to reenvision the traditional sukkah as a text. *Occupants of the interior—contemplating, conversing, laughing, remembering—fill the pages of the sukkah when viewed from the exterior*, Fawcett wrote in his description. *The same occupants also share that relationship with the happenings of the exterior, where the surrounding environment filters into the sukkah as a faint scripture*. As someone who often finds refuge among words, I was particularly intrigued by this sukkah's interplay of shelter and sacred text.

With all my questions about home, I was amazed that I should find myself amongst these evocative shelters. Though they provided no answers, they graced my *peregrinatio* with their elegant, imaginative presences that bore witness to how home can be found even in a space that is fleeting. The sukkah, and the festival of which it is a part, invites us to consider what lies deepest in our sense of home. Story, relationships, shelter, God: when we know ourselves as part of each of these, we know something of what it means to be at home.

I carried the memory of those beautiful, transitory structures with me as I began to make my way back to Florida. Seven weeks after I had left, I walked back through my front door. The shelters of

Sukkahville linger with me still, feeding my imagination as I continue to discern how home happens in ways both temporary and more lasting.

Has there been a fleeting, temporary place that gave you a glimpse of home—a space that captured your imagination and inspired you to think about home in a new way? How do you experience—or long to experience—shelter and refuge in the elements of community: in a relationship, a story, a ritual, a tradition?

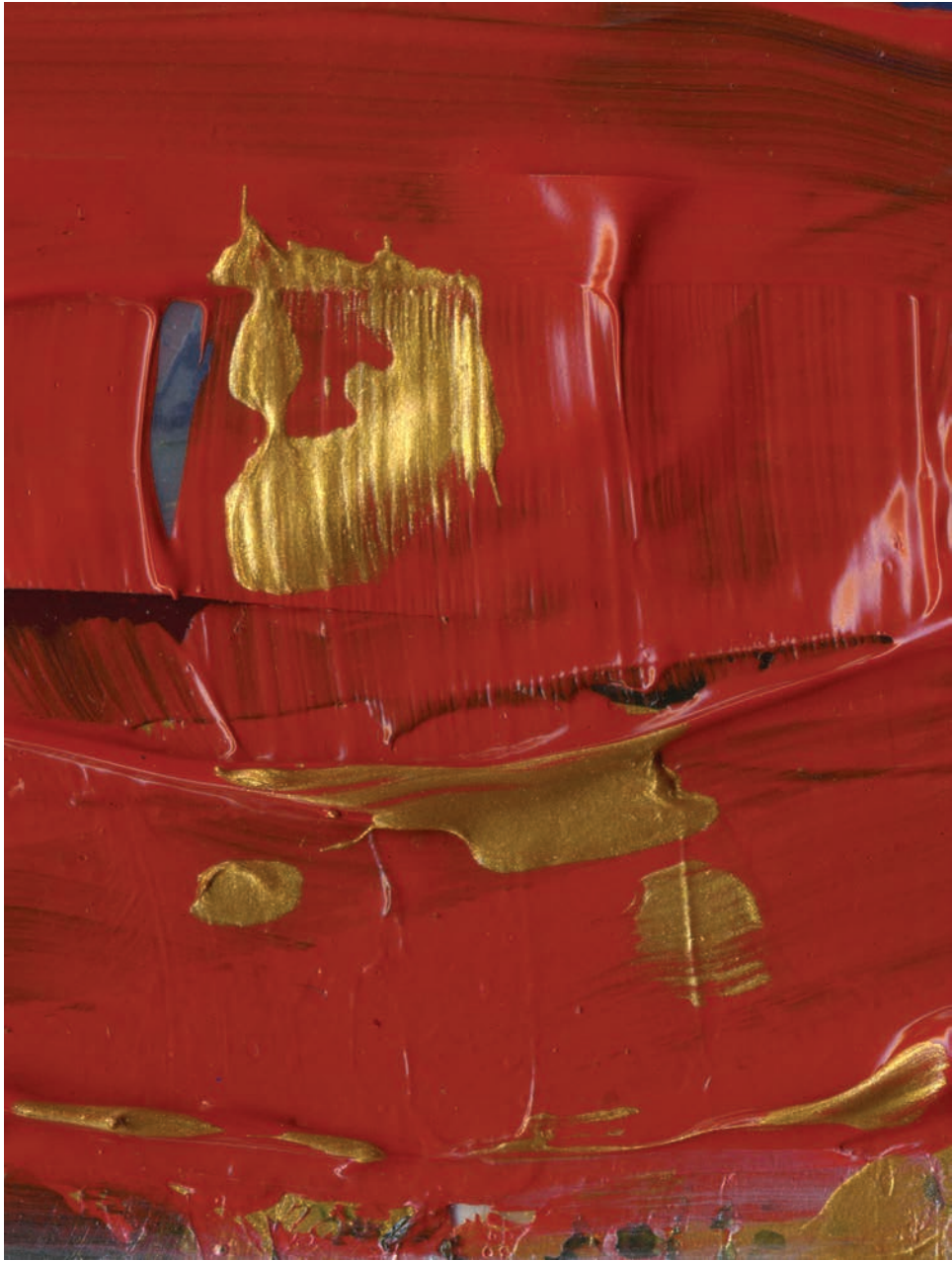
BLESSING

When you are most lost,
may grace come
to be your shelter.

When you are in sorrow,
may delight come
to be your refuge.

May you be surprised
by what offers itself
to you
as home,
gathering you in
with solace,
with rest,

sending you forth
with light
for your way.



Gift of Courage

POSTSCRIPT: STAYING HOME

Sometimes courage means flinging ourselves into new territory. Gathering up every scrap of daring and leaping into worlds unknown.

Sometimes courage means staying in place, choosing to look at an aspect of our lives differently, moving with intention into new terrain within the space of our own souls.

For a dozen years, before marrying Gary in 2010, I lived in a marvelous studio apartment over a garage. It was about 300 square feet on a good day, and I both lived and worked in that apartment. Living there became a powerful spiritual practice. I learned to make the most of a space. I learned to ask myself what I really needed to bring across the threshold. I learned that when I couldn't go wide, I could go deep.

In those years I thought often of Julian of Norwich, the medieval English mystic who, on a day in the fourteenth century, chose to enter the cell attached to the church of St. Julian at Conisford in Norwich. She never left. Day by day, within the walls of that intimate space, she grew closer to God and moved deeper into the realm of her own soul.

Perhaps the most radical act we can commit, writes Terry Tempest Williams, *is to stay home.*

Courage can propel us to make a wild and brave leap at a crucial moment. And it can inspire us to make the daring step that draws us deeper into our own life, that helps us to resist the urge to flee when we need to stay, that pivots us toward the person or place or situation that needs our presence, our attention, our compassion, our strength. Sometimes fully entering the present moment, completely inhabiting the space of our daily life, requires the most courage of all.

I wrote the above words about courage and home nearly three years ago, for a reflection during what became the final online retreat that Gary and I would offer (the Beloved Lenten Retreat in 2013). I created the *Gift of Courage* image to accompany the reflection. We could not have imagined that less than a year later, Gary would be gone, and that I would need the greatest courage of my life.

During the first year and a half after Gary died, I traveled often. This required a courage of its own. Choosing to find new roads, both literally and figuratively, instead of hiding under the covers was no small thing. My longest stretch of time away was the seven-week road trip from Florida to Canada. My farthest trip was to Ireland early last summer—a place Gary and I had dreamed of visiting together.

After returning from Ireland, I knew it was time to stay home. In the months that have followed, I have learned about the courage involved in the call to stay put, and the grace that comes in looking for the home that is emerging within this home that Gary and I created.

I spent much of the summer moving my studio into Gary's studio, creating a new space that honors and continues the creative life Gary and I made together, and also helps make possible the life that is unfolding for me. The new studio has been baptized with many tears. It has been baptized with laughter, too, as I have welcomed friends and family into its space, knowing that finding home is something that I cannot do entirely on my own.

John O'Donohue says, *The most ancient word for "home" in every language is the word for God.* I pray that in this year, you will find yourself gathered into the heart of God, our shelter and our home.

*Jan Richardson
Epiphany Eve, 2016*

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ABOUT JAN

Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. With a distinctive intertwining of word and image, Jan's work has attracted an international audience drawn to the welcoming and imaginative spaces that she creates in her books, online blogs, and public events. She frequently collaborated in retreats and conferences with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan's most recent book is *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*. She makes her home in Florida.

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

The Painted Prayerbook
paintedprayerbook.com

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