



A PATH CALLED SOLACE

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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WHAT THE NIGHT IS FOR
A Blessing for Women's Christmas

Oh, my heart,
if we could cease working
on our sorrow
like we were trying
to stitch together
shattered glass.

This breaking
is not for fixing,
as though,
if we could just find
the fitting tool,
everything would tumble
into its place,
joined and whole.

Perhaps it is time
to let the shards lie
where they have
fallen.

Perhaps it is time
to let ourselves
sit and weep
over them.

And then perhaps
we scatter them—
into the soil,
into the sky,
it does not matter
where.

Let them take
their place.
Let them shimmer
like a constellation
in all that darkness—

sky-dark, soil-dark,
at home in that strange
and radiant solace
that knows
what the night
is for—

how it takes
the broken things
and sets them
shining
to light our way
from here.

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 what this new year will hold.

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.

Over this past year, many of the wise women's questions have been about solace. I have had much occasion to think about solace since the unexpected death of my husband, and the questions have had particular inflections in this time of pandemic and the losses that have come to us all.

Solace is not only about comfort, though finding what will bring ease and rest amid our aching is a crucial part of our grieving. Solace invites us to enter into an ongoing conversation with our heart, one in which we ask the questions we need to ask. For me, those questions have included, *What do I need? Who can help? What's the invitation? How do I listen for the life that is still unfolding? What solace can I offer in turn?* It can take a long, long time to get to the rooms of our heart where such questions live. Part of solace, then, involves allowing ourselves the grace to breathe and weep and mourn and do those things that help us find our way into the spaces where we can ask these kinds of questions.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat invites you to ponder the ways that solace happens, both individually and together. With reflections and images from my own searching, the pages of this retreat invite you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you contemplate how solace takes place in your life and how it draws you deeper into the life of the world.

NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these readings. 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, a family member, a small group—and use it as a way to connect in this time, perhaps selecting just one or two of the readings as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these pages, 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

I pray that in these pages, you will find a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and 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 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 arrived at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who heard the tale of the shepherds were amazed. *But Mary*, Luke writes—Mary, who would come to know so well about loss and solace—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (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 may you be accompanied by many graces. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



For What Binds Us

GRIEF, PARTICULARLY

Grief is piercingly particular. There is hardly any limit to the ways loss will find us, entering into our lives not only through the death of someone we love but also through the myriad other ways life can wrest from us what we have held dear. When grief does find us—however it finds us—it shapes itself precisely to the details of our lives. It fits itself to our habits and routines, our relationships, our priorities, what we have organized our lives around—all that makes us who we are in this world. Because of this, no one will know our grief as we do. No one will inhabit it in the same way we do. No one will entirely understand what it is like to live with our specific shattering.

There is something beautiful about this. Our particular grief reflects the particular wonder of what we had—a grace that visited our life in a way designed especially for us. Yet this very quality can compound our grief because it leaves us feeling so alone. One of grief's most insidious aspects lies in how isolating it can become. This aspect of grief calls for intentionality from us: that we resist grief's capacity to cut us off from those around us at the time we need them most.

For all its particularity, the heartrending and hopeful reality of grief is that it is universal. It hardly needs saying that in our living, each of us will know loss. Though we will never know how it feels to live in someone else's loss, grief has the capacity to connect us even across deep divides. Fierce loss can forge fierce connections. Grief holds the power to help us recognize our shared fragility and also to call forth our mutual resilience as we meet one another in sometimes unspeakable pain.

Has there been a time when grief became a place of connection, a bridge, a door? How was it for you to allow this, or to seek it out? Is there a connection you are needing now? Who might help?

BLESSING FOR THE BROKENHEARTED

There is no remedy for love but to love more.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,

when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,

as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.



Singing to the Night

SINGING TO THE NIGHT

It was three o'clock in the morning on the night of the summer solstice, and the bird would not be quiet.

Poised somewhere in my back yard, the bird had already been at it for a couple of hours as a light rain fell. It was not the cause of my wakefulness. A chronic night owl, I had tumbled into bed particularly late after working far past dark, and I lay there for a long time, partly reading, mostly listening, enchanted by the song that the bird was sending into the night.

I do not know why the bird was singing in those hours, or to whom. I do not know if it sang in longing or announcement, if it was singing up the morning star or giving praise to the sheltering dark.

What I know is that its song sounded like hope. It sounded like testimony, like it was bearing witness not only to the promise of the day ahead but to every single night it had come through, every danger it had withstood, as if for the purpose of telling someone, this particular night, where it had been.

Though I do not think the bird showed up just to sing to me on that solstice night, I had sense enough to listen, to bear witness in turn. In the hours that followed, the song began to work its way into a chamber of my heart where things had been still and unattended for a long time as I grieved the loss of music that accompanied Gary's death. I fell asleep thinking about what comes to sing in the dark, and the grace that meets us in the shadows.

I woke with a strange gladness, carrying the song into the day.

When has a word, a message, a song arrived as an unexpected comfort and grace? What invitation did it hold for you then, and what might it hold for you now—a gift to carry with you from here, perhaps to offer in turn?

SINGING TO THE NIGHT

Who would have thought
the sky could be so pierced,
or that it could pour forth such
light through the breach
whose shape matched
so precisely
the hole in the heart
that had ached
for long ages,
weary from all its emptying?

And what had once been
a wound
opened now
like a door
or a dream,
radiant in its welcome,

singing to the night
that would prove itself
at last
not endless.

Call the piercing a star.
Call it the place the light begins.
Call it the point that tethers us
to this sheltering sky.

Call it the hope
that keeps holding us
to this broken,
blessed earth,
that keeps turning us
toward this world
luminous beneath
its shadows.

Call it the vigil fire
kept in that place
where every last thing
will be mended
and we will see one another
finally whole,
shining like the
noonday sun.



Until the Breath of God Breathes in Me

BREATHING THE WATER

It rained earlier today, then turned into a gorgeous evening. I took a walk—a beautiful time of day for it. Walked through part of Reenagross Park, behind the hotel, and took the path to where it comes out on Shelbourne Street. Hung a left and walked down to the small park on Kenmare Bay. Sat there for a while, watching the light on the water and a quartet of dogs having a blast down the way, chasing sticks their people threw into the water.

The gills of grief. Thinking just now about breathing the water, about diving and learning how to breathe underwater—how do we learn to do this when we are drowning in sorrow? Perhaps it takes that relaxing, letting ourselves learn how not to struggle, so that those gills appear on their own—that mechanism, that capacity that enables us to move through the worlds for which we were not very well designed.

It occurs to me that it takes a certain unburdening of ourselves in order to do this, a streamlining, letting go of what keeps us from moving through the waters.

Maybe this is just a different way of talking about the underworld—the strange journey into other realms that grief propels us toward. We have to learn what it takes to pass through those realms—to identify and complete the tasks, discern what offering is required, or figure out the riddle. Sometimes it's not about coming up with the right answer but with the right question. I think of Perceval in the Grail legends and the suffering he goes through because, at a crucial point, he fails to ask the right question.

In the legends, one version of the Grail question is *What ails thee?* It strikes me as an apt question for my life right now. What ails me? Not quite in the sense of *What is wrong with you?* Though there are days the question does feel like that. What is wrong with me? Why can't I get it together? Will I always feel this way? Despite those days, the question seems more like *What's the wound, and what medicine does it need?*

I wrote this passage in Ireland, a place that has held great solace for me. Ireland has helped me learn to breathe with the sorrow, to pay attention to its questions, and to discern what my grief needs. Is there a place that has held good medicine for you, or people who have helped you learn to live and breathe in the midst of loss and who have asked the questions you needed most?

STAY

I know how your mind
rushes ahead,
trying to fathom
what could follow this.
What will you do,
where will you go,
how will you live?

You will want
to outrun the grief.

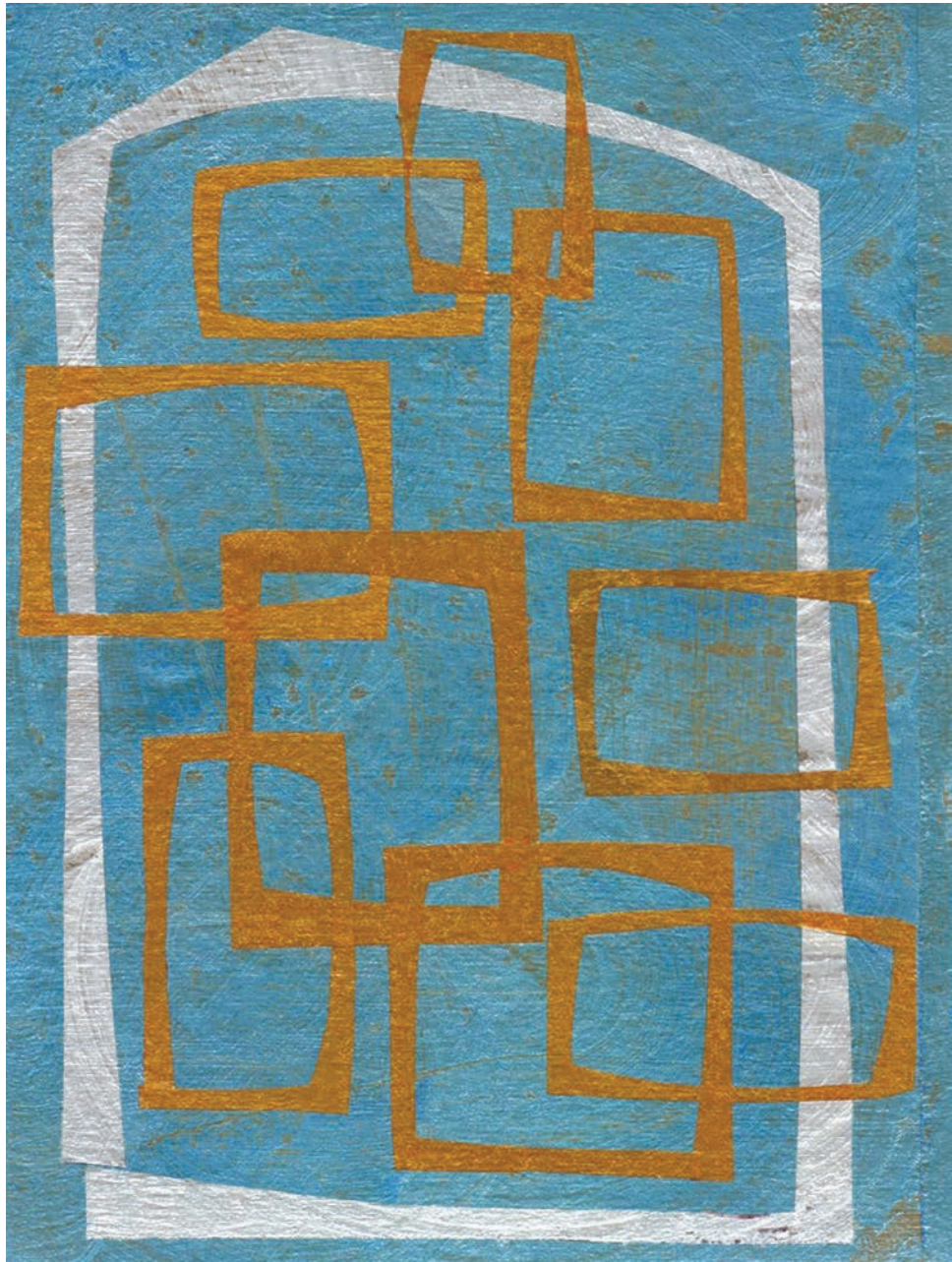
You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.

For now,
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself,
is to turn toward one another,
is to stay.

Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.
Wait with your hands open
to receive what could never come
except to what is empty
and hollow.

You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming
when breath will
fill your lungs
as it never has before,
and with your own ears
you will hear words
coming to you new
and startling.
You will dream dreams
and you will see the world
ablaze with blessing.

Wait for it.
Still yourself.
Stay.



Many Rooms

HOUSE OF GRIEF, HOUSE OF SOLACE

So much of my journey in the wake of Gary's death has had to do with finding images that will give me a place to land, a way to explore the grief. In living with those images, I am not trying to make sense of my grief but to find a way to move around inside it, to find space within it that allows me to begin to name and articulate the loss while also becoming more present to the love that endures, the love that the loss cannot erase.

I have thought a lot about grief as a house. My experience is that grief offers spaces of shelter and also of surprise. There are rooms that hold treasures and rooms that hold dynamite. There are secret rooms and shadowed rooms and rooms drenched in sunlight. There are rooms where the floor crumbles beneath us and rooms where we find ourselves falling into astonishing grace. We don't know just what is going to meet us when the door swings open or the floor gives way. This is both a challenge and an invitation. We can be assured, though, that in the same way that our grief is piercingly particular, what comes to meet us in our sorrow is tailored very specifically to us; our solace is custom built, though not with any blueprint that we can see at the outset. We find it only as it unfolds.

When I think of grief and solace as a house, and also about the mystery of how our hearts can become bigger in the breaking, I sometimes think of an image that comes up in the Harry Potter series. It's the tent that the Weasley family uses. On the outside it looks like a typical tent. But when you step inside, it is more spacious than you could have imagined. The tent expands and configures itself to meet its guests. It is a space of welcome where they can move around in the ways they need to move.

When you think about your experience of grief and how you are being invited to explore and inhabit it, is there an image that comes to mind? What helps you navigate the surprises and secret rooms that come as you look for solace?

BLESSING FOR FALLING INTO A NEW LAYER OF GRIEF

You thought
you had hit
every layer possible,
that you had found
the far limit
of your sorrow,
your grief.

Now the world falls
from beneath your feet
all over again,
as if the wound
were opening
for the first time,

only now with
an ache you recognize
as ancient.

Here is the time
for kindness—
your own, to yourself—
as you fall
and fall,
as you land hard
in this layer
that lies deeper than
you ever imagined
you could go.

Think of it as
a secret room—
this space
that has opened
before you,
that has opened
inside you,
though it may look
sharp in every corner
and sinister
no matter where
you turn.

Think of it as
a hidden chamber
in your heart
where you can stay
as long as you need,
where you will
find provision
you never wanted
but on which
your life will now
depend.

I want to tell you
there is treasure
even here—
that the sharp lines
that so match your scars

will lead
to solace,
that this space
that feels so foreign
will become for you
a shelter.

So let yourself fall.
It will not be
the last time,
but do not let this be
cause for fear.

These are the rooms
around which your
new home will grow—
the home of your heart,
the home of your life
that welcomes you
with such completeness,
opening and
opening and
opening itself to you,
no part of you
turned away.



Longest Night

THE MOON IS ALWAYS WHOLE

I walk with Kary under a full moon on the grounds of the only castle in New Zealand. Under its light I tell her about a Barbara Kingsolver poem I have recently come across: "Remember the Moon Survives." It does, Kingsolver writes. Around the encroaching darkness the moon bends herself, curls herself and waits. Against the waxing and waning shadow, she writes, the moon is always whole.

Kary asks me if I believe this, believe in the constant wholeness of the moon. I think about the year past, about the rising and falling tide of sorrow that has played on my shores. I think of how I embraced the opportunity for this trip to another land and the possibility for respite it would provide. But the tides run in this Southern Hemisphere as well, and I am dismayed by the flow of memory that pulls me even here.

But here, beneath the full moon, I tell Kary yes. Yes, the moon survives. Beneath the ebb and flow of darkness it is waiting. I have seen it whole.

Where do you find hope? In all the changes, what endures for you? Do you have practices or rhythms that help you find your way through times of shadow and uncertainty?

BLESSING FOR THE LONGEST NIGHT

All throughout these months,
as the shadows
have lengthened,
this blessing has been
gathering itself,
making ready,
preparing for
this night.

It has practiced
walking in the dark,
traveling with
its eyes closed,
feeling its way
by memory,
by touch,
by the pull of the moon
even as it wanes.

So believe me
when I tell you
this blessing will
reach you,
even if you
have not light enough
to read it;

it will find you,
even though you cannot
see it coming.

You will know
the moment of its
arriving
by your release
of the breath
you have held
so long;
a loosening
of the clenching
in your hands,
of the clutch
around your heart;
a thinning
of the darkness
that had drawn itself
around you.

This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away,
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend.

So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.

This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.

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.



In Wonder

GRIEF MEDICINE

There is an inherent weirdness to grief. It is such a strange ride, turning us inside out, making us feel like a stranger in our life. Nothing is normal. Part of the appeal of finding something a little odd or offbeat—like Helen Macdonald with her falconry, say, or threads I've been following in the studio—is that it meets the inherent strangeness of grief with its own weirdness. Like a homeopathic remedy, taking a dose of something that would be damaging in larger doses and using that as part of the cure. *Like cures like*, I read when I looked up a definition for *homeopathy* just now. *Similia similibus curentur*.

It can be so easy to get caught up in what grief *should* look like that it can be difficult to let ourselves take this different approach, to engage it with all the imagination and resources we have at hand, including things that might seem weird or strange to those who aren't actually living inside our grief.

Within reason, of course. I know the strangeness of grief can take disturbing twists and turns, can lure us into reaching for things to dose it with (often literally; it's no surprise people in grief are susceptible to substance abuse) to tamp down the weirdness and pain of it.

And that stirs something for me—thinking about the temptation to find shortcuts that will dial back the weirdness and pain of grief. I am remembering when I was working with the story of Eve for *In the Sanctuary of Women*. Writing about that moment when, having taken the fruit, having eaten it, Eve and Adam find their eyes opened, and they see and know as they have not done before. They turn away from God and, somehow, from themselves. Across the centuries, we have thought this was because their seeing caused them shame. But I began to wonder, working with that story, if they turned away not for shame but because what they saw was so stunning. That Eden was overwhelming. That opening their eyes to the beauty of that earth and of their own selves was unbearable.

That's part of what grief does, in an intensely painful, perverse kind of way: it reveals to us the wonder of what we have known, the beauty of the world and of the love we have lived with. And the pain comes not only because the person who stirred that love (*you, you, you*) has died but because the absence of that person has a way of revealing the intensity and wonder of the love that was present and has not entirely left.

This deepening sense, since your death: How beautiful you were. How beautiful you are. Without glossing over, varnishing, overlooking anything. Simply the beauty of you and of your love. Seeing this more and more clearly. The pain of this; the wonder of this.

Praying to keep my eyes open, even to the aching beauty. Perhaps this is part of the grief medicine: letting myself know that beauty and that love, not only as things of the past, as the stuff of memories, but woven deeply—how deeply—into the present. Here and now.

In the strangeness of grief, solace sometimes finds its way to us in unexpected or seemingly unusual forms. How do you keep your eyes open to the solace that might come by a path you didn't anticipate?

SOLACE BLESSING

That's it.
That's all this blessing
knows how to do:

Shine your shoes.
Fill your refrigerator.
Water your plants.
Make some soup.

All the things
you cannot think
to do yourself
when the world
has come apart,
when nothing
will be normal
again.

Somehow
this blessing knows
precisely what you need,
even before
you know.

It sees what will bring
the deepest solace
for you.
It senses what will offer
the kindest grace.

And so it will step
with such quietness
into the ordinary moments
where the absence
is the deepest.

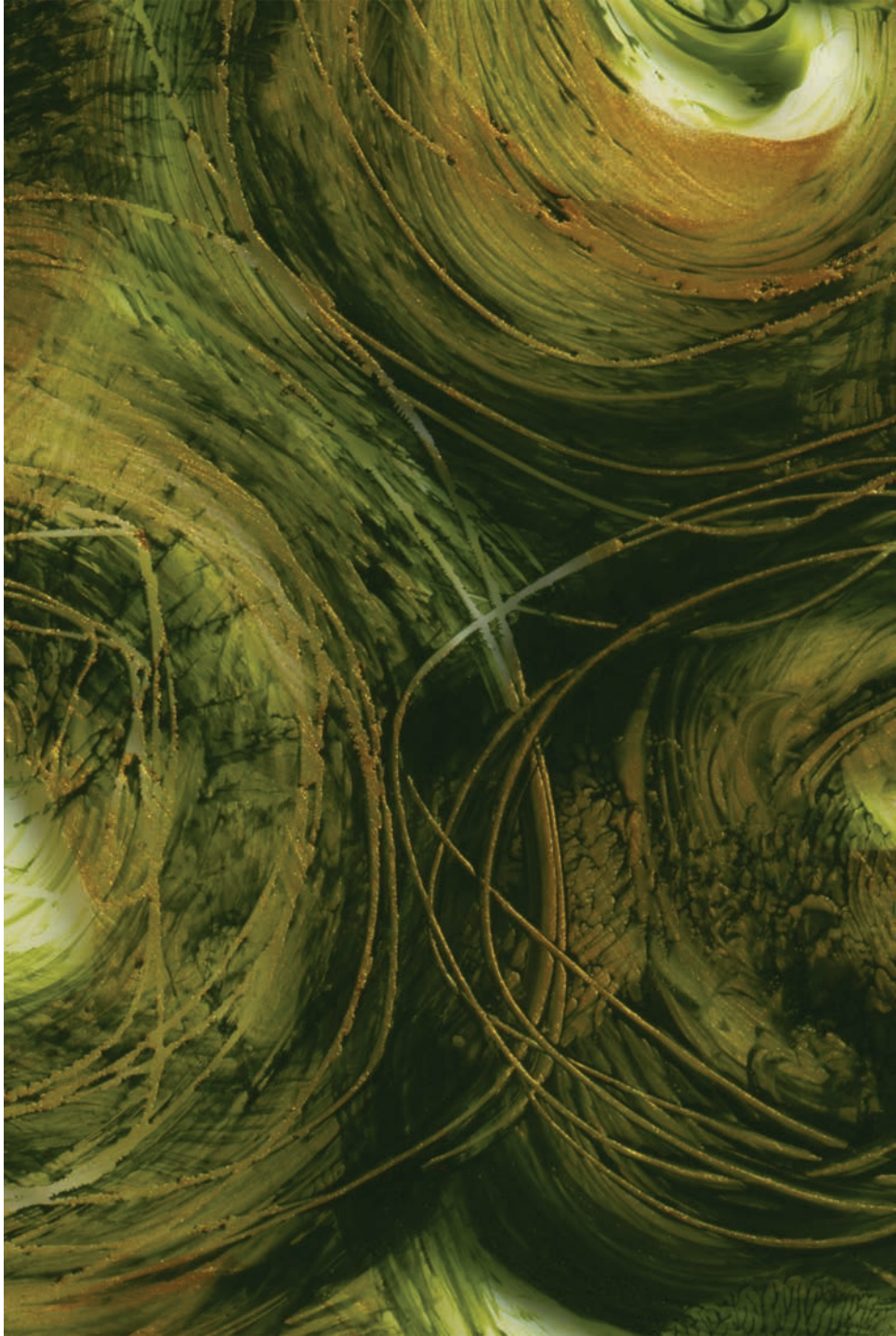
It will enter
with such tenderness
into the hours
where the sorrow
is most keen.

You do not even
have to ask.

Just leave it open—
your door,
your heart,
your day
in every aching moment
it holds.

See what solace
spills through the gaps
your sorrow has torn.

See what comfort
comes to visit,
holding out its gifts
in each compassionate hand.



Pattern and Path

BOUND TO LOVE

Far from being a progressive process, grief moves by turns and spirals, a twisting path that I am not sure can even be called a path because it is not always that clear or orderly. Grief is the least linear thing I know.

The unpredictable and circuitous nature of grief offers a paradoxical, if unsought, freedom and grace. If sorrow gives us no straightforward or prescribed road, no standard manual for its healing, then we are not bound to travel it by a way that does not fit for us.

What we are bound to is love: the love that gives rise to our grief but finally goes deeper than it, the love that undergirds and carries us through every turning. As we learn to navigate our sorrow, love gives us the tools we need—the language, the images, the remedies, the particular forms of solace by which our particular hearts will find repair.

I have found the most compelling repairs are the ones that make themselves visible, that leave evidence of the breakage and also of the imagination by which the breakage becomes transformed. Such repairs are always provisional, imperfect, and ongoing. Like a nest, they involve continual mending. They ask for a willingness to keep remaking what is perpetually at risk of falling apart. It is this remaking by which a home, and a life, may come: not in spite of what has gone before, but because of it.

What helps you stay present to the love that lives within, and deeper than, the chaos of grief? In the rending that comes with loss, are there tools you have found that have enabled you to engage in the work of repair and remaking?

BLESSING THE TOOLS OF GRIEF

You had hardly thought
your heart could be
so claimed,
and so willingly.

Now the heart
that gave itself
with such gladness
finds itself stunned
by its anguish,
abandoned and inhabited
all at the same time
by the absence
that has gathered itself
to you.

It will astonish you
how grief comes
with such purpose

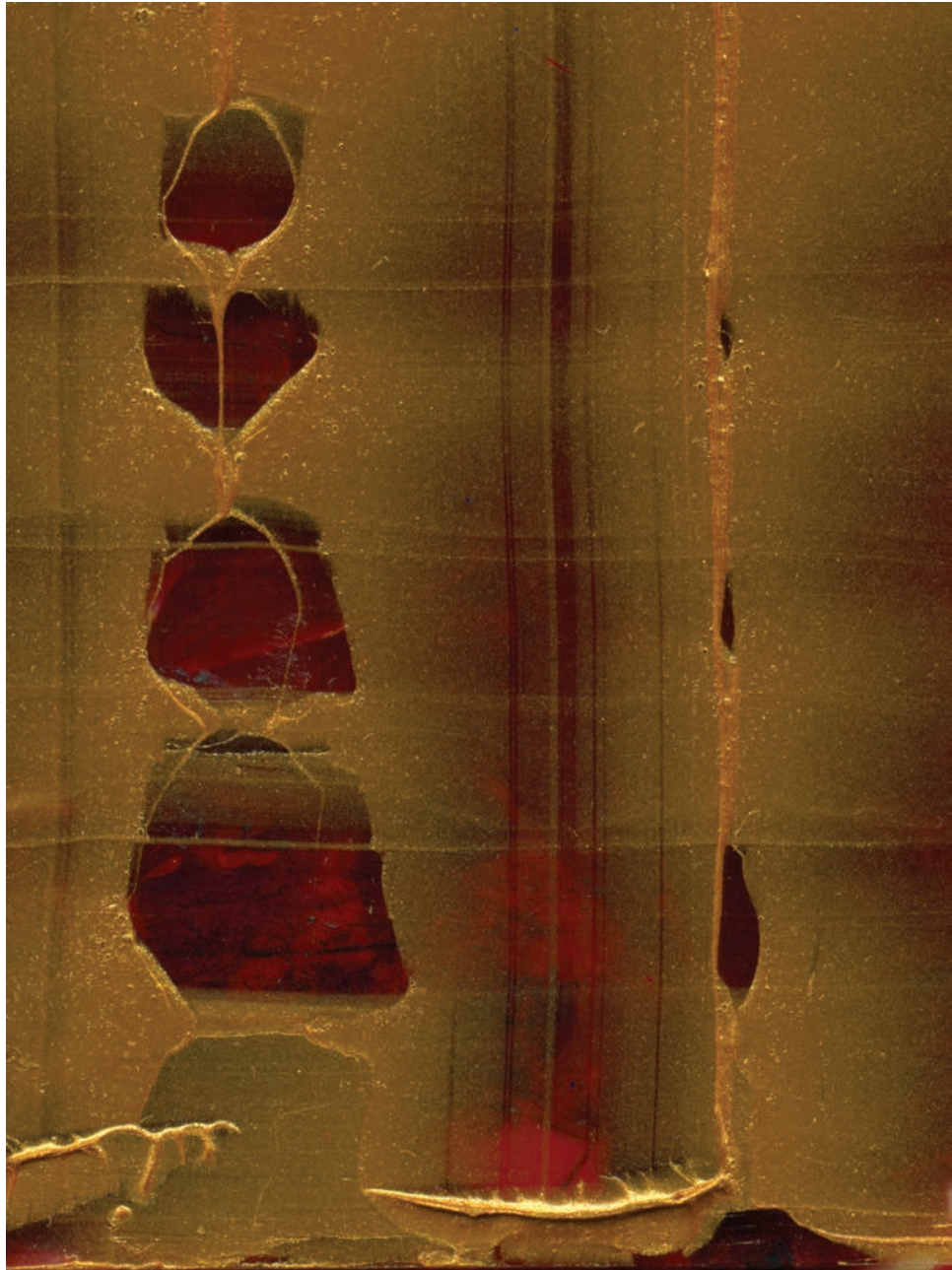
to undo us,
to unmake us
with tools fashioned
so exactly
to its terrible art—

how with such precision
they are fitted for
the rending, flaying,
tearing, unstitching,
unmooring,
unhinging,
undoing
of us.

It is hard to see
from here
how these tools
are the same ones
that will make us again,

this time with
an aching slowness,
a painful pace
so measured we will
hardly perceive it
when it begins
to happen—

the joining that comes
piece to piece
in a pattern
that will never be
the same
but will leave us
inexplicably whole.



Heartbeat Liturgy

HEARTBEAT LITURGY

A quiet night in Gainesville. Crickets humming in Mom and Dad's back yard. The fan turning. The ticking of your watch.

I wear that watch sometimes these days, though it vexed me when you were alive. How loudly it ticked. I would sometimes move it to another room so I couldn't hear it. You liked the ticking, found it soothing, were perplexed why it disturbed me.

When I went to Toronto in April, I grabbed your watch on impulse as I was leaving the house. Began to wear it some. Told Sally one day how I had disliked its loud ticking. *Now I think it sounds like a heartbeat*, I said to her.

I have found that solace so often happens in the seemingly small moments such as this, when grace slips in and shifts something in a helpful or needed way. How has solace met you in the midst of the ordinary? In the deep disruption and disorientation that loss can bring, what helps you find your own heartbeat again?

BLESSING FOR CARRYING LONG SORROW

When long sorrow.
When the endless
bearing of grief.
When sadness
has been waking
with you
for what seems like
forever
and going to bed with you
for what approximates
an eternity.

When your heart
has become
an ancient timepiece,
its beat measuring ages
and eons,
ticking the turning
of centuries,
and the stars
have nothing on you
for long enduring.

May there come
a moment
when time
falls away.

May there come
a space
between the beats
of your heart
when you know
your burden
carried.

May there come
a gap between
your painful breaths
when you sense
your own self
borne,
unalone in your
endless sorrowing,
no longer solitary—

as if you could
ever have been
left in your grief,
as if you could
ever have been
for one moment
abandoned to this weight,
uncompassed by the love
more ancient still
than the sorrow
you bear.



That We Might Receive This Joy

THE CURE FOR SORROW

Is there a cure for sorrow? At its deepest, grief can make it difficult to believe that we will ever be whole again, that we will ever know joy again, or that hope will ever visit us again. It can leave us believing we will feel this way forever. Yet grief holds strange graces that make it possible to enter into the wholeness that God continually desires for us, even as we continue to live with the pain of our loss.

If there is any cure for sorrow, the cure will not look like we expect. We often think of a cure as a return to a condition we have once known—that it repairs us in a way that leaves us recognizable to ourselves and others. The reality of grief is that the breakage it brings will not allow us to be put back together in the same way. Our life will never look like it did before sorrow arrived.

Yet there is a healing that comes in our grieving, a redemption that does something other than restore us to the lives we once knew. This healing comes, somewhat paradoxically, in allowing ourselves to give exquisite attention to our grief—to feel it in its terrible fullness instead of ignoring it, to let it speak instead of silencing it, and to allow it to show us a way that we could not find on our own.

Part of the strange mystery of grief is that it holds its own cure. We grieve because we have lost a beloved connection to another person or to a way of being in this world. As we tend the connections that remain—our connection to others, including our beloved dead; our connection to God, even when we feel fury at God for allowing such loss; and our connection to the layers of our own hearts—a wholeness steals in that has the ability to make a home in us even when we still feel broken.

It can sometimes seem our grief is all that connects us to what we have lost. This gives it a perilous potency that can threaten the life that seeks to unfold in us—a life capable of holding both love and sorrow. If we allow grief to do its work, the love that lives within it becomes ever more clear and present to us. In time, the love has a way of overtaking the grief, so that our loving, rather than our grieving, becomes our primary bond to what we have lost.

It is, finally, this love that holds our cure. It is this love that *is* our cure. In the deepest pain that rends us, in the keenest solace that visits us, in the hope that does not release its hold on us, love lives, bearing itself toward us as sorrow's most lasting cure.

In the anguish and in the grief. In the unmendable loss and unfixable sorrow. In the rending of the heart within us and the ruptures of the world around us. In the divisions, the rancor, the fractures, and all the ways that life breaks us open. In this. How do we give exquisite attention to our grief in a way that allows the love to become more present than the pain? How might we bear witness to the grief of others and tend both the wounds and the connections between us? As we find solace, how will we offer solace in turn?

THE CURE FOR SORROW

Because I do not know
any medicine for grief
but to let ourselves
grieve.

Because I do not know
any cure for sorrow
but to let ourselves
sorrow.

Because I do not know
any remedy
but to let the heart break,
to let it fall open, then
to let it fall open
still more.

Because I do not know
how to mend
the unmendable,
unfixable,
unhealable wound
that keeps finding
itself healed
as we tend it,
as we follow
the line of it,
as we let it lead us
on the path
it knows.

Because I do not know
any solace
but to give ourselves
into the love
that will never cease
to find us,
that will never loose
its hold on us,
that will never abandon us
to the sorrow
for which it holds
the cure.

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The reflections and blessings are from these sources, in some places slightly adapted for this retreat.

“Grief, Particularly,” “Blessing for the Brokenhearted,” “Stay,” “Blessing for Falling into a New Layer of Grief,” “Blessing for the Longest Night,” “Solace Blessing,” “Blessing the Tools of Grief,” “Blessing for Carrying Long Sorrow,” and “The Cure for Sorrow” (reflection and blessing) from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* © Jan Richardson. Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016.

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Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and United Methodist minister who serves as director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC. Her work has attracted an international audience drawn to the spaces of welcome, imagination, and solace that she creates in both word and image. She frequently collaborated with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in 2013. Jan's most recent book is *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life*. She makes her home in Florida.

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