



IN THE LIGHT *of a*
NEW CONSTELLATION

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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THOSE STARS THAT TURN IN US
A Blessing for Women's Christmas

I do not know
how to keep it all together
or by what patterns
this world might
finally hold.

What I know is that
our hearts are bigger
than this sky
that wheels above us

and what shines
through all this darkness
shines through us,
setting every shattered thing
into a new constellation

and we can turn
our faces
to that light,
to the grace of
those stars
that turn in us.

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 an 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.

Lately, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with reimagining my life. We each come to times when we need to reinvent ourselves—when we have to dream anew of what our life might look like and what it would take to create it again. How might we work with the fragments to find new patterns? How might we allow the pieces to come together in unexpected ways that provide new light for our path?

I am continually curious about how to do this, even as I have few answers. What I have are questions I am traveling with, choices I've made, and stories of times when I needed to reenvision my life in small or very large ways. I share some of those stories and questions here, simply by way of inviting you to contemplate what your own life might be asking. With reflections and images from my own searching, the pages of this year's retreat offer a space to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream about what new constellation might be coming together to light your way.

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 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 feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and rest. I hope also that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that welcomes 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 always 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 had completely reimagined her own life—*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!



A Place of Beginning

THE PRAYERS BENEATH

Whenever my artist friends Peg and Chuck begin a new painting, they take a few quiet moments with the canvas. Before reaching for a paintbrush, they first pick up a pencil. They write a prayer onto the canvas. No one else will ever see the penciled words. With every stroke of the paintbrush, the prayer disappears. Yet the words infuse the work. Beneath the layers of paint, the prayer persists. Blessing and invocation, it calls to the viewer, both concealing and revealing its presence.

Here at this beginning, I am writing prayers. Within these lines, between these lines, tucked between the words, scribbled onto the backs of the pages, I am writing. Line by line, the prayers will disappear, swallowed by the layers of words that will yet be inscribed on top of them, around them, across them. But the prayers will persist.

Perhaps, along the way, a word will show itself. *Enfold*, your eye will spot one day. *Encompass*. *Delight*. Or perhaps you'll be reading along and suddenly you think you've caught a glimpse of *courage*. Or *wisdom*. Or *grace*. Or *vision*. I cannot tell you the prayers—I just barely know them myself—but if you find in these pages a word that you most need, a phrase that you hardly knew you were hungry for, then perhaps you've stumbled across one of them that left itself exposed.

On this day of beginnings, know that you are an answered prayer. I have been waiting for you.

Here at the outset—of this year, this day, this retreat—is there a word you would like to write? Is there a prayer, blessing, hope, or question that you might inscribe onto the canvas of this year before you set out into it? As you think about changes or shifts you hope to make at this point in your path, what words or images might help you set your intention and your direction?

BELOVED IS WHERE WE BEGIN

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find

it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.



Those Doors in the Dark

REIMAGINING A LIFE

to Gary

I have stopped making assumptions about some of the things that were such a part of my life before you died—that they would continue to be part of my life after you died. Given how grief undoes us at a molecular level, it's hard to say what will be preserved from our life before grief entered into it. Though, I should say, I am grateful beyond measure for the strong threads that endure: family and friendships, writing, making art. These particular things that continue—these things I just named—these are the things I want my life to be about, and not precisely as before. Though I would so much rather you be here, creating this life anew with me.

I think again of the question you asked, not so long before you died: *Would you be interested in reimagining our life?* I've had this deepening sense, as I have let go of some things this past year and have made substantial decisions about the shape of my life, that your question still holds. That the decisions I'm making now are part of my response to your question—that they are an outflow of the *yes* I gave you at the time, a *yes* whose outcome we could not see.

I remember that day when, as we sat on the porch of our home, Gary asked if I would be interested in reimagining our life. I don't think either of us had a vision of what he was asking, or what I felt immediately drawn to say yes to—did it mean moving, or working together differently, or finding new patterns and rhythms of being in community? Still, the question resonated, and both of us were curious about what it might mean to live into it together. Sometime after Gary's death—too soon after that initial conversation—his question came back to me, and I realized that it was still in play; the question had taken a wildly unexpected turn, but it had not released me.

So what does it mean to reimagine a life, especially when the life we have landed in is not the one we had envisioned? What do we draw on as we dream anew? Who might be able to help? How would it be for us to ask for that help?

BLESSING OF THE GATE

Press your hand
to this blessing,
here along
the side
where you can feel
its seam.

Follow the seam
and you will find
the hinges
on which
this blessing turns.

Feel how
your fingers
catch on them—
top,
bottom,
the slightest pressure
sending the gate
gliding open
in a glad welcome.

Wait, did I say
press your hand
to this blessing?

What I meant was
press your hand
to your heart.

Rest it over that
place in your chest
that has grown
closed and tight,
where the rust,
with its talent
for making decay
look artful,
has bitten into
what you once
held dear.

Breathe deep.
Press on the knot
and feel how it
begins to give way,
turning upon
the hinge
of your heart.

Notice how it
opens wide
and wider still
as you exhale,

spilling you out
into a realm
where you never dreamed
to go
but cannot now imagine
living this life
without.



Beginning Again

IN WHICH WE BEGIN AGAIN

I have been painting again.

There was a stretch of time when I did not. A couple of years after Gary's death, I realized I needed a season of setting aside my paints and allowing myself to enter the studio without an agenda, without a deadline, without a clear plan, and see what happened. It was a long season; it turned into three years. During that time, I worked on other kinds of artwork: other mediums I was experimenting with, other ideas I wanted to explore just for myself.

This year, as autumn approached, I began feeling the tug to paint again. Which required figuring out a few things. When Gary and I were married and began making a home together, I set up my painting studio in the front of our house. After he died just a few years later, I stopped painting in there. I couldn't stand the thought of sitting at my drafting table and not being able to call from my studio to his studio, *Sweetheart, can you come take a look at this when you have a chance?*

In time, I slowly began moving into Gary's studio, working to make his creative space my own. Then this summer brought disruptions to that space; for now, let's just say it involved a number of tarps and no room to work.

But as autumn arrived, there was that tug, and I needed to paint somewhere. I kept thinking about that front studio, with its tables Gary built for me, the shelves he hung for me, the chair where he would sit as we talked and planned and dreamed. And I began to think, *Maybe that's something I can do now*—to paint in that room and listen not only for what echoed within those walls but also for what might be calling to me in that place now.

It took some time to settle back in, because first the space needed clearing, and paints needed unearthing, and brushes and tools needed gathering. The drafting table needed scrubbing and aimless circles needed spinning. Finally I sat down and began—again—to paint. It has been messy and wonderful and scary and stretching. I am still working to figure out what's emerging in the wake of my long and un-agendaed season away. I am having to learn how to paint all over again.

Yet this is the creative process; this is life. There are times we get concentrated doses of having to learn our life all over again—seasons when everything shatters and we must discern what to do with the pieces. There are seasons, too, when life hands us a wonder that undoes us: think of Mary and Joseph in the gospel stories we hear during Advent and Christmas, or Elizabeth and Zechariah, their lives utterly altered by the visitation of marvels they could not have imagined. Even in between the seasons of intense change, every season and every day invites us to rethink what we know, reconfigure what we have experienced, and regather the pieces to find what new pattern they might hold.

We begin again.

When have you had an occasion of beginning again? As you look back on this, what do you notice? Were there graces that came to you during this time? Were there graces you can perceive only now? What stirs for you as you think about beginning as a practice of its own—something that we do over and over, an art that encompasses not only obvious and overt action but also waiting, preparation, and discernment?

BLESSING WHEN THE WORLD IS ENDING

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.



Knocking from the Inside

PATTERNS

Kary sends me bits and pieces of patterns from halfway around the world. Postcards and envelopes postmarked New Zealand bear to me photos of fabrics she has collected, vivid papers, scraps of textures, colors, lines. I lay them out on my table, arrange and rearrange them, turn them in my hands. I pray the patterns will pierce my eye, settle in my brain, rework the lines that tunnel my field of vision.

Long ago she told me she takes a dim view of always making patterns match. Delight comes in the unlikeliest pairings, she said. Comfort arrives in changing the rules.

One of the questions I have carried for a long time is, "What is the rhythm of life I need in order to do what I feel called to do?" Living with this question can be especially challenging when the needed rhythm is different at different times. Yet I keep coming back to the question, praying to know what I need for this particular time and place in my life. I often think about this question in terms of heartbeat—what rhythms and practices will help me hear my own heartbeat and listen for the dreams that live there?

Rhythms, practices, heartbeat—these are all ways of thinking about the patterns in which we live, the regular pathways and routines that make up so much of our lives. Is there any pattern you would like to shift, a habit or practice you would like to adjust in a way that will help you hear your own heart and what God is inviting there? How might it be to look at your patterns differently and search for pathways and connections that might not initially seem likely? What first step might you take as you do this? Who could help?

BLESSING IN THE CHAOS

To all that is chaotic
in you,
let there come silence.

Let there be
a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim
on you,
that have made their
home in you,

that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life

with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you
cease.

Let what divides you
cease.

Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.

Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find
the peace
you did not think
possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.



Holy in Delight

THE HOUSE OF LONGING

“I think I’m addicted to longing,” my friend Daniel once said to me. We talk about longing from time to time, how we are drawn to it, how it fuels us. It’s a powerful thing, acknowledging what we want, what we yearn for, what we arc and ache toward.

Desire can offer clues to God’s longing for our lives. Yet I’ve known the times when it has provided less of a map than a dwelling, a residence, a space where I have invited my longings in, entertained them lavishly, fed them well, and wound up being consumed in return. The House of Longing, I call it. The Place of Perpetual Ache.

How is it that we sometimes slip into a state where our longings leave us stuck? Where is the line we cross from desire into denial? Longing comes with its own enchantments: our yearning for what could be sometimes blinds us to what is and to what is truly possible and whole-making.

This is why it’s crucial to learn to pray with our desires, to sit with what we think we want. Longing bids us to a kind of *lectio* in which we approach our desire as a sacred text, that we may discern where God is stirring within it and what God desires for us. Sometimes, in this kind of prayer, we find that it’s time to leave the House of Longing, to step beyond its walls so that our vision can become restored. Or perhaps it’s time to remodel the house or to reenvision it or to name it anew. Or maybe even to tear it down in order to see the stunning vista that it was blocking.

In the Christian tradition, there has often been a bias against noticing what we long for; we are taught to be suspicious of our desires because they might be obstacles to knowing God’s will for our life. Given how frequently our wants can cloud our judgment (or scuttle it entirely), a keen spirit of discernment is a thing to be prayed for and practiced. How, indeed, to sort out God’s desires from our own?

But what if paying attention to what we long for is part of how we find God’s longing for us? How do we find the longing within the longing within the longing, the core desire by which we know that our heart is held in the heart of God? Having just come through a season that tells us of the God who so longed for us that God took flesh to be with us, how might our longing be a place of prayer, of questioning, of discerning, of knowing more fully the God who knows us completely?

BLESSING

That you will be wise
to the longings
that come to visit you.
That you will see their true faces
and know their true names.
That you will welcome the ones
that have gifts to bear.
That you will be graceful with yourself
for the ones
that took you a fool,
for they have their wisdom
that can be gained
no other way.

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.



The Beckoning Path

A BAG OF MANY COLORS

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

As I cross the threshold into a new season and a new year, the bag prompts questions. What do I need for the journey ahead? What would I put in the bag to take with me? What objects, words, blessings, hopes, charms would I keep within its colors against my chest as I meet the coming days? How will my actions in the year ahead stretch my own thresholds, my own boundaries, and bring me closer to others—to ones such as those who fashioned this very bag? Or do I need to leave it empty, to wait and see what will fill it this year?

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

I remember a pivotal point early in my ministry when a friend and colleague asked a question that opened a path I had not expected. His question landed in a place of both resistance and longing, and it set me on a course that I have loved, one that I am not sure would have happened without that question.

Is there someone in your life who asks good questions and helps you listen for the answer? When has a question held a surprise, a door, a way ahead? What questions are you carrying into this new year?

BLESSING

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

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



Inscribed

THE HIDDEN PATTERN

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

—Luke 2:19

There are experiences that forever alter us, journeys that unmake us and put us back together in new ways. There are occasions when it is as if a map passes into us, sears itself into our bones, inscribes itself onto our hearts with lines we cannot see but that somehow reconfigure us, reorient us, draw us toward a path we could not have dreamed all by ourselves.

As Epiphany approaches, I am contemplating those occasions as I remember the companions we have traveled with from the Advent and Christmas stories. I am imagining them in the hours after Jesus' birth, when they did some contemplating themselves, these characters who traveled far, far beyond their known terrain in order to reach that moment of arrival and welcome.

I think of Joseph, who listened to his dreaming and allowed his life to become undone. I think of the shepherds, the song of the angels forever lingering with them. I think of the Magi whom we remember on Epiphany Day, those mysterious wise ones who followed a star in search of the Christ child and left changed, marveling at what they had seen.

I think of Mary, who, by the time of Jesus' birth, had crossed worlds, and more; she had brought forth a new world through her own being. I am struck that on a night when, hearing the shepherds' words of wonder, she could have laid claim to being the person who made such a marvel possible, Mary instead simply savored what had come to pass. She treasured all these words, Luke tells us, and pondered them in the hiddenness of her heart.

The treasuring, pondering Mary was much on my mind as I worked on the artwork for this reflection. The stitches in this piece were inspired by the stitching on the reverse of a piece of art I had created earlier in a series for an Advent retreat. As I looked at the pattern underneath, it tugged at my imagination as if it were some kind of hidden text—a secret map, perhaps, that wanted my attention, my pondering.

I recreated the hidden pattern for this new piece, bringing it to light with gold painted thread. As I worked on it, I thought about how this kind of movement is part of the invitation we receive at this time of the year: to notice what happened as Advent and Christmas unfolded, to gather these things into our hearts, to reflect on them in that secret space, and, in time, to see what begins to shimmer for us—what lines might emerge that could become a map, a story, a blessing, a prayer for the next part of our path.

Sometimes the path that is calling to us lies hidden beneath the path we know. Our lives might hold hints, clues, questions, dreams that have gathered themselves away from our primary sight. There are times when we are invited to look more closely—to turn over the story we have known, and to find the lines and fragments that could become a new path. Is there something that has been living just beyond or beneath your attention, something perhaps you haven't had energy or time to look at but has stayed with you? How might it be for you to pick that up and look at it more closely, to see where it might lead?

SECRET BLESSING

This is the blessing
no one can write
for you.

This is the blessing
you will find
for yourself—

tucked into
the crack
in the wall,

scribbled in
the gap
between worlds,

sheltered beneath
the outstretched
wing,

inscribed within
the tender
wound.

Secret blessing,
solace blessing,
soothing blessing,
shadowed blessing.

Blessing that steals
into the clench
of your first.

Blessing that blooms
in your opening
hand.

Blessing that lights
the beckoning
path.

Blessing that sings
your new name
to you.



The Star at the End of the World

THE STAR AT THE END OF THE WORLD

The deeper we enter into the love that God holds for us, the more difficult it can become to distinguish our endings from our beginnings.

This knowledge does not always come as a comfort.

When an end comes, it can feel cataclysmic. We see this repeatedly in the scriptures that accompany us during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. As we travel our own path over ground that can suddenly fall away, the question Mary poses to the angel in Luke 1 often becomes our own: *How can this be?*

But the sacred texts tell us also that when God shows up, God intends for us to know that loss and change are not where the story stops. In the endings upon endings, in the chaos, in the lostness and helplessness we often feel, what appears to be absence proves to be something quite other than that. The emptiness unfurls and unfolds itself to reveal a presence that holds love at its heart.

As we move through Epiphany Day and Women's Christmas, this time of year invites us to open ourselves to this love that continually makes its way toward us from the end of the world. Every broken part of our life, everything we have lost, each thread of our story that has come to a close: all of our endings are held in the love that knows all about endings—the love that, in God's circuitous sense of time, has already seen the end and comes back to show us that there is something beyond even that end, beyond every end.

This day tells us this love is luminous, that it bears a star, that it holds a light that remains with us amid every change. This light may remain hidden from our sight for a very long time. Endings sometimes have a way of confounding our vision, of stoking fear and uncertainty that can make it hard to find our way. And still (*and still*) this season tells us of a God who comes to us even by paths we cannot see, a God who meets us in the deepest darkness, becoming the light that goes with us from here.

How is it for you to travel in the dark, to live with the uncertainty and unknowing that often come with endings and beginnings? Is there a practice that helps you to find your footing when the ground has shifted? Who holds the light for you when the world you have known has ended? For whom do you hold the light in turn?

EVERY BRIGHT THING

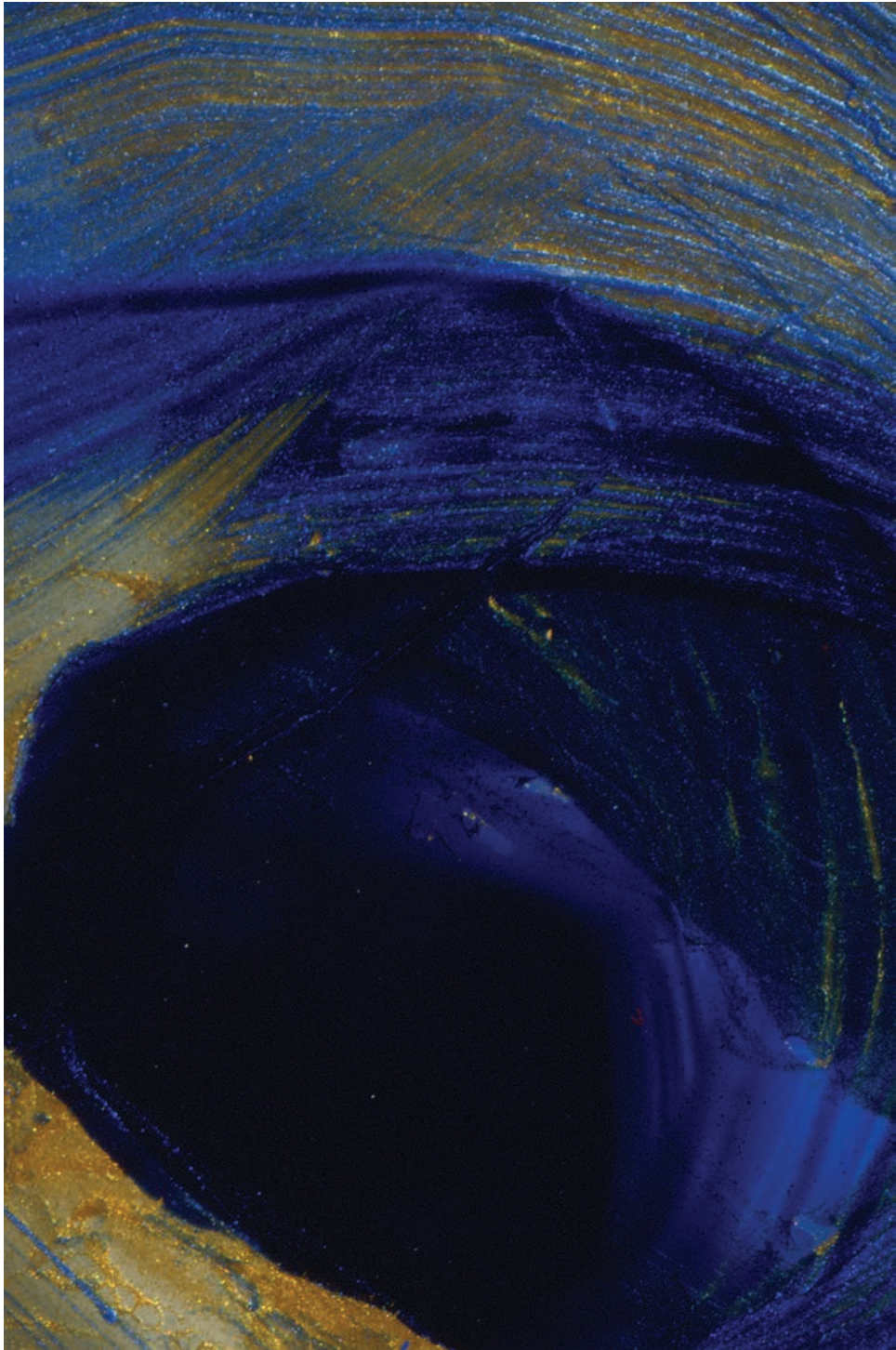
If I could write this blessing
backwards,
I would begin it
at the end.

I would start it
from that far place where
I could show you
every bright thing
that lies ahead for you,

radiant in its wholeness
and complete
in its own joy.

For now,
all I can offer
is this blessing that
begins here—
in the gap,
in the hollow,
in the hope
that tells us

this is how a blessing
becomes;
this is how a blessing
is made—
from the broken things
we travel with
from here.



Where the Light Begins

THE STARS IN IRELAND

A few nights ago, I went to the window of my room here in Kenmare and could see stars. I turned out all the lights, curled up in the chair by the window, and watched the sky for a long time. I took in its lights, its constellations, and could not think when I had ever seen so many stars from inside.

Sitting there, I thought again of something that turned up in my writing last week—an image of a kind of shelter that our lives hold, a house of the heart that is astonishingly spacious and ever-shifting because of the doors that fly open unexpectedly, the floors that shift or fall, the secret passageways that reveal themselves. The way that the house continually changes and shifts can be frustrating and painful because we never know quite what to expect, or when it will change on us yet again. But the house of the heart is full of wonders, too, because of the treasures that can turn up, the unexpected spaces of welcome that unhide themselves as the house remakes itself again and again.

A house from which the stars can be seen, I think to myself as I continue to look out that window. A space where constellations can be viewed. Patterns detected. Where we can see how the sky arranges itself. How it challenges us to see our own patterns, what we have constellated our lives around, or long to.

I wonder if the invitation of this present threshold that I sense so keenly has not so much to do with finding a particular, singular path from here, but instead continuing to notice where my energy stirs, what tugs at my attention, and how those things might fit together. How might they reorder and rearrange themselves, and me; how might they constellate? Perhaps they have already become a new constellation, and the invitation is to open my eyes and take in that light. Perhaps that light is already illuminating what I need to know.

In the wake of Gary's death, Ireland came as an unexpected gift. I have spent stretches of time writing there, and in its landscape, there has been a spaciousness that has allowed needed questions to come to the surface. Earlier in this retreat, I wrote about how grief has a way of undoing us at a molecular level. Ireland became a place where many of those molecules came together in a new way—where new constellations appeared, and I could dream about what patterns and rhythms might become part of the unexpected life that was unfolding for me now.

Close to home or farther away, do you have places that help you see your life? When life fractures or shatters, do you have spaces, practices, or people who help you notice how the fragments might reconfigure themselves into a new road for you to travel, or a new constellation that might light your way? As we move into this new year, what fragment might you pick up first, to see where it leads?

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE FAR TO TRAVEL

If you could see
the journey whole,
you might never
undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
that propels you

from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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 December 2013. Her most recent book is *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life*. She makes her home in Florida.

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