



HOW THE STARS GET IN YOUR BONES

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

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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

Long 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 my path 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.

Each year, some of those questions constellate in a central theme that provides the inspiration for the Women's Christmas Retreat. This time, I am finding it challenging to describe what my questions have been about. *Transformation* is the closest word I know, but even this doesn't quite get at this year's theme. What I can say is that it involves how we enter into the constant presence of change and how we engage the events, sought or unbidden, that happen to us. It has to do with how we continue to become who we are—a becoming that begins in our marrow, in the crucible where time, intention, accident, and grace work together to keep forming us in the love of God that is the truest part of who we are.

For this year's retreat, I have gathered up some stories, reflections, blessings, and artwork from other occasions of navigating questions such as these. From the place—and the person—I am now, I am visiting these pieces anew and sharing them here by way of inviting you to contemplate how transformation happens for you. Think of them as being like votive candles: little lights I am offering to remind you of the fire you already carry—the love that lives deep in your bones.

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. 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 the pieces of your life: 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 willingly agreed to the utter altering of her life—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (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 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!



Magnificat

A BLESSING BETWEEN

And blessed is she who believed.

—Luke 1:45

Presumably it was otherwise an ordinary day for Mary. Into the midst of it, the archangel arrives. Announces. Asks. And because I know how the story unfolds—every time I read it, Mary always says *Here am I*, always says *let it be*—it can be easy for me to miss how astounding it is, that Mary speaks her astonishing *yes*. With her response, Mary releases nearly everything she has known; she willingly gives up every last plan she might have had for her life. Her words of consent are a radical act of clearing by which she makes a new way possible—for herself and for the world.

It was an unimaginable invitation that Gabriel extended. And still, Mary dares to imagine what it might mean for her to say yes, even when she cannot fathom the full weight of it. Just how completely she is willing to imagine becomes evident in the song we hear her offer just a few verses later, a canticle we have come to know as the Magnificat for its opening words: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

With her song, Mary proclaims a profound vision of a world restored. Her song—an echo of one sung by her foremother Hannah, now become her own—is all the more remarkable because she sings as if this restoration has already come to pass: God *has* brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God *has* filled the hungry with good things.

I have been thinking about what makes this kind of declaration possible, and what stirs this sort of hope that perceives a wholeness that, in our time line, God is still working to accomplish. What happens between the moment when Mary says *Let it be* and the moment in which she cries out in song and vision, articulating the redeemed world?

What lies between those moments is, of course, a blessing. It comes as a grace from her kinswoman Elizabeth, to whom Mary flees (*with haste*, Luke is careful to note) when she finds herself quite alone after Gabriel's departure. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth immediately welcomes her, with no expectation that she needs to explain or justify what she has done. At the heart of Elizabeth's welcome is a blessing so generous, life-giving, and full of joy that it helps free Mary to sing what comes next. She knows what a restored world might look like in part because, in receiving Elizabeth's blessing, she has just walked into one.

A blessing comes as a word most needed, a gesture of compassion, an act by which we say or hear *I see you*. It recognizes and asks for God's presence and guidance in every time, including those times when what we have known has come to an end. A blessing makes it possible to imagine and to dream when we have entered into a clearing without being able to see where it will lead. It helps us abide the gap between the life we have known and the life we know not, making just enough room for the next step, the next breath.

Has there been a time when you received a gift of blessing that helped you be present to a change that arrived by choice or by circumstance? Has there been a place where someone saw you, welcomed you, and helped you imagine and enter into what comes next? What did you receive there? What did the blessing help make possible? Who might need this kind of blessing from you?

AS IF A CIRCLE

As if everything
between us
was already
a blessing,

as if a circle traced
around all
that waited
to be seen,

as if needing
only that word
that made it
welcome,
known,

released at last
into its astonished
joy.



Redemption

REDEMPTION

I looked into the mirror one day several months after moving to San Pedro and was struck by how tired I looked. Suddenly I thought, *I'm shedding my skin*. I had moved to my new life. I had unpacked my boxes, I had changed my address, I had settled into a different rhythm, but the transformation was still unfolding within me.

I thought about how not all creatures who shed their skins shed them whole. For some, bits and pieces of old skin linger as the new emerges, creating odd patches of dullness against the emerging shiny flesh. That was how I felt, wanting to scrub away all the roughness to emerge fully transformed. But that roughness had protected me in the past, and its flesh was tough. I knew it would take time.

Pondering this, I began to work with images of shedding. I spent a day figuring out how to make a reasonable likeness of snakeskin. (Coating mesh with white printing ink and pressing it on wax paper does the trick.) I found myself curious about why I wanted to stitch the pieces together. In the wild, discarded skin simply crumbles and returns to the earth. Yet I was intrigued by the thought of creating from something so fragile. What are the hands fashioning from the discarded, forgotten flesh? A snakeskin sheet, perhaps, or a sail, or a piece of parchment on which to write the story of how the snake knew, in due season, it was time to let go.

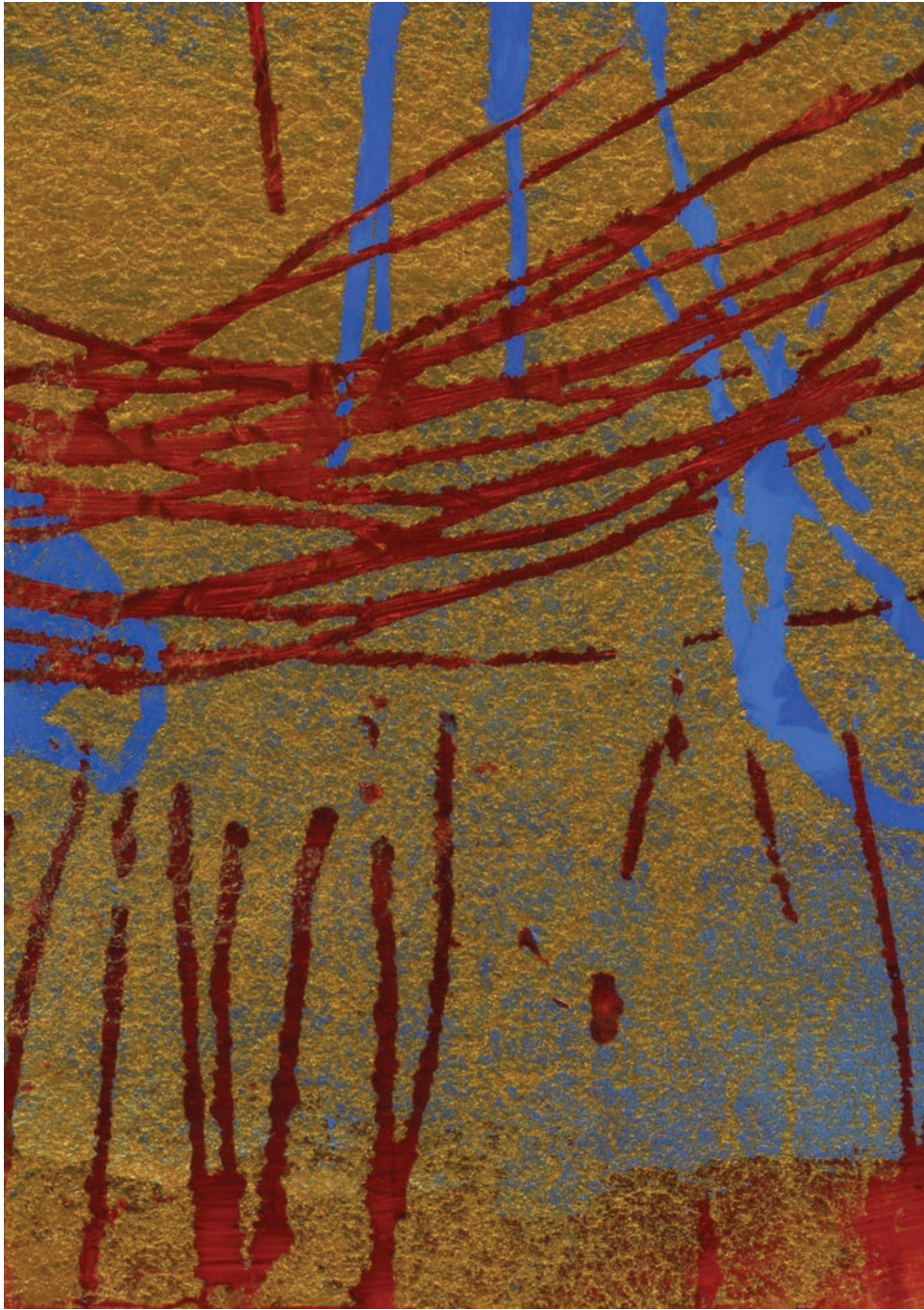
I have a passion for redemption, for taking pieces and fragments and turning them into something new. I have found an artistic hero in my friend Tammy, who proclaims the motto, "Better living through cardboard." With a utility knife and green paint she turned cardboard boxes into an amazing Christmas tree one year, and a four-foot-long angel that she made for me out of a refrigerator box hangs over the archway that divides my cabin.

We possess remarkable powers of transformation—not of others but of ourselves and the stuff of our lives. Cardboard, memories, stories, choices, flesh, and the human heart: in the creative darkness within us, they can become transformed, reborn, and set free.

It can take time for our transformations to work themselves out in us, or for our souls to catch up to them. For me, creative work is one of the primary habits that help me live into the shifting and shedding that happen in my life. In the studio, working with the elements at hand becomes a way to engage whatever is unfolding for me; it is a means of witnessing the process of transformation even—and sometimes especially—when it feels awkward, ugly, or messy. Do you have a practice that helps you show up for the transformations that are working themselves out in you—something that helps you attend to the fragments that are part of that process?

BLESSING

From all that is broken,
let there be beauty.
From what is torn, jagged,
ripped, frayed,
let there be
not just mendings
but meetings unimagined.
May the God in whom
nothing is wasted
gather up every scrap,
every shred and shard,
and make of them
new paths,
doorways,
worlds.



The Wrestling Is Where the Blessing Begins

THE WRESTLING IS WHERE THE BLESSING BEGINS

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

—Genesis 32:24

Jacob is no stranger to encountering God in a dark, betwixt place. It has been just four chapters and a lifetime since that night when, fleeing for his life, he was visited by an angel-drenched dream that assured him of God's presence on his path. Now, in this latest nighttime meeting, Jacob learns that sometimes when an angel meets us in the wilderness, it makes us work for a blessing. This seems to be one of the ways the angels choose to minister to us, knowing there are times when a good struggle comes as one of those strange comforts of the wilderness. Sometimes we need not to rest but to wrestle, to be stretched to our limits, to reach deep into the reserves we did not know we had.

We are not certain, of course, just who it is that goes toe-to-toe with Jacob in the night as he is on his way, with trepidation, to seek Esau years and lifetimes after fleeing in fear. The text is fuzzy—likely with intention—on whether the visitor who approaches Jacob in the dark is a man or God. The visual tradition settled somewhere in between, frequently depicting Jacob wrestling an angel.

Working on this painting as I thought about this passage, I began to find my imagination drawn not to the figures locked in their fierce struggle; what drew me instead was the ground. I imagined the tracks and traces left by their feet, the imprint of their bodies on the earth, the map made by their wrestling. I imagined those lines beginning to form the blessing that Jacob receives, twining into the letters of the new name he will bear with him, limping, when morning comes.

On your path, where have you encountered a struggle that brought not only a wound but also a blessing that altered you? When has an experience of wrestling with God helped you know who you are, and which way to go? If you were to write a blessing whose lines have their roots in a time of struggle, what would that blessing be?

JACOB'S BLESSING

If this blessing were easy,
anyone could claim it.
As it is,
I am here to tell you
that it will take some work.

This is the blessing
that visits you
in the struggling,
in the wrestling,
in the striving.

This is the blessing
that comes

after you have left
everything behind,
after you have stepped out,
after you have crossed
into that realm
beyond every landmark
you have known.

This is the blessing
that takes all night
to find.

It's not that this blessing
is so difficult,
as if it were not filled
with grace
or with the love
that lives
in every line.

It's simply that
it requires you
to want it,
to ask for it,
to place yourself
in its path.
It demands that you
stand to meet it
when it arrives,
that you stretch yourself
in ways you didn't know
you could move,
that you agree
to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,
borne in the hands
of the difficult angel
who has chosen you,
do not let go.
Give yourself
into its grip.

It will wound you,
but I tell you
there will come a day
when what felt to you
like limping
was something more
like dancing
as you moved into
the cadence
of your new
and blessed name.



Soft Sheets

SOFT SHEETS

I bought the sheets during a lonely spell. They looked like the colors of my soul, warm and deep and welcoming. But after I washed them and spread them on my bed and lay down on them that night, they began to mock me. I called a friend of mine, weeping. “I’m so lonely and these sheets are so scratchy and it takes so long for one person to make sheets soft!” I wailed. It was like a Zen koan: What is the sound of one hand clapping? How does one person make sheets soft?

Her voice was soothing, and I slept. Night turned into day turned into another night, and after a long while of this I called her back. “I woke up this morning and realized my sheets were soft,” I said.

Looking back at this long-ago reflection, I cannot help but think—Why didn’t I just get new sheets? (They really were beautiful, and I was just that stubborn.) Still, this memory speaks to me about how transformation can take place through small practices over time, as we keep showing up even when it might seem like nothing is happening. This reminds me also that, so often, becoming who we are involves a wearing away—letting time and intention smooth out what has been a hindrance or obstacle. Are there tangible things that remind you of the transformations that have occurred for you over time, or that have provided comfort amid the changes? What do you notice about those things now?

BLESSING

Beloved companion,
you are my delight,
but sometimes I need you
to take flesh
and form,
to feel the breath of you
on my neck,
the hem of your garment
thrown across me
when the night
is at its darkest
and the land
has turned to sleep.



The Seed Is the Light of the Earth

THE SEED IS THE LIGHT OF THE EARTH

Sometimes in the studio I become fixated on what frustrates me. When a piece isn't working, I can get all too readily stuck, immobilized by the messiness of it all.

It's that same messiness, though, that keeps drawing me back. Even as I sometimes resist showing up to what is unformed, uncertain, and in progress, this is so much of what I love about being in the studio. It's a place where I both *have to* and *get to* be present to all of that as I keep vigil amid the chaos, praying to stay open to what comes: the connections and the surprises, the serendipities and the fortunate accidents that help to move the work along.

Still, I struggle with my own resistance to the process, in part because I tend to think of that resistance as being wasteful. It seems so clearly an obstacle, a hindrance that keeps me from the real work.

My spiritual director, Maru, encourages me to see resistance as integral to the creative process. It's not tangential to the work, and it is not its enemy. It is part of how the work happens. Even as I wrestle with my resistance, somehow it serves to sharpen my vision and my intention. If I allow it, the struggle stokes my courage. It helps propel me to do whatever it takes to get myself back into the studio again.

I have been thinking lately about seeds and how living with resistance is a crucial part of their work. For everything that begins underground, the press of the earth is integral to their growth. It is part of what forms them and roots them, a kind of holding that makes it possible for them to find their way. Resistance can be an irritant, but that very friction makes its own kind of light, sometimes long before we can perceive it.

In the obstacles you encounter and in your places of resistance, where do you find the seeds—the beginnings of what wants to come to life in you? Where, and to whom, do you turn for encouragement and for wisdom in the tending of those seeds?

HIDDEN LANTERN

Steady, love;
this is what
the struggle
is for,

the press
of darkness
and time
making its own light

as if in the earth
a hidden lantern
or in the seed
a star

that blossoms finally
into the yielding night,
bearing forth
the radiant day.

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.



Wisdom's Path

INTO THE QUESTIONS

One of the great gifts of the spiritual director I work with is her ability to ask good questions: questions that arise from her long knowing of me, questions that come from her ability to listen well both to God and to me, questions that offer not a map but a doorway that helps me find my way.

What's the invitation? Maru asked me in a conversation one day. I scribble down these things she says sometimes, not wanting to forget. I find them later; don't always remember what we were talking about but know it helped get me to a different place. A question that might need visiting again. *What do you have energy for? What can you do where you really are?*

And this more recent one on a day when I was looking back: *What would it take for you not to have any regrets now?*

Although Maru stops short of telling me what to do, I keep going back to her because she's willing to say what she sees. *There are no mistakes when it comes to the heart*, she told me once. *There is just the landscape of mystery. I sometimes wonder*, she told me another day, *if we're cowards when it comes to love.*

We need ancient stones for this one, she said to me in a time of much mystery. *A garden maze on the grounds of an old castle . . .*

Do you have someone in your life who asks good questions; someone who sees you in a way that helps you to see yourself? Is there a question that has been pivotal in becoming who you are?

BLESSING THE QUESTIONS

Let them come:
the questions
that storm through
the crack in the world.

Let them come:
the questions
that crawl through
the hole in your heart.

Let them come:
the questions
in anguish,
the questions
in tears.

Let them come:
the questions
in rage,
the questions
in fear.

Let them come:
the questions
that whisper themselves
so slow,

the questions
that arrive with
breathtaking speed,

the questions
that never entirely leave,
the questions
that bring
more questions still.

Let them come:
the questions
that haunt you
in shadowy hours,
the questions
that visit
in deepest night,

the questions
that draw you
into rest,
into dream,

the questions
that stir
the wakening
world.



Gathering the Fragments

A STRANGER IN OUR OWN LIFE

There are transformations we would never look for—cataclysmic losses that undo us in a way that can make it hard to recognize ourselves. The reflection below is from my experience with this; it is part of the writing I did in the first couple of years after my husband's unexpected death. I am including it here simply to say that if you have experienced the rupture of the life you have known, I see you, and I am holding you in prayer and blessing. I pray that you are finding those who can bear witness to what has come apart, and whose presence can help the fragments come together in new ways.

I remember a time after your [Gary's] death—maybe toward the end of the first year or the beginning of the second—when I said to Maru, *I feel like I have a wasting disease*. That was the best way I could describe it. The grief was so grinding, and I felt so unlike the person I had been before your death.

Which makes me think of—and pull out of my satchel—one of the pieces of paper I brought with me for this writing time in Ireland. It's a reservation confirmation for the clinic I went to after I broke my foot, with notes I scribbled onto it one night here last year. Among those notes, this:

How I could feel myself becoming another person, and hating that.

I remember the sorrow and dismay of writing that. How keenly I could feel myself becoming someone other than who I was before you died. Could feel myself becoming Jan After Gary's Death, Jan Having to Make a New Life, Jan Learning How to Be in This World Without You. Even as I recognized the graces and could take some measure of solace in making decisions that helped me move into this life, I hated the fact of it, hated having to become someone other than who I had been.

I wrote this, too, on that piece of paper:

Now—making some peace with the person I am becoming—but still feeling like such a stranger in my own life. How do I find/make something familiar—territory that is more familiar to me? Not familiar, exactly—but where I don't feel like so much of a stranger in my own skin, my own being. How do I settle into this new skin? How do I fit my frame around these bones that are—literally—shifting?

June 10, I noted on the paper. Almost exactly a year ago. Grateful, now, to be feeling like less of a stranger in my life.

I think of what I wrote in *The Cure for Sorrow*—that, ultimately, love is the remedy for grief. And there I am, spiraled back around to my own medicine.

THE HEALING THAT COMES

I know how long
you have been waiting
for your story to take
a different turn,
how far
you have gone in search
of what will mend you
and make you whole.

I bear no remedy,
no cure,
no miracle
for the easing
of your pain.

But I know
the medicine
that lives in a story
that has been
broken open.

I know
the healing that comes
in ceasing
to hide ourselves away
with fingers clutched
around the fragments
we think are
none but ours.

See how they fit together,
these shards
we have been carrying—
how in their meeting
they make a way
we could not
find alone.



A Circle of Quiet

HOLY ABSENCE

But there is this too. Respite. Rest. Letting the desert be the desert, without feeling compelled to bulldoze our way through it.

I think of a long stretch when I found myself in a soul struggle that had caught me entirely by surprise. Consumed by the wrestling and working and searching, I felt exhausted. After a time, Maru gave me this phrase: *holy absence*.

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

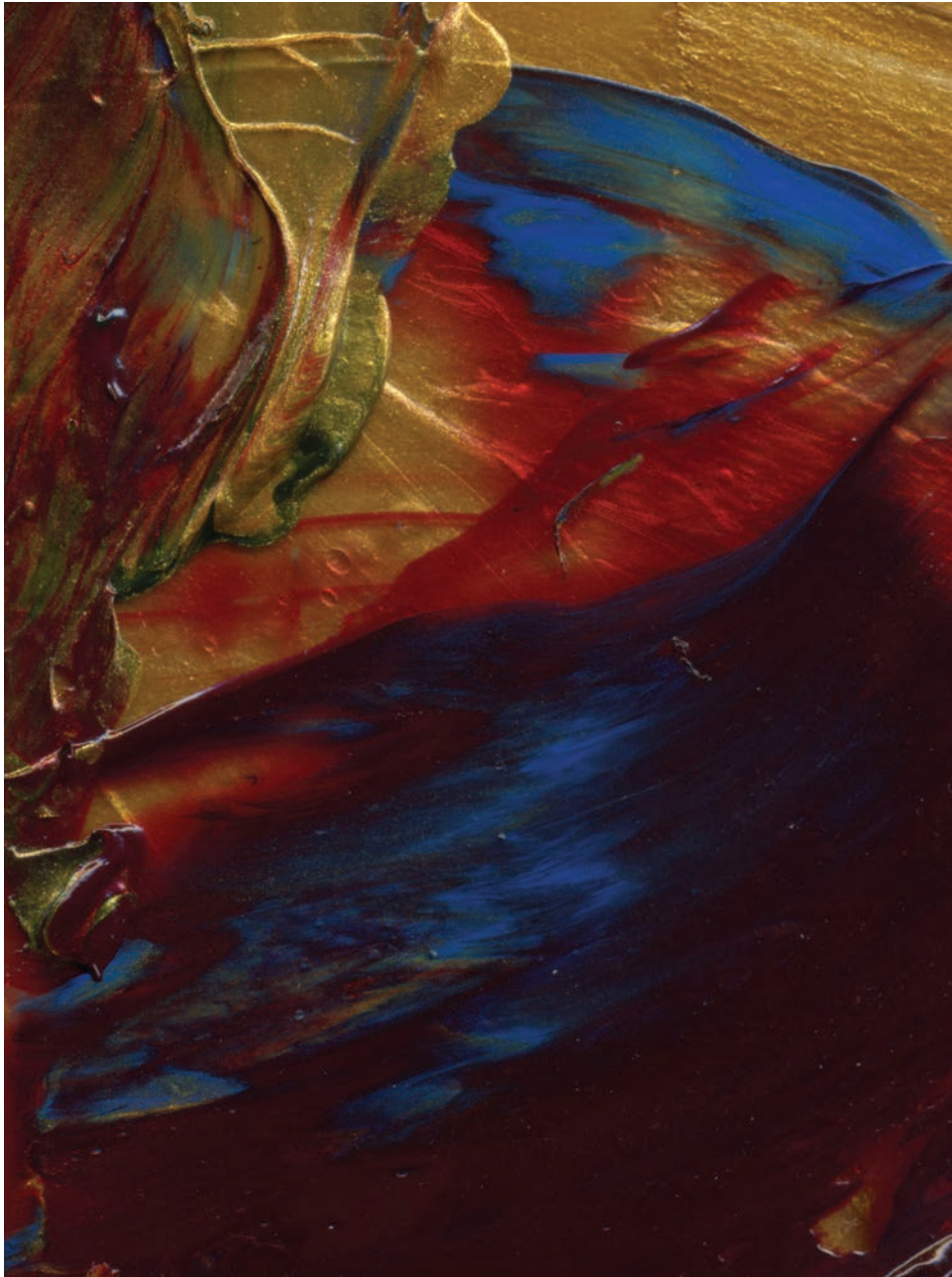
And you? In the ongoing process of becoming who you are, is there some kind of rest you are needing? Is there someone or something that can help you find this? Who might need your help in finding the respite they need?

BLESSING OF REST

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

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

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



The Present Moment

BLESSING OF COURAGE

Sometimes courage means leaving, gathering up every scrap of daring and setting out 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 I was married, 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. Staying in that place 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 crucible of that intimate space, she allowed herself to be transformed by the God she found there.

Courage can propel us to make a wild and brave leap—or a brave and stumbling step—at a crucial moment. And it can inspire us to make a daring choice that draws us deeper into our own life as we pivot toward a person or place or situation that needs our presence, our attention, our compassion, our strength. Sometimes fully entering the present moment, completely inhabiting our daily life and the transformations it invites, asks for the most courage of all.

In this season, is there some corner of your soul or your story that might be inviting you to turn toward it, to become present in a way that carries you deeper into your life? What kind of courage would you need for this? When courage is difficult to come by, how might it be to ask for it as a grace?

BLESSING OF COURAGE

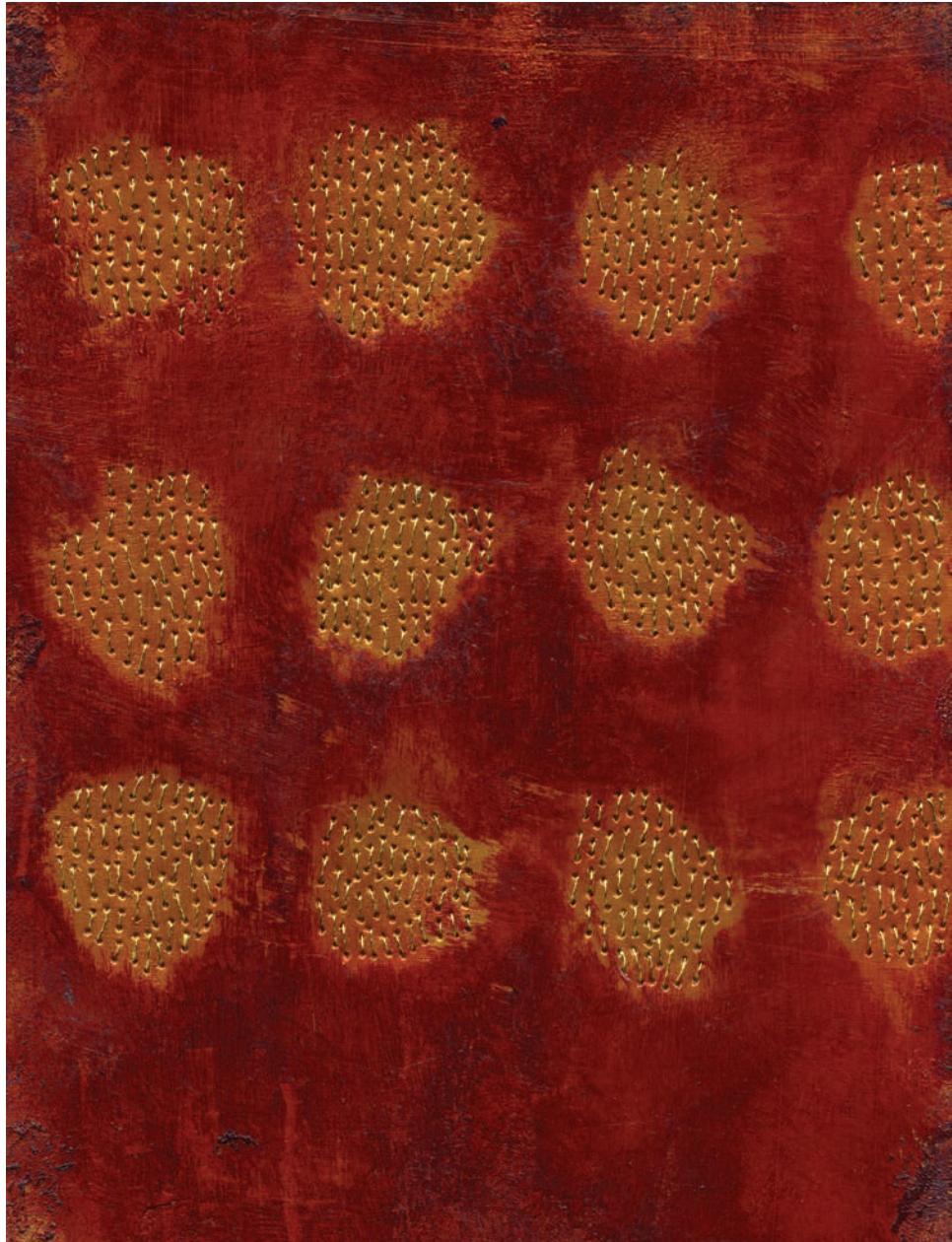
I cannot say
where it lives,
only that it comes
to the heart
that is open,
to the heart
that asks,
to the heart
that does not turn away.

It can take practice,
days of tugging at
what keeps us bound,
seasons of pushing against
what keeps our dreaming
small.

When it arrives,
it might surprise you
by how quiet it is,
how it moves
with such grace
for possessing
such power.

But you will know it
by the strength
that rises from within you
to meet it,
by the release
of the knot
in the center of
your chest
that suddenly lets go.

You will recognize it
by how still
your fear becomes
as it loosens its grip,
perhaps never quite
leaving you,
but calmly turning
into joy
as you enter the life
that is finally
your own.



How the Stars Get in Your Bones

HOW THE STARS GET IN YOUR BONES

It was a December afternoon, and I was visiting with Father Rob Lord, an Episcopal priest who led a contemplative Eucharist service where I had found a space of great solace after my husband's sudden death. We talked together in his office that adjoined the church's playground, the sound of children's laughter attending us. As we talked, an angel bobbed up in the window, complete with a tinsel halo, cardboard wings, and a Rudolph-red nose.

The angel continued to appear and disappear as Father Rob and I spoke of Advent and grief, the communion of saints, seasons and time and eternity. Our conversation turned to Saint John of the Cross, the medieval Spanish mystic known particularly for his stunning writings about the dark night of the soul.

God is radiantly illuminating us in ways we cannot see or feel or know, Father Rob said to me.

Receiving those words, I breathed deeply for the first time in a long while. In a time of such shadow and loss, when my trust in God was fragile, his words came as a reminder that the work of God has a way of happening far beyond our ability to perceive it or make sense of it at the time.

The seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany offer their own distinctive invitation to trust this work, this love that does not depend solely on our awareness of it. These weeks ask us, in fact, to enter into a story that unfolds substantially in darkness and in mystery, where events hinge on dreams, strange visitors, far journeys, stars, and developments that can happen only in what is hidden. Darkness, in these days, shows itself as a place where God meets us, where Christ comes to us not simply to transform the darkness but to transform *us*, that we might open ourselves to the love that has been in us from the beginning.

“God is radiantly illuminating us in ways we cannot see or feel or know.” On this day, how might it be to trust this, to know that the love of God bears itself in our very bones? How might we allow this to draw us into the world so that, in the beauty and in the brokenness, we might bear witness to the love of God that is ever at work?

HOW THE STARS GET IN YOUR BONES

Sapphire, diamond, emerald, quartz:
think of every hard thing
that carries its own brilliance,
shining with the luster that comes
only from uncountable ages
in the earth, in the dark,
buried beneath unimaginable weight,
bearing what seemed impossible,
bearing it still.

And you, shouldering the grief
you had thought so solid, so impermeable,
the terrible anguish
you carried as a burden
now become—
who can say what day it happened?—
a beginning.

See how the sorrow in you
slowly makes its own light,
how it conjures its own fire.

See how radiant
even your despair has become
in the grace of that sun.

Did you think this would happen
by holding the weight of the world,
by giving in to the press of sadness
and time?

I tell you, this blazing in you—
it does not come by choosing
the most difficult way, the most daunting;
it does not come by the sheer force
of your will.

It comes from the helpless place in you
that, despite all, cannot help but hope,
the part of you that does not know
how not to keep turning
toward this world,
to keep turning your face
toward this sky,
to keep turning your heart
toward this unendurable earth,
knowing your heart will break
but turning it still.

I tell you,
this is how the stars
get in your bones.

This is how the brightness
makes a home in you,
as you open to the hope that burnishes
every fractured thing it finds
and sets it shimmering,
a generous light that will not cease,
no matter how deep the darkness grows,
no matter how long the night becomes.

Still, still, still
the secret of secrets
keeps turning in you,
becoming beautiful,
becoming blessed,
kindling the luminous way
by which you will emerge,
carrying your shattered heart
like a constellation within you,
singing to the day
that will not fail to come.

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

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The blessing “How the Stars Get in Your Bones” will appear in a forthcoming book of blessings.

The Artwork

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The title of “The Seed Is the Light of the Earth” was inspired by the title of a poem by Christina Pacosz.



Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. She serves as director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC, and has traveled widely as a retreat leader and conference speaker. With work described by the Chicago Tribune as “breathtaking,” she has attracted an international audience drawn to the spaces of welcome, imagination, and solace that she creates with her words and her art. Jan’s most recent book is *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life*.

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