

# *The Pandemic Poems*



*Stuart Higginbotham*

In Advent of 2019, I had a strong feeling that I needed to cultivate a regular practice of writing poetry. I have always loved poetry; I believe reading it can heal. Writing it, even badly, can be an even stronger catalyst for such insight, growth, and healing. With this nudge, I kept a pen and journal close at hand and began paying attention.

I had no idea what lay in store for us all in just three short months, when the Covid pandemic swept across the world and our lives were upended. I kept paying attention and writing. My eyes got sharper when I took walks—both sets of them. I censored myself less and less as I realized more and more what a liminal space we had entered.

This collection of poems is simple, to be sure, but they are poems rooted in a growing awareness of God's presence in my life in a time full of such pain, anxiety, fear, and confusion. Presence has become the key image for how I understand "God." The poems continue to be healing for me.

I sat with them for a year and half after I first wrote them, and it was hard to go back and read them for a few months. I needed space, I think, to let my soul engage the experience.

Now, as I read them slowly I can see how the Spirit was at work in my life, and that, in itself, is a reason for enormous gratitude. We all need reminders of God's redeeming grace, and maybe these poems can be that for you as they have been for me.

I had the forethought to put a date on each one, and that has only added to the poignancy, because now I can sense even more clearly the Presence of the Spirit in certain moments of global and national pain: when we closed our campus, the first Holy Week from home, the murder of George Floyd, the experience of the protests, the months leading up to the toxic election season. These poems span nine of the most significant months in my life. I still

write poetry, but something told me I could pause with this exercise after nine months. I find that curious, too.

It is particularly meaningful when I sit with a poem that was written *just before* some major transition, especially the ones around February and March, perhaps. I had no idea of what was on the horizon, and came to me in a poem somehow caught a glimpse of...something. What can I see in there that shows me the Spirit's movement as well as the dynamic of my own inner life?

Now, as I write this introduction near the end of May, in 2022, I am still metabolizing my experience. We all are. The Spirit is still at work, helping us heal even more as we all look around us and wonder what all this means.

With enormous gratitude, I offer these to whoever might find them helpful. Maybe they can come alongside you as you continue to wonder and wrestle. Maybe they can offer you hope, or at least encouragement to reflect honestly and prayerfully.

Stuart Higginbotham  
May 2022

## **When the wind is just right**

Some days when the wind is  
just right and I dig my hands  
in the soil and  
bring them to my face and  
breathe in deeply,  
I can smell myself  
in a hundred years.

12/8/2019

**Untitled**

I saw you today.  
I was going in.  
You were coming out.  
For an instant  
our eyes locked.  
I lowered mine.  
You turned yours.  
I kept going.  
You did too.

12/12/2019

## **Shimmer**

Often it is only a shimmer  
the dance of light through the trees  
that makes your heart sing.

12/24/2019

(while taking a walk on Christmas Eve morning, I went to the waterfall in our neighborhood)

## Stories of Life

Sometimes you meet a person  
and the story of their  
life manages to wiggle its way

deep in your own--or come at you  
head on and demand  
to be given room.

True stories are like that:  
they should be given a garden  
to dance around in with their arms

raised high and make noise  
and breathe deeply.  
Underline that part because

your life could depend on it.

12/25/2019

(while reading Padraig O Tuama's work)

## **Until I am given the words**

I cannot write until I am given the words.  
I cannot be given the words until I can see.  
I cannot see until I learn to pause,  
to stop.

And to stop in this way takes trust  
that the Spirit is always waiting  
and inviting me to open my eyes--  
not those, the other ones--

and behold.

12/26/2019

## Magic

Magic is very real.  
It is just not  
what they taught us it was--  
like love.  
Love is very real  
but looks nothing like it did  
when I was a child--  
feels nothing like it did either.  
Only when I saw our daughter  
being born of water and blood  
did I even begin to understand  
I had much to learn.  
Only when I whispered "thank you"  
in my peaceful grandmother's ear--  
her body still warm--  
did I even catch a glimpse  
of the pulse of life,  
the deepest truth of all things.

12/29/2019

## **Yes, a waiting**

There is a certain stillness in all things  
like a stone that lies waiting  
for the rivulet to touch it  
and wash away what needs  
to be let go of so that  
what is left--

Oh, what is left!

A stone worn smooth by  
the flow of life to leave  
the core of its own life--  
truth, perhaps,  
or close to it.

The truth that comes  
from the persistence of Spirit  
softly calling the sharp rock  
to let go of what is not  
most true, most real--  
sometimes fierce, though.

Yes, a waiting.

At the end I think I will ask,  
“What will be left when all that is not all  
is washed away?”

12/30/2019

## Minaret

The sound of the bells  
stayed close that morning because of  
the fog and clouds that  
pressed down and gently held the memory  
to give it time to soak in.

The kindness of his eyes and  
the love in the squeeze  
of his hand had seeped in my skin  
and filled the place where  
love loves to settle down  
and rest a while--  
only, so much space is there it seems  
and what filled me yearned  
to make its way elsewhere--  
onward, to rooms that lacked.

The only way out was from  
the eyes, in the spill that  
flowed and surprised me when  
it came in a cracked word laid bare  
for all to hear.

The tower was low to the ground  
that day, so we could all  
look the muezzin in the eye  
as he slowly opened his mouth  
and called us to prayer.

12/30/2019

(After having the gift of giving Last Rites to an incredible soul between  
services on Sunday morning.)

## A Bad Poem

Is it not worth it to reach  
out with your shaking hand--

even with the other one  
pressed across your eyes--

and take your pencil and  
make the first hesitating

mark on the paper  
so that the questions you have

long held like a frightened bird  
whipped in the wind

can take flight and lure your eyes  
up and open more to see the horizon?

Even a bad poem  
takes an admirable chance.

12/31/2019

## The things that are sown

My grandmother grew roses  
in the hot Arkansas sun  
with my eyes fixed on her  
walking through her garden  
with ranks of pine trees  
towering like rooted columns  
in our private cathedral that was  
censed with sweet, dripping resin  
with a carpet of St. Augustine  
pushing between my toes  
*put off thy shoes from thy feet*  
as our procession continued  
with her dropping seeds that  
took root and spread life and  
beauty that rose in her wake  
*and as the garden causeth*  
*the things that are sown*  
*in it to spring forth*  
with the prayer flags of fresh sheets  
catching the wind and lifting  
like bright, crisp sails marked with  
faded flowers announcing to all  
that we were loved.  
Now I grow roses...

1/2/2020

**Hot g...u...m...**

Some days

my soul feels

so very

s t r e t c h e d

pulled thin like

hot gum on the

bottom

of a shoe.

1/3/2020

## The same other side

There is a peculiar pressure  
in this weary world  
to go out and up,

out to conquer and solve,  
up to succeed and better--  
a peculiar pressure to out and up.

Why, then, does my heart,  
the still center of my soul,  
feel pulled in and down?

Deeper into what makes me tick--and you--  
that part of me that think it's me  
and that part of me that un-knows better.

Deeper into the soil to re-learn  
what I would prefer to forget,  
what I wish weren't true.

Deeper into darkened rooms  
with only a candle in hand  
celebrating the subtle and silken shadows.

A whisper tells me that by going in and down  
I will go through--be brought through--  
and thus will kneel on the other side

having gone through myself and  
teased out the knots, untied them,  
the slack in the line giving room

for my face to lift enough and stretch  
that my eyes can rest beyond me

and I can breathe deeply and rest.

The weight I felt burns away  
like a fine fog in the ray of sunlight  
that greets me each day and wakes my soul.

1/4/2020

## **The Sweetest Flame**

Love burns away what is not it--  
what is not of it--  
with the sweetest flame.  
Life is sublime if you invite  
the Spirit to blow on the  
embers of your life.

.

1/4/2020

## Ode to Wanda Lou

At least five times a day  
I lift our cat Wanda Lou  
and press the side of my face  
against her furry body  
and close my eyes and listen.

And stop.

I don't know if she knows  
that her heart beats within her,  
but I know and am thankful  
and I hope she knows that  
she is loved.

1/5/2020

## **I Scream with my Fingers**

Is it not enough to grow roses?  
To bow to the curve of a stem,  
to respect the thorn that stifles  
    my greed,  
to show devotion not to a friend,  
no, but to something deeper  
and truer still?

Brushing petals trains my hands to  
    be gentle--  
perhaps my heart can take a cue.

With my hands plunged into the  
    moist, dark earth,  
they are unable to grasp anything  
but that which will one day  
    hold me--  
Ah, the fierce grace of grounding.

In the face of such fear and anger,  
when hot tears perch on the lips  
of my eyes and that part of me  
craves to do something,

I scream with my fingers.

1/6/2020

## I lived a word today

I read a word today  
 I had never seen before,  
 tucked away in a Mary Oliver piece:  
*bumptious*  
 “Adjective: self-assertive to an irritating degree”

I looked it up to see how to use it  
 properly or improperly--  
 however I want.

I heard a word today  
 I had not run across  
 for a long time:  
*commingle*  
 “Verb: blend or mix”

I know how to use this word,  
 only, it makes me uncomfortable.

I lived a word today  
 I did not expect to meet  
 hidden between masses and hymns:  
*unction*  
 “Noun: anointing someone with oil  
 In a religious service.”

Only then was I reminded  
 that I was not the point.

1/9/2020

## On Joy

When I was a child, I once saw my grandmother  
laugh so hard that she threw her head back  
as she clapped her hands together.  
I have never been the same.

Joy can smooth the furrowed eyebrows of  
a burdened heart so that, even with just  
a slightly opened space in my chest, I can feel  
the Spirit breathing in me and through me.  
It is no small thing.

*Give them the gift of joy and wonder  
in all your works.*

Joy is not ignorant nor neglectful of the  
pain of the world--of each human life.  
Joy sees all and calls me back to a  
posture of trust that reminds me of hope.  
It is no small thing.

*All of us go down to the dust;  
yet even at the grave we make our song:  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.*

Joy is not a sugar high that we lose  
in a moment's time or at the first encounter with  
even a slight stumble or bruise.  
Joy plunges deep to the heart of all things--  
to the heart of all things.

1/13/2020

**To compost is to pray**

To compost is to pray, a coming-together of things:  
To see, to understand where things return  
is to see, to understand, where things come from.

The earthy wisdom in the awareness  
of the connection of all things  
can transform our hearts--and thus the world.

1/20/2020

## **That holy void**

If I can so empty myself of myself--  
what is "that" anyway?--  
that smallness constructed around my fears  
of never being understood  
of never being enough  
of never being.

If I can so empty myself of that self,  
perhaps when others encounter--me?--  
they will meet not that brittle facade,  
that construction, against which they may clash,  
toward which they may press,  
on which they may project,  
but they will encounter in that supposed emptiness,  
that holy void,

a certain Love that has been given space  
and room to take root and grow.  
Such a Love has been seeking for so long!  
Nothing need crash against that Love  
like an angry wave against rocks,  
because even a glancing blow in that space,  
even the briefest encounter,  
offers the potential to be embraced  
and transformed and healed.  
Where do I start?

1/18/2020

## Mepkin Abbey

On the Feast of St. Agatha  
I finished my boiled egg and toast and  
slipped out the refectory door for Holy Communion  
walking slowly to give my eyes  
a chance to fall where they would fall,  
on the ancient oaks and Spanish moss  
draped like memories over every available branch.

At the corner of two sidewalks  
I paused to follow an older monk in a wheelchair  
who was very familiar with this path to prayer,  
whose feet slowly pulled him forward.  
I relaxed into the pace he set.

As I walked behind him at a distance,  
his white hair cut close and his  
eyes looking toward the space where  
we would pray,  
the wheels on the left side of his chair  
suddenly slipped off the edge of the sidewalk.  
We both stopped.

I stepped beside him and said, "Here, let me get it."  
"No, no," he said.  
"I need to be able to see this for myself."  
With feeble legs he slowly stood and  
righted himself with patience and focus.  
It was a transmission.

2/6/2020

## **Something has shifted**

Something has shifted,  
slipped suddenly into  
a new position, a new angle  
within my soul and  
the soul of all of us--  
maybe we're beginning to  
remember that this is real?  
Something has shifted  
as I walked today with my wife  
and we looked ahead of us  
as we noticed the couple with the dog  
in a new way--  
subtle but so obvious to me that  
my perspective was different.  
Something has shifted  
in me and I can feel  
my body move and begin  
to settle into a new posture,  
my voice taking on a kinder timbre.  
Something has shifted  
and while my mind cannot yet  
get its clever little fingers around  
what is going on,  
my heart knows enough to  
pause and pay attention and  
listen very deeply because  
I believe Spirit is trying to show us something.

3/14/20

I closed the campus yesterday, on Friday, March 13, and we entered into the time of "social distancing." I have no idea when we will return, during this pandemic.

## Fresh ink

Oh to be alive now  
and keep my eyes open--  
and my beating heart--  
to what is being written  
like marks on a scroll,  
unfurled all around us,  
with words and images  
in bold, fresh ink  
that try to describe  
what we are sharing in these days,  
struggling to keep up with  
the pace of all that is  
being manifested in the  
shift of consciousness  
that is so close that we  
strain to see it even though  
it stands before our very eyes--  
the deep truth of things--  
even though some would like us  
to believe otherwise.

3/15/2020

## Deep Lent

We had gotten so accustomed  
to setting out our usual things:  
the purple vestments with the  
wooden candlesticks,  
pebbles in the font,  
sticks and vines on the chancel.  
Then Deep Lent began  
and we found ourselves taken  
to a place we had not chosen for ourselves.  
We looked around with confusion,  
feeling a connection with  
a truth we have known but have ignored:  
the union of things.  
We pause now and read the invitation again  
with new eyes and hearts:  
“I invite you, therefore,  
in the name of the Church,  
to the observance of a holy Lent,  
by self-examination and repentance;  
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;  
and by reading and meditating on  
God’s Holy Word.  
And, to make a right  
beginning of repentance  
and as a mark of our mortal nature,  
let us now kneel before the Lord,  
our maker and redeemer.”

3/15/2020

## **We have but taken the first steps**

Last night I couldn't sleep  
because I realized  
we have but taken the first steps.

The first.

Many more will follow.

The impulse is always to grasp,  
to understand

--now--

to get a handle on the significance  
of this surreal experience.

All of it.

While my mind craves to figure this out yesterday,  
my heart softly speaks to me--

with my body demanding attention,  
our body demanding attention--

our body, saying:

Pause.

Listen more intently than you  
have ever listened before.

Pay attention!

Notice where compassion is needed,  
a healing of wounds long unattended.

Look your neighbor in the eye and smile as  
you pass them on the sidewalk.

Do not rush, do not rush,  
do not rush,

Do

not

rush

because there is a wisdom among us now,  
that we must learn,

We must learn.

We must.

We.

3/18/2020

## The prophets of these days

Perhaps you are the prophets of these days--  
and why not?--

women and men calling us to remember  
the command to love our neighbor.

*Do no harm.*

*Teach our children.*

*Love your neighbor as yourself.*

We are being shaken out of our stupor.

Perhaps in your dedication we are reminded  
of the call shared by all human beings:  
To nurture healing in a hurting world--  
hopeful for restoration.

The witness of your life triggers  
the timeless words of wisdom and prayer  
to pulse stronger within us.

With the throbbing of our spiritual heart,  
the embers of deep truth are fanned and strengthened.

We can no longer afford to be distracted.

Our preoccupation with the absurd is laid bare  
in the light of your care for our lives.

We are convicted by our shallowness  
and find inspiration in those who heal,  
those who teach, those who feed,  
those who serve.

All who love.

I can only pray this: that what we are remembering now  
will reframe the way we live from now on.

Our union, our true selves.

3/22/2020

I am thinking today of the healthcare workers and the way they are being  
called into spaces of great risk on behalf of us all.

**A Litany of Embodied Solitude**  
**A Poem for the Prayers of Holy Week**

*How do we sing the Lord's song  
 in a strange land?*

By opening our hearts before  
 we open our mouths and  
 giving thanks for God's pervasive presence  
 in glimpses of truth, that we are being held.

*Let the same mind be in you--in us--  
 that was in Christ Jesus.*

Let go.

Let go.

Let go.

*Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord  
 God of our salvation,  
 that we may enter with joy upon  
 the contemplation of those mighty acts,  
 whereby You have given us life and immortality.*

May I remember that contemplation's  
 home is in my heart, not my grasping mind.

May I look to the Blessed Mother,  
 alone in that room when the messenger came,  
 who pondered such beauty in her heart.

*All glory, laud, and honor.*

Let go.

Let go.

Let go.

*Mercifully grant that we may receive  
 this Sacrament thankfully in  
 remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord,  
 who in these holy mysteries gives us  
 a pledge of eternal life.*

May I remember and may those disjointed  
 parts of me--the conflicting pieces--be brought

together into the wholeness Your dream.  
 May I remember that the Sacrament is not  
 a thing but the Thing in the thing.  
 Keep my eyes there and I see hope  
 even in isolation.

*On the night in which he was betrayed  
 Jesus took a loaf of bread.*

*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

Let go.

Let go.

Let go.

*Almighty God, we pray you graciously  
 to behold this your family,  
 for whom our Lord Jesus Christ  
 was willing to be betrayed,  
 and given into the hands of sinners,  
 and to suffer death upon the cross.*

May I remember that you see me  
 where I am, as I am, here and now.

*For behold, you look or truth deep within me,  
 and will make me understand wisdom secretly.*

*Where can I go, then, from your Spirit?*

*Where can I flee from your presence?*

You see me--see us--and sometimes I wish you didn't,  
 but now I am so thankful you do.

Help me remember that  
 my suffering, solitude, fear--the unknown--  
 all of it is redeemed in You.

Let go.

Let go.

Let go.

*O God, Creator of heaven and earth:  
 Grant that, as the crucified body of  
 Your dear Son was laid in the tomb and  
 rested on this holy Sabbath,  
 so may we await with him the coming of  
 the third day, and rise with him  
 to newness of life.*

May I rest. Oh yes, may I rest.  
May I trust enough and  
my heart relax enough  
that I feel the pressure of your touch  
on the wounded places of my soul.  
What is there to do sometimes but wait?  
*Be still and know that I am God.*  
Oh we are not good at this, but  
it is today's lesson.  
Let go.  
Let go.  
Let go.  
*On this most holy night,  
in which our Lord Jesus passed over  
from death to life, the Church  
invites her members, dispersed throughout  
the world, to gather in vigil and prayer.*  
Let us keep vigil and ponder--yes ponder--  
in our hearts, those spaces that have been  
stretched in our suffering, our isolation,  
perhaps now ready, more supple to see  
the Thing within the thing.  
Yes, that deeper truth--  
in our life, our heart, our bodies.  
*Stir up in your Church that  
Spirit of adoption which is  
given to us in Baptism, that we,  
being renewed in both body and mind,  
may worship you in sincerity and truth.*  
Now these words come alive  
and sing in our hearts, pulsing,  
because of this, because of now.  
My heart is broken open, and  
perhaps now redemption and healing  
are more than topics in a paper.  
I can taste them, even in the hunger  
and my deep yearning.  
Yes. I will pause here, even now:

the deep yearning.

4/1/2020

I am thinking particularly of how hard this Holy Week is, in isolation and away from our communities. It brings a whole new meaning to the image of “how can we sing our song in a foreign land.”

## **Sentinels, or Wisdom**

A murder of crows gathered  
in the tree in our backyard  
eleven jet black bodies  
set against the growing green buds.  
I have no idea what  
they were talking about--intently--  
but they definitely meant it  
and they kept at it for  
as long as it took  
while their eyes scanned all around  
for the next tree they would visit.

4/1/2020

## Traveling Companions

Today, while on a walk  
I saw grief and imagination  
ahead of me, at a steady pace,  
holding hands.  
I never knew they had even met  
but obviously they had with the  
stories they were telling each other.  
As I approached, they invited me to  
walk with them  
as we made another lap around.  
There I stood, one on each side,  
as they shared with me their stories--  
and listened intently to mine.  
I felt my heart open as we  
reached half way, my vision stretched  
to see the connections in the blurry spaces.  
When we finished our lap,  
I wished them the best, as they told me  
they would each see me soon.  
I turned toward home  
with my soul transformed.

4/8/2020

## If then, Easter

A violet clematis bloomed last night,  
yesterday's bulging bud that caught my eye  
now totally transformed and stretching wide,  
sheathed in luscious color on a Spring morning.

The cardinal pair who stay close to our home,  
grateful for the sunflower seed in the feeders,  
tend their nest, hidden somewhere in a nearby tree,  
out of my sight but nevertheless real.

Each morning we take our walk around the lake  
and pay our respects to the geese and ducks  
and the stately blue heron which always  
silently encourages me to improve my posture.

If then, Easter is the return of life,  
a resurgence out of a time of waiting, even loss,  
a blossoming forth of hope that makes us  
catch our breath with eyes straining to see all  
lest we miss any morsel that is placed  
on this table of delights by the Spirit  
who is the pulsing heart of all life,

If then, Easter is this life  
that I can see with my own eyes  
and feel in my heart and touch softly  
and even bring toward my face and smell,  
I have only one thing to do:  
Pause, and give thanks with my whole heart  
for the force of love that  
pushes through the dense soil of my own doubt.  
Yes, pause and give thanks to God.

4/12/2020

## One month in

This morning I took stock of  
a settling within my soul,  
more sure-footed so that I can  
pivot to where my heart is calling me  
to pay attention and be present.

I do not claim to know any overarching  
lesson that these days are teaching us.  
The roses blooming on my patio are  
a different shade of pink than yours.  
I can only try to remain still enough,  
my mind silent enough,  
to see what I am meant to see.

4/13/2020

**To the side**

It was the most subtle of movements  
as our two souls drew close,  
the slightest step to the side,  
granting enough space between us  
so that all the unnamed anxieties  
that were accompanying us on our walks  
would have plenty of room to  
move around and have space to breathe.  
The gentlest leaning and then a step away,  
and something in my soul took note and wondered:  
Is this out of fear or respect?  
These days, I honestly cannot tell the difference.

4/14/2020

## **As long as it takes**

Moses entered into the cloud  
on the top of the mountain  
and stayed there, in God's presence,  
to see what he needed to see--  
to learn how to see--  
for forty days.

The wisdom forged in that space  
guided his people through their  
wilderness journey, struggling and hoping,  
for forty years, or, as a dear professor once said,  
as long as it took.

Before their stories sat Noah with his family,  
sheltering in place in their floating home  
while all around them storms blew.  
They waited and prayed for forty days--  
as long as it took.

After them Our Lord Himself was  
shoved out of his routine--what one there was--  
and thrust into the wilderness  
to encounter the shadow shared by all  
as he prayed in silence and solitude  
for forty days--  
as long as it took.

Each encountered the  
deeper questions within themselves  
and the impulse to deflect and deny  
the call for a transformation of heart.

This morning I sat at my desk  
with birds singing while also aware  
that so many are crying in the world,  
brothers and sisters with deep grief  
and fear and loneliness.

In my own praying and waiting,  
I am aware that today marks

forty days for me in my crucible space,  
with the potential for transformation.  
Yes, potential, even as I wonder  
“How long, O Lord?”  
And in that place in my heart  
where God sets up a home and waits  
and prays, yes prays, for us all,  
while the storms of my inner life blows,  
I hear a whisper:  
“As long as it takes.”

4/20/2020

## Normal

When are we going to go back to normal? When will things return to normal? I hear this so often and a part of me echoes this as well, but my soul, my soul, whispers about something else to yearn for, something else to set our eyes and hearts on. My soul desires not to go back but to go forward, towards wholeness, towards a transformed way of life that smells like healing and fresh air and smiles.

4/21/2020

## Real Presence

Two small squirrels leapt off the trunk  
of the maple tree and ran through the grass.  
I could not tell if they were barking or laughing,  
but they meant what they were saying,  
like the crows.  
I keep trying to stand still and wait for  
what is to be to come into view.

When?

At first I felt as though I needed  
to work on new tasks, a way of being  
a priest among the people whom I love,  
but now I can glimpse that perhaps  
these days are a subtraction of unnecessary things.  
Can I see my reflection in a raindrop?

My soul somehow feels more nimble,  
resting in a realness I knew--sometimes--but that was  
often shaded from the eye of my heart.  
These days the barnacles are being scraped off the  
hull of the ship so that it can glide more smoothly  
on waters that are often choppy.

Now?

It seems odd that we squabble  
over the tiniest details of whether  
Christ is present in bread and wine, and how,  
when the answer is so clear  
as the sun reflects off the ripples in the lake  
and the heron steps slowly forward.

4/28/2020

## **When I sit quietly in my chair**

When I sit quietly and softly in my chair  
on the patio garden, beside the sage,

when I allow my soul time to pause,  
to step aside from the noise and the sparkle,

when I sit still and silent with my breath and closed eyes  
and feel the breeze blow so gently across my skin,

sometimes a finch will light on the dangling feeder  
and chirp with joy as it picks through the seed.

Sometimes there are several finches, chattering,  
and the cardinal pair whose eyes follow each other.

If I move suddenly and grab hold of  
the thing that has crept back into my mind,

the finches will fly away and light in the nearby tree,  
watching and waiting for the stillness to settle back in

If I allow myself the time and space to sit with my breath  
perhaps they will return again.

5/4/2020

## **Incarnational Resistance**

The Word became flesh  
and dwells among us.

Why do we so badly  
want to shove it back?

I need to sit here for a while  
and not think about this.

5/5/2020

## Roots

The winds blew strong yesterday  
and the shrubs, newly planted,  
were whipped to and fro,  
so this morning I replanted them  
and packed the dirt tighter  
around their roots so that  
perhaps now they can stand stronger.  
Because the winds will come again.

5/7/2020

## Grandfather Flame

The metal doors on the black fireplace  
in my grandparents' house had glass windows  
that glowed orange and bathed the whole room  
in a warm light as the sun set and  
I snuggled in her lap while she rocked me.

He would let me add logs to the fire,  
showing me how to open the door carefully  
by tapping it with my fingers, going  
*pfft, pfft, pfft* with my lips at each touch.  
To grasp too tightly was to be burned.

Even as a child I was drawn to the fire,  
that part of my soul remembering  
all the way back to those moments of sitting  
around the circle telling the stories that kept us  
alive when there was so much to fear.

On those cold days when we sat near our flame,  
I already knew we had not tamed it, or captured it.  
We were blessed to have it dwell among us  
and cast both warmth and shadows  
around the room as we sat together in silence.

5/7/2020

## Sanctuary Light

I slip into the nave for a moment of prayer,  
which, while it makes my soul sing,  
also stokes heaviness in my heart that  
I am sitting here alone, with teary eyes.  
The light streams through stained glass  
like it always does this time of day and year,  
yet never so wonderfully than after  
fifty-nine days of only memories.  
To the left of the altar hangs the sanctuary light,  
the visible reminder of Jesus' presence with us  
in bread and wine: blessed, broken, and shared.  
My heart swells when I see it is still on.  
I giggle when I remember past days of  
critique when I suggested we use only  
real candles, that it needed to be authentic.  
The electric bulb in its red glass sconce once seemed  
to fall short of my standard of what it should be.  
Yet now I sit here, my heart bursting with gratitude:  
that I forgot to consume the elements in Holy Week,  
that there is still bread and wine in the aumbry,  
that I never replaced this bulb with a candle  
that would have burned out in only a week—  
that would have burned out in just one week,  
oh to think about that—  
and that the red light is there with the elements,  
reminding us all that His Presence never leaves.

5/9/2020

## **Like children running**

The dappled rays of light squeeze through the branches  
like children running through their parents' legs  
to go outside and play in the grass.

They almost giggle as they launch out into the day  
and join the swallows who greet them there.

5/12/2020

## Heart-shaped rocks

I don't know if heart-shaped rocks  
are rare, but I know it is rare  
that I see one on a walk.  
Maybe it's because I don't  
pay attention, but today I saw  
these two stones lying beside each other,  
so I brought them home to teach me.

5/13/2020

## Master of Divinity

Months back I took all my diplomas  
off my office wall and replaced them  
with paintings and icons that I swap out  
from time to time to see  
how a change in the sunlight would catch an eye.  
I could not help but laugh out loud  
when I lifted one particular diploma that read  
“Master of Divinity” in black ink,  
so nicely framed and respectable—  
as if there were such a thing.  
Now, on day sixty-eight, I sit at home  
with my family, in my garden, with my prayers,  
keeping presence with my community  
as best as I can in these days of anxiety  
while imagination and hope still dance,  
inviting us to soften our grasp and consent  
to the breath on which our lives take sail  
while well-framed diplomas rest in the closet.

5/20/2020

## Veils and Light

While our faces were obscured by masks  
the light seeped through the cloth  
and poured out all around while we stood  
in the garden to commit the ashes of a friend.

Each person became Moses  
with a veil that didn't stand a chance  
against the pressure of grace that always  
pours outward, drenching us,

while even at the grave we make our song.  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

5/21/2020

## Stone and Water

Be a stone, planted firm as a cliff,  
on which the waves of reaction  
are exhausted and eventually settle  
and gently lap the sandy shore.

Be a stream of water, a river,  
whose persistent flow and presence  
crosses the rigid boundary of the stones  
by passing through them--and beyond.

Be the stone, be the water.  
A practice of prayer guides the heart  
to know which and when.

5/21/2020

## Relentless

How long, O Lord, how long?  
I keep looking for some sign that  
we are nearing the end of this.  
Of what, exactly?  
Of life?  
Because the tension and  
fear in uncertainty that  
I am feeling in these months  
is the normal existence for so many.  
Too many.  
Normal. What is this anyway?  
The word has become almost  
meaningless to me when so much  
is uncertain--which I have learned  
is the state of things even though  
I was blind to see it for so long.  
I am learning, and I have a long way  
to go but my teacher is  
relentless.

5/26/2020

Reflecting on some ten weeks in this physical distancing space,  
not realizing the shift that was coming with protests after the death of  
George Floyd.

## Send down angels

Send down angels to lift my chin  
so that my face turns towards  
what needs to be seen.  
Guide their fingers to lift  
my heavy eyelids when I  
try to squeeze them closed,  
because I need to see.  
I need to see both the pain around me  
as well as the particular place where  
I am called to plant my feet and  
be present here and now  
with you, whose heart is breaking  
and whose voice is now just a whisper  
because of the cries you have  
poured into this world.  
Send down angels to open  
our eyes so that the illusion  
of separation melts away like wax  
in the heat of the sun  
that flows into our shared heart.

6/5/2020

## Spider Web Meditation

You must sit still  
with the rays of light  
riding through the branches  
on chariots of dust  
to see the shimmer  
of the thin strand  
of the spider's web  
that connects this leaf  
with that one over there.  
In this moment of  
stillness,  
it shocks you:  
The connection of things,  
of all things, the deep truth,  
and the pain of not seeing,  
a persistent wound  
in our body, our body,  
because we cannot  
be still and know.

6/10/2020

## **On a bench at the auto shop**

To take time each day  
to sit in quietness,  
to sit still in the busyness  
that presses upon us and lures us  
like a siren to join it and  
yield our groundedness to  
the distractions that sap our soul.  
To sit, to plant ourselves in one place,  
on the ground, if we can, to feel  
it pulse with the beat of life that  
calls us back to the heart of things.  
To be still and listen so that, when we  
stand again, our hearts can see  
those deeper truths about ourselves  
with God's eyes, even on days when  
our vision is dimmed with tears.  
To dare to take a moment alone  
when the shadows that stalk  
our souls and look for cracks to  
squeeze through can be seen in the light  
that pierces all darkness and we are  
again aware that we are all held  
in love, in love, in love.

6/15/2020

119

I had lost count of  
how many days we have been here  
in this new way of life that  
we keep resisting on some level but that  
is stubborn in its insistence that  
we are being transformed into something  
different, something possible and whole.  
Our fears grab our ankles and choke our voices  
as our ears turn towards that  
still small voice that whispers through  
the anxieties that rise up in the night.

I had lost count of  
how much time had passed,  
and perhaps that is a grace in itself,  
because I was here in this place,  
at least for a moment, now.

What is this desert we are traveling through?  
What is the desert you are traveling through?  
How long, O Lord?  
As long as it takes.

This morning when I walked into the nave  
to prepare for prayers, I looked past  
the empty pews and my eye rested on  
the red light there on the chancel,  
the sanctuary light,  
that small beacon holding silent vigil  
for all this time, never tiring or stressing  
in its constant assurance that God is here.  
Maybe I can be here too.

7/5/2020

## Not in control

Some lessons are so hard to learn  
that we will do whatever we can to avoid them  
and keep trying to convince ourselves  
that we will be able to figure this out  
alone, with our own cleverness.

That we don't need help.

What a sad lie.

I have hit a wall and my heart hurts  
from realizing how much what I have said  
only flirts with the reality of what  
I tried to describe.

Sunday school is over. Dismissed.

And now we are called to practice our faith,  
and listen deeply for the Spirit's voice  
in these days when the armor around our heart  
cracks and moves like tectonic plates,  
exposing the fault lines of our own  
vanity and pride.

In that moment of running into a wall,

I learn that two things are real:

My own limits and God's grace.

These are lessons of beauty,  
if we can stand to pause and look.

7/6/2020

## **So that our eyes look forward**

What does it mean to be present  
in all of this, around us and within us?  
To be present, surrounded by  
so much we cannot control, yet  
called on to pay attention to it.  
The wind blows where it will.  
Which wind? How will we know  
when we lick our finger and raise it  
above our heads that this wind is the one  
that will lead us to safer shores  
and not toss us against the rocks?  
What does it mean to be present  
here and now, to notice that  
the anxious cloud my soul knows so well  
is rising again?  
I feel it rising again.  
I remember the way things were,  
the way we used to pray, to stand, to sing,  
to touch. I remember it all, but--or and--  
at what point will that one pebble land  
that will tip the balance of the scale  
so that our eyes look forward and not back?  
What will that pebble feel like  
when I hold it in my hand, close my eyes,  
run my fingers over the cool surface,  
and flick it into the pile  
with a smile on my face?

7/9/2020

## **The Spirit blows where it will**

We do not know where it comes from  
or where it is going, yet we can feel it  
all around us: in one moment  
a cool breeze that helps us catch our breath  
as we close our eyes and relax in peace,  
while in the next moment  
a strong gale blows away the  
dust of illusion from the corners of our lives.  
At some point, when we have long trimmed  
our sails and have grown accustomed to  
the direction our life is going,  
the great wind blows down upon us,  
and through shielded and surprised eyes  
we realize that we have been moved to  
a different course we did not expect  
and would have never chosen for ourselves.  
The Spirit blows where it will--and it will.  
And it has.

7/19/2020

## What can I do with this shit?

Today, when my jaw was clinched so tight  
for the umpteenth time that  
it hurt and my ears rang from  
the pressure that I carry right there in  
that place where I try my best to keep  
my face calm and project a facade of  
“I can handle all this. I’m fine.”  
As if what we are going through is  
just like the late winter ice storms  
we had as children where we  
moaned because we had to sit next to  
a fire with our families  
and pass the time.  
For five days. Can you imagine!  
This is no minor inconvenience.  
My jaw will tell you that, as will  
the tears that well up in conversations  
when the grief presses me down on the floor  
like an annoying sibling that won’t  
get off my back.  
So will my heart break. And yours.  
Today, when my my body needed to do  
something to help me ground and steady  
my heart in the midst of the stupidity and  
selfishness that swirls around us all,  
I took three giant bags of composted cow shit,  
planted flowers, and tended my pomegranate tree.  
Perhaps the rudbeckia will benefit from this shit,  
or the lantana. I bet the gardenias will  
put it to good use in these days when I feel like  
this shit has to go somewhere.  
Some good has to come of it,  
and I believe deep down that something in  
my soul is sprouting in all this, taking root  
and growing stronger in the dark places.  
So, I will keep watching the flowers and hope.

7/25/2020

## Bee

Just the other day I was  
watering the plants in the garden  
at dusk in the shade when  
the water had a chance to soak in.  
My shoulder brushed a shrub  
I love with violet flowers like paper  
and a blossom buzzed.  
I paused and gently tapped several  
until one spoke back.  
One drowsy bee slowly walked out  
and flew off to more peaceful accommodations.

Just the other day I was  
sitting in a friend's driveway  
talking about our grief and struggle  
in these days, our hopes and our hearts.  
We laughed too, with gratitude.  
As we sat there together by the jasmine,  
a bee circled and landed gently  
on my hand, calmly crawling over my fingers  
as we paused and watched.  
In that moment, I could feel  
every tiny foot, the faintest pressure on my skin.  
After a blissful moment, I snapped a photo  
and the bee flew away, message delivered.

8/2/2020  
My 41st birthday

## The dead cardinal

The thing about windows is that  
you don't want them so clean that  
the birds can't tell whether it's  
an opening to a room to explore  
or the impending cause of their demise.  
I have seen some people place  
stickers of little butterflies there,  
but I think that's a bit tacky, really,  
so I prefer just not to clean them obsessively  
and let life leave a mark that can be seen.

Just the other day I was watching a program  
about creating wildflower gardens  
and my heart knew as soon as I heard  
the bird hit the window.

It was dead.

There on the patio lay a female cardinal,  
her feathers creamy brown with hints of red.  
The body lay perfectly still, and still beautiful, too.  
I walked out onto the patio barefoot  
with a large spoon from the stove  
and stooped next to the beautiful creature.

They always love the sunflower seeds, don't they?  
We feed our birds like the children they are--  
children of God in their own way, beloved.  
The cats love them, of course, and spend hours  
in chairs by the patio windows, dreaming.  
When we step out to refill the three feeders,  
we can hear them in the trees, calling out  
and encouraging us to hurry up so they can feast.  
They are like small proverbs with feathers,  
prayers that flutter by and perch for a while  
and then move on to where they are going.

I took her small body and buried it in the large pot  
with the magnolia tree that I love so much.  
As I slid the dirt back over, I just sat there  
for a moment, giving thanks and grieving.  
Then, a few days later, I noticed the sparrow  
tucked in the branches of that same tree  
crying its heart out about something  
I can only imagine, and that made me smile.

August 31, 2020

## Unleashed

It feels like something has been unleashed  
in our world, something dark and primal  
that feeds on fear,  
pulling us apart like gravity  
dragging down a heavenly body.

Powers and principalities, St. Paul called it.

What has been unleashed has long  
seethed within us, since we first sat  
around fires and looked at another  
and saw an other to shove down.  
Growing like an infection in our soul,  
fed by a culture fixated on greed,  
a celebrity society obsessed with  
those who sparkle most and  
scream the loudest with  
nothing to say of substance.  
Sirens in our midst who  
lure us toward illusion while  
we crash on the rocks and perish.

The ropes that pull us down  
are anchored in that place  
in our own small self  
that nurtures a willful ignorance  
and a cultivated arrogance--  
perhaps the two demons of our days  
that most need exorcizing.

Entertainers rise to the top because  
bread and circuses have always  
been tools to distract and numb  
while people cheer themselves

deeper and deeper into suffering.

Yet, while these soul shackles  
are anchored in that shallowness,  
that is not all there is to  
us as a people made in  
God's image--each and all of us together.

We must look back to those  
sages and wise ones  
who spoke the truth  
about how emptiness and humility are  
the antidote to the poison that plagues us.  
We must look here, in this moment,  
to name that which must be named  
so that the spell may be broken and  
the fog lifted to see more clearly.  
And we must look just enough ahead  
so that we can see the place where  
our next step must be planted.

9/17/2020

