

VIGIL AND VICE



HARLEY BELL

poetry and blessings



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for harriet,
who stood with me

vigil

a period of keeping awake during the time usually spent asleep,
especially to keep watch or pray.

“A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal,
and strengthen. Life is a constant flow of emergence. The beauty of
blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds.”

- John O'Donohue

INTRODUCTION

I press a thick jacket against my body. A question begins to rise. How can I continue my conversation with the earth?

The words are saliva on my lips and the wind that licks my face. The light is fading fast. There is a good chance I will become lost in the dark. I keep walking.

This is my process of exploring poetry. With each piece in this project, I have shared the inquiries that shone like sunlight onto the pages of my journal. Where prudent, I plucked the weeds. Where potent, I included my intentions. Where nothing, there was nothing else to share.

My hope is that these words will connect my inner landscape to yours. Like a tributary creek that finally meets a river. Like a river that feeds the ocean. May we offer an invitation to each other: keep exploring. Illume, illume, illume.



The sun will rise soon and my dreams are already gathering like dust beneath the bed. I stir from my slumber and sweep into the kitchen. The windows are bleeding with tiny rivers and a freeze clings to the air. I greet the stove and introduce myself to the kettle. I promised to make you coffee.

You have been gone all night. I want the house to welcome you with warmth. We need fire. There are logs stacked in the shed and pinecones in a wicker basket. There are trees that need to remember my axe. I swing and the wood splits. I sweat, then rest.

I carry my treasure inside and begin my prayer. All I need is a single spark to catch. My flame flickers and dwindles. I sip my coffee and the fire burns brightly.

You open the door with leaves clinging to your hair. You hang your coat upon a hook. There is frost on the fabric. I hand you a cup and you gather close. There is a whisper in your voice as you unfurl your story of the night. I take your words into my heart and listen.

CELEBRATION OF THE DAWN

You are potent
even when the moonlight wanes
and catches on the canopy of the trees.

May you gather your strength
through pine needles, thistles and rock.
Even now, the insects are working
on their incantation.
Allow your voice to join the choir.

Do you cling, skintight and snug
to the soft blankets of sleep?
Allow your voice to speak.

Let the weight of your thoughts
walk upon the earth,
start by walking home.
Allow your footsteps to caress the dirt.

If you pause at the river's edge,
may you weave water
to your lips and sip
from the known recipe of a prayer.

Allow your blessing to be carried upon the air.

Your breath travels with you
and you rise with the dawn.
May you remember the way home.

My insides feel like expired bottle of milk. I find myself sniffing the forgotten corners until I realise that I never took out the trash. I must be fermenting. I double check the deep dust of the cupboards. I find a coffee plunger made of stainless steel. I carry it into the light.

I see you, crossing the creek at the edge of our paddock. There are wild flowers bundled in your arms. You look to me and all I have to offer is this coffee-stained vessel.



I've been telling myself for years that coffee is a gift from the Gods.

But what if all I have is decaf?

Even when you are surrounded by those that do see, hear or care for you.

You possess the power to surrender to the softness of yourself and whisper:
everything matters.

Start by walking home.

FOR COFFEE

May your first taste of the morning
be the welcome embrace of coffee.

May you stir slowly and rise
into the fullness of your senses.

May you bless the sweet, dark,
bitter and bright. Bless all creeds
that initiate your body.

Every cup contains the possibility of a miracle.
Each sip could bring you back to life.

May you remember the recipe
for the perfect infusion
of water and earth.

May your presence
meet with mine
and hold true
to our delicious promises.

Bless the simple miracle of coffee.

My car is corroding from too much salt in the air. The windows won't wind down. The music won't turn up. An unknown amount of oil leaks from my veins. There are splatter stains in the carparks, pitstops, petrol stations and driveways. There are endless paddocks alongside the highway. I feel like I'm trying to catch the horizon.

The radio becomes static. Is this an intermission or am I going somewhere?

What would happen if I allowed myself to rest?

THE ROAD

Care for the creature
that carries you home.

Even if your road is rough,
if tarmac and asphalt
become gravel and rock,

if dust and dirt
are the only fair surfaces of the earth

keep driving through.

Even if trees tumble
and night falls

and weariness overwhelms the way,

let your lights illumine
a safe passage
to keep driving through.

If you need to rest,
please rest. Care
for the creature
that carries you home.

The nights are long. The days are short. There are many blankets bundled around my body like bandages. If I wake up and get up, it means facing myself. I must admit fatigue. Do I have the energy to drive back to the highway home?

There is so much dirt on this Earth that I feel dirty.

I dig at my thoughts and strike something hard. Shall I go on?

FOR SLEEPING BEYOND NOON

Cast away the heaviness
that does not serve you.

May you feel safe while the world
around you waits
for you to be exactly as you are.

When you wake, feel welcome.

May you slumber till any hour
that your body needs.

When you rise, rise gently.

Bless your boundaries
and be excessively patient.
Time moves differently
in the expanding realms of sleep.

All possibilities await you.

Love cannot flourish without care and attention. Have you ever witnessed a false face with friendly eyes?

I need to tell you this,
do not take me into your heart
until I have accepted myself
and eased my judgment of others.

If you have known the dark,
come now, let us talk
beside the fire.

FOR FRIENDSHIPS ON FIRE

Loneliness clings to your chest
and constricts your breathing.

Who among your friends would lend you an inhaler?

Come now, call in compassion. Your own compassion.
Have you ignored an invitation like this before?
Build the bridges you want to build.

Your buttons dangle from a thread
and you never learnt to sew.

You roll your pants above your ankles
and stumble with your arms.
How long can you keep yourself
from falling?

The night claws closer to your eyes.
You need to name the darkness.

Who among your friends would build
their own fire brighter
to guide you back home?

THERE IS A SEAT AT MY TABLE FOR YOU

I catch you listening to the aromatic notes of the kitchen.
You murmur a blessing to the beets and brassicas.
You said something about the toil
that plucked these plants
from the soil.

I catch you looking at the dancing oil on the pan.
I see you sneaking salt. You said something
about welcoming strangers as friends
and gracing guests with wine and water.

I catch you carrying more seats to the table.
I hear you calling: come in, come in,
the meal is about to begin.

ON THE EDGE OF A FOREST

I do not know a great many things
only to walk within reach of the trees.

I feel more like myself
in the gentle listening
that belongs to the forest.

Do I belong like the onion weeds or wild seeds?

Winged creatures fly at my approach. Is it because
my footsteps seem louder than my thoughts?

As the mud creeps between my toes,
I do not know how to offer myself
to this conversation.
I want to thank you
for being here.
I keep listening
for my own
silence.

The grass is long and wild with thistles. This was once a paddock. Productive land, they call it. Now, it is simply, forgotten.

There is a pond at the bottom of the hill. It is fed from a creek that is no more than a thin crack in the land. I watch it swell in the rain and threaten to spill its banks. But there is a wall of rocks around the water for exactly this purpose.

This pond was created by way of concrete. But the concrete is old and crumbling. Water slips through the tiniest of cracks. The flow falls down the hill and rejoins the creek near the road. Whereby, it becomes a gutter and disappears beyond my sight.

On my birthday, I was gifted a packet of wildflower seeds and I kept them in the pocket of my pants. I scattered the seeds and hoped they would not be plucked by hungry birds.

I keep coming back, day after day. I see zero frogs. Nor birds for that matter. I did see leaf after leaf fall from the trees. I watch as they grow heavy with water and sink into the sediment of mud.

There is a footbridge that crosses the creek. I like to sit on it and dangle my feet. Sometimes, I bring a book. Perhaps, I am waiting for my seeds to grow.

The book is full of poetry. I tear out a page and turn it into a paper boat. A leaf falls into the water. My boat makes its maiden voyage. It does not travel far before taking on water. The boat shipwrecks and sinks. It is my contribution to a life that was.

I walk back to the house.

An idea emerges and begins to bubble. I open my notebook. My pencil is dull from many repetitions. The idea evaporates. Inspiration dries up like a creek in the summer. The only hydration available to me tastes like coffee.

I am an expert in critiquing my own work. How can I ease the saboteur that does not want me to create?

I show up to the canvas without intention. I paint and repaint the same shapes. Colours muddy as I smear myself from edge to edge.

The artist creates the work but the work creates the artist.

I start again.

FOR THE ARTIST

It will always be harder than you think.

Practice your craft till you know
the importance of a clean bench.

May you attempt mastery
but take your time to bloom,

allow the dark days to deepen
the capacity of your heart.

May you listen
and keep on listening
for any seduction that dulls your work.
May you create and keep on creating.

Keep seeking the source.

May you dive safely into the depths
beneath this body of water.

What does water look like when worn around the body?

WHAT SHALL I MAKE OF THIS MEETING?

I linger on the edge of water and land.

Some call this a beach
and some look for the horizon
but I suspect there are other ways of being here.

Shall it be sand or rocks or water
that hold me while I fall
into the depths of myself?

How can I carry on
when I am afraid
to turn back home?

Some say an ending is the perfect place
to begin again.

FOR OATH MAKING

May we hold each other steady
while our words are witnessed
by the intimate ways of water.

What can I learn
from the never-ending touch
of a river around the rocks?

The current will carry us closer

and if we fall to wild waters,
may we trust in our ability to swim
to the place of oath making.

Even when I dive into the depths and dark
regions of the heart,
trust I shall always return.

Even through the fierce invocation
of unknown tides, I am with you.
With you, I invoke this oath,
may all our love be known.

FOR WINTER

No doubt, there are houses built to be warm.
Blessed by fireplaces, blessed by carpet.

How shall I move my body from beneath
the mountainous blankets of my bed?

I long to break this spell of sleep.

How can I erase a constellation of nebulous mould
when the immortal spores civilise me with a cough?

This could be my initiation.

A dew drop drifts on a pane of glass and joins the river
of water on the windowsill. I should tell my landlord,
I've always wanted a room with a view.

I need the magic of honey to clear my throat
but which jar shall sweeten my spoon?

The rain looks sweet and innocent,
as it sings through the thin membrane
of my walls. I become music.

A CONTEMPLATION ON A YOGA MAT

We begin with an inquiry.

How far is it from one edge
to the other?

The first touch
of the breath
to the base of the body?

The way a mat
mirrors the internal
landscape of the limbs.

The way we reach
and grasp

and fold and ask
can I continue
being here?

Thank you for sharing
this practice with me.

Can blessings speak fresh water
into stagnant wells?

Or be like lantern lights to traverse the long night?

FOR PERIL AND PROCRASTINATION

You show up at your desk,
after sharing a morning prayer
with coffee. Your inbox is silent.

It is time.

May the inner workings of your heart
match the skill of your hands.

Dissolve any doubt that stops you moving forward.

Make time and protect that time.
Keep showing up at your desk.
Even if your body feels
broke. May poverty
not impoverish
your commitment
to keep walking
home.

Even if you feel wild,
so far from the forest,

slowly
drift
home.



You are potent
even when the moonlight wanes
and catches on the canopy of the trees.

