

# Horizons of Joy:

Poetic Thresholds for Winter



*Books by Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill*

Horizons of Joy: Poetic Thresholds for Winter

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Horizons of Joy: Poetic Thresholds for Winter

Floating Midnight

Flight Patterns

Listening to Light

Midnight Housekeeping

# Horizons of Joy:

Poetic Thresholds for Winter

Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill



San Antonio

Seattle

# Dedication

For Rose Ellen Meyer Gasaway,  
whose poems remained private.

For those who did not live to receive a vaccine.  
May this book bring some solace to their Beloveds  
who now live in the wake of their loss.

Horizons of Joy:  
Poetic Thresholds for Winter

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Welcome!

Welcome to *Horizons of Joy: Poetic Thresholds for Winter*. This collection invites us to take a time out, to enjoy the days shortening and the nights deepening, as we move through our annual cycle of grieving the old and welcoming the new. This is often a time in which we wrestle with meaning, and so this collection also encourages intentionality, in the choosing and using of not only traditionally festive words of the season, but also their common work-a-day counterparts.

For me, raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, Winter has always been shaped by Christmas and the season of *Advent*, from the Latin *ad* meaning *toward* + *venio* meaning *coming*: a movement toward something good, whether that's the birth of the Son in a Christian tradition on December 25th, or the birth of the Sun in more ancient traditions on December 21st. Maybe you celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas that bridge the old year with the new? Maybe you celebrate Yule or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa this time of year? Maybe you choose not to celebrate any holiday and wonder what all the fuss is about? No matter how we encounter it, Winter is a time when the Earth calls all life to a place of deep rest and contemplation.

Lest we get too literal, this collection is also an invitation to the transformation of Winter that can occur at any time in our lives. Yes, as a planet we experience the season between distinct markings on a well-organized calendar and time-table. However, we know that Winter paints her landscape within us as well. Our personal Winters may last a few seconds or may last much longer than the three to four months of the physical season. Winter is a malleable metaphor for those moments of encounter with starkness, be that a brief meeting in the middle of a day, or a sustained situation that lasts several years.

The following poetic meditations invite us to bask in the cold beauty of the season, as our beloved planet swings on the hinge of the Winter Solstice, closing the door on the old year, to throw open the vistas of the new. These word-paths invite us to wander as we cross that threshold into a new year, a simultaneous linear and circular time: a linear movement from one month and year into the next, a circular movement of the Earth spinning us in the elemental life cycle around the sun. This duality seems appropriate given that the word January finds its origins in the double-faced Roman god *Janus*, who graces entrances and exits. One set of eyes gazes back in remembrance of yesterday; the other set gazes forward in visions of tomorrow. Janus is the god of beginnings, who stands with us and holds our hands, in this in-between space of Winter's threshold.

Thresholds, those sills of doorways, lintels of entrances and exits, are places of liminality, of transition as we move *from-to*, *in-through*, *out-of*, a particular place, time or event. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the memorable character of Bilbo Baggins reminds his nephew Frodo that, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." We cross a threshold and we don't know what awaits us. It's a dangerous business, indeed.

Thresholds separate us from before and after, but they simultaneously hold us—even if just for a second—between times, spaces, and events. In this holding, we can be transformed by and through words and deeds, listenings and speakings. As recounted in Krista Tippett's book, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, philosopher poet



John O'Donohue reminds us that the key to thresholds is in how we cross them. Are we crossing in the way he calls *worthily*? If so, we cross with beauty. O'Donohue states, “[B]eauty isn’t all about niceness, loveliness. Beauty is about more rounded substantial becoming. And when we cross a new threshold *worthily*, what we do is we heal the patterns of repetition that were in us that had us caught somewhere.”

A worthy crossing frees us from the craggy patterns of repetition that our love, kindness, ingenuity, and creativity get snagged upon. How often do we cling to a craggy rock in a dangerous sea because it’s familiar, instead of trusting the wind to carry our ragged-cloth-self to a new shore of “a more rounded substantial becoming”?

We know that love plays the long game in the dialectic of our becoming. To paraphrase Hegel, we begin at a starting point; let us call this entrance a *thesis*. We encounter a challenge to that starting point; let us call this holding the *antithesis*. We wrestle with this challenge until we are transformed by it; let us call this exit a *synthesis*. This new synthesis in its time becomes a thesis, itself—until it is challenged by something new, by an invitation to step again on to that lintel to *worthily* thresh out a new synthesis in love and beauty. Our solstices, Winter and Summer, are just such thresholds, which hold us in our transforming, as the planet rotates through the cosmic dialectic of the seasons. They are global lintels modeling for us a “more rounded substantial becoming” on the planetary scale.

The deep story, or etymology, of the word *solstice* comes from the Latin *sôlstitium*: *sôl* or sun + the verb *sistĕre*, to stand still, to hold in place. Our Sun, source of light-heat-life, appears to stand still on our horizons twice a year, at the Winter and Summer Solstices, which occur around December 21st and June 21st, respectively. On these days, the Earth and Sun together invite us to stand still on the cosmic threshold, in our paradox of existing in linear and circular time, of being terminally organic in a world where neither energy nor matter can be created or destroyed, of being languaged beings who often find ourselves speechless. Seamus Heaney, in *The Government of the Tongue*, takes us into the paradox of poetry that parallels these Solstice moments, when he reminds us that, “Poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly departed from, at which readers and

writers undergo, in their different ways, the experience of being at the same time summoned and released.” With the gift of such summoning and releasing, how can we not pause, in the embrace of Janus, for a moment or two, to honor Winter’s invitation?

## The Deep Stories of Words: Horizons, Stillness, Tidings, & Joy

Divided into four themes of *Horizons*, *Stillness*, *Tidings*, and *Joy*, this collection summons and releases us to thresh a particular word, such as *wassail* or *twinkling*, by digging into its deep story, reflecting upon it, and then setting that word to work in a poem. Following each poem are prompts, *Pauses at Our Thresholds*, to encourage your own threshing about of the words, ideas or images. Do this in the margins of this book or in its companion journal, or in your own creative space of journal, canvas, clay, song, or other medium. My hope is that the process, of moving from a word’s deep story through a poem to a prompt, can serve as a transformative holding space for your own refreshment, whether that takes form as writing, sketching, painting, knitting, or humming an old familiar tune as you wash the dishes. While intentionally ordered for a sustained meditation, each word-path or theme may be engaged in any order by one’s self, with a partner, or with a small community. Play gently and enjoy as you wish: A word per day for four weeks? A word per week for twenty-eight weeks? A theme per month for four months? A bit here and there as we bumble along graciously over the course of a year or so? No matter. You choose. Allow yourself the gift of time and spaciousness to rest with these ancient artifacts that we’ve inherited from our human ancestors: these puffs of air, scratches on paper, pixels on the screen that whisper the Zen prayer of infinite gratitude for what has been, infinite service for what is, and infinite responsibility for what shall be.

This project grew from my own delight and struggle with the Winter season. Each year in our family, the anticipation of Christmas is exquisite. The music. The cards. The decorations and gifts. In our family,

Christmas is a BIG DEAL. But for me, as an individual, the season has always been tinged with grief. I don't ever want to surrender the old year; even though, as Shakespeare's Julius Caesar reflects, "death, a necessary end, will come when it will come." And so, the old slips into the new. To cross this threshold worthily, I have to thresh the dialectic of the old thesis into the more rounded becoming synthesis of the new. I have to accept that I cannot rupture time to hold it still. Each year. You'd think that I'd have figured it out by now and gotten over it. However, that's not how it works for me. There's a compound word in Old English, *wintercearig*, that captures this feeling for me. The word combines *winter* and *cearig* or *chary*, meaning *to cause sorrow*. Here it is in the tenth century poem, "The Wanderer," from the *Exeter Book*:

ond ic hean þonan  
 wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind,

"and I, abject,  
 Proceeded thence, *winter-sad*, over the binding of the waves."

*Wintercearig*. This word, now lost to Modern English, captures my experiences of Winter sorrow, as I struggle with the peculiarity of a liminal time: the week or so between Christmas Eve, my favorite night of the year, pregnant with possibility, gentleness, kindness, and the first few days of the New Year, which too often feel garish and hollow, as another year fades into memory. There is this dying with which to reckon as we jump over the lintel of the old into the new. Perhaps this is why many of my ancestors celebrated the entire Twelve Days of Christmas, from December 26 through January 6? Perhaps they understood, in ways which we, who are divorced from the land and live in grocery-store based cultures cannot, the need for the spaciousness of those twelve days to reckon the *wintercearig*? It is a coming to terms of Winter expiring, *ex spirare*—an exhaling of its spirit, even as this very expiring oxygenates Spring's rejuvenation.

Our Winter seasons are an encounter with this poignancy: Janus simultaneously holds in his hands bitterness, for the loss of the chances and

gifts of the past, along with sweetness, for the promise of the chances and gifts of the future. In *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman asks his readers, “have you reckon’d a thousand acres much?” And, I answer yes—the bittersweet temporal reckoning of the thousand acres of our minds, our thinkings, our feelings, our expectings, our grievings, our fearings, our lovings. We may live in these reckonings for moments or for years, discerning whether it’s best to stay with the grief, by letting Janus hold our hands for a while, or to release his hands and rouse ourselves worthily into Spring.

To cross these thresholds worthily, with beauty, we often need kindness and creativity. So, like the ancients before us, we decorate with the tenacious holly and ivy that bare their living to us even in the harshest of frosts. Such decorations clothe the skeletons of our fears and anxieties, of the naked bones of the trees and bushes shivering in the wind, which Winter sketches on her landscape. We swag the garlands, tinsel the trees, and light the lights that befriend the darkness. And we give presents. The giving of gifts can be the vital warm corner in which we let our Beloveds know that they matter; because in the reptilian portion of our biology, we know that the warmth of their presence is a gift. *Present*. What a workhorse of a word—

- of being a gift, an expression of connection. *Thank you for my present.*
- of being aware of oneself and attentively engaged in the moment. *She is present to them in their conversation.*
- of being in a physical location at a particular time. *The child is present in the class.*

Being present and giving presents mark the heavy fluidity of time and our desire to hold it manifest in artifacts of affection. Whether those artifacts are ones of the presence of togetherness or presents wrapped in shiny paper and bows, they are love made visible. It seems fitting then that this generosity of giving also is a key part of Valentine’s Day in February, which helps mark our movement toward the ending of the Winter season.

What I am learning through my cycles of *wintercearig* is twofold. First, we have to own ourselves in Winter as fiercely as we do in the other seasons of our lives, so that fear of change doesn't destroy the beauty of it; so that, to borrow from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the Winter of our discontent can indeed be made glorious summer, not just for a House of York, but for our own Houses, within our own Bodies, within our own Beloved Communities. Second, Winter is not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to delve into, learn about, linger with, and explore that which brings us to a cold stop; it is a transformational invitation to dig deep into that which we cherish. It is a summons to cross the threshold worthily, with beauty, to honor the Great Dialectic of Being Fully Alive, which requires us to reckon the antithesis of death directly.

Aren't we all electrified with living in the moments when we encounter dying? Perhaps this is why we remember where we were when certain dyings occurred: publicly when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, when the Challenger space shuttle fell from the sky, when the planes were flown into the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania; or privately when our mothers, fathers, friends and other Beloveds passed over, or when foundational relationships were severed. However, these electrified moments also include the sort of dyings that surface in moments of joy. I have been happily married for over 30 years. But, before I walked down the aisle, as my mother placed a veil on my head, she whispered in mourning, "Does this mean you will always live in Texas?" And we stood very quietly together in a frost of Winter, grieving the loss of our life together as we had known it in Illinois, even as we welcomed our new one. These are all threshold moments of poignancy, bitter sweet moments of Winter Encounter, when all of the stardust in the cosmos is accounted for, rearranged and reconfigured into new forms, shapes, and relationships.

One of the beauties of language is that it provides the means to share this experience of electrified encounter and its transformation of us, from *before* to *after*. The words highlighted in this collection are presents, from and of the human voice over millennia, to support us in our worthy crossings of Winter's thresholds, when we are simultaneously summoned and released from craggy rocks in dangerous seas. I am a linguist by training and am

fascinated by the stories that our words carry. We, in turn, carry their stories with us, as we walk out into our daily adventures like Frodo and Bilbo did theirs. This dialectic, between the voices uttering the words and the evolution of the words, themselves, has taken English on a magnificent adventure, horrible and beautiful, as it has evolved as a *lingua franca*, with its words packing tales from long ago and far away. For those interested in learning more about particular words, I encourage diving into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the source of the etymologies highlighted in this collection.

## A Barefoot History

To ground us in this endeavor, here's a barefoot run through the epic tale of English. The language's taproot is a proto-language called Indo-European (IE), assumed to be spoken by those who lived in Eastern Europe and Central Asia sometime after 5000 CE. Over the next few millennia, as IE speakers spread across the land, the language splinters into a dozen or so language families such as Indo-Iranian, Italic, Hellenic, and Germanic. These families give birth to scores of new languages from Hindi to Portuguese to Latin to Gaelic to Farsi and German. They share family resemblances called *cognates*, similar words in different languages. For example, English's *three* has cousins in Latin's *tres*, Greek's *tris*, German's *drei*, Dutch's *drie*, and Sanskrit's *trí*. What we call *English* today is a descendant of Old English of the West Germanic branch. The Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians brought their West Germanic dialects to Britain, where a Celtic language was spoken, along with the Latin of the earlier conquering Romans. Through alliance, conquest and intermarriage, Old English emerges over the next few centuries; the depth of these new relationships re-christens the island: the land of the Angles, *Angleland*, or England. Over the next millennium, this island is invaded by Vikings, beginning in 793 CE, and then by the Norman French in 1066. These bloody invasions along with subsequent colonization, social life, trade, marriage, and friendship ultimately gives birth to the language two billion people now speak on our planet.

Welcome

May you enjoy pausing with these words and poems as the sun and moon dance their eternal fandango, moving in harmony, tethered by the unseen.







## Horizons

The theme of *Horizons* is drawn from the beautiful story of the word's birth. Originating in Greek ὀρίζων, horizon means *the bounding circle*. We are bound within so many circles, but especially those of each season's horizon. Gazing out on our Winter landscape, we bathe in mirroring silvers, glistening whites, and frosty greys, blanketing Nature's pulse points, nourishing the fallow landscape. It is a time of reckoning, of threshing the wheat and the chaff of our living. What do we wish to take into the new year? What do we wish to leave behind? Do we need to shift our position, posture, or change our gait, when we walk out the door to expand the vision of our horizons? Or is it a time for us to concentrate more intentionally on something closer to home, to contract our horizons? Regardless of where our focus is resting on that internal-external spectrum, our horizons bind us. They bind us even as they beckon us forward, deeper to discovery, challenging us to encounter the dragons, who guard the boundaries of the Great Arc spread before us, that we call home.

Enjoy the words and poems that anchor the meditations rooted in the theme of *Horizons*:

*Bright, Mistletoe, Symmetry, Day, Horizon, Night, and Ember.*

## Bright

Pronunciation: 'brIt.

Function: Adjective

*Bright* has journeyed to us through Middle English, from the Old English *beorht*, akin to Old High German *beraht* bright, and to the Sanskrit verb of *bhrAjate*, meaning “it shines.”

*Bright*, as a well-traveled word of description, represents: *a radiating or reflecting light; a high saturation or brilliance of colors; a high degree of intelligence.*

We begin with this commonly used word, *bright*, as it is one of our oldest ones, spoken by our ancestors thousands of years ago. In Winter time today, we often hear it in several classic holiday carols such as *White Christmas*: “May your days be merry and *bright*./And may all your Christmases be white ...” and *We Three Kings of Orient Are*: “Oh, star of wonder, star of night/Star with royal beauty *bright*...”

While many of us sing this ancient word throughout the holiday season, we also use it to describe the lights sparkling on our trees, the brilliant colors popping off our greeting cards, and our children exploring their intelligence and creativity during this time of profound wonder.

*Bright* is an adaptable word that vibrates with a sense of hope—hope for us to see more clearly, to gaze more deeply, and to understand more fully the human desire to be *BRIGHT*—luminous, radiant, and brilliant in relation to all of creation. On Winter’s horizon, we witness the re-emergence of the *bright* sun as the Earth swings on its Solstice hinge, to bind us in its circle of warmth.

Bright

The sun,  
in its wistful winter cloak,  
warms

bright

the joy of each step  
across the threshold

between the generosity

of water pure,  
of soil rich,  
of air fresh,

and the grace

of a tale told,  
of a song sung,  
of a hand extended  
in friendship,

as the Earth swings on its hinge

between the

healing darkness

and the

nurturing light.

Pausing at Our Thresholds

1. Consider these dimensions of *bright*—radiating light, saturation of color, and high intelligence—to reflect on all that is *bright* on our magnificent planet, and how hope is derived from the *bright* radiance of our sun. What do you want to *brighten* in your life? What small step might you take to begin that *brightening*?
2. As the Earth swings on its hinge, what tales do you wish to tell in the new year?
3. Step outside. Look to the sky and consider how it animates our idea of *bright*. What is the *brightness* on your horizons these days? What is the darkness? How does their interplay offer you space of healing darkness and nurturing light? Can you draw it? Paint it? Stitch it? Sing it? Dance it?

## Mistletoe

Pronunciation: 'mi-s&l-”tO

Function: Noun

*Mistletoe* has its roots in the Middle English *mistilto*, from Old English *misteltAn*, from *mistel*, *mistletoe* + *tAn* twig; akin to Old High German *zein* twig. It has relatives with Old Icelandic *mistilteinn*, and Danish and Swedish regional *mistelten*.

*Mistletoe*. As the excuse for sharing a holiday kiss and sparking romance, this well-known *semiparasitic* green bundle, also known as a kissing ball, *has thick leaves, small yellowish flowers, and waxy-white glutinous berries*.

It is a Winter's day. Time to stretch our legs. We wander outside for a walk and look up into the seemingly bare branches of our favorite tree, and there it is: the sacred *mistletoe*, Nature's ornament for her Winter branches.

When we stop to enjoy the splash of green and white amongst the branches, we step into the myths surrounding this plant. This Winter burst of greenery, which lives in symbiosis with its sleeping host, is honored in several traditions.

In Celtic tradition, the ancient Druids hold that all plants and trees have a soul, and that which takes its sustenance from its tree host, holds the soul of the tree. Thus, *mistletoe* wards off evil and is potent for healing, particularly if cut from an oak or apple tree. As part of the Winter Solstice ritual, priests cut down the *mistletoe* using a golden sickle to distribute the sprigs amongst the community.

Italian and Swedish traditions also hold that bunches of oak *mistletoe*, hung in the entryways and ceilings of homes, protect all within from harm, particularly from fire.

In Norse mythology, the goddess Frigga, in an attempt to protect her son, Baldur, god of vegetation, casts a series of spells to make him invulnerable. However, the trickster, Loki, figures out that Frigga had not protected Baldur from *mistletoe*. Loki crafts a dart made of *mistletoe*, convincing Heder, the blind god, to throw it at Baldur in a game. It kills Baldur; but the other gods revive him. Upon his resurrection, Frigga pronounces the plant sacred, declaring that it brings peace to the world, and that all enemies should gather once a year to exchange the kiss of peace.

## Mistletoe

The silver sickle

of a Yuletide Moon

curves the waning night

into the expectant dawn.

Its light cascades

through the bare branches of the oak,

with its knots of mistletoe –

shocks of white berries

nestled within lush green,

tantalizing –

Just out of reach.

In the tenderness of our Mother's shortest days,

the lips of her wind

brush our cheeks

with a whisper,

the feather kiss of the holy quiet,

that proffers her promise of renewal.

## Pausing at Our Thresholds

1. What *mistletoe* is just out of reach for you on your contemporary horizon? Do you wish to continue reaching for it over the next year? Why? Why not?
2. With whom or with what might you exchange a kiss of peace for the new year?
3. Pause in the protection of one of your thresholds. What is the *mistletoe* that protects you here? Take a moment to honor it, perhaps by intentionally engaging someone or something we are charged to protect: listening to a child or an elder; caring for a pet or creatures in or near our homes; watering and pruning our plants.