A photograph of a sunset over a calm lake. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright yellow and orange near the horizon. The sun is just below the horizon, creating a shimmering reflection on the water. In the foreground, the dark, intricate branches of bare trees frame the left and top edges of the image. A single log floats in the middle of the lake, its reflection visible in the water. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

# Treasures in the darkness

(Susanne Irving)

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am blessed with many people who have been my cheerleaders and faithful companions on my journey.

I am particularly grateful to

- my husband John, who has stood by me in sickness and in health for more than 15 years,
- the other Creative Communicators (Dave and Sue Carter, Natalie Eacott and Denise Bush),
- Angie Tabbiner,
- Pauline Medinger,
- Bob Whelan,
- my family back in Germany

I am aware that many of you have faced significant challenges this year, yet you have never hesitated to support and encourage me.

For me, my family and friends have been my biggest treasure in the darkness. May you be aware of God's love and blessings.

I dedicate this book to the friends who have died in 2020: Ruth, Janet, Soraya – you have taught me that each day is a gift.

Susanne Irving, December 2020

## Boats

Jesus,  
some say we simply need to invite you into our boat,  
and life will go swimmingly.  
When I read your story  
a more nuanced picture emerges.

Yes, it is true, you sometimes helped your friends  
to do their day jobs more effectively  
and got them to their destination speedily.

But there are other times when you were sleeping  
or decided to take a break on a mountain  
while your friends battled the wind and the waves.

It is one thing to trust you when we  
are anchoring in calm waters  
and quite another when you ask us  
to step out of our boat  
in the middle of a storm!

Help us to remember that neither our shipwrecks,  
nor the winds and waves will have the last word  
and that each sunset is followed by a sunrise.



I did not have many plans for 2020, but my vision for the year did not include:

- the unexpected deaths and life-limiting illnesses of several friends,
- being in lockdown during a global pandemic,
- becoming tired of working online after being one of the pioneers and advocates for this way of working for more than a decade.

On the other hand, I could also not foresee that

- I would discover treasures on my doorstep that I had overlooked for the past 15 years,
- emotional intimacy deepened at a physical distance as we learned to communicate differently,
- learning to bake sourdough can teach valuable lessons about life in a slower lane.

I am aware that I have been richly blessed amidst the challenges of this year - many others have faced challenges I cannot even begin to imagine.

We have not all been in the same boat (we never are), but I hope that this booklet will still bring hope and inspiration as I share some of my experiences and insights.

The photo of the boat was taken in January. Earlier in the day, I had received a voicemail from a stranger. She said she had news regarding our friend Ruth, who had been in our creativity group for many years.

A month earlier, Ruth had cancelled a meeting due to eye problems. I thought that if a stranger bothered to call me, the news was unlikely to be good. I decided to call her back from my favourite local beauty spot.

As I watched the sunset, I was told that Ruth had been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. She had already gone blind and only had days, maybe a few weeks, left to live.

Three of our group were able to say good-bye to Ruth in a hospice six days later. We tried to sing Psalm 23 over her, out of tune and out of words. She seemed at peace – ready for her journey home to her Creator.

Many inspirational things were shared at Ruth's memorial service, but I am aware that she never got to write her book about her experiences as a mature single Christian woman. I pray that other women will develop Ruth's idea. In the meantime, Ruth's unexpected death has challenged me to look for ways of sharing my insights.



Each sunset is followed by a sunrise... (Easter Sunday)

## Desert

The desert can feel hostile, even menacing.  
It seems empty and devoid of life.  
The desert slows you down.  
You can no longer run from place to place.

The desert exposes your heart and soul.  
There is nowhere left to hide.  
Your footprints reveal every step you have taken.  
You now must face who you are and who you have become.

The desert forces you to reduce your luggage.  
You will not have the strength to carry excess baggage.  
You learn to focus on what is essential:  
the difference between needs and wants.

The desert helps you to see where you have been bent out of shape.  
You notice if your shoes no longer fit,  
and when your load is digging into your shoulders.  
You must stop and tend to your blisters and wounds.

The desert magnifies heaven:  
you realize that you are not the Lord of this universe.  
God's whispers no longer get lost among the other voices,  
clamouring for your attention.

The desert is not empty,  
just free from distractions.  
The desert can be your friend rather than your foe.  
Green pastures will come if you keep on walking...



Whilst 2020 feels like a collective desert journey, times in the desert seem to be a regular feature in most lives. We cannot stay on mountain tops forever.

The first version of the desert poem was written in 2001. A friend asked me what happened at that time – I have no idea! Whatever it was, it clearly passed...

When the journey is draining and there does not seem an end in sight, I need the reminder that my desert experiences are finite.

Rereading what I wrote almost two decades ago also challenges me: Excess baggage, distractions, chasing wants, soldiering on when situations are no longer life-giving – lessons I had to look at again since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I do not simply want to go through the desert but grow through the experience.

The painting accompanying the desert poem was started on a day when heavy rains seemed to wash out nature's colours prematurely.

There were talks about another lockdown. During the first lockdown, the days were getting lighter and brighter, making the enforced seclusion more bearable. This time around, I was aware of the encroaching darkness - I find the transition from autumn to winter tricky at the best of times.

The painting process helped me to figure out how I want to transition through challenging seasons.

I usually work fast. This time I slowed down. Over several days I poured leftover household paint on my canvas, observing how it wanted to flow, before gradually adding graphite powder, Brusho granules, coffee grounds and leaves to see how they would interact. I even added some of my hair, which has gone grey in recent months, as part of the process of embracing, even celebrating, the transition.

I do not usually leave a lot of space in my paintings or in my life, yet it now feels important to leave some margin and embrace emptiness. The painting currently hangs in my office, so that I can see it whenever I interact with others on webcam - a visual reminder that I can learn to go with the flow rather than resist changes.



The desert is not empty – just free from distractions.

## **Journey**

The painting is too blue for my taste,  
too messy and confusing,  
but I cannot pass it on to someone else.  
This is my journey and not theirs:

Jagged edges of conflict and pain,  
an unconquered mountain -  
a path that has led nowhere,  
my world swallowed up.

I need others to show me what I have missed.  
Through the lens of hope  
I see the possibility of new birth,  
fresh visions emerging out of chaos.

Yes, the world is under water;  
Noah's ark has not yet landed on the mountain top,  
but waters that drown will one day recede;  
water can cleanse, soothe and refresh.

I need to trust that my soulscape  
is not a barren, inhospitable wilderness,  
but richly populated.  
Fellow travellers enrich my journey.

There is a path that leads beyond the mountain –  
to who knows where?  
Just higher than I have ever climbed before  
to a place outside the current picture.



The journey painting started as an exercise in an online creative vision programme in which I was enrolled. We were meant to experiment with texture and layers.

As soon as I collaged in a print of my last view of Kilimanjaro, my thoughts turned back to my attempt to climb the mountain: Was it worth the price? Could/should I have done something differently to avoid my premature descent? The adventure felt like yet another example of my body letting me down.

When I dropped a kitchen knife and its tip broke off, I collaged the tip into the painting. It seemed the perfect symbol for pain and disappointment.

Something curious happened when I showed the finished painting to other people. They saw boats and water, faces and figures – but no-one appeared to see the mountain! We seemed to be looking at completely different paintings.

I began to recognize that my view of my life has been distorted and twisted by my focus on disappointments. Yet my life is so much richer than this.

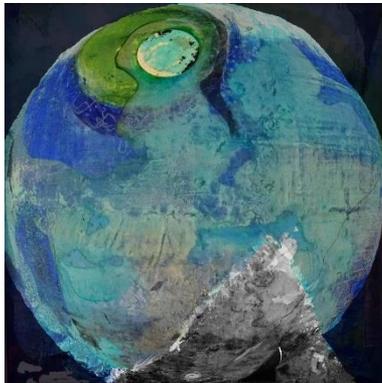
It got me thinking: If I had made it to the top of Kilimanjaro, what difference would that make now? Climbing mountains was a temporary distraction, after all, postponing the necessary grieving process of not having children.

I am not sure that my life would have been better or more meaningful if I had become a mother.

My life is bearing fruit in other ways. My husband and I wrote a book about our Kilimanjaro expedition, which has now been selling for 6 years. In a few cases, we have been told that our story has helped others who are facing hardships. In most cases, we will never know who is reading our story and what difference it may make.

I want to leave a positive legacy, but I am increasingly aware that the final result is not up to me. All I can do is plant and water seeds (trying my best to avoid sowing weeds!).

The final harvest is a mystery for now – so I am trying to be slow(er) to judge and quick(er) to look for blessings in the challenges of life.



"I have realised that the most challenging mountains are the ones inside. There was a mountain I *wanted* to climb, but there is a mountain range I *need* to climb. Pride, doubt, grief – these mountains are more formidable than any physical mountain I could ever scale. No, I am not expecting to get to the top any time soon – some mountains take a lifetime to climb." (p 133 "How to conquer a mountain: Kilimanjaro lessons", Sue & John R. Irving, 2014)

## **Good news**

The cocoon has finally burst –  
a butterfly unfolds its wings,  
exploring new heights  
and tasting fresh delights.

Forgotten is that painful time  
in the cocoon,  
when life was disintegrating  
and all hope died.

Death is  
forever transformed  
by the joy of  
resurrection.



Intellectually, I understood that a pandemic could never cancel Easter. Emotionally, it was a different matter, so I decided to explore the Easter story through art.

I immediately knew how I wanted to represent Easter Sunday. To me, butterflies are the ultimate symbol of resurrection. If an insect can change so dramatically, why should it be impossible that humans can also undergo a metamorphosis, even if there are no signs of it in the present? (Even on the first Easter morning, most inhabitants of Jerusalem would have missed the turning point in history.)

Coming to grips with the Good Friday story has always been a challenge. My first response as a child was disappointment. I wanted Jesus to come down from the cross and beat up all the baddies, showing them who is boss! Instead, he died...

It is still hard to grasp that the crucifixion was always part of the rescue plan: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."  
(Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16)

The Creator became part of His creation and submitted himself willingly to His creatures. Love and justice triumphed, but victory was disguised as defeat.

This year I noticed the bright Paschal moon, which turned night into day – still the same moon that would have put Jesus in the spotlight when he prayed in an olive grove before his arrest.

On the day of the crucifixion, darkness and light appeared to trade places. There was darkness where there should have been light (the sun disappeared in the middle of the day), and there was light where there should have been darkness. (The extremely heavy temple curtain tore from top to bottom, revealing the light of the Holy of Holies.)

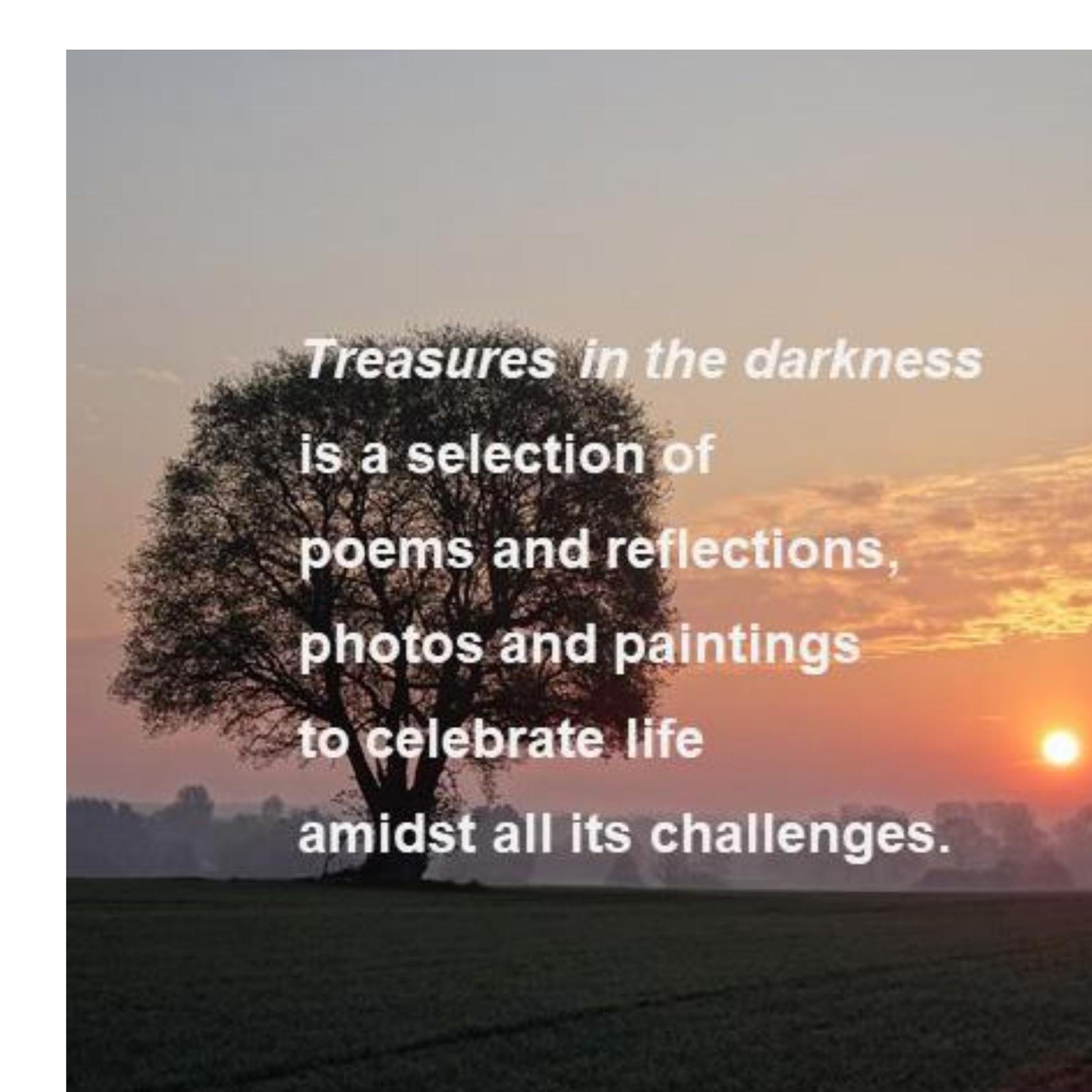
I incorporated some glass shards that I had rescued from another canvas to represent the shattering of the old order. However, many people who have seen the finished painting comment on the figure that appears to leap out of the canvas and over the cup of wrath, the symbol for judgment and death.

I believe that our creative processes can hint at truths we could never consciously express. So, I have been mulling over who or what the figure might represent. Maybe it is the soul of the criminal who was saved in the last hour of his life when he asked Jesus for forgiveness, recognizing that the man who was crucified next to him was no ordinary human? Or maybe the figure is a reminder that on days when we think that all hell has broken loose, all heaven is breaking loose too.

I want to look for signs of hope when bad news outweighs good news. After all, have we not all learned this year how something that is usually invisible can change the course of world history?



What if the conclusion of this season were “All heaven broke loose amidst destruction and death?”

A large, dark silhouette of a tree stands in the center-left of the frame. The background is a sunset sky with a bright sun on the right horizon, casting a warm orange glow. The sky transitions from a pale blue at the top to a deep orange near the horizon. The foreground is a dark, flat landscape.

*Treasures in the darkness*  
is a selection of  
poems and reflections,  
photos and paintings  
to celebrate life  
amidst all its challenges.