

## POETRY AND FAITH IN PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA'S *KITCHEN HYMNS*

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*Poet and peace-builder Pádraig Ó Tuama invites us into the everyday sacred. Through poetry as prayer, questions without answers, thresholds that teach stillness, and kitchen liturgy, we learn to listen, pay attention, and discover God in ordinary life.*

1. **God Between the Lines: Poetry, Prayer, and the Places We Begin**  
(September 14)

Poetry can hold our questions about God without rushing to answer them.

2. **Do You Believe in God? And Other Questions Worth Answering Slowly** (September 21)

In a world that demands quick answers, Ó Tuama invites us to sit with life's deepest questions—long enough to hear what they're really asking.

3. **In a Garden by a Gate: The Sacred Work of Standing Still**  
(September 28)

A journey into the spaces between—waiting, watching, and discovering God in small, overlooked places.

4. **Kitchen Hymns: The Liturgy of Kettles, Cups, and Quiet Blessings**  
(October 5)

In Ó Tuama's world, even making tea can be a prayer. Daily life becomes liturgy when we pay attention.

5. **The Prophetic Voice of Poetry** (October 12)

Discover how poetry unites spirituality and justice, calling us into deeper compassion.

## TALK 2

### IN A GARDEN BY A GATE: THE SACRED WORK OF STANDING STILL

1. The section “In a Garden by a Gate” contains a series of “Hell Poems”, that is poems set in the underworld.
2. In the Creed we say about Jesus: “He descended into hell”
  - 2.1. The phrase is rooted in New Testament passages like 1 Peter 3:18–20 (Christ preaching to “the spirits in prison”) and Ephesians 4:9 (Christ “descended into the lower parts of the earth”).
  - 2.2. These texts were understood to mean that after his death, Christ entered the realm of the dead (*Sheol* in Hebrew, *Hades* in Greek, *Inferi* in Latin).
  - 2.3. “Hell” here does not mean the place of eternal damnation, but the abode of the dead, the place where souls awaited redemption before Christ’s resurrection.
  - 2.4. In English language this is referred to as the “harrowing of hell” (the raiding, storming, or plundering of hell) and includes the ideas of
    - i. *Victory over death*: Christ endures death fully, so that nothing is untouched by redemption.
    - ii. *Liberation of the dead*: Christ proclaimed the Gospel to the dead and brought salvation to those who had died before the Incarnation.
    - iii. *Solidarity*: The descent expresses Christ’s complete identification with human mortality—he shares not only death but the silence and separation of the grave.
  - 2.5. Christ’s descent assures believers that there is no place too far for God to come and rescue us.
3. Ó Tuama reimagines the descent as interiority and despair:
  - 3.1. “hell” is the underworld inside the body, the mind, the place of rage, silence, and emptiness.
  - 3.2. His “Hell Psalms” display Jesus not as triumphant but as vulnerable, learning from Persephone what it means to live without certitude, to feel rage, and to inhabit liminal spaces.
  - 3.3. The descent is not just past event but present experience: whenever one goes through despair, silence, or absence of God, Christ is there too.
4. **Persephone** is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter in Greek mythology.
  - 4.1. Abducted by Hades, she became queen of the underworld but returns to earth each spring.
  - 4.2. Her myth explains the seasons: her time below brings winter, her return brings growth.
  - 4.3. She embodies both life and death, innocence and power, and serves as a symbol of transformation and survival.
  - 4.4. In Pádraig Ó Tuama’s *Kitchen Hymns*, she converses with “Hell Jesus” as an equal, sharing wisdom about rage, trauma, and renewal, representing resilience in the cycles of loss and return.

## Ó Tuama's explanation of the Hell Poems<sup>1</sup>

5. "I found myself in the persona of Jesus of Nazareth, in an underworld—not any theological imagination of Jesus, but a mask. A truth-telling mask—maybe a part of me, but maybe a part of my readings of these texts, too. [...] I wondered what would Jesus say? What would his speaking voice be?"
6. [...] That character is in despair towards the beginning, but not towards the end.
7. It's a certain journey towards some kind of acceptance and resolution all occurring in these Hell Psalms.
8. [...] And they're also an experience of solitude, a person in conversation with himself, a person addressing a you who never speaks back. They're a reflection of interiority.
9. So, on the one hand, it's in the underworld; but on the other hand, it's inside a body, it's inside a brain.
10. And just because there's no light in those places, it doesn't mean that there's no enlightenment.
11. The character speaking in the Hell Psalms is, of course, moving away from previous ideas of God, and is beginning to move into some kind of experience of speaking to a favorite emptiness.
12. There is an epigraph in the book from Paul Celan, "Blessed art thou, No One." I love that line from his poem "Psalm" because it speaks of how, even though one might believe there's nothing, one might have a need to speak.
13. The source of prayer, or yearning, or praise, or lament, or rage, needs to find an expression. Isn't that what poetry is? So this is an overlap between one of the functions of prayer and one of the functions of poetry: to imagine that there's an experience of listening at the end of it.
14. Even if this character is unsure, or reframing, or in doubt, or decided that there is no such thing listening, there is nonetheless the yearning to be listened to, and the need to create on the page that which you may not believe exists.
15. [...] I shouldn't even call him Jesus of Nazareth, he's more like Hell Jesus because he has been fundamentally changed.
  - 15.1. He's not from anywhere now, and they [Jesus and Persephone] each know that they're gods.
  - 15.2. He, for the first time, it seems, or certainly the way I've constructed it, has met an equal. He's saying, "Oh, you know my father's God," and she's like, "Mine, too! He's a bastard."
  - 15.3. He's been in hell, and she's like, "I've been there more times than I can count, a hundred hundred winters."
  - 15.4. There are ways that he is experiencing touch not only physically, but also intellectually, that is reciprocal between him and Persephone. There's deep respect, albeit deep trauma and wariness between them. [...]

a.

<sup>1</sup> Kate Millar's interview of Pádraig Ó Tuama, "[Beyond the "Burden of Belief": Pádraig Ó Tuama on Religious Trauma, Eros, and Poetry as Prayer"](#)"

16. Kate Millar: *That makes me think of the moment where Persephone asks him, “What keeps you returning?” And he says, “I need to feel.” That moment felt like a microcosm of what’s happening in the whole collection. That garden is a place where the Jesus character is being given permission to feel all kinds of things that he hadn’t had permission to feel. The book itself is a garden where the poems can interrogate feelings that have been suppressed or avoided for whatever reason. One of which is **rage**.*
  - 16.1. PÓT: Yeah, there’s plenty of rage in the poems.
  - 16.2. [...] What’s it like for these characters to have wisdom to share, particularly Persephone to Jesus in terms of what it’s like to live with rage.
17. [...] Persephone is used to having to deal with this story, and Hell Jesus is learning something that he doesn’t have the coordinates for. On a literary level I was curious about what it would be like to pose a Jesus character who has things to learn, who is meeting an equal, because in so much of the literature about him, he is so burdened by knowledge and preemptive knowledge and clarity and certitude that I wanted to take all those away.
18. Playfully theological as the collection is, one of the theological things that I do think is important is that many human beings live without certitude and live in the context of shock.
19. I wanted to look at what an incarnation would look and sound like if it took the body seriously, the erotic seriously, the conversation and questions and challenge seriously, and takes temporality seriously.
20. [...] These are experiences of rage and denial, like Persephone asks Hell Jesus once, “Who did this to you?” because she can see what’s happened on his back, and she sees that he stands warily. [...]
21. I’ve worked in conflict resolution for many years, and you can always tell who in a room has been incarcerated for political reasons. People who will always want to have an eye on the door. At Corrymeela, where I used to work, most of the rooms where we did facilitation had multiple doors and lots of windows deliberately designed because we were working often with populations of people for whom enclosure was not comfortable.
  - 21.1. [...] Persephone has held back from asking Jesus what happened because she can see that he, even though they’re in a garden, is still trying to escape through some kind of door, even if that door is a door back to Hades.
  - 21.2. And then when she is saying, “Come on, you have to tell me,” and you encounter this rage of absolute resistance in him. “Can’t,” he says. “Don’t want to, either,” distinguishing the difference between capacity and desire.
22. That is a wall of rage, a wall of refusal in him. Later on, in the middle of the night, he wakes her up, and he destroys the whole world and the heavens, in order to show through a kind of imagined cosmic, correlative projection of what rage can do in you. And Persephone goes, “Watch!” And she does the same thing. They experience something like catharsis in their meeting of rage, and that is at no point sat down and facilitated through conversation.
23. Rage and trauma are experiences of the body, and they are resolved through creative experiences of the body rather than cognitive experiences of explaining it all.

## **Do You Believe in God?**

Do you believe in God, after all that you've been through? she asked.  
I'm not sure, he said, Do you?

Not like I used to, she replied. I grew up thinking  
God was light, then I went to where there was no light.

I used to think that God made all things new, but I've been  
wandering a while now-nothing's new.

Everything's a lens through which  
another everything can be viewed. That screws you up.

And releases you. I look at dawn now, and love the turning,  
the way that morning is both dead and new. How about you?

I like walking alone at twilight, he said,  
I like the in-between.

She held his gaze, asked, Is that your answer?  
It's all I've got, he said.

Pádraig Ó Tuama's *Kitchen Hymns* , 43

## POETIC ANALYSIS

### **24. Do you believe in God, after all that you've been through? she asked.**

- 24.1.** The poem opens with a question. Persephone addresses Jesus not as teacher or redeemer but as a fellow sufferer.
- 24.2.** Both Persephone and Hell Jesus are survivors of violation, standing in a garden that is the gate to hell.
- 24.3.** The question is less about metaphysics and more about: after what has been done to you, can you still believe in God?
- 24.4.** This is the mask Ó Tuama says he puts on—Jesus as a persona, a truth-telling mask through which he voices his own losses.

### **25. I'm not sure, he said, Do you?**

- 25.1.** Hell Jesus resists certainty.
- 25.2.** Instead of authority, he acknowledges his reciprocity with Persephone, turning the question back.
- 25.3.** We have a Jesus who accepts that he “has things to learn”.

### **26. Not like I used to, she replied. I grew up thinking**

- 26.1.** Persephone embodies wisdom about living without certitude.
- 26.2.** Her words voice the long knowledge of someone who has endured a hundred hundred winters.

### **27. God was light, then I went to where there was no light.**

- 27.1.** The traditional metaphor collapses. Light as divine presence no longer holds when one lives in the underworld.
- 27.2.** Persephone, who knows hell intimately, speaks with the authority of one whose beliefs are tested against darkness.
- 27.3.** Ó Tuama says that just because there is no light it doesn't mean there is no enlightenment.

### **28. I used to think that God made all things new, but I've been wandering a while now—nothing's new.**

- 28.1.** The Biblical promise of renewal (Revelation 21:5 “He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!””) is contradicted by lived experience.
- 28.2.** Persephone's wandering echoes exile and her cyclical descents to Hades.
- 28.3.** Her wisdom comes from the experience of this repetition: spring, summer, autumn, winter—again.
- 28.4.** She teaches Hell Jesus to endure rather than to escape.

### **29. Everything's a lens through which another everything can be viewed. That screws you up.**

- 29.1.** Persephone is saying that everything you live is shaped by what you've already seen or lived through.
- 29.2.** When trauma is part of your story, every new experience is colored by past pain, which can be confusing and overwhelming.
- 29.3.** This expresses how tangled inner life can feel.
- 29.4.** Persephone's phrase “screws you up” brings this idea down to the raw, bodily level of how it actually feels

**30. And releases you. I look at dawn now, and love the turning,**

- 30.1.** Persephone adds that this experience can also set you free.
- 30.2.** She says she now looks at dawn and loves the way it changes from night to day.
- 30.3.** What matters is the turning itself. For Ó Tuama, this connects to his idea of “favorite emptiness”: even if no one is listening, you still speak. That act of speaking or praying, even into silence, can itself be freeing.

**31. the way that morning is both dead and new. How about you?**

- 31.1.** Persephone points out that morning carries both endings and beginnings at once.
- 31.2.** This matches her own life split between the underworld and the world above.
- 31.3.** She is showing Hell Jesus that you can hold pain and renewal at the same time.

**32. I like walking alone at twilight, he said,  
I like the in-between.**

- 32.1.** Hell Jesus points instead to twilight, another in-between moment. Like Persephone he is learning how to live with uncertainty.
- 32.2.** Twilight is not a resolution, but it is a way of keeping going.

**33. She held his gaze, asked, Is that your answer?**

- 33.1.** Persephone pushes him to be clear. She sense Jesus’ unease, his readiness to flee.
- 33.2.** Her gaze demands honesty
- 33.3.** Her question can also be interpreted in another way: is this really *your* answer too or are you just repeating what I say without meaning it? Have you really embraced the importance of coming to terms with liminality, with uncertainty?

**34. It's all I've got, he said.**

- 34.1.** This ending refuses the kind of certainty usually expected from Jesus in Christian tradition.
- 34.2.** Instead of offering resolution, he gives something fragile and honest: survival, honesty about limits, and the willingness to stay in the uncertainty.