Pain shared is halved and joy shared, doubled.
THE CLOOTIE WALL: Processing a Pandemic

By Sarah Gowan

In April 2017, our band Coracree was in Scotland, performing at the Portsoy Haal Music Festival and the Aberdeen Folk Club. On a sunny off-day, we took a side trip to visit the Clootie Well at Munlochy. A clootie well is a place, usually at a spring surrounded by trees, where people seeking healing make a ritual offering of a piece of cloth (cloot). Sometimes the cloth is dipped in the spring waters or used to wash the ailing person before it is offered. The belief is that as the cloth rots away, the illness leaves the afflicted person. The Clootie Well at Munlochy has been in continuous use since before the year 620, when the missionary Saint Boniface came to be associated with it. Located just off the highway, the approach to the Well is unremarkable: a parking lot, some trash cans, signs like you would see at any park. As we walked up the path, we noticed that the site began to appear increasingly quirky—even whimsical. A pair of trainers over a tree limb reminded me of my Philly home with end-of-school-year sneakers tossed over telephone wires. A string of plastic beads festooned a shrub. A few grubby stuffed animals peered through the foliage. As we wandered deeper into the wood, the air became still, the birds quieted, and a full view of the offerings came into view.

It took my breath away. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so human in all my life.

Thousands and thousands of wishes and prayers for healing were tied to every tree and vine. Suddenly I could see that the sneakers hadn’t been thrown on a dare; they were a teen with leukemia. The bras dangling from a branch weren’t a drunken afterthought; they were a mom with breast cancer. Some people left healing prayers for the world, just wanting everything to be better for everyone.

So I started to sew. I began with a facemask pattern I found online and made masks for Bill and myself. I adapted the design to make it more comfortable, thinking of the long hours Bill had to wear it. I sent masks to family and began getting requests for masks from friends and then friends people still come, as they have for more than a thousand years, to say, “I am one of you. I share your pain. Let’s ask for help together.”

In March, Coracree set out on another tour, this time to play contra dances in the South. COVID-19 was hitting the East Coast, and our home dances in the North had cancelled, but Southern dances had not yet come to that decision. After a flurry of phone calls and emails, when we were halfway to North Carolina, the first dance was cancelled. The rest of the tour quickly followed suit.

On the ride home, we jokingly renamed our band “Coronacree” and discussed having t-shirts made in honor of our cancelled “Don’t Touch Your Face” tour. Within days of returning home, cities were locking down, toilet paper and hand sanitizer were running out, and the theatrical rigging business I work for furloughed all of its employees. I was out a tour, out of work, and worried for my family and friends. While my husband, Bill Quern, continued to work as an essential employee, I was stuck at home with too much nervous energy to sit still and not enough creative energy left for art.
of friends. So I kept sewing. Each mask I made helped me
calm down. The repetition of stitching was soothing and,
knowing that I could help in this small way, it felt like the
best use of my time. The box of scraps under my table grew
fuller, and when I was about 300 masks in, I found myself
thinking about the Clootie Well in Scotland.

Spring was in full blossom and May Day was coming up.
Knowing that we would likely be celebrating the day
from our backyard, I lit on the idea of creating a festive
backdrop for a May Day video. As it happened, my
backyard neighbor had decided to remove the beautiful
old cedar trees that bordered our yards. He replaced
them with a stark, and very unfriendly, wood fence. I was
mourning the loss of greenery, and I craved something
more organic to look at than those sterile wooden slats.
With images of May Day, Clootie Wells, and Morris rag
suits dancing in my head, I started constructing a simple
trellis from bamboo and string.

Shaping the backyard sculpture came to be my daily
meditation; I brought the scraps from the day’s work and
tied them up while thinking of the folks I had sent masks.
The ritual of simply knotting cloth to branch gave me time
and a quiet space to sort through my frustration and fury
and to ask for strength and calm. I visualized the outside
world as a place as peaceful as my backyard. Quieting,
becoming still, healing. I started adding other offerings (I
no longer thought of them as decorations): blue bottles to
trap bad energy and send it to ground, some old taps from
clogging shoes representing how much I missed dancing
with friends, empty thread spools for the other mask makers
sewing like mad, an empty packing tape roll for the postal
workers, and thank you cards from friends. Bill suggested I
call it “The Clootie Wall,” and so I did, and I began sharing
photos of the Wall’s progress on social media.

Then a remarkable thing happened: people started
sending me offerings to add to the Wall. Everything from
“cloots” to photos of grandchildren, farewells to people
who had passed away, poems, tunes, drawings, jewelry, and
messages of longing expressing grief, hope, fear, and love.
Our friend Ann Mintz made a special excursion to the wall
to add a treasured scarf that had belonged to Jack McGann,
one of the founders of the Cherry Tree Folk Club who died
during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

My strange project took on a life of its own, drawing
together friends, family, and strangers to affirm our
connection in a time of isolation and to give each other
strength and focus in a time of chaos. Here, in my little
urban backyard, through these offerings, we could hold
hands, singing and dancing our fears away among the
shimmering cloots under a banner that reads, “Pain shared
is halved and joy shared, doubled.”

Recently I noticed that a volunteer squash plant escaped
the nearby compost pile and has started up the Clootie
Wall. The deep yellow flowers cheer me immensely. As the
flowers swell into plump little fruits and the vines spread
across the wall, I give thanks for the gift of nourishment and life bursting between the cloots and offerings. The beloved catbirds that I was sure I had lost to the felling of the cedars have come back to holler at me from the top of the wall, their screeching displeasure at my proximity to their nest sounding like the first joyous cry of a newborn baby.

The Wall still stands despite several violent thunderstorms and a large squirrel population. Mother Nature will probably decide when it’s time for the Clootie Wall to come down, but for now she embraces it—embraces us—feeding our bodies and hearts through the hard times, protecting this tiny oasis and murmuring, “I am one of you. I share your pain. Let’s ask for help together.”

Read more about Sarah’s Clootie Wall, watch a video, and hear the tune “The Clootie Well” at sarahgowan.com/clootiewall.htm

About the Author

Sarah Gowan is a dancer, musician, and artist living in Drexel Hill, PA, with her husband and partner, Bill Quern. As of this writing she has made more than 700 masks. Social media friends will be relieved to know that this is not an article about her cats. sarahgowan.com

Photos by Sarah Gowan.