

# The Holy Mother, the Queen of the Witches and the Goddess of Flowers:

Encounters with Death through Deity

By Aja Bond

## Part 1

Like other mysterious aspects of our sentient, incarnate experience, both Death and Deity can be elusive. Until they are not. We may never have been looking for them or given them much thought at all, until everything changes. This is an account, in 4 parts, of this kind of experience from my own twisting path towards Death and Deity. It details how I eventually came to heed my intuition and surrender to my own unique experience of the Divine instead of relying on roadmaps others had left me, looking for their trusted landmarks. Only then did the robust treasure of myth, story, ancient pantheons and the realms beyond this one begin to feel directly accessible, a source that could nourish me in my journey towards solidarity and collaboration with the ineffable.

For most of my formal, magickal life - which I identify as when I came into relationship with writing, traditions and practices in magic outside my initial isolated, subjective experience of it - I have had a polite, respectful, but distant relationship with Deity. The Reclaiming Tradition of Witchcraft, which I have been a part of for over a decade, loves their Goddesses (and Godds<sup>1</sup>, but in this Feminist tradition the Goddess in her many forms reigns supreme). Yet despite my persistent involvement in this community, the practice of worship and devotion to a particular Goddess has never quite taken me. The Imminent Divine has always held a vaguely feminine quality, and yet my experience of it has been so vast and abstract that it defied naming, articulating, or pinning down in any way.

Instead of trying to put a face, especially a human one, to the underlying power I clearly sensed in both my darkest and most ecstatic moments, I oriented myself towards the more Elemental manifestations

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<sup>1</sup> My attempt at a gender-neutral spelling. While Goddess' are generally assumed to be "female" (whatever that means in the forms Deities assume) I prefer not to assume that Godds are "male".

of the sacred, and found meaning in the organization of powers, medicines and ally or accomplice beings into rough categories, residing in discrete directions radiating out from my own center. Making sense of the divine is no easy task, some people make their life's work of it and most never quite figure it out. For a long time this system worked for me and I was blessed to have a significant community of people who also tended to prefer to work this way for group ritual. It led to many years of experimenting without the direct invocation of Deity as was traditional in Reclaiming and it was very enriching. But inevitably there came to be a mysterious absence in my meaning structure, a hole or opening, vaguely shaped and waiting for me to walk through it into the unknown.

This led me back to Deity, but not in the ways one might expect. Despite all my seeking for some concrete experience with Deity in my baby-witch years, it never came to me in the more common ways it seemed to for others. I suspect that this has as much to do with my neuro-divergence<sup>2</sup> as my particular orientation as an artist and perhaps even the non-consensual, heroic dose of entheogens that blew my doors of perception off their hinges at a formative age. All that is to say that I never saw a beautiful, terrible woman in my mind's eye, I never heard her speak to me in words. I felt her in the crushing white noise of a waterfall, in the overwhelming repeating forms of a patchwork quilt, and more recently I have felt her as a shudder in my proximity to death. All these experiences gave me clues about my unique experience of what Lasara Firefox Allen calls "the Feminal Divine".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Neuro-divergence (also Neuro-queer) is a way of describing atypical neurological and sensory processing experiences, for example with people on the autism spectrum, with brain injuries, PTSD, anxiety and depression, among other things. It is less a diagnosis and more a term that people use to self-identify themselves as having this experience.

<sup>3</sup> Her 2016 book, *Jailbreaking the Goddess*, while making great progress towards identifying the ways in which we witches unwittingly reproduce oppression, particularly patriarchy and transphobia in our conception of the Goddess as a 3 fold Maiden, Mother and Crone subject to much biological determinism, she still relies heavily on the assumed associations most of her readers will already have with a wide variety of Goddesses. The author's conception of the Goddess as 5 fold is refreshing and ingenious, but I wonder whether these 5 forms would be able to exist on their own without leaning on all the previous manifestations of the Feminal Divine as points of reference, or

The most cogent explanation I have ever found for *what* Deity is in the book *Neopagan Rites* by Isaac Bonewits<sup>4</sup>. For Bonewits, and my own experience supports this definition, a Deity is a particular energy pattern (a definition which supports the different beliefs of both metaphoric and literal existence of Deity). The Deity/energy pattern increasingly gains power and form when it is offered or invested with energy; the ritual administration of attention, particularly emotional and ecstatic energy, but also in forms such as prayer and sacrifice. In return, it gives us a taste of its own divine energy which includes information, blessings, and sometimes the manipulation of probability (aka miracles). Non-consensual relationships of a similar nature may be described in demonic or vampiric terms but ideally this is a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship.

This very sober breakdown was what it took for the concept of Deity to become a reality for this psychedelic, neuro-queer, artist weirdo. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, I found it easier to relate to an energy pattern than I did a big powerful woman in the sky (or in the ground, or the ocean, depending on Who we are referring to).

From this moment I stopped waiting for the Goddess<sup>5</sup> to reveal Herself to me in the way others experienced Her and began counting my diverse perception as a strength rather than a failing and that my skill as an artist and person invested in the production of a culture of resistance left me well positioned to communicate valuable insights about how we could collectively transform our conception of our place in the world, which I was coming to realize included a whole lot of Gods.

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whether this suggests a kind of cross-cultural equivocation which may be over-simplifying. I suspect it's too soon to tell. Lasara Firefox Allen, *Jailbreaking the Goddess: A Radical Revisioning of Feminist Spirituality*, (Woodbury: Llewelyn, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Highly recommended, though very nerdy and technical. Mostly for people interested in understanding why magic works sometimes and not others and to learn to control what factors we may in order to produce more consistent and powerful results in our ritual workings. Isaac Bonewits, *Neopagan Rites: a Guide to Creating Public Ritual*, (Woodbury: Llewelyn, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> While I use the singular, I am referring to multitudes.

## Part 2

In the Summer of 2016, my dear friend was living with late stage lung cancer, and I had just moved from another country to a short bike ride away from her home. Within 2 weeks of my arrival, after a very wonderful heart to heart visit where we caught up after so much had happened, including her diagnosis and the birth of her child, her health began to steadily deteriorate and she was moved to the Hospital and needed constant company. I spent 3 long days with her there, along with a couple other close friends as we awaited the loved ones from farther off to arrive to say their farewells, as it seemed clear that she was going to die soon.<sup>6</sup>

I had never had the experience of knowing a beloved friend was dying and having the honor of being by their side as it unfolded. I had lost a considerable amount of friends and acquaintances suddenly, but never this way. It was beautiful and terrible - she was transforming before my eyes, her pain was reaching new levels and we struggled with nurses and doctors to manage it so she could have some peace in which to come to terms with what was happening to her. Our fears and sorrows all mixed together in the tiny room as we anticipated the losses on the horizon and yet still prayed for a miracle. And amongst all that, I found a quality of presence in myself that I never knew was possible.

There is one moment in particular that has stayed at the forefront of my consciousness, like one of those dreams that silently screams “REMEMBER” as it is forever etched onto the soul. My friend,

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<sup>6</sup> To the friends and family members of hers who may read this, I realize that it may be upsetting for you to read my account of the intense pain she was in on and off for those first few days in the hospital. We who were in that room did not tell many people about this part of our experience together. I have considered omitting these details but I feel that the core of what I experienced and feel compelled to share here has to do with that pain and her eventual overcoming of it.

her partner and I were fervently praying through a spike in her pain that left us all desperate. The boundaries between us had been blurring and it was hard to know where one of us ended and the other began. For days I had been flooding with care, empathy pouring out in all directions, like a tap I couldn't turn off. We were praying to the Holy Mother, to whom she was devoted, in a stream of words that barely left space for breath, over and over for I don't know how long, the trance it generated subsuming us. Then, something happened. The Holy Mother poured Herself into the vessel of my tired body. I felt a drastic shift in my energy levels - whereas up to that point I was struggling with each recitation, barely getting enough breath, my tongue stumbling with exhaustion as the words left my mouth, once She was in me I knew I could keep praying that way all night if I had to. I was fully present and yet distant. A vague form of a swan emerged from somewhere and grew to envelop the whole room, changing the energy from that of frantic fear and suffering to peace, surrender and ultimately love. Eventually the moment passed, but I don't remember much else. I know that she seemed more comfortable from that point until she died a couple of days later.

It took me days to recover. My edges, which had been blurred by the effort of sustained empathy under duress had been completely dissolved by Her unexpected possession of me<sup>7</sup>. At home, relieved from my bedside vigil by the new arrivals, I slowly reformed myself around my core in time to participate in her wake and memorial<sup>8</sup>. I remember the residual power I felt in the rituals, standing up to offer a song to the hundreds of mourners amassed, energetically cleansing countless people for hours as they came and went, the incredible energy we raised in the Spiral Dance at the end. I know that as much as I was emptied out by the experience, my capacity was also increased as a result. I could now shine brighter, thanks to Her blessing.

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<sup>7</sup> I could describe this trance possession non-consensual, but it would flatten so much complexity about the experience. Considering that we were praying to Her, how open we were, how badly we needed Her help, I consider it a gift and a great honor that She came in the way that She did.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Selenite.

In the weeks following her death I somehow came to be in trust of my dead friend's no longer needed supply of morphine. During that time I was haunted by an image of a Poppy, and I searched the internet for photographs I might draw to give form to this spirit that was with me. While the medicine was in my keeping, there were a few people in my immediate surroundings whom I was sure should not have access to it - friends who, like many people close to me, have been caught in the web created by the powerful opiate pharmakon that turns so quickly from medicine to life-destroying poison. And yet, as I drew, and stared into the center of the mandala form that was the blooming flower seen from above, tattered and ragged petal edges framing a burst of flame around an unblinking, penetrating eye, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had been changed by witnessing its mercy, so like that ascribed to the Holy Mother. The Blessed Poppy<sup>9</sup> bestowed sweet relief on my friend in her time of transition between the worlds, just long enough to give us sweet memories of her smile, her jokes that had us laughing and crying with ecstatic relief after days of pain, before she would forever leave the body that could no longer hold her great spirit. Somehow this Goddess and this plant were one.

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<sup>9</sup> Or more accurately its modern day, medicalized sister.

## Part 3

A year later, it was dark and I was walking through a field with some old friends and a few new ones who had offered to share a devotional ritual to the Goddess Hekate, also known as the Queen of the Witches, at her time of the New Moon. It was a generous offer and I was excited to learn from these friends who had come so far to share their magic.

We made our way to a 3-way crossroads on the land chanting her song in a long procession. On one side was an altar to The Unnamed Dead, a powerful, simple structure that resonated silently every time I passed it for all the years I had been coming to this place, even before I knew what it was. On the other side was where I happened to be camping, nestled in a bunch of trees. When I chose my spot, a favorite with which I was becoming familiar, I was quite oblivious to the significance of where it was located.

The ritual, called Deipnon, translates to “evening meal” in Greek. We were taught the appropriate way to leave Her offerings, which she distributes accordingly at her discretion to the legion of restless dead of whom she is a kind of ward; appropriate offerings for this Mysterious One include food, such as eggs, garlic and leeks as well as the equivalent of magickal leftovers: spells that have run their course, candle nubs and incense ashes, things we are ready to let go of in order to purify our altars and begin fresh for the next moon cycle. There are elements of offering, sacrifice and purification in the ritual. We were told adamantly that when we are done, we must not look back (which I almost did, compelled by something, turning my head halfway back until I realized with a shock of fear the danger I was accidentally putting myself in) for the restless dead do not want to be observed as they feast on our offerings. The whole of the ritual was charged with a kind of dark

static electricity - I felt it prickling along my skin like an invisible storm and while I didn't "see" anything, my sense was that there were at least 2 worlds, stacked directly on top of one another in that moment, one being the world I was experiencing and one I was sure I would not even recognize if I could see it... they were touching somehow, affecting one another in ways that were beyond understanding.

That night, I had to walk back to the crossroads where we had our ritual in order to get to my tent. I was afraid that whatever goings on I had turned my back on would still be in full force as I stumbled back across it in the dark, but I was exhausted and decided to risk it. I fell asleep alright and my dreams were wild and vivid....

*Set in a scene like a paintball course, with shoddy facades of old timey buildings, which I can tell there is nothing behind, I am surrounded by countless beings with jack o' lantern heads, dressed like oogles<sup>10</sup> which I know are a symbolic rendering of the beings I have just fed in the night's earlier ritual. They walk the way the scarecrow from the wizard of OZ does, jangly, like their limbs might fall off at any moment. They are kind of like zombies - they aren't trying to hurt me, but I get the sense that they might inadvertently kill me just by their mass and their lack of empathy or care for the concerns of the living. They are however, attracted to me, they keep crowding me, shuffling towards me...*

*I am surrounded, effectively being suffocated in slow motion by these curious but dangerous ghouls, feeling their generalized confusion clouding my brain, hampering my ability to choose a course of action or do anything. Suddenly a magickal letter appears in my hand informing me I have been awarded a prestigious art residency in Japan! The excitement that takes over my affect at the good news seems to act as kryptonite to*

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<sup>10</sup> Traveller punks who usually wear worn out and/or patched canvas, denim and leather clothes in a monochrome of dirty green/grey/brown/black that reads a like a scrappy militant uniform.

*the pumpkin head oogles. They recoil from me and begin to slowly scatter off in all directions, disappointed and deterred. I realize that the best protection from these beings is to live a directed, creative life.*

This was one of those dreams that I just can't forget. I can still see it now, so clearly. I woke up with no fear of forgetting it and wrote it down in detail a while later. When I excitedly shared this dream with my friend who led the ritual, he laughed at the comical way my subconscious conjured the unruly dead. It was a rare thing for me to dream so clearly and directly about experiences the night after they happen. Often my nightly dreams are filled with confusion, a clusterfuck of anxieties and stuff that doesn't make much sense. These crystal clear dreams that I get every so often feel like they come from somewhere outside of the tangled mess of my own personal underworld. It's as if someone really clever made up a fantastical story especially for me to describe something that I need to learn.<sup>11</sup>

In the unfolding of this event, I have learned more about Hekate and eventually come to devote myself. As I felt the calling to Death work, I felt also pulled to her. It is a new relationship, and I am still learning how to be of service to her (though the basic form of that new moon ritual has been a reliable center in the swirling chaos). There will always be decomposition and trash to take out, be it material, spiritual or otherwise and there will always be those among the dead who are hungry. It seems that it serves all in the cycles of life and death and the mysterious in between that the substance of our daily workings keep moving as is needed. It is an aspect of right relationship that we let go when it is time, when we recognize that the needs of these strange

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<sup>11</sup> Many months later, I came across a book on tape (in a very synchronistic, thriftomantic way) by the Feminist writer and mythologist Clarissa Pinkola Estes, called *In the House of the Riddle Mother*, where she describes her favorite way of understanding dreams - as a message, containing everything you need to know, but formed into the shape of a riddle by this Goddess, the Riddle Mother whom you visit in her domain in your dreams. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *In the House of the Riddle Mother: The Most Common Archetypal Motifs in Women's Dreams*, (Louisville: Sounds True, 1991)

others may be greater than our need to hold on a little longer. Even as I admit that I have no idea what purpose they serve, that it is very literally beyond me, I can know in my body that it is right to feed them and that in her wisdom there is a method to the madness. I follow my intuition, watch and learn. I show up to the cross roads, sometimes late out of negligence, sometimes early when I have an offering within me that cannot wait. I cleanse myself and the altar repeatedly. Just last night, the new moon/their need/her calling woke me in the middle of the night, and I climbed out of bed with offerings and found myself unable to get to the altar because the yard was full of a family of skunks and reeking with their gnarly scent. I sat on the couch in the dark with my black cat, staring out the open window into the blackness of the yard, watching their shadows moving about, listening to the sounds of their nocturnal wanderings, wondering...

## Part 4

Persephone is the Goddess of Flowers from the Ancient Greek Pantheon. Through the course of her mythical life she also came to be the Goddess of the Underworld, through the process of being kidnapped by Hades and eventually, upon being rescued, was forced to strike the compromise that for half of the year, she would reside above ground in the realm out of which her authority originates, that of growing, blooming, living flora, and the other half of the year she must return to Hades in the Underworld, the land of the Dead, and rule there alongside him.

There are many rich layers to this story, many ways to interpret it, and many equally powerful Deities woven into its tapestry. My reading, which is not based on much prior knowledge of the lore, but from intimate experience that has been unfolding over the course of this year, is connected to personal details of my magickal journey that are not all appropriate to share here<sup>12</sup>. The emotional and spiritual gravity of my story may not translate through the omission of details and multilayered contexts that might fill a whole book if I gave them the space. And still, this part of the larger account is required and I will try my best to do it justice.

Through means that will be left unmentioned, I have become, temporarily, a holographic<sup>13</sup> or perhaps fractal aspect of Persephone in service of a community that I have been circling like a satellite for over 10 years, with whom I have recently forged a more formal relationship

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<sup>12</sup> The meaning of the work “occult” is quite simply “hidden”, and some magickal workings must remain so in order to retain their integrity.

<sup>13</sup> An aspect of the nature of holograms is that if you tear a hologram in half, you can still see the whole image in each piece. The same is true with smaller and smaller pieces. This is an accurate way to describe how it feels to embody even the tiniest shred of a Deity (or energy pattern, or hologram).

through the kind of initiatory, divinitory ritual in which this role fell upon me, quite outside my own conscious choosing. The ancestors buried on the land, whose altars I had specifically come to tend and make offerings at; the spirits of the land, who have been watching my work and my way of being in that place through many rounds of catharsis, each one perhaps preparing me for the current work being asked of me; the Deities involved in the years long (in this community) and centuries old (in the larger world) iterations of these rituals, all somehow came to decide together that I was well positioned for the task, and laid the mantle upon me, though not in a straightforward way, by any means. If anything, the way this ritual went down was not only an initiation into a chaotically cohesive clusterfuck that is the Radical Faerie tradition, it was also an initiation into the realm of the sacred-clown which I have ostensibly needed to adopt as a strategy for coping with the nonsense of it all.<sup>14</sup>

So here I am, contracted to play this part, for a full turn of the seasons, in an ever unfolding drama of the Goddess of flowers descending to the Underworld and re-emerging in the spring. I was given no job description but one close friend tried to reassure me that I had merely won the equivalent of a magickal beauty pageant and that my only responsibility was to wear fabulous outfits and make ridiculous pronouncements as I smiled and waved at my admirers. That didn't sit well, for obvious reasons, but the point was taken. No one agreed on what this meant or how it would manifest, and as I returned from the concentrated atmosphere of intensive ritual to the day to day of my life, it seemed I could engage it as much or as little as I cared to. It is, after all, one of the more anarchic traditions and doesn't tend towards telling others what to do.

So when the halfway point of my time was up at Samhain<sup>15</sup>, I felt the yank of obligation, to join the people on the land again, to

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<sup>14</sup> One of the things that seemed clear to one of the elders guiding me through this process was that my training in the Reclaiming Tradition, with its relative orderliness, logic and by contrast entrenched traditions, would be a hilarious counterpoint to the way this magic was running amok in my life.

<sup>15</sup> Concurrent with Halloween, a time of ancestor veneration when the veils are thin and Autumn turns to Winter.

participate in whatever dubious holy-sacred pranks were in store. And yet try as I might, I couldn't get there. The tide was going out while I was trying to swim to shore, and rather than exhaust my resources, I sought the counsel of my Elders and friends and came to the conclusion that I should stay where I would make my strongest magic rather than exerting a bunch of energy travelling hundreds of miles from home. In the midst of one of these phone calls, I looked out my window and saw, for the first time, that the natural-built cobb oven in my yard was actually a cave, an opening in the ground, and a portal to the underworld. I had never noticed this other side of such a mundane object as an oven, but in that moment it was clear as day.

The year of the initiation had been a time of putting down roots. I had tended to the hearth of my new home for the whole Summer and Fall, building altars in the yard, energetically cleansing the place and building up a reservoir of energy that I and others could draw on from the sanctuary of this long-time Anarchist house. I realized that I had everything I needed right where I was and it seemed clear that I would stay and do my own parallel Persephone Ritual from home.

In the days before the ritual, after years in the making, I had my first loom set up and ready to weave. After hundreds of hours working at weaving for someone else as wage work, I finally had the means of production and was free to follow my own muse. The first thing I made was a portal for Persephone - simple geometric shapes and a perspective like descending down a staircase or walking down a corridor, in rich green and floral patterned material cut into long strips and rewoven into a thick tapestry. The doorway through which she was to come/go was a static blur of black and white fuzz. I wove it in a frenzy, sweating, my heart racing and hands shaking. It was so intense that I could barely look at it afterwards, but I bundled it up and brought it out with me, as if it were a baby that needed to be close to me until it was time for it to be put to its intended ritual purpose.

On the day of the ritual, I gathered all the flowers and fresh herbs that were still growing and blooming in my California yard. The fragrance, as I chopped them up into a fine, fluffy potpourri, was heady and strong. I also added the crumbled up dried flower crown I had been wearing when I was chosen, which was a difficult sacrifice as it had

come to be a powerful symbol of my journey but I knew I had to let it go in order to become whatever was next. Lastly added to the mix was a half a pomegranate, the fateful food from the land of the dead she ate that sealed her destiny of returning again and again to the underworld.<sup>16</sup>

I created a body for the Goddess, out of a beautiful rich red, fuschia fabric printed with a luscious garden scene, I lovingly cut and stitched by hand the form of a doll, made her a red silk dress and a long braid of hair. I filled her body with the fragrant mixture, tenderly pushing it into the far corners of her limbs, into her core, where I placed a rose quartz. Then, when she was stitched up, I wrote upon her in red ink the qualities I imagined she would need on her journey and over the course of her long stay.

Like any self-preserving Femme I have had my struggles with men trying to make me do things I didn't want to do. From my fathers, to my lovers, to teachers and all the strangers who ever felt they were entitled to any aspect of me, from my smile to my body to the smell of my fear of them. I felt for Persephone, stalked by this Hades, as I had been by a nameless man for over a year of my life. I felt the rage and resentment at her being taken away from the beautiful living Earth to reign over a land of ghosts with only the company of this selfish man of a God. I offered every strength and protection I could think of to this precious Goddess as I cradled her in my arms. And yet I knew she had done this a thousand times, and she didn't need my help nearly as much as I needed hers. Still, the tenderness and understanding I felt between us was like that of a treasured sister and it was sweet.

I knew what I had to do. I gathered wood and cleansing water. I bundled up the doll in the tapestry portal and made my way, first, to the 3-way crossroads altar. I knew that even as I was told that I would become Persephone through this ritual, I also knew I needed a mediator to help hold the space between us so that I could stay myself and retain my sovereignty. For who agrees to become a Goddess they have barely made the acquaintance of? And as powerful as Persephone is, that night

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Devin for the counsel NOT to eat the pomegranate as part of the ritual. It is one thing to become an aspect of a Goddess you hardly know for a year, and another thing to commit to do the underworld journey with forever more.

she was committed to her ordeal and could not be asked to take care of me simultaneously. And so, as it is in the story, Hekate, Queen of the Witches, was called upon for help. And she came, and I am forever grateful.

The ritual was simple, really. I made a fire in the cave, at the mouth of the gate to the underworld. I went into many levels of trance, with a simple dried gourd I had found in the compost, a perfectly formed rattle with a soft, clear sound. I sang to her like I had to another loved one on the edge of death. And when the words and sounds had run out, all there was to do was gently place her in the fire and watch in silence and she journeyed from this realm to another. It was peaceful, clear, and clean. I said my thanks, devoked and opened the circle once the fire had died down. In the morning I sifted through the ashes and retrieved the rose quartz which was now white from the heat of the fire. Changed.

Now it is spring and the trees and bushes around the opening to the cave are budding and bursting and dropping strange berries. I do not know what will happen next. I do not know how she will return. But the Holy Day to which is ascribed the beginning of her slow ascent is Imbolc, right next to my birthday in early February, which this year I spent sick but well enough to get out of bed to wassail and sing and pour cider on the roots of the apples trees in the hopes that they will bear bountifully this year. In the same way that my ancestors could not take for granted that they would survive the winter, I cannot assume that the spring will always come in ways we recognize in times to come. Perhaps we will never again have the same regular, reassuring turn of the seasons that we have come to rely on for our sense of place and right relationship with the world, but in my mind it is all the more reason to work with these Mysterious Ones who have their own wisdom, accrued over centuries, sometimes millenia, and are sometimes willing to share it with those with desire for relationship and a willingness to show up.

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