

Serpent Star

Newsletter for the Australian and New Zealand members of OBOD

Alban Arthan, June 2006

Blessing of the Seasons (Winter) -

Anon

*Black is the season of deep winter,
The margins of the world are storm-crested.
Sad are the birds of every meadow,
Lamenting the harsh winter's clamour,
All save ravens gorged on blood.*

*Winter - rough-black, dark-smoked, cold-flinted.
Dogs splinter the cracking bones,
Cauldrons sit on fires at the dark day's end.*

*Irish poem from 11th century, translated by C. Matthews.
From: 'The Little Book of Celtic Blessings', compiled by
Caitlin Matthews, Element Books, 1994*

When Love Comes

You sit before the hearth, spinning wool. A simple broth warms on the stove. A knock at the door makes you prick your finger, for you are expecting no company. On your doorstep is an ancient woman with dancing eyes. You invite her in to warm herself by the fire. Add your favourite spice to the meal and open your finest wine. When she is well nourished and comfortable, humbly await her wisdom. Slowly, she reaches a gnarled old hand into the flames and draws forth a stick with red-hot coal at its tip. Then, lithely she stands and makes her way to the darkest, coldest corner of your home. Her lantern sheds a soft glow on your forgotten dreams, crippled hopes, banished memories and cruelest fears. They stir to life as you bear silent witness to her healing. When her work has begun a life of its own, and she is wearied to the bone, offer her your bed. And in the morn, when her belly is full with your best chook's eggs and the singing cow's milk, offer your heart for her keeping, to give strength on her journey. For when love knocks unexpectedly at your door... it is time.

Reilly McCarron

Water

I know now, listening deep,
water's note. I feel it cold
like a bell. I see it sleep
like a spirit aeons old.

Then the bell's yelp of speaking,
waking air up into lapping
leaps of water breaking
into ripples is like clapping

meaning down. I feel it glisten
and hear structured in water
sense, truth, and I listen.
I am the child, the wedding's daughter

and my mother is a sea.
Like an ocean she holds me.

vyyan.



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STORM WOLF'S RAMBLINGS



*He comes,---he comes,---
the Frost Spirit comes!*

(John Greenleaf Whittier, *The Frost Spirit*)

Hi everyone,

Winter has definitely set in here, with frosts and temperatures down to -5° during the night.

We have just been out in the garden planting bulbs this afternoon. The soil is so dry, the ground has cracks in it everywhere. Hopefully they will survive and we will have a lovely colourful display come Imbolc!

No matter what happens in our lives, life goes on around us. The seasons keep changing, the wheel of the year keeps turning. It reminds me how mother earth does not need us to survive, she just gets on with it, but we cannot survive without her. Makes you wonder why the human race seems hell-bent on ruining the planet!

On a brighter note, it is good to see that public opinion still has power over politics, with the news that the NSW government is not going to sell off the Snowy River hydro scheme. Apparently they were going to use the money for upgrading roads and hospitals. So, if that is the case, where does all of our hard-earned tax money end up? Isn't that what it is for?

Anyway, enough of me on my soapbox, I'll let you get on with enjoying this winter-warming issue!

Storm Wolf

Websites

Hi all!

We are currently seeking content for the Oceania region webpages of The Druid Network. URL-
<http://www.druidnetwork.org/oceania/index.html>

The idea is to build this area into a resource of depth and substance for those of us practising the Druid craft in this region. If you have written something or you would like to write something then we'd love to hear from you. It's an opportunity to contribute something which will be a lasting resource for Druids of the future and of course to see your name in pixels :)

If any-one has any suggestions about the site or ideas about what they would like to see I'd love to hear about that as well.

Please spread the word to any other Druid types you know who may be interested.

Bright Blessings
Murray

When I think of the month of November, the first visions that pop into my head are those of cloudy and dark days. In each region of North America where I have lived, the low sun and short days of November enhanced the gloom of skies frequently flushed with stratus clouds from dusk to dawn. But often November mornings dawn quite the opposite with a quiet, spectacularly brilliant beauty. These are the mornings touched by the brush of Jack Frost.

Our friend Jack Frost, it appears, is a benevolent artist compared to some of the other *frost beings* of mythology. Jack is likely the son of the Norse god of wind Kari, born Jokul ("icicle") Frosti ("frost"). When Jokul Frosti immigrated to England with the Norse, he became Jack Frost, an elf-like being who colours tree leaves and paints patterns on windows.

Other *frost beings* including the Frost Woman and Frost Man, important weather deities in Finland and northern Russia, who control blizzards and other cold, wintry elements in these northern regions. Elsewhere in Russia, folks believed Father Frost to be a mighty blacksmith who forged great chains of ice to bind water to the earth each winter. And when Old Mother Frost shook the white feathers from her bed, they fell on German soil as snow.

In Japanese folklore, the Frost Man was the roguish brother of the Mist Man. Australian aborigines attribute frost to icicles thrown down to earth from seven sisters whose bodies sparkle with ice. These frosty sisters could not live with men on earth, so they sought a home in the heavens, each one becoming a star of the Pleiades constellation.

From:

http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/almanac/arc_1999/alm99nov.htm

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Interview with a Yew Tree

by Greywolf (Philip Shallcrass)

One thing that's expected of Druids is that we should talk to trees.

I recall in my youth watching the Andy Williams Show on TV and seeing him start singing the old standard, "I Talk to the Trees". After the first few bars two men in white coats came and carried him away. It gets you like that sometimes.

Undaunted, I read about Ents in Lord of the Rings, ingested a mind-altering substance, and, towards dawn, as the effects of the drug were wearing off, wandered down through the trees towards the sea on the Isle of Wight. On the way I was called by a particularly fine and upright conifer. I took out my recorder and began to play, improvising a tune to fit the moment, responding to the spirit of the tree. I gave my music as an offering in return for the beauty of the moment and the tree. The tree really liked my music. I was rewarded with the most spectacularly gorgeous sunrise I have ever seen; one side of the sky was velvet night, embracing the moon and stars, the other side fresh with the light of newborn day, the red-gold disk of the sun just cresting the horizon. Breathtaking.

That was almost thirty years ago. As we grow older, we're supposed to get more sensible, but a good deal of Druidry, like most spiritual traditions, has little to do with sense as defined in the Pocket Oxford Dictionary as "sanity or presence of mind regarded as based on the normal action of the senses". Indeed, an excess of this kind of rationality can be a positive hindrance when one is seeking to encounter worlds beyond the mundane.

So it was that, whilst walking through my local park recently, I passed a yew tree with whom I had previously struck up an acquaintance. She's a young tree for a yew, only about 120 years old. I saw that she'd had some vandal trouble. One of her lower branches was cracked and twisted. There were stumps here and there where other branches had been lopped off. In my concern for her, I went over to ask how she was doing. I was thinking in human terms. I rested my hands on her trunk and thought about her plight, stuck there close by a busy main road, swung on by passing children, abused or peed on by occasional drunks. I framed my question:

"What is your wyrd"? I asked her. For anyone unfamiliar with the term, wyrd is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning something like fate.¹

Her reply was simple:

"The wyrd of all living things: beauty and then death".

I quickly realised the stupidity of my human response to what I saw as her ill treatment. Another quotation from my teens comes to mind: "You call it fame, but the human name doesn't mean shit to a tree". That's from Eskimo Blue Day by Jefferson
Airplane. Yes, the value system of trees is very different from ours.

"The wyrd of all living things: beauty and then death".

The implications of this statement began to sink in. First,

it implies that all living things are beautiful, even slugs, mosquitos and politicians. I found this less difficult to contemplate than I would have imagined, standing there with my hands on the bole of that yew. All life is beautiful. Think of an autumn sunset across the sea, the full moon of midsummer flickering through the woodland canopy, flickering firelight on a lover's naked body, an eagle gliding over a rocky mountainside, the twitch of a hare on its hind legs, sniffing the spring morning air, the dancing patterns of ants around their nest, the intricate tracteries of a spider's web, silvered with dew on a frosty morn. To know that life is beautiful one need only look, and look with feeling, focus, and full awareness.

A regular meditation I used to practice in my teens was to find a pebble on the beach and just sit and look at it. At first it would sit in the hollow of my palm like a ... well, like a pebble, then the patterns and colours on its surface would begin to stand out, signs and symbols emerging within them, then beginning to move and shift. Eventually, the pebble would disappear, shrinking to the size of a single atom and beyond, expanding to fill the universe and beyond. All existence would be contained within the pebble, held in the palm of my hand.

I used this meditation to re-balance myself, to re-connect, to merge my individual human consciousness into the immense awareness of the infinite universe. I found it a simple, yet invariably effective way to produce mystical experience. I used pebbles because I live near a beach, and because the sound of the sea is a fine accompaniment to meditation. But the exercise works just as well with a hazel-nut, a feather, a fir-cone, a shell, a mushroom, an egg or anything else for that matter. Nor is the setting important. When one's vision is awakened, even the ugly grey buildings that populate our cities begin to glow with strange, swirling colours, tracing intricate patterns of life through their manufactured forms. The more intense the mystical experience, the more it is possible to find beauty even in the most gruesome artefacts of modern life - or death...

"Beauty and then death", the yew tree said.

Yes, for all things must die, even those we love, even ourselves, perhaps especially ourselves, for we relate to mortality, as to life, as sentient, self-aware creatures. One of the greatest fears we sentient beings have is the fear of our own death, of extinction.

As we work through the chaotic discipline of Druidry, we come across death many times and in many forms as we seek to conquer or transcend our fear. We experience the death, often excruciatingly painful, of aspects of our selves; we work with the dying, easing their passage to the Otherworld, or with those left behind to live, working with their grief; we work through our own pain at the death of friends or loved ones; we shape-shift into other forms, some of which may die while we inhabit them; we go back through past lives, the final wall of each being the crushing instant of death; we communicate with the spirits of the dead, sometimes allowing those spirits to enter us so that we can feel the pain of their death and, through our empathy, help them to release; we guide the living on spirit journeys to the point of death and beyond, helping them too to experience release, knowing that this will help them to overcome their fear of death and, consequently, of life.

Woden and the World Tree



At the summer solstice of 1997, I had spoken with my priestess of my desire to undergo an experience like that of Odin when he hung for nine nights on Yggdrasil, the world tree, pierced with a spear, sacrificed to himself. Yggdrasil is said by some to be a great ash tree whose roots penetrate to the depths of the Underworld and whose branches reach the realm of the gods. Others say that Yggdrasil is a yew tree.

I have a strong connection with Woden, as my Anglo-Saxon ancestors called Odin. I have clear memories of a past life in late fifth, early sixth century Wessex when my spirit inhabited the body of a Saxon shaman who was dedicated to Woden. Well into medieval times, Woden was recalled as leader of the Wild Hunt, riding his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, leading the souls of the dead on their nocturnal journey to the Otherworld.

When working as a priest, particularly when dealing with a deity as powerful as Woden, it pays to be very careful what you wish for. Beginning shortly after the conversation with my priestess, and for about two months, I had the unpleasant experience of witnessing the death of everyone I saw. At first, I was confronted with the actual moment of death of each one, some in car crashes, some by drowning, others through old age or disease, some on operating tables, some by murder. After a while, I no longer saw the moment of death, but its aftermath. It was like living on the set of *Plague of the Zombies*. I was surrounded by walking corpses.

Then one day a scrawny, white-haired old man came walking purposefully, if creakily, up the hill towards me. He would have been tall once but was bent with age. Our eyes met briefly and in that moment I saw that his focus was fixed with stubborn determination on his own imminent death. I saw too that he viewed death as a welcome friend, that he had no fear, but a grateful acceptance both of life and its allotted end. He seemed to me a pagan saint, that old man, though for all I know he may have been the best of Christians. I blessed his strength, his courage and the vision he had shared with me and continued on my way. From that moment, the death-visions stopped.

A few weeks later, I saw the old man again. He was wearing a bright red cap, a dreamy smile, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and he was skipping, yes skipping, down the same hill I had seen him struggle painfully up before. Again, our eyes met briefly as he passed, and he smiled just the flicker of a knowing smile.

Was he real? Was he some spirit of the Otherworld? Was he a servant of Woden, or the god himself, the great shape-shifter, come to earth in frail, human form to teach me the lesson I needed? Was he a creature of my imagination? Of someone else's imagination? Of his own? I don't know, but I accept the gifts he gave me with gratitude and respect. He showed me again what I had learned many times before, but had contrived to forget: that death has its own beauty.

The words of the yew tree reminded me again of that beauty, for death can be beautiful, even when it is outwardly tragic, clinical, painful, even brutal. Part of its beauty lies in the fact that death itself takes those experiencing it beyond tragedy and pain, changing their perceptions, altering their priorities. Many of those who have had near death experiences report that their outlook on life has been dramatically changed as a result. Many have reported visions of profound peace and exquisite beauty. Some out-of-the-body experiences in my teens proved for me beyond doubt that consciousness is capable of functioning without a

physical frame. It seemed logical to conclude that the death of the body need not be the end of existence.

Curiously, by no means all who die realise this. There are spirits who cling to places they inhabited in life, endlessly reliving echoes from their mortal existence in the belief that they are still alive. Some are unable to release into the experience of death simply because they are so conditioned in the belief that death equals oblivion that they refuse to accept its reality. We experience them as ghosts.

Others are aware that they are no longer in body, but still cling to their earthly haunts because of some trauma experienced in life that will not let them move on, or because their own emotions, whether of love or hatred, bind them to this world. When we find such souls, our sympathy may lead us to work with them, teasing out the threads that bind them, helping them to find the will to cut those threads and release into the freedom and beauty that is to be found in letting go.

The Cormorant and the Three Worlds

The local park where the yew tree lives harbours other spirits I have worked with and learnt from. One day in the depths of winter, whilst walking my son to school, I saw a dead cormorant floating some way from the shore in one of the lakes in the park. I decided that, if it was still there next time I passed by, I would take that as a sign that I should take it home and work with it.

The weekend intervened and I felt sure that the park wardens would have removed the bird. But on Monday morning there was the cormorant, only now it had drifted right up to the shore close by the path. That was omen enough. I took it home, made prayers for the safe passage of its individual spirit to the Otherworld, and to the divine spirit of the cormorant clan. I worked with the body, dismembering it, making tools to help me in my work: an outstretched wing for fanning incense smoke in saining rites; a claw and tail feathers to adorn a rattle I was making.

Why a cormorant? Well, the cormorant moves through the three worlds of earth, sea and sky. On land it often sits with its dark wings outstretched, drying in the breeze. It swims low in the water because its feathers are not waterproof, making it heavy. It swims with only a little of its body and its long, snake-like neck above the surface. Then it flips forward in a trice to dive down, its long, bent, arrow-sharp beak searching for fish. It emerges again into the sunlight, tips back its head and, in a flash of wriggling silver, the fish is gone.

In the air, the cormorant is a black shadow, beating its wings hard and steady, then gliding in graceful arcs, looking for a landing place. The three worlds of earth, sea and sky parallel the three worlds of the living, the dead and the gods.

The ability to travel consciously and deliberately within these three worlds is, for me, the defining skill of the Druid. So, for me, the cormorant is an exemplar of what a Druid should be. As Morfran, the Sea Crow, the cormorant appears in the Welsh story of Taliesin, where he is one of the children of the goddess Ceridwen, she who brews the cauldron of awen, inspiration. He turns up as a warrior in an early Arthurian tale, Culhwch and Olwen, where it is said that "no one struck him at the battle of Camlan by reason of his ugliness: all thought he was an auxiliary devil".

Here is one of the prayers I made while working with the cormorant's body:

Morfran eil Tegid²

Hair had he upon him like the hair upon a stag, and dark was he like Afagddu, Utter Darkness, from whose spirit he was made before the world began.

Guardian of the Crystal Egg that all of life contains, beauty is its nature, and Creirwy its name, created from the coupling of Tegid Foel and Ceridwen, the Beautiful, the Crooked White One, patroness of Bards, when turned to serpent form they make the sacred spiral dance that takes them far across the face of ocean deep and dark, before the sun and moon are made in answer to their prayer, the one arising from the sea, the other born of air.

Morfran his name, the dark, ill-favoured, Cormorant, Sea Raven, haunting shores of Llyn Tegid and diving 'neath its waves in search of food he goes from upper world to world below, resting on the Earth between, black wings drying on the wind, master of the three worlds, of earth and air and water, guiding souls to Otherworlds beyond the western seas.

Driven inland by the gales of winter with your kin, to seek freshwater fish beneath the heavy frosted ice that held you down until your spirit broke free from this life, and I who found you floating ask for wings and feet and head to grant me power to pass between the worlds with equal skill, that I may make the journey to the dark land of the dead and bring the gifts of healing and of wisdom to my clan;

I ask this in the name of Celi Mawr, Morfran.

Celi Mawr means 'Great Creator.'

The partner of the dead cormorant remained for many weeks, perched on the end of a branch sticking up out of the water near where her mate had died. In the summer she departed, but as autumn turned to winter she returned, bringing six of her family with her. They held a wake for the dead one. The others stayed for a few weeks then moved on. The partner remained until the Beltane moon had passed, then she too left.

Almost the last time I saw her I took the time to merge my consciousness with hers, diving with her beneath the surface of the dark lake. Within the waters we found the spirits of the dead, their forms reflecting the passions and concerns of life. We dived deeper and there we found darkness, the utter darkness that the Welsh language calls Annwn, the Not-Place.

I encountered this inky, eternal state of non-existence many times as a child. It used to beat into my mind night after night in the space between waking and sleeping and it terrified me. It seemed all-embracing, eternal, merciless, cold, inescapable, like a great yawning mouth eager to devour my very soul.

Now, through the experiences I have described and others besides, I have come to know death as a friend and have found the beauty in death. And so, when the cormorant and I dived together into the inky blackness of Annwn, it seemed no longer a threatening maw but a welcoming embrace, not the fearful darkness of childhood, but a warm velvet bed of rest from the stresses and struggles of life. There is peace in Annwn, the Not-Place, a peace beyond any other, a peace in which our wounds may be healed, our cares resolved, freeing the spirit to journey on into rebirth unhindered by the burdens of the past. And yes, there is a vast and indescribable beauty in the embrace of that great night.

Having understood these things, we returned to the surface of the lake. I carefully and deliberately separated my consciousness from that of the cormorant, acknowledging with gratitude her help in making the journey.

The implications of the yew-woman's words continue to echo around me, drawing threads of association and understanding into my own centre of the web of wyrd. A tree helps me to grow. A cormorant helps me to understand.

I read once about a Native American who, confronted by a black-clad Christian priest brandishing a Bible, patiently tried to explain that he and his people didn't try to trap the Great Spirit in a book, but read his words in the clouds, in

the trees, in the movement of animals, in the sun, moon and stars.

It's much the same with Druidry. Julius Caesar said that the Druids of his time never wrote down their teachings, preferring to rely on memory. I like to think that there was more to it than that and that the old Druids, like that bemused Native American, rejected the written word in favour of the greater text of the rich, complex and intelligent world around them.

After all, not only these words, but a hundred thousand more that have escaped the printed page, all stem from the simple answer the yew tree gave to my simple question:

"What is your wyrd"?

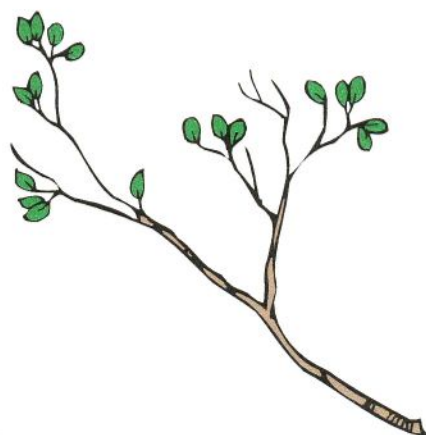
"The wyrd of all living things: beauty and then death".

Notes:

1. For more about the concept of wyrd, see the book, *The Wisdom of the Wyrd*, by Brian Bates, Rider Books, 1996.
2. The prayer, *Morfran eil Tegid*, is included in *The Passing of the Year: A Collection of Songs, Poems, Spells and Invocations*, by Philip Shallcrass, published by the British Druid Order, St Leonards-on-Sea, 1997.

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How to See Faeries by Vyryan Ogma Wyverne

*'When silver moon looks out and the day has fled
A little elfin man in a coat of red
Calls to all the faeries near
Telling them they may appear
All the mortal folk are asleep in bed.'*



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1. Get basic. It is a sensory perception, involving sensoria whose optimal functioning depends on the same sound health principles as any of our other sensoria. Get yourself in peak physical condition, for maximum performance from all your sense organs, including those specialised for the seeing and hearing of faeries.

2. Get less humanocentric. We are their 'faeries' as much as they are ours. This corrects unbalanced views of our world as a primary one with peripheral worlds that are somehow less real or less complete than ours existing in an inferior relation to ours. I am a guide to many faeries wishing to access our world, just as you are, or will be when you open your life to them. There are faeries who will guide you to their worlds. But in general faeries are not our helpers. They have rich full busy lives of their own and need our worlds to interface effectively with theirs for reasons of their own that we have yet to learn.

3. Get confident. There ain't no such thing as a 'muggles'. You are magical. You are constantly sensing and interacting with faeries. You can become conscious of this interaction and get more in control of it. If you're not aware of it, you may be losing critical power-struggles between you and beings of other realms, resulting in subtle disadvantages that could detract from your full enjoyment of life. Conversely, you may be unconsciously using your subconscious magic to repel, harm or manipulate innocent faeries, or to foil your own attempts to see them.

Where to start? Meditate. Practice austerities (but not so that it's no longer fun). Dance – ballet, for example, requires you to manage your energies elegantly for the benefit of the flying fairies of the air, jigging helps you loosen up and lighten up for the Celtic-style faerie, clog-dancing clears the way for conversation with pixies and earth faeries, the dwellers in hills and mountains. Sing or play a flute or fife. This combines controlled breath-work with the sensitizing of your own life-field to the aerial faeries' presence. Aerial faeries include many nature spirits, elves, human beings evolving on the aerial plane and many others. Corroboree brings in the Aborigine Tuckonies. Yoga, trance, tai chi: your own soul will know which methods are best for you.

'Faeries' is a term covering a wide range of beings who are not normally visible to most people. Their diversity appears even greater since many beings are able to project from great distances holographic faerie images which are actual ephemeral beings in their own right. Some of these are quite idiosyncratic, ranging from cartoon-like characters to visions of great beauty and saintliness, with myriads of varieties in between. So the perception of them must be highly selective – you decide which faeries you want to see and craft your lifestyle to incorporate your quest for them - or you can optimise the functioning of all your dormant sensoria to enable you to see as many different kinds as possible. They're not all fond of us, so this way is strictly for the foolhardy.

An easy and safe way is through atonement with nature and simultaneously with faeries, using the stereotypic faerie glen of children's literature as a focus. I call this the Dingly Dell method, and recommend it for its fun and safety. That's the method I'll be describing here.

The first thing to do is find a place or make one at least a square metre or so in area and tell the faeries it is theirs. Imagine a Tinkerbell-like faerie – she's not a bad icon for the type she represents, and will tell the others. Then work with this space while focussing on faeries.

If it's a pretty outdoor place with moss and wildflowers, water, sunshine and bushes full of birds surrounding it, or in a garden, that is wonderful. Expect to see them there, or feel them or hear them, and you'll be surprised at how quickly you begin to do so. Look for a peculiar sparkling quality in the sunlight or the air, an uplifting ambience full of happiness and pleasure.

Don't get too close too soon – let it be wild, and then the shyer types will feel safe there. This place will attract Tinkerbell-like faeries, elves of two or three kinds (all diminutive), pixies, gnomes, brownies, and many other kinds, including tiny human beings and many degrees of hybridism between them and the stranger types of faeries.

If it is inside you may feel inspired to decorate it. Be whimsical – they are. I made three 10" – 18" high papier maché mushrooms for three little men, identifying as a brownie, a leprechaun and one I know only from German folklore as *das M'annlein wer steht im Walde ganz still und stumm* (the little man who stood in the forest quite still and silent, who corresponds to 'the little elfin man' in the song quoted at the head of this article) who insisted on coming inside although I'd given them their own shrines outside, and it's one of the most active magical areas on Wyeuro. They are demanding, hilarious, gruff, grim and totally, profoundly good.

I started by yielding to whimsical impulses to give them coffee every morning when I make mine. I made a cauldron out of clay and fired it in my hearth. They showed their gratitude with an audible and visible display, one morning as I filled it for them.

"No, I tell you," declared the brownie after the first few times. "It just *does* happen. You watch." The others stared at the

empty cauldron intently. I glimpsed them just as I touched the cauldron, and heard them all gasp and exclaim as I lifted it out of their sight. They shouted excitedly when I put it down, freshly filled, among them, and then fell silent and awestruck, looking at it. Then they dipped in their cups and drank happily.

They take it for granted now, but the brownie is demanding his fresh clean linen shirt, which he says he's entitled to each year at Alban Athena, and I suppose I will have to make him one. He's earned it.

I often see them playing chess (or hear them fighting noisily over it), and *das ma''nlein* helps me with my comparative philology, speaking a quaint little ancient patois which is totally idiosyncratic and sometimes utterly hilarious.

With these, if you want fun, they'll give you that, crafted to suit you personally. If you want to understand them in a scientific way they'll help you with that. They become major benefactors in a shamanism that includes them. They are enlightened beings wise enough to be that versatile. Not all faeries are. Perhaps most importantly, they'll act as your guide and protectors in your exploration of the other realms of our planet. In traditional lore they are the wise counsellors. Refer to them if ever you feel out of your depth or afraid.

To see plant spirits you have to hang loose, be able to lose yourself in your gardening, study of botany, or enjoyment of nature, and engage as totally and innocently as a child with individual plants, leaves, flowers, and grains, focussing on plants you love, especially any are special to you from your earliest childhood. Wild-plant faeries are wild and sometimes hostile, but rarely dangerous. They may accuse all humans equally of poisoning our shared worlds and can be persuaded to listen while you teach them that some humans are loving and respectful and want to reverence their herb – thistle, bramble, thorn, whatever it might be. Gifts of small crystals, tiny plastic toys, silver tokens or coins, etc, buried or placed beside their plant, usually help to appease them, as they signal our willingness to care about them.

Plant spirits range in size from vast to tiny. Landscape spirits may shapeshift or project an archetypal animation representing a gigantic human, animal or dragon form. Forest, grassland, or dune spirits may appear as giants, antlered, hooved, or winged, or shapeshifting among many forms, as the Australian Aborigine spirits of place do. Trees as single species or as individuals, may project a variety of forms – blossom fairies, elf-like knee high diminutive, high-strangeness wood spirits and dryads like those often depicted in 19th Century art, or beautiful maidens and youths, modrons and men, crones and hoary old men full of laughter, or grim, loving or stand-offish according to the spirituality of their tree.

Laughing old hags coming out of bushes to clutch your arm and hug you are less scary than they sound. You come to love them as you get to know them. You come to sense the shyness of the leafy youths, the distrust of the pixies, and the fear of the tree woman, who holds herself visible for you with the utmost, heroic courage and leaves you awed and reverent with gratitude. And you get better at recognising their love, joy and gratitude, too.

Then there are the tiny ones, spirits of herbs, flowers and weeds. Fat-hen enchants you with a kindly fraternity and then suddenly reveals his tiny inner warrior, in shining armour, engaged in the deadly biochemical and spiritual warfare with other plants that takes place under and above ground in a garden. Comfrey schemes malevolently against couch grass, and lavender envenoms the soil around her roots to drive out invading neighbours. Nasty they are, but thrilling, because they are utterly, uncompromisingly real, and expressed in forms taken directly from images of human warfare, until you can no longer deny the connection and the importance of our understanding it. It's also Gaia's way of ensuring there is an interface across which ideational exchanges will be mutually intelligible. They're harmless to us because their nastiness is contained within their own contexts and their warriors are only illustrations or symbolic interpretations of their biochemical characters.

These help with gardening and are easily accessed by gardeners or botanists, working intently with plants. They begin to break through to us when we recall that despite their conflicts with human needs, weeds are worthy of respect. They reach us more freely when we allow at least some weeds and garden plants their fullness, not lopping off 'dead' flowers to prevent them seeding, or hoicking them out when they go to seed. They like weedy untidy gardens and fill them with flowers, food, and beauty for those who like wildness.

For those who don't, clipped hedges, manicured lawns and disciplined weedless beds of gay annuals are just as full of faeries of other kinds. Elegant winged faeries help to perfect specimen blooms, having their own interests in their perfection, queenly nymphs glide among well tended shrubberies and little cosmic elves love strict mathematics and fussily tended knots and arbours, and even help to make the worst garden chemicals safer and more effective. Concrete and gravel spaces draw their own kinds of faeries, witches and gnomes as well.

Gnomes need help to focus themselves in your garden, and will take up residence in any stony structure that resembles or suggests to you the shape and character of a gnome. Profoundly wise cosmic beings, they are easily trapped in coercive relationships with people and so are shy. Treat them with great respect and kindness, and they will suss you out over a few years before slowly, sensitively beginning to become more active for you. Two or three are happier than one.

So, install your faerie shrine, dedicate it to faeries generally, and service it regularly, preferably every evening of the full moon. Spill clear water over a stone, place flowers or crystals in a dish of water placed so as to catch the moonbeams, or leave a hearty feast of cakes and coffee, mead and bread and butter, or cheese and bickies, distance yourself from it a bit, and watch what happens!



The Jewish Goddess, Past and Present

By Jay Michaelson



"The Da Vinci Code," soon to be a major motion picture, is an old tale in new clothing: It is the story of the goddess, sometimes referred to as the "Divine Feminine," the female aspect of — or counterpart to — the familiar male God of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles.

In Dan Brown's phenomenal best seller, She appears as Mary Magdalene, Bride of Jesus, whose identity was deliberately effaced by the church fathers. But concealing the existence of the Divine Feminine is much older than the Holy Grail. As scholars have shown, the Hebrew Bible itself condemns, marginalizes and ultimately buries the veneration of female deity-images that were common in ancient Israel.

Based on the Bible, one might think that most Israelites were pious monotheists; yes, they came into contact with foreign gods and goddesses, and many strayed, but the Temple was the centre of religious life, and the priests there maintained the covenant between the God in heaven and His people.

Recently, however, archaeologists and biblical critics have revealed a far more complicated picture of how biblical Israelites lived their religious lives. As exhaustively summarized in William Dever's "Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel," most scholars now believe that the ancient Israelite world was far less monolithic, and monotheistic, than the Bible suggests. Household shrines, statuettes of male and female figures, and inscriptions and carvings describing "YHVH and His Asherah" all point to a decentralized biblical religion that was practiced largely within family structures, and well beyond the strictures of Jerusalem's orthodox elite. Some scholars believe that this evidence points to an indigenous "goddess worship" that regarded the biblical God as one half of a divine couple. Others say it suggests the influence of non-Israelite religions. And still others, such as Raphael Patai, whose enormously influential 1978 book, "The Hebrew Goddess," arguably inaugurated the popular appropriation of this scholarship, believe that the tradition of the Divine Feminine — a female half of God, or bride of God, or earth-centered, body-centered counterpart to the sky god Yah — endured long after the biblical period ended.

Dever, professor emeritus of Near Eastern archaeology and anthropology at the University of Arizona, begins his study by drawing a detailed portrait of biblical Israelite life: Based on meticulous archaeological research and imaginative analysis, Dever describes biblical Israel as an "economic backwater" with sparse population, almost no literacy and mere survival as the all-consuming, and often elusive, goal. Moreover, in Dever's view, the Bible's long list of prohibited idolatrous practices "implies that the majority of people, not just an easily ignored minority, were doing them — and, I would argue, principally doing them in a family context, where women played a highly significant role."

At the same time, Dever disputes the image of orgiastic "fertility cults," which he says were imagined by puritanical (and prurient) biblical theologians. His book depicts a cult not of the sexual but of the maternal: a family-centered, women-centered veneration of Asherah, the "nursing

goddess" of the Israelites. He rejects the narrative of a sexual, sensual Canaanite paganism that was replaced by a staid monotheism of the Israelites. Statues featuring large-breasted women, for example, likely connoted not sex but nursing — not the consort but the mother. As Dever notes, when ancient religion wants to depict sexuality, like that of the goddesses Anat or Astarte, it does so in graphic detail.

Finally, Dever denies that Israelite monotheism was ever the dominant religion in pre-Exilic Israel, suggesting instead that there was a kind of "religious pluralism within the national Yahweh cult" — he notes the Prophet Jeremiah's permission for women to continue their "domestic piety" — in which veneration of feminine imagery was not "foreign" but indigenous. Many of these images were not shunned but integrated, albeit in subtle disguises. Here's one rather shocking example from Dever's book: Asherah's tree was often drawn in the form of pubic hair above the female genitalia — yet, as Dever observes, it also looks suspiciously like the menorah.

Dever's book is a treasure trove of archaeological data and analyses of both biblical text and society, though it is marred by endless sniping at other academics and by boasts about Dever's own theories. Dever also has a rather selective reading practice: While he agrees with some biblical contentions (regarding Rachel's "household gods" and the idolatrous "high places," both confirmed by archaeology), he rejects others, denying, for example, the Molech was actually the name of a foreign god.

What Dever only touches on at the end, however, is how veneration of the goddess persisted long after the biblical period. His analysis of the Divine Feminine in Kabbalah — where She emerges as a central preoccupation — relies almost completely on Patai and omits the best evidence for his own case: the Zohar's use of "Asherah" as a name for the Shechinah, the feminine aspect of God. For the Kabbalah, uniting the transcendent masculine and the immanent feminine is a core religious act, and for the many who welcome "the Sabbath Queen" every Friday night, images of the Divine Feminine are not hard to find.

Fair enough; Dever is a biblical archaeologist, not a historian of religion. But where Dever leaves off, contemporary teachers (and some scholars) begin. For example, the feminine imagery of biblical "wisdom literature," omitted by Dever, is the subject of "The Divine Feminine in Biblical Wisdom Literature," a new book by Rami Shapiro, a popular teacher of contemporary spirituality and mysticism. Unfortunately, while Shapiro's book does contain some fine new translations of biblical poetry, the book, meant for self-help purposes, elides the distinctions between the wisdom literature's Divine Feminine (Wisdom; Chochma in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek) and the "Divine Mother" as expressed in Dever's sources, as well as in Kabbalah, Christianity and contemporary Jewish spirituality. Simply to say, as Shapiro does, that Wisdom "is the manifestation of the Divine Mother as She appears in the Hebrew Bible" is not

accurate, and lessens, rather than heightens, the impact of this complex literature. In the Kabbalah, intuitive Wisdom is balanced by rational, critical understanding (the latter of which, ironically, is Binah, the Divine Mother); Shapiro's book should have been, as well.

Yet the Divine Feminine is not purely the province of the New Age. As Professor Susan Sered has observed, the pattern of women-centered "domestic piety" co-existing with men-centered "normative religion" still exists throughout the Jewish world, where women maintain folk traditions and "family wisdom" independent of the book religion of male elites. Think of the "superstitions" and "old wives' tales" one inherits not from books but from grandmothers and aunts. And, of course, traditional symbols of the Divine Feminine endure, albeit removed from their original context. Consider the Easter egg and Christmas tree in the Christian tradition (both originally pagan symbols of the Divine Feminine) or, for that matter, the Holy Grail.

In the Jewish tradition, the most obvious symbol of the Divine Feminine may be none other than the Torah itself, as has been pointed out by Amichai Lau-Lavie, director of StorahTelling: Jewish Ritual Theater Revived. Called the "Tree of Life" (yet another euphemism for Asherah), the Torah's symbolism, Lau-Lavie says, enacts the revelation of the Goddess. "The ark, the Holy of Holies, is separated by a curtain, like in the Temple, and behind it is the Torah, wearing a silver crown and velvet dress, always referred to in the feminine. Then we bring her out with great decorum, kiss her, undress her, open her up and commence the ritual of knowledge in the biblical sense."

While "the Goddess" has long been in hiding in such coded symbols, today She is, as it were, coming out of the closet, appearing in everything from feminine God(dess) language to "priestess training programs" in both Israel and the United States. Folklorist Taya Shere, a co-leader of one such program, says that she is merely recapturing an ancient, lost and more balanced Jewish religion. "Judaism came from somewhere, and it is comforting for me to be aware of its roots," she said. "Even the challah loaves come from the holy cakes baked for Astarte."

Today's ritual innovators may seem quite distant from the rural women described in Dever's volume. But as Dever notes, images of the Divine Feminine persist because they speak to deep human needs. Rational, philosophical monotheism, he says, "is in some ways less sophisticated — that is, less comprehensive, less flexible, less natural" than its more mythic antecedents. One is reminded how much more nuanced is the Zohar's dynamic, embodied human psychology than the linear rationalism of Maimonides, which posits one human faculty as supreme above all others.

Perhaps the deeper question here is what we mean when we speak of Judaism — whether we refer to the normative texts of the elite, or the descriptive reality of the masses. Which is more accurate, and which more wise: the strict ideals of the rabbis, or the complex realities of the peasants? For that matter, who is the "Sabbath Queen," anyway? And why, despite millennia of suppression, does She continue to endure?

From: <http://www.forward.com/main/printer-friendly.php?id=7728>

Seasonal Recipes

Healing Bath for Colds and Flu

When using essential oils in the bath you should make sure that the bathwater is not too hot — not only does this release the fragrance of the oils too quickly, but it can also be quite debilitating. Try to make your bathtime a relaxing event — don't rush and hurry. Soak for as long as you feel like!

Add the following to your bathwater:

- 4 drops lavender oil
- 2 drops eucalyptus oil
- 2 drops jasmine oil
- 1 drop cinnamon oil
- 1 drop ginger oil

After bathing, wrap up warmly and go to bed with a warm drink.

You can also place a few drops of the following oils on a tissue and inhale at regular intervals:

- 4 drops lavender oil
- 2 drops cinnamon oil
- 2 drops eucalyptus oil
- 2 drops jasmine oil
- 2 drops cypress oil
- 1 drop ginger oil

For children under three, just use the lavender, eucalyptus, and jasmine oils. Place somewhere out of their reach, but where they can still breathe the aroma.

Winter Solstice Incense

- 2 parts frankincense
- 2 parts pine needles
- 1 part cedar
- 1 part juniper berries
- ¼ part cinnamon
- ¼ part nutmeg
- ¼ part ginger
- ¼ part orange peel

Grind all ingredients together with a mortar and pestle. Add to burning charcoal block (on a heatproof surface) as needed.

Winter Tea (serves 1)

Very warming, even smells like Christmas! Always use china or glass when making herbal teas as plastic or metal can taint the flavour.

- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- 4 whole cloves
- 1 crushed cardamom seed

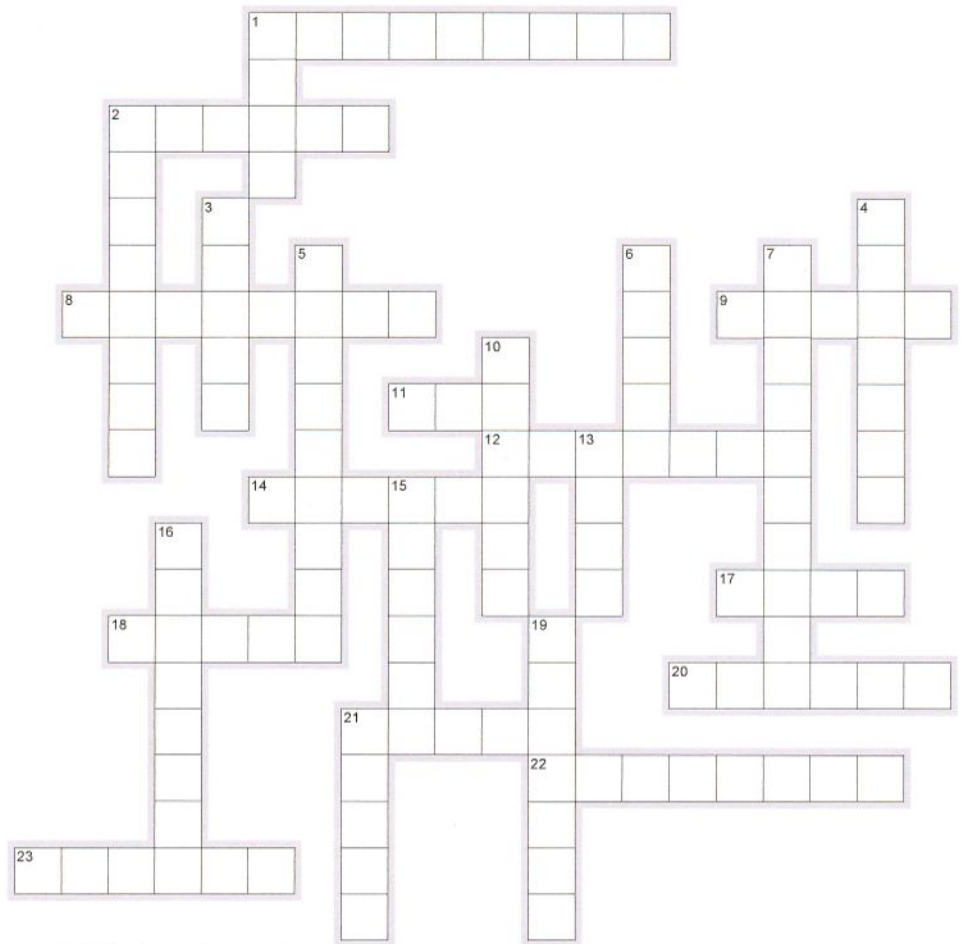
Place in teapot and add ½ pint boiling water. Allow to stand for ten minutes. Do not stir, as this can bruise the herbs. Strain. Add honey to sweeten if desired.

From: 'The Real Witches' Kitchen' by Kate West, Element Books, 2002

Australian Native Animals

Across

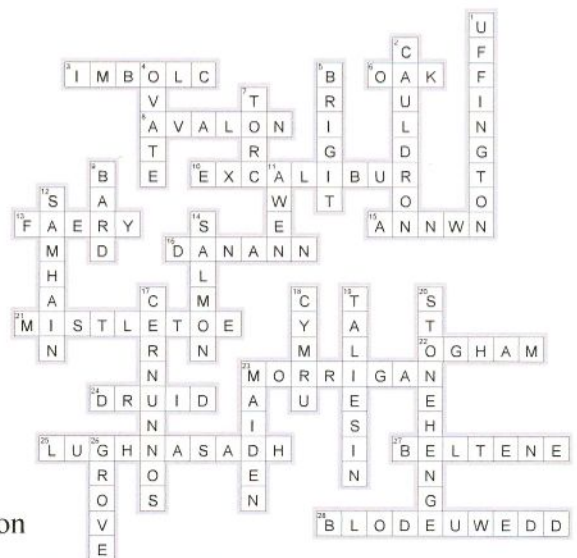
1. Large flightless bird from the north coast of Queensland
2. Insect that sings in the trees in summer
8. Animal that hops on its hind legs, has a long tail, and a pouch
9. Lives in trees and eats gum leaves
11. Large flightless bird
12. Arnotts' bird, Crimson _____ (7 letters)
14. Hairy nose _____ (6 letters)
17. Green tree _____ (4 letters)
18. Pink and grey bird
20. Large lizard
21. Lives in the desert, Thorny _____ (5 letters)
22. Bird with the colours of the rainbow
23. Tree dwelling mammal with a long tail



Created with EclipseCrossword — www.eclipsecrossword.com

Down

1. Sea creature with one claw larger than the other. Fiddler _____ (4 letters)
2. White bird with yellow crest on its head
3. Wedge tailed _____ (5 letters)
4. Sea dwelling mammal, made Monkey Mia famous
5. Tawny _____ (bird, 9 letters. Also known as a Mopoke)
6. Red-bellied black _____ (5 letters)
7. Bird that laughs
10. Green sea _____ (6 letters)
13. Australian fur _____ (4 letters)
15. Insect that comes at Christmas
16. Water mammal with a duck-like bill
19. Yellow footed rock _____ (7 letters)
21. Native dog



Last issue's solution

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