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Dance of the Wight Goddess

In the aftermath of my sister's death, I had moved to Wight, a small island off the south coast of Britain. Something in the island's nature promised renewal and healing.

I walked the beach, feeling my fear like an incoming tide. In the swirl and eddy I saw the repeated patterns of my life, so many unresolved emotions rippling out from past moments, hidden currents strong enough to unsteady me. In the aftermath of my sister's death, I had moved to the Isle of Wight, a small island off the south coast of Britain. That journey across water to a new home spoke of possibilities; something in the island's nature promised renewal and healing. I had worked hard on myself over the last few years, reaching for my spiritual core, discovering the Goddess and endeavouring to find healing for my life-time wounds; but the events of the previous months had left me exhausted. So I sought sanctuary, immersing myself in the beauty of the island whenever I felt the old fears rising.

Today was such a day when the past clamored. I watched the sea mist swirl, thicken and part, like a veil closing and opening on another world. A buzzard coasted the thermals high above; I envied her access to the bigger picture, remembering all the times I had allowed the painful details to cloud my understanding.

Suddenly, I was alerted to a loud cracking noise. A large chunk of green-sand rock fell away from the top of the cliff, and I watched as it tumbled down to rest on the ledge above me. My heart raced and my legs longed to run, but I became aware of a young family who had joined me and were swimming in the sea. The father pointed briefly to the rock fall and then they resumed their play, laughing and splashing, enjoying the glorious day and the thrill of the ocean. Their bond with each other appeared to me like a shield against life's unexpected dangers, as if, in their closeness, nothing could harm them. The contrast of the family's joy with my fear stirred a raw place inside.

I had reached forty, and yet still I yearned for belonging and safety, still fearing that what was precious would crumble away. Family is just a small word, and yet the power locked up in these six letters can have an enormous impact on our sense of self and our place in the world. We all have a family even if they are lost to us. They are the moving, breathing spirit house that we live within long after we have left our actual childhood homes, and like houses, their ability to let in light and air, to warm and nurture, can vary. I had spent almost my entire life feeling an inward, frantic need to conserve this spectral space, desperate to reshape it, ignoring the cold that whistled through the widening cracks of its walls.

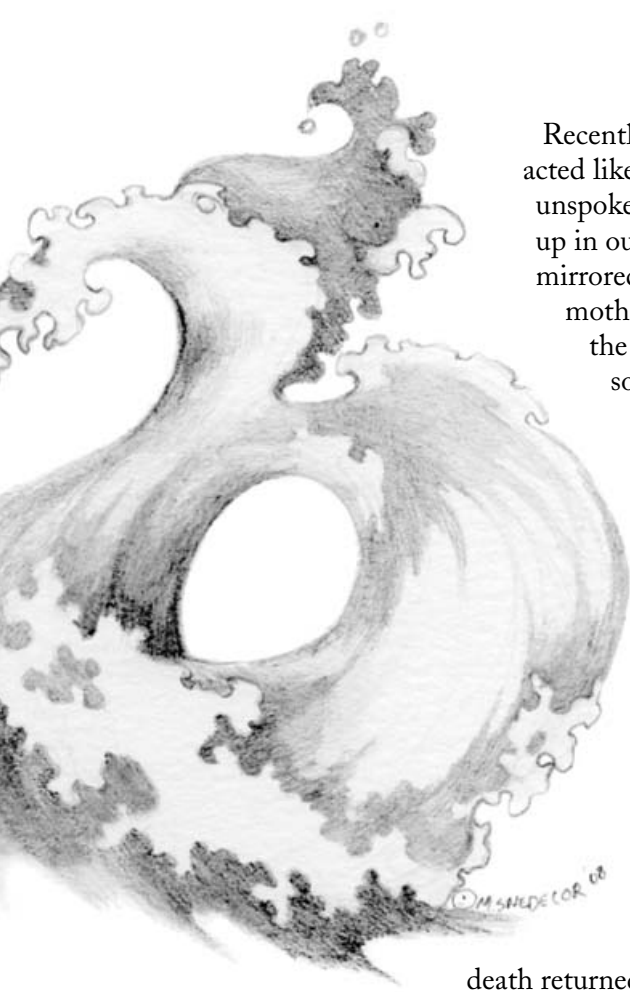
My own family landscape had settled on the fault line of our mother's death a quarter of a century before, an event that had never been fully healed. My mother endured the physical pain of cancer, but more terrible in its impact was her refusal to be told the diagnosis. We circled her, our grief forcibly hidden behind a mask of normality, unable to get close in those last vital moments for fear of betraying all that we knew. Her cancer had made eating almost impossible; but caught in a delusional state fueled by anxiety and malnutrition, she came to believe that my father was poisoning her. In the end, she starved to death, too afraid to face the devastating truth of her terminal illness.

I was thirteen and the dependable earth of my mother's being had fallen away, my sense of home and safety sucked down into the chasm that had taken her. My father was grieving; I loved him dearly and did not want to add to his pain. My siblings were almost two decades older than I; without the mortar of play to bond us, I felt an unbridgeable distance and my adolescent awkwardness left me unable to communicate my grief and fear. With no outlet, my emotions surfaced in nightmares: my mother's silent and decomposing figure repeatedly visiting my dreams. There were waking terrors too: an overwhelming fear that something, somewhere — out there, or even deep inside — was waiting to dismember me. I sought out the closeness of others who were wounded, perhaps hoping that my own hurt might be recognized and acknowledged. This risky strategy led to an emotionally and sexually abusive relationship with an adult, and as each fresh hurt undermined my sense of self, I became less and less able to share my struggles with my family and find the refuge and support I needed.



As the years passed, I struggled to transcend all that had happened. But I was blind to my addiction to crisis; I sought opportunities to test myself, attempting to feel some sense of control. I clung to the idea of family, yet the distance between my siblings and me grew ever greater, wedged apart by our differences. I suffered immobilizing depressions and, continuing the pattern of my teens, kept my suffering hidden. On the occasions that I felt happy or safe, fear overtook me, as if these joyful feelings would betray my hiding place and yet more loss would find me. I was always waiting for the shaky earth to crumble, always hoping that my family would become a sanctuary of closeness.

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Recently, the chronic illness of my sister acted like an eruption, exposing all the unspoken hurts and resentments locked up in our wounded family. Her illness mirrored, in almost unbearable detail, our mother's. Although they had not shared the same illness, my sister's Parkinson's disease symptoms mimicked my mother's. A devastating side effect of both her treatment and illness meant that digestion became excruciatingly painful. She began to starve. Resisting help and sliding inexorably into hopelessness, she diminished, and eventually, she too began to believe that those trying to help her were actually planning to kill her. I watched helplessly, the already weakened infrastructure of our family shaken to rubble.

The spectre of my mother's death returned, grimly demanding to be faced.

As the whole agonizing collapse repeated itself, I felt the emotions of my thirteen-year-old-self rise to the surface. I raged at my mother for dying, for not saying goodbye, for being in denial, and leaving us with the wreckage. I raged at my sister for her seemingly willful and self-destructive desire to die in exactly the same way, when it seemed so clear to me that another way was possible. I raged at my family for not suspecting the pain I had suffered and for now wanting me to be the dutiful sister. The motherless child in me found her voice, trying to communicate how emotionally abandoned, vulnerable, and powerless she had felt at the darkest point in her life.



I had struggled so long with the notion of family, with a yearning for home and belonging; yet, in the aftermath of my sister's death, my family was more fractured than ever. I had maintained a very close relationship with my father and that closeness remained; but now, having reached his eighties, I could feel the shift in our relationship — one that comes when we inevitably take on a more parental role ourselves. I felt the most crushing loneliness, no rock to cling to as the wave of grief took me. Physically low, my creative outlets became dulled and blocked. I visited and revisited all the inner sites of my childhood pain over and over, internally raging at my family, at the lack of intimacy and connection I felt. The grief and loss narrowed my focus until the wider vision of my life become distorted and obscured. Now, here I was, walking the bay, drawn back again and again to its crumbling cliffs — a living landscape of impermanence and loss — seeking an epiphany.

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By now the gleeful young family had left the bay and I was alone. Closing my eyes, I reached for the Goddess: *Lady, I am so tired; I cannot carry this anymore...*

I looked up at the towering greensand cliffs that framed the beach. A large section of the cliff had fallen many years before, the slip forming a vast ledge at the base of the rock face. Mature trees clung to the cliff's edge, their roots clearly visible, trunks leaning into the sheer drop that would soon claim them. Fallen trees, like bleached dinosaur bones, littered the sand, eerily beautiful sculptures worn and reshaped by the sea. A wild, ancient, constantly moving energy powered through every fiber of this place: the crumbling earth, the relentless tides, the forces of sea and wind and land.

Lady this hurts too much, I have no fight left... I felt the island beneath me, layer upon layer of marine life and debris, compacted and solidified — raised up by the unimaginably slow and powerful forces of the earth — and now releasing itself slowly but surely back to the sea. In the eternal motion of its dance, I heard the Lady answer... *Let it fall... let go... trust...*



Could it really be that easy? For twenty-seven years I had not felt safe. My terror that death would take away the people I loved had consumed me, so much that many of my relationships had crumbled or were kept at a distance, leaving me feeling more alone than ever. For all my efforts, I had felt no safer. The more I hunkered down, the more exiled I had become.

My life was waiting to be lived. But how do you learn to trust death, to embrace the letting go? My mind shot back to the last moments of my sister's life. Throughout her last week I had felt a loving and peaceful presence with us in the hospice room. At the point of her death I had felt nothing of the awful fear that surrounded my mother's passing; instead I perceived in death a deep compassion. This loving presence, this infinitely wise Midwife of Souls now called to me.

There comes a point when holding on just doesn't make sense any more; a moment when all our known ways of coping betray their inadequacies, when our shape no longer fits and must be shed if we are to grow. I need to let go, even to fall.

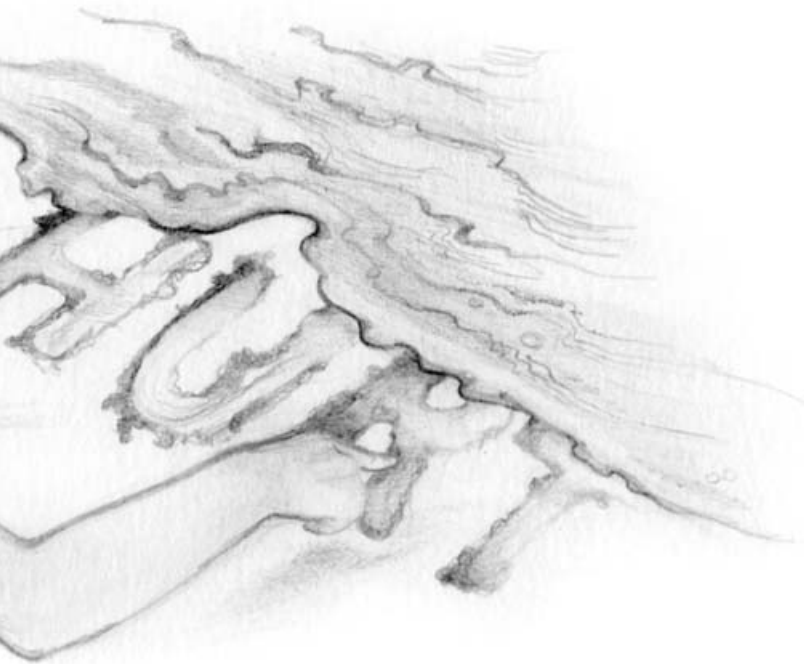
First I heard the muffled rumble of the ground shifting, then the sharp crack of the earth breaking free. I felt the sudden slip of it, a breath-taking moment of suspension and then the thunderous rush of my fall. In that moment of realization the old ground of my being released its hold, taut muscle relaxing into the void, arms stretched wide in surrender. All the yearning, hurt, and fear plummeted past me down into the gape of that familiar chasm, and yet its once implacable blackness now seemed shot through with a numinous light. In that starkly beautiful and unstable landscape I surrendered; I let my earth fall away and with it all the pain I had



nurtured, all my impossible notions of family, the desperate scramble to find safe ground. As I fell away from my old self, as I gave it all over to Her, I learned that release demands a sacrifice: the giving up of our most stubbornly held illusions. In acceptance of what is, we give ourselves the chance to move on.

As I realized my decision to surrender my pain, I wrote "*hurt and anger*" in the sand and watched as the ocean wiped it clean. The tears came — it was so simple. I had just to give it all over — no endless revisiting or analyzing, no blame, no demanding of justice; no guilt — just the trust of surrender: the blissful opening and emptying, the readiness to be filled again. My pain had come, I realized, not only from the hurt of all that had happened, but from the strain of not letting it pass. I felt compassion for the wounded child in me: she had needed the acknowledgement of her hurt, but most of all she yearned to play again.

I looked up, my eye catching the lushness of the old landslips. So much had fallen away, but the foliage had grown back rapidly, covering over each scar like a green bandage. I felt a strange peace that seemed to anchor me. I



smiled to think that I had made my home on an island known for its erosion and that it was here — where the constant flow of life communicated itself so powerfully — that I was beginning to feel truly safe. I could feel the ancient earth beneath my feet and knew that I was home; and in the eternal motion of the Lady's vital dance of death and rebirth, I was discovering my real sense of belonging. I closed my eyes once more, imagining my old life had fallen back into the sea, its rigid shape broken down in the ocean's flow — a million dancing particles of sand.

I made my way back along the shore. Turning toward the headland, my home town appeared, graced by the vibrant, reflective light of the sun upon the water. As I stood, held in the vast, enfolding embrace of the bay, I felt my new life forming, born in the awakening of each moment.

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A Life Complete

If I had but thirty days to live,
how would I complete my life?
What would be on my "to do" list
of projects to finish, contacts to make?

There would be just this one thing ...

I'd go home –
to the place of my birth, where I am rooted still,
like the sturdy cottonwoods

I'd lean into the prairie wind and let it blow away
any remaining hurt or regret,
still clinging on, tenaciously, like so many dead leaves

I'd let my arms float out in a wide embrace,
arch my back, tilt my head to the sun, and sprawl –
claiming my place amid the Indian grass
and the wild roses in the ditches

I'd visit my mother's grave, and gingerly touch that
smooth, granite stone, which in no way resembles
her

I'd listen to the meadowlarks' cascading serenade –
delightful, lilting ... beyond imitation;
Knowing, I'm not going anywhere ... I'm coming home.

People ponder the idea of an "other-worldly" afterlife,
but I know where I'll be...

I'll dart among the tall grasses with the ring-necked pheasants,
blithely soar with the sparrow hawks,
nestle in with the lichen that sprout in damp nooks
at Red Rock Falls;

I'll be there, eternally refreshed by the rising mist
from the frothy, tumbling waters

And every spring, wisps of cotton will gather at my feet, and
I'll scoop up copious handfuls and toss them to the wind,
to watch them meander, carefree, back to the ground

For the downy seeds will not venture far from home;
Like me, they will sink into the rich earth...
deeply, gratefully,
contentedly.

– Lisa Wersal