

The World Below

lyric and story book



By Katy Hellman

This album is inspired by the richness of inner world journeys, the potency of ancestral sounds and the archetypal wisdom of fairytales and myths that help us remember how to be human.

Just below the surface is all of the care and medicine we need.



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The World Below

Standing at the mouth of a cave, I peer into the darkness and feel the cold, moist air of the earth reaching toward me. From deep within I hear shadowy voices and ancient songs. I long to find the source. I cross the threshold and begin my descent, through the depths, into the realm of the underworld.

The journey is frightening, and disorienting, like a hall of mirrors. It is here that all that is known becomes irrelevant, all that provides security dissolves. I am stripped bare, radically humbled by the potency of the darkness. In the caverns of my own fear and grief I come to know myself anew. I see myself in the fullness of my power, in my connection to both creation and destruction. Here, I discover the profound care and wisdom that lives within the darkness and, like a thousand arms embracing me, I am held, and known by the great mystery of life.

You wanted to believe in
A path along the way
A small and steady stream and
A clear and guiding day
A clear and guiding day

They taught you how to listen
To the language of the leaves
To watch the shadows dance
As the light moves through the trees
The light moves through the trees

You set out in the evening to find the world below
You heard the spirits singing
They wanted you to know
They wanted you to know

Suddenly
You're all around
And the voices calling out from underneath
The turning waves around us
Found their place

Deep within the forest there was but one dark place
An endless sea of shadows
Where daylight never came
Where daylight never came

Here within the darkness the cold and writhing life
Wove a web of promise and sung the song of time
Sung the song of time

Take my hand
Follow through
You belong
I am you

Night comes and I know
Night comes and I go
Night comes and I know
Night comes and I go



Trillium

In Irish mythology, the Otherworld is a realm that exists just beyond our own, a timeless place of abundance, music, and magic. It is a world of beauty and wonder, but also one of danger, for mortals who enter may never return. Dwelling in this realm are the Tuatha Dé Danann, a supernatural race gifted with healing and prophetic powers. They are immune to sickness and aging, living in eternal pleasure and prosperity. From time to time, these beings reach across the threshold between worlds, interacting with mortals to offer blessings, pose challenges, or stir mischief.

The Otherworld is said to be accessible during liminal times of the year, such as Samhain and Beltane, and through liminal places, such as bodies of water, ancient mounds, or within the forest. Many songs and tales recount the adventures and dangers of being drawn into the fairy realm, stories that speak to the disorienting experience of liminality and connection with the otherworldly beings. This song is an invitation to dance on the threshold of the unknown, to enter the Otherworld and return to tell the tale.

Gather round the firelight the dark is growing near
I traveled from the other side to share my story here
So close I can remember and yet so long ago
Time it moves in strange ways. In and out it flows
Like the ocean tide it goes

Once there was a warm day the bright of early May
I walked into the forest I thought I knew the way
The trillium was dancing within the dappled light
The leaves they rustled softly, the pedals glowing white
I was transfixed by the sight

My mind began to wander to move away from me
I heard a soft voice calling from out within the trees
They sang like running water as clear as any bell
My body started dancing enchanted by the spell
And under their trance I fell

We came upon a clearing, a grove of apple trees
The branches they were swaying
Though there wasn't any breeze
And here within the clearing
Was a deep hole in the ground
That led me to a stairwell forever winding down
To the palace underground

Here within the palace there lived the fairy queen
She welcomed me with bounty
She taught me how to sing
And my story could have ended here you see
But then I remembered the stories told to me
And I climbed the stairs to leave

Up upon the surface was winter white as snow
Many years had passed while I was down below
And I have traveled to sing my song to you
So that you'll remember and you'll know what to do
If they try to pull you through



Cailleach

Ragged and wretched, raw and ruthless, the Cailleach speaks. She calls across the centuries to find me. Cold and bereaved, she meets me in my grief, in my ugliness and in my raw power. As the wind howls and the freeze of winter sinks its teeth deep into the earth, I am drawn toward the mystery of death, toward the elongated shadows, toward the song of the Cailleach.

The Cailleach is a Scottish and Irish mythological figure, an old and powerful hag, a keeper of the wisdom of winter storms and the transformative power of death. In modern, western culture we are taught to fear and disdain feminine darkness and to turn our gaze away from old age and the mystery of death. Yet as I listen to the sharp wind rattle at my window and watch the skeletal arms of the trees dance violently in the wind, I know that her song is the healing medicine I need. She mirrors back to me the raw power that lives in my own darkness.

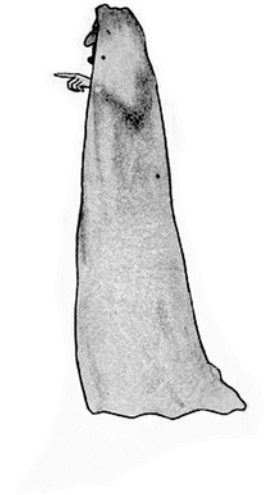
In the valley winter came
Cailleach sang to me oh
Calling darkness by their name
Cailleach came to me oh

Claimed the earth the frozen land
Cailleach sang to me oh
Withered life at her command
Cailleach came to me oh

But when the snow began to fade
Cailleach sang to me oh
Howling in a fearsome rage
Cailleach came to me oh

In the spring she found the well
Cailleach sang to me oh
She drank the water cast the spell
Cailleach came to me oh

She slept all through the summer days
Cailleach sang to me oh
Until the light began to fade
Cailleach came to me oh



Creature

Within me lives a monster. A being made of shadow and restlessness. They sit just below my ribcage in the cavern of my gut. I have come to know this being, to feel their pain, to listen to their screams, and to cry their hot and painful tears. I have learned to soothe them with my caring presence and my earnest desire to understand.

Most of the time this being is quiet, still and peacefully sleeping. But when they are pricked and awoken, their cry, like a column of red, rises from my gut to my throat, searing and acidic. I sit with them while they act out their pain. I bear witness as they claw and scrape and wail. And, if I stay long enough and hold steady in my presence, I often witness the monster transform. In exasperation and exhaustion, for the briefest of moments, they reveal a small child, red and swollen from crying, depleted from their tantrum. In these moments I share with this child all of the care, love and patience that has ever been shared with me.

This song explores the importance of engaging with the shadows of the inner and outer world as a strategy for survival, for if these beings are not attended to they wreak havoc, violate and cause harm. If our world is to transform it will require all of us to find the courage to engage in this potent healing work.

Deep in the woods, in the dark of the cave
The creature was waking up
Scratching the walls, screeching in pain
And we knew what was going on
And we gathered round the candlelight
And waited

Word it had spread that the child was dead
We wept for their innocence
Voices rang out, wondering how
We had all grown so unprepared
We shall depart with the dwindling light
To the heart of the aching woods
To the mouth of the creatures cave
To listen

And the sun it won't stay
No the sun it won't stay
The sun it won't stay
And the sun it won't

Lantern light cast shadows about
As we moved through the leafless trees
Frozen the air, sharp in the mouth
As we heaved together through the snow
Fear it rang deep as we heard the shriek
And we knew we were growing near
To the hollowed stone
The cold earth breathing
Deeper

And the darkness won't stay
No the darkness won't stay
And the darkness won't stay
And the darkness won't stay
And the darkness won't stay
And the darkness won't stay
And the darkness won't stay
And the darkness

Up ahead a clearing shone
Silver in the morning light
A hollow cave a deep unknown
A creature living once again

Hold steady, hold steady
Hold steady, hold steady
Hold steady, hold steady
Hold steady, hold steady



Snake Song

The sun is warm, and the world glows with the green of early June. We walk together across the yard, black flies darting, wild strawberries and spongy moss soft beneath our feet. Something rises in me, a sense of wonder, a buoyant and curious heart. I walk with eagerness.

We move toward a natural spring at the edge of the property, one she hadn't known was there when she bought the home. "Come," she says. "Let me show you."

We enter a dense stand of trees, beech, maple, and hawthorn. Beneath the canopy, the land drops, and we descend through a tangle of branches. At the base of the trench, I see the spring: an old stone cistern, moss-covered, cradling a pool of trembling water. A trail of vibrant green follows the water as it spills gently downhill toward the road. We crouch at the edge of the pool and peer in. A soft layer of leaves rests on the bottom in many shades of brown. Our dark reflections shiver on the surface. She cups her hands and drinks. My wonder sharpens into a deep longing. I dip my hands into the spring and drink from the water of the earth.

It is here, at the edge of this water, that I will spend many warm mornings, snowy afternoons, cloudy evenings and moonlit nights. Returning again and again to awaken to the forgotten depth of mystery within me.

A snake was dancing in the water
I turned away. I turned away I feared
The movement might become my other hand
And pull me under

A well a natural spring discovered
In a stand of trees beside the road
Under a canopy a wonder
Rising from below

I told my sister, told my mother
Of the water rising in the trees
There is a feeling I remember
Being here before

And when the moon was ripe with fullness
I wandered through the cold night toward the well
My shadow dancing on the surface
Mesmerized, in I fell

Now I am dancing in the water
The serpent is beside me and the fear
Was never mine but given from another
I was young, how could I know



Curse of Macha

Many canonized creation myths in Western culture portray women not as creators or equals, but as sources of downfall—chaotic forces to be conquered. Deceitful women, violated mothers, and dismembered goddesses struggle in vain against the violence of male counterparts. These narratives are steeped in themes of unchecked destruction, with ruthless male gods who do not hesitate to annihilate what they have created. The feminine, once revered, became something to be tamed, subdued, and broken.

In this time of global strife, when the world as we know it teeters on the edge of collapse, we witness the long shadow of this cultural legacy. We see the destructive impact of Western ideologies rooted in domination and imbalance. Amid this unraveling, I search for the powerful feminine in the western lineage. I sift through ancient stories and songs, seeking traces of the goddesses: Eve, Lilith, Tiamat, Gaia, Danu, Morrigan, Cailleach, Inanna, Ereshkigal, Pandora, Hera. And I begin to know them anew. Their presence rises—furious, radiant, and deeply loving.

Ancient stories of feminine power, miraculously preserved through time, feel like sacred gold. The Curse of Macha is one such story. It is an Irish myth from the Ulster Cycle that speaks of feminine rage and strength in the face of brutal masculine force.

Coming from across the field
Out of the deep, the great unknown
A woman of the other world
Arriving at the farmers home
Arriving at the farmers home

To the farmer she was wed
Wearing a gown of golden thread
She brought abundance to the land
All that he had began to grow
All that he had began to grow

When the seasons they did change
A festival of the turning days
She warned him not to speak her name
To share of the power she had shown
To share of the power she had shown

But the farmer was a man of pride
Hardly a secret he could keep
He said his wife had swifter stride
Then the horses of the king
Then the horses of the king

She begged her husband not to run
Pregnant with child she did plea
But the race was set, the deal was done
They showed the woman no mercy
They showed the woman no mercy

The men were astonished at the woman's pace
Faster than the horses she won the race
She went into labor a slow and painful birth
In agony and anger she spoke the curse
When dangers upon you and enemies surround
You will feel the pains of labor, be struck down



The Tower

When I visited Ireland for the first time in 2022, it took me some time to locate the source of an underlying distress I was experiencing. As we drove through the vibrant green landscape, rolling hills and small cottages dotting the hills, there was a palpable feeling of absence. Gradually it dawned on me, there were no forests.

The historical deforestation of Ireland was a multifaceted process, driven by British colonization, resource exploitation, and land use changes. The 16th and 17th centuries saw massive forest clearance by English, Welsh, and Scottish landlords during the plantation period. This was primarily for agricultural purposes, creating farmland and pasture for livestock. The demand for timber for shipbuilding and industrial development also played a significant role, with Irish forests being a valuable resource for the expanding British empire.

As I reflect upon the loss of ancient forests around the world at the hands of greed and domination I feel deep grief. Irreparable damage has been done, ecosystems destroyed and indigenous place based ways of life uprooted. And yet, deep within the grief there is hope. The wild animal within us is enduring. With a return to ancient ecological wisdom, and with concerted care and effort, a flourishing forest can return.

Light it was glistening out of the grey
From a tall stormy tower at the edge of the sea
Many a year I had been away
But the current was calling me
Back to the island to see

Word it had spread that the trees were all gone
That their axes were sharp
And their bodies were strong
I couldn't believe them, how could it be so
So I carried the wind
To come see for myself and to know

What is the darkness that tears it all down
That takes life away and watches it drown
I know of the darkness it lives within me
And the mist it was clearing
Revealing the shoreline to be

We anchored our boats and we swam to the shore
The waves they were restless
Our arms they were sore
On the cold rocky coastline we fell to our knees
And our sorrow was singing
A song for the forest, the trees

What are the stories we need to hear
On the edge of oblivion frozen in fear
Will we remember and can we conceive
Of a flourishing forest returning
A chorus of leaves



Rusalka

Sitting at the edge of the lake, I listen to the water lapping against the rocks and the lulling sound conjures a hypnotic state. I gaze into the water and watch as the light cuts downward in amber beams. Down, down, down into unseen still waters. On the surface, the water swells and sways and the light bounces back in an ever changing glittering pattern, like the music of a windchime. It is here that I come to know the watery songs of the siren, the mermaid, the rusalka. As I watch the shifting surface of the water and the still darkness of its depths, I reflect on how these mythological beings, like so many feminine figures, have been misunderstood. Their wisdom has been dismissed, their stories flattened, their motives misconstrued.

A year later, at 8:00 PM, I walk into Trader Joe's. The repressed feminine surging through me like a thunderstorm, grief rising just beneath the surface. It has been an exhausting and frustrating day. I approach the male cashier cautiously, my defenses up. Through the winding path of small talk, like the strange and disorienting conversations one often has with Trader Joe's cashiers, he begins talking about deep sea diving. "It's like being held in the arms of the Great Mother," he says. "Like returning to the womb." I nearly burst into tears. She is here! I think. She is alive! Though she is repressed, she is not lost.

We are in a time of crisis, but the feminine is rising. By leaning in and getting close we can learn from the memory and power of her song. We can join the chorus of voices calling us back home to the water depths from which we emerged.

Behold
An amber light glows
Below the waves

A sound
A beckoning down
The voices sang

They call
A cloudy nightfall
Cold drops of rain

Come close
We share the same skin
The water moves

Around me
Around me
Around me

I wade
Into the deep lake
They know my name

I drown
Into the dark sound
The under way

Darkness, eyes they glow
And the faces gather round

Open hands to mine
In the underwater caves



Inspiration

Below is a short list of resources that served as inspiration for this creative project.

Non-Fiction Books

Celtic Myth and Religion - Sharon Paice MacLeod
Celtic Cosmology and the Otherworld - Sharon Paice MacLeod
Women Who Run with the Wolves - Clarissa Pinkola Estes
To Speak for the Trees - Diana Beresford Kroeger
Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales - Marie Loluse von Franz
Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche - Marie Loluse von Franz

Fiction Books

Other Worlds: Peasants, Pilgrims, Spirits, Saints - Teffi
Elfin Kingdoms - Sylvia Townsend Warner
Lolly Willows - Sylvia Townsend Warner
The Found and the Lost - Ursula K LeGuin
Irish Fairy Tales - Edmund Leamy
Grimms Fairy Tales - The Brothers Grimm

Albums

Anne Briggs - Anne Briggs
Liege and Leif - Fairport Convention
Shapeshifter - Alannah Thornburgh
Wee Tam - Incredible String Band
Live in Dublin - Lankum
All of this is Chance - Lisa O'Niell
I want to see the Bright lights - Richard and Linda Thompson
Faces in the Rocks - Mariee Sioux
Hell On - Neko Case
Cruel Sister - Pentangle
No More to Dance - Silly Sisters
Hark! the Village Wait - Steeleye Span

Other

On the Soul's Terms - Chris Skidmore (podcast)
Vermont School of Irish Traditional Music (seasonal classes in Wat
erbury VT)
Bard Mythologies (Online mythology courses)