



photo by Angie Miranda

## IN LOVING MEMORY OF SHEKHINAH MOUNTAINWATER

From Ruth Rhiannon Barrett

Muse-possessed poet, priestess, witch, musician, lover of the Goddess, chant writer extraordinaire, teacher, seeker, mother, artist, author of *Ariadne's Thread* and creator of *Womanrunes*. How many other ways will she be remembered?

A general email letter arrived just a few days before my partner and I traveled to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival where we were teaching and involved in a variety of events. The email informed me that it appeared Shekhinah's illness had brought her closer to the end of her life. I wrote her a letter to let her know that I loved her and appreciated her. The week long festival was filled with powerful experiences, elders discussions and ceremonies for healing Gaia. There was no way to be reached there with news from the outside. I don't know if my letter arrived before Shekhinah passed in the afternoon of Saturday, August 11th. I heard the news of her passing by way of a cell phone message, sitting stunned in the parking lot at a local market on August 13<sup>th</sup> where we stopped after festival to pick up some drinks on our way home.

We arrived home in Wisconsin late on Tuesday, August 14<sup>th</sup>, to read that Shekhinah's funeral had already happened that very day. My numbness at the finality of the news finally broke through my heart. I was not going to be flying to California to pay my last respects with community around her. It was already done.

This is my letter to honor my old friend, early teacher, mentor, and sister. I hope to provide a few small windows into earlier times that show Shekhinah's genius. If you wish, you may share my letter with anyone who wishes to read what I am sharing here on August 15<sup>th</sup> in the early dawn hours.

In the early 1970's there wasn't yet a goddess movement, where words like "witch" and "priestess" were not in our vocabulary. The stirring and converging ingredients of anti-Vietnam war activists, ecology back-to-the land folk, women's liberation feminists, and mind expanding Jungian and eastern meditators and hippies (many who became the founders of the early pagan revival in the U.S.) were all bubbling together in the cauldron of change. Shekhinah was a woman who embodied these times, influenced these times, and the times that followed.

There have been few mentors in my life that truly helped shape the direction of my goddess and musical path. Shekhinah was the first, I met Shekhinah 35 years ago, in 1972 when we were both performing at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in southern California. She had a different name then, and I would be asked to call her several other names in the years that followed before she settled on Shekhinah Mountainwater. It was the young man who would later become my daughter's father with tears on his eyes insisted that I come to watch and listen as a young woman with her guitar and wild black hair together with her two children enacted myths and fairy tales in music and dance on the dusty faire paths. Shekhinah and her two children, Freya and Frey, called themselves "The Sybil" and they were magical in the truest sense. I was mesmerized at the beauty and spirituality they all embodied, working as one to bring their audience into a state of enchantment. They were what today we would call "performance artists" and what we called then, "sacred theatre."

It was through a shared love of the old traditional ballads and myths that she and I made our first (and lasting) connection. The White Goddess by Robert Graves was her bible, and her love of tarot divination inspired her many original songs.

In 1975 I moved to Santa Cruz, California to do independent folklore study at the University. It was here where The Sybil and I often shared our music together at a small club in the Santa Cruz mountains, and leaned on one another for support and inspiration. I was blessed to participate in Shekhinah's first teaching circle at her home in Ben Lomand. In a circular yurt in the red wood forest that she called "the moon hut" she held our weekly classes for several hours every "Moonday". As I am writing this I open my tattered but intact journal from this magical year-and-a-day journey to read its title, "Women's Mysteries and Sacred Theatre". Names of my circle sisters – Meg, Leslie, Lynn, Lefka, Sherry, are written under the list of books Shekhinah recommended. As I leaf through the journal, I read my notes of our discussions that resulted in agreements for our Pact of Sisterhood that completed our learning together, what we were taking responsibility to create in our lives, with other women, and in the world. I read my notes about the Maiden, Mother, and Crone, and rituals of our mysteries and rites of life. Shekhinah also originated the MA chant that I would later bring into the rituals of the Dianic tradition. Our classes were not neck up. Shekhinah was teaching us how to become ecstatic, and how through ecstatic states the Goddess guides us, shows us, tells us, what She wants us to know and do. Our class culminated in a sacred theatre presentation open to invited guests, of the

Demeter and Persephone myth. Shekhinah gave roles to our circle based on what would challenge us to stretch into, and not based on any physical type casting. The ritual role itself would reveal its mystery to the woman who took it on.

I moved back to Los Angeles, California in the fall of 1976. I missed Shekhinah and her children, and our contact lessened. After my ordination in 1980, and the eventual formation of Circle of Aradia, I was able to bring Shekhinah to teach my students on a semi-regular basis. It was very important to me that my own community knew her and had opportunities to learn directly from the woman that had been such a primary influence in their own teacher's life. My other favorite way to share Shekhinah was to sing and teach Shekhinah's songs and chants through workshops, ritual's and my own recordings. I made certain that it was known who wrote the chant "We Are The Flow", and her numerous other chants that had been long a part of the fabric of the goddess and neo-pagan movements. When her book Ariadne's Thread was published, many more women were able to learn from her.

Over the decades I repeatedly heard from her that she felt unseen, unappreciated, and unrecognized as one of the foremothers of the goddess spirituality movement. Although I would constantly tell her that this was not at all my own experience, this belief caused her continuous resentment and pain. I hope and pray that toward the end of her life she was able to fully receive the recognition she earned and that was there for her all along.

So as it is with all of us, we will pass on and leave behind our legacy. I will continue my commitment to carry Shekhinah's teachings, love of the Goddess, magic, and mysteries as they live in me. She will be lovingly remembered by all of her daughters, sisters, and friends in our ritual and singing circles, and daily lives.

May her spirit be sheltered in the arms of the Mother she loved so deeply, and may she know deep peace.

I will miss you and remember you, my sister.

Ruth Barrett

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