

GUDJEWG SEASON 2

Gudjewg, often from January to February, is a time of violent thunderstorms, heavy rain and flooding: a sparkling, fresh, inundated time. Heat and humidity generate an explosion of plant and animal life. Waterfalls thunder and creeks flow, breathing new life into the landscape. To escape the flooding, goannas, snakes and possums seek refuge in the trees. Magpie geese nest and their eggs are ready for gathering.

If you are not silent, you don't hear what the trees are saying.
Ralph Metzner

Darwin airport, 1 January 1993

Dear Clare,

I'm in the airport waiting for my morning flight to Perth. Before I can no longer believe it, I must tell you what happened last night. I was packing and decided to stay in my room, even though it was New Year's Eve. I'd had enough change for one year. Or so I thought.

It began with a voice in my head.

Something important. You've forgotten something important.

My mind reviewed the past weeks, endless lists, my struggle to finalise one life I'd barely learned and prepare for another that loomed equally unfamiliar. What had I forgotten? Surely nothing important had escaped my vigilance.

What had I forgotten?

You must go back there before it's too late, a voice deep inside prompted me. For what you've missed.

The interior voice persisted. *Something important.* It nagged at me like that persistent student nightmare about the exam I was about to miss, the classroom number illegible on the paper, the textbook lost. But the nagging was turning to fear. Whatever I had forgotten was important. I must return there before it was too late.

I stepped onto the balcony and turned to survey the carport below, marvelling at how empty it looked. In only two hours earlier in the day, a muscular young removalist had packed and stowed the supports of my year's adventure. They were reduced to a large pile of

dirty, damaged, mildewed junk: gas bottles, camping stoves, tents and nets, battered pots and pans, bookcases, bed, gas lamps, tables, chairs and hundreds of books and papers. It had taken me two weeks in the sweltering heat to sort them after my abrupt departure from Mica's land and to decipher, catalogue and pack my research notes. Now all my belongings were in that truck, heading for, back to urban life. I would follow on the morning plane.

Back inside my room, I glanced apprehensively at the clock. Ten-thirty. There was just time, if nothing went wrong. But time for what? I stepped out of my one respectable dress and wrapped a sarong around me. That felt better. Kicking off my shoes, I rummaged in my suitcase for my small torch. I grabbed my compass, wondering why. Outside, cars continued to roar and honk in celebration of the New Year.

Still debating whether I should stay or go, I picked up a book. I'd been reading about Yingana, the Earth Mother sacred to the Gagadju people of northern Australia, the original ancestress from whom all life emanates. She is the symbol of fertility, the creator of all living things, responsible for the fluctuation of the seasons from plenty to scarcity, from Wet to Dry. She came from far across the sea, entering the land through Arnhem Land with a stomach filled with children. In a dilly bag suspended from her head were yams, bulbs and tubers that she planted as she travelled everywhere, forming the hills, creeks, animals and plants. She came from the sunrise and walked from sunrise to sunset, leaving behind many spirit children, giving each group a different language.

Yingana lives mainly underground, but can be seen in many different places at the same time and assumes many different shapes and forms. Her story is the story of contemporary Goddess spirituality—that divine creativity or ultimate mystery is in and around us, immanent, not concentrated in some distant seat of power, a transcendent sky-god. She is the Magna Mater, a child of cosmic process, who bore in her life all the flora and fauna.

For years, I sensed I was in the service of a compassionate and protective goddess but I could not discover how to connect with her wisdom and counsel. Connection with the goddess always eluded me.

Finally, putting my sad thoughts aside, I selected a fireflower from the vase on the bedside table and tucked it behind my ear. I supposed I was ready.

The journey to Deep Creek, only fifty kilometres, was much easier than I had expected. Most revellers were temporarily grounded, preparing to welcome the New Year. The streets of Darwin and the highway were deserted. As I drove, I reviewed the year I had spent at Deep Creek. It had challenged everything I believed and brought my deepest fears to the surface. Mica and I were constantly at war, our mutual stubbornness, a massive cultural clash and the harsh living conditions complicating our unrealistic expectations. For months we didn't speak.

I had tried to heal our relationship and later, when that was impossible, I grieved for the loss of my long friendship with Mica. More importantly, I had grown to love the Deep Creek landscape with a fierce passion. I grieved for leaving but I could not stay.

It was well past eleven when I arrived. I felt the tug of the familiar Deep Creek landmarks, puzzled to find myself travelling that road again so soon after what I had

considered my final departure. I had finished with Mica and my research. Or so I thought. I had said my final farewells to the landscape, to my beloved creek and the trees beside my house that had nurtured and taught me and yet I must have forgotten something. Otherwise, what was I doing back on this road, only hours before I was to fly south?

The place would be deserted and my visit would not be noticed, as Mica was in town for the New Year. I drove down the gravel track past Mica's and pulled into my accustomed parking spot in the clearing beside the white gums. Nobody was about; all was as it had been. Barefoot in the moonlight, I navigated the path and the bridge over the creek, feeling my way as I had done for many months. It had been raining. The earth was soft underfoot and the frogs in the creek were at it again. The house was deserted, stripped of the accoutrements I had used to make it homey, and yet its beauty persisted. I imagined it returning to the bush, vines and flowers claiming its honey-coloured poles, a spring bursting through the earth floor.

The house had served me well. Protected by it, I had learned to listen to the forest's voices, and I felt refreshed down to the cellular level. Now that I'd recovered from the shock of having to move, I saw that my study of environmental ethics had gone well. My sojourn here had certainly not been wasted. I had come to the end of my journey and had to leave.

So what had I forgotten? I opened the screen door, searched the downstairs and climbed the stairs. Emptiness greeted me. There was nothing left. At the shower under the lophostemon tree, I collected a cake of soap that the wallabies had nearly devoured, a comb and a small rubbish bin. Surely I was here for more than that.

Something important, something important, the voice continued inside me.

Then I remembered. Picking my way through the underbrush north of my shower, I recollected the warm feelings that had filled my heart during my solitary nights. Gratitude and peace entered my anxious heart. I remembered the first time I had seen the stars whirling back in June—what I called “the starry vortex.

I hid from the swirling sky in those days, struggling to keep its vastness at bay. I was careful about dark moon. I was not ready to be enlisted. Would I ever be? I learned to brace myself before I looked up at the stars. I was always prepared to hide.

Now I crept through a tangle of branches and pandanus fronds and, stepping off my established path, I stood before the single pandanus that had survived unscathed the Big Fire of 1991. The tree was a giant among the pandanus palms: easily three metres tall. The crisp, brown skirt brushed the earth; a crown of spiky fronds cast sharp, black shadows on the forest floor. The flames stopped before the tree, consuming several small saplings and severely damaging many larger neighbouring trees. Unaccountably, this pandanus was untouched, a pale circle of dry leaves perhaps two metres in diameter its mysterious protection.



The Goddess Pandanus

I imagined this beautiful tree as my local Earth Goddess, but was unable to make contact with her, much less worship her. When I was afraid, I made supplications, burning candles and incense at her feet, leaving sweet wine before her in a small blue china cup. But I was hesitant to enter her aura. I did not feel worthy of her blessing or invited to share in her goodness. I also feared that the deity could be wrathful, sensing my weakness.

Now I stood alone in her presence.

In the starlight, the Goddess beckoned. I stood my ground. She beckoned again, shimmering. *Something important*, I heard the voice whisper inside me. I found myself asking: “Am I ready?”

An order was given for silence. The forest stilled, waiting. All the creatures, even the smallest ones, listened, tiny eyes alert. I could not move.

Again the Goddess beckoned. I breathed in the scented air, drawing strength from deep within the Earth. I drew near, extending a hesitant hand to touch the tree’s dry skirt, like a child reaching for an apron.

I hung my head and stood, paralysed, begging for protection, reassurance. The trees encircled me, bending forward—a circle of Nature, like a circle of friends, high witness to my initiation.

“Look upwards, Wendy,” the tree instructed, “and hold yourself fast.”

I raised my head, turning my eyes to the patch of sky between the lophostemon tree and the Earth Goddess. I breathed through every pore in my body, I swayed. The sky began to spin, sparkling far beyond the circle of witnesses. The trees breathed, the Goddess breathed.

The Goddess called again. What was I waiting for?

Planting my feet and drawing a deep breath, I found a strong voice within myself, calling out to the sky, to the Goddess, to all who would listen. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” I cried. A sacred yes, formed of swirling stars, returning to them, binding me to them, to the Earth.

The Goddess whispered again—words that sounded familiar: *listen, journey, wait, purify, dance*. Where had I heard them before?

Then from the heavens, a single stream of energy spiked into me, through me from my head to my toes, striking something new into being. It sparked to my core, enlivening me. It was ice, it was fire, it was everything. Taut as an arrow in a bow, I stood. Not moving, not one muscle. I could only stare at the sky. Rapture, fierce rapture. I could barely breathe but remarkably, I could speak. At least inside.

Then I heard words, like an announcement, but spoken within me, in my own voice, my announcement. The words shot into me through the crown of my head, energy streaming from stars above, charging me, binding me to Earth and sky.

“I am now consecrated,” I announced. I announced it again. And again: “I am now consecrated.” I felt like a cathedral.

When I could move, I knelt. My shoulders relaxed. The witnessing beings sighed.

I found myself folding my hands before my heart. Turning to the Goddess, I spoke at last: “Thank you.” And removing it from behind my ear, I placed the fireflower before the Goddess.

There was nothing more. The trees beheld: silent witnesses. High in the sky, night birds resumed their chorus, sharply as before. I steadied myself as I got to my feet. The forest pulsated and shimmered—a dance of energy.

Everything I had waited for was here, everything I had forgotten. Before me the Goddess glowed, filigrees of light edging every frond. I had brighter sight, sharper hearing. Within the circle of the Goddess’s protection, I sighed my last goodbye, noticing everything, as if for the first time. I turned around and walked slowly back past the house and across the bridge to my car, carrying my few mementos.

I could breathe easily now and my pounding heart was settling. I stood in the clearing south of the creek, surrounded by pandanus palms, facing north—back past the White Gum Gate, entry to my territory. I noticed the path and the bridge across the creek to the house where my light had shone at night. One path to enlightenment, to the north, the light side. My journey had taken me to the vastness of Australia’s North to tread that path to the light.

I stepped to the right of one of the largest pandanus palms to get a view of the east where I knew the morning light emerged and the lightning storms originated. In my forest haven I couldn't see the horizon, so I took it on faith that the sun rose in the east. A familiar, light place.

I turned to face the south: an entirely different perspective. To the south all was shadow—dark forest, dark path to Mica's place—a masculine place. Barefoot and ragged, I had worn that path, hesitantly back and forth, dancing with my Shadow. Best I could, I had embraced my Shadow on that path to Darkness.

Then I turned to face the west. There was no path on that unfamiliar land; it was wild, tangled and deserted. As with sunrise, I could not see the setting sun. I accepted that it set in the West.

"I must go there now," I announced to the night birds, the witnessing trees. "Another frontier, into middle age."

I had my direction, my marching orders. I climbed into my car and headed back to the city.

As I rattled past the Deep Creek gate, I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was a minute past midnight.

By the time I returned to the Research Unit, something strong was growing inside me, surging from my tailbone, drawing fire from my genitals, pulsating toward my heart. I sat on the edge of the bed, breathing hard. Drawing energy from the base of my spine, I rocked, nourishing my heart, opening, its beating almost too strong to bear. The crown of my head vibrated.

The feeling was of honey flowing in the secret places bees guard. Born deep in the Earth. Fashioned from the wellspring, the terror and blackness of the creekbed, the glancing aspects of sunlight on pandanus fronds, tree shadow, the wash of memory. Overseen by a Goddess of boundless creativity—the immanent divine, inside and around me. Earth surging into heart and back again. I sensed the dynamic cycles of life. The sacred process of becoming myself.

The room vibrated, the night birds screeched. Rich tropical fragrance from the garden below swirled through the open window. I breathed it up from my roots, broadening my shoulders, expanding my chest. A pulse was growing somewhere below my navel, forcing energy upwards. My arms opened like wings. Could I contain more joy?

The dictionary was open on the table before me.

Consecrate. I breathed the word.

Consecrate:

to dedicate

devote as sacred, deify

to make sacred

to set apart (a person or thing) as sacred to the Deity

“consecrate your hands thus unto the Lorde.”

I drew my hands in front of my eyes and inspected them, scratched and torn, nails black from digging in the earth. After a year in the bush, they had a grudging familiarity with real work. I smiled. How handy I had become.

Consecrate. That was the word. My journey distilled into one word, one message. My direction. I wrapped my arms around myself again.

I crossed the room, opened the screen door and stepped onto the verandah. All around the city slept beneath a sky of soft, luminous pink. Dawn was moments away, its promise having swept away the stars. I breathed in—breathed with—the frangipani tree, the fireflowers, the peaceful garden.

Turning to the east and opening my arms, I embraced the warm day, the New Year.

The new day breathed with me: *Yes.*