

PRAISE FOR *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water*

“In this stunning collection, we are offered pilgrimage in its most generous sense. We are given joy in the familiar and the strange. We are given grief in the dark night of the soul and the potent glare of truth. We are given the vast breadth of centuries and the intimate essence of moments. This is the home ground of the heart, and the wending ways of body and spirit.”

– **Regina O’Melveny, author of *The Book of Madness and Cures***

“*Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* is both striking and stimulating...Reading it now I see that I owe a debt to these Americans who came to discover Ireland but in their own way they have made me look at Ireland through New World eyes...shoulder to shoulder, with ancient eyes and young thoughts commingled.”

– **From the Foreword by Gerard Clarke, County Meath, Ireland, Irish Guide & Ecologist**

“A gorgeous book . . . From meeting modern stone diviners, to finding the hag-goddess *Cailleach*, to tromps across wet moss to greet old stones, *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* is a document of a life-altering journey. It reveals the beautiful mystery of an ancient tradition, and the power of ancestral land in sourcing what’s essential now.”

– **Sonya Lea, author of *Wondering Who You Are***

“These writers and artists sought inspiration, spiritual connection and personal enlightenment by choosing to retreat to Ireland. *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* is proof that they found what they were searching for. This book captures Ireland’s haunting beauty and mystical history. The blessing is that they have shared it with us. We are grateful.”

– **Sue Booth-Forbes, Director, Anam Cara Writer’s and Artist’s Retreat, Eyeries, Ireland**

“This deeply soul-filled work is drenched in beauty, longing, memory, and intimacy. The land, the ancient stones and wells are eloquent with the voices of the ancestors who speak their wisdom to those who listen.”

– **Patricia Reis, author of *Motherlines and Daughters of Saturn***

“Carolyn Brigit Flynn has once again assembled a soulful, heart-full feast to savor. *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* offers a glimpse into the timeless allure, elemental nature, and enduring enchantment of Ireland’s magical landscape. For an armchair traveler, the Irish descendant, or simply a soulful pilgrim this book offers deep, pure nourishment.”

– **L.R. Heartsong, author of *To Kneel and Kiss the Earth***

“Open *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water*. Enter the mystic voices of carved stone, falling feather, awe-filled chamber, shimmering well, hidden missive, and simmering interwoven bloods. The taste long lingers. The reverberations flood. Blessed be those who sing the secret phrases of the rocks and rivers, rising suns, stone jewelry, and gas stations of blessed ancient mother Ireland.”

– **Pamela Eakins, author of *Tarot of the Spirit***

Sacred Stone
Sacred Water

Sacred Stone Sacred Water

Women Writers & Artists Encounter Ireland

edited by **Carolyn Brigit Flynn**

foreword by Gerard Clarke

designed by Janis O'Driscoll

White Cloud Press
Ashland, Oregon

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With thanks to the land and people of Ireland
for their profound welcome, enduring wisdom and ancient beauty

Thanks to Gerard Clarke, our brilliant Irish guide

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Sister Phil of *Solas Bhríde* for guidance and wisdom

Sue Boothe Forbes of Anam Cara Writers' Retreat for beauty and hospitality
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And to the goddess/saint Brigit, divine feminine patron of Ireland

CONTENTS

Foreword	<i>Gerard Clarke</i>	xi
Preface		xiii
Introduction		1
WELCOME		
This	<i>Ursi Barshi</i>	8
She Calls	<i>Sarojani Rohan</i>	11
<i>Fáilte. Fáilte. Fáilte.</i>	<i>Judy Tsafirir</i>	12
What Brought Me to Ireland	<i>Jessica Webb</i>	13
Field After Field	<i>Sandy Dempsey</i>	15
Feathers	<i>Janis O'Driscoll</i>	16
Scribe	<i>Carolyn Brigit Flynn</i>	19
The Grass Sings	<i>Jean Mahoney</i>	21
LIGHT		
Autumnal Equinox	<i>Sarojani Rohan</i>	24
Autumn Equinox at <i>Sliabh na Cailleach</i>	<i>June BlueSpruce</i>	30
The Other	<i>Jessica Webb</i>	32
Sacred Jolt (<i>Sliabh na Cailleach</i>)	<i>Jennifer Comeau</i>	33
After Loughcrew	<i>Carolyn Brigit Flynn</i>	34
On This Morning	<i>Linda Serrato</i>	35
Dimensions	<i>Sandy Dempsey</i>	36
STONE		
Who Will Roll Back the Stone?	<i>Anne Fitzgerald</i>	41
Boyne Valley	<i>Suzanne Daub</i>	42
Teach Yourself to Read Your Stone	<i>Jennifer Comeau</i>	47

ANCESTOR		
Carrying My Dead	<i>Nora Jamieson</i>	50
To My Mother, One Month Gone	<i>Jean Mahoney</i>	53
Father	<i>Sandy Dempsey</i>	54
The Territory of Memory	<i>Nora Jamieson</i>	59
Hunger	<i>June BlueSpruce</i>	64
O Come All Ye Rovers (song)	<i>Sarojani Rohan</i>	66
<i>Solas Bhríde</i> – St Brigid in Kildare	<i>Anne Fitzgerald</i>	68
WATER		
Reflection at Castletownbere	<i>Linda Serrato</i>	72
Fishing Vessels at Sunset	<i>Anne Fitzgerald</i>	74
Heart Wide Open	<i>Judy Tsafirir</i>	77
Island Song	<i>Suzanne Daub</i>	78
Bridhe's Well	<i>Ursi Barshi</i>	81
Mother Well	<i>Jessica Webb</i>	82
BLESSING		
Blessing	<i>Judy Tsafirir</i>	88
On the Bus to Castletownbere	<i>Suzanne Daub</i>	90
Wedding Party	<i>Linda Serrato</i>	93
Blue-Eyed, Carrot-Topped Boy	<i>Jennifer Comeau</i>	94
Insomnia	<i>June BlueSpruce</i>	97
The Goose	<i>Ursi Barshi</i>	98
Healing	<i>June BlueSpruce</i>	100
At Mary Madison's, County Cork	<i>Linda Serrato</i>	102
On Returning	<i>Jean Mahoney</i>	105
The Gas Station	<i>Carolyn Brigit Flynn</i>	107
Contributor Bios		116
Photograph Attributions and Locations		120

FOREWORD

by Gerard Clarke

I have worked as a guide in Ireland for more than 25 years, and it was under that heading that I first met Carolyn Brigit Flynn in 2002. She was bringing a group of writers to Ireland, and needed someone to show them around the Boyne Valley. Thus began a connection that has continued, broadened and deepened over the intervening years. Carolyn, I discovered, was not only a creative writer and poet but a woman who was passionate about her roots and equally passionate about her love of Irish heritage and culture.

She brought a fresh way of looking at what we take for granted here in Ireland and presented it to her fellow American travelers and seekers. I gradually came to understand what was required of me, but also realized that these visitors had a great willingness to explore the way Irish society now lives in a landscape steeped in history, archaeology, folklore and tradition.

I have worked at many of the major historical sites in Ireland, but the times I spent at Newgrange and the Hill of Tara have been some of the happiest years of my life. At Newgrange, I was lucky to meet renowned academics as well as poets, musicians and deeply spiritual people. I was also in charge of the Hill of Tara, Ireland's most sacred ritual site, for five years. The exploration of Tara in every discipline taught me about the influence of landscape, history and beliefs on the creation of a national identity. The challenge as a guide was to put all that into a coherent and logical interpretation for those not of Irish background.

Carolyn and her groups of writers and artists would arrive in Ireland every few years. Each visit brought its own dynamic but also a joyful, passionate and at times irreverent look at Ireland. The works produced by the fourteen dedicated and inspiring artists in *Sacred Stone*, *Sacred Water* are both striking and stimulating. Looking at the art and photographs and reading the deeply felt poems and prose brings back the excitement and joy that was in the air each day as we progressed from site to site. The wealth of knowledge and experience each brought, their willingness to listen, and their beginning to understand what being truly Irish means is humbling.

Reading it now, I see that I have grown in their company. I owe a debt to these Americans who came to discover Ireland, but who in their own way have made me look at Ireland not just from the traditional viewpoint but through New World eyes. That has impressed me, but also given me the confidence to be proud all over again. That we can stand there, shoulder to shoulder, with ancient eyes and young thoughts commingled.

PREFACE

Working with these groups has not really been work at all; rather a chance to affirm my beliefs in the ancestors, in our landscape and in the people of Ireland. While my role was to be the introducer of Ireland to the group, I was always conscious that their journey onwards after our four or five days together would involve meeting different interpreters in different parts of the country. Carolyn has chosen well with all of her Irish locations and guides.

Sacred Stone, Sacred Water is a thoughtful, warm collection of connections, reactions and statements of a diverse group of people from all over the United States, brought together by their love of art and of Ireland. I look forward with eagerness and anticipation to our next Irish American encounter.

Beir bua dibh, agus beannachtai deithe na cloiche` is na h-uisce oraibh go leir.

Best wishes and the blessings of the gods of the stones and the waters on you all.

–Gerard Clarke
Ecologist and Eco-Spiritual Mentor
Mayo and Meath, Ireland

The predawn autumn equinox morning was dark and crisp as we climbed the hill of Loughcrew, also known for its old Irish name, *Sliabh na Cailleach*, or “Hill of the Old Woman.” Our twenty-minute walk had begun in twilight darkness; we could still see stars in the Irish sky. Still, as we climbed we were at the cusp of time. As we crested the hill, the sky was cerulean blue—otherworldly and clear. A few stars still shone.

Before us was the sacred passage mound of Loughcrew, an apparent grassy hill about 30 feet high, lined with huge megalithic stones. Back in the day—that is, 5,000 years ago—this “hill” was a dazzling mound of immense stones covered in small white quartz, with an inner chamber large enough to hold a dozen people. Each year on the autumn and spring equinox, the rising sun—then and still today—precisely enters the inner chamber and illuminates the carved stones within. The ancient symbols carved upon the stones seem to glow and pulse. It is a breathtaking sight.

That is, if the sky is clear and the sun emerges from behind the clouds. Which is never taken for granted in our beloved Ireland. I’ve climbed Loughcrew on Equinox morning in the past only to be met by low, gray skies. That morning, however, the signs were good. We found our place in line alongside some two hundred other women, men and children. There was a hush as the horizon turned pink, then rosy salmon, too bright for words, then the orange sun peaked the hill and touched our faces. It is not exaggeration to say that every single human on the hill that morning was beautiful. Our much-loved guide, Gerard Clarke, and our wonderful driver, Trevor Mitchell, had climbed the hill with us. All of us wore the wide-open face of awe.

In this book, you will see that the solar alignment occurred, and we were there to witness it. You will read the poetry and writing that unfolded, and see photographic images of an unrepeatably moment. You will, as well, enter countless other moments—small encounters and epic sights—that occurred during our two-week journey. Our time in Ireland seared each of us and changed us thoroughly. To share what we saw and felt, we used poetry, story, essay. We used the lens of our cameras and the click of our phones. We used pen and ink, paintbrush and lithograph.

What emerged in *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* is a vision of Ireland not often seen. Most of our group of fourteen women writers and artists have photographs in this book, but I want to acknowledge Janis O’Driscoll and Suzanne Daub, whose photos grace many of these pages. As I watched the two of them with their cameras,

holding still for the shot, I understood that we had seriously good art in the making. In particular, I want to offer gratitude to Janis O’Driscoll, whose design for this book elevates these works into a single, elegant vision.

Our journey was a writing retreat, and we wrote every day. As we journeyed, I was deeply moved by each woman’s writing and poetry, which seemed to spring from a unique collaboration between her individual spirit and the ancient Irish landscape. The group included published writers, artists, novelists, poets, photographers, painters, medical doctors, healers, musicians, educators, political organizers, social workers, and international women’s activists. The work of this talented circle was elevated, intelligent, soulful, and finely honed. Ireland had opened all of our hearts, and we took up her invitation.

Ours was an intimate journey, and *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* is an intimate book. Everywhere we turned in the Irish landscape, stones had outlasted millennia and water was all around, often falling from the sky. Our group of writers and artists let all of this enter. With this book, you can join us.

–Carolyn Brigit Flynn

INTRODUCTION

Three Beautiful Parts of Ireland

Sacred Stone, Sacred Water emerged from a writing retreat and tour in three remarkable parts of Ireland, focused upon mythic places and sacred sites that still live prominently in the Irish landscape. Our journey included the **Boyne Valley**, about an hour north of Dublin in the east, the **Beara Peninsula** in the scenic southwest, and the ancient town of **Kildare** in the midlands.

This book is organized thematically rather than by geographic area, and in this section I will tell you a bit about the places we visited and the images in this book. As you read *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water*, if you are taken by a particular photograph, you can find the name of the photographer as well as the location indexed in the back.

For readers who have been to Ireland, the images from these three wonderful parts of the island will bring her magic to you all over again. If you have not yet been, the writing, images and art will give your heart and spirit a new journey of its own. Perhaps *Sacred Stone, Sacred Water* will inspire you to travel to *Éire* yourself, or to return. You will always be grateful for the chance to walk the land of this wonderful new/old world.

Boyne Valley

We began in the verdant Boyne Valley, which is famous throughout the world as the location of Ireland’s premier ancient site, the majestic passage mound Newgrange. Ever since my first visit to Newgrange in 1996, I have remained thunderstruck by a love of the old sacred stones of Ireland.

Newgrange is a remarkable feat of engineering and astronomical knowledge, and archeologists conclude it is most appropriately called a monument or a cathedral. It was built 5,000 years ago of megalithic stones, each about eight feet tall and weighing about two tons. The indigenous Irish placed these massive slabs of granite laying sideways in a huge circle about the size of an acre, and then built a passageway of vertical standing stones about sixty feet long into the circle. At the end of that long entrance, they built a stunning inner chamber of stones, all carved with intricate designs, including Newgrange’s famous triple spiral. Following a form developed over several centuries, they covered the chamber with layers of stone and soil, to create a huge mound about 40 feet high and 250 feet across.

The construction of Newgrange 5,000 years ago, without motorized power of any kind, is amazing enough to dazzle the modern mind. A thousand years older than Stonehenge in England and the pyramids in Egypt, it is one of the oldest extant buildings in the world. Inside, Newgrange is intact, dry, profoundly quiet and church-like. The great mound endured in Irish myth and folktale through the ages, and was known as *Bru na Boinne*, or “Mansion on the River Boyne.” But the most remarkable aspect of Newgrange was re-discovered in the 1960s, when archeologists found that the inner chamber was precisely designed to receive the rays of the rising sun on the Winter Solstice. To walk through the passageway of Newgrange, to experience a recreation of the rising Winter Solstice sun as a pinhole of golden light broadening to fill the inner chamber, is to touch an enduring aspect of the human spirit.

Our group spent a day at *Bru na Boinne*, along with its nearby sister mound Knowth, which is equally large and stunning with two openings, one oriented to the Equinox sunrise and another to the sunset. We visited a small passage mound on the Hill of Tara, with its own solar orientation to the cross-quarter days of *Imbolc* and *Samhein* in early November and February. And on one incredible dawn morning, we climbed the sacred hill of Loughcrew and experienced the sunrise Equinox alignment directly ourselves.

The Boyne Valley has been continuously occupied by humans for 9,000 years, and all of this settlement occurred around the valley’s central organizing element: the River Boyne. This beautiful, slow-moving ancient river is older than the last Ice Age. Her earliest known name is *River Bóuvinda*— *Bó* meaning cow, a sacred animal in Neolithic Ireland, and *vin* meaning white or illuminated. Thus the Boyne was anciently known as the “River of the White Cow Goddess.”

This great river was always nearby as we explored the many ritual places of the Boyne Valley. We visited Ireland’s ancient monastic sites from the 5th to the 15th centuries: Kells, Monasterboice, Bective Abbey, with their bucolic stone ruins and magnificent Celtic crosses, intricately carved with biblical motifs and stories. These places, and the ancient towns that grew among them, make the Boyne Valley a profound place to fall in love with the Irish landscape, and to touch many eras in Ireland’s long, remarkable story.

Beara Peninsula

From the Boyne Valley we journeyed to the Beara Peninsula in the southwest, a somewhat off-the-beaten-path part of Ireland, full of marvelous, hidden gems. Or not so hidden, as we came to see as we arrived, wide-eyed as we all were with glorious views of the sea, the cliffs, the shoreline and the lakes and rivers of the Caha Mountains.

Surrounded at all times by the sea, our group stayed in lodges above the ocean, near the ancient port town of Castletownbere. All around us were remnants of old Ireland, a world of water and of stone, the last vestiges of old Irish churches, stone circles, and venerable standing stone circles. We spent a day at the Anam Cara Writer’s Retreat in Eyeries, and several pieces in the book were written there, where we could settle in, write, and enjoy the fabulous cascading waterfalls of its grounds. Sue Boothe Forbes of Anam Cara introduced us to the Irish storyteller and stone diviner Mary Madison, who unforgettably offered us her deep insight and lyrical stories, giving us old Ireland in a pure, unfettered form.

But it was our day exploring the Ring of Beara and its ancient landscape that most changed and grounded us. The rain poured in buckets all day long. Still, we told our guide that yes, we wanted to hike in boots and umbrellas across three drenched, muddy fields to the Ardgroom Stone Circle. Built 4,000 years ago, the stones stand together in a kind of eternity, withstanding human hazards and the endless wind and rain. As the Irish skies poured, we felt what we might have missed on a sunny day: that the stones are alive, they have personalities, that they too suffer and absorb the elements of life. They have stood as silent witness to humanity for four millennia, from the time of the very ancient Irish who set them there, to us modern-day women in our rubber shoes and engineered waterproof coats.

That same day of endless rain, we drove to the Hag of Beara, one of southwest Ireland’s iconic spirits. She is a craggy stone on a tall cliff at the edge of the sea, and in folktales is known as the earthbound remnant of Ireland’s old woman of the land, The Hag of Beara, or the *Cailleach*—the same old hag woman of Loughcrew. The stone Hag of Beara was laden with offerings: coins, flowers, jewelry, beads, clooties or prayer cloths, all faded and worn by sun, wind and rain, and now part of the ancient divine woman in her stone version. We kneeled before her in the pouring rain, and one of us wept in her presence.

The port town of Castletownbere was a constant delight during our time in Beara. We enjoyed an evening of traditional music at MacCarthy’s Pub, explored the old Irish town of longtime taverns and modern mobile phone stores, fishing gear and upscale cafes. We sighed once again at how wonderfully Ireland mixes the ancient and the modern as we sipped excellent Irish tea, strong coffee, and of course, a pint of Guinness or a glass of Irish whiskey, or two.

Kildare

The divine feminine of Ireland remained with us as we journeyed to the ancient town of Kildare, where we immersed ourselves in the spirit and tradition of Brigit, Ireland’s famous goddess and saint. We began with a

visit to Brigit's Holy Well, where we blessed ourselves and each other with her healing waters. We kneeled and prayed, and left our offerings and intentions on the sacred tree above the well.

Among the great gifts in Kildare today is the opportunity to visit the Catholic sisters of *Solas Bhríde* Centre, the name meaning "Brigid's Flame" in Irish. In 1995, the sisters re-lit Kildare's eternal flame to Brigit, which, incredibly, was once tended ritually by priestesses and nuns for at least 800 years and perhaps much longer in the mists of time. The sisters and their community now carry Brigit's flame and spirit forward, honoring both the goddess who was a patroness of poets, holy wells and the eternal flame, and the famous saint who traveled with her people into the Christian era as protector of the poor and downtrodden, mistress of the land and animals, builder of monasteries and the educator of women.

At the site of Brigit's monastery in Kildare, we visited the Fire Temple where her eternal flame burned. We explored the massive round tower of what had been her thriving medieval monastic center and walked the grounds of her abbey. We spent a day of writing and retreat at the newly built *Solas Bhríde* Centre, an acclaimed, modern center for Celtic spirituality devoted to Ireland's indigenous ways of caring for the feminine spirit, the earth, and each other.

Later in Kildare, we had the good luck to happen upon excellent traditional music in a pub, dancing with the locals and raising a pint or two. Afterwards the musicians, charming, older, witty men, took out their phones and made sure we all became friends on Facebook. This and other moments brought us into modern-day Ireland and her people, who everywhere met us with calm grace, humor, intelligence, and dignity.

I come from this land, as my grandparents were born here. I visit often to renew my connection with the ancient landscape and to see my Irish cousins, who keep me grounded in the world of modern Ireland. Still, one of the great joys of my life is to bring others to this beautiful Old World landscape. Our group of writers and artists, many with their own Irish heritage, formed a living tapestry as we traveled in September 2016. To have created a book by such talented people, with writing and art inspired by such beautiful parts of Ireland, provides sustenance that goes deep. These pages bring me joy; may they feed your soul. May they offer praise to the ancient spirits of old Ireland, *Éire*, who live on, still.

–Carolyn Brigit Flynn



WELCOME

This

This land wide open
The scent of tundra on its mossy body
Skin torn and healed into
Massive rock slabs—
This land calls me home.

Heather, lichen and herbs are
in its welcome bouquet.
Crouched bushes tell
Of the wintery gale.

They invite me into homes
They hold in their midst.
Merry small buildings
Huddled together to tell
Stories of long gone inhabitants.

They murmur in a language
Only history knows
Accented by a robin's call
Beginning with a fluty song
And finishing with a shiver
Evoking a sweet melancholy
And a sense of
Soothing solitude.

—*Ursi Barshi*





She Calls

When day is done, and the clatter
and cacophony of the world's roar subsides,
I hear her.

Gentle lapping waves along the Aran Island shores,
echo of surf crashing 300-foot cliff fortress walls.
The crunch of gravel under hiking boots
headed for solitary mountain trails.
Lone hikers tuned to the melodies of sheep and wind,
the generous quiet of green rolling hills.
The blazing music of fiddles and whistles,
bouzoukis and bodhrans spilling from pub doorways
into the rain-washed streets at midnight.
Hearth fires still being lit from peat
gathered in backyard bogs. The very particular shade
of softened golden light falling between
rainbows and rain.

Megalithic passage tombs sharing secrets
with those who listen. Stone circles waiting
to add their quiet strength and silent messages.
The music of an ancient language, sliding sideways
into the Irish tongue. Sheep and wild shades of green
that meet your eyes in every direction.
Wisdom of old ways.

Ireland has called again. She has become a siren song.
Traveling across the waters. Whispering through
the California pines and old growth redwoods.
Blowing across dry parched grasses
of my drought-stricken state.
Coming through my window.

Landing on my pillow.
Entering my dreams and my waking.
Finding me, once again, across time and distance.
Like a lake, stream, river, sea,
Ireland is Friend. Lover. Teacher.
Hearth. And Sanctuary.

Though I thought she did not know me,
though my name was from another land,
Ireland called to me across the waters
and landing on her shores
I had come home.

-Sarojani Rohan



Fáilte. Fáilte. Fáilte.

You are welcome here.

May this moment usher in a new era,
where I embody the light of the Universe
and stars coming through me,
where I am the crescent moon
put up over the gate to the festival.*

–Judy Tsafir

*Inspired by a poem “When I See You and How You Are”
by 13th-century poet Rumi

What Brought Me to Ireland

Ireland actually brought *me*. It sought me out and gently but unrelentingly marched me through the necessary steps. Each part of the journey here was prepared by a “deeper river than I am,” to use a phrase borrowed from Jenny Comeau.

The sudden longing for this land was born of desire that began long ago, without my realizing. My father told me of his trip here twenty years ago. He could not stop talking about his encounter with a group of schoolgirls... the joy he felt experiencing their energy and beauty. Somehow, he caught how different they seemed from the ones he might have known back in the States. I remember feeling curious. What really touched him so deeply, eclipsing every other memory of his experience here? Was he just feeling so different because of the land, or was it simply the adventure of travelling to a foreign place that was exhilarating for him? Was that really the beginning of my longing for the place?

I now find myself at a strange and unfamiliar juncture. After retirement, basic logistics and a new lifestyle are established. This opens and frees me up to truly begin my golden years, my third act, my fourth quarter. Oh! I so wish them to be hearty and rich and deep! That inevitable Blue Bus will come calling to whisk my spirit away. How to make best use of my time here and now?

Know Thyself rings true in my ears—in my head—and joins the tinnitus already present. Tinnitus. A constant reminder that my head is already reverberating with sensations of the afterlife. So please, prepare me for more unknown! May I be ever more familiar with the inner landscape, to help ground and heal and experience more of the Joy I deeply know is there waiting for me. Salud!

–Jessica Webb