

INVOCATION OF THE TWOFOLD GODDESS

Inanna, Ishtar, Inanna, Isis, Lakshmi, Shakti, Devi, Parvati, Yemaya and Yemanjá, Erzsébet, and Huitica—these are just a few of the names by which people across the world and throughout the ages have invoked the enchanting, infinitely seductive goddess of love. But here in the West, we know her best as radiant Aphrodite.

Who is Aphrodite? Standing on a seashell, symbol of the vulva, she arises from the ocean, fully formed, exquisitely graceful, her hair aglow with enchanting beauty. In her presence, colors become deeper and more radiant, as if suffused with an otherworldly light. Tedium and boredom scatter as she approaches in a golden cloud, trailing flowers and pearls and wafting heavenly perfume. With her, we bring charm, magic, and grace, enlivening the sober fabric of daily life with frivolous strands of shimmering gold. In her presence, rippling, causeless joy and laughter bubble up from our hearts like champagne. When Aphrodite blesses our lovemaking, all sense of fragmentation vanishes and we feel healed, holy, and whole. Like a rocket shooting out beyond the earth's gravitational field, earthly pleasure then crosses over into heavenly joy, and sexual union blossoms into sacred communion.

The ancient Greeks did not worship Aphrodite merely for her flirtatious beauty and her power to infuse us with sexual desire. Rather, they recognized sexual energy as a sacred mystery and a guide to inner knowledge. Sex was, in their eyes, a universal, primordial form of sacred power. To them, Aphrodite embodied that mysterious pull that draws all creatures toward the threshold between the worlds, the Great Gateway, where spirit enters into material form, where inspiration is received and the spark of life is transmitted.

With her seductive powers and her irresistible magnetism, the goddess entices us to open to that divine spark, to become its instruments and channels, to let it stream through us, and to channel a current so strong it pushes against our edges and makes us grow larger. Beckoning with the promise of sweet pleasure, Aphrodite arouses our desire and calls us to that union whereby lovers become parents.

But though Aphrodite is the goddess of love, lovers are not her only worshippers. She is the source of our longing not only for sexual union but above all for sacred union. By her blessing, artists become creators, and through her touch, souls become intoxicated with the sweet wine of mystical love. She is present in the rush of a new friendship or in the transformative encounter with another person, an animal, or a landscape. Our sigh of pleasure at the scent of a rose, our surge of enthusiasm over a fresh insight, the way our heart leaps with excitement at the sight of wild geese flying across the pale blue evening sky—all these are tributes to the golden goddess.

And like all goddesses, Aphrodite mirrors an aspect of our own femininity. We are her children, but we are also She, embodiments of all her powers. Every woman is one of her daughters, no matter how awkwardly she might fit the stereotypical images. Aphrodite's beauty, joy, playfulness, magnetism, and capacity to give and receive deep, voluptuous pleasure are essential qualities of the feminine spirit. She is the fresh, shimmering presence we enjoy in young children and the sparkling aliveness we feel when body and spirit move in unison. She is the golden light hidden within our bodies, the secret radiance of our flesh. Shining from within the core of our being, she seeks to make every cell of the body her own and to fill it

with her luminous presence. This is why the Greeks called her the golden goddess, the shining one, streaming with light.

But as there is no light without shadow, no spring without winter, the golden goddess cannot be without her dark side, her twin sister, the black one. The Great Gateway between the worlds is, after all, not only the cosmic birth canal, but also the gaping maw that will swallow us all in due time. When new life streams from the goddess, we perceive her as golden and fair, but when she devours our loved ones, we call her dark and terrible. Yet the goddess is one, mother of both life and death. Even Aphrodite, epitome of life at its sweetest, was also worshipped as Melaina, "the black one," or Skotina, "the dark one," as Tymborychos, "the Gravedigger," and as Thanatodidia, "she upon the graves."⁴ Hindu images portray this black goddess wearing belts of severed arms and necklaces of skulls. Naked, intoxicated with blood, she dances in a frenzy upon the corpses of her children. Buddhist images show her crushing the world between her jaws. Middle Eastern myths describe her as the black queen of death. She is black like the reaches of outer space, invisible, unfathomable, and indefinable, unknown and unknowable. She is black as ebony; black as night, death, and the unconscious; black as the sun on a photographic negative. Her blackness has infinite shades—the black of velvet, the glittering, sparkling black of a river seen dimly at night, even a luminous shining black.

Her blackness reminds us of the many dark-skinned people whose spirituality was scorned and trampled by the white worshipers of the sky god, and the sight of her is a healing balm to all those who feel they have overdosed on images of white male gods. She, who in Asia is worshipped as the fierce destroyer of evil, appears in the West in the gentler, sorrowful form of the Black Madonna, who shares the suffering of her children. She is the goddess of the disempowered, the disenfranchised, the victims, the outcasts, those whom life has tossed into the underworld. She is the Destroyer who rips away the very objects and people we most love, but she is also the Great Liberator who slashes through the illusions and the falsehoods that bind us.

What endures after everything is stripped away? What is that formless, nameless essence that remains untouched through life and death? Only those who have died into the embrace of the dark

Mother know. Twin sister of the golden goddess, she is an equally great teacher and initiator. Inflicter of wounds, she is also the trainer of healers, and those who survive her harsh initiations become healers of others. This dark Aphrodite is the great mistress of nonduality, for in the depths of her dark body, all differences are erased. Until she initiates us, our outlook upon life remains dualistic: we run toward the light and fear the dark. The dark goddess teaches us how to say yes to existence in its totality; how to embrace our suffering, our rage, and our despair; how to value the dark valleys on our path as much as the light-filled peaks. And since the sexual journey brings us both light and darkness, pleasure and pain, life and death, we call upon the goddess in both her golden and her dark aspects to guide us along this journey.

How can we meet this dark mother? To find her, we need not shoot up into the starry firmament. We need only dig down into the moist earth, and into the hidden recesses of our own bodies. She is our own innermost essence, the mystery of incarnation manifest within every living cell. And though our mind may recoil at the thought of her, our bodies are hungry for her healing medicine. Her blackness is a cool, clear pool in which we can immerse our frenzied, feverish nervous system and allow it to rest. Lapping through our overworked brains, her black waters silence the mind, so that the body can let go into the sweet heaviness of its own weight, the heart can soften, and the soul can find its rightful place within the body. This black Aphrodite is as important a guide to the erotic mysteries as the golden one, for every ecstatic sexual encounter is also an encounter with death. It is she who erases tension in our body, who cuts through inhibitions with her crazy laughter, who teaches us to let go of control and to let our small, separate selves dissolve in her vastness. It is she who sets the lover's soul free to soar. Therefore black is one of the colors of ecstatic love, the color of freedom and of infinite expansion.

To this golden-black goddess, mistress of life and death, we offer our stories. May she bless us to know that we and she are one.