few days ago, I rode my bike through forests and across pastures along winding paths which inclined ever upward to find a nearby ritual site. I live in a valley in the southern Ardennes, 7 kilometers away from an ancient Celtic town and 5 kilometers from a former Roman settlement. All this land was once heavily forested; when the Treverii lived here, wolves, wild boars, bears, lynx, and aurochs roamed through massive oaks, alder, and beech.

It’s not sure when the last lynx disappeared from the Ardennes, though they live not far, a bit south in Leucii lands in the Vosges. The last bear was killed in that same region in the late 1700’s: to find one you now need to travel far east to where the Baiuvarii lived. Or, you can cross the mountains where dwelt the Helvetti and the Briganti to the land of the Vennotetes, where brown bears incur slowly northward through the white-capped mountains now called the Alps.
A ten-minute walk from my home will take me to the spot where “the last wolf” was killed. He died not far from where the writer Ernest Hemingway, during the second World War, was once heard screaming in a wine cellar. Hemingway was a guest in the house, but was secretly drinking all the wine of the owners. To hide his deed he filled the bottles with his own piss and recorked them, but then, one drunken night, couldn’t remember which bottles were which and drank the wrong one.

The last wolf died in 1893, but he is no longer the last wolf. A thirty minute walk from the last wolf’s murder and Hemingway’s piss-drunk mistake takes me to the place where mangled and mauled corpses of sheep heralded the wolf’s return.

All these animals, including me, live in the forests that the Romans called “Arduenna Sylva,” the Forests of Arduinna. Arduinna is a Celtic goddess of the hunt. Her name meaning ‘of the high places,’ Arduinna was later associated by the Romans with Diana. The Romans made always the mistake of assuming their gods were universal, that there could not be more than one type of a specific divinity in the world, just as the Christians later did and Anglo-American neopagans often still do.
But also there could be an older god or goddess there regardless, just as there was an older forest here. The Forests of Arduinna were once part of ἕρκυνια, the Hercynian Forest, which until the end of the Roman Empire spread as far west as the edge of what is now France and as far east as what is now Poland. The Oaks of Arduinna have distant relatives, long-lost cousins cut off from each other by “progress” and “civilization.” The Morvan in central France, where the Aedui left the ruins of their great city Bibracte (30,000 inhabitants at the time of Roman invasion), is one of those cousins. Both those forests are siblings of the Forests of Vosegus, another hunting god, in what is now called the Vosges, and of the Black Forest (Schwartzwald in modern German), where the Allemanni lived and worshiped Abnoba, a goddess of forests, streams, and hunting.

They were all once part of a greater forest, so perhaps also once all spoken of as the same god (Perkuna, some believe, a god of oak and thunder). But I have been in all four of those forests: they are not the same, nor are their gods. The Forests of Abnoba are not the Forests of Arduinna nor of Vosegus, nor of Sequana (possibly the goddess of the Morvan, but definitely the goddess of the Seine river and especially its source).

Each forest is similar and yet not at all the same, just like gods and goddess are often similar and yet not the same. The wolves that returned to Arduinna’s forests are not the same that were killed, yet they are most definitely kin, just as the wild boars which grunt and gruffle in the woods above my favorite stream are kin to those wild boars in Abnoba’s and Vosegus’s forest.

Just as they were all one continuous forest and yet also separate forests spread across varying climates and terrain, with their own gods and their own peoples, all the streams here are one stream and yet many, many others. That stream I mentioned, where I sit and dream and talk to gods while listening to boars grunt and gruffle, is its own stream with its own goddess. Yet she soon meets up with another, who is already myriad streams.

Soon after she is with another, and then another, and then they all dance down to the Syre, which herself starts at Syren near Hiirschdelchen, the “small forested valley of deer.” Syre and my stream and all these others eventually meet at the Moselle, which flows down from Vosegus’s forest and eventually meets the great Rhine (who starts in the mountains of the Helvetii) before flowing out into the sea.

Speaking of streams, one of the goddesses of the Treverii who lived here in Arduinna’s forests is a goddess of river crossings, Ritona. The land here pulses with water, the streams like capillaries carrying water from the hillsides into the larger arteries of rivers in periodic
rushes and ebbs. The stream I love most here is call the Fassbach, “the fasting stream” because of its swells and ebbs. You can see quite quickly watching the patterns of it and all the others why a goddess of river crossings would be popular.

To get to the ritual site I needed only cross one such stream, but it was easy. Like the Roman empire before them, all the newer rulers laid roads everywhere, bridging streams only when they could not be shunted into large metal pipes under asphalt. The path I took was ancient, however, one of the myriad forest roads which connected ancient Celtic and then later Frankish villages to each other. These roads are as old as the villages themselves, reliable paths villagers would take from one to another to visit cousins and friends, to sell their eggs, meat, grain, and vegetables, or to walk to sacred sites and festivals.

Much of the forest through which that path to the ritual site took is new. Arduinna’s oaks are mostly gone from this area, hewn and toppled by the villagers at behest of the Roman lords, and then the Frankish lords, or for heating, or for more pasture for cattle. What remained of her great forest through the “middle ages” then shrunk even faster and more furiously as the factories began and newer Empires (the British, the French, the Nazi, and then the Neoliberal) demanded tree-flesh to burn or with which to build.
A few oaks remain, and they are sacred. Just outside my window is a massive grandmother of an oak, the size and age of which the architects rebuilding Notre Dame cathedral desperately want. They seek to cut down the sacred to build the sacred, which is nothing new for the Catholic Church—Thor’s oaks were toppled everywhere and their wood used to build churches to replace the old religions. But at least the Catholics knew those trees had been sacred: the Protestants, the Christians of the cities, cared not whether the wood had been sacred or mundane—it all burned the same in their mills.

This particular sacred oak, which stands above a sacred spring marked only by a large rock, is not alone. Upon a hill overlooking this valley is a sacred healing oak, fronted by a shrine to “our lady of healing” with votives always lit and offerings of flowers adorning her statue. It is well-maintained, but I can find no evidence of when the shrine was built nor what existed before it. I have only the apparent age of the tree to go by, born well before the birth of Capital and the factories, but well after the worship of Pagan gods is believed to have ended here.

Christianity was brought to these lands along the Roman roads by traders, missionaries, and soldiers, just as COVID-19 has spread throughout the world through capitalist and imperial networks of travel. The first abbot here, Willibrord, was a companion of the much more famed Boniface (the one who cut down the Thor’s oaks, yes), and was not keen on trees either. He is said to have despaired not far from where I live now, sitting in the darkness of the interminable forests of Arduinna, cursing and reading scriptures aloud to himself to drive away the spirits lingering within.

Because of his devotion, they say, a spring broke out from the earth where he sat.

“Saint” Willibrord’s miracles are mostly all the creation of holy springs, though like Columbus “discovering” America, it’s much more likely they were already there, flowing into streams watering the forests of oaks which so affrighted him. The original parts of the abbey he founded, Echternach, still exist; unsurprisingly, in the crypts of its foundation there is a holy spring formerly venerated by the Pagan Treverii.

There is another miracle attributed to him, however. A sorcerer named Veit played a violin at his hanging, causing all the inhabitants of the town around the abbey to break out into uncontrollable dancing. As with the Pied Piper leading the children away from Hamelin, or of the many historically documented accounts of “dancing mania” overcoming a faithful Christian population, the dance could not be ended until a good saint broke the spell.
Not far south from here, where Arduinna’s forests meet the Forest of Vosegus, in the lands of the Mediomatrici (the “middle-mothers,” possibly a reference to their location between two “mother” rivers, or a reference to their worship of the Matrona), there lived a dragon, Graouly. Saint Clement is said to have driven off the dragon, sinking it into the river Seile where she soon meets the Moselle.

For Clement it was easy. St. Walfroy, the “apostle to the Ardennes,” built a column upon a hill in front of one of the few attested statues to Arduinna. In true drama-queen fashion, he is said to have sat upon that column, day and night for months, refusing to come down until the Pagans stopped worshiping Arduinna.

Because sitting on that column had not completed the conversion, Walfroy was followed by another saint, Hubert, who encountered an otherworldly stag in Arduinna’s forest. But rather than leading to Arawn or another chthonic deity, that stag—it is said—had a glowing cross between its antlers and urged him to give up hunting altogether in order to convert the pagans to Christianity. And so the once pagan peoples living in the remnants of a divine huntress’s forests now venerate a man as the “patron saint of hunters,” ignoring the irony that he gave up hunting altogether for Christ.

By the two sacred oaks only short walks from my door, where the last wolf of Arduinna’s forest once lived and met its end, there stands a memorial plaque. It commemorates the “victory” over nature by one Edouard Wolff (...indeed), whose heroic action was not even to catch the sacred beast but to be the person who killed it upon examination. The memorial was created and paid for, of course, by the catholic Saint Hubert Hunting Society.

Both Edouard and Hubert are long dead though, and the wolf is back, aided in no small part by the reduced industry and traffic here wrought by the Covid-19 crisis. Last year the population of ravens appears to have exploded as well. In old French they are “graula,” from the Frankish gräulich, meaning “grey,” “dark,” or “foreboding.” They seem to share this name with Graouly, the dragon of the middle-mothers. So the graula are also back, and perhaps they forebode not just the return of the wolf but of others, too.

I rode along old village paths through fragments of Arduinna’s forests, up past ancient sacred oaks by which the society of a saint declared final victory over a hunting-goddess’s beast, to arrive at a pagan ritual site on a hilltop. There, on the *ardu* ("high place" in Gaulish celtic, the root of Arduinna’s name), villagers piled old yule trees and straw around a tall wooden cross beam in preparation for the ritual.
In the distance, other villagers also piled straw and old yule trees around similar cross beams.

The ritual is called Beuergbrennen in Letzebuergesch, the isolated and well-preserved Frankish language of Luxembourg. The Frankish tribes (more specifically the Frankish confederation, composed of displaced Germanic peoples united under new leaders) moved into this area towards the end of the Roman Empire, mixing with the Romanized Treverii. The language here, as with many of the ancient customs, reflects this mixture as well as the influences of Rome. Letzebuergesch behaves sometimes like a dialect of German, sometimes a dialect of Dutch, and sometimes like a pidgin. To say hello you say moien, from the German “morgen.” But to say good-bye you say Äddi, an ancient version of the French adieu.

The name of Lëtzebuerg/Luxembourg comes from Lucilinburhuc, a very old Germanic word meaning fortified community, with the “fortified” part referring to the sort of structures used for dams or for shoring up cliffs. The castle of Lucilinburhuc overlooked a deep gorge from a cliff-side over which a pagan spring poured its sacred waters into the river Alzette.

Traces of Treverii worship of Ritona—and of river and stream spirits—linger in Luxembourg's famous founding story. Siegfried, a Frankish king, is said to have rebuilt Lucilinburhuc with the help of a water spirit, Melusina. She married him and offered to him all the wealth and magic required to build a realm there on the condition that he let her completely alone one day a week. Eventually so curious as to what she was doing on those days, he spied on her bathing in the sacred river below and found neither she nor their children were fully human, but rather part river serpent.

Frankish kings had a habit of stating they either descended from or had married sea creatures. King Mérovech, the legendary and possibly mythical ancestor of the Merovingian line, was claimed to have married a sea-witch. This story and that of Melusina's hand in refounding Lucilinburhuc, however, echoes stories from other parts of the once great Hercynian Forest: in the far western edge, where dwelt the Osismii on the “edge of the world” (now Finistere in Bretagne), Breton refugees from Saxon invasions in Yns Prydein recounted the history of their king, Gradlon, and his daughter, a sea witch, who caused the drowning of the City of Ys. Much closer though is the Mediomatriaci’s Grauolly, who was only stoppable by a bishop installed by Metz’s later Merovingian rulers.
It isn’t difficult to suspect that these repeated stories point to the displacement of older pagan veneration of spirits and deities of seas and rivers. The Frankish rulers had no spiritual claim to authority over the Celtic peoples they were supplanting. Themselves inheritors of displacement caused by other tribes and Roman resettlement, and also the first Germanic peoples to convert to the monotheistic Christian religion of a ruined Empire, they no longer had connection to the land, its people, and their ancestral beliefs.

Thus, claiming descent from, or marriage to, or conquering of the otherworldly beings which populated the sacred rivers, streams, wells, and seas of the Celtic peoples would have helped the Frankish rulers assert right-to-rule. No doubt they would have been guided in this strategy by those masters of religious/political propaganda, the Bishops and missionaries from Rome, who themselves had learned how to manipulate the beliefs of people from the Empire which birthed Christianity itself.

We don’t have to dig very far back or scratch too deep at the surface to find what was before, however. The veneration of older deities of land and stream still linger only a little behind the thin veil of Christian Imperial myth. The place where this is clearest is the Buergbrennen, these fires on high places at the end of the dark days of the year. Much like the Celtic Beltane bonfires, these events (known throughout old Germanic and Celtic lands by many other names, including Biikebrânen, Hüttenbrennen, or the Christianized names of Pers Awten, Walpurgisnacht, and generally Osterfeur) are community-based. Each village gathers wood and straw and builds its own fire on the highest point overlooking the village.

The mix of Celtic and Germanic religious beliefs are clear in the rituals: the continued belief in many places that the fire and ashes can cleanse cattle, which persists as far as in Ireland to the northwest and the Alps to the southeast, is a Celtic tradition. The importance of using Yule trees and particular rituals around newly-married couples (found more prominently east of what is now France) is Germanic.

A later theory, primarily promulgated by Anglo-American academics, asserts that these traditions are not pagan at all, but rather spread through Christian influence since so many of them are timed to Easter. This falls apart quickly with a short glance at the Catholic Church’s early terror of these fires. The aforementioned Boniface, that very same oak-killer, wrote multiple letters to several Popes in Rome complaining of such pagan celebrations in the Frankish lands. In one such letter he even chided Pope Zachary for not stopping similar practices in Italy, because the local Pagans knew they also happened there:
“Because the sensual and ignorant Allemanians, Bavarians and Franks see that some of these abuses which we condemn are rife in Rome, they think that the priests there allow them, and on that account they reproach us and take bad example.” Boniface to Pope Zacharias On His Accession to the Papacy (742)

We already know from these letters, especially those between Boniface and Pope Gregory, that a new policy had arisen in regards the Pagan practices. Rather than completely destroy old shrines and attempt to annihilate old beliefs, the Interpretatio Romana began again. But rather than assimilating Celtic and Germanic gods into Roman ones, the missionaries and priests began to assimilate the practices themselves into a Christian narrative. Thus in Rome Saturnalia became Christ’s Mass and Sylvester, as in the Gaelic lands Samhain became All Saints and Imbolc became Candlemass. And in all the lands of the once great Hycernian Forest, sacred oaks were either toppled to make churches (including Notre Dame in Paris) or re-dedicated (as with sacred springs) to Mary or saints.

And the fires? In most places they became the Paschal fires, the flame lit during Easter to symbolize the resurrection of Christ. In parts of what is now Germany, Switzerland, the Nordic countries and even in England those fires are now dedicated to Saint Walburga, a missionary from Devon sent to convert the Frankish peoples, invoked against witches and witchcraft to this day.

The fires still burn and have continuously done so for as long as anyone has been able to guess. Here in the land of the Treverii, despite government cautions about gatherings that might increase Covid infections, many villages—including the two villages adjacent to the one where I live—built and burned those fires.

How can I describe this experience? What words can I possibly use to explain what it was like for me, a pagan born into the settler-colonial nation of the United States, far from any ancestral connection to gods and people of land, to witness this?

This entire essay has been my attempt to explain what it was like, and yet I have barely even written of the event itself.

That’s the point, though. Ancient rituals cannot be merely described without their context, and that context is ever-expanding. When Christian missionaries arrived in the “New World” (new of course only to them), they complained relentlessly of how the people they were trying to convert could never tell a story directly. Early anthropologists found this same thing to be true, and the missionaries of that newer religion, Capital, likewise
complain that people in the Global South take a very long time to explain their customs and beliefs.

The systematic sort of cultural appropriation, the one enacted by museums and industry, makes the same mistake everyone else makes in secular Western society. Rituals and practices are not isolated artifacts or products, but rather nodes in great webs of meaning and relation. They cannot be torn from those webs without their meaning being diminished, lost, or at best completely misunderstood.

“I rode a bike to go see a fire” tells you nothing, and anyway isn’t what I did. It speaks nothing of where I am, where the fire was, who the fire is with, what the fire was for, how that fire relates to all the other fires that same night, how the fires were able to survive being extinguished, who wanted to extinguish them, why they failed. It tells you nothing of the people burning the fires, why they do it, why their ancestors built them, and their ancestors before them, and before them. Nor about who those ancestors were related to, how across an entire continent in the remnants of a massive forest the ancestors of others burned those same fires, as do their descendants.

And of that forest which once connected all those fires together we cannot even begin to tell the stories. I know only the stories of Arduinna’s forest, but she was once connected to Abnoba’s, and Vosegus’s, and many other forests the name of whose gods I do not yet know. I have not yet begun to tell you the story of how that forest became many forests instead, and it is a story I cannot tell because I only know bits of it.

These old pagan fires still burn, though, and the remnants of the great forest live on. Just as the last wolf was killed and yet came back, many other things have disappeared and yet are now around again—if they ever really left at all.
This afternoon I took a break from writing this and traveled with the man I love to a place he’d been wanting to show me for months. It wasn’t far, in fact embarrassingly close, so close that I’m in awe I’d not yet discovered it. Maybe that was how it was supposed to go, though. Perhaps I could not see it, could not understand it, could not meet it, until I was almost done telling the story of the fire.

The place has many names. The Franks called it Frelay, Freya’s Rock, but in local custom now it is called Härtcheslay, the grove rock. As in many similar sites I’ve personally witnessed, it is quite obviously a druidic site, formed by massive boulders which appear to form a ring. As in other places I have seen (for example, above the Heidenmauer on the mountain of Allitona—Mont Ste. Odile—in Vosegus’s land, or on the many hilltop shrines in what is now Burgundy), the site overlooks an old Celtic town. But unlike those other sites, it bears still visible carvings of two figures, a man and a woman, dressed in long robes.
Some think the two figures were mere Celtic nobles, but it would be deeply uncharacteristic for their reliefs to be carved into the entry rock to the grove. It is also likely they were unidentified gods or ancestors—not enough of their features remain to identify them. The woman appears to hold a staff, but that is all that can be discerned.

So, while telling you the story of the ancient still-burning fires of this land, just a few paragraphs before I completed this essay, I found a new mystery and a new place of connection to the land, its people, and the fires of their meaning.

Meaning is like that. It is always beginning, never ending, always leading like streams into other streams, like forests into other forests, and like fires on one hilltop to fires on every high place.