



stag cult

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All gnarled up inside us are people, animals and places. We peer into a bog cauldron (a name for the location of preserved bodies in peat) and witness a giant, and within him a young girl and within her a hare and within him a salmon. Through this scrying we locate secret histories

Sometimes a hill can be a white cow at a certain time of day,
a river, a sauntering woman.

My friend, Manchán Magan knows all about this kind of thing.
Things that saunter and twirl. He suggests that to an Irish way
of looking, a field's not just a field. It could be:

Tuar—a night field for cattle
Biorach—a field of marsh
Plasog—a field sheltered for foals to grow
Cluain—a meadow field between two woods
Caithairin—a field with a fairy place within it

We all swoon into such distinctions, the care, the poly not the
mono. It's how humans also desire to be known. That a lover
knows your many temperaments and seasonal shifts. Tied up
with close attention is usually something of a love affair. The
farmer knows the field's character because they love and depend
on the character of that field. They coax it, get into the muck
of it, even dream with it.

Manchán had his young mind blown as a kid by his granny
delivering a proverb to him, a *seanfhocal*—an 'old word'.
She said this:

Saol tri mhiol mhor saol Iomaire amhain, saol tri Iomaire saol an domhain.

'Three times the life of a whale is the lifespan of a ridge, and
three times the lifespan of a ridge is the lifespan of the world.'

The saying works like this: it used to be speculated that a whale
could live a thousand years, a ridge for growing could make
three thousand, and the world which the Irish understood
would be nine thousand years old. With nine thousand years
being around the time that humans first started settling in
Ireland there really is encoded knowledge in this saying:
it's a storehouse, as all good thinking and storytelling is.

Long before they were thought of as entertainers, storytellers were oral libraries, they kept history and magical lore tucked under the antler of their tongue.

Nine thousand years feels just about bearable for a human to comprehend. When we move into millions of years our legs buckle or we simply vacate the proposition. There was a time when we believed the sun revolved around us, not the other way round. There was a time when we looked up at the planets and called them *influences*, that they affected our mood, our tides, plants and minerals. So in a wonderful way, when you looked up you were also looking inward, you saw aspects of yourself scattered over the night sky. Very beautiful. Reassuring and awesome. I'm not convinced that our current knowledge of nameless, endless universes has done much to steady us? Humble us, possibly.

*

Celts. When Tacitus looked on at the invasion of Anglesey, he was awed by wild-haired women all in black, facing off the Romans with flaming torches. Dio Cassius looked on at Boudicca as she stood terrible-wonderful in her chariot; 120,000 warriors at her back. And yes, a hare under cloak, spear in hand, daughters by her side. She called on Andrasta—*Unconquered Goddess*, to bring the Iceni victory. Posidonius, Strabo, Aristotle, Caesar too, filled the Mediterranean mind with accounts of this boastful, brave, head-hunting, mysterious, fearsome people. *Celts*. The catch-all phrase.

Ptolemy, son of Lagus, said they claimed to have only one anxiety: that the sky would plummet onto their heads. You may remember that idea from kids books. That they spoke in the high register of riddle and exaggeration, exaggeration vital to get anywhere near the majesty of what they were trying to communicate. That they sat on wolf skin, arse on the ground, took seriously their

poets, philosophers and theologians. That they divined by the movement of animal or bird, or even by ritually stabbing someone in the chest. That if you had the eyes to behold it, the world was constantly murmuring disclosures, from seen and unseen worlds.

In tents with wine and bodyguards, the southerners scribble away. They tell us of Druids and feasting, that a man would happily die at such a meal just to fight for the *hero's portion*—the thigh bone. The stories of the Irish are so ghastly it will remain uninvaded. Traded with—it was Irish leather on the backs of the Roman Legions—but not invaded. Because sometimes the Irish are wolves, sometimes they are human. They are a grievous wallop, a smash of weirdness, these people of the North Atlantic. You don't quite know what you are fighting, a man with a moustache and a shield can suddenly become a cormorant, a scarred woman with a spear can become a fox and slink off between your feet. They are a hallucination, a grim bedtime story, lords and ladies of misrule.

Anderna; - bricotom uidluias uidlu tigontias so.
Underworld magíc seeress see weave this

At night the artist Joseph Beuys reaches into his skin and rearranges the shrapnel. Takes his Luftwaffe medicine and shifts it around under his felt hat. In the corner of the studio is a long box of Scottish soil. He curls up on it and leaves the imprint of a hare.

Joseph is listening to Merlin who is listening to Geoffrey of Monmouth who is cracking open his mind to release rum old tales of the snuffling Welsh Warlock. Joseph calls up from his box of soil, "we need an enchanter Geoff". Geoffrey nods and keeps working.

There is a strange thought—not necessarily a good thought—that Merlin once was Taliesin, though Geoffrey keeps them separate. But I am looking into my bog cauldron, and I see some new shapes: a hare, a bird, a salmon, a grain of wheat.

Within a hare
Is a bird
Within the bird
A salmon
Within the salmon
A grain of wheat

Merlin and Taliesin are talking up from the bog cauldron about another cauldron. From this one was birthed the lad Taliesin himself.

elianom uo—dui-uoderce -lunget. utonid
their two manifestation maintain below

We knew of the two of them, living up at Bala Lake. A witchy wife, Ceridwen, and her vast husband. She was the power source in their relationship. There are those that will tell you she is a goddess; others, a woman with a few herbs and time on her hands. I will argue a third way, the blue-feather-in-the-maggie's-tail way. I think she was a bit of both. She had real, proper knowing. Not good or bad, black or white, but substantial, magical knowledge. Some of us knew a spell or two, the occasional curse-mutter, but she'd been at it, hammer and tongs, since Noah's flood. She outranked everyone. We were scared of her, but in a way that was exciting not eviscerating. Always good to know the difference.

She had kids, a boy and girl. We all fancied the girl. How could you not? To not adore her was like not loving dusk, or black beer, or a chop. To not adore her was to not love life. We could see her way would be a bright path. About my age. But her brother was all mangled up, a big old ugly mess. Morfan. If she was light; he was night. Rook-wing black. We could see his way would be a dark road. It wasn't a tantalising darkness, a rich, sexy darkness, it would be wretched and filled with pain. A blindness that no Homer could navigate.

But Ceridwen got to work. It can be grand to have a mother that's a witch. She knew there wasn't much she could do with Morfan's exterior—other than drag a comb through his hair—but his interior was different. She could make him glow, light him up from the inside. She could bring inspiration to him. If he'd have any luck at Arthur's camp, he'd need to be a sage, a wit, even a prophet. Not a runty little crow.

I said the magic name, the totem name, didn't I?

Arthur.

Before Camelot, before swords in stones, before Round Tables, before we even referred to him as a king. Just Arthur. But he was great, even then. The idea of Arthur was what we as a people circled around, there was meat and mead just in the uttering of his name. Ceridwen wanted Morfan in his orbit, under his wingspan, seeing things as he did.

She got to preparing the great spell of her life. Year and a day, the ancient terms. A cauldron that was loaded up with all her herbs, mutters, bones. That it would cook away until it finally spat three drops of the pure stuff, the real ticket, the wyrd, the big word—*awen*—into the mouth of her son. He was excited but excused from the labour of preparation. I, as a young local lad with time on his hands, got roped in to stir. A geriatric from the settlement, Morda, was to keep the kindling ticking over. Blind as blind is, so he was. So when Ceridwen swiped his eye out, I suppose it didn't make much difference. I'll get to that.

Ceridwen was not to be refused, so we cracked on.

All year we grafted on the spell. The seasons got chucked in too: different chants, herbs, sacrifices depending on the time of year and the movement of the moon. Ceridwen was relentless, barely taking a shift off, rarely kipping. For all the liquid in the cauldron it was only those three drops that would be any good, the rest would kill you, straight up poison. She had to get it right. It was mistressful watching her.

And now, all these years later, I realise what I owe her from that particular labour.

My people, and peoples like us, make these pots, these cauldrons. On the outer rim of the pot are all sorts of shapes and symbols to be deciphered by outsiders. But on the inner rim of the pot are other insignias and images that can only be deciphered by insiders. Hidden stuff. The difference being what you could

call Explicit and Tacit. It was the tacit stuff that was getting cooked, stewed and stretched in the cauldron. I'd look down at crouching Morda as my stirring arm ached, I'd look into his milky, unseeing eyes, not knowing that Ceridwen was teaching us to become alchemists.

We were getting to the end of the stretch and had maybe lost track of time a little. The fumes from the cauldron were overpowering. For once Ceridwen wasn't towering over us, her lime white face and creepy bush of hair peering over my knackered stirring arm. She'd gone off to sleep some distance away.

I heard a sound from the cauldron I'd never heard before, like a stag at bay, a roar, and then it all happened so fast: three drops spurted from the bubbling onto my thumb. You know exactly what I did, what we all would have done, I stuck my thumb straight in my gob to cool it down.

Just like dear Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom. Just like all the wonder girls and wonder boys of folk tales. It just happens that way. There wasn't malice, not even ambition. I didn't want to rob Morfan of his moment, it just bloody hurt is all. That was the heavy, heavy dose his mum had cooked up.

To think in *awen* is not like normal thinking. I'm not even quite sure it *is* thinking. I was flung into something I would never return from.

There is a cord of light that bangs out from me to Ceridwen, like echo location but I can see it, a fire trail in the whipping air and I know she's awake and she's after me. She didn't work that hard, that long, stretch herself half mad on magical austerities to see me gobble down the good stuff. I didn't hear her fury, or see her fury, I *felt* her fury push into me like a boxer's blows. I ran for my life and as I ran, I fell.

I didn't change into the shape of a hare, I *fell* into the shape of a hare. Fell into mad bucktooth magic, between those gnashers that don't ever stop growing, the chewer, the fellow in the rain, the double backer, the stag of the brush, I fell into hare. In your time it was minutes, in my new, startling quadrant of dreaming, it was aeons.

She became a greyhound and leathered after me, a-slobber and proper garish in her rage. So, into the soft dimension I leapt, into the greening river as a fish. Again, a falling. Not a contortion. She became an otter, furious and vigilant, till I pushed my mind into wet feathers and erupted from the froth as a bird, she twisting from otter to hawk.

I have to tell you again, so you are understanding this with me, these things took place over immeasurable time. I was in the future of wherever you are now, reading me. This took place in a place that hasn't happened yet. I finally fell into a grain of wheat, she now a black hen, and gobbled me up.

Was I in the cauldron, was I in her belly?
Was the cauldron always her belly,
Was the potion made of oestrogen
And amniotic fluid?

These things I can't talk about, it'll cheapen the whole thing.

But I was born again, like the Christians.
This was my second birthday.

I was a baby again, a baby brewed in the belly of a woman
Who wished to kill me. A woman who when she saw me
Could not throttle me, or slip in a blade to my folds.
A woman who wrapped me in swaddling, placed me
In a coracle and gave me to the fates and the waters.

Like Moses
Like Dionysus
Like dear Tristan

I am Shining Brow, and thousands of years on
There is still energy in my name.

Thousands of years on, there is still
Energy in this story.

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