

Good Morning Helen,

Please find attached the story of a witch burning in Orkney. This is based on the story of Janet Reid and others who met a similar fate. The story has won an international writing competition this year as well as being published in the Lenster leader newspaper July edition. It is also forthcoming in the literary journal The Lonesome Blues. I must say I am delighted it's going back to Orkney for the time capsule. When I wrote it I had a Scottish publication in mind as I felt it belonged there. I was in Orkney in 2017 and visited a number of sites. It was a great experience.

All the best

Elizabeth

## **Storm Raiser**

**By**

**Elizabeth Power (Connemara Ireland)**

They said we hid men's penises in trees. We took their power and turned their member into birds. We pictured this - the penises, like birds in a nest, popped up with their blushing tips and hungry mouths. They said we leave men with nothing to do but consider their floppy organs. 'I'm telling you,' my sister insisted, as we tittered and shook our heads. 'John says it's in that book - The Witch's Hammer. 'No, really,' she said, as we threw back our heads and let rise a great belly laugh.

I wake from this dream, this stump of memory, with a smile on my face. My shoulders sag. I am sitting naked on the floor of Marwick's Hole, in this great Kirk. The air is so cold it is hard to breathe. Grey walls drizzle tears. A long rope of iron chains, wet and heavy, is attached to the wall and manacled to my ankle. I try to move my leg and it lifts a little, before sinking back to the ground.

The door opens and a man's pinched face seeks me out in the grim light. His mouth straightens to a thin line as he registers my naked filth. He places a plate of food within my reach. 'I won't accept it,' I say, as I do each morning. I raise my voice and inquire, for good measure this morning, as to what harm I have done?

'You know very well,' he replies. His voice is colder than this dungeon. 'In this year of our Lord 1660, *you* raised a storm that killed those young fishermen.'

On his way out, he yanks the chain attached to the wall and I am dragged across the floor.

They say thousands of us women are gone from the mainland. I wonder about the others who disappeared and left their families frantic. Did those who occupied this place

waver in the breaking of their bones or when injurious ruin was inflicted on them? Such hatred of women. I cannot speak for them but for me; a spea - woman from the Orkneys which has a fearsome reputation as a haven for witches. Not much of a haven now, I think, for already twenty two women and a man killed for their pagan lore. Others walked free. Surely I would do so, too. I am more concerned with life than death and disaster. I have harmed no one.

Was it just a few months ago? That evening when my sisters and I were gathered for the Chalice Raising Ritual at the Ring of Brodgar and we laughed at the nonsense they supposed we women did. My sister sang the list. 'We are

Demons who suck blood,

Wolf riders,

Women who turn good folk into fairies,

Women who raise storms,

Women who curse crops and herds of fine cattle,

Women who steal the butter and milk in this rich Orcadian Isle,

Women who curse and hex.

And don't forget the evil eye,' my sister jested, and we practiced squinting at each other.

'They've finally seen sense,' I say to my tormentor this morning when he lays out my clothes. I move slowly to dress and use the water in a pot to wash my face. He takes care not to touch me or meet my eyes and points to the waiting cart beyond. But my destination is not home but the dusty room in front of a magistrate.

The guard motions me to sit on a wooden bench. The room fills with people. There is my neighbour Rena. Now, that's good. I have sat through many of her difficult births and at

its end, welcomed her newborns into my hands. She will speak for me. Her mother sits beside her and I'm pleased to see my potions have cleared that hacking cough. And here is Selma who walks with ease into the room. She was crippled with pain the last time I saw to her. I raise my hand in greeting but there is no reply. I try to quell the anxiety but it's no use. What are they going to say?

The magistrate enters the room and addresses me.

'You are charged with the raising of a storm that killed the fishermen. What say you?'

'It is errant nonsense,' I reply, expecting this fine man to know that too.

'You hold a purse. There are witnesses here to say you heal people?' he pointed to Rena, her mother and Selma who still did not look my way but kept their eyes on the ground.

'Yes,' I reply with confidence. 'I am a healer.'

'And where do you get your power to heal?'

'From the ancients. From the Earth,' I reply.

'Hah. So you admit you have powers.'

He pointed to the other women I don't recognise. 'Begin,' he directs.

One by woeful one, these women rise to tell their tale. They say I use my powers to poison their crops; to turn their milk sour. One of them cannot have children because of my curse.

'What say you?' the magistrate asks again, intent on my answer.

'I've done none of those things. There isn't a shred of evidence. I don't even know these women.' My voice is quick and reedy. I have no power to assert the truth. It has been robbed by the liars before me.

He raises his voice. 'You admit freely in this court that you have powers. *You ensnare men's souls withal into damnation.* You are condemned before me. You'll be taken to Gallows Haw to be put to death.'

I bend over in shock and pain. How did we go from wise to witch?

I accept then. My fate will be no different to the others. How could it be otherwise? We are all innocent. I become the stones in the dungeon that hold vigil with me - as though my body is the dungeon itself. Tears burn into the years already lined on my face. An out of season fly, its hour glass figure and fine glass wings, flutters on my hand and nestles kindly in the folds of my skin. It is here to do my bidding. It tilts its head to look at me as it rests on its crossed hands.

‘Will you tell my sisters where I am?’ I say to it. ‘They are worried.’

I think again of that fine spring day when we were gathered at the Ring of Brodgar.

‘Let’s tell them the truth then,’ one sister cried and her voice was light and careless.

‘Let’s tell them about the good we do:

Shape Shifters,

Time turners,

Future tellers,

Chalice raisers,

Vision seekers,

Healers,

Midwives and creators,

Earth worshippers.’

‘Let’s not,’ another replies. ‘They will shame us with their ignorance. What do the Christians know of us?’

The hoot outside my window of this Marwick’s hole calls forth my practice. It is a full moon and I vision travel to see what is plainly held in the future. There it is. My death at Gallows Haw, will be an elaborate, extravagant spectacle paid for from the public purse and

by all accounts, a good day out for the general public. My face is composed. I am to be released from the crazy holiness.

I see further forward and people realise that we deserved no barbarous treatment meted out, and if we sold a charm or a healing we were no different to those healers in the future who sell skill to magic yearnings.

But see this. Munificent - our relatives come forward, looking for the vein that was our time and life but our tree is erased and it will leave many generations without roots. Our branch of knowing is set aside. But the resonance will live on. *Burn the witch. Lock her up* will follow many a woman who dares to exert influence.

Now I see the magic of Orkney's ancient sites; this viaduct of primordial power. The sky in Skara Brea, with its translucent beauty, is a monument to fair and foul weather. It has the strength to bear both, equally and well - no matter what century. See those women in the future at the moonlight in Stenness, leaning into the strength of those towering stones, celebrating the seasons, the gold sun and green earth. The thread cast by us women goes back millennia and there is no breach in our knowing, or our knowledge.

'I confess,' I will say to my executioner at the last, and my voice will come from the very earth. 'I confess to nothing more than your brutality and barbarism. There is more malevolence in your little finger than in the bones of any witch on this Isle.'

I find solace in knowing that he who turned my life to ash that day, turned to dust as well and nobody remembered him or claimed his line or gene or tree.

I have travelled into the future and I am content. I take heart and sleep better on this cold floor tonight.

Tomorrow?

Perhaps I will raise a storm.