

C^①ILLE DORCHA

SAMHAIN: AT THE THRESHOLD



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Part 1 - The Turning

AT THE THRESHOLD



When I was a child, Samhain had no name.

Halloween existed, certainly, but only as a faint disturbance at the edge of things. It had not yet become the bright commercial carnival that now arrives in the shops while summer is scarcely cold in its grave. There were no great displays of grinning pumpkins, no gardens webbed in white plastic, no solemn parental expeditions in search of costumes, sweets and battery-powered ghosts. In my part of England, at least, Halloween passed with little ceremony.

Yet the season itself did not pass unnoticed.

Something changed as October drew towards its end. Darkness began to arrive before the day had properly finished with us. Roads which had seemed perfectly ordinary in summer acquired uncertain corners. The trees withdrew into silhouette, the air grew damp, and fields disappeared into an evening mist that appeared to possess intentions of its own. The world beyond the windows became less inviting, although considerably more interesting.

Christmas could already be sensed somewhere in the distance. It

had not yet arrived in the shops with all its lights and promises, but there was the faintest anticipation of it, like the glow of a town still hidden beyond the horizon. Between the fading of autumn and that approaching brightness lay a peculiar interval: magical, dangerous and inward-looking.

It was a time for drawing the curtains and allowing the imagination to wander where the body had been discouraged from going. The outer world was closing, but an inner one was opening. I wanted to hibernate, although not merely to sleep. I wanted to make things, to invent things, to disappear into stories and return carrying something that had not existed before.

There was one occasion when the older spirit of Halloween reached through the respectable walls of the schoolroom and placed one of its strange relics before me. A teacher, or perhaps one of those visiting adults whose names vanish while the objects they carried remain, arrived with a collection of turnips and the tale of Jack of the Lantern.

I remember being enchanted by the story and rather less impressed by the vegetable.

Somewhere, through books or television, I had already encountered the magnificent American pumpkin: round, orange and apparently designed by nature for the sole purpose of receiving a wicked grin. What we were given seemed a poor substitute. These were probably swedes, although they were called turnips according to the older custom. They were heavy, stubborn things, and defended their interiors with the determination of locked strongboxes. I privately suspected that economy, rather than tradition, had determined their presence.

Nevertheless, we set about them. Metal spoons scraped against dense flesh. Small hands grew tired. The wholesome smell of a root vegetable filled the room while we attempted to turn our unpromising harvest into a company of illuminated heads. However crude the result, there came a moment when a light was placed within the hollow and the face awakened.

It was only much later that I discovered how thoroughly I had misjudged the humble turnip. It was not an impoverished imitation of the pumpkin. It was the ancestor.

By my teenage years, the atmosphere I had sensed as a child had acquired a name. I became aware of Samhain and began to understand Halloween not as an isolated night of ghosts and mischief, but as the

surviving face of a much deeper seasonal threshold. The unease, fascination and inward pull of late autumn were no longer private impressions. They belonged to an older recognition that the year had crossed a boundary.

Darkness was not merely arriving earlier each evening. It had become a presence to be entered deliberately: a season of memory, story, ancestry and communion with that which lies beyond ordinary sight.

Years passed, and Halloween itself changed. By the time I was taking my daughter trick-or-treating, the festival had stepped out of the shadows and announced itself with considerable confidence. Pumpkins were no longer exotic objects glimpsed through an American screen. They sat in heaps outside supermarkets and appeared upon doorsteps throughout the neighbourhood. Costumes became more elaborate, houses more theatrical, and the streets filled with children moving excitedly from one pool of porchlight to another.

I carved pumpkins with my daughter, discovering how generously they surrendered their interiors compared with the iron-hearted roots of my childhood. We gave them faces, set lights inside them and placed them at the boundary of the home. Then we went out together into the October darkness, joining that temporary community of disguised children, accompanying parents and householders waiting behind decorated doors.

It is easy to dismiss trick-or-treating as a protection racket conducted by very small people in unsuitable clothing. Sweets are demanded, vague consequences are threatened, and householders submit with remarkably good humour. Yet beneath the transaction lies something warmer and more important.

Like carolling at Christmas, Halloween brings communities to one another's doorsteps. Doors which remain closed throughout most of the year are opened. Neighbours who ordinarily pass with little more than a nod exchange a few words. We meet one another's children, admire their disguises and notice who is answering the door. We discover who has joined the neighbourhood, who has grown older, who is living alone and who may welcome a little company.

These encounters are brief, but brevity does not make them meaningless. They create a modest opportunity to notice one another. We meet those with whom we share a place, exchange a few words at the threshold and renew connections which may have grown faint

during the busy months of the year. A lantern beside the door says that someone is home and that, for this night at least, the boundary may be approached.

This, too, belongs to Samhain. It is not only a private contemplation of death, ancestors and the unseen. It is a communal crossing into the dark half of the year.

For the communities from which Samhain emerged, darkness and cold could not be dismissed by the flicking of a switch or the turning of a dial. Night concealed the road, the edge of the water, the animal beyond the boundary and the stranger approaching unseen. Cold threatened crops, livestock, shelter and life itself. The dark half of the year was mysterious because much within it could not be seen, and dangerous because what could not be seen might still draw near.

People naturally sought ways to survive it. They tended fires, stored food, strengthened shelter, watched the weather and drew more closely upon the knowledge of the community. Yet survival did not require them to imagine that darkness could be vanquished. Winter returned regardless of how fiercely a fire was built, and the night remained beyond the reach of the hearth.

The task was to learn how to live beside it: to recognise its dangers, respect its boundaries and discover what could be learned when the visible world receded. Darkness offered concealment and uncertainty, but also rest, dream, gestation and the sharpening of other senses. It was neither wholly benevolent nor wholly hostile. It was a power with which life had to enter into relationship.

Light and heat are no less capable of danger. Fire escapes the hearth. The sun scorches the land. Heat exhausts the body and consumes the moisture upon which life depends. We are inclined to treat light as good and darkness as threatening largely because we are creatures accustomed to navigating by sight. Familiarity is easily mistaken for safety.

Samhain does not ask us to pretend that darkness cannot harm us. Neither does it ask us to cast darkness as an enemy which courage, community or flame will finally defeat. It asks for something more difficult: that we enter knowingly, carrying what protection and wisdom we possess, while accepting that mystery and danger cannot be removed from the world.

The meeting of neighbours at the doorstep therefore becomes more than resistance to the coming night. It is an acknowledgement that

danger may be faced without imagining it can be abolished, and that mystery may be approached without demanding that it surrender all its secrets. We cross into the dark half of the year together, not to conquer it, but to learn once again how to live within it.

Yet not everyone once believed to approach the threshold at Samhain belonged to the visible community, nor were all those thought to travel through the darkness among the living.

The thinning of the veil is often spoken of as though it were an uncomplicated invitation. Candles are lit, photographs arranged, names spoken and places set for those who have died. These can be beautiful acts, but grief does not become gentle merely because the Wheel has turned to a season in which we are expected to approach it.

Like many families, mine has suffered tragedy. I will not recount it here, for the memory does not belong to me alone. Even after many years, healing continues, and Samhain has therefore remained a difficult time for me to approach the dead through formal ceremony.

There is sometimes a temptation within spiritual practice to believe that every door must be opened simply because we have arrived at the proper date. Yet a threshold is sacred partly because we may choose whether or not to cross it. The veil may thin, but we are not compelled to reach through.

My remembrance has consequently remained quiet. I have carried it inwardly, without summoning grief into the centre of the household or asking those I love to confront what they are not yet ready to meet. This restraint is not forgetfulness, nor is it a refusal to honour the dead. It is an act of care for the living.

Our memories are seldom ours alone. A name which brings comfort to one person may reopen a wound in another. A ritual intended as healing may ask too much, too soon, of somebody standing beside us. Samhain teaches us to honour our ancestors and beloved dead, but it must also teach us to recognise those who remain: the people still sharing our table, answering our doors and making their way beside us through the dark.

This year, however, another loss has come, new enough that time has not yet softened its edges. A very close friend died far too soon, and their absence will be foremost in my thoughts as Samhain approaches. I do not yet know what form that remembrance will take. Perhaps it does not need to take any form beyond the willingness to sit quietly with the truth that someone who should still be here is not.

Older grief taught me caution at the threshold. This fresh grief may teach me something else: that remembrance need not always summon the dead or demand an answer from the darkness. Sometimes it is simply the act of keeping company with a life that mattered, allowing gratitude and sorrow to occupy the same small circle of light.

One day Samhain may play a more formal part in the healing of those older wounds. This year, its work may be nearer and simpler. I will remember my friend.

Perhaps this, too, is part of the wisdom of the threshold. Some doors are opened with ceremony. Some are approached slowly. Others remain closed until every hand resting upon them is ready. Yet we may still place a light beside them, so that those we love are not left in darkness, on either side.

The thinning veil does not, however, belong only to the dead. Beyond it lies another possibility, one which has filled me not with reluctance, but with longing.

I have always longed to commune with the *sídhe*.

I do not mean that I wish to reduce them to pretty woodland spirits, summoned for comfort or persuaded to decorate an otherwise ordinary world with convenient signs. Nor do I regard every movement among the leaves as a message addressed personally to me. The longing is older and less easily satisfied than that. It is the desire to stand, however briefly, near the boundary of another order of being and to know that the visible world is not the whole of the world.

The *sídhe* are not the spirits of our human dead. They are not our ancestors wearing more glamorous clothes, nor are they obliged to guide, reassure or heal us. They belong to the Otherworld and to themselves. Any approach to them must therefore begin with respect rather than expectation.

Samhain offers no guarantee of communion. The thinning of a boundary is not the same as its disappearance, and an open door does not grant us ownership of whatever may stand beyond it. We may make ourselves attentive. We may offer hospitality. We may listen. What we cannot rightly do is demand that the unseen make itself visible merely to satisfy our curiosity.

This is part of Samhain's danger as well as its enchantment. It is a night of possibility, but not all possibilities exist for our benefit. Traditional caution around the *sídhe* need not extinguish wonder. It gives wonder its proper gravity. Courtesy matters because the

encounter, if it comes, is not imagined as a meeting between master and servant, but between beings whose purposes may be very different.

For me, the longing itself has become part of the observance. To stand at the edge of the dark and acknowledge that another world may draw near is already to loosen the certainty with which ordinary life encloses us. Communion may come as presence, dream, intuition or silence. Silence is not necessarily failure. Sometimes the most honest encounter with mystery is to remain before it without forcing it to speak.

Recently, another old light entered my practice.

I first encountered the mullein torch through a friend whose late mother had brought the custom with her from Ireland and encouraged him to continue it here. She was a Christian woman, and the practice came not as an act of Pagan reconstruction, but as something inherited, familiar and worth preserving.

By then, whatever gods might once have watched over such a flame had long ceased to be named. The hands that gathered the stalks and carried the light were Christian hands, and perhaps had been for generations; yet the old seasonal instinct endured, needing neither doctrine nor explanation, but surviving through the quiet authority of custom.

The mullein spends the brighter part of the year raising a tall golden spire towards the sun. Then its flowers fall, its green life withdraws and the stalk is left standing dry and apparently spent. Coated in wax and touched by fire, that dead stalk becomes a torch. What has finished growing becomes a bearer of light.

From Ireland it passed from mother to son, and then from friend to friend. There, the flame reached me.

Celebrating Samhain

There is no single ceremony which must be performed at Samhain. The season has room for solemn remembrance, noisy children, watchful silence, old stories and the warm absurdity of trying to persuade a candle to remain lit inside a carved vegetable.

A pumpkin may be carved and placed at the threshold, not merely as decoration but as a sign that the boundary has been acknowledged.

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Those wishing to reach further into the past might attempt a traditional turnip lantern, or the large, iron-hearted swede which often travelled under that name. Its resistance is part of the undertaking. The making requires time, effort and perhaps a renewed appreciation for the accommodating nature of the pumpkin.

As you cut the face and kindle the light within it, consider the threshold upon which it will stand. Whom are you welcoming? What boundary does it mark? What becomes visible within its small circle of light, and what are you willing to leave mysterious beyond it?

The lantern need not be understood as a weapon raised against the darkness. Its purpose may simply be

to show where one world meets another.

Darkness remains around it, neither conquered nor diminished, but the threshold can now be recognised.

If children come to your door, meet them as part of the community rather than as an interruption. Admire the costumes into which they have poured such serious thought. Learn the names of neighbours you have not met. Notice who accompanies them



and who opens nearby doors. If somebody usually joins the evening but is absent, remember them afterwards. A festival concerned with the unseen should also sharpen our attention towards those who are plainly visible but too easily overlooked.

If you take children trick-or-treating, allow the journey to be more than the acquisition of sweets. You are walking the neighbourhood together after dark, moving between familiar thresholds and meeting the people with whom you share a place. The custom may appear frivolous, but community is often renewed through precisely such small permissions to knock, answer, speak and exchange.

Samhain brings us to one another's doors and asks us to recognise who stands there.

If you wish to honour ancestors or beloved friends who have died, choose a form of remembrance appropriate to the tenderness of the loss. Light a candle. Speak a name. Display a photograph. Tell a story which allows laughter to sit beside sorrow. Leave an empty place if that brings comfort.

Do not feel obliged to perform grief for the sake of the season. Quiet remembrance is remembrance. If others share the loss, consider their readiness as well as your own. No calendar, however sacred, has the right to force open a wound.

Those who wish to acknowledge the *sídh*e might leave a simple offering outdoors, given freely and without bargaining. Approach the act as hospitality, not payment, and certainly not command. Choose something which will not harm the land or its creatures, and leave behind no vessel, ribbon, plastic or other object which the living earth must endure after the observance has ended.

Do not demand a sign. Do not assume that every coincidence is an answer. Attend instead to the place itself: the change in the air, the movement of branches, the calls of creatures continuing their own lives in the darkness, and the silence beneath them. Let mystery remain larger than your interpretation of it.

A mullein torch may be made from a thoroughly dried flower stalk coated in wax or tallow. It should be treated as a true outdoor torch, not as an indoor candle. Keep it away from buildings, dry vegetation and overhanging branches, have water ready, and extinguish it completely when the observance is finished.

As it burns, consider what the stalk has become. Its flowering is over. Its visible life has withdrawn. Yet in death it receives the flame

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and gives light. The torch does not vanquish the darkness. Neither is its flame harmless. Both must be approached with attention.

Its light allows us to see the few steps immediately before us, but no farther. The darkness remains beyond that small circle, holding dangers, presences and possibilities which the flame can neither reveal nor destroy. This is not a failure of the light. It is an honest measure of what light can do.

Carry it carefully for the dead you remember, the living beside you and the unseen you approach with reverence. Carry it for those who learned to cross the winter without pretending themselves masters of it. Carry it for those who brought their customs across land and sea, even when the names of the old gods had ceased to be spoken. Carry it for what has ended and for what may yet be transformed.

When the observance is complete, extinguish the torch and allow your eyes to adjust. Samhain does not teach us to choose light over darkness, or darkness over light. It teaches us to respect the powers and dangers of both, and to find our place beside them.



Part 2 - The Grove

THE SHAPE IN THE SMOKE



Before entering the grove, I begin as I always do, with cleansing. Water runs warm across my shoulders, and for a little while there is only its sound and the fading weight of the day. Afterwards, dressed in clean clothes, I sit beside the darkened window. My reflection hangs upon the glass; beyond it, nothing of the garden remains. As my breathing settles, the reflected face becomes indistinct, the room recedes, and the scent of wet leaves reaches me through a window which has never opened.

Beneath the trees, the cold is immediate. It finds my wrists, my throat, the warmth beneath my clothes. Somewhere overhead the branches move, but here at ground level the air lies still, heavy with the black sweetness of decay. I know this path. Tonight, knowledge offers little help: its turns disappear after a few paces, and roots buried beneath the leaves catch at my feet. Through the canopy there is no light.

Smoke threads the undergrowth. Following its bitter scent, I reach the clearing, where a lamp burns upon the altar amongst the prepared bottles, bowls and tools. Moisture glistens on the stone. Beyond the flame, darkness gathers so closely that I cannot distinguish the farther

edge of the clearing, though I have stood here often enough to remember every tree.

A woman is watching me across the altar.

At first I see only her mouth and the pale hand resting beside the lamp. Then she leans forward, and the light discovers a cheekbone, a dark eye, black hair falling against her throat. Something tightens beneath my ribs. Beautiful, certainly, but with a beauty that leaves me more exposed for having looked upon it. Under her regard, I have the unwelcome sensation that something concealed even from myself has already been found.

Neither of us speaks. Raising my eyes to meet hers, I find that she is no longer opposite me. She stands amongst the trees to my right, one shoulder turned towards the wood; yet upon the altar her shadow remains, stretched across the waiting vessels. Smoke passes through it. When I look back towards the trees, a crow drops from a branch and vanishes without a cry.

The lamp gutters, then steadies. Close behind my ear, I hear an intake of breath.

I turn. Nothing moves except the smoke, slipping between the trunks with the slow deliberation of something that knows it will be followed. For a moment I keep my hand upon the altar. Beyond its little circle of light, the path has become almost invisible, but farther in, where the trees lean together, a pale face waits. Her eyes catch mine. Before I can decide whether she is inviting or challenging me, she withdraws.

Leaving the lamp, I follow her into the wood.

Bramble drags across my sleeve. Beneath the leaves, water fills a hollow into which my foot sinks, cold rising sharply above my ankle. Ahead of me she passes through a narrow interval between two trunks. I see the movement of her hair, the pale nape of her neck, and hurry towards her; smoke fills the opening, and my outstretched hand closes upon wet bark. From somewhere to my left comes a low laugh. It is quiet enough that I might have mistaken it for breath, had I not felt its amusement so precisely.

“Wait.”

My voice sounds intrusive here. Listening to its return amongst the trees, I become aware of how loudly I have been breathing, how heedlessly I have followed. She is standing farther down the slope, motionless beside a fallen trunk. This time she allows me to approach.

Within the split wood, embers glow like a wound beneath dark flesh.

Their warmth reaches my wet clothes, and I draw nearer with a relief I have done nothing to earn. The Morrígan watches from the opposite side. As I bend towards the hollow, a draught passes through it; buried fire wakes, runs along the dry interior and suddenly opens before my face. Heat drives me backwards. Sparks strike my sleeve. For several breaths I can see everything with terrible clarity, the thorns behind her, the silver rims of the leaves, her fingers resting calmly upon the burning wood, while the path by which I came disappears beyond the glare.

She lifts a branch from the fire. Flame curls around her hand, illuminating the underside of her face, and in that fierce upward light I can no longer tell whether she is young or ancient. Slowly she lowers the burning end into the mud beside her foot. A hiss, a little steam; along the fallen trunk the flames collapse and vanish, the embers blackening until no spark remains. In the sudden darkness, their brightness persists behind my eyes, illuminating nothing.

I dare not move.

Water drips from the roots. Somewhere nearby, a small creature passes beneath the leaves and stops when my clothing rustles. The cold returns gradually, settling against the places the fire has warmed. With it comes the scent of moss, previously lost beneath the smoke. Waiting for my eyes to recover, I begin to hear the space around me: water below, branches rubbing overhead, the open passage to my left through which the draught still moves. When at last I distinguish the ground, I set my foot down carefully and find firm earth.

Across the smouldering wood, the Morrígan holds out her hand.

I could remain where I am. The thought is clear, and she makes no movement to hurry it. Between her fingers, smoke rises from the branch she has extinguished. I look at that hand for a long time before crossing the fallen timber and placing mine within it.

Her touch is cold enough to hurt. Through the thickening smoke she leads me, and with every step the grove loses something of its substance, until branches, earth and the hand enclosing mine seem woven from the same uncertain grey. Faces begin to form within it. My own, at different ages, wearing expressions I recognise before I wish to: the hard mouth of a judgement delivered too quickly, the lifted chin of an argument I could not bear to lose. Around each, the smoke briefly assumes the outline of a room, a doorway, another person turning away.

I try to withdraw my hand. Her fingers close more firmly.

There is nowhere to look that does not return me to myself. Even

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my wish to escape appears amongst the shifting faces, familiar and unflattering. Beneath the apprehension, something harder begins to yield. These are things I have carried as though carrying them could keep them true. Watching the smoke enter an older version of my face, pass through its open mouth and dissolve the answer it is still preparing, I feel my own jaw loosen. The Morrígan releases me.

For a moment I reach after her. Then, allowing my hand to fall, I continue through the smoke without knowing what will meet me beyond it.

Stone touches my fingertips. The altar emerges slowly, its vessels dulled by moisture, the lamp burning low amongst them. Across it stands the Morrígan, close enough now that I can see a fine trace of ash along her wrist. She lifts the empty bowl and breathes across it. Smoke gathers within the hollow, darkens, and spills over the rim, winding between the bottles and tools before descending along the sides of the stone.

“Make what can enter the dark without lying about the light.”

Her words hold me where I stand. Setting the bowl before me, she rests her hand briefly over mine; when the smoke rises between us, I feel her fingers loosen, though I cannot see her leave. A wing brushes the air beside my face. Farther into the wood, something settles amongst the branches.

I remain at the altar, breathing the damp, bitter air. In the bowl, the last of the smoke turns upon itself and lifts away. Her words stay with me as I place both hands upon the stone, near enough to the lamp to feel its warmth, far enough to leave the flame its space.

The making may begin.



Part 3 - The Practice

WHERE THE VEIL GIVES WAY



Samhain brings us to thresholds: between seasons, between the familiar and the unknown, between the lives we have lived and the changes we are beginning to recognise. At such boundaries, transformation asks something of our judgement. We may feel drawn towards an opening without being ready to enter it; we may also discover that a boundary which once protected us has become one we are ready to cross.

Fear can press upon us from either direction. Anxiety about what will happen if we remain may drive us towards a hurried decision, while apprehension about change can hold us still long after we wish to move. Learning to recognise those pressures gives us room to choose more honestly.

This meditation takes a different form from those earlier in the Wheel. Within the grove, you will be offered a choice, and the narrative will divide into two paths. One invites you to remain beside the threshold; the other leads you beyond it. Each offers an encounter of its own, and both return you to the same clearing. Read the passage that follows your decision, then continue with the shared return.

Neither path is a measure of courage or spiritual progress.

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Transformation can begin in the decision to wait as surely as in the act of crossing. Choose according to what feels honest tonight, allowing the meaning of that choice whatever time it needs to unfold.

Entering the Grove

As evening gathers, prepare a place where you can sit undisturbed. Allow the Samhain accord to diffuse gently around you, giving its fragrance time to become part of the room. Beyond the window, the last familiar shapes are withdrawing into darkness. Leave a little of that darkness amongst the objects beside you.

Whatever has brought you here may remain unnamed. A loss, a longing, the sense that something in your life is changing: none requires an explanation before you begin. If remembrance feels tender tonight, let it remain quiet. You may approach this season without asking anyone you love, living or dead, to come closer than you are ready to bear.

Settle into the support beneath your body. Let your hands rest, loosen your shoulders and allow your breathing to find its own pace. With your eyes closed, attend to the fragrance as it reaches you, fades and returns. Gradually, imagine distance opening within it, until the air seems to have travelled through wet branches and over fallen leaves before touching your face.

Beneath your feet, a woodland path begins to emerge.

The grove has entered its dark season. Across the ground, leaves lie pressed together by rain, their bronze and russet colours almost swallowed by the night. Above them, branches interlace like the ribs of a vast, abandoned roof. Through its broken spaces, a few stars are visible. Walk slowly, allowing your eyes to discover what they can. Cold gathers beneath your clothes, and somewhere downhill water moves over stone with a persistence you can hear long before you can locate it.

At the clearing, the altar waits. Upon its surface stands a lantern, its flame enclosed behind glass darkened slightly by smoke. Place your hands against the stone and notice its coolness. Behind you lies the path by which you came; ahead, the wood deepens beyond the reach of the lantern.

For a while, remain here. Let the small sounds of the grove become distinct.

A woman stands beside the farthest tree.

Perhaps you first notice the pale oval of her face, perhaps the movement of a hand against the bark. Her dark clothing gives little back to the light. Looking towards her, you find that she is already watching you, with an attention which makes the distance between you feel smaller than it is. Smoke slips across the clearing. Through it, her outline loosens, and when the air clears she is standing farther along

the path.

Take up the lantern if you wish to follow. Its handle is firm beneath your fingers, its warmth slight but perceptible. Between the trees, the woman appears and disappears: a shoulder beside a trunk, hair moving where the air seems still, a face briefly reflected in water which holds no other light. Follow at your own pace. The ground deserves your attention as much as she does.

Behind you, leaves shift beneath a weight you cannot see.

At first the sound seems part of your own passage, arriving a little after each footstep. When you stop, it stops. Between the trunks, the lantern reveals wet bark and the tangled stems of fern, but nothing to account for what you have heard. Continue slowly. A little farther on, something brushes through the undergrowth, close enough to shake water from the leaves.

Ahead, the woman waits between two ancient trees. Their roots have grown together beneath the earth, but between their trunks there is an opening scarcely wider than a doorway. Through it, the wood appears strangely distant. No leaves stir there. Even the sound of running water falls away as you approach.

She watches you come nearer. Beyond her shoulder, smoke moves through the opening, hiding the path almost as soon as it begins. Something about its depth draws the eye; something about its silence makes the body hesitate.

Behind you, a branch bends with a slow, fibrous creak.

Notice what happens before you move. Perhaps your grip tightens upon the lantern. Perhaps the opening suddenly seems preferable simply because it offers somewhere to go. Or the stillness beyond it may hold you more firmly than the approaching sound can drive you forwards.

The woman speaks.

“If nothing pursued you, would you still wish to cross?”

Let the question interrupt the urgency. Feel the ground beneath both feet. There is time here to attend to what is calling you, as well as to what seems to be pressing at your back.

Now consider the other side of the choice. If the passage beyond were less frightening, would you still wish to remain?

An answer may come slowly. Desire, caution, grief and curiosity can be difficult to distinguish when they speak together. Allow them that complexity. The sound behind you has offered no clear account of itself;

neither has the opening ahead. You may acknowledge both without allowing either to make the decision for you.

The woman steps aside. You may cross, or you may remain upon this side. Neither choice needs to settle what you will do on another night.

Continue with the passage that follows your choice, then move to “Returning to the Grove.”

If You Remain

Set the lantern upon the ground beside the nearer tree. As you step back from the opening, the woman inclines her head, acknowledging your decision. She comes to stand beside you. Together, you turn towards the wood through which you have travelled.

For a moment, everything is still.

Then leaves stir beyond the lantern’s reach. The impulse to turn and hurry through the opening may return, sharp enough to unsettle the choice you have just made. Let your hand rest against the tree. Beneath your palm, the bark is cold and deeply ridged; beneath your feet, the ground holds.

Listen carefully. There is the sound itself, and there is whatever your mind has already placed behind it. Allow a little distance between the two. You need not persuade yourself that the darkness is harmless, nor discover its contents before you can take another breath.

Amongst the ferns, something moves again. The woman remains beside you, her attention directed towards the sound. She offers no explanation, but neither does she urge you to leave.

What have you chosen to care for by remaining?

Allow whatever answer comes to arrive in its own form. It may concern your own readiness, someone who shares your grief, or a part of your life that needs attention before you travel farther. Perhaps there is no answer yet. Beside you, the woman waits without impatience.

At the foot of the tree, a broad root offers a place to sit. Settle there if you wish, keeping the lantern nearby. Across the opening, smoke gathers briefly into a shape and disperses before it can be known. Longing may remain. You are allowed to feel it without rising to follow.

Turn your attention gently towards what troubles you about staying. Is there something that will eventually require a decision, a conversation, an ending, an act of care? Let only as much become clear as you can use. Choosing to remain tonight can include acknowledging what needs attention tomorrow.

There is no need to promise more than that.

If a person comes to mind, offer whatever acknowledgement feels possible: a name held silently, a remembered expression, the simple admission that they matter. Their image need not appear amongst the trees. Nothing has to answer.

After a while, the woman places her palm against the earth between you. Follow the gesture if you wish. Beneath the cold leaves, the ground holds its weight and substance. Your hand belongs here, amongst roots that continue beyond sight, in a world where you still have things to do and people to meet.

The sounds within the wood become less distinct. You cannot tell whether their source has moved away or whether your attention has widened enough to hear the rest of the grove around it: water downhill, branches overhead, the small movements of the living earth.

When you look up, the woman is standing beside the opening again. Her fingers rest briefly against the bark, then fall to her side.

“The threshold will keep.”

Receive the words without turning them into a promise you must fulfil. Tonight, you have stayed and attended. Something may already have changed in the manner of your staying.

Rise when you are ready and retrieve the lantern. The path towards the altar is visible between the trees.

If You Cross

Place the lantern upon a flat stone beside the opening. Before stepping between the trunks, rest a hand against the bark and look back towards the grove. Notice the path, the angle of a low branch, the lantern at your feet. These familiar things remain available to you.

From within the undergrowth comes another movement. Allow yourself to hear it without immediately stepping forwards. Let the first impulse to escape pass through you, then return your attention to whatever drew you towards this threshold before the sound approached.

What makes the crossing yours?

You need not be certain of its outcome. Look for enough willingness to take the step thoughtfully, and enough honesty to recognise that you can reconsider. The woman waits beside the opening while you gather yourself.

Cross when you are ready.

Beyond the trees, the air feels different, carrying a stillness so complete that your footsteps seem to arrive a moment after you have taken them. Pale moss catches a light whose source you cannot find.

Mabon / ALban Elfed: Full Measure

Farther away, trunks stand like figures half concealed beneath long veils, their branches lost overhead.

Pause here. Notice that crossing has not answered every question. Whatever troubled you in the grove may still require attention when you return. For now, you have chosen to meet what lies before you.

Ahead, the woman waits beside a dark pool. As you approach, you see her reflection turn towards you before she does.

Remain at a comfortable distance from the water. Its surface holds fragments of the wood, yet the spaces between them suggest a depth greater than the pool should contain. Somewhere beyond it comes a sound which might be a voice, a bird, or air moving through a hollow tree. Listen without deciding too quickly.

What have you hoped to find here?

Give the question time. You may have arrived seeking reassurance, recognition, a message, a change. Notice whether that hope begins to shape everything you see. Let the water remain water for a while, the distant sound unresolved.

The woman kneels and touches the surface. Rings widen from her fingers, drawing the reflected trees apart. For a moment, something beneath them seems close enough to recognise. Leaning nearer will not make it clearer.

“You may leave it unnamed.”

As the water settles, allow space for your own experience. An image may form, a memory return, a question become sharper. Perhaps you encounter only the pool and the woman beside it. Stay with what is present rather than supplying what you think ought to happen.

If something invites you farther, consider it. You may approach, pause or decline. Having crossed one boundary, you still possess the right to choose the next.

Take whatever time you need beside the water. There is no obligation to bring away a revelation. When you feel ready to return, let that readiness matter, even if curiosity remains. The woman rises as you turn towards the path.

Between the distant trunks, the lantern becomes visible. Its flame is small, but the opening around it is recognisable. Walk towards it slowly. Behind you, the pool keeps whatever you have left unanswered.

Passing between the ancient trees, feel the familiar bark beneath your palm once more. Retrieve the lantern and notice the return of moving air, the water downhill, the leaves beneath your feet. You have

entered and returned; the meaning of the encounter may take longer.

Returning to the Grove

From either side of the threshold, the path leads back to the clearing. Carry the lantern at an easy height and let its light fall where your next steps will be. Beyond that small reach, the grove continues in darkness. You need not account for all of it.

There may still be sounds amongst the trees. Let them belong to the wood while you attend to the ground ahead. You can listen, pause and choose your footing. Fear need not disappear for you to move with care.

At the altar, set the lantern down and place your hands upon the stone. The woman stands opposite you. Her gaze rests upon your face, then upon your hands, as though allowing you time to recognise that you have returned.

You may wish to thank her. You may simply remain still.

Smoke gathers along the edge of the altar, passing between you in a thin grey fold. When it disperses, the woman is gone. Somewhere amongst the branches, a crow settles with a brief disturbance of leaves.

Consider the choice you made tonight. Without judging it against the path you did not take, notice one thing about it that you can carry into ordinary life. Perhaps it is a boundary you wish to honour, a question you can allow to remain open, or something you are ready to address without being hurried by dread. Let the impression be small enough to hold.

The rest may unfold in its own time.

Gradually allow the grove to recede. Become aware again of the fragrance around you, the support beneath your body and the position of your hands. Move your fingers; feel the ground beneath your feet. Ordinary sounds return, locating you within the room.

When you are ready, open your eyes. There is no need to interpret the encounter immediately. You have made a choice for tonight, and you are free to let its meaning develop as you return to the people, places and small familiar tasks of your life.

Part 4 - The Accord

THE ACCORD AT THE THRESHOLD



By Samhain, the woodland has begun to disclose a different architecture. Through branches lately crowded with leaves, distances open which summer kept concealed. Below them, fallen growth darkens against the earth, while the air carries the first cold sharp enough to make each breath an act of attention. Much is ending, yet the stripped trees reveal how much has been present all along.

Aonta na Sgàile belongs within that changing landscape. In bringing together aromatic foliage, spice, resin, wood and root, I find a language for the threshold: something which draws the attention outward into the night even as it invites a quieter movement within. There is room here for apprehension and attraction to exist together. Samhain has always held both for me.

Juniper berry and cypress establish the woodland air. Their coniferous character gives the fragrance an upright, open quality, recalling the spaces between trunks as readily as the trees themselves.

Against that coolness, pink pepper brings a quick, bright disturbance. Its spice can suggest the sudden awareness of movement at the edge of sight, the small interruption which makes us stop and listen more closely.

Such brightness has a place within a dark accord. In the grove, the lamp reveals enough to draw me onwards, although its light offers no assurance about what I will find. Here, the livelier materials can serve a similar purpose, inviting attention into the fragrance. Darkness acquires depth through these brief illuminations.

Woven amongst them, bog myrtle brings an aromatic wildness particularly suited to this encounter. Its herbal, resinous character suggests vegetation brushed in passing, releasing its scent into air already damp with evening. For me, it gives the imagined landscape something untamed. The path may be familiar, but beyond it the land continues according to conditions of its own.

Frankincense opens another space within that landscape. Resinous yet capable of considerable brightness, it brings an association with incense and the deliberate attention of ceremony. The connection with smoke is partly one of memory and imagination: a fragrance can recall the atmosphere of an offering without reproducing the smell of burning. Through frankincense, the grove becomes somewhere I might pause, acknowledge a presence and listen.

Beneath this movement, cedarwood and vetiver give the accord its darker footing. The dry grain of cedarwood offers substance, while vetiver draws attention towards roots and the earth surrounding them. Their presence matters. However strongly the unseen may call, there is still ground beneath our feet, still a body taking breath, still a world to which we must return.

Angelica root, used here in dilution, adds a quieter root-like, musky complexity. Between the aromatic upper character and the deeper woods, it offers another shade rather than a separate declaration. Golden jojoba accompanies the fragrant materials as part of the blend; its role is practical, leaving the more expressive ingredients to carry the landscape.

Together, these materials give me ways to approach Samhain through scent without reducing it to a single familiar image. The season contains more than smoke, more than fallen leaves, more than the solemnity of remembrance. There is alertness in it, and curiosity; the desire to turn towards a sound whose source remains

hidden. Beneath that desire lies the question which accompanies every threshold: how shall I approach?

For this reason, the Morrígan's presence belongs close to the heart of the accord. Within the vision, she refuses to remain where I expect to find her. Each attempt to hold her in one place reveals how much of the encounter I have already decided upon. Fragrance offers a gentler expression of that difficulty. A material which first claims our attention may later seem woven into something larger, while another, previously overlooked, becomes apparent. Returning to the same scent, we do not always encounter it in quite the same way.

I am drawn to that shifting attention. It allows the accord to accompany transformation without pretending to determine its course. Something can change before we have found language for the change; equally, we may need to remain still while its significance catches up with us.

At Samhain, this has a particular tenderness. The boundary we approach may concern an old certainty, a life we are leaving behind, or a relationship altered by death. Formal remembrance can be welcome, but it can also ask more than we are ready to give. A fragrance may accompany the lighting of a candle, the quiet holding of a name, or an evening in which nothing is spoken. Its presence need not make a demand.

My longing for the *sídhe* brings a different kind of attention to the same season. There is an attraction towards what lies beyond familiar understanding, accompanied by the knowledge that longing grants no authority over its object. Within that observance, I use scent to mark a change in my own attentiveness. Any encounter remains its own mystery.

The branching meditation offers a choice because the meaning of a threshold includes our response to it. Crossing may begin a transformation; remaining may give one already underway the time it requires. Either can involve courage. With the accord moving through the room, there is space to consider which belongs to us tonight, without demanding that the decision bind every future version of ourselves.

As the Wheel turns towards Yule, there will be time to rest with whom we have become. For now, Samhain asks us to attend to the passage: what draws us onwards, what deserves caution, what we may carry, and what has grown too rigid to accompany us unchanged.

Beneath it all, the seed entrusted to darkness remains asleep. We need not disturb it to know that possibility endures.

I return, finally, to the words spoken across the altar: “Make what can enter the dark without lying about the light.” Within Aonta na Sgàile, the bright aromatic materials and the deeper woods belong to one composition. Each gives the other depth; neither removes the need for attention. Together they accompany me towards the trees, where the path is visible for a little way and the night continues beyond it.

SAMHAIN: THE THRESHOLD

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