

THE LONGEST NIGHT

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Sample

BLACK CHAPBOOK SERIES

No. 2

Chapbook (noun): a small book of poems

Black book (noun): a grimoire or manuscript collection of spells

The Black Chapbook series explores the conjunction of spell and poem because, when the poet embraces her sorcerous alter-ego, and vice versa, the otherworld stirs and magic is done.

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of folk-poems, incantations, catechisms, eulogies, hymns and evocations is concerned with the dark half of the year. That is, the six months from the autumn equinox to the vernal equinox. Ordered according to the ritual calendar, to read these poems in sequence is to ride the seasonal dark tide as it washes over this world, reaching its apogee on the longest night - winter solstice - before ebbing thereafter.

Many of these works are inevitably concerned with myth, dealing as they do with the sun's cosmic struggle at this time of the year. These days, the term 'myth' is pejorative, synonymous with falsehood ('the myth of capitalism'.) But myths are not lies or confections; rather, they are sacred narratives describing a primal epoch when humans were surrounded by an unseen supernatural realm. Myth was the product of mystical engagement with directly apprehended powers, of the unmediated revelations of gods and goddesses.

We still exist in a continuum of mythic activity, where some have occurred, some are in progress and some are yet to pass. Conscious magical engagement with the mythic cycles of creation and destruction, enshrined in the wheel of the year, gives us, like our ancestors, license to direct their unfolding. And in so doing, we can briefly walk with gods once more.

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AUTUMN EQUINOX

Threshold Day.
The fulcrum in perfect balance.

Sunrise breathes
Squarely upon the blade,
Illuminating our way
As we step from the light.

Behind us:
The earth, fecund;
Life burgeoning;
Oaths and promises fulfilled;
A great reaping
And then a waning.

Before us:
The fire, guttering;
Life withering;
Oaths and promised made;
A great sowing
And then a waxing.

Sunset cascades
Squarely into the cup,
Filling us with with hope
As we step into the darkness.

MÓRRÍGAN

Hail Mórríghna, triune of fate and terror;
She who is triple-voiced and triple-clawed;
Hail great queen, hag, crow-omen;
Hail the women with blazing torches
Who mock the follies of man's ambition.

Welcome frenzied Nemain of the Lamiae, Lilith's sister,
She who grants sovereignty to those who would be kings.
Such proud and foolish boys, stumbling towards their doom,
Unaware that the crows will shortly tug their entrails.
Nemain knows these vain consorts are unworthy of her.
And, because of this, the rites of congress confer only death.

Welcome bloody Macha of the plain, Hecate's sister,
She who presides over the boundaries and the cross-ways.
Few have seen you at the place where road and river meet,
Washing the armour of those about to die; dying the water red.
Fewer still have seen Macha one-legged and one-eyed,
Proclaiming her witch-blood in autumn's bleak groves.

Welcome black Badb the battle-raven, Freyja's sister,
She who flies above the tumult, already divining its outcome.
Warriors fear the grey-red bitch-wolf whose glare can kill;
They know you wield power over the host and all their fates.
But Badb comes for only heroes and kings, men whose time

is short;

Such is the fate of those who the Mórríghna choose to attend.

Draw near then, you sinister daughters of awful boding,

Let us hear your prophesies of vengeance;

Go forth you ragged and ancient ravens

And pile high the heads of our unworthy kings.

Scatter them around the *Mesrad Machae*,

Thwart their ambition,

Grant them terror,

To the end of the world.

WHITETHORN

Tangled briar of the ancient boundaries
I name thee wishing tree, haghthorn, ladythorn
Solitary guardian of hidden doorways
Virid waymarker of Albion

Patron tree of the sabbatic folk
Thy boughs are fed by the blood of Elphame
Shrouding the shores of the sacred dewpond
And all those who gather in His name

At dusk they attend to the errant hedge-queen
Who stirs and rises on eldritch brumes
Riding the ragged frontier of haws
Stained russet by a chthonian womb

YULE

There is a covenant between us and them:
The day is ours, and our occupation multiplies
With its lengthening.
The night is theirs, when the darkness
Reveals their kingdoms and principalities.

Here, at the nightside of summer,
They hold sway. With a surfeit of hours,
They rise up and sweep down;
Through the cracks,
The in-between times and places,
To walk amongst us.

We know our place, which is the home.
We gather together our allies,
The Mistletoe and the Holly,
And the fires of the hearth, carefully tended.
We observe the rites long-negotiated:
Food and drink for them, sacred meals for us;
Propitiations and honours,
Candlelit nights of wakefulness,
In fulfilment of our contract.

We undertake no toil
Because our endeavours are unimportant;
This is not our time. It is theirs

And we yield to their winter agency.
This is how we and they, together,
Sustain the great cycles of myth.
Our ritual deeds are in conformity
With their cosmic pageants,
Forever turning,
Forever coming into being.