



Wassail

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Mythology

Wassail

Gathering time. Bless the year time. Shiver together to remember we're still alive and console ourselves against the snow. Fight time. You can't have one without the other. We fight against winter to bless the trees and the year turning so heat comes back to us.

This year it is my turn to sacrifice. I dance the wassail every year in the dark amid the fires with the others, but this year is different. We drew lots, so it is my turn to give blood. I am afraid, but I saw Jimmy give last year; a boy who lives nearer the forest and it was mother the year before. It is right that I give. The big orchard is tended by us. And it will be Hazel's turn one day too, and I will show her how.

She watches me as I tie plaits and ribbons in my hair. She has brought me apple twig, leafless in midwinter and she has pinned it to my belt. She helps me with my decorations of ribbons, bells and feathers. She has begun dancing too and I sit her on the low stool now by the hearth to braid her hair and fix the pheasant feathers in.

We must dress and disguise ourselves. I have explained this to Hazel on our long walks across fallow fields in a grey and brown country to collect feathers and berries. We must wear the pheasant and kite feather so the birds bless us. We protect them too, with our wassail, to bring back the sun and give them food with our trees.

We must wear some of the rowan, the blackthorn and snowberry to symbolise eternal life, how even in death, earth sustains its creatures. She nods gravely and picks the berries from the hedgerows and we bring them home together, dry them hung up over the hearth and decorate them with ribbons.

As we sit together by the fire during Yule festivities, tying ribbons and eating toasted walnuts I tell her about the importance of ribbons. The bright colours awaken the spring spirits, fill their minds with colour so they remember what they must do when the sun brings longer days, so they can turn the world back to its purples, yellows, reds and greens. I tell her why we must wassail our trees, to drive out the demons from the roots, and

terrify her sleep with stories of rotten apples; starvation. I make her squeal with tales of evil spirits that lie resting in the white flesh of a russet or cox and when it is bitten, fly into the minds of little girls and turn them blind and steal their minds. She shrieks and giggles but she knows these things are true and half knows the horror and disaster that comes when the dancers do not gather for the wassail.

I am feathered, furred and skirted. I am ribboned red for Braeburn and Hazel is Egremont green. I hand her the sticks for clashing. Our father is heating the ale at the stove, spiced and appled, and smiles at us. I know he is proud that we carry on these ways. That we dance to save our apples and we will tend them all our lives as will our children and theirs. He is proud that his daughter will give tonight, and when I drew my lot, I did not flinch, or look at him, but clenched my fist and nodded. I knew he watched. He hands us a cup of ale each, to warm us through before our journey tonight. Mother is outside, lighting the sticks and lanterns. Her ribbons are pippin yellow red and father's are the brown of russets. I will lead them through the village to collect the dancers, then begins our trail round the acres of our homes in the ice wind we call Njordr to bless the trees of all the people. Then I will give my sacrifice and we will sing and dance and drink to scare the devils, wake the spirits and make the giving take.

I give the first shout and step out, banging willow, and my namesake ash. My bells clang in the stillness of the frosty night, as if crystals of frost could have voice and fall against each other. I take the firebrand from my mother. I am ready.

We begin our loop of the village. I lead this year, begin the song to sing each house that beckons them each out of doors. We stand before the black face of a cottage and shout, bang our ash and willow and demand them out. Then the eyes of the house blink open as my fellow youth who have been ready waiting, come out and join the song. They raise their willow and light it from mine. They hand us ale to sip, as is custom, then we all go on together, building the noise and flames into flickering towers piled up in the black sky. Cold night. Beautiful. But unfeeling and unloving, so we must put our warmth in.

We reach the highest point of the orchard. The trees' bare fingers clutch at the wind and all is jumping shadows with our flames. We start here. First we sing, then my blood and hair are mixed with the ale and we all drink, then we sprinkle it on the roots of the trees here, and all the trees of our home. It is more than ritual. It is arduous, methodical, thorough and long. I sing my last song as one who is separate from these trees, then I will become part of them, mixed in forever, immortal in them, like all of us here.

Jimmy steps forward. As giver last year, he must take this year. He hands me the knife, a mistletoe handle,

carved with an apple. First one of my thin ribboned braids is severed from the masses mixed with feathers and dropped in the cup. My breath quickens now, shallow. I can feel Hazel shaking behind me and see the faces of my parents set and harden. Jimmy takes the knife back. I pull my sleeve away from my left arm. He does the same. I see the scar on his arm yet his ordeal is still not over as he must hold my arm still, be deaf to my cry and spill my blood.

I am afraid now.

But I am afraid of more than pain. I am afraid that if I do not give, the blackbird I have not heard sing for months will not come back, nor the swallow; the sun that smiles on bare arms and an eased body soothed from shivering will remain forever hunched and covered. I am afraid the evil will come back into the world, as it did before, as we have all been told since we could speak, and before, and that Hazel will run out and stop the giving in her childish fear and in the end we will all die of the evil.

My mother told me these tales on winter nights as she dressed me in my first ribbons and I asked why I had to go out into the cold. I was appeased with the fun of shouting and singing and hot ale and dancing with the village. But I asked again when I was older. I tell Hazel now as the sun goes blood red and fat and the nights stretch eternally over us. That years ago, men came. They built a stone building that was cold and cut us off from our fields and trees. They tried to make us go in and speak to a brutal statue of a dead bloody man, instead of to the spirits and the trees and air. They told us to stop dancing and singing but speak to their statue. Some did.

The wassailing was left off. Then the canker crept into the trees. A little boy, fed an apple for his lunch, cut in little pieces by his father while bringing the corn in, died. We saw the trees were bleeding. A red sap leaked out of them and their leaves withered, and the big orchard had to be felled to stop it spreading. After that orchardist hanged himself off one of his own trees, we cut him down, mixed his blood with the earth and danced the wassail. Mournfully; to wail our sadness as many of us had died and summer had not come. Then the beat of our drums and sticks warmed us, and we took heart, and we struck the stone building down and used its stones to hold up our own doorways. And we danced the wassail every year until the apples came back, and the sun warmed us again and now every year on this night, the blood of a willing giver is mixed in with the roots so we never lose another drop unwillingly.

I look at Hazel hard. She takes a deep breath and screws her eyes up. While I stare at her light brown hair in the curling red of the fire, Jimmy seizes my arm and slices clean. I cry out but clench the fist which he holds over

the three handled wassail cup. I hold another handle of it and my blood drips quickly in. My tears fall silently, but I can't stop my shoulders from shaking and I feel dizzy. Jimmy looks from the cup to me and sees me swaying then looks frantically at my mother who nods.

It is enough.

I take the cup and he raises up my bleeding arm and swiftly bandages it tight. I hold it up in the air while he kisses my forehead roughly, then with his arm high about my shoulder and neck he cheers, and I drink the ale and my blood. He sips next, then I pass the cup to Hazel, who drinks, then passes it round her people. We sprinkle bloody ale on the tree roots systematically, then warm ourselves with a song and a stamp and dance to our drums. I cry-sing and Jimmy keeps hold of my waist until I am strong again. My mother kisses me and then father leads the dance away through the trees again, brandishing the smoky, eye-watering torches to banish the demons as his ribbons flail out behind him, and our passage round the village's trees begins again until every apple tree has been blessed and exorcised.

We danced long into the night at the ale house. The fires burned all night, we drank and we sang. I spun Hazel round until our red and green skirts merged to an Elstar apple blur. She is growing strong and brave and has learnt all the uses for Goldens this year. And Jimmy and I stood outside when the wind dropped under the naked arms of our trees and felt blessed to be part of them.

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