

AFTERWORD

Dun Aonghasa (the Fort) on the Aran Islands is a ruin of a fort whose walls were meant to withstand the tremendous winds that slapped into the island regularly. Lore had it that no one quite knew why this fort was built here, on the edge of a 300-foot drop that no one in his or her right mind would try to scale. For an enemy to try seemed unlikely indeed.

The three walls of the fort were formed in irregular semicircles, one within the other. The massive innermost wall was made of unmortared stone blocks, open to the cliff that drops off into the sea. Humans had done what they could by building this fort, to stave “it” off—whatever “it” was. Maybe the fort was built to combat the elements themselves—not against cannons or spears but against wind, rain and ocean; they had built something to make themselves feel invincible in this place of stark vulnerability. Why, then, the open side, the side that should have been the most secure? Surely the theory that this fort had once been a complete oval and that sometime in its two-thousand-year history, it had been sheered in half by the elements was accurate. In that case, the elements had won, uncovering the soft underbelly, the fragility of life itself in the unwinnable war against mortality.

When the five women set out for the Aran Islands in the first adventure of their rearranged lives it was Halloween. Emma misread the ferry schedule and they unexpectedly stayed there over Halloween. The proprietor of the bed and breakfast recommended that they attend a Halloween ceremony on Drowned Woman beach. “This area right out there is known as An Bhean Bhaite, the drowned woman. A century or so ago, a young pregnant woman from Connemara—or so the locals surmised from her clothing—washed up on those shores. Maybe she couldn’t stand the thought of telling anyone about the baby and couldn’t stand the thought of not; anyway, it appears she put an end to it. The Church wouldn’t let her body be buried in sacred ground since she’d taken her own life and that of her almost-born baby. But the farmer who owned that soil where she landed took pity on her lost soul and buried her right there on his land,

where she remains to this day, with a small stone at her head and a small stone at her feet.”

They went to the Halloween celebration dressed as the Siberian five elements (earth, air, fire, water and space) and joined the circle on Drowned Woman beach. Lucy spoke to the organizers and was given permission to share something with the fire circle. After introductions were made, the celebrants called in the directions and set the circle.

Emma listened intently to the invocations to the directions and to the elements. At one point she looked across the circle and saw someone on the other side of the fire who looked very much like Brigid, the woman who had sat next to her on her flight to Ireland. They made eye contact and the woman winked at her.

When the time came, the five women took turns reading the myth that Lucy wrote called Elemental Time:

ELEMENTAL TIME

Everything was cycling along beautifully, the seasons taking turns, night merging into day and day into night, the tides coming and going at their usual intervals. Sun rose predictably and Moon, though mysterious in her comings and goings, followed a schedule of waxing and waning.

All five elements, earth, air, fire, water, and space (which contained them all and was unconditional love) were sacred; and since all beings contained differing amounts of each element, they, too were considered sacred. Desire was elemental—elements in one, desired elements in another and if it was mutual, they mated pleasurably to form the creatures and landscapes on earth.

There were many things that humans did not understand; death loomed large and mysterious—diseases, accidents and disasters killed loved ones in seemingly random ways. People prayed to their elemental gods for help in understanding these mysteries.

A man named Nede and a woman named Mog lived happily together side by side. Mog was an extraordinary person who brought out the best in everyone and was loved not only by Nede but by all she encountered. When Mog was giving birth, something went wrong and she died a painful and horrific death. At her burial, heavy rains fell and the earth sucked Mog into it, like quicksand. The community mourned.

The baby lived and prospered in spite of her initial loss. Her father was distraught and searched for ways to relieve his pain. He convinced himself that the elements of earth and water killed Mog and he prayed to air and fire, whom he believed lived in the sky. He forgot all about the element of space. He kept his head tilted toward the sky, listening for wisdom. When the sun shone bright, he turned his face toward it, looking for help. And when the breezes blew, he listened for clues about how to make pain go away. He decided he should separate himself from attachments to earth and

water since they were the cause of pain and death. Where he used to feel connected to animals, the fertile soil and bodies of rippling water, now he distanced himself from them so that if they dried up or died, he would not suffer.

True, it was awkward to leave his baby daughter crying while he detached, but he resolved this difficulty by giving her to another family to raise and by moving to a mountaintop where he could not hear her cries. Over many years he built a cathedral with a tall spire and then spent most of his time as high as he could off the ground.

Meanwhile, the elements continued on as usual, though concerned that Nede was listening so hard to the voices in his own head that he could not hear them. They felt sure that one day he would realize his mistake and ask for the hot spring of forgiveness and the compassion of a soft breeze. They waited.

Many years went by until a group of seekers, having heard a rumor that a wise man lived up on the mountain, came to him for help. Nede, looking at their worried faces, searched the sky for answers but heard nothing. So he spoke the words of retribution that had been bubbling up within him since Mog's death.

He preached about overcoming evil and pain. He set up a system of opposites and ordained that people must die to earth and be reborn in the distant sky. The "good" and "light" things were to be held on high while the "bad" and "dark" ones—earth, water—should be stomped into the ground. He praised air and fire as the only trustworthy gods and composed sermons of the hottest air he could bluster.

He preached, "And the gods have decreed that women shall henceforth be linked with earth and water, in charge of childbearing, nurturance and all things to do with the mortal body. And men's job will be to care for the immortal soul. Only men shall be priests and hear the words of the gods. As you know, I have already sacrificed the woman I love for this cause. Men must take women's fire and air in exchange for their own earth and water. Give up earth and water, oh men of little faith, and you will be rewarded with eternal life."

Nede, seeing how the men were hanging on his every word, went on, "From this day forward, women shall be limited to being mothers; and mothers shall be vessels to reproduce our species. Don't become attached to them. Women are not divine; only men have a direct link to the gods of air and fire."

The search party went back down the mountain to carry out Nede's decrees. Men devised ways to trick girls and women into giving up their air and fire. Nede practiced these techniques on his own daughter, Ekans. He invited her to his cathedral to cook for him; but he treated her with contempt and accused her of killing Mog. "Because you are wicked, dark and undisciplined," he told Ekans, "whatever happens to you will be your own fault." He blamed her for using her water and earth seductively and shamed her into giving up her fire and air, making her dependent on him.

He discovered new ways to disconnect from her. He began to take her sexually every time she showed signs of independence, dooming her to a life of shame and drudgery.

“Discipline,” he repeated as he felt himself getting stronger.

Nede killed animals who were once his friends, finding he enjoyed the taste of their flesh. “Good practice; good discipline for no attachments,” he said, as the blood dripped off of his chin. He passed his new methods on to other men.

After Ekans was forced to give up her air and fire, she bore many children. And she taught her daughters and anyone else who would listen that holding onto air and fire was dangerous—the girls could get badly burned; and what’s more, the fires, if left unchecked, could rage on and on and take out the whole civilization.

These traditions were passed down from generation to generation; and even though every newborn continued to contain all of the elements, boys were trained early to give up their water and earth and girls to give up their air and fire. And everyone forgot about the element of space and its unconditional love. Boys rose and girls sank.

Gradually rules were instituted to control desire so that it no longer rose up out of the stirring of the wind on water, water caressing rock, the licking of flames against the peat. Instead it was ordained that sex occur only with one man and one woman in the privacy of a bedroom and only in order to procreate. Such were the rules.

Human passion became destructive and no longer loving. And the penis, which once gave elements freely, now forced itself into women, took away their breath and smothered their fire. To feel whole, they needed to suck from each other the elements they had given up and they became like parasites, coupling desperately, seeking reunion.

Where humans used to have respect for the elements, now they seemed only to care about power. What had started out as a gentle, loving life force had been turned toward destruction and hate. Humans communicated only with one another and their priests instead of with the elements directly. So absorbed by listening to and reading words, humans forgot the old ways. The elements, angered by this insensitive display of human actions, continued their relationships with other species on earth, but found it harder and harder to ignore the behaviors of humans who were reproducing incessantly, eliminating other species, rapidly using up the elements and creating only waste.

Mog, who had returned to the elements after her death, knew that all her descendants had elements in common with her, and through the ages, she reached out to them. Mostly they could not hear her. Sometimes it would seem she found a receptive one; but in the end that woman, too, was forced to conform. Mog became discouraged but never gave up.

After eons and eons, Mog finally reached one of her descendents, Hale, and advised her to hold onto her air and fire, and these elements within her started singing. She challenged Nede’s ancient laws about desire and loved heartily.

Her mother, Ace, disgusted by Hale’s rebellion did everything in her power to make her conform and be a “normal” woman. But, believing what she had heard, Hale cursed water and earth that she was still stuck in a woman’s body. She birthed a daughter, Em, and in spite of herself, Hale felt deeply connected to her and wanted to

pass Mog's wisdom onto her. Mother and grandmother fought bitterly over Em. "Cling to your fire, your passion and your air, your voice," Hale told little Em and for this Hale was locked up in an asylum.

Frightened by what had happened to Hale, and for the sake of harmony, Em grew up taking whatever shape people around her wanted. She married a priest, had a son and daughter, and for many years faithfully served her husband and his sky Gods.

Upon Hale's death at age ninety-nine, she was reunited with her earth, water, and space and assumed a power she had never known before. She finally could reach Em through the element of space, and she told her stories of how this world had become unbalanced and destructive, and how false it was that men were made in the image of gods and women were mere vessels containing no divinity. Em finally heard the stories of her ancestors and learned the language of the elements, and she passed this onto her daughter Luꞥ.

Luꞥ learned, listened and wrote. She spoke directly with the elements, who told her how they suffered from humans' disregard, sheer numbers and indiscriminate abuse. Luꞥ, stronger for the stories of her motherline, decided to keep and respect all her elements and write them. She knew that each of us is born divine. We can all see the divine mirrored back to us simply by looking deeply into the life around us.

She spoke to large crowds of people saying, "Benhole yourselves! Be spacious! Let your elements fly and swim, run and burn! Embrace all elements and all beings or we will lose this human race. Long live all the elements!"

And Mog finally smiled again, rested her weariness, and repeated to herself, "Patience, in elemental time, it won't be long."

This ending reminded Margaret of a song by Canadian singer/songwriter Ferron, and she sang it with a lovely alto voice.

When the stories had all returned to the sea like drops of water, and the singing died down, a lone drummer beat out an ancient rhythm. Each of the five women had experienced the alchemy of the give and take of sea and land, fire and wind; the give and take with their ancestors and among those gathered together on that misty Hallow's Eve. Nothing would ever be black and white again.

After the revelers went home, the five women went back to their rooms and then the next day, made their way back to their own lives.