

In Word and Thread

Restoration for Agnes Sampson

Dear Agnes,

Outside, the wind howls past the house. The air is heavy and full of movement, as if it wants to tell something that has been silenced for centuries. On the table lies wool in shades of ash, red and white; colours that intertwine as my hands move. Every thread I weave carries a memory, every crossing a breath of the past. I think of you, Agnes Sampson, the wise woman of Keith, who knew the storm and was swept up in it.

They said you had power over the sea. That you raised storms to defy the king, that at night you conspired with the devil in churches. But I believe you only listened to the language of nature. You knew the power of herbs, the warmth of birth, the rhythm of rain. You lived with the water, not against it. And yet that became your downfall, because knowledge in a woman was not tolerated then.

You lived in a century in which fear was stronger than reason. Scotland was ablaze with superstition and war. The cold of the Little Ice Age swept across the land, harvests failed, ships were lost, and the king saw signs everywhere. King James, who considered himself learned, became obsessed with the idea that the devil hid in storms. And when the sea nearly swallowed him on his return from Denmark, he sought someone to blame. You inherited his fear.

I try to imagine how they took you, the soldiers, the people watching. The journey from Haddington to Edinburgh, through mud and cold. Perhaps you were silent, perhaps you still sang an old song to hold on to courage. Your hands rough from work, your feet cracked from the frost. You, a midwife, a healer, suddenly the centre of a madness that spread like fire.

In North Berwick, they spoke of nightly gatherings, of women who kissed the devil, of gusts of wind said to come from you. In thick registers they wrote your name beside the accusations, as if letters could capture truth. Your hair was cut off, your body examined in places that should not be touched. They pricked with needles, they turned screws, they did not let you sleep. They waited until you broke. And when you finally spoke, they were their words, not yours.

And yet something of you remained, Agnes. Something in your eyes that even pain could not extinguish. When you stood before the king, you spoke softly, with the voice of someone who knows more than she says. You whispered something to him that only he and his bride could know, and that became your sentence. Because what a woman knew could only come from the devil.

On Castlehill, where the wind had free rein, they bound you to the stake. First the rope, then the fire. The air smelled of pitch and fear. Perhaps you thought of the women you had helped give birth, of the children you had saved. Perhaps you looked up one last time, at the rising smoke ...

After you came thousands. Women who knew, who spoke, who helped. And again and again their knowledge was made suspect. The stake did not burn the devil, but trust. Fire was the answer to what people did not dare to understand.

That is why today I weave with your name, Agnes. The threads of Icelandic wool are rough at first, but grow softer with every touch. I weave triangles that together form a tartan; a pattern that repeats like a memory. In every thread lives meaning: black for the ash, red for the blood and the courage, white for the grace that never came. Three threads, crossed by a white one, for forgiveness, recognition, remembrance. The tartan of The Witches of Scotland, a living tribute to those consumed by fear.

I imagine you would have found this weaving beautiful. The rhythm, the repetition, the calm that grows between the threads. You would have seen how order arises from confusion, how every crossing is a choice. Perhaps you would have taught me how herbs can strengthen the fabric, how a little lavender protects the thread from moths. And I would have listened, breathless, to your stories about wind directions, moon phases and the power of silence.

There is something in handwork that heals time. Every thread restores what was once torn away. Where the world was broken, I weave coherence. You were destroyed for your knowledge, and yet that knowledge lives on: in hands that weave, in women who heal, in people who dare to listen again.

Sometimes I think: if you had lived in another century, we would have come to you with respect. We would have called you wise instead of mad. We would have asked you about herbs for a difficult birth, for advice in a storm at sea. And you would have laughed softly, because you knew that nature is never hostile, only misunderstood.

The stone on Castlehill bears no name for you alone, but I believe the earth knows you. When I was there, it felt as if the wind stood still for a moment. As if it recognised what we had forgotten. And I felt it: the world still carries your breath, your strength, your knowing.

We now live in a time that calls itself enlightened. Yet shadows remain: women who lose their voice in noise, people who are accused for who they are. The stakes no longer burn in the open air, but their sparks are still there. Therefore, Agnes, your story is not the past, but a reminder of courage.

So I write you this letter, as a restoration in thread. Not to name your suffering again, but to return your place in the fabric of time. You were not a witch, Agnes. You were a woman with knowledge, with strength, with tenderness. And none of that ever deserves fire.

Rest now, Agnes. The storm has passed. Your name has been woven back into the fabric. This time without fire.

With reverence and love,
Micca