

In word and thread

Restoration of honour for Janet Horne

Dear Janet,

Outside lies a thin layer of snow. Not the biting cold of the Highlands, but cold enough to think of your final night. I sit inside, with warm wool in soft colours around me: wheat, carmine red, olive, black. From those threads grow a cowl and a beret as signs of restoration.

They said you had turned your daughter into a horse. As if your caring love could simply become something devilish. I see your hands, trembling with age and cold, that kneaded bread, washed wool and drove sheep. And I hear the whispering of the neighbours, the suspicion that spreads like weeds. In your time, the light of reason began to dawn in Edinburgh, London and Paris, but not in Dornoch. In the Highlands, the darkness lingered a while longer. And you stood there, on the border of two worlds: the old, steeped in superstition, and the new, which forgot you.

I try to imagine the moment when they brought you to the market. The air smelled of peat and tar. You were placed in a barrel, your body smeared with tar. And they called it justice. Perhaps you heard them muttering that the fire would cleanse your soul. Perhaps you thought of your daughter. They said you laughed; that you said: 'I am going to take a warm bath.' I have read that sentence so many times and each time my breath falters. I do not know whether it was courage or madness. Perhaps it was a final attempt to hold on to dignity in a world that had already let you go.

You lived in a time when Scotland was still struggling with itself. The Union with England had only just been born. The Jacobite fire began to glow. And amid all that turmoil there was no place for old women. The Witchcraft Act from long before was almost forgotten. The law was hardly applied anymore. But in Dornoch they reached for it one last time, as if they did not want to let the old darkness disappear without a final flame.

As I read about you, I see images from all over Europe. Women in Hainaut, Schleswig, Salem ... all struck by the same mix of fear, cold and power. In your Scotland too, the aftermath of the Little Ice Age still lingered. Harvests failed, livestock starved, and people searched for someone to blame. And as so often, that blame was found in the face of a woman. The church had preached that women stood closer to the flesh than to the spirit, that temptation lay in their nature. And a society weary from hunger and uncertainty was all too ready to believe it.

In another time they would have called you wise instead of mad. They would have asked you about herbs for rheumatism, about stories of the storm wind, about the meaning of dreams. But in your century people feared women who knew too much or spoke too little.

What moves me, Janet, is how your death coincided with a beginning. Not long after, the witch laws were finally abandoned. The world awoke in shame from a nightmare. You died at the end of that era, but your name lingered in whispers, somewhere on the margins of history.

That is why I now knit with your name a restoration in wool. The Janet cowl and beret grow under my hands from soft alpaca. Wheat, black, olive and red; the colours of the tartan The Witches of Scotland. In every thread there is meaning: black for the ash, red for the blood and the courage, white for the grace that never came. There is something in knitting that softens time. Perhaps that is what we do, women of today, when we let our needles click. Rest now, Janet. The hatred is over. The fire has been extinguished. The thread endures.

With respect and love,

Micca