

## **‘Songs For The Trees’ Words and Background**

*Hi everyone...*

*This album came about when storyteller Xanthe Gresham-Knight asked me to sing a folk song about a tree every month, at The Guesthouse Storyteller nights in Newhaven. Her idea was to loosely base the monthly get-togethers around the Ogham (Druidic) tree calendar.*

*At first, I learnt pre-existing folk songs for each tree, but as I began to research the folklore around these incredible beings, it seemed that most traditional tree songs were about human dramas with trees as frames, as mute bystanders.*

*It seemed to me that there needed to be songs written to honour and portray some of the innate powers, characters and stories of the trees, so they could be central characters themselves. I researched folklore, herbalism, biological characteristics and made friends with trees themselves, asking them ‘Would you like to help me write about you?’ Some weren't interested, some just wanted to hear the finished song, and some gave me a leaf, a twig or a blossom as ritual objects to help me receive the melodies and words - tuning forks to catch the particular spirit of what wanted to come through.*

*The songs were so different to each other, just as the tree species differ, and the individual trees have their own spirit.*

*Nick Pynn was a spectacular midwife - devising arrangements with me, playing his exquisite wood-and-string instruments, and recording with care and fine artistry the fruits of this strange, numinous project. He contributed two beautiful pieces for the Elder and Holly for the album.*

*We hope you enjoy the buds, shoots, leaves and fruits of this collaboration with The Green...*

Kate and Nick



## **Oh Silverskin (For The Birch Tree)**

*Words and Music: Kate Daisy Grant*

Oh Silverskin

Oh bright one

Sweep clear the air

Help us begin

Split through the white

Oh pilgrim

Shelter me

In the frozen

Oh little light, of wonder

Bless us as we leave you

Oh little life,

Oh Mother

Cradle us ...in beauty

*This song was based around the symbolic significance of the Birch (Ogham: Beith) as the tree of new beginnings, a pilgrim tree that has pierced through the ice age, to mother the earth, making the soil ready for insects and other trees. With a lifespan similar to that of humans, this tree has been seen as cleanser, the tree of broomsticks and a light in dark places.*



## **Fearn (For the Alder)**

*Words and Music: Kate Daisy Grant*

CHORUS

*They call me Fearn*

*And they do fear me*

*Fisher queen of weeping waters*

*I lay me down*

*Bridge of the wetlands,*

*But I will die above the ground*

Turn back traveller, don't cross this way unknown

Stay farther from the water

That turned my heart to stone

Life-bringer to your dead,

The sunrise and the start

My body bleeds out crimson

Protection of the heart.

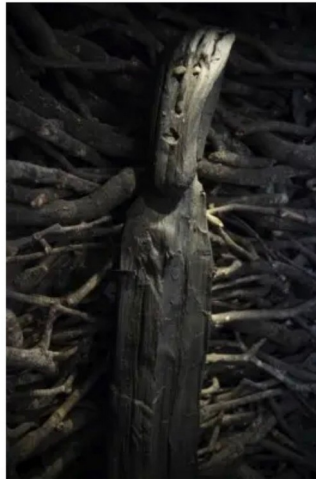
Mine is the bark from which all men are born  
The friend of time, with older fruit and future buds to come,  
The flame dies in your body,  
I will cool you down  
Bring you child, and shield you  
Embrace, and all- surround.

*An Alder leaf inside each shoe  
Hide me one and hide me two.  
Grounded in your living green  
I will walk unseen.*

I'll hide you outlaw lovers, keep secret your disguise  
Come whistling winds to pipe song, give sight to the divine,  
Come fairies to my flowers  
Safe from human eyes  
I'll hold you childless woman,  
From cruel and heartless chides

*The Ogham term for the Alder is 'Fearn' (farn). A tree of protection, for runaways, thieves, and the fey folk, who bears bud and cone simultaneously reaching past and future simultaneously. The Alder bleeds red when cut, and would be used to make shields for warriors, with the belief that the tree would sacrificially bleed in place of the shield-bearer. The Alder turns as hard as stone under water, but degrades when brought back to the air.*

*This was apparent when The Ballachulish Goddess was discovered in the Victorian era; on the land between two dangerous straits in Scotland, a female goddess made from a single piece of Alder was brought up from the water. With quartz pebbles for eyes, she may have been a fertility goddess, as well as likely offering warning and protection for those embarking on the crossing of the wild waters. Intact when discovered, she warped and withered once brought out into the air.*



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<https://discoverglencoe.scot/the-ballachulish-goddess/>

*One of the most poignant histories of the Alder for me, was that the graves of childless women were surrounded by Alder twigs as so-called protection from barrenness, but in this song, I believe that the Alder would have been instead protecting the women from mankind's ignorance.*



## **The Elder Mother**

Music : Nick Pynn

Nick says: *Fairies love music in general, and particularly from instruments made from Elder wood. Whistles, pipes and chanters have been made from Elder wood (Ogham: Ruis). Philippe's wooden flute probably isn't made from Elder, but believe it certainly evokes that spirit. Elder is often depicted as being protective tree, though it has been said that If someone takes wood from the tree without asking the Elder Mother's permission, they will face bad luck or the Elder Mother's revenge. My Mountain Dulcimer isn't made of Elder, but if I were ever to make one that is, I'll certainly check in with her first.*



## **Od's Song (For The Ash)**

*Words and Music: Kate Daisy Grant*

I am the tree that no man knows  
Where the web of the world is wound  
The horse of the hanged, the poor man's noose  
That falls like dewdrops down  
My roots are three from first I seed  
We know not how they fell  
With one to the frost, one to the man, and one to the holy Hel  
The brightest of the noble trees, that covers all the skies  
The greatest god hangs from its branch In highest sacrifice

### **CHORUS**

Keep that steadfast will of thine....  
Hold to your life and hold to the line  
Boast your beauty, steely spine  
But tie your will to mine,  
Tie to the will divine.

I swing and sway on the sacred tree  
For nine long days and nights  
Sons of Wolfsnake be my guides as wild and twist we ride  
The three are the Winder, the King of the ditch, and the Sleep of eternal night  
The bringer, the way, the receiver all as I give myself to mine  
Come prophecy, come poetry, rain on my drooping head  
The lightning strike will forge the line  
Through God, and man and dead

The agony of prophecy  
Carved into every side  
The brightest of the noble trees  
That reaches through the skies

Mighty tree you'll be my steed  
As I wade through the river and rime  
Through boiling waters With a scream  
And a gift for all mankind  
You will see what is not yet and back to early time  
As above is so below; without is so inside  
So drink up, revel in the cheer- the three worlds come to life  
For the swing and the sway is the only way  
To where all worlds collide

*Storyteller Xanthe Gresham-Knight holds the view that the lesser-known God, Od - the consort of creation Goddess Frigg - is an early iteration of the God Odin - the warlord, he of death, often associated with extractive ownership, patriarchy and territorialism. She sees Od as the gentler, harmonious consort of the Goddess, who loves mankind so much as to sacrifice himself on the World Tree (Ash, or Nion in Ogham) so as to gift humanity poetry and prophecy in the form of the runes.*

*This song tells the story of that sacrifice - and the swinging of Od on the World Tree being connected to the swaying of altered states that might connect us to the Otherworldly levels.*



## **The Yew Tree On The Downs**

Words: DH Lawrence, Music: Kate Daisy Grant

A gibbous moon hangs out of the twilight,  
Star-spiders, spinning their thread,  
Drop a little lower, withouten respite  
Watching us overhead.

Come then under this tree, where the tent-cloths  
Curtain us in so dark  
That here we're safe from even the ermine moth's  
Twitching remark.

Here in this swarthy, secret tent,  
Whose black boughs flap the ground,  
Come, draw the thorn from my discontent,  
And bless the wound.

This rare, ancient night! For in here  
Under the yew-tree tent  
The darkness is secret, and I could sear  
You like frankincense into scent.

Here not even the stars can spy us,  
Not even the moths can alight  
On our mystery; nought can descry us  
Nor put us to flight.

Put trust then now in the black-boughed tree,  
Lie down, and open to me  
The inner dark of the mystery,  
Be penetrate, like the tree.

Waste not the yew-tree's waiting, waste  
Not this inner night!  
Open the core of gloaming, taste  
The last dark delight.

*The Yew Tree (Ogham: Ioho) stories and symbolism are often about their association with graveyards, death and resurrection. There are wild tales of the Yew roots reaching into the skulls of the surrounding dead, and of course terrifying stories of poisoning due to eating their beautiful red berries. But this poem - and DH Lawrence was not celebrated for his poetry - encapsulated something for me of the erotic, dark mystique without being overly gothic. The extreme secrecy of this tryst made me wonder if this might be a love song from DH's heterosexual leanings, or perhaps his rumoured, more complex relationship to same-sex attraction, which due to the times, would have been forced to exist in the shadows.*



## The Rowan Tree

*Words: by Carolina Oliphant (Lady Nairn), Music: Kate Daisy Grant*

Oh! Rowan Tree, Oh! Rowan Tree, thou'lt aye be dear to me,  
Intwin'd thou art wi' mony ties o' hame and infancy.  
Thy leaves were aye the first o' spring, thy flow'rs the simmer's pride;  
There was nae sic a bonny tree, in a' the countrie side.  
Oh! Rowan Tree.

How fair wert thou in simmer time, wi' a' thy clusters white,  
How rich and gay thy autumn dress, wi' berries red and bright!  
On thy fair stem were mony names, which now nae mair I see,  
But they're engraven on my heart — forgot they ne'er can be!  
Oh! Rowan Tree.

We sat aneath thy spreading shade, the bairnies round thee ran,  
They pu'd thy bonny berries red, and necklaces they strang;  
My mother! oh! I see her still, she smiled our sports to see,  
Wi' little Jeanie on her lap, an' Jamie at her knee!  
Oh! Rowan Tree.

Oh! there arose my father's prayer, in holy evening's calm,  
How sweet was then my mother's voice, in the Martyr's psalm!  
Now a' are gane! we meet nae mair aneath the Rowan Tree;  
But hallowed thoughts around thee twine o' hame and infancy.  
Oh! Rowan Tree.

*This was a poem that I felt honoured both the Rowan Tree (Luis in Ogham) and the people's lives surrounding it equally, and I heard a new tune for this beautiful folk song.*



## **The Shadow On The Lowlands (Willow Song)**

*Words and Music: Kate Daisy Grant*

Rest here lost one

Safe on lower ground

Tie your prayer to me, loved one

Bring him back and make me found

The pallor of a dead man

The tears of moonlit bark.

Keep your faith lost one,

See clearly in the dark

CHORUS

Can you hear him still

Can you see him still

Like the shadow on the lowlands

The hawk above the hill

Broke branch body, from river fathoms deep

He has gone, Willow, too far for me to reach

The bitter taste of weeping

The bitter tastes so sweet

Hold him fast, Willow

In the clutches of the green

Tell a tale, Willow

Of all time and decay

Tell of things born of night time

And dark things of the day

Lend your gift, Willow

for hunter and the prey

Hold me fast, Willow

This body must not break

Come to me, I'll follow you

The first to bud in springtime

The last to lose the leaf

In fine coloured withee

My love has crossed the Lee

I hear him in the grass grow

I see him in the deep

Willow wind waly

Bring back my love to me

*Willow (Sail in Ogham) the cathedral of grief, has an international association with weeping, sorrow and loss. Another graveyard tree, also to be found drooping over still waters. It kills pain (the basis of aspirin), and offers the gift of yielding to unbearable pressure. It also has a reputation for following the unwary traveller. Depending on the culture, Willow promises to deepen connection to the dead, or to protect from visitations from the deceased. I wanted to capture the entrapment of this complex grief - should we let go, or can we meet just one more time?*



## **Queen of May (For the Hawthorn)**

Music and Lyrics: Kate Daisy Grant

Strike, strike, felled with fright

Make you rise while your blood runs white

Ne'er a prize was set so high

Never be your bride

Hard, kind, friend, foe

Soft as summer and cruel as snow

Give my hand to mortal

No man so wise

**CHORUS**

Hail fair, Queen of May

She leaves petals in her wake

Her body will not move

And your heart will break

And you will not take

Huath, huath

Pure heart, blessed be

Enter the shade of the peasant tree

Only the prey and humble be worth sanctuary

Whole, free,

The Holy Three

Grow from the roots of the Hawthorn tree

Know your heart for its mastery

And sovereignty

Come all ye beauty

When dusk meets the dew

Heed not the warnings

Burning black and midnight blue

Enter in the light renewed

Lonethorn, Moonthorn,

Wolfcrow blessing crown adorned

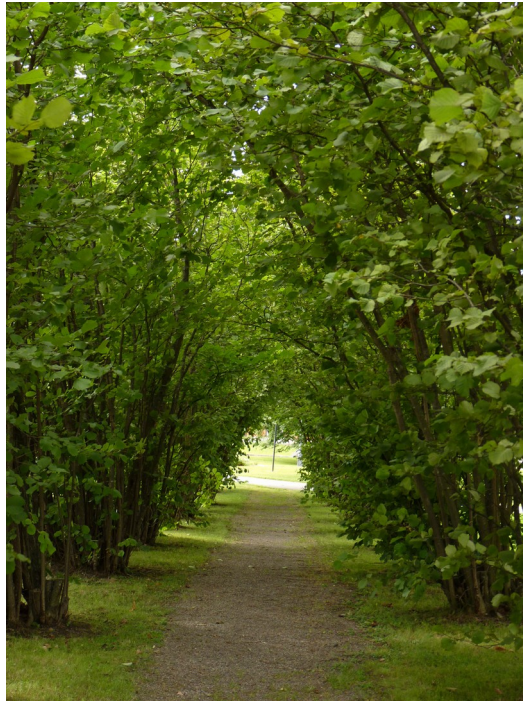
Born of lightning hill and storm

When the veil is torn

*Hawthorn (Ogham: Huath) has many facets, like many trees who have light and shadow characteristics - and can be seen as both friendly and not-so-friendly to humans. What shone out to me of the stories I read, were the association with the Queen of May. This Queen is always and ever betrothed to the Oak King, but always has time to set impossible tasks for foolhardy suitors.*

*Also interesting to me was the sanctity of the Hawthorn - illegal to move these trees, Irish roads would be forced to curve around them. Embodying consent and bodily autonomy, the Hawthorn is in charge of who may or may not enter her sphere. Small animals, and beautiful maidens entranced by fairy music are welcome...gallumphing interlopers, not so much. Reading the folklore about the blossom bringing potentially bad luck into the house, I asked my helpful Hawthorn songwriting partner tree, who allowed me to borrow, not keep, a twig in bloom to get*

*the song in motion.*



## **Keening Song (For the Hazel)**

**Words and Music: Kate Daisy Grant**

Abii, etsi me vides

Solum luctus, desiderium

Carmen silentii sentio

Ex loco numquam viso

*(I have gone*

*Although you see me,*

*Alone in grief, in longing.*

*I sense a song beyond my hearing*

*From a place never seen)*

Ad viam obscuram  
Femina flammans,  
Non vivi non mortui  
Dolor, i mecum, vigila mecum  
Da vocem tuam pro me

*At the dark road,  
A woman in flames,  
Neither living nor dead  
Grief, go with me, keep vigil with me  
Give your voice for me*

### **Lamentare**

**Insomnis mecum iace**

**Aufer me sono tuo**

**Ulula, stride, eiula**

Lament!  
Lie sleepless with me  
Carry me over on your sound,  
Wail, shriek, howl

Sonus planctus, carmen lamenti  
Ex lex, quo modo lugemus?  
Locum amitte, pudorem abice  
Antiqui et orbi

*The sound of keening, the song of sorrow,  
Outlawed, how shall we mourn?  
Lose your place, cast off your shame,*

*Ancient and orphaned*

Clamate, plorantes

Ne anima mea disperdat

Exsules sine ritu

Ignis perpetuus, revivisce

*Cry out, keeners*

*So that my soul may not be lost*

*Exiles without ritual*

*Perpetual flame, revive*

Abimus, etsi nos audis,

Luctus, pro amissis

Tibi qui semper quaeris

Vale terra, quae mei memor es

*We are gone, though you hear us*

*Grief, for all that is lost*

*For you who forever searches*

*Farewell land, who holds me in memory*

*There is a myth where the Goddess Brighid's son dies on the battlefield and as she searched for his body holding a sprig of hazel (Coll, Ogham), her wailing was heard throughout all Ireland – this was said to be the birth of keening.*

*Keening is a Shamanic practice in which (usually older) women screech and howl to transport the soul of the deceased to the Otherworld. These were the crones of the community, women of flame, in the dark road between life and death. The Catholic church banned the practice as the women were seen to be taking power from the priests in Ireland. So, the keening for lost land, lost rituals, grief for the living and the dead, was crushed into the Latin liturgy – the Goddess Brighid was remade as Saint Bridget, and the women were forced to mourn in a language not their own...perhaps with the memory and power of the keen waiting to burst through the constraints. This song wanted to be written in Latin - a keen for the loss of keening itself.*



## **Oh, Joy, Wassail (For the Apple)**

*Music and Lyrics: Kate Daisy Grant (featuring a mangled misquote from Thomas Traherne)*

**Sing me a song from another day**

**From the time before the great unknowing**

**We're alive, we're alive**

**Strangely survived**

**The flame is faint but it's growing**

**Where have you been, my long lost friend?**

**Have you come to take me home to the island**

**Come swing into these arms again**

**And we'll never be so far apart my friend**

## CHORUS

*Oh joy, Wassail*

*I do wish you well*

Let us go run rings ragged round the moon then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out where the changeling summer lies  
Speak with Angels as they come spinning by  
Let them call us madmen on the border line  
All the deadways and highways on hallowed ground  
How does the wild wind know how to blow it all down  
For if we fall it's from wondrous high  
Not from, but from above, the endless Apple sky

*Oh joy, Wassail*

*I do wish you well*

Come swing into these arms again  
And we'll never be so far apart my friend

*Oh joy, Wassail*

*I do wish you well*

Sing me a song from another day

*The Apple (Ogham: Ceirt). An associated ancient meaning is 'Shelter of a Lunatic'. This song took ages to get right - I asked a local apple tree, who just said 'Keep it simple, something I can dance to' and that was...it. I span around stories of the mad mystics associated with the Apple - Merlin, Johnny Appleseed, and the Isle of Avalon. I was charmed by the unpredictability of the apple - if you can possibly plant one from seed, it will attempt to revert back to its ancestral crab apple self, although it contains all varieties. I was surrounded by a helpful apple slowly rotting, an apple twig, crab apple remedy, and then some more helpful apple trees lent me their leaves, I happened upon a quote from Christ-and-Nature mystic Thomas Traherne, and we were off. This song was so light, I had to inhabit a cloud, a sunset, an evening from an old harvest dance that I had never lived and be spinning 1,000 miles an hour.*



## **Bring Us Back To Life (For the Oak)**

*Music and Lyrics: Kate Daisy Grant*

A garden, country and a world,  
The gateway, to the bright  
Courage, friend, walk on, endure  
Grow greater than before

Oldest watcher of the night  
Despair before the dawn.  
I see the future bird in flight  
Won't you bring us back to life

Gospel tree, the hero shield  
Hold and bury, cloak cover me  
As all long last the acorn falls  
First flower will I see

Windsong ringing through the leaves  
The knowing breath, the light perceives  
As the morning, hope arrives  
Won't you bring us back to life

Between the water and the land  
Nothing slipping through my hands,  
Between day and dark and sleep and sign  
Split bark and wood and breath and line

Undergrief , and underground  
Hold our body, hold our sound  
Split breath and faith and sand and time  
Won't you bring us back to life

Bring me some courage in this night  
Won't you bring us back to life

*The Oak (Dair in Ogham) has all the Divine Masculine solidity, associations with enduring strength and the being of the good father to so many species. And it was the light and ephemeral details of Oak mythology that also drew me - that the Druids, who were primarily associated with Oak groves, would divine the future by watching the flight of birds from the branches, or from seeing patterns between the wood and the bark - the finest of details, the most fleeting of happenings.*



# Holly

*Music by Nick Pynn*

Nick says: *The Druids considered Holly a sacred tree, and Holly wood was used for making magic wands.*

*Faeries and sprites shelter in Holly bushes. If you take clippings of Holly branches indoors, it is said that the fairies and sprites of the forest will follow, and will bring you good luck in exchange for the warmth of your fire.*



## **Where Do I Go From Here? (Song for the Pine)**

There were things done and a world undone  
That I can't remember - the path to this place  
Always lived out, always in doubt  
Condemned and sorry, a song half-empty

But I think I found hope,  
In a last ray of smoke  
The way back for maybe the first time

There was a crow  
Flown in from the cold  
And there was a tree just covered with starlight  
Perhaps only those winter birds know the taste of no home  
Blown only skywards

Stay by my side, stay in my life,

Lend me your faith and your farsight

A last look before leaving,

Friend of the long night

You're reaching back for me

The lost rite

See us as we are, afraid in the dark

But mantled with starlight and wonder

Where do I go from here...

Where do we go from here...

*The Druids would apparently enact beautiful light shows - early firework displays in the forest in Winter. People all the way back through time would hang bright and shining objects on the pine trees, hoping to entice Spring and light back again. The Pine (Ailm in Ogham) was relied on as a beacon of hope in the lengthening dark, the trees so tall that maybe they could see the future, maybe they could reassure that all was not lost, however black things might seem.*

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Thanks for going on this trip with us - and we really hope you've enjoyed this album. There are many excellent books and sources if you want to find out more about the trees there are so many sources - including The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, the writing of Danu Forest, Jacqueline Memory Paterson...all excellent collectors of the various aspects of tree medicine and magic.

There are also excellent resources about keening – books by Anne Schilling, John O'Donoghue, Michelle Collins and writings/ courses with Jude Lally.

There will be storytellers and myth-weavers in your town - support them if you can - they are the holders of the lineages. Online, among many others I recommend the storyteller Story Crow and Tim Hawthorn and of course, online and in print, Xanthe Gresham-Knight, who blends goddess tales with stories of the green in her brilliant book. 'Herbalism Mythica'.

*All images: thanks to Canva*