

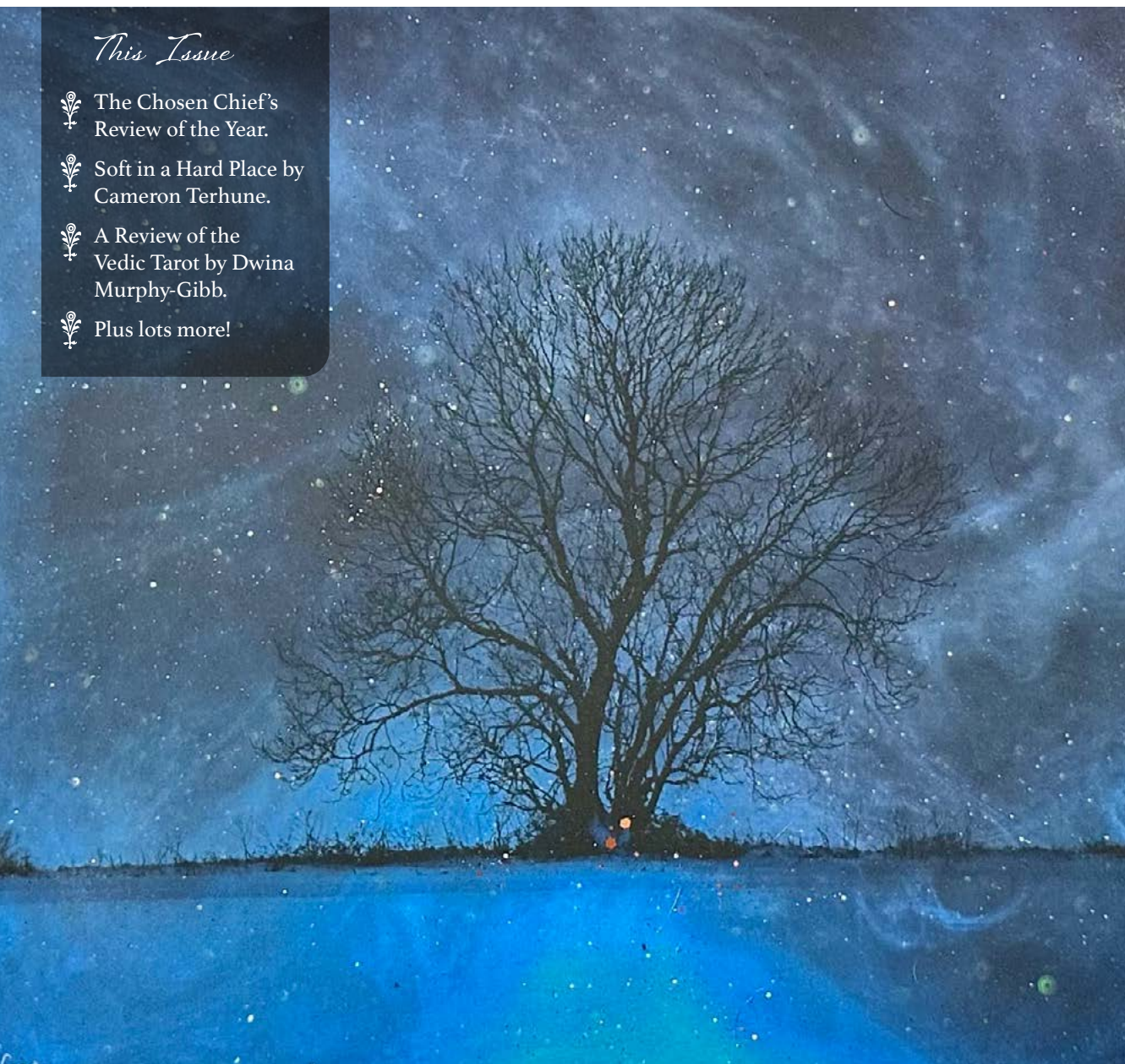


The journal of
**THE ORDER OF BARDS,
OVATES & DRUIDS**

January 2025 | Issue 329

This Issue

- ✿ The Chosen Chief's
Review of the Year.
- ✿ Soft in a Hard Place by
Cameron Terhune.
- ✿ A Review of the
Vedic Tarot by Dwina
Murphy-Gibb.
- ✿ Plus lots more!



COVER: "A Winter's Tale" by Rosemary Gosden

Editorial

Welcome to January's *Touchstone*! You will find plenty here to get you through those long dark nights. Grab a cup of something warm and relax into the new year, as we look both forward and backward.

Our retrospective begins with Eimear's wonderful review of the year, which is packed full of memories of a busy 2024. So much has happened in the past twelve months, it's worth checking to see what you missed! There is also the second part of my interview with Penny Billington, looking back on her time as editor of *Touchstone*. Penny also looks to the future and gives us some hints about her upcoming projects.

Elsewhere, you will find a bumper Bard's Page with some gorgeous poetry and a raven theme to the artwork. Then there is our first article by an astonishing writer, Cameron Terhune. His article, *Soft in a Hard Place*, will warm your heart and really make you think. There will be more from Cameron in future.

This month's beautiful cover is by the very talented Rosemary Gosden. It's a perfectly magical piece to lead us into this month's edition. Shortly after I received it, Paulie VonEdWærd-Benjamin's poem, above right, arrived. It's almost like the pair work in tandem and speak to each other. It's another one of those little bits of contributor magic which still astound me!

Whilst putting together this issue, I heard of the passing of Mary Spain, who was the Druid grade mentor. Mary was such a kind, supportive soul, she will be deeply missed. We will celebrate her contribution to the (rder more fully in February's edition.

Until then, stay safe and warm - and if the awen strikes you, please do send in the resulting articles, poems or artwork to *Touchstone*!



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Winter Tree Dreams by Paulie VonEdWærd-Benjamin

Standing tall, the sleeping trees
With blanketed boughs under gentle snow,
Peacefully feel the sun's cold rays
Caressed by flakes they gently sway
Where so ever the wind may blow
And patiently await for this they know:
While it's comfy, nestled in
The Springtime dream shall come again!



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Opinions/statements by contributors are not necessarily those of the editor, Order or publishers. Submissions from members are welcomed, but it is not always possible to use everything offered for publication. Contributions must focus on Druidry or contributor's experience of Druidry and may be edited without consultation unless a request is made to the contrary. Poetry no more than 40 lines. Articles of 1,400 words or fewer. No AI generated content. Deadline for events inclusion is 5th of the month before publication. Submissions may be printed on the OBOD website unless requested otherwise.

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Chosen Chief's Bit

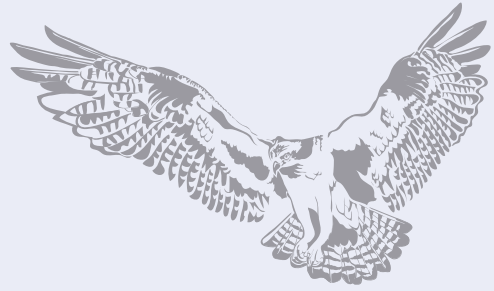
A chairde, Athbhliain faoi mhaise daoibh go léir!
Hello everyone and Happy New Year to you all!

I'm sitting here writing after Storm Darragh and all that came with it, looking out on my garden. The sky is a clear blue, and the sun is shining on the bare trees. Even with all this brightness, I'm aware we are heading towards the darkest time of the year and reflecting on how this contrast of light and dark is mirrored in the world today, how we, as Druids, work with contrasts and ambiguities and how we can hold polarities together; how we honour An Trí Bhís Mhór – Beatha, Bás agus Athbhreith, the Great Triple Spiral of Life, Death and Rebirth; how despite all the pain and destruction in the world today we do not give up hope, but we persist and we begin again. I love this quotation from Meister Eckhart, which sums up this need to start again: "Be willing to be a beginner every single morning."

We began again last December, 2023, when we created a new tradition of holding our Gatherings in Strode Theatre in Street. While it was not the same as the Town Hall, and I know many of our members miss the old place, it offered a larger space with a café area and a greater sense of warmth. Our theme was Animism, and there were three wonderful presentations on this topic from Gordon McClelland, Lucy Jones and Graham Harvey. We had a beautiful Winter Ceremony in the grounds of Strode Theatre. It was quite magical as we processed to the site with a view of the Tor and a Trilithon, and we processed back to the theatre in the dark.



This was the last Gathering Damh the Bard organised after over 20 years. This task is so huge that three people have replaced him. A big thanks, Damh!



We had two Druid Gorseddau this year, one in Cornwall in March and the other in Yorkshire in April. A Gorsedd is an in person event where a theme is explored and discussed, usually over the course of a weekend. There are usually rituals, discussions and an Eisteddfod where attendees can share songs, poems or other artistic creations.

Again, the demand for places was high, so it was decided to hold three in 2025. For information, contact druidgorsedds@obod.org

The European Druid Gorsedd was held in Germany in March and another one will take place in the coming year.

The second Bardic Gorsedd was held in Penmaenmawr, Wales and was very well-attended. For information about next year's one, contact bardicgorsedds@obod.org

Bealtaine was marked by the launch of The Hearth. This is such a wonderful innovation for the Order. It took many years to bring this to fruition following suggestions from members to have our own space where we can connect and be free from advertising and the toxicity of social media platforms. A special thanks to Matthew and his team for their dedication and skills in creating this platform. They continue to develop The Hearth, and I'm so impressed with how the capacity for connection and communication continues to grow.



There are now 119 Circles on The Hearth. We also have Druid TV, where you can access videos of workshops and interviews. Thanks to everyone who has signed up to The Hearth and for your support in this endeavour. Without your support, The Hearth cannot function. Everyone should have received an invitation email to sign up for The Hearth. If you have not yet checked in why not take a look inside? Thanks to the moderators Steve Hounsborne and Bryan Flowers for their hard work.

This year marked the 60th anniversary of the Order, and we had a special celebration at our Summer Gathering in the Strode Theatre. We set things off with a Meet and Greet on Friday afternoon in the Avalon Club, Glastonbury, facilitated by the Sylvan Grove. Our Gathering began on Saturday morning with an Oak Ceremony held by Adrian Rook and JJ Middleway as a mirror to the Mistletoe ceremony held at the Winter Gatherings. There were three talks from myself, Ronald and Philip. Recordings of these talks can be found on Druid Cast.



We broke with tradition when the Grove meetings were held and put the focus on socialising rather than on learning or preparing for the Tor ritual. We held our Summer ritual in two places simultaneously – On the Tor and the grounds of Strode Theatre. This ensured accessibility and choice for our members. I was at the ceremony on the Tor, and one magical moment I'd like to mention was when Philip, the Bard of the Future and myself, representing the past, future and present of the Order, were standing together. Philip was in the shade, I was in partial shade, and as the Bard of the Future spoke, the sun burst out from behind the clouds. A wonderful portent for our future!

As usual, we had an amazing Eisteddfod. Seán

Hayes has retired after many years as MC of the Eisteddfodau. His humour and warmth will be sadly missed and we wish him well. Gary Llewellyn will take on the role of MC.

We honoured Penny Billington as Honorary Bard. Penny retired as editor of *Touchstone* at the end of 2023 after so many years of service. A big thank you! Andrew Anderson has taken up the mantle of Editor, and we wish him much success. We had a Poetry workshop in the Theatre on Sunday morning where four poets were invited to speak about their process: Penny Billington, Andrew Anderson, Lorraine Munn, and Joshua Ramey-Renk. This was followed by a workshop in break-out groups where the participants were invited to think of a soul moment they had over the weekend and to write a three-line poem; the first line literal; the second line emotional; the third line spiritual/magical. People were invited to send their pieces to Andrew for *Touchstone*, such as this wonderful piece by Sue Dudley, Kevin Mcilroy and Steve King:

Sudden shaft of golden light
Brings to all joy and delight
Summoned Sun pours magic bright

The Fringe started with an Open Mic session in the Assembly rooms, facilitated by Marcus Bollonius. The rationale for this was to have a space beyond the Eisteddfod for our members to share their Bardic skills. The response to this was so positive that we are going to continue to hold an Open Mic session on the Friday evening of our Gatherings. We had seventeen presentations in the Fringe in various venues in Glastonbury on Monday and Tuesday.

Thanks to our new Gatherings team: Tom Moxon, Marcella Dillon-Walshe and Lorraine Munn and to all those members who offered their help throughout the weekend.



This was the year for Mount Haemus. Due to the COVID pandemic in 2020, we were not able to host our four-yearly Mount Haemus Day. This left us with eight papers to be presented. We had two online presentations in May by our scholars RoMa Johnson (*The Well and the Chalice*), Michelle Le France (*The Feminist Druid: Making Way for New Stories*), Dana Driscoll (*Channelling the Awen Within: An Exploratory Study of the Bardic Arts in the Modern Druid Tradition*) and Larisa White (*World Druidry: Seasonal Festivals in a Globalizing Tradition*). Each presentation was followed by a breakout session to facilitate a social element to the evening.

In October, we held our Mt. Haemus Day in Glastonbury with presentations by Jonathan Woolley (*The Elemental Forms of Druidic Life*), Paul Whit (*Discovering Meaning in Ireland: Megalithic Spiritual Experiences*), Bill Bruen (*Fallen Branches: Reconstructing the Lost Sage of Caswallawn ap Beli Mawr*), and Philip Carr-Gomm read for Susan Jones (*What Druidry does: a perspective on the spiritual dynamics of the OBOD course*), who was not able to attend. The event was held in the beautiful St. Benedict's Church. Penny Billington



began the proceedings with a most interesting history of St. Benedict's. The presentations were punctuated with the wonderful music and songs of Honorary Bard Arthur Billington.

Our online ceremonies to mark the Wheel of the Year continue. Many thanks to the Groves and Seed groups who offer their service to hold these ceremonies. The response from members and non-members to these ceremonies is very positive. Thanks to OBOD Healer's Circle Grove, Mystic River Grove, Cú Chulainn's Belt, Sylvan Grove, South Devon & Dartmoor Grove, Wren's Nest Grove, Chinook Hills Grove, Mentrax Grove.

Our members in the Southern Hemisphere have started to hold online ceremonies again - Araras



Seed Group, Treesong Forest Seed Group, and South Coast Seed Group.

A special thanks to Stephen Barnes for his beautiful and creative invitation and thanks posters.

Our only Druid Mentor, Mary Spain, retired this year after over 30 years of service to the Order and sadly passed away a few weeks ago. I am sure many of our Druid grade members have fond memories of their communications with Mary. A memory I'd like to share is when I wrote to Mary expressing my anxiety about writing my Druid review, whether it would be good enough, how much to write, etc. Her response to me was: 'These are not the questions to ask yourself. The question is - Are you enjoying it?' I was so reassured by her response, and it changed everything for me. I wrote my review, and I did enjoy writing it. Ar dheis na Déithe go raibh a hanam! This is a variation of an Irish blessing when someone passes, meaning May her soul sit at the right hand of the Gods(esses). Steve Hounscome and Jane Booth are now the Druid Mentors and Fi Ware is the Mentor Co-ordinator.



Tea with a Druid continues on Monday nights at 8pm UK time and Philip also hosts *Biscuits with Druids* on The Hearth afterwards. *Fireside Chats with Eimear* are broadcast on Thursday nights at 8pm UK time for about 45 minutes, and then we move over to The Heath for a more intimate chat. *Druidcast* is now on episode 209. If you haven't been able to watch them live, recordings of the *Teas*, *Chats* and *DruidCast* can be found on the Order's OBOD YouTube channel and on The Hearth.

David Bramwell's Series 3 of *Adventures in Nutopia* podcast, which is sponsored by OBOD, went live in October this year. If you enjoyed series one and two, you will be fascinated by the range of topics covered, from Randomness, Consciousness, and Intelligence and David's quirky and brilliant way of dealing with these subjects.

Members activities:

The Building Resilience for Hard Times listening circle continues to be held on the first Wednesday of the month at 7pm UK time. Details can be found in the OBOD Deep Listening Circle on The Hearth.

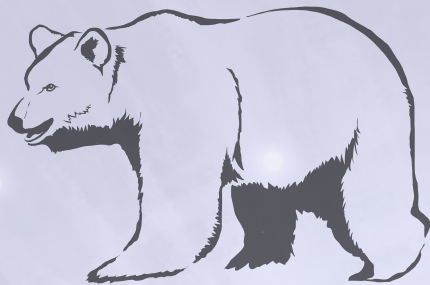
John King facilitates *The Death Café* on the 3rd Wednesday of every month, details in the Death Café circle on The Hearth.

The Mental Health Group meets every month where we have a presentation and break-out discussions on a topic. About twelve members of the MHG attended the *Eurotas Transpersonal Psychology* conference in Oxford in September. The Order was one of the sponsors and we had our own desk, which served as a meeting point for those of us who attended. Philip, Hari Sams, and Zoë Meerburg presented papers at the conference. The Healer's Circle held online Healing rituals in April and December.

Seán Ó'Gaoithín and I held the *Bioróg Retreat* in Donegal in June, and all the participants were OBOD members. It was great to share the story of Bioróg, the little Druid woman who features and plays a key role in the Battle of Moytura in Irish Mythology within the magical landscape where the story takes place.

I was invited to take part in the Bealtaine Festival at Uisneach, the sacred centre of Ireland. I was accompanied by OBOD members Adrian Rook, Matt McCabe, Pete Ball (Bodger) and JJ Middleway.

There were three camps in Europe. Adrian Rook, JJ Middleway and I were invited to Mt. Thunder Camp Germany in August. The camp was held near a castle on a hill where Richard



the Lionheart stayed on his way back from the Holy Land. I attended the OBOD Druid Camp in Molise, Italy, in June. Sowing the Seeds of Intention Druid Camp Autumn Equinox Gathering was held in Belgium in September.

The first OBOD camp in Canada - Alberta Druid Camp, was hosted by the Chinook Hills OBOD Grove in June.

In the USA, the Gulf Coast Gathering was held in Louisiana in March; MAGUS: OBOD-AODA Co-gathering in May; BAM and DOOR in September in the USA.

The Community Cloak is still travelling around the world weaving its story and it comes back to the Strode Theatre for the Summer and Winter Gatherings, where members are invited to add their own creative stitches. The cloak is a ritual object. Its purpose is to be worn in ritual by those who have added stitches. The wearer bears the stories of the embroiderers.

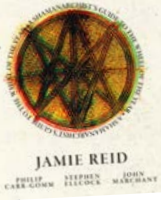
The OBOD Inner Journeying and Ritual weekends with Penny Billington, Matt McCabe and Gary Llewellyn will be held again in April and September 2025.



Image: A Wandering Group of Druids at Uisneach by Eimear Burke

Our members and friends continue to publish books on Druidry and related topics. I hope I have not left anyone out:

TIME FOR MAGIC



Time for Magic: A Shamanarchist's Guide to the Wheel of the Year by Jamie Reid, Philip Carr-Gomm, Stephen Ellcock & John Marchant.

Encounters with Mermaids: Lessons from the Realm of the Water Elementals by William R Mistele.

The Turning of the Wheel of the Year: Celtic Mythology, Nature and the Quest for the Soul by Mike Wilson.

Sacred Bones, Magic Bones: Stories from the Path of the Bones by Ness Bosch.

Folklore Rising: An Artist's Journey through the British Ritual Year by Ben Edge.

Mount Haemus Lectures Volume 3.

The Shrine Way by Jim Hindle.

The Crowdfunder for *The Ogham Card Game* by Yannick of Forestheart, Anna Richardson from Children's Forest, The Order of Bards Ovates and Druids and Oak Tree Press.

The Vedic Tarot: East Meets West by the Order's Patron Dwina Murphy-Gibb.

Bee Tarot by Kristoffer Hughes, Art by Nadia Turner.



I will end with a poem from one of my favourite poets:

Begin

Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of the light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along Pembroke Road.

Every beginning is a promise
born in light and dying in dark
determination and exaltation of springtime
flowering the way to work.

Begin to the pageant of queuing girls
the arrogant loneliness of swans in the canal
bridges linking the past and future
old friends passing though with us still.

Begin to the loneliness that cannot end
since it perhaps is what makes us begin,
begin to wonder at unknown faces
at crying birds in the sudden rain
at branches stark in the willing sunlight
at seagulls foraging for bread
at couples sharing a sunny secret
alone together while making good.

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.

— From *The Essential Brendan Kennelly*

Go n-éirí síocháin is suaimhneas libh go léir!
Literally - May peace and tranquillity rise with
you all!



Image: Gwyn Ap Nudd by Josh Warren

Eimear



A Bard Emerges by Myfyriol Eremiticus

I was a gazer at the skies
I watched the clouds, the ice, the snow.
I was a watcher of celestial drama
from twilight to midnight- the silent opera.

I cried out though I was a child:
The gods have a place at my table,
the gods have a place at my hearth.
And I declared their names. I declared their names.

I was he who dreamt of Cerridwen
I was he who called her forth
I was he whose heart stood still
in the spell of underworld song.

I lived the tale, I returned transformed
I am he who drank deeply from life.
I learned that weeping lasts through the night
but joy dawns in the morning.

I am he who stirs at the hearth
even though I run to the horizon.
I have become an old wayfarer
And I wander full of rejoicing.

Our task is clear to make alive
things which should not be forgotten:
The remembering, the lore-keeping;
to preserve a world enchanted.

Winter Journeying by Linda Davis

I am following the sun
skirting scratched branches of the southern
wood
down the day's shortening.
I am embracing the cold body of the year
sinking to the dark ground.
I am making my home in the grave-place
searching the caverns of night
enquiring of ancestors and archetypes
seeking both shadow and light
that I may know my true face
and when the new fire is kindled
Rise!



Image: Raven Triskelion by David Caimbeul

Our Radiant Hearts by Charlie Bigwood



Our Radiant Hearts, a glowing flame
A beacon of love, it has no name
The beat so strong, a steady drum
A call to peace where chaos can hum

We summon our light, our luminous grace
From within our souls, reaching every space
Bridging the gaps where pain can be found
To lovingly return us down to the ground

This quiet strength, the power vast
This timeless gift remains steadfast
Together, we're strong, the truth unfurled
Our Radiant Hearts will heal the world

Journey unknown by Jennie Bergman (Clurifixa)

I do long for this journey unknown
to be known.
Learning more but never really learning it all.
Openminded in the midst of questioning.
Seeds of fact and fiction are ever
so carefully sown.
Somewhat scared of not understanding.
Feeling lost when also being found.
Expansion of mind and body is eternal.
That is how the lifting also is a part
of the landing.

To an Island People by Dan O'Neill

The Oak is bare, but the circle is open,
We must build a fire for those that are coming.
You wish harm to the venal,
but the sun will rise,
Truth is lurking, lithe, not able to be denied,
Who will judge us if we try?

The dormant Oak, still holds our space,
We ride the back of the whipped dog, disgraced.
We urge it: 'bite the master',
but its head won't rise.
Yet, somewhere in these islands, buried
treasures still abide,
Even as we whimper and whine.

The Oak is bare, but it cannot lie,
What appeals to truth still qualify?
Wearied by corruption, you reject the invitation,
Somehow still enchanted by a
promise of connection,
Bending branches to the sun.

The Oak still stands and can endure,
The flimsy whims of those that obscure,
And only sense poison where
our roots still stray,
Resistance would diminish if we
followed their way,
those blunted blades with faithless aims.

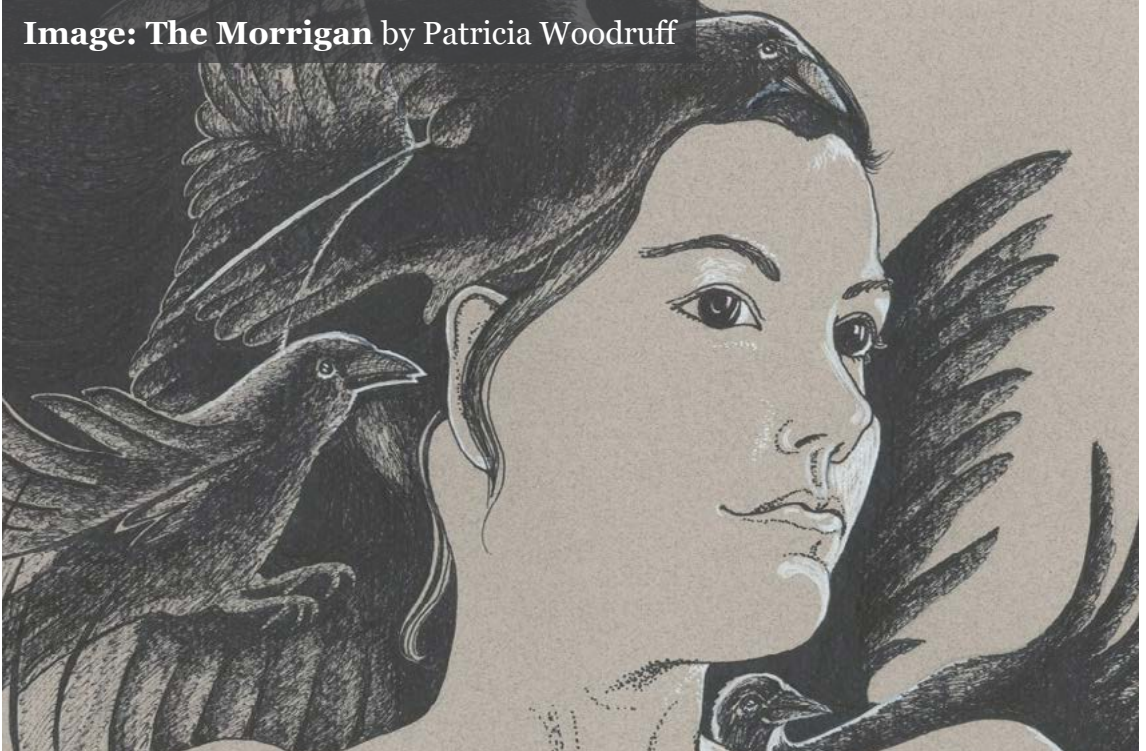
The Oak is bare, and the winter long,
and the power of words seem
no longer your own.
Mirrored worlds of occupiers see
treachery in all,
Still Autumn leaves and ruses can't help but fall,
All agreements are yours alone.

The Oak is bare yet what more can we want?
Whilst still we deny its purpose and strength.
The rooks don't decry its lingering presence,
But when seasons turn cold, here we
freeze in defiance,
Mistaking stillness for silence.

Who now reads this stuff anymore?
The Oak is still bare, and it's hard to be sure,
The watchers confuse you, seem
tired and unclear,
But under the surface, their binds domineer.
Return to power draws near.

The Oak is bare, but something is stirring,
I'm building a fire for the real world returning.
I'm standing here trying to make some
sense of it all,
Clearing a space for a tower to fall,
For light to flood in and ask nothing more.

Image: The Morrigan by Patricia Woodruff



Soft in a Hard Place by Cameron Terhune

Prisons are not soft and cuddly.

All across the world prisons are built from cement and steel. They are stocked with hard people doing hard time and ruled with iron fists. In a place where toughness is mandatory and brutality is a virtue, those who do not affect a spiritual exoskeleton and fashion their minds and bodies into weapons held ever ready to fend off the assaults of a hostile world which values strength alone are seen as lesser, as contemptible, as objects of scorn, as prey.

Perhaps prison could have persisted indefinitely. Perhaps these hard places filled with granite hearts and iron wills would never crumble. Perhaps these mean lives born out in the closest proximity to our fellow humans, these callous existences devoid of compassion where we could not so much as acknowledge the struggle, the despair, the suffering of those beside us as they were subjected to the exact same indignities and cruelties that we were, could have kept on without diverging, and the prison mentality could have maintained its crushing grasp upon us, enforced its illogical directive that humans – a species by all accounts predisposed to seek softness, warmth and comfort, not stone and solitude – be hard, be cold, be heartless.

Perhaps.

But then there were cats.

At first there was just one, a wary orange tabby that prowled the yard between human hours and haunted the forbidden spaces beyond the fences like the phantom of a world long forgotten. We watched from behind glass and steel and wire and cement, watched her chase birds and share a meal with us. She grew, fed both by pigeons and state food offered by many hands, though in time we realised it was not the meagre scraps of unidentifiable meat which made her fat.

The blessing she bestowed upon us for our gifts was delivered, appropriately enough, in an unused locker in the yard's religious grounds. From the moment the litter of kittens arrived, there existed a covenant among all her feeders and fawners and fans: we shall belong to these cats.

Thus the ensuing weeks were heavy with the sounds of crinkling plastic as not just state food but

canteen and package morsels were brought to the site of the pilgrimage, set like sacrifices upon the altar of this mysterious beast who walked among us. We watched in quiet awe from behind stoic masks as the kittens opened their eyes and emerged to take their first steps, as they explored the world they now shared with us and grew into rambunctious, playful, beings of wonder.

Then, of course, we pet them.

I had not, until a small orange cat wandered over to sit with me in the grass, had the divine pleasure of petting a cat in fifteen years. I am a writer by trade but to describe the experience leaves me scrabbling for words. Simply, it reminded me that I am alive. It instilled in me a raw, unbridled happiness that I had never felt, not even as a child. I spent many hours with those cats and still I am amazed at how perfectly they reject everything it means to be in prison: they are playful and unselfconscious, curious and silly, soft and cuddly and so damned schmoofy that if I had a thousand of them I would delight in being buried alive. But even one is bliss.

Sometimes it is even more interesting to watch the interactions of my fellow prisoners with our cats. All those hard cases doing hard time melt like butter on a summer sidewalk when they visit the cats, when they feed them and watch them chasing bees and birds, when they make toys to entice the cats to play with them (as I myself have done – it is too fun for words). Engaging with a fluffy ball of innocence that offers no judgement whatsoever, stony visages finally bear smiles.

And I understand. I don't think about the past when a cat hops in my lap. I don't think of what I should or could have done. I don't think about courts or life sentences or parole boards. What comes to mind is peace, and a sense that everything is going to be OK. What comes to mind is that what's in the past needs to stay there if I want to have a future, if I want to be grateful for today and for the fact that I am no longer the person I once was.

The cats, of course, know this, but they are gracious enough to spend their time with us so that we might learn, and so that we can enjoy a few quiet moments of softness, of non-judgement. Of freedom.

Every prison should have cats.



My Grove Is Not Among The Oaks by IKissDogs

When I do grove meditations my grove is not among the oaks, though I've tried to make it that way a few times because I thought that maybe I should. That I was supposed to, that I had to. Then I remembered that, hooray, we're Druids and part of the beauty is that we don't have to do things in a dogmatic way. I grew up in mid-America (enough dogma for a few lifetimes) and spent years' worth of Springs and Summers playing fairies in the bushes and climbing trees - the Oaks among them. When I grew up I moved to different places until settling for many years in Northern California. Redwoods. Nothing had prepared me for Redwoods and when I hear the word 'grove' they are all that I can think of. Like the Grand Canyon, pictures can never really show you the power of being among them but I included some anyway.

I no longer live near these giants but was lucky enough to have worked a few years in one of the state parks where I learned a lot about Redwoods. The cones themselves are small and inside each one are 50-60 little seeds, each one about the size of a single flake of oatmeal.

And from that we get this gloriously massive tree – and all five feet five and a half inches of



me just to show scale.

Their roots don't run deep at all, six to ten feet down. Underground it's a great crisscross system as they intertwine, holding each other in place – very rare for one to fall in flood or earthquake. They even send nutrients to rare Albino Redwoods that can't fend for themselves. I know the power these trees have with me but it was always fun to see the reactions of others.

I once had a visiting businessman, tense in his manner, who was obviously just checking our Redwood Grove off a list of things to do. Who else would wear a suit to the woods? I pointed him in the right direction and assured him that that particular trail was an easy loop of less than a mile. He managed a polite nod for me, the crazy tree hugging woman who clearly had no idea what his time was worth.

It took him longer to return than I would have guessed for someone in a hurry. When he did return he was visibly emotional and just said "I get it now. I didn't know." Being able to witness someone having an epiphany like that was the highlight of all my time there.

So, yes, by Oak, Ash and Thorn. But my grove is in the Redwoods.



An Interview with Penny Billington; Part 2

by Andrew Anderson

In this second part of my interview with Penny Billington, we discuss how and why she decided to give up editing Touchstone, what life has been like since and her advice for both editors and contributors.

AA: I believe, alongside *Touchstone*, you also took on other jobs for the Order.

PB: Once OBOD knew I was reliable, then I took on coordinating events. Back then, everyone booked for the assemblies on paper. It was all done via post. I had an Order paying in book and so all these cheques would come and I would take them to the bank, all physical, and send out the receipts. So, between that and *Touchstone*, I got to know people's names. I possibly know more names in OBOD than anybody else! When people arrived at a Gathering I was able to put a face to the name, which made an immediate contact. It would just be a joy. And that was my main concern about giving up *Touchstone*: how would I feel not having that personal contact, because it was such a privilege making those contacts.

AA: So you edited *Touchstone* for 22 years. What was it that made you decide it was time to go?

PB: I had a significant birthday recently and I woke up at 2 in the morning and thought 'Oh, I'm giving up *Touchstone*'. I had been on a Kabala course and we'd talked about 'messages from the deep place' that surprise you; you know where you open your mouth and something comes out that sort of means you've crossed a bridge and you don't know where it came from. It really was one of those moments. I had thought about it many times over the years because it can be a drag keeping to deadlines – every time you go on holiday you have to think 'when was the last one out, when is the next one coming in?' But, in the end, it was nothing to do with that. I just thought 'That's it. I've just done that.' And I think, within about 10 days, your name came along.

AA: That's just stunning that that was such a deep knowing.

PB: I remember feeling like that when I got married. And I remember thinking 'this is right'. And it is significant that I had thought around

other possible editors and nothing had come up and then Bing ... Andrew arrives! That is the wonderful thing about Druidry. It helps us listen to those things and puts them in our way by being around in the right place at the right time.

AA: So what's life been like since you've given up editing *Touchstone*?

PB: Well, we're 5 months on and I'm just beginning to settle down.. It's been wonderful because I've been on holiday without worrying about deadlines or anything like that. I was away for 2 weeks and normally, between *Touchstone* deadlines, that's a really big deal. It means there has to be a really big push to get it ready. Because I love studying, I've committed to a Welsh Course. I will be doing that more intensively now. And I haven't settled down to this yet, but there's a book bubbling under and it will not form! However, I'm reassured by the workings of my magical mentor - Dion Fortune. There's a saying which goes 'when the student is ready the teacher arrives'. I used to think 'No they don't! Where the hell are they?!' The I realized this woman who had died about 5 years before I was born was my magical mentor, and she was on my bookshelves with all of her wisdom. One of her books, *Moon Magic*, she had to put down about 5 times before she got it right. I think, if I produce something as good as *Moon Magic* at the end of this hiatus I will be very pleased! The interesting thing about writing a book is you have to say 'what justifies more words in the world'" and I've always had to have a very clear idea about why I was doing it. Once you have got that you've got a clear answer if anyone asks 'Why on earth did you write that?!' I was talking to David

Bramwell last night and we agreed, once you can answer that question you can go ahead and write with confidence.

AA: You were made an honorary Bard at this year's summer gathering. What does that mean to you?

PB: It's a huge and a grown-up thing. I was rather charmed by the fact that Eimear mentioned my washboard playing which is a thing from my past! It's a bit downmarket for bardship really but my bardship is my writing, my poetry and my stories. Poetry is a really difficult thing. I was looking through a relative's papers after they'd died and part of it said 'I could never be a poet because it's too exposing, too revealing'. They just dare not do it. They were very good at doggerel



and amusing verse and that sort of thing but there is something that can be searing about real poetry. So, when someone said to me "I didn't know you wrote poetry" I thought, I do but I don't publish it. In fact, I'm quite wary about even writing it down. When I die, I don't particularly want anyone to read this stuff! It's very exposing. But my books and also talks, that's my bardship; the spoken word. And I like my Druid detective novels because they try and use story to inculcate Druidic principles. That's what Dion Fortune did in her books. She said, through a rattling good story, people could actually have an initiatory experience if they were in the right state to have it. People read her books and say "what's the point of that?" and other people are just blown away.

AA: I know what you said to me, but what advice would you give to a future editor of *Touchstone*?

PB: I would say, know that you're in charge. It's like giving a talk or holding a space at an Eisteddfod; the tone of the thing will spin from you and your Druidry. You can't help that. But, it is mediated so much by everyone else's input. Trust yourself and your own Druidry. Have your guidelines absolutely clear. The only reason we have guidelines is because people look at a long article and think "Oh that looks interesting, I'll read it later," and then they never do. That's a real shame. They're all practical guidelines. They're not meant to censor anyone or stop them doing anything they want. We are just trying to get people's ideas out to a wide number of people. And what I would say to a contributor is that it is very difficult writing for any magazine unless you read the magazine. It's no good sending in a 57 stanza poem. If you read *Touchstone*, you know we haven't got the space for it! If you're not sure, just email the editor first and get the guidelines. You want to communicate, you want to be heard so gear your response to the magazine's format. And if it's not that format, then send it to a magazine which it does fit into because there will be a vehicle for your contribution. But an OBOD magazine is about Druidry.

AA: Thank you for your time, Penny, for all the advice and help you've given me and for all you have done for the Order. It is so very appreciated.

PB: There's also a mea culpa thing! No matter what you do, you might offend someone, just inadvertently. Because we don't know how robust or how fragile people are and emails are not good ways of communicating. So, as a past editor I want to say, if I've been guilty of that, it has always been unintentional. Every single contribution is valued.



Open Forum

A Novel Inspired by Tarot by Marion Wiesler

Tarot can be many things, but I would never have thought that one day it might become an important part of a fiction book for me ...

After I had published my Celtic historical fiction series *Die Wortflechterin* (German title), I was working on adding a novella with a new adventure of my Bard Arduinna. Thinking about a story, my eyes fell onto my bookshelf and onto Philip Carr-Gomm's wonderful *DruidCraft Tarot*, a faithful companion in my life. For the fun of it I randomly pulled six cards from the deck and they became characters in the story ...

A year later the series about the young Bard is being published in English as *Braider of Words* and also the novella has been translated. And I have joined OBOD, having been a solitary pagan for far too long. I was overwhelmed by how friendly and warm the community is! Which is why I want to give something back. So to all Bards, Ovates and Druids interested in historical fiction, a story about a young Bard, and tarot, you can download *Moon of the Raven* for free as epub or PDF by simply going to <https://BookHip.com/GPBSHLQ>. I would love to hear if you guessed the cards I used! Just drop me a line at marion@marionwiesler.com. Thank you all for being such a wonderful community and enjoy diving into the world of the Celts also in fiction!

Braider of Words is a series set in 38 BC in Noricum, which is approximately today's Austria. When the young Bard Arduinna tried to flee with the son of the ruler of the Sequani on the day of his wedding, her master saved her life with a curse. For nine years now, she has been on her own. Accompanied only by a wolfhound and a raven, she has to keep on wandering every half moon - at a time when your clan means safety, nature is unforgiving and only the power of her songs and stories can protect her.



Reviews

The Vedic Tarot

by Dwina Murphy-Gibb

"The system of the Tarot and the Vedic Mysteries comes together in this card deck, bridging the divide between East and West and demonstrating the many parallels between the symbolic and spiritual systems of both cultures."

Dwina Murphy-Gibb

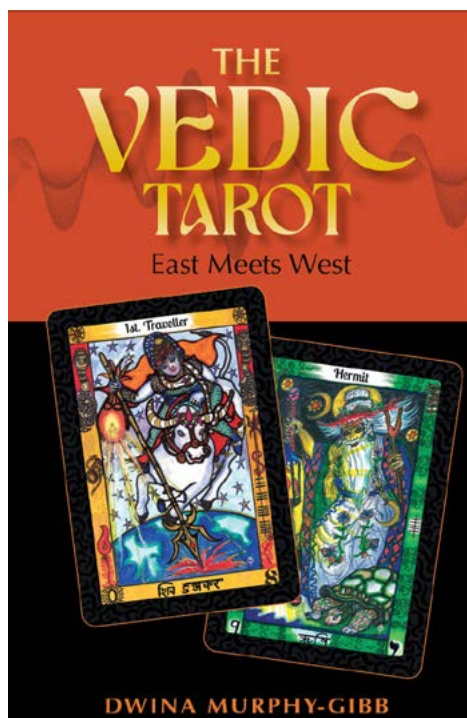
The Vedic Tarot is one of the most important tarot decks to appear on the market in the last few years. It feels like a reimagining, specifically the Major Arcana, and a deepening of the mysteries the cards hold. In working across cultures, this deck elegantly brings together a wealth of spiritual traditions to provide the user with a path of discovery which will present new dimensions to the cards many of us have been using for many years.

The journey of discovery begins with the artwork, which is bright and sumptuous. Murphy-Gibb's illustrations are incredibly detailed and express layers of mystery. The black borders around the card seem to make the myriad colours even more intense. They are the kind of cards you could lose yourself in, and doing so brings many rewards. I would recommend working with the cards in this way to begin with, before beginning to read the very thorough book.

There are some changes to the major arcana, perhaps most notably, the inclusion of some new cards, such as *Arbor Vitae* and *Oogenesis*. These cards were included because the tarot only contains seven cards representative of the Power of the Soul and the Path of Enlightenment, when "In almost all spiritual paths and ancient religions, eight soul powers are recognised, and an eightfold path to Enlightenment." The *Arbor Vitae* is the Tree of Life and representative of movement and growth. *Oogenesis* is the Golden Egg or Womb and represents the power of primal love and sacrifice. There is also the mysterious *Supreme Soul* card, which sits before the Fool (here called the *First Traveller*). Elsewhere in the Major Arcana, card 13 is called *Changes* rather than *Death*, representing, as it does, "transformation and changes in the Soul" rather than the sense of finality the card usually has. Elsewhere there are smaller, linguistic changes, so card 1 is *Magus* rather than *Magician*, card 2 *Maga* rather than *High Priestess* and 15 is *Déofol* rather than *Devil*. These are very small changes which do not markedly affect the meaning of the card although, for those who are new to Tarot, this may be worth noting.

Things feel somewhat more familiar when working with the Minor Arcana, although here the suits of Cups, Wands and Swords is joined by the suit of Shields. In the court cards we find Pages, Knights, Queens and Kings as we would expect. Again, layers of meaning have been woven into each card, which makes it feel very different from a standard deck.

When using the booklet to divine meaning, each card is given an extraordinary amount of attention and detail. The history and imagery of each card in the Major Arcana is outlined before a divinatory meaning is offered. This is then followed by further analysis of the symbols found on the card. Murphy-Gibb writes: "This Tarot is really an illustrative book that explores secrets of four ancient languages: Vedic Sanskrit, Irish Ogham Tree alphabet, and Hebrew, as well as English and the influence of sound or music in the spheres and in the chakras of the body." The Minor Arcana is similarly presented. This level of detail and understanding is incredibly profound and opens the deck up to be read on multiple levels. This is not a deck to turn to if you want quick or simple readings. It feels like this is the result of a lifetime's work and contemplation; it will take a long time for someone coming to the deck to be able to use it fully. This is in no sense a criticism. This deck really is astonishing but it will take you a while to explore and learn the full potential of these cards. It will, however, be a thoroughly rewarding and enlightening journey. This deck is highly recommended.



Andrew's Bit At The Back

January can be such a difficult month. After all the celebrations of the previous seasons, it can feel rather anti-climactic. We go from the balmy delights of summer, into the bounty of harvest, the spooktacular delights of Halloween, the deep remembering of Samhain, the celebrations of Bonfire Night and Thanksgiving, then into the hope and light of the Solstice and Christmas. And then ... nothing.

It's as if everything just stops.

If you look at the media at this time, we are encouraged to book summer holidays and go on diets so that we have a body that is 'beach ready' (I haven't had a beach body since 1994, unless you count my current 'fifty-something walrus' look as a beach body). Even within the Druid path we end up looking forward, to Imbolc, to Spring. It feels as if all the good things are deferred to a later date and we live for what is to come, rather than what is happening.

That's why I really try to follow the advice of that inspirational writer, Henry David Thoreau. I was lucky enough to visit Walden Pond, many years ago, before I really knew who he was, and there, on a postcard, was a quotation which would change how I lived my life: "Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth." What could be more beautifully simple than that?

The key to January is to find the magic within it, to live it, not defer our pleasures and delights until a later point. The nights are still long and dark, darker since the Christmas lights are taken down, but it's the perfect opportunity to follow the steps of our ancestors on these long, dark nights and indulge in some good, old-fashioned storytelling. I find I tend to pick up my most magical reading in January. In previous years, I have turned to books such as *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, or the work of Alan Garner or Susannah Clarke. This year it's Pat O'Shea's *The Hounds of the Morrigan* which is on my reading list.

It's also a good time to engage with Scottish literature or, more generally, poetry in preparation for Burns' Night on 25th of the month.

The big tradition in our house is our annual rewatching of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* films in January and early February. For me, there is something about those films which fits so perfectly with that time of year. We may go out for a walk beforehand but it is good to know that there is a roaring TV waiting for us on our return, with a suitably epic tale ready to unfold.

Last year I spent the month reading books about Warwickshire's folklore, to help me connect even more deeply with the landscape around me. That made my forays out into the countryside even more magical, particularly when I was able to find Hiron's Hole, George's Elm Lane and other sites of Warwickshire's wonderful folk history. You can take this one step further by going to wassails, which run throughout this period, and celebrating local traditions on Plough Monday.



The real magic lies outside in January. We may have ripped down those Christmas lights but that helps us to see and appreciate the growing light of the sun even more acutely. January has some spectacular sunsets, particularly when the cold sets in and the frozen, frosty landscape is cast in fiery reds and pale golds. A salutation to the sun during this period, at sunrise and sunset, will help you notice how the days are getting longer. Get out into wild spaces as much as possible during this period. Remember, there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes (although the storm currently raging outside my window suggests that is not necessarily true, so stay safe!). Getting out into nature and experiencing the cold and the wind and the rain is good at fostering connection to the natural world. If you really can't get out for a walk, can you drive to a natural space and take in the view?

It is also a great time to begin supporting your local wildlife, putting food out for the birds to help them survive the harsh conditions. This also raises your serotonin levels as you spot the variety of feathered friends who help themselves to your bird seed. You can support other types of wildlife too – check your local and regional wildlife experts for more information.

If you are struggling with the January blues, the best thing you can do is embrace the season, not wish it away. January will pass, warmer, lighter days are on their way, but there are plenty of marvels waiting for you now. Yes, plan for the future – map out your summer allotment and get those bulbs and seeds planted in preparation– but lift your head from those plans to see the winter wonders that are all around you.

Until
next time,

Andrew



To find Events from OBOD members and friends throughout the year, check the events page on the Druid Hearth: <https://hearth.druidry.org/events>

OBOD Wheel Of The Year Online Rituals

Check the Tune In page on the Druid Hearth: <https://hearth.druidry.org/tune-in>

DATES FOR 2025:

Imbolc - February 8th | Alban Eilir - March 22nd | Bealtaine - May 3rd | Alban Hefin - June 21st

Lughnasadh - August 2nd | Alban Elfed - September 20th | Samhain - November 1st

Alban Arthan - December 20th

Upcoming Events

Bardic Gorsedd: 25-27 July 2025 at Penmaenmawr, Wales. For more information email bardicgorsedds@obod.org

Ovate Gorsedd: in Ireland. More information to follow.

Druid Gorseddau: 7-9 March 2025, Bude, Cornwall. For more information email bomcbruce@gmail.com

11-13 April 2025, Malvern. For more information, email druidgorsedds@obod.org

Summer Gathering: 7 & 8 June 2025, Strode Theatre, Street.

Winter Gathering: 6 December 2025, Strode Theatre, Street.

I am a mountain

I become the mountain

earth creeps upon me

The oceans thrash against me

The air spirals around me

The sun shines through me

I ascend to greet the sun

I enter the translucent point

I am the above mountain

I am the earth, as I am solar

I am the air, as I am water

above and below

I am the mountain



Poem and Image

by Vohl