HAGITUDE

REIMAGINING THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

SHARON BLACKIE

Illustrations by Natalie Eslick

s
ept
em
b
er



THE HAG'S CALL

Ceaití ní Bheildiúin

She is the essence of weather itself.
She is the wind
tearing violently at the roof,
squealing on the old gate,
calling down the chimney.
She is my fear taking human form,
calling into me tonight –
unexpected –
seeking lodgings.
Dressed as Karalalam,
she torments me
'til, at first sight of day,
she flees.

Let me out to the wind after her.
out of my concrete skin,
out of my iron skull,
because there's a fierceness in me
that desires the edge,
the tempest,
the change.
Marrow stirs in my bones
reviving the awe of youth
in my flesh,
ending
the inertia of winter,
reopening my sword-sharp eye.[1]

This book is dedicated to the feisty and irrepressible old matriarchs of the far north-east of England, who enlivened my younger years and taught me never to let the illegitimi *get me down.*

HOW THE JOURNEY BEGINS

In the oldest known cosmology of my native lands, it wasn't a skybound old man with a beard who made and shaped this world. It was an old woman. A giant old woman, who has been with us down all the long ages, since the beginning of time. 'When I was a young lass, the ocean was a forest, full of trees,' she says, in some of the stories about her – stories that are still told today, firmly embedded in the oral tradition.

This mythology is from right here. From these islands of Britain and Ireland, strung out along the farthest western reaches of Europe where I was born, and where I live still today. In the lands where my feet are firmly planted. Although a lot of attention has been paid to the question of whether ancient European cultures honoured a 'Great Mother' goddess, in these islands we were actually honouring a Great Grandmother. Her name in the Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland is the Cailleach: literally, the Old Woman. There are traces of other divine old women scattered throughout the rest of the British Isles and Europe; they're probably the oldest deities of all.

How thoroughly we've been taught to forget. Today, we don't see these narratives as remnants of ancient belief systems – rather, they're presented to us as folk tales

intended merely to entertain, as oddities of primitive history, the vaguely amusing relics of more superstitious times or bedtime stories for children.

Whatever we've been taught they are – they're not. They are remnants of pre-Christian cosmologies – cosmologies that are firmly embedded in the land, the sea, the sky, and the human, animal and plant-populated cultures to which we belong. Cosmologies in which old women mattered.

What I love most about our Old Woman is that she clearly wasn't a character to be messed with. Take this story from the south-west of Ireland. One day, a parish priest visited the Cailleach's house to ask how old she was. He thought, as such men do, that he was a fine fellow, and very clever; he'd heard that she claimed to be as old as time, and he wanted to catch her out. Well, the old woman replied that she couldn't quite remember her exact age, but every year on her birthday, she told him, she would kill a bullock, and after she'd eaten it, she would throw one of its thigh bones into her attic. So if he wanted to, he could go up to the attic and count the bones. For every bone you find up there in that attic, she said to him, you can add a year of my life. Well, he counted the bones for a day and a night and still he couldn't make a dent in them. His hands, they say, were shaking as he pulled at the door handle and left.

A few years ago, on the opening night of a women's retreat I was leading on the far coastal tip of the Beara Peninsula in south-west Ireland – heartland of Cailleach folklore – I had a dream about her. I was part of a small group of resistance fighters, women and men together. We were captured by the establishment's military, then securely locked away in a prison with thick stone walls. I spoke to the leader through the bars of our cell door. 'You'd better be careful,' I said. 'She's coming.' He laughed, and shook a set of big shiny keys in my face. Just as he turned away from me, there was a rumbling outside, like thunder. A giant old

woman in a black hooded cloak walked right through the prison walls as if they weren't there, and all the stones came tumbling down around her feet. The iron door to our cell crashed to the floor, and we walked right out of that prison behind her.

I'll go for that.

In 2018, in the middle of the night and in the throes of some rather cloudier dream, I woke up suddenly and proclaimed the word 'hagitude' to an empty, silent room. As you do. I had no idea what it meant, or where it had come from. But, the next morning, I realised it was going to be the title of my next book. *Hagitude*: hags with attitude. Like the Cailleach, and all the other feisty, ageing women of European myth and folklore who we've so thoroughly buried – just as we've relegated the ageing women of contemporary life to the shadows. They're the inconvenient ones, the invisible ones. The over-culture would so like to pretend they're not there.

On the threshold of elderhood, celebrating sixty years on this beautiful, troubled planet as I complete this book, I have no intention of being invisible. But I'm quite prepared to be inconvenient. As inconvenient as the Cailleach was to the Christian priests who tried to stamp out her memory – and failed. Failed, because everywhere you go in Scotland and Ireland there are stories about her. There are places in every county named after her, mountains that are believed to embody her and ancient monuments where her presence is still honoured.

But really, why should the Cailleach matter now? Why should the other fierce and shining old women of European myth and folklore who populate the pages of this book matter? Why should *any* of these old stories matter? Aren't they just ancient history? Nice to know, but irrelevant to our infinitely more sophisticated lives today? Well, they matter because the ways in which we think about ageing

depend on the stories we tell about it. How we think about ageing women depends on the images we hold of them. And the images we hold of ageing women today aren't healthy. Truth is, there is no clear image of enviable female elderhood in the contemporary cultural mythology of the West; it's not an archetype we recognise any more. In our culture, old women are mostly ignored, encouraged to be inconspicuous, or held up as objects of derision and satire.

But our old mythology and folklore tell us something very much more interesting: that it hasn't always been so. In our more distant past, as of course in many indigenous cultures today, female elders were respected, and had important and meaningful roles to play. They are the ones who hold the myths and the wisdom stories; the ones who know where the medicine plants grow and what their uses are. They serve as guides for younger adults; they're the caregivers and mentors for the community's children. They know when the community is going to the dogs, and they're not afraid to speak out and say so. When they do, they're listened to. Their focus is on giving back – on bringing out, for the sake of Earth and community, the hard-earned wisdom which they've grown within themselves.

It's not surprising that these old myths and stories of Europe that I'm offering up should be populated with European women. Although migration has been a major force throughout human history, most of these old folktales have their roots in poor, often rural communities in which travel – either in or out – was much less of an option, and in which there was much less diversity than we experience in our world today. But that doesn't mean that they exclude others. These stories offer up wisdom which is accessible and relevant to all women who are now rooted in these lands – whatever their skin colour or ancestry. It's a wisdom that's accessible and relevant, in many different ways, to all those who identify as women. These old folktales are not

in the business of excluding. Archetypes are, by definition, universal, and students of folklore know perfectly well that all the major themes and motifs in these stories are cross-cultural. The simplicity of the tales, and the sketchiness of their description and characterisation, allows each of us to bring to them our own history, our own concerns and our own interpretations. We draw from them what we need, and they give to all of us with equal generosity.

Myths and stories such as these help us not only to understand life as it is, or was – but to dream life as it ought to be. We perceive, explain and make sense of the world through stories. They are the stars we navigate by, and that's why storytelling is a universal human phenomenon, a vital aspect of communal life across all cultures and throughout the entirety of our known history. Stories teach us everything we know, and their lessons are deep and rich. Stories can reveal to us longings that we never knew we had, fire us up with new ideas and insights, and inspire us to grow and change. The characters in stories are great teachers, too: they are role models for our development, helping us to reimagine ourselves. Helping us to unravel who we are, and to work out who we want to become.

It's always been that way for me. Since I was a small child, discovering fairy tales for the first time, my favourite characters have always been iterations of the dangerous, ambiguous but infinitely wise old woman in the woods. I didn't ever relate to beautiful princesses with wide blue eyes and golden locks, no matter how abandoned or down on their luck. Their experience was so far from my own, growing up as I did on the fringes of impoverished council estates in the far north-east of England, that I couldn't see myself in them in any way at all. But I always related to the Old Woman. The one who haunted the edgelands; the mysterious shadow in the heart of the darkwood. The exile, the rebel, the one who shrugged off the fetters of

conventional society; the one who imagined and cultivated her own vision of how the world should be, thank you very much. At the earliest of ages, I already knew that was the old woman I wanted to grow into. The spirited, unpredictable, not-to-be-messed-with elder. An elder who's always ready to tell you the often-unwelcome truths about the condition of your life – leavened, of course, with compassion, and a glint of fierce humour in her eyes.

But here in the contemporary West, we don't really do elders: instead, we have 'the elderly'. The connotations are quite different. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary online, 'elderly' is nothing more than 'a polite word for old'. The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary informs us that 'elderly' can also mean 'old-fashioned'. In Lexico, the Oxford online thesaurus, the word is associated with synonyms such as 'doddering', 'decrepit', 'in one's dotage', 'past one's prime', 'past it' and 'over the hill'.

It doesn't paint a pretty picture; these are not exactly the adjectives that most ageing women would aspire to embody. But the ageing woman has had a particularly troubled history in Western culture. The last convictions might have taken place in the eighteenth century, but in many ways we still haven't quite recovered from our demonisation in the witch trials. Older women, when they're not rendered completely invisible, are still trivialised and marginalised, and often actively ridiculed. 'Little old ladies', we call them here in Britain; 'old bats' (if we think they're crazy), or 'old bags' and 'old trouts' (if they don't live up to our expectations that old women should rarely be seen, and certainly should never be heard). The 2019 'Ageist Britain' report, which surveyed 4,000 UK adults and analysed thousands of tweets and blogposts in the UK, found that this kind of everyday ageism is increasingly of concern to mental health experts, as evidence grows which suggests that it can impact people's physical performance, impair mental

health, hasten the onset of dementia and even shorten life expectancy.[2]

What would it mean, instead of being an elderly woman, to be an elder woman? Because to be an elder implies something rather different – it implies authority: 'a leader or senior figure in a tribe or other group', says Lexico. According to Merriam-Webster, 'a person having authority because of age and experience'. The Cambridge Dictionary tells us it's 'an older person, especially one with a respected position in society'. So how do women transition from becoming elderly to becoming elder?

There are a lot of ageing women out there. Between 1918 and 2018, average life expectancy increased by around twenty-five to thirty years in the United Kingdom, the United States and other developed countries of the world. In most of those countries, women also live on average four or five years longer than men. The elderly – by most societal definitions, adults aged sixty and older – are now the fastest-growing segment of most Western populations, and a majority of them are women.

What should we do with those extra years of life? How should we choose to spend them, in this culture which offers few inspiring role models, and no well-trodden paths for us to follow? Because in contemporary Western society, to be old is rarely to be thought of as gifted and wise. We see old age as a time of loss, of decay; we focus on holding ageing and death at bay. We find the process embarrassing, verging on distasteful. It's not something we really want to hear about, and yet the media is full of it, and all of it negative. We're constantly flooded with stories about the 'burden' that old people place on health services, and with news about Alzheimer's disease, designed to strike horror into all ageing hearts. There are endless exposés of appalling conditions in care homes; stories about older women being preyed upon, scammed and even raped; stories about the impossibility of

finding or even holding down a job once you're over fifty and are effectively written off by a culture which prides itself on productivity rather than quality. Where are the stories of empowered and fulfilled elders? Where are the stories of the ways in which they can bring meaning and hope into the lives of the young? Where are the still-thriving lives?

This lack of cultural recognition and support for the process of becoming elder is why so many people with ageing bodies insist on trying to live as though they were still approaching midlife. It's why so few of us investigate the rich possibilities of growing older, or undertake the necessary inner work that prepares us for a passage into a more conscious and meaningful elderhood. And even if we can bring ourselves to talk about the biological and psychological dimensions of ageing, more often than not we back away from discussing the existential – or spiritual – dimensions. We avoid the only question that it makes sense for us to ask now: what is all of this life *for*? Why are we still here; what do we still have to offer?

But we don't much talk about spirituality in this post-Enlightenment culture which respects and rewards only rationality. We live in a society whose power systems value only the material, and which dismiss, become vaguely embarrassed about or actively ridicule the spiritual. Elderhood is a passage that ends in death by design, and we don't much talk about death, either. So many taboos to overcome; so many strong feelings which arise.

And yet, ever since the groundbreaking work of Carl Jung in the first half of the twentieth century, most depth psychologists have argued that the journey into elderhood is a spiritual passage above all, and that the purpose of the second half of our lives is to grow into the person that we were always meant to become. Jung believed that ageing fulfilled a necessary function, saying: 'A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years

old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own …'[3] I'm a psychologist with a profound affection for Jung and his successors, and so throughout this book I'll be sharing with you some of the wisdom which this flourishing discipline offers to help us address these questions. But as a folklorist and mythologist too, I firmly believe that story is our primary inspiration – an ancient, much-neglected tool which helps us conjure up sharply honed images of who exactly it is that we might want to become if we are lucky enough to grow old. Because stories are spells; they change things. When they hook us and reel us into their magic, they change us. It's stories that will save us, in the end. Not just the stories we read or tell, or the stories we want to be in, but the ones that live inside us and the ones we live inside. The stories we invite in; those that we choose to inhabit.

As a culture, our failure to understand or embrace ageing is also related to the fact that we are increasingly and profoundly cut off from nature, and so from the natural cycles and rhythms of our human life. And yet the old women in our old stories, without exception, are forces of nature, and of the ancestral Otherworld which is so beautifully entangled with this world. There are no twice-removed, transcendental star-goddesses here; no twinkly fairy queens, reluctant to sully themselves with the dirt and mess of physical incarnation. Our old women are the dark heart of the forest, the stone womb of the mountain, immanent in the living land itself. They're elemental beings: storm-hags, fire-keepers, grandmothers of the sea. They show us how to live when everything we thought mattered to us has been stripped away; they teach us how to stay rooted in the face of inevitable death. They teach us how to stand firm in the face of all the culture's bullshit, and laugh.

It's interesting, nevertheless, that there are very few European folk and fairy tales with older women as their

main protagonists. I have found no stories that clearly teach us how to transition into a rich and meaningful elderhood, or which hold up a mirror of clarity to the nature of our life journey at this time. But still, there exist many different kinds of archetypal old women who play pivotal roles in the stories: characters who pull the strings, weave the webs, test or advise the heroes and heroines. These elders are usually presented as wise – though they manifest their wisdom in very different ways. What, then, is the nature of an elder woman's wisdom, and how might myths and fairy tales offer us insight into the ways that each of us could uniquely embody it? That's the key question at the heart of this book: how an exploration of these wonderfully vivid and diverse archetypal characters in our fairy tales and myths might help us to recreate a map of what it is to become a good elder. How do we make the most of the fertile decades which stretch out between the first tentative buddings of menopause and the final fruits of elderhood? How can we build on those old tales and combine them with the richness of our own experience to create new elder-woman stories, so inspiring the next generation? The good news is that all the archetypes in this book offer the potential to become something you couldn't have imagined before you began to grow old.

The adventure begins now.