

Arthurian Tarot

The Green Knight

winter. this snow won't quit.
what at first was gentle, soft
 now bludgeoning inner whispers
 the ruin I've made of this life
 silhouetted, this stark landscape.
unwanted, uninvited, unexpected
luck, wealth, feasting,
all good things come –
the midwinter door thrown open
but only the wind
hauls down sharp tacks of snow.
barefoot in winter the Green Man comes
struck down but
sap rising, buds hardy.
who foolhardy would stick his neck
under that axe? or
wear green foliage in the bitter
bare time
a time of deep paradox
a time between deep and deep.

starlight enormous conflagrations
stupendous spheres of superheated gas
suspended alone unthinkable distances;

snow tiny unrepeatable crystals
carrying the water of life
in neither jug nor jar nor skin;

the green leaf sun inside it,
water falling up, light its food,
breathing out earth's air

dying dies again
a change of life comes
 unavoidable
 the goal
 to be defeated
 decisively, to

live again.

The Spears Speak

(Spears 7, 8, 9)

7

I have been planted before the massive stone
entry – challenge me at risk
of your dearth.

I protect the sacred and the family,
and what's within
may not be casually approached –
this is hallowed ground
and may not be trodden except by those
to whom I yield.

8

Finding me afloat on the river –
instantly you know the venture is over.
He would not have dropped me had he lived.
His spirit carried now effortless
downstream,
meadows golden on both shores.
All looks the same but all
entirely different.

9

Here on the coast, I stand a signal
that may not be missed –
I warn away – one lone, tall,
mute word staying behind when the one
who carried it must not.
Do not land here, go on –
here is danger, no one to meet you.
Fare forward, find a better place to land.

Fecundating

(the Moon)

wild, flowering, joyful,
pulse of life
at moon-bright midnight
salmon
leaping upstream
between yellow fields –
cattails
line both banks
fecund marshland,
the flailing, life-giving
fishtail threshes redds,
blood pulses the veins
no matter the season
or hour, the great
wild fecundating pulse
ripens in grain
dies in salmon
needs neither ceremony
nor watchfulness,
neither drive
nor push
nor pull of any mechanics.

two round towers
flanking the natal stream,
are closed –
shut tight;
the human eye misses
the night alive
vibrant power, beauty,
fate; the citadels
of knowledge and learning
gray concrete cylinders
on foundations set
amidst teaming life,
the small window set
high up in each tight closed –
Lancelot has already approached
the Grail Chapel
and fallen asleep,
salmon spawn in black cold water
grain ripens and is harvested by mice

child in the moon aborning
– our own
awaiting the moment
to which we are led
by salmon, herbs –

it is happening now
it happens while you
are not watching,
at night, in fallow, in winter,
now while you sleep,
in the quietest hour, the night alive
nature lives
magic is afoot
in truth –
nothing more.

Nothing here will give birth
but any act can abort
the answer. Don't go in.
Don't turn back. Don't place a piece
on the board. Don't leave.

The Washer at the Ford

Washer of loss, no, only
 an old woman kneeling
at the ford,

 her faint smile grim
 holding out
two twisted ends of the winding
sheet she's washing
as if she were selling blood peaches.

She is not the angel of loss.
No, an old washerwoman
kneeling by blood-soaked water
trying to wash out stains. Only

 an old woman blocking
 the ford
 betraying
slim traces of youth
in her figure –

 the raven that will pick the bones
 perches on a dolman
 behind her left shoulder;
 dogs howl to the bloodied
 nose of the sky, a moon that mocks

by its soft sailing in a tureen of blood
over her right.
What was lost?

Who was wound in this cloth?
Why do we come upon this *before* the battle?

Begrimed face crossed by gray wisps
of hair

 too thin to account
 for all the gray in it –

old body too thin
for its frayed age –

No, old Gran's set face belies
the small smile,
ruthless compassion –
grim eyes that stare 1000 miles
into death.

Her stringy lacework of locks
fail to hide
the face of loss
no one wants to see.

Did she receive the wounded king into
the Isle of Death
to heal?

Dark Woman of Knowledge
at Barking Ford
No –

Loss has bled the white cloth red,
an old hag holds up a bloody rag –
no, no
flag, nor does she flag
while the waters of the ford beg
the question, reflecting
a mordant moon-swum blood-sky –

– she shows it:
“the blood won't come out.”

What sort of ruthless renewal
does she invite?

No, the Washer at the Ford
is not cleaning
but polluting –

the dogs point their muzzles
in the direction of loss.

No,
there is no washing of sins
only blood-pollution's spread
there is no salvation
only the grim head
there is no redemption

only scrubbing that will make the linen thin –

outworn ideas discarded?
shapes shifted?
ecstatic union with a crone?

No, loss

in the hands of the Washer at the Ford.

Dash into the Fire

*Stone six, Sword nine (Arthurian Tarot)
Rilke Letter to Benvenuta, February 16, 1914*

i

Six stones, huge henges, stand like maidens
around a bonfire flaming tall as they,
turning the night golden it burns
their hair the color of withering leaves
their golden hair backswept from their faces
turned toward the fire,
sparks that rise.

from the wider ring, the staked palisade that circles
their xanthophyllus hair,
the outer ring of cold, three cold faces stare
three heads impaled, mouths that open
to horror they no longer know.

one lone sword floats in the rain-filled trench below,
the moat that circles even them, outside the fence.

ii

Those three fought to burst through, ransack, roughly rape
now face wrong way out,
the backs of their heads burnt by the fire
to which they would have won,
faces burning with the cold toward which they go,
puzzled as the blood that runs down from where their necks
no longer are, staining the sharpened stakes of the stockade –
the one rosy inflection in a world gone pale and black.

Those within stand facing the fire
as if those three had died in them;
they feel them burst within, warming them from within
but the tall maidens are not startled,
it is for them

second nature
to encircle and encompass men whole, no matter

iii

their shocked surprise –
those piked heads who seem to be holding their breath

No child need grow into one of them, but

dash
into the fire.

The Old King Lies in Wound

The old king lies in wound, blooded in streaks.
How comes there a wound years unclosed?
No one asks.

One hand woodenly clutches the red cloth
covering the bier where none but he has lain.
Drawn face wooden in death's fears, eyes closed
in pain –

No one fain would know what avails
the banner that fails its golden lion, or which prevails –
the banner displaying the one-sailed ship
that bears

away the dying over the waters,
or the one emblazoned with the Cup
that would heal could it but touch the lip?
His dog

looks up puzzled, crouches near,
ignores the blood beneath his paws, crawls
faithful to the bier; wonders why his master
nor stirs
nor takes food.

Why a sovereign suffered to lie unhealed?
There is a golden light but the wound does not close.
There is golden

light that would gladden,
could the day be new. A block of marble stands
at the edge of the forest, in it a carved basin
of cool water.

But none heal, neither the banners,
nor dog, nor cool water, nor golden light.
The old king lies in wound and does not rise.

Stone Queen

Dread winter, the interminable winter upon us,
the winter of the grave, the iron ground,
the bare branch;
the winter of the owl, the moon, the loss of hope;
the rain-drenched silent trees
the scudding cloud,
the black and white squares of the chessboard
replicated by the view out window –
the frozen waste, cold light on snow.

How the Dragon Became Extinct

(the Star)

The comet like a great bird's wing
slashes the sky,
 suddenly, a dragon's head
watchdog of god
careens down centuries after the impious.

And he who points, does he know
any more than the one who sleeps?
The beady-eyed rooster stares intently,
 knowing the most.
The calm ocean rolls to shore,
a fire burns in the tripod cauldron
where nothing is cooked,
and one man has gone to sleep, slumped
against his spear.

The dragon snorts, two angled blasts
of incinerating fire
cross thousands of light-years of cosmos
giving Newton his Opticks, stirring
Galileo to build his telescope.
One man takes from it nothing but notions
of domination and gain –
the other sleeps on. When that one wakes
he will slaughter millions, abetted
by the blunt-minded pointer who, though awake,
is but a tourist, a hunter
who regards the cosmic dragon
as but another partridge to be speared
for the pot.