

Guernen Sang Again:
Pryderi's Pigs and other poems

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Guernan's Boast

At the back of the North Wind
I had my beginning
Near the Head of the Alder-Wood
I got my birth

Taliesin was my teacher
First Bard of the Cymry
I have slept in his homestead
I have learnt well his words

I have drunk wine and mead
With Aneirin in Dun Eidyn
I have feasted before battle
I have seen the spears fly

I have traveled all of Britain
North to south, east to west
I have told tales for Princes.
I have sung before Kings

I have walked at midnight
Beneath the Summer Stars
And in the midst of Winter
I have seen the Spirits' Dance

I have played my harp
Beside the Gates of Annwn
I have sung at Samhain
In the shadow of the Stones

On the Isle of Druids
I have slept alone
And I have watched at daybreak
for the opening of the Gate

All through my Kingdom
My name is not ill-known
Alder-tree am I:
I have sung songs.

I Frwno

Rhyfelwr cryf yw, ganddo – calon fawr
 Fel cawr, ac mae arno
 Cot ddu iawn gedennog – O!
 Gorau o gwn yw Brwno.

To Bruno

A strong warrior is he, with – a great heart
 Like a giant, and there is on him
 A very black shaggy coat – Oh!
 Best of hounds is Bruno.

Cruel is the Frost

Cruel is the frost that glitters in the dawn;
 Cruel is the cutting wind that blows all day;
 Cruel is the cold that comes when light is gone
 And only fire can keep the ice at bay.

Cruel is the pain that's wrought with bitter steel;
 Cruel are the chains that mock a prisoner's groans;
 Cruel are the wounds that bleed and will not heal,
 And cruel the tears that fall on barren stone–

But crueler, claws that lurk in silken glove
 And caltrops sharp well-hidden in the mire.
 More cruel betrayal by a friend once loved
 Than any wound that's got of steel or fire.

Cruellest of all the thoughts that come by night
 When minds have no defense from memory's bite.

War Song

Our war-drums beat, our trumpets call –
– *the Outlands riding forth to war* –
the Stag will lead us one and all!
– *now sing the Outlands evermore!*

King Maelgwyn to Estrella goes
– *the Outlands riding forth to war* –
to plunder, fight and crush his foes!
– *now sing the Outlands evermore!*

Queen Cainnleach she rides with him
– *the Outlands riding forth to war* –
to take the field of battle grim!
– *now sing the Outlands evermore!*

The army of the Outlands wide
– the Outlands riding forth to war –
will follow them in all its pride!
– now sing the Outlands evermore!

From Caerthe fair, that Castle strong
– *the Outlands riding forth to war* –
rides forth a fierce and mighty throng!
– *now sing the Outlands evermore!*

From mighty al-Barran now come
– the Outlands riding forth to war –
the fell pack of the Scorpion!
– now sing the Outlands evermore!

The Dragon's brood of Dragonsspine
– *the Outlands riding forth to war* –
come clad in armor fierce and fine!
– *now sing the Outlands evermore!*

From Citadel far in the south
– the Outlands riding forth to war –
come warriors who will dare hell's mouth!
– now sing the Outlands evermore!

From Unser Hafen's northern plains
– the Outlands riding forth to war –

the Legion comes to dare hell's pains!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

From college, shire and canton fair
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 come fighters true all hell to dare!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

The Stag's war cry will terror raise
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 our mighty heroes bards will praise!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

With spear and sword we'll slay our foes
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 and leave them for the wolves and crows!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

When battle's done we'll feast and sing
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 and toast our Outlands queen and king!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

We'll drum and dance till break of day
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 then mount and homeward make our way!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

So follow, heed the Stag's fierce call!
 – the Outlands riding forth to war –
 to Estrella's field – come one and all!
 – now sing the Outlands evermore!

Last Battle

When blood-red rose the sun that day
 the omens all were ill.
 Though Druids had warned, he would not heed –
 his foes he rode to kill.
 For though the price should be his blood
 or death in battle cruel,
 He knew his time was growing short –
 and soon his son must rule.

On Beltane morn he led them out,
his war-band fair to see –
The sun shone warm, the grass grew green,
and young was leaf on tree.
A land in winter he had ruled
through wild and savage storm,
And glad his heart to see at last
a day spring-bright and warm.

His father's crown had passed to him
in solemn hall and high –
He'd thought that his would do the same
when came his time to die.
But now he wondered – on this field
he knew that he might fall –
Would some then snatch away that crown
from his young son so tall?

The foes he went to fight that day
were not his only foes –
Strife in his land in past had been
not least of all his woes.
Would those who rode beside him now
still follow his commands
When he lay dead, or rise and seek
by strength to rule these lands?

His thoughts were broken by a shout –
“The enemy draws near!”
He looked and saw their banners bright
against the sky so clear,
And doubt and fear he put aside –
now was his time to be
In body, mind, and soul, all one
'gainst all adversity.

The war-horns brayed, the war-shout rose
and horses' hooves drummed loud –
They charged, and from the thin spring tuff
dust rose in choking cloud
The battle-din was echoed back
from hills and mountains high
With sounds of blows and shouts and screams
and circling raven's cry.

And in that battle-murk the King
 with bloody spear and sword
 Fought grimly on while all around
 the battle-tumult roared,
 And one by one his foes he found
 and one by one they fell
 As blow by blow he cleft their shields
 and sent their souls to hell.

No easy task – his own blood flowed
 from many wounds and deep,
 Yet on he rode to rend his foes
 as wolves rend frightened sheep.
 And when at last the fight was done,
 his enemies lay dead
 And he rode home in victory
 still at his war-band's head –

But knew he too had got his death,
 and Death rode by his side –
 That grisly specter with a grin
 now matched him stride for stride
 Unseen by any but himself –
 his close and faithful friend
 Who'd go with him to board and bed
 until he reached his end.'

Back to his Rath he led his men,
 and they were met with cheers –
 But songs and laughter both alike
 fell bitter on his ears.
 His Queen so fair awaited him –
 he took her in his arms
 And saw within her eyes the smile
 change into deep alarm.

"My Lord, you're hurt!" – His smile grew grim.
 "Help me within, my sweet,
 Then send and summon all my lords
 in my high hall to meet.
 I've words for them that cannot wait –
 my hour it draws near.
 Give me your arm, and smile, for now
 there's nothing left to fear."

His lords they came from near and far –
his word brooked no delay –
And gathered all outside the hall
where their High King he lay.
They murmured each unto the next –
wild rumors flew about –
But not a man among them all
would dare his lord to flout.

At last he called them all within –
and quietly did they come
And stood within that hall so still
as they were stricken dumb.
They saw his face was ghastly pale
and blood it stained his side,
But still he stood before them, straight
and tall, upheld by pride.

“My lords,” he said, “now listen well –
I’ve words that I must say.
My wounds go deeper than you know –
I’ll not live out this day.
I’ve summoned you all here to see
me give my son this crown –
For me it’s now a heavy weight,
and I must lay it down.”

In silence then his son he came
and knelt before the King
Who drew from off his own right hand
an old and massive ring
And placed it on the boy’s young hand.
“Now swear,” he said, “you will
Remember well these words I speak
through times both good and ill.

“A King is not a master, but
a servant to his land.
Your knights are not your minions, but
your own and strong right hand.
Your ministers and priests and bards
can give you counsel true –
But when at last the die is cast,
they all depend on you.

“So honor all your people from
the highest to most low,
And strive to take within your heart
their every joy and woe.
You are their sole defense against
the enemy without,
And they will give you all their strength –
so that your heart be stout.

“Your land is not your plaything – you
must love her like your Queen,
And cherish every rock and tree,
each lake and pasture green.
She feeds you and your people – from her
comes your every good –
Without her you are nothing, so
defend her with your blood.”

He paused and closed his eyes in thought,
and drew a heavy breath.
Cold sweat stood on his forehead; he
could feel the touch of Death.
No harder fight he'd ever fought,
no battle dearer won –
Yet still he stood upon his feet
and looked down on his son.

“Now swear,” he said, “you will accept
this charge I on you lay.”
“I will,” the boy replied. “I'll do
most gladly all you say.”
The King took off his crown and placed
it on his son's own head,
Then swayed, and while the folk all watched,
dropped down before them – dead.

The lords all swore allegiance then
unto their new-made King,
And one by one they knelt and kissed
his – once his father's – ring.
Beside the old King only knelt
the Queen, whose loss and pain
Showed in her tears, which silent fell
on him like bitter rain.

The Royal Hound

Beside her throne he lolls, red tongue thrust out,
And laughs with grinning jaws to see us play.
He is not young – mixed with the black, some gray
Shows in his chin – but still his heart is stout.

Around him people pass, and laugh or shout,
And sometimes he joins in with bark or bay.
His life is simple – his but to obey,
And wait, and watch, and guard, and never doubt –

And he is wise. O Bruno, warrior strong,
Keep well your Queen, the one who loves you best
And whom you best do love. Stay by her side,
Black-coated guardian who abides no wrong,
Purer than knight that ever rode on quest,
Whose soul knows neither vanity nor pride,

Puppy Love

My puppy is so feckless,
She doesn't mind me well –
She's sometimes wild and reckless
And likes to leap and yell.

When I am rushing head-long
She'll take another tack,
And then she is so head-strong
It's hard to rein her back.

She has the strangest notion
That she's the one in charge.
Although she's swift in motion
She isn't very large,

But she is so insistent
That I – not she! – give in
I have to be consistent –
I always let her win.

Yet still sometimes I wonder
 While lying at her feet
 If I have made a blunder
 Which I should not repeat –

I love my puppy dearly,
 Un-dog-like though she be
 And yet I'm sure, or nearly,
 She thinks that she owns me!

Host Raider

His new green surcoat suited him,
 and he was feeling good;
 The Aten sun was shining, and
 the spring was in his blood,
 And Cainnleach was with him,
 his high Goddess and his Queen
 As he set out to raid that day –
 on Estrella's fields so green.

Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

'Twas not his first Estrella – he
 had been this way before;
 He'd raided here and there for sport,
 since he first went to war.
 But now he saw he'd chances that
 before he'd been denied –
 Let all our Royal Hosts look out!

'Twas Bruno's day to ride!

Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

To Artemesia first they went,
 that camp of Gold and Black,
 And when no one was looking,
 Bruno made his first attack –
 Some luckless breakfast bacon
 they would never see again –
 It vanished into Bruno's mouth –
 beyond all mortal ken!

Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

Next Bruno went to Calontir,
 our fine and faithful friends
 (Though sometimes they have raided us
 for their own private ends!) –
 A loaf of bread and half a cheese
 went into his insides,
 And, “What has happened to our lunch?” –
 the Calontiri cried.
Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

Queen Cainnleach suspected
 there was something going on,
 For Bruno looked too innocent,
 and someone’s food was gone,
 But she was not the one to call
 attention to her Hound,
 And so she led the party on –
 upon that visit round.
Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

They came at last to Atenveldt
 beneath its golden Sun,
 And Bruno’s tail was wagging,
 he was having lots of fun –
 But nothing to what met his eyes
 within that Aten tent –
 He looked upon that table –
 and he knew ’twas heaven-sent!
Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

He saw a splendid banquet,
 laid out right before his nose!
 While Cainnleach distracted them,
 old Bruno carefully chose,
 And one by one those sausages
 did quickly disappear –
 There never was a Raider
 could so fast a platter clear!
Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

The table was half empty
 before someone looked around,
 And then apologies were due
 unto the Aten Crown,

But Bruno he was happy
 as they led him home again –
 ‘Cause when warriors go a-raiding –
 it’s the old ones always win!
Bruno is here! Bruno is here! Host Raider in disguise!

Shore Song

by the cold shore silent
 stone fort lonely standing,
 winter’s late light level
 low upon it showing.
 sea wind rattles rushes,
 roaring loud, cloud-pushing;
 black-winged rooks call roughly,
 raucous, rustling tree-tops

gold sun gilding ocean,
 gliding low, red-glowing,
 touches broken towers,
 topless walls half-fallen,
 withered weeds rain-sodden,
 willow-herb still seeding,
 grow in empty arches,
 open doors and portals.

broken hearth of heroes,
 heatless, set with nettles,
 ruined and unremembered,
 roofless now lies silent.
 none knows now who ruled here—
 nameless lord, once famous—
 of the songs once sung here,
 sounds now only owlsong.

al-Barran

scorpions a-scurry,
snakes on rocks a-baking –
stretching 'round this stronghold
stony deserts lonely.

once within it winning
wond'rous the abundance!
In this fair oasis
all men call a welcome

Dainty maidens dance there;
drums their war-cry thunder;
Warriors fierce go wearing
white silks thin and princely.

Poets weave their praises
proudly in hall crowded –
al-Barran the ancient –
at her core, the Scorpion.

Citadel of the Southern Pass

Citadel of south-land
shining fortress courtly
rises by a river
running in hot sunlight

water in the wasteland
winding fast through passes
home to warriors humble
who're to Temple truest

feasting here is famous –
finest wine and dining
here the famous Herald
home does come from roaming

artisans and artists
all here lushly flourish.
keep of perfect comfort –
Cup of shining kindness.

Pryderi's Pigs

From purple twilight full of mist and rain
 into the torchlight at my gates they came,
 twelve men in sodden cloaks, mud-splashed and cold,
 and to my Porter said, as I was told,
 that they were bards from Gwynedd in the north.
 He did not ask their names, or state, or worth –
 all peaceful men were welcome in my halls.
 He lodged them well, brought water, wine and all,
 and sent a boy to bring them to the feast.
 They took their seats, and when the noise had ceased
 I asked their chief if one of his young men,
 to entertain us, might some story spin,
 or sing a song, perchance, to make time fly.
 He smiled and rose, and looked me in the eye,
 and said the custom of their company was
 the first night they arrived at some new house
 the Chief Bard was the one who should perform,
 and so he would. In mellow voice and warm
 he started then a story to unfold.
 Tale followed tale until the night grew old,
 and laughter, wonder, fear and even joy
 he conjured up. I never heard a boy
 or man could any better story spin,
 and when at last he came unto the end
 I bade him join me at my table high.
 He gladly sat, and heaved a weary sigh.
 With mead I filled his cup, and merrily
 we did converse, and pleasure 'twas to me.
 His beard was black; to me he seemed full young –
 a green-eyed lad, born with a silver tongue.
 "Chieftain," he said at last, "I'll tell my task –
 I've journeyed here, a boon of you to ask.
 I've heard you own strange beasts: 'pigs' they are named –
 not like wild boar, but creatures small and tamed.
 I ask their gift." I sighed and shook my head.
 "Alas, my friend, though I myself were glad
 to give them you, I cannot – not my own
 are they to give. They came from dark Annwn,
 whose lord was years ago my father's friend,
 and them I may not give or sell or lend
 'til twice they've bred their number in this land."

The stranger smiled. "O lord, leave my demand
unanswered, 'til tomorrow morn we meet,
and then I'll show you how an answer sweet
to find, for when you see what I shall bring,
you may exchange them for some better thing."
I laughed – it seemed a joke – no more was said.
We drank our mead, and off we went to bed.

I dreamed that night of magic. Long ago
a spell was laid on Dyfed by a foe
for vengeance, and myself was held in thrall,
and only by good luck escaped at all.
That night again I knew captivity –
the prisoner's hopeless longing to win free –
the treachery that sent me to that fate
to satisfy a long-enduring hate
conceived before my birth. I woke in fear
and lay awake to think. No warning clear
it seemed to me – and yet I think it was.
All things are clearer when you know their cause.

Clear was next morning, for the day dawned bright,
and all my dreams and fears it put to flight.
Out of my court I went to take the air,
and splendid was the sight that met me there.
Twelve shields as round and golden as the sun
lay sparkling in my courtyard, every one
full worthy to be bourn by any king,
and bright as blooming gorse in early spring.
Beside them stood twelve stallions black as night –
six young men held them by their harness bright,
and that again was gold where iron should be –
but fairer were those horses fine to see!
Their manes and tails fell shining, thick, and long;
their chests were deep, their legs were straight and strong;
their eyes were bright; their hides like jet did shine.
They looked as fleet as stags, swift as the wind.
Beside them sat twelve hounds, a splendid pack,
their breasts snow-white, and all else raven-black.
Their collars and their leashes were all gold.
Their fangs gleamed white; their looks were fierce and bold.
While I stood gaping, all this wealth to see,
the green-eyed stranger came and greeted me.

“What think you, lord? Is this a fair exchange
for what I ask, your creatures small and strange?”

“Indeed it is!” I scarce looked at his face.

“But I must counsel take, not chose in haste.”

I lied. Already then my heart was set
upon those lovely horses black as jet.

I called my counselors – once they had gazed
they were like me by beauty’s spell amazed.

We all agreed, and on that self-same day

I let the strangers drive my pigs away.

That afternoon I hunted my new pack.

My sons and I bestrode those stallions black,
and when at last at evening we rode home
they seemed as fresh and swift as when we’d come.

We talked of nothing else that night in hall –

but of my pigs we never spoke at all.

Twas only next morn, waking in my bed,

A thought came to me, cold as creeping dread –
when those twelve strangers to my gates had come
of horses, dogs, or shields, they had brought none.

I found no stallions in my paddocks green;
no hounds were waiting in my kennels clean,
but only sticks and trash and scraps of bone –
the magic holding them alive had flown.

And in my strong-room where those shields had lain
nothing but withered toadstools now remained.

A burning anger rose inside me then –
what sort of wretch, what poor excuse for men
could come as guests within my halls so high
and there betray my trust with ruse and lie?

I mounted then, and with my war-band raced
along the track those thieves had gone in haste,
but ere we reached the river, my pigs’ spoor
had vanished; we could follow them no more.

I knew then who that northerner had been –
such power is passing rare in mortal men,
and only from the family of great Dôn,
Mathonwy’s brood, could such a wizard come.

To all my one-and-twenty cantrifs wide
my messengers I sent, to swiftly ride
and summon war-bands ready-armed for fight
to meet me here before the second night,

prepared to march. My insult-price twice o'er
I'd have from Gwynedd, as I grimly swore,
and when at last he felt my vengeance's sting
that green-eyed bard a different tune should sing.

Our journey could have been a pleasure ride,
an amble through the summer countryside
up Helen's Track, through green Caredigawn,
each day to wake to birdsong in the dawn,
and sleep each night to cuckoo's lullaby –
it seemed by far too fine a time to die.

We passed the Ystwyth, winding river clear,
and watched old Idris' Chair draw slowly near.

We crossed above the Dyfi's mouth so wide
through shoals of salmon silver in her tide.

Then on and up a pass, where forest thick
pressed in upon us. Grey rocks wet and slick
slid underfoot, as loud the river ran
and deer fled up the cliffs on either hand.

Then downward past Llyn Fach, where wildfowl rose
on thrumming wings, and Idris towered close
above us as another pass we climbed,
where ferns grew thick, and falling fountains chimed.

At last onto Arduwy's verdant plains
in sparkling showers of sunlight mixed with rain
we rode, and saw against the northern sky
Eryri's snows shine on Yr Wyddfa high.

One night we camped beside the Dwyryd stream
and set good watch. Beyond the firelight's gleam
the hills rose full of shadows, dark and steep.

I lingered by the fire – I could not sleep.

Beside my tent there stood a old black stone,
as rooted in the land as if't had grown.

It seemed to breathe of cold – I touched its side
and shivered. In the west the sunset died.

The river muttered in its stony bed,
a hunting owl sailed silent overhead
and summer stars bloomed in the twilight sky.

I heard far off a hunting vixen's cry.

The camp grew quiet; the night wore softly on,
but I lay wakeful to the edge of dawn.

Next day we rode full-armed, prepared for war,
 and in the early afternoon we saw
 ahead of us an army. Banners bright
 stood on the wind, and spearheads caught the light.
 My scouts had warned us, and my captains all
 had got their orders. For my war-horn's call
 alone they waited, but ere I might blow
 three riders galloped forth from out our foe.
 They bore green branches, ancient sign of truce –
 no one would dare to use them for a ruse.
 I rode alone to meet those warriors strong –
 the eldest of them I had known full long.
 His hair and beard shone like Yr Wyddfa's snow;
 his power wrapped him; I could see its glow.
 Old Math son of Mathonwy he was named –
 long was his life and far his magic famed.
 Beside him on his left my green-eyed bard
 came riding – now he looked a warrior hard.
 The third man had his features, not his fire –
 a younger brother by the self-same sire –
 Math's nephews, surely, both his sister's sons,
 called Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, born to Dôn.
 As we drew rein, a sudden anger bright
 burst in my heart – I wanted then to fight.
 I wrenched my eyes away from Gwydion's smile
 and looked at Math, his manner stern and mild.
 "Good friend Pryderi," said he, "why come here
 leading an army? What have you to fear,
 here in my land, that needs a thousand men?" –
 "Do you then meet me," asked I, "like a friend?
 Your nephew owes me *wyneb-werth* and more –
 and I will have it from him, as I swore."
 "I will not pay you," Gwydion harshly said.
 "You made your choice – the end be on your head!"
 I looked at Math. "Is that your final word?"
 I found my hand already on my sword.
 All through my life my anger and my pride
 had driven me; I could not now abide
 to be held light. Math saw it. "Wait!" he said.
 "Can reparation benefit the dead?
 My nephew may have spoke in too much haste –
 put back your sword, and let us talk of peace."
 I looked at Gwydion – in his sneering glance

I wanted then to sheathe my iron-shod lance.
“Then let him speak again, or by my word
I’ll take my reparation in his blood.” –
“Old man,” said Gwydion, grinning, “you may try,
but on the day you do, you’ll surely die!” –
Math shook his head. “Pryderi, take from me
your payment, and ride home, and I will see
to Gwydion.” – “No!” I cried, “I will not go
insulted – no man lives, who’s spoke me so!”
With that I wound my horn, and wheeled my horse,
and galloped headlong back toward my force.
The war horns brayed, the war-shouts echoed loud
from Arfon’s peaks, dust rose in choking cloud
behind our charge, as like a mighty flood
we rushed upon our foes – then all was blood.

Tedious to me it would be to relate
all that day’s fighting – combats small and great –
blood-bursts from spears, those shafts of bitter pain,
bespattering all with their warm scarlet rain,
the reek of blood, the din of sword on shield,
the dead men lying thick upon the field
as in old Eiru when I went with Brân –
never was there a greater fighting man! –
The icy waters of the streams ran red
as finest wine – it seemed all nature bled,
not we alone. And yet the blood I sought
could not, it seemed, for any price be bought.
Long raged that fight – at last we must retreat
into the pass, but fighting still, not beat.
There in Glyn Coll we rallied, made a stand,
and there died many another fighting man.
Too many died – I cannot list their names,
I am no bard to give undying fame,
but only death that day was mine to give,
and somewhere still I knew that Gwydion lived.
As last, as evening’s shadows gathered black
I called for truce – to Dôl Benmaen fell back,
and there we camped. Full five of my nine sons
had died that day – the very rocks and stones
had fought against us. Now must I in pain
devise a way to save those who remained.

Math sent two nobles to arrange a truce,
 and I gave hostages. It was no use
 to carp or to complain. The eldest son
 of my first son I gave, the dearest one,
 and three-and-twenty noble youths besides –
 I stood and watched them proudly northward ride.

Our dead we buried – far too many gone –
 and then rode south. The summer sun still shone,
 the sky was blue, the flowers bright as May,
 but all the world for me was cold and gray –
 for while I rode downcast and deeply grieved,
 the man who caused this loss to me still lived.
 My army – less than half the men who came –
 marched sullenly – they felt despised and shamed.
 And all the while the Gwynedd men kept pace
 and showed no self-restraint, no gentle grace,
 but insults, clods, and stones at us they threw.
 Of course my men fought back. Soon arrows flew,
 and blood was shed. Before we lost all peace

I stopped at Y Felinrhyd for a space.
 My heart ached. Such defeat I'd never known.
 I thought about my long slow journey home,
 and afterwards. Another arrow fell
 close by me – I could hear my soldiers yell.
 I called a messenger to take my words
 back to old Math. I'd settle this with swords.

The afternoon was late, the evening near.
 I stood and watched them come. I felt no fear.
 Around me stretched wide sands – the tide was out.
 A salt wind stroked my cheek, and all about
 white seagulls swooped and cried. I stood alone,
 and watched the wave-dance of the sinking sun.
 Their horses stopped – I heard the steps of men
 crunch on the sand. I turned to face them then,
 and Gwydion stood there, the green-eyed lad
 who had betrayed me, cheated, and made mad.
 Like me he stood full-armed. His friends drew back
 as mine were doing. There'd be no attack.
 My eyes sought his – I smiled within my beard –
 if I was fearless, here was one a-feared.
 To face me man to man he did not choose,
 for he was young and had a life to lose

and I was old, and full of craft and hate,
full ready now to dare a throw with fate.
At last I spoke. "You understand," I said,
"the two of us must fight 'til one is dead." –
"I do." He grimaced. "I'd wish this undone.
You could withdraw, and still go safely home." –
"Oh, no," I laughed. "My meaning still you miss.
I want you dead – you've bought and paid for this.
Though I am old, I've garnered no mean skill.
You will not find me easier to kill
than you yourself, for of no mortal breed
my mother came, and I am her true seed.
But if by luck you somehow cut me down,
remember this when I lie on the ground.
I curse you now – as you did me betray,
so shall another do to you one day.
I curse you also with my dying breath –
that thing you most do love, you'll lose to death.
So though you slay me, and I lose this fight,
you win my curse, and dead men's curses bite."
His eyes flashed fire; he swiftly drew his sword
and I drew mine. We said no other word,
but spoke with ringing blows of sword on shield,
and gasping breath, and hiss of cutting steel.
Soon both we bled, though neither wounded sore.
The fight went on, though on the distant shore
the tide had turned. The sun was sinking fast.
It mattered not – 'til dusk we could not last.
Blow after blow – my shield was broken now,
and streams of sweat ran on my bleeding brow.
My sword's strong hilt was slick with sweat and blood;
the ground we trod was trampled into mud.
The sun's low light showed Gwydion's face was set
into a snarl. No fiercer foe he'd met.
My sword-tip caught his leg – I heard him hiss.
He swung at me in turn, but somehow missed.
His parched lips moved. I saw him framing words
beneath his breath, but nothing of them heard.
Those words came faster still. I gave a groan –
I had forgot the magic that he owned!
I lunged at him – he shouted, and a light
burst in my face like sunrise, fiercely bright.
I closed my eyes, unsighted, stumbled blind,

and wildly swung my sword my foe to find,
 but he found me. His sword-point pierced my breast
 and I fell down. Far in the bloody west
 the sun had set. The tide was coming in –
 I heard its roar. A gull cried on the wind.
 My blood ran out and soaked the trampled sand.
 My strength was gone – I could not lift a hand.
 I looked at Gwydion, and I tried to smile –
 he felt my curse bite deep. His eyes were wild
 and he looked old, as I had never been.
 So may betrayers all betrayèd end.

Go Tell the Outlands

Go tell the Outlands, passer-by
 Here on Estrella's bloody fields we lie
 Though our army they came late
 Still we stood and fought as fated –
 Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

E'en though we faced three kingdom's might
 Yet did we stand and fiercely fight
 Let the glory our blood bought,
 And our names not be forgotten –
 Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

Dukes Artan and Hrothgar death long defied
Sir James and **Sir Sterling** slew and died
 Fiercely though our foes they fought,
 High the price at which they bought us –
 Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

Sir Lavan Longwalker slew foes untold
Sir Berold and **Trystan de Gilbert** were bold
 Boldly there our foes we slew,
 Tho the price was our undoing –
 Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

Ladies Alethea and **Keridwen** fought there
Lord Thomas Winterbourne and **Wolf** did their share
 Though the price we paid was dear,
 Few the foes we left to fear us –
 Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.
That on no foreign field we lie
For our blood that soaked this sand
Changed it into Outlands land –
Go tell the Outlands, passer-by.

A Man

Oh, I was just a youngling
when first I came to serve
within Ceridwen's Castle,
and there I fell in love –
I loved my royal Lady
as truly as heart can,
and childlike, vowed to wed her
when I was grown a man.

As page-boy first I served her,
and carried cloak and glove.
She smiled and touched my bright curls,
but spoke no word of love.
Yet on her many errands
full joyfully I ran,
and dreamed that she would love me
when I became a man.

I shot up like a young tree,
and served her as a squire.
I never glanced at maidens –
she was my whole desire.
At last one day it happened –
she smiled and took my hand.
Her lips were sweet as honey,
and she found I was a man.

I sang for her in feast-hall
and joined her at her board,
and she was my dear lady,
though I was not her lord.
We danced in silver moonlight,
we galloped o'er the land –

in hunt and court and bower
I served her as a man.

The years ran by so swiftly,
and now my beard is grey.
My body's old and withered,
and she's not aged a day.
When I am gone she'll miss me –
as much as her heart can –
though she be Queen immortal,
and I was just – a man.

Invitation to Hunter's Feast

Fine and fair the foodstuffs brought forth by our land –
grains from the farmer, grown by hoe and hand,
wild fruits found and gathered, or herdsman's slaughtered beast –
but none can compare with our noble Hunter's Feast.

Oats and wheat are splendid for making bonny bread;
cabbages and turnips both help to keep us fed;
carrots, kale and onions of foods are not the least,
but only serve to garnish our noble Hunter's Feast.

Apples crisp and ruddy make pies and cider fine;
berries red and purple and grapes make splendid wine;
beer and mead make merry soldier, prince and priest –
but these but serve to sweeten our noble Hunter's Feast.

Eggs and milk and cheeses, creamy, salt and sweet,
are excellent as staples and pleasant oft to eat;
chickens, ducks and peacocks are loved in west and east,
but still cannot compare with our noble Hunter's Feast.

Cow's meat for the Saxons, pig's meat for the Celts,
mutton for the Normans, and goat's meat for all else –
every clan and nation has each their favorite beast,
but higher still they value our noble Hunter's Feast.

Salmon full of wisdom, antelope and hare,
wildfowl from the marshes, deer and boar and bear –
these make up our menu, so when my words have ceased
come and join our company at our noble Hunter's Feast!

Praise to Maelgwyn and Cainnleach

Praise to high lords princely,
proud, I now sing loudly –
over Outlands lovely
long their rule, song-worthy.

Worthy man, King Maelgwyn,
mighty hound in fighting,
foe-blood sheds he fiercely –
fright'ning force, resourceful.

Source of good, gold-giver
gladdens all in hall-place –
clad in tartan clothing,
king great-minded, kindly.

Cainnleach most queenly
close beside him biding –
best she shines in beauty
brightly Outlands lighting.

Light from eyes of emerald
ever on her servant –
Bruno, best and bravest –
bards all raise his praises.

Praise to high lords princely,
proud, I now sing loudly –
over Outlands lovely
long their rule, song-worthy.

A Song for St. Goliass

Of old the Irish loved their cows –
great were their cattle raids.
For one fine bull Cuchulain fought
and devastation made.
For love of cows an Irish king
did trade away his wife –
Oh! cows indeed in Ireland old
caused muckle death and strife!

And so I'll never love a cow –
 they're not my favorite beasts,
 and nor will they take precedence
 when I prepare a feast!
 No more of beauteous cows I'll sing –
 their company I'll not keep –
 Though fine their milk and meat and hide,
 they can't compare with sheep!

For pigs In Wales a fierce war
 twixt north and south they fought,
 'Cause Gwydion had carried home
 some swine unfairly got!
 And Arthur's men for Culhwch's sake
 a monstrous boar pursued,
 and though they got the things they sought,
 that contest sorely rued!

And so I'll never love a pig –
 they're not my favorite beasts,
 and nor will they take precedence
 when I prepare a feast!
 Though magical they well may be,
 brought forth from Annwn deep,
 For usefulness they can't compare
 with splendid wooly sheep!

Now sheep have never caused a war –
 who sings of mutton raids?
 And sheep have led no monstrous hunts –
 for who's of sheep afraid?
 No king did e'er give up a wife
 for parchment, wool or meat,
 Or find his ears were charmed by sounds
 of soft recurring bleats.

And so I vow I'll love my sheep –
 they are my favorite beasts,
 and always will take precedence
 when I prepare a feast!
 For cows and bulls I will not mourn,
 for boars and sows not weep,
 But always first in Goliath
 I'll praise – beloved sheep!

Wings
(for Mistress Kyriel)

Wings, wings in the sky
high in the west where the sunset was dying
over the mountains and prairies you loved –
wings of a hawk high above.

Wings, wings in the night –
coyotes and cattle both sang for your flighting –
spirit as true as the great sword you loved –
windhover hawk, fly above.

Wings, wings in the fire –
burning away all pain and vain desiring –
warming and lighting the people you loved
wings of a hawk high above.

wings, wings in the stone –
there where they laid you, the crown and the bone –
part now forever of this land you loved –
windhover hawk, fly above.

Wings, wings in my heart –
knowing that truly this is not a parting –
you will watch over this kingdom you loved
on the wings of a hawk high above –
windhover bard that we loved.

Two Riddles
(from the Bardic List)

Maiden huntress, silver bow,
first I shrink, and then I grow.
I bring high ones, also low.

(the moon)

Struck with sharp nails, this tree will sing
 and leafless still sweet harvest bring –
 freely she sings, though wound with wire,
 and flameless burns with Apollo's fire.

(a harp)

Indulgences and Pardons

“By my hand for the good of the state,
 the bearer has done what has been done” – on a writ from the hand of
 that Cardinal great
 so did the fateful message run.

Twas a pardon free to maim or slay,
 harrow or burn, with war or raid –
 knowing there'd be no debt to pay,
 no need for the bearer to be afraid
 of mortal law or of heaven high
 (for surely this was an indulgence too?)
 Raise your weapons and then let fly;
 nor king nor devil shall harry you!

I hold no indulgence nor pardon free
 but I have a weapon I dare to use –
 Taliesin's spear, true poetry,
 given to me by the hand of the muse.

So mind all gentles the wrath of a bard
 (the fire from heaven that burns all men)
 and threaten me not with weapons hard –
 sharper than swords is the point of a pen.

“pren onn hyd yw fy awen gwen”

“my ash spear is my awen” – Taliesin

Summer's Heat

Summer's heat grows heavy now –
droops the flower, bends the bough
laden with the ripening fruit –
weary charge on branch and root.

Sultry sun in brazen sky
fixes all with burning eye –
where he gazes all grows hot –
short the step from ripe to rot.

Blossoms beckon buzzing bees,
loud cicadas call from trees,
whining gnats, mosquitoes too
add their voices to the crew.

Shadows lengthen – dusk at last
comes to take us in his clasp,
wraps in darkness cool and sweet –
brief respite from summer's heat.

Five Limericks (from the Bardic List)

The Ban-Fili Caelte Caitcainn
owns words that can sooth or can burn -
just lend her an ear
and whatever you hear
I promise some new thing you'll learn.

Our Savya who's called the silent
writes poems exciting and violent,
and in Goliath's halls
she sings one and all -
she hardly ever is silent!

I ne'er said that filk was a sin -
it's just not the most noble end,
but when the time's right
(by the bard-fire at night)
I'll commit the act now and again.

There once was a laureate bard
 who purchased twelve gallons of lard,
 and when they asked why,
 she replied, "This supply
 is to oil up my praise when required."

There once was a fighter named Jock
 who sometimes gave ladies a shock
 for the tilt of the hilt
 that he wore by his kilt
 was almost as stiff as his socks.

These limericks are far too clean -
 there's hardly a – to be seen,
 but the cleverest still
 while avoiding that ill
 can be funny and yet not obscene.

To Be A Bard

To be a bard is not a easy thing –
 it is no harmless, idle game we play.
 To sing a song, pluck music from a string,
 or juggle words in pleasing bright array –

these things are lightly done, and yet with them
 a heavy burden comes, whose weight is this:
 sharp words may fly as swift as arrow slim
 to strike a target – or, as deadly, miss.

For though I hold no sword, yet still I fight –
 I bear the muse's spear, true poetry,
 and careful must I be as armored knight
 to wield my weapon, which may harm or free.

So know before you start, this road is hard –
 it is no easy thing to be a bard.

**A Welsh Curse
(To King Edward I of the English)**

Your head on a pike, O Edward,
as you did by Llywelyn my lord
(with ivy crowned green) –
Oh, naught that I've seen
more pleasure to me could afford!

Your children to die unwedded –
all your issue to rot and decay –
as our Gwenllian died
locked away there inside
far removed from the light of the day.

Your body to lie on our mountains,
and feed the wild dogs and the kites –
and the wind to make moan
over every white bone
for ten thousand bitter-cold nights.

And hell-fire to burn you, Edward –
Oh, hotter than Black Mountains coal!
And loud may you scream
midst the smoke and the steam –
the Devil to keep your soul!

Wizard's Lament

My castle grey stands on a lonely shore
where salt mist drifts in bitter choking cloud.
White seagulls swoop and soar and cry aloud,
and green waves break with deep resounding roar.

Black candles burn beside my open door;
their fickle flames cast shadows on a shroud.
September's twilight brings the ghosts that crowd
about this bier, where hope comes never-more.

For all I have of magery or lore,
and all that once was high and strong and proud,
could not unspeak a promise once avowed,
nor one of summer's days to us restore.

All flesh that lives in time must come to dust,
as day must come to dark, and steel to rust.

Exile

September's seas stretch cold and grey between
this castle black and lands I once did love,
yet still within my heart those fields are green
and radiant sunlight clothes the hills above.

Though lonely winter soon will wrap this land
and candle flames may give my only light,
last summer's sweetness still will not be banned
from thoughts and dreams that warm my weary nights.

But when bright spring returns, then shall I come
as steel to lode-stone, needle to the north,
and like those birds by winter stricken dumb
again will pour my heart's wild longing forth.

Swift then I'll fly to that which my heart craves,
light as a seagull o'er the sundering waves.

The Birth of Taliesin

Ceridwen's cauldron seethes and steams tonight;
the wind without her hut gusts high and wild
to shake the stars that shining lend their light
upon the world that waits her new-born child.

The frost-seared fern burns red as fire or blood
and violets shiver, crouched between the stones,
while thorny brambles rattle in the wood
and slender birches show like dancing bones.

Inside this vortex, at the center still
in warmth and steady silence there he lies
within her arms, the babe she cannot kill,
and watches her with ancient knowing eyes.

From wind and fire, from water and from earth
true poetry takes shape and comes to birth.

September Crown

Two voices raised by turns, bards call our past
 while scattered dust makes one field all our land,
 and king and queen bright-crowned with power stand
 to seek those who must follow them at last.

Strong warriors rich-bedight and ladies gay,
 each pair in turn strides forth from carven gate
 while heralds call their deeds, to silent wait
 preparing mind and body for the fray.

Sword oath is sworn and consorts heed their queen,
 the lists are drawn and armor buckled tight,
 then two by two those warriors face the fight
 that tests their skill, and strength, and honor clean.

Though all alike have dreamed, yet only one
 today will triumph 'neath our Outlands sun.

More Riddles From the Bardic List

calling and cursing
 over wide wastes
 white-clad, wind-borne,
 wide I wander
 each of two elements
 boundless buoys me
 only one offers
 food to feed me

(seagull)

from five flakes
 of argent hue
 red as blood
 so I grew
 five fold star
 in me still
 till my golden
 blood you spill

(apple)

silver war-sark
 spearless, swordless
 fearless farer
 great my ganging
 high as heroes
 long my leaping
 hazels harvest
 of all oldest

(salmon)

golden gladness
 warriors' wages
 hall all hails me
 sweet as summer
 bitter burden
 blood-price buys me
 paid to princes
 potent poison

(mead)

well-armed, I bear
 two bundles of spears
 my loud war-cry sounds
 when autumn nears
 in snow I show
 but tracks alone
 yet far and wide
 my form is known.

(the outlands stag)

Bela and Elizabeth

O, Bela and Elizabeth
when Outlands King and Queen
did seek what gifts they best could give
to bless their land so green –
for reign of King and Queen is short
but memory is long,
and by the gifts they leave behind
we know them when they're gone.

"O, herds of horses swift," said he,
"would bear our knights to war –
so should our Outlands might be known
by foes both near and afar!"
"O, horses swift are good," said she,
"yet many have the same,
and I would find a gift more true
to Outlands' far-flung fame!"

"O, swords of steel so bright," said he
"would arm our fighting men –
so should our Outlands might be known
afar to foe and friend!"
"O, swords of steel are good," said she,
"yet many have the same,
and I would find a gift more true
to Outlands' far-flung fame!"

"O, barrels of mead and wine," said he,
"nine hundred score and more,
would serve to toast our victories
and down our throats to pour!"
"O, mead and wine are good," said she,
"yet many have the same,
and I would find a gift more true
to Outlands' far-flung fame!"

Then as they stood a-speaking there,
a hawk cried overhead –
she hovered high upon the air
and then away she sped.
"O, what then means this?" cried the King –
"I know," the Queen replied.

"An omen fair from heaven sent
to help us now decide!

"O, once within this land there lived
a bard of great renown,
and sad the day for all of us
when death did cut her down!
As Windhover the hawk upon
her banner once was seen,
so Windhover we'll leave behind
to bless the Outlands green!"

Swift messengers throughout the land
they sent to bear the news
of what great gift they meant to give
and how they meant to choose –
to Fields of Gold and Silver Pass
they summoned all their bards
to come with song and tale, prepared
to meet in contest hard.

The bards they came as they were bid
and gathered round the fire
neath starry night and silver moon
in bold and brave attire,
and for their King and Queen they sang
and told their tales of old,
and two were chosen, best at Silver
Pass and Fields of Gold.

To Hinterland the King and Queen
did come to find Their Heirs,
and there these bardic Champions did
contend and were compared,
and when the Prince and Princess new
sat down in Royal pride,
Windhover Bard sat down as well
in Court there at their side!

O, Bela and Elizabeth
when Outlands King and Queen
did seek what gifts they best could give
to bless the Outlands green –
though reign of King and Queen is short

and history is long,
Windhover Bard with song and tale
will keep their memory strong!

Seagull Sestina

I walked alone to hear the cry of owls
come echo'ng through the silence of the night.
Far-off through ghostly trees I saw a flame
and went toward it, drawn like flutt'ring moth.
Lurid and bright, it glowed like any candle
but was instead a white and ghostly seagull.

Never had I so strange a glowing seagull
encountered in the night – as if the owl
whose voice I loved had made himself a candle
to flicker in the vastness of the night
and thereby draw unto himself a moth
who could not help but join him in the flame

which coldly burned – so that immortal flame
here danced about this white and ghastly seagull
although without attracting any moths
while I stood blinking like a stupid owl
confused by this deceiver of the night
and wond'ring if the game was worth the candle.

The bird's cold eye glowed like a sickly candle
a-flutter in the breeze that bows its flame,
but held me there, sad prisoner of the night,
caught in the spell of that disgusting seagull,
wishing I had the wisdom of the owl
instead of being stupid as a moth.

But soft and foolish as the furry moth
who does not know the nature of a candle,
or like the mouse before she feels the owl
drive claws into her back like blades of flame,
upon a limb there sat this silly seagull
alight to draw the dangers of the night.

The black and secret murders of the night
 have victims greater than the mouse or moth,
 so soon, I thought, the blood of this foul seagull
 like wax that rises in a globéd candle
 would drown its wildly flick'ring eldritch flame
 and leave the night and darkness to the owl.

Back to the night I went without a candle -
 no moth, I needed no bright guiding flame -
 and left the seagull to the hungry owl.

Pwll Remembers

When night lies slow and heavy on the land
 sometimes I wake, and memory brings back
 like sound of voices raised in sudden song
 the cry of hounds upon their quarry's track,
 a well-built hall, so high and wide and long,
 the taste of mead, the touch of your white hand.

Indeed it was the work of my own hand
 that sent me to that land beneath the land
 disguised and held in idleness year-long.
 Knowing no way by which I could win back –
 the road he led me left no trace or track –
 I spent my days and nights in play and song.

Sweet as high king within a minstrel's song
 I lived, and dined each day at your right hand,
 the while along that strange dark year's slow track
 approached my bloody battle for this land –
 for only through that fight could I win back
 into the world for which I now did long.

But every night that year was hard and long.
 I lay awake and listened to the song
 of your sweet breath behind my rigid back,
 the while I dared not even kiss your hand –
 for wife you were to him who ruled this land,
 whose magic set me on this secret track.

At last the year was gone – along the track
 I rode to face that fight I'd wanted long

against the other claimant for this land.
And I rode gladly, singing some bright song,
gladly I took my lance into my hand,
and in the ford I flung him dying back.

Then I was free, and all my journey back
was easy. Sunlight shone upon my track.
I met King Arawn, smiled, and clasped his hand,
and he did vow to be my friend life-long.
My heart was high, and all the birds in song
rejoiced at my returning to my land.

Yet sometimes I look back when night is long.
The track I went's now but a winter's song.
I lost your hand to win again my land.

Devil's Island

Tw'as once upon a Samhain-tide,
and bitter cold the night,
I went down to the salt sea shore
alone without a light.
I went down to the salt sea shore
to walk to Devil's Island,
for when the tides be at the springs
there's causeway to that island.

In mist and rain there on the shore
I saw the lights a-jigging,
but thought it was the fisher-folk
for clams and such a-digging.
I walked out on the naked sands,
I walked out to the Island,
and took three pebbles from the beach
and turned for home, a-smiling.

To take three pebbles from that beach
alone on Samhain Night
gives knowledge true, and power sure,
and gold and silver bright.
I'd turned for home a happy man
to walk that causeway long,

when from the shadows on the shore
I heard a wailsome song.

My hair stood up upon my head
and cold the sweat ran on me.
No mortal throat could make that moan –
I knew not what it could be.
I fled along the causeway paved
with sand and stone and shell –
the fear that was upon my soul,
it was the fear of Hell.

As I came up unto the shore
the lights were drawing near.
The ghostly song grew on the wind,
though words I could not hear.
The first of my three pebbles rare
I threw toward the sound,
and thought it paused, as with a prayer
I came again to land.

The lonely path I had to go
ran steep through rock and tree.
I could not haste, though I had need –
too dark it was to see.
I looked behind and saw the lights
come bobbing up the shore.
The way that I had still to go,
it was a mile and more.

The second pebble of the three
I lost upon that path
as like a blind man in the dark
I fumbled for a staff.
So black it was beneath the trees
I could not see my feet –
I found a stick and felt my way
through rain and wind and sleet.

And all the while behind my back
the lights drew closer still,
and all the while that wailing song
my ears did seek to fill –
a wordless call, a voiceless call

that bade me stay my flight,
put off myself and join with those
who walked this shore by night.

At last I reached the road above
where I had tied my horse,
to find but broken bridle reins
amidst the fern and gorse.
The beast had fled and left me there
alone and far from home.
I turned to face the forest path –
no farther could I run.

The thing I saw that followed me,
I will not give it name,
though sometimes still in nightmare black
I see its face again.

The last of my three pebbles dear
I threw towards the shore –
"Go back," I cried, "from whence you come
and follow me no more!"

I took three pebbles from the beach
of Devil's Isle that night,
for knowledge true, and power sure,
and gold and silver bright.
That none of these are got for naught
I now do understand –
and so I came back home again,
a sad but wiser man.

November Riddle

no box of wood this treasure bright can hold
nor can one mind its meaning wide unfold
each in his way some part of it may own -
a weapon sharp each in his way must hone,
or endless stream that sings as it does flow,
or garden bright where brilliant flowers grow.
if you're unable still to name this prize,
the answer's here before your dreaming eyes!

(answer: poetry!)

Seagull Cywydd

O gull, white-winged one, gliding high above
 the salt sea bleak, seek out my beloved,
 fairest of maids – first-of-May dew her face
 needs not! – fly to that spot so blest she graces
 bearing a burden, O bird, heavy as sin
 yet feather-light - your flight it will not hinder!

Take her my heart, swift-darter, take it, speed,
 a hollow shell while she heeds not my pleading,
 a bubble of foam, of homeless, wind-blown spume,
 bladder-wack racked by restless tide, unblooming,
 tossed to dry land, sandy, salt-bleached and dead
 as bitter bare bones alone on storm-lashed headland.

Yet this light thing, O bird! bring her, I pray!
 Carry it safe, far-farer, carefully lay it
 in her white hands, near to her honey-sweet lips
 whose kiss would fill it, cup brim-full for sipping,
 heavy as gold! To me its free return then
 would heal my woe and show me love unending!

Blodeuwedd

From the steep woods I hear the owl's sad cry
 come echoing through the twilight and the rain.
 She mourns tonight, and listening, so do I
 for beauty brought to life, and brought in vain.

To break a boy's curse, who else could have no wife,
 I, Gwydion, once created with my powers
 a woman, by strong magic brought to life,
 Blodeuwedd named, as she was made from flowers.

White was her skin as foaming meadowsweet,
 her hair as golden as the sun-bright broom,
 and she was tender as oak-blossom sweet
 that comes and passes in swift sudden bloom.

Her eyes were green as darkness under trees,
her smile as wild and urgent as the spring;
the passion in her rang like thrush's song
that in my apple-orchard used to sing.

Indeed, I could have envied Lleu, my boy,
when at the feast he joined hands with that maid –
to be a young man's pleasure and sweet joy,
she was the fairest thing I ever made.

How could I know, before three years were out,
that she instead his grievous death would be,
plotted by stealth with some ignoble lout
to satisfy their lust through treachery?

And yet their plan by magic went awry:
Lleu did not die on Gronw Pebr's spear,
but, changed to eagle, vanished with a cry.
And when that tale came wind-borne to my ears

I tireless sought him through this living land
and through the lands below, beyond, above,
and found him, won him back to shape of man,
and brought him home by magic and by love.

When he was healed, and sought false Gronw's blood,
I went instead to seek my flower maid
implacably to do the thing I should
and break the creature I myself had made.

She fled from me in horror and in fear
but not in guilt – as there was none in me
when by my magic I created her,
so like her maker was she made – guilt-free.

I caught her by the lake and worked my will,
but oh, I still recall her pleading eyes,
and though in truth I came prepared to kill,
instead I changed her, to our joint surprise,

into an owl – and changed myself as well.
I made her and unmade her with my power.
Now in cold darkness must she ever dwell,
and I have not forgot her since that hour.

From the steep woods once more I hear her cry
 fading in distance, softer than the rain.
 She mourns alone, and listening, so do I,
 for beauty lost to love, and lost in vain.

Praise to Arthur High King of Britain

Hail to Arthur high enthroned –
 Britain's brightest, Uthur's son –
 two and ten fell fights he won –
 Arthur our High King!

Fierce in battle, foeman's bane –
 blood-bought Britain back again –
 twelve-score Saxons clove in twain –
 Arthur our High King!

Peace and plenty to us gave –
 welcome warm to warriors brave –
 none in vain a boon might crave –
 Arthur our High King!

Caerleon and Camelot
 now shall never be forgot –
 blessed both his favorite spots –
 Arthur our High King!

Generous hand to every bard –
 praise to raise no labor hard –
 still he stands our land to guard –
 Arthur our High King!

Catraeth

White moonlight falls across the tumbled dead,
 unburied, prey to wolf or carrion crow.
 Black wounds gape wide where flowed their blood so red
 from flesh now cold and still as winter snow.

White moonlight jinks on rings of riven mail,
 on broken swords and splintered shields so fine,

and silken banners torn to ribbons pale,
trodden to pulp and soaked with war's red wine.

White moonlight dreams where echoed brazen horn
and battle shouts, and clash of blade on blade,
and screams and cries from dying warriors torn –
now only silence fills this forest glade.

White moonlight burns in me like silver flame:
the while I weep, I sing their shining name:
Gododdin's blood shall buy undying fame.

Bard's Revenge

The wind from the north blows cold tonight
and it drives the bitter rain,
and flings the smoke from the leaping fire
in my weeping eyes again.

Dead is my heart and dead my voice –
I cannot sing nor call –
for I killed my lord with my ashen spear
in his own high feasting hall.

To my lord full long as his bard I'd sung
and followed his sword to war,
and in his high praise my voice I raised
at courts both near and far –
for a bard makes fame and the mighty name
that only true praise can give,
and though under the sky a man may die
his bard's praise makes him live.

On an evil day my lord rode away
to his own high lord to come,
but I'd caught a chill and I lay sore ill
so he left me behind at home.
And when he rode back up that weary track
in the winter weather grim
behind in his train through the snow and rain
a new bard rode with him.

My lord he called me to his hall
and he would not meet my eye,

but said I was old and no more could hold
my place at his table high.

I could get my bread and keep my bed
in his hall if I wished to stay,
but no more I'd sing to the brazen string –
I had long outlived my day.

Now praise to sing is a precious thing
that should last as long as life,
and a lord and his bard should be joined as hard
as ever were man and wife.

To a bard his word is his shield and sword
and his muse is his ashen spear,
and to wake his wrath is a dangerous path
that any sane man should fear.

I looked at him and my face was grim
and I started to sing a verse –
for a bard's true song can be just as strong
as ever was druid's curse –
and straight and loud I called him coward
and his people's black disgrace,
and the force of my words as they were heard
raised blisters on his face.

He started to shout but my song rang out
and I blew his words away,
and I called him a fool with a withered tool
and I saw his face turn grey.
His sweat showed clear and the stink of fear
hung around him like a cloud,
and the last and third of my deadly words
in my final curse rang loud.

The word I said it swiftly sped
and it took him like a knife,
and his eyes grew wide and I think he tried
to beg for his forfeit life.

To his knees he fell with a strangled yell
that choked on his final breath,
and I turned away for I could not stay
but I knew that he had his death.

As I turned away I met the eye
of the new young bard who'd come –
with his face milk-white in the smoky light
he stood as stricken dumb –
but I shook my head – my lord lay dead –
and he saw he had naught to fear,
and he drew deep breath for he'd seen his death
and he bowed as I passed near.

The wind from the north blows cold tonight
and it drives the bitter rain,
and flings the smoke from the leaping fire
in my weeping eyes again.
No more I'll sing to the brazen string,
and no more to my muse I'll call –
for I killed my lord with one true word
in his own high feasting hall.

To a Chicken

White-winged one, sad and lowly is thy life –
no soaring through the wintry skies for thee!
Thou knowest not the thrill of flying free
and battling with the wind's enduring strife,
but quiet thy patch of barnyard or of coop –
a simple life, domestic and hand-fed.
Soft clucking nights together in the shed –
no fear for thee of owl, or falcon's stoop.

And yet thou too mayst greet the morning sun
with joy, and listen proud to husband's cries,
or pounce ferocious on a bug thou spyst
while scratching in the gravel of thy run –

as soars the seagull over the storm-lashed height
so even a chicken may have moments bright.

Tell-Tale Feathers

They floated light as snowflakes in the air,
and yet not cold their downy white embrace;
wind-borne a while, they dropped with stately grace
alighting randomly, now here, now there.

I followed to their source with great unease –
was there some slaughter in the chicken pen?
Had by ill chance old Brother Fox got in,
to leave these remnants drifting on the breeze?

Or was there warfare twixt the broody hens,
contending in fierce contest for their food,
in beaky onslaughts seeking to denude
each other's breast? Ah no – instead, my friends,

I found this time that little was amiss –
a slaughtered pillow was the cause of this!

The Storm

A bolt of fire that sets the heavens ablaze
followed by thunder fit to wake the dead,
then gales of driven rain, a blinding haze
of wind-borne water by the tempests sped –

and in that fog huge breakers from the deep
come rolling up the shore in vast array
to crash against the rocks in roaring heaps,
high-leaping on the wind like whips of spray.

They shake the earth and set the very dunes
in motion, waves of sand on waves of wind,
while racing clouds across the silent moon
charge on as if this storm will never end.

At last a pale dawn shows an altered land
and one brave seagull lights upon the sand.

The Choice

Part I.

A door shone in the darkness of the night,
a glowing entrance to the hollow hill –
within, a land that knows not winter's chill
but is forever springtime-young and bright

in colors glowing strange on mortal sight –
a place of joy where none are ever ill,
where fountains run with mead – come, drink your fill!
Forget the earth and mortal man's sad plight!

Outside that door the wind blows bitter cold,
the rain is chill, the rocks and stones are hard,
the world is wide and full of grievous harm.
Fleeting and rare is joy as fairy gold,
fortune is fickle, even to a bard,
and lucky the man tonight sleeps safe and warm.

Part II.

And yet I turned away, for well I know
that he who passes through that glowing door
to middle earth can safely come no more
or if he come, yet back again must go.

Eternal springtime does not draw me so –
once young, I'd be no happier than before.
Change in the shell still changes not the core,
and mortal death is not life's cruelest blow.

But still I dream sometimes as I grow old
of that fair land so beautiful, and still
I feel the pull of its undying light.
I doubt that I again could be so bold
to turn away, if from the hollow hill
a door shone in the darkness of the night.

Maiden's Lament

O once I loved a fine young man,
 as fine as fine can be –
 to marry soon we long had planned
 and live beside the sea.

An evil wizard envied us,
 oh evil as can be –
 he set a charm upon my love
 and hid him neath the sea.

O long the road I followed then,
 as long as long can be –
 to find the wizard and win back
 my love from neath the sea.

“O what will you take to end that charm,
 as strong as strong can be,
 that keeps my true love from my arms,
 imprisoned neath the sea?”

“O maiden, if with me you lie
 as glad as glad can be,
 your true love's bonds I will untie
 and I will set him free.”

“O wizard old, with you I'll lie
 as glad as glad can be,
 if you will then my love untie
 and once more set him free.”

I gave my body to him then,
 as glad as glad can be,
 and thought but only of the end –
 my love he should be free.

There was but one flaw in my plan,
 it's true as true can be –
 I never asked my love be man –
 but oh, he now is free!

As seagull white he roams the world
 as free as free can be –
 while I, alas, sit here at home
 and weep beside the sea.

Birdsong at Dawn

Birdsong at dawn –
a young cat's delight!
He sleeps open-eyed
throughout the spring night

knowing that soon
the birds will appear.
He watches the moon
and waits for to hear

their dawn chorus loud –
his tail is a-twitch.
He would be so proud
to catch just one finch!

He would leap, he would pounce
on his prey – oh! the pride!
Now if only he could
just somehow get outside...

Silence Is Not A Virtue

Silence is not a virtue in a bard –
indeed it is your job to sing or speak.
Neither is it a virtue to be meek
or shy, when speaking out's the thing required.

(Though sometimes it may get you feather'd and tarred!)
Still truth it is you ceaselessly should seek,
then, heart be brave! (though sometimes flesh be weak)
and battle on, howe'er the road be hard!

Yet if you can, before you say your word
a moment's pause for quiet reflection take –
remember what you own to kith and crown.
Once said, a thing can never be un-heard –
a whispered thought great empires still can shake
and pebble's roll can bring a mountain down.

Aranrhod's Lament for Dylan ap Ton

White seagulls swoop and call along the shore
 and I sit watching on this rock alone,
 but from the sea my boy will come no more.

The long green waves as garments once he wore
 and gold as midday sun his bright hair shone.
 White seagulls swoop and call along the shore
 and loud the empty waves in storm may roar
 in rage against this coast of ancient stone,
 but from the sea my boy will come no more.

For unexpected in the smithy's door,
 Gofannon's spear it clove him, flesh and bone.
 White seagulls swoop and call along the shore

where red as fire I saw his heart's blood pour.
 He vanished in the waves without a groan,
 but from the sea my boy will come no more.

What time has taken, she will not restore,
 and I am left behind, a bitter crone.
 White seagulls swoop and call along the shore
 but from the sea my boy will come no more.

Cilmeri

Snow cloaked the fields. The river
 armored with ice lay silent.
 Shouts echoed faintly – shivers
 of wind-borne mist, not violent.

Warfare and death seemed unreal.
 Blood on the snow was not red.
 In the grey light of that field.
 Snow-covered mounds were not dead.

Half-way twixt Annwn and earth,
 with ice for arrows and spears,
 armies of unhuman birth
 were battling down the long years –

or so it seemed. But red blood
showed when our torches came.
Dead men lay mixed in the mud,
made real by that flickering flame.

Was it Llywelyn we found?
Or Arthur, on Camlan field?
Welsh blood defending Welsh ground,
Welsh bodies borne on Welsh shields

in the deep cold of that night –
our dream and our King brought low.
Darkness devoured his light
and left our blood on the snow.

Snow Sonnet

This blanket white and soft, yet deathly cold,
covers high mountains, coats the fields below
in silent sleeping winter – smooth and slow,
unchanging even chill that keeps its hold

though sun across the sky has blindly rolled,
seeking without success to send his glow
through that clean coverlet, and life to sow
into the drowsy sod and slumb'ring mold.

All now is white or blue, no trace of gold
unless at dawn or dusk the clouds bestow
reflected color. Nothing green can grow
out of this shroud which now the earth enfolds –

yet if we wait, time's turning wheel will show
that spring's bright promise sleeps beneath this snow.

Poem for Galiana Fitz William

(on her admission to the Order of the Pelican)

Your Majesties –

This Norman lady fair and generous
the Arts does well support of every kind,
but firstly, cookery – she labors thus
to feed your folk, and flesh to spirit bind.

With thread and needle does she labor far
to clothe your folk against the heat and cold;
in field or tourney, court or camp or war,
full many wear her work, as I am told.

More generous than many a King of old,
her marvelous tapestries she makes to give
unto her Kingdom, raising wealth untold
through beauty's work, which makes our dreams to live.

In all these ways does Galiana show
the generous arts that from her heart do flow.

Alas for the Irish Bard

Oh alas, alas! for the Irish bard
who cannot go to war -
oh alas! that she must bide at home
and oh! her heart is sore.

For them as goes to the foreign wars
must sleep on the cold, hard ground,
but them as bides at home, alas!
on a feather bed are found.

And them as goes to the foreign wars
have but dry bread to eat,
while them as bides at home, alas!
at the feast must take their seat.

And them as goes to the foreign wars
are glad of water stale,

while them as bides at home, alas!
may swim in wine and ale.

And them as goes to the foreign wars
by the sword must live or die,
while them as bides at home, alas!
have little to do but sigh.

Yet them as goes to the foreign wars
around the fires may sing,
and are richer there by the songs they share
than ever was crownéd king.

Oh alas, alas! for the Irish bard
who cannot go to war -
oh alas! that she must bide at home
and oh! her heart is sore.

The Headless Herald

With his head tucked underneath his arm,
he walks the Aten court,
With his head tucked underneath his arm
by his Herald's report.

They say he's lost it three times now,
or maybe it was four,

For once you've been beheaded once,
why, no one's keeping score,
But every year I see him here
at this Estrella War

With his head tucked underneath his arm.

With his head tucked underneath his arm,
he haunts the battlefield,
With his head tucked underneath his arm –
yet I'm sure he's real.

I've heard a twisted story of
a cherry and a Queen,
Of a herald making merry, and
a headsman's axe so keen,
And that, I think's the reason for
this specter that we've seen

With his head tucked underneath his arm.

With his head tucked underneath his arm,
 he haunts the bardic fires,
 With his head tucked underneath his arm
 till the night expires.
 Now bards and heralds both, of course,
 with words do like to play,
 But when you're standing up in court
 be careful what you say,
 Or you could wake to find yourself
 in Tonis' plight one day
 With your head tucked underneath your arm!

 what is cold to me?
 a bardic blaze will warm me,
 mead of song most pure –
 a golden gold-filled goblet
 grows greater the more it's shared.

A Bard's War

I came into your circle
 out of the freezing night
 to join your fire and singing
 and share your mead so bright,
 then when the songs were finished
 I took the road once more
 wandering through the final night
 of that far desert War.

The camp stretched out around me,
 a world without an end,
 with kingdoms' great pavilions
 and tents of humbler men,
 and rising all above them
 beneath the wheeling stars
 hung wood smoke sweet as incense
 from half a thousand fires.

I heard the sounds of drumming
 and scraps of distant song;
 that night was one brief moment –

that night was ages long.
So many friends I'd found there,
so many old and new,
so many songs and stories shared –
and all the tales were true.

At last the camp grew quieter;
the night was growing old.
I heard the coyotes calling
from mountains high and cold.
So far it seemed I'd journeyed
across the miles and years,
I'd never reach my home again –
I'll always wander here.

I'll come into your circle
out of the freezing night
to join your fire and singing
and share your mead so bright,
then when the songs are finished
I'll take the road once more,
wandering through the final night
of this far desert War.

Badger Patter Song

should you set out on a wager
to entice a friendly badger
first be sure that you engage her
interest in your humble plot,

'cause full many a thought can happen
to a badger when you trap one
and she's like to catch you napping
and then put you on the spot.

now a badger is unsightly
crude and rude and not politely
and you'll have to hang on tightly
or she'll vanish in the night,

and no coin you'll be winning
when the badger's left you spinning

and she's home and dry and grinning -
while you're not a pretty sight!

Badger Sestina

There's many a thought that might my mind entice,
as dreams of treasure, rubies and gold coins;
or expeditions through the dark of night,
adventures wild, when anything might happen;
but nothing now that snares my wandering thought
as much as an encounter with a badger.

A surly gentleman, old Brocc, the badger,
a wanderer, not easy to entice
out of his sett. He does not care for thought,
nor treasures he cold rubies and gold coins,
and yet sometimes upon him you may happen
when both of you are wandering through the night.

The white of moonlight and the black of night –
these are the colors of old Brocc, the badger,
and well they hide him – even should you happen
to cross his path, he'll likely not entice
your glance, unless the full moon's silver coin
should trap him, still and potent as a thought.

And yet, next moment, swift as any thought
he'll vanish once more in the friendly night.
Oh, much I'd gladly give, in silver coin
for half an hour's viewing of a badger!
The offer of it certainly would entice
me far to travel, if such thing should happen.

And yet, I know, far stranger things may happen –
and so I comfort still myself with thought,
the bait that me, like Brocc, may yet entice
out of my lair, to meet him in the night –
that potent night, where like the pied badger
dark winter trees do stripe the moon's pale coin.

And there's my chance, like toss of random coin –
I walk the night of dreams, where much may happen,
and stranger creatures than old Brocc, the badger,

may lurk in shadows and in random thoughts.
 And on the edge of dawn, of dwindling night,
 who knows what meetings I may there entice?

I'll offer then, a coin for your thoughts –
 what sightings happen in the dreaming night
 your inward eye, like badgers, to entice?

Badger Sestina 2

Day after day, the sunrise bright will happen,
 from dreams the world with sweet light to entice –
 all save the poet, weary, sad and badgered,
 who has been toiling through the dreary night
 in search of one clear all-inspiring thought
 which might with luck win him a paltry coin.

Not even poets can live without a coin –
 only in Paradise could such thing happen! –
 and therefore must he cruelly spend his thought
 which should be saved the fair muse to entice
 by searching like a seagull through the night
 to find relief from wants that do him badger.
 As seagulls swoop and soar and seamen badger
 for fish or bread, indifferent to a coin,
 the poet's mind goes questing all the night
 for inspiration. Could it ever happen,
 that he by dint of labor might entice
 into the light a pure and supple thought?

Oh, no, alas, reject that bitter thought!
 Nor try by reading books the muse to badger!
 Never with off'ring false her heart entice –
 she'll spurn you as a seagull would a coin!
 Forcing the issue ne'er could make it happen,
 not in a thousand thousand bitter nights!

Yet e'en a poet must sometimes sleep at night,
 and in that sleep may snare a hopeful thought.
 E'en to seagulls sometimes luck may happen:
 some silvery minnow in the sea, unbadgered,
 sparkling as bright as any silver coin
 from his high soaring would the gull entice.

So from great depths my bait may yet entice
 out of the dreaming billows of the night
 a poem worth full many a silver coin!
 Yes, like the gull, I'll take wing on that thought –
 no more my muse with piteous pleas I'll badger;
 I'll sleep and let the night's calm magic happen.

And it will happen – carefully to entice
 my muse, I'll seagulls badger through the night
 ill from bright thought fair glittering words I'll coin.

spring's silver shadows
 lie beneath old winter's trees
 until rain sends them
 down to join the green water
 streaming toward summer's sea.

Sun-Tide's Flow

The red leaves of autumn are falling in the rain
 and I am a stag in the forest once again,
 a stag in the forest running swift beside my doe –
 but all things change with the sun-tide's flow,
 yes, all things change with the sun-tide's flow.

The white snows of winter come whistling down the wind
 and I am a wolf running wild with my kin,
 a wolf bright and fierce as the blood on the snow –
 but all things change with the sun-tide's flow, etc.

The green shoots of springtime rise out of the dark earth
 and I am a sow in the thickets giving birth.
 My young one follows me where ever I may go –
 but all things change with the sun-tide's flow, etc.

The summer comes at last, and once more we walk as men
 as the sun-tide's swell brings us home to our friends,
 and hunting and feasting is all that we know –
 but all things change with the sun-tide's flow, etc.

Around the turning circle the magic drives us on,
and each new year is another life begun,
and each life we live is the only life we know –
but all things change with the sun-tide's flow, etc.

Crownéd King

A King sat down on his father's throne;
his rich robes gleamed and his bright crown shone,
and he smiled and he said, "By my strength alone
have I been crownéd as King!
By my strong right arm and my shining sword
I sit here now as your King and Lord,
and all who hear must obey my word –
for such is a crownéd King!"

Then spoke a Knight, stood beside his throne,
whose chain and his belt and his bright spurs shone,
"My Liege, tis not by your strength alone
that you are crownéd our King.
For by my chain and my shining sword,
I knelt and I swore to you as my Lord
to shed my blood at your lightest word –
in fealty to my King!"

The King he thought, and he said, "Sir Knight,
by my Crown and my Oath, you have spoke aright!
My Kingship rests on your loyal might,
yet still I am your King!
You carry your sword against my foe,
and follow my banner wherever I go,
for the fealty dear that to me you owe
because I am your King."

Then a Master spoke from beside the throne,
whose arts and labors afar were known,
"My Liege, tis not by your right alone
that you are crownéd our King.
For all of your folk who beauty make,
or while others sleep do work and wake
for your Kingdom's glory and own dear sake
have also made you King."

The King he thought, and he said, "Tis true,
 that all who Service or Arts pursue
 to their Land and their King have given their due,
 yet still I am your King.

All those who labor to build my hall,
 to plant in the spring and reap in the fall,
 have given their share to my splendid All
 because I am your King."

Then a old Bard came and approached the throne
 whose songs to the ends of the earth were known.

"My Lord, tis not for your power alone
 that you are crowned our King.

For the songs that I and others shall make
 your name and your fame and your power could break –
 we sing for the Truth and for Honor's sake
 when we sing before our King."

The King he thought, and he said, "Tis right
 for my Masters proud and my faithful Knights,
 whenever I bid, to work or fight,
 because I am their King.

Yet Bard, you are given a different task –
 one I cannot bid, though I well may ask –
 speak Truth when you must and take me to task
 because I am your King."

Then the old Bard smiled, and he said, "My Lord,
 you have spoken now a wiser word,
 for a song may defeat the sharpest sword
 though it be held by a King.

A King who sits on a carven throne
 is not set there by his strength alone
 but by the Honor that he has shown –
 for SUCH is a crownéd King!"

The Outlands Stag

The Outlands Stag with glory is crowned!
His roaring shakes both sky and ground!
We follow him wherever he goes
with sword and shield to smite our foes!

The Outlands Stag his lands are wide –
he takes high mountains in his stride!
We follow him to lands afar
to crush our foes in bloody war!

The Outlands Stag will swiftly run
in Atenvedlt's hot desert sun –
our army strikes like mighty flood
to drown their fields in tides of blood!

The Outlands Stag will lead us forth
to Artemesia, west and north –
our archers let their arrows fly
in deadly cloud that darkens sky!

The Outlands Stag will go to feast
in Ansteorra, south and east –
and when our army leaves those plains
we'll stagger home with golden gains!

The Outlands Stag will eastward go
to Calontir our friend and foe –
like thunder comes our battle-cry –
who hears it now, prepare to die!

The Outlands Stag leads us to fight
with Northshield, Griffin's armored might!
we'll battle long, and at the end
we'll feast as allies first – and friends!

The Outlands Stag with glory is crowned!
His roaring shakes both sky and ground!
We follow him wherever he goes
with sword and shield to smite our foes!

Awen

From where then my awen pure –
 truth's clear voice to the hearer?
 From Britain's foremost high bards –
 first come, fairest of record!

First named in word-fame was there,
 Iron Brow, powerful singer!
 High praise he raised for high kings –
 long his song and his singing!

Shining Brow, singing bright lays –
 fine pay, fair praise for princes!
 Honey sweet mead his nightly
 to give – long living was he!

Third then – Bard of Dun Eiden,
 to Catraeth with Gododdin
 he went; to sing their high deeds –
 bitter their mead! - was needed!

Cynan then and Wheat of Song –
 two names, word-fame belonging –
 but alas, theirs be tales there
 untold, lost gold, found nowhere.

Sweet do these famous names ring,
 song-fair source for my singing –
 brightest of Britain's word-kin,
 first dawn of fire-struck awen.

The Ash Spear

(the word *awen* is the Welsh term for poetic inspiration)

Among the ancient Irish,
or so the Sagas say,
when a boy first takes up weapons
he takes up Valor that day.

When he slings his shield on his shoulder
and takes his spear in his hand,
on the day that a boy takes Valor
that day he becomes a man.

When a squire he wins his knighthood
and kisses the hilt of his sword,
and vows to use it for justice
in fealty to his Lord,

he vows to defend the helpless;
he vows not to strike without need;
to treat all about him as worthy
and be noble in word and deed.

I am not an Irish warrior;
I am not a belted knight;
but my ash spear is my *awen*
and I swear to use it aright.

And I swear by Taliesin,
by the name of every bard
who has walked this road before me
and carried this burden hard

that I will not use my *awen*
either for profit or gain,
and I will not use it falsely,
nor strike to give needless pain.

And I will not use it lightly
lest it should turn in my hand,
but I will defend those who need it,
and strike at my King's command,

for the ashen spear of a poet
 is his awen pure and fair –
 it has a blade that can cut the wind
 and it must be used with care.

White Rose

I hold her here between my two cupped hands –
 an ivory blossom, innocent and fair,
 with petals silken-soft that scent the air
 more sweet than perfumes brought from far-off lands.

Once tight-curved bud, now at the Sun's commands
 she opens wide, her inmost self to bare –
 from green, to purest white, to gold most rare
 beneath his heat she steadily expands.

Sweet though she be, this blossom pure does grow
 on thorny stalk, her treasure fair to keep
 in caskets small borne on thin living wire.
 Untimely force her not, least you should weep,
 and wounded turn away, no more to know
 that sweet gold dust which is the bee's desire.

Lament for Dafydd ap Gwilym (1320? – 1370?)

Bright singing voice which filled the forest's shade
 with music, images of life and love,
 in earthen house beneath some leafy glade
 you now do lie, and silence reigns above.

Teller of tales, pursuer of fair maids
 (who often failed and laughing was brought low)
 now in the mist a dying echo fades
 of that sweet mirth which you so well did know.

So brief a life, though ending in old age,
 in times so dark and bright, so grim and fair,
 leaving behind but words upon a page,
 the memory of a breath upon the air –

yet, Dafydd dear, six hundred years along
Welsh poetry still echoes back your song.

Lament for Earngyld

Bright was the fire which now has burned to ash:
bright the high hall which now is fallen stone:
silent the glade which once heard weapons' clash:
silent the seat from which Sea-Eagle's flown.

Northern lights still across the midnight sky
do make their dance of green and red and gold,
and on high mountains still the white snows lie
as deep and pure as in those days of old –

but no one there now lifts a voice in song,
or flies bright banners on the morning wind;
no king or queen will make the journey long
to share a hall with that small band of friends,

unless reborn upon her northern shore
Earngyld the fair should someday rise once more.

Silence

Birds in the bushes, traffic in the streets,
wind in the trees or roaring through the air,
clattering dust-bins, sounds of running feet,
and barking dogs contribute each their share.

Rain on the roof and thunder in the clouds,
or church bells ringing, marking every hour,
and voices, songs and music echo loud
by day, and crickets chirp with nightly power.

Yet in this noise, one sound is absent now,
one sound so dear, that I heard every day:
one sweet familiar voice, one small meow
belonging to a shadow white and grey –

And lacking this, no more can I rejoice:
all sound is silence now without your voice.

Friday Tanka 9/23/04

last day of the week
 Friday passes so slowly
 on its leaden feet:
 the weekend will race swiftly –
 a breeze, a breath, and it's gone!

gold and red, the leaves
 drift on the autumn breezes,
 spinning slowly down.
 above, the higher mountains
 have put on their new white coats.

Above me now the sky
 stretches, pale clear and empty,
 touched with autumn's chill.
 emptier now this echo
 where no voice speaks but my own.

Autumn Tanka

days now grow shorter –
 after hot summer's noon-tide
 evening advances
 and in cool autumn twilight
 we await the coming night.

world-gates now stand open
 cold fog, an icy curtain
 ghosts across the lake
 clouds hang like tattered curtains
 and somewhere thunder mutters

groping in the dark
 I stumble on broken stones
 trying not to fall
 will there be light at the end?
 it is so long till sunrise.

The Measure of a Crown

(first verse & refrain:)

Blood and sweat and tears
are the measure of a Crown –
blood and sweat and tears
all shed to the thirsty ground.
Blood for the wounds they take,
and sweat for the good they make,
tears for the joys and the pain
that come with every reign.

A young King and Queen when they start
stand tall and proud and strong,
ready in mind and heart
to embark on their journey long.
They must keep that strength as they go
and the days and the seasons roll
while the burdens that they know
weigh down on their hearts and souls.

(refrain)

Though their clothes be of the best,
their pavilion fine and brave,
they may get but little rest
for they are their Kingdom's slaves.
Bright mead and wine in haste
they may drink from a golden cup,
and though bitter be the taste
they must smile and drink it up.

(refrain)

Yet all through they weary miles
small moments will warm their hearts –
the sight of a young child's smile
as she sees the procession start;
a lady's love so bright
as her lord fights for her alone;
and the eyes of a new-made knight
as he kneels before the throne.

(refrain)

Great Achilles

Once great Achilles in his tent
sat silent and apart –
his self-esteem and honor both
were wounded to the heart.
His dearest prize was taken by
the man who wore the crown,
and so Achilles went to sulk
and let the army down.

The silence of his absence
through the Greeks did echo loud –
some said the king was justified,
some said he was too proud.
The wisest of them went and made
appeal then to the knight –
"Come back and help your comrades, for
most desperate is their plight."

Achilles would not heed them, and
he sent his friends about
to advertise his point of view
with whisper and with shout,
and many a Greek met bloody death
(so Homer made the song)
unneded, just to satisfy
Achilles' sense of wrong.

Immortal Thetis gave him birth,
yet he was mortal man,
as capable of error grave
as any in this land.
Though much he did of good and ill
like any manner wight,
his greatest wrong by far was never
doubting he was right.

Owl's Cry

In the forest fire burns red;
stars are shining overhead –
diamonds in black velvet sky –
listen, heed the owl's soft cry!

Longest night of all the year
when the Old Ones shall appear
dancing neath the silent sky –
listen, heed the owl's soft cry!

Black as coal and soft as silk,
eyes like flame, teeth white as milk,
padding softly neath the sky –
listen, heed the owl's soft cry!

Those who mount the forest throne
sleep in pairs but hunt alone
till bright morning gilds the sky –
listen, heed the owl's soft cry!

In Arthur's Hall

In Arthur's hall the fires burned high and bright
to warm his heroes who had battles won,
and mead and wine flowed freely every night,
while bards sang praises of great deeds they'd done;
and silk-clad maidens, bright as blossoms fair
in springtime, smiled at squires and belted knights,
and Gueneviere the Queen from her high chair
looked down upon them, laughing at the sight.
Beside her Arthur smiled. We all were young
with many a song of sorrow yet unsung.

In Arthur's hall the fires burned hot and red –
the red of passion, and of true blood spilled
for friendships broken and for love now dead;
the magic lost, that once this hall had filled.
And time and warfare both had dearly cost –
some seats stood empty. Youth and joy had fled
like springtime. Touched untimely by the frost,
Queen Gueneviere looked down; bright tears she shed.

Beside her Arthur frowned, and turned away.
 But still ahead lay Camlann's wicked day.

In Arthur's hall the fires at last burned low,
 and tired men gathered from the autumn night.
 They found scant refuge - in the feeble glow
 all things seemed grey, or brown, and nothing bright.
 And fear found lodging then in corners dark,
 and in their wary eyes and faces showed.
 No one was left to blow the fading spark
 into a battle-flame, and forward go.
 The Saxon tide was rising, Arthur gone
 to rest in far-off golden Avalon.

In Arthur's hall the hearth is cold and bare,
 his dream and all who dreamed it there are dead
 save I alone, who wander here to share
 their stories with you now, for food and bed.
 And yet the glory that they had and lost
 might live again, if dreaming hearts should dare
 to live in chivalry, whate'er the cost,
 in honor bright as springtime, and as fair.
 Then Arthur's fire once more could blaze alight
 to warm us all against cold winter's night.

Fire in the West

Fire in the west – the mountains seem to burn,
 so bright the blaze that lights the western sky,
 till clouds like glowing sparks to ashes turn
 as light withdraws – so ever sunsets die.

And autumn's colors, bright on leaf and blade
 as mid-day sunset, flame and light the land
 crimson and gold, yet soon in drifts are laid,
 as leaf by leaf yields to the cold's command.

Then through the twilight woods, bitter and bare,
 we'll make our way to join the harvest feast,
 where food and drink and memories we'll share,
 like summer's heat by leaping flames released.

The moon will rise, the stars above us turn,
until pale dawn heralds the sun's return.

Blue Autumn Haze

Blue autumn haze lies softly on the land,
a coverlet to wrap her warm in sleep,
for summer's death is now once more at hand
and what in spring was sown we now must reap.

And hope dies hard beneath the creeping frost
of weariness and grief. The sun is fled
that warmed us once – now even light is lost,
and few stars burn within the black o'erhead.

Red drifted leaves do crumble into mold
and bright steel dulls in time to rust again.
It seems the earth herself is growing old
and where was joy there now is only pain –

yet as from winter's grave new life will rise,
so joy from grief will come that death defies.

Sestina 5

Then sailing home we came, hearts full of hope,
only to find a scene of silent death –
no warming fires, no drifting peat smoke blue,
only the blue-grey mists of early autumn,
and in that harbor under mountains black
no sign of life except a lonely seagull.

No voices called, no movement but the seagull
soaring along the shore, as white as hope.
But in the shadows, motionless and black
we found their bodies where they met their deaths –
a lonely death, there in the sun-flecked autumn
beneath a sky of pure and tender blue.

Some ship had come across the ocean blue
accompanied by a flock of calling seagulls,
returning as we were, called by the autumn,
and looking for a winter warm with hope;
but all unknowing, they brought only death
as cargo in their hull so slim and black.

We searched in fear, in anguish sharp and black
through gathering mist and darkness chill and blue,
our hearts in terror of the silent death
coming on wings as swift as hawk or seagull.
We knew that there was little space for hope
in the cold night and frost of early autumn.

We built a fire that burned as red as autumn
and fed it with the bodies, still and black.
All night it burned, as bright as our lost hope,
until the rising sun touched waters blue
and our tired eyes looked up and saw the seagulls
like clouds of souls all rising from their death.

We turned our backs upon that place of death
and set sail on the bitter winds of autumn,
as all around us flew that flock of seagulls.
Our hearts were cold, our faces grim and black,
while overhead a sky of purest blue
smiled peacefully in false and lying hope.

If death we carried as our cargo black
across that autumn sea of pitiless blue,
the seagull flew ahead to give us hope.

Darkness Surrounds Me

Darkness surrounds me as I seek my love
through shadowy halls and tunnels all unknown;
a hint of perfume on the breezes blown
still lures me on, though no star shine above.

My footsteps echo in some lofty space;
to break the spell I hum again the tune
that once I sang for her. O may I soon
behold that form which makes my heart to race!

But soft! Some echo faint disturbs the air
of other feet than mine! I pause in fear,
then Ah! the world has fallen on my back,
and swords do pierce me through! O lady rare!
Instead of wedding bed, I found a bier!
Remember me, and drape my tomb in black.

(inspired by a news article reporting that male mice sing when they
encounter the scent of a female mouse.)