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Glossing Faery: Imagine If You Can't Remember!

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"Why do you hunger after our myths and stories? Why don't you go in search of your own?" a Cree student once asked me in our classroom in James Bay, Ontario. His words provoked a meaning crisis and sent me on a quest to investigate my roots in the British Isles.

Richard Terdiman describes a similar meaning or memory crisis that has been plaguing Western peoples since the French Revolution: "I argue these two theses concerning the century that precedes and informs our own: first, that one of its most powerful perceptions was of massive disruption of traditional forms of memory, and, second, that within the atmosphere of such disruption, the functioning of memory itself, the institution of memory and thereby history, became critical preoccupations in the effort to think through what intellectuals were coming to call the 'modern.' The 'long nineteenth century' became a present whose self-conception was framed by a disciplined obsession with the past" (1993, 5). Terdiman also points to the rapid post-Revolutionary urbanisation that has swept the world. Urban peoples have been driven "to reconstruct the prehistory of their new environment in an effort to naturalize it" (6). But how far back can I go if my family has only been in North America for some 350 years? And what if political correctness blocks the way?

I remember telling a Mohawk student who said his terra firma was Kahnawake, Quebec, that my homeland was poetry. It then occurred to me to situate my explorations into my British/Celtic

roots in literature itself, albeit in extant texts recorded by Christian scribes with a bias against paganism. No ur-text exists like Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus's *Germania; or, On the Origins and Situation of the Germans*. Written in 98 CE, it defined Germanic tribes as standing apart and isolated in their vast inland forests (Schama 1995, 76). Unfortunately, this early geographical isolation helped foster the enduring Germanic obsession with racial purity. It comes as no surprise that Hitler was an avid reader of *Germania* (Schama, 78).

Certainly no Nazi, J. R. R. Tolkien nevertheless wrote *The Lord of the Rings* in response to the lack of a defining English mythology (Glover 1971, 39). Tolkien's beloved *Beowulf* would never do as an ur-text because it portrayed a Swedish warrior battling Danish ogres and dragons. Unlike the forest-shrouded homelands of the Germanic tribes, the British Isles, jutting into the Atlantic, have served as a maritime crossroads since the Mesolithic. Barry Cunliffe describes the geographical impact of the Irish Sea and the English Channel: "We may distinguish the *narrowing seas* which serve as antichambers between the open Atlantic and other seas, to the north leading to the North Sea and the Baltic and to the south to the Mediterranean. These narrowing seas were choke-points in the maritime system where shipping activities concentrated and in consequence many ports developed" (1999, 93; italics in the original). Thus, reaching for my earliest literary sources, I found a melting pot of Anglo-Saxon, Old Irish, Middle Welsh, Old German, and Norman sources. In these texts depicting sea invasions, journeys to magical islands, and mist-filled otherworldly portals, one theme that stood out was Faery.

In my literary explorations, I found a verse form called a glosa, derived from the idea of a gloss (a note made in the margin that comments on something in the text). To write a glosa, you must take four consecutive lines from another source. Using them as an epigraph, you draft an

accompanying four stanzas of ten lines each. Line ten of each stanza is a line from the epigraph, interwoven into the syntax of your poem-commentary. Thus the glosa has allowed me to listen to, muse upon, embellish, and transform lines—if not events—from the past.

My musings have involved my imagination much more than my memory. But one proceeds as if doing what Edward S. Casey calls “a historical reconstruction” (1991, 142). Casey explains, “It is just because the historian cannot, from her own experiences and resources alone, imagine a given past event in full detail that she seeks out the testimony of those who once witnessed it—which is to say, she seeks their rememberings in lieu of her own. Yet precisely because these rememberings are notoriously untrustworthy (frequently being based on what still others remembered or were reported to remember), the historian must correct and supplement them by her own imaginings in the present” (1991, 141). Thus listening to the past leads to evoking the poet’s imagination to fill in what’s missing.

Here the ancient fragment serves as archive. Reconstructing the past from epigraphs adapted and constructed from ancient texts can prove even more daunting than cobbling together accounts of modern history. Such early texts are primarily myths, legends, and folklore set in a remote, unverifiable past. As Casey (1991) reminds us, “What we cannot remember, we can try to imagine” (1991, 141).

Such imagining is also happening in the Neopagan revival, a movement that has accompanied and critiqued the Industrial Revolution and has led to contemporary re-inventions of the Faery Faith. To better understand these reconstructive efforts, I attended a Faery Doctoring workshop given by Celtic shaman Tom Cowan. Such doctors were/are the alternative healers of Ireland with origins dating back to the Iron Age. A famous nineteenth-century example was Bidy Early, the Wise

Woman of Clare. She was given her famous blue bottle by the Faeries to heal the many who sought her out.

Often a Faery Doctor has a Faery co-walker or Comimeadh (pronounced ‘comemay’), which in Gaelic means “attending, or attendant” (Cowan 2008). I met my own Comimeadh via a process called journeying, which goes as follows: you begin with an intent or purpose for your undertaking—for example, to meet a co-walker. You then lie down; close your eyes; and, aided by a soft continuous drumbeat, imagine a gateway to an otherworld. Entering this parallel universe, you can meet and dialogue with animals, faery presences, and gods and goddesses as well as undergo challenging psychic events. This waking-dream procedure is exceedingly ancient. An account of it appears at the beginning of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Kinsella 1970), an epic depicting life in first-century Ireland. The opening passages of the *Táin* explain how this oral story had been lost and then re-dreamed, recovered, and remembered. Here, the Irish poet Muirgen chants over the grave of Fergus mac Róich, one of the heroes of the lost *Táin*, causing a weather change: “A great mist suddenly formed around him—for the space of three days and three nights he could not be found. And the figure of Fergus approached him in fierce majesty . . . Fergus recited him the whole *Táin*, how everything had happened, from start to finish. Then they [Muirgen and his followers] went back to Senchán with their story, and he rejoiced over it” (Kinsella 1970, 1–2).

This ‘dreamed’ reinvention of oral Irish pre-history eventually appeared as the twelfth-century written account of the *Táin*. Muirgen’s journeying process is similar to how Casey defines Jungian active imagining as a visionary and therapeutic meditation that focuses on, elaborates, redirects, and transforms images—often retrieved from dreams—in order to enter the “drama of the psyche itself by participating in what is psychically real” (1991, 17). As Casey explains, in order not

to be victimised by an upsurge of the unconscious (i.e., the terrifying ghostly Fergus), “we can attempt to alter the course of the on-going experience by becoming the agents of fantasy rather than its victims” (1991, 4). Thus journeying/active imagining is “an image-making, form-giving, creative activity” (1991, 4) that can allow such a traveller to listen to and reclaim a lost epic, or transform a contemporary meaning quest.

During one such journey, my Faery co-walker reminded me that my whole childhood had been touched by elemental presences because I had grown up in a Maine cottage fronted by the Atlantic and backed by a tidal marsh and wood. One thing that active imagining and remembering have in common is that both are “derived from sensory perception” (Casey 1991, 137). Consequently, as I continued journeying, childhood memories flooded back: in the wood was a gnarled crab apple that I loved because it was low enough for a child of six or seven to climb. I spent hours alone in the arms of this Old Apple Man, overlooking a Faery ring—a circle of dark grass growing up out of the woodland floor. Scientists report that such a grassy ring is caused by mycelia branching their thread-like hyphae underground beneath it. But children, myth, and folklore attribute it to the Faeries dancing their rounds there under a full moon. So what else do the old texts tell us about the Faeries?

In one of the earliest Old Irish explanations, *The Book of the Invasions*, the Faeries—a divine race called the Tuatha Dé Danaan—sail from “the northern islands of the world” to conquer Ireland (Koch and Carey 1997, 244). They fight the Second Battle of Mag Tuired against the native Fomoiré, supposedly around the time of “the destruction of Troy” (Gray 1982, stanza 69). Preparing for war, King Lug of the Tuatha Dé Danaan asks his people, “What is your power in battle?” (Gray, stanza 100) As each Faery caste replies, we glimpse the gifts of this Faery race. Druids begin prophesying and causing fire to shower down from the sky. Smiths and carpenters go on crafting weaponry of

beauty and magic for the warriors who offer up their martial skills. Poets are poised to satirise and shame their enemies. Witches promise to “enchant the trees and the stones and the sods of the earth so that they will be a host under arms against them” (Gray, stanza 117). Sorcerers agree to cause earthquakes and steal two-thirds of the enemies’ strength while preventing “them from urinating” (Gray, stanza 109). Harpers tune their strings in order to soothe the battle-weary with three strains of music that induced sorrow, joy, and the sleep of forgetfulness. Finally, Faery physicians will heal the wounded and bring the dead back to life with herbs and sacred well water.

Clearly, the Tuatha Dé Danaan deserve their title, “the people of many arts” (Gregory [1904] 2007, 14). Art and science—magical or medicinal—spring from efforts of the human imagination. It is not surprising, then, that Faeries have long been associated with the imagination, whether that of the child, poet, or healer. As muse-figures, they often facilitate the early stages of the creative process. During the Faery Doctoring workshop in 2008, Cowan said, “The Faeries live on the edge where the essence is becoming what is. And this essence is one that yearns to become individualized.” This calls to mind the Faeries crowding around Sleeping Beauty’s birth cradle to shape her destiny. Whether symbolic or actual, Faeries inhabit a liminal space of ever-becoming. This betwixt-and-between, twilight state suggests John Keats’s state of doubt and uncertainty that one must rest in long enough to create an original poem. In a letter to his brothers, which is dated December 22, 1817, Keats writes, “At once it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *negative capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1954, 62; italics in the original). Such *negative capability* allows on to listen to accounts of the past.

During another journey, my Faery co-walker showed me a vision of my imagination at work. It appeared as a well of rosy light, in which waves of reddish energy kept contracting inwards, never outwards. Once a wave reached the centre, a new wave from the outer rim pulsed in. I asked to be taken to the edge where the incoming waves first entered my field of perception. There, suddenly plunged into darkness, I sensed a wind blowing beyond in boundless space. The darkness was greenish—a green burgeoning on the edge of chaos. Casey describes an “imaginal margin,” a place or “fading fringe found at the outer limit of specific imagined content” (2000, 53). Here, imagined imagery trails off to “suggest a region located alongside or behind imagined content” (108)—the very description of a parallel Faery world found in the Old Celtic texts.

My own experience of this “imaginal margin”—or green, twilight edge—suggests a burgeoning creativity that issues from a somewhat terrifying yet fertile void, bringing with it the images that our brain needs to function and perceive. Green has always been the Faery colour and is associated, of course, with the earth, which the Tuatha Dé Danaan retreated into when they were conquered by a new wave of invaders, the Milesians: “When the sons of Míl Espáine [the Soldiers of Spain] came to Ireland, their cleverness prevailed over the Tuatha Dé Danann: thus Ireland was left to be divided by Amairgen Glúnmár. . . . He divided Ireland in two, and he gave the half of Ireland that was underground to the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the other to the sons of Míl Espáine who were of his own blood-kindred. The Tuatha Dé Danann went into the hills and the tumuli [*sid-brugaib*]” (Koch and Carey 1997, 95).

Thus Faery became associated with the green hills, Neolithic mounds, and the earth itself. In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama affirms that such old nature myths are still alive today, as our modern “landscape tradition” is “built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions”

(1995, 14). He explains that “landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructions of the imagination projected onto woods and water and rock . . . but it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery” (61).

The Victorians, for example, perpetuated their inherited myths about the Faery “People of the Hill” and also reworked them for their own cultural ends: “The Victorians seemed to emphasize the idea of a world within the earth—in part because it was an area that remained to be investigated, in part because it was a realm that the emerging science of archaeology was exploring” (Silver 1999, 43). This Faery knoll example shows the Victorians continuing to breathe life into the age-old connection “between the faeries and the dead” (Silver, 43). Here, we can see the muddling of categories that Schama (1995) speaks of: are the interred the Christian dead awaiting the Last Judgment or the pagan dead awaiting rebirth?

But what of the all-but-dead? Traditionally, a Faery Doctor would heal a depressed, often listless, client by bringing back his or her energies supposedly stolen by the Faeries, for we must remember that King Lug’s sorcerers promised to steal two-thirds of an enemy warrior’s energy. Due to the soaring rates of depression, Cowen (2008) believes that today’s Faeries continue to take away our energies in order to right the imbalances we have caused, particularly in nature. The following glosa explores my own academic lethargy. It was inspired by how a Faery woman lured the early Irish hero Bran away to her paradise island:

“Silver Branch”

*The branch springs from Bran's hand
so that it is in the woman's hand
for there is not enough strength
in Bran's hand to hold it.*

“The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal”

(adapted from Mac Mathúna 1985)

I cut a branch from a crab apple
deep in the wood, a silver branch
and dream all night of how to dress it:
silken ribbons of purple and blue,
seven hawk bells dangling in a row.
I am quickly made to understand
the branch possesses a potency all its own,
calling, called to those it chooses
like the silver one from faeryland;
the branch springs from Bran's hand.

Bran has dreams too. Waking,
he finds a silver branch in blossom,
a woman entering his locked fort.
She sings of a cultivated island: music
in the air, fragrant with vines and fruit,
sky-blue horses cantering the sands,
and joyful women await his coming.
Bran is called to go; the silver branch
leaps like a lure from his hand,
so that it is in the woman's hand.

Mine falls prey to other hands,
my own in this age of scientific fact.
I forget my branch on a library shelf.
Dust from the streets covers it,
clouding my desires, leaving me
to starve in spite of the feasting, the wealth,
deaf to the dream-maker's approach:
her branch cannot pull me out of time,
her songs do not go on at length,
for there is not enough strength

in my hands yet to grasp this gift,
this flowering branch and my breath, wind
through one of its bells. I linger on
among skeptics in barren rooms,
humouring their questions and doubts,
dissecting nothing but what is minute,
nothing compared to a silver branch,
the tones and half-tones of its bells
brimming over a level sea, the delight
in Bran's hand to hold it.

Here, a strange woman bearing a magical branch seduces Bran into a reality outside of time. He enters the continuous flow of a dreamtime—a “Land of Women” existing “without grief, without sorrow, without death, without any sickness, without weakness” (Gregory [1904] 2007, 103). This eternal dreamtime eludes most mortals, and as a poet/listener left “dissecting nothing but what is minute,” I remain trapped in my time-driven mind and memories. As Richard Coe writes, “What normal memory retains is merely a series of ‘still photographs,’ isolated the one from the other, often in irrational juxtaposition, and consequently with the one essential element which constituted their ‘reality’ omitted altogether” (1984, 81).

A metaphor used to describe Faery is water. The Celts worshiped their sacred springs, rivers, and wells. In John Matthews’s *The Sidhe*, a Faery contacted during active imagining explains:

We live in a liquid world, a place of constant movement. . . . I do not mean that we live in water, but that the formation of our world is constantly in fluid motion. We do have a form, yet it is not a fixed form. . . . It is also why we are able to pass through your world at every level, physically and spiritually, so that you are aware of us both in the realm of the senses and in that of the Spirit. (2004, 91)

This quotation emphasises the protean nature of Faery. It also suggests that Faery has long been a metaphorical way of talking about the imagination itself. Casey reminds us of the “fluidity and freedom” (2000, 36) of imagined experience, a state of “unimpeded possibility” (37). And imagined content, Casey explains, is often of an “uneven, undulating character” (107) suggestive of the “liquid world” (Matthews 2004, 91) mentioned above. In the epigraph for another glosa I created, the Faery Queen Fand is likened to the water moistening our eye. The early Irish poets, with their hypersensitivity to the sacred significance of water, saw the saline solution protecting our eyes as a liminal threshold where outer sensations begin their transformative journey into our brain:

“Fand, The Faery Queen”

*Fand is the tear that covers the eye,
and she is so named for her purity and beauty,
since there is none like her
anywhere in the world.*

“The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulaind”

(adapted from Gantz 1981)

A film of water moistens every eye,
tiny lake with its false bottom
light passes through, threshold awash
between worlds. Little salt sea,
it's where the mind begins to bend
and play with images, magnified
into desires, the hero Cú Chulaind's
for Fand, so strong his men mix
him an opiate to forget, deny
Fand is the tear that covers the eye.

Fand's caught in the corner
of his eye, treading the bay,
its swells, a trick of watery light,
taking on the countenance of clouds
rolling in over the abyss.
Eerie like a moon's halo at sea,
pale as dissolving crystals of salt,
she washes away the dust of battle,
the lifelessness from his eyes quickly,
and she is so named for her purity and beauty.

Cú Chulaind's jealous wife
and her fifty maidens with sharpened knives
wait for Fand: a tear trickles
its salt path down his cheek, is gone
for the living eye is moist, warm,
large, golden. White blur
of her breast, a falcon stoops
into this poem, messenger of fate,
following Fand the world over,
since there is none like her.

Aqua vitae. Spring of vision,
Fand is the tear we all have cried,
cold mornings on the stuffy bus
with its grey faces and its sleepers,
streams of tears and black eyeliner
streaking cheeks like those of a girl
I saw there once bruised and weeping,
as our wheels spun, and we lurched and swayed,
a crowd of us being hurled
anywhere in the world.

Here, “the very lack of sharply focused detail” (Casey 2000, 110) of a figure seen far out at sea permits Cú Chulaind to project his desires and imaginings on the approaching Fand. In other words, the less sharp the focus, the more openness exists for the imagination to play. Also, in my poem I am trying to bridge the distant past and the present—the ancient seaside and the contemporary bus—because the imagination allows for, as Casey writes, “a purely possible space and time” (2000, 37). For him, in each imagined scenario, “*anything was possible*” (37; italics in the original). Thus, using the glosa, my imagination ranged free to join passages, archival fragments from ancient texts, with present day perceptions.

Our blood is comprised of water, too. Schama emphasises the “ancient pre-Christian tradition, composed of the mutable liquids of blood, wine and water” (1995, 288). This ancient confluence of water, blood, and wine reappears in “Thomas the Rhymer,” a medieval English ballad. The Queen of

Elfland is abducting True Thomas to make him her apprentice poet for seven years. To get to her kingdom, Thomas and his beautiful kidnapper imbibe a bit of wine en route after taking on this challenge:

For forty days and forty nights
They waded through red blood to the knee.
And he saw neither sun nor moon,
But heard the roaring of the sea.
(Stewart 1992, 55)

This boundary river of blood between our world and that of the Faeries indicates that we ourselves must encounter our own ancestral blood to get there. Facing and purging one's self of a trauma-ridden past is done in most traditional cultures in order to enter non-ordinary reality. Orion Foxwood, an Appalachian seer and modern-day Faery Doctor, writes about the necessity to do ancestral (memory) work:

The teaching tells us that each of us is born to redeem our bloodline and its inner power. The concept of redemption is rarely addressed in modern mystical practices. Redemption involves resolution and movement of the bloodline spiritually forward. It most often entails encountering certain ancestors, hearing the voice of their crying in the River of Blood and assuring that their problems are not carried forward through you into the next generation. This is one way which we, the living, purify the blood and redeem the dead. (2007, 99)

In my glosa “The Loathy Lady,” an ancient Celtic goad—typically a physically deformed, powerful Faery woman—chides me for not asking questions about the redemption of my own
bloodline:

“The Loathy Lady”

*You asked neither their cause nor their meaning.
Had you asked, the king would have been made well
and the kingdom made peaceful,
but now there will be battles and killing.*

“Peredure Son of Evrawg” (Gantz 1976)

She comes to wake me from a stupor,
the usual sleep. She’s hideous,
her red face, sagging features,
nostrils flaring like a mule’s with every
breath. I can’t breathe as she stares
with one speckled eye protruding,
the other sunken and lamp black.
I stand mute in the face of miracles,
large or small. She is screaming:
“You asked neither their cause nor their meaning.”

Fists clenched, she's covered
by a rosy, blue black mane, twisting
about her like a back-lit cloud.
She scowls as her eyes test mine.
The protruding one demands answers;
the sunken obsidian one foretells
what haunts me: a wounded father
grown indifferent to his daughter.
As if I too were deaf, she yells:
"Had you asked, the king would have been made well."

She accuses me of abandoning a king
laid to sleep on a stone slab.
Veiled or winged, a woman tends him,
as a red-eared dog laps a long
wound in his side from which
blood and water pour in two
streams. "Look!" All I see
are shadows behind a waterfall. What is
my question? Would that I were insightful
and the kingdom made peaceful.

My father's stationed on a stuffed chair,
holding a newspaper come between us.
The dog, not the usual our family
feeds or grooms, licks him
with a black tongue. The curling and uncurling
tongue, doing and repeating its doings,
the stretch of chin and shaggy throat,
free something in me: a howl
not a question, terrible and willing,
but now there will be battles and killing.

Again and again while listening to epigraphs taken from these early Western European texts, I could hear ancestral voices crying out from this "River of Blood" (Foxwood 2007, 99), particularly to decry how less and less capable we are of controlling human violence.

Pagan tree idolatry has existed worldwide (Schama 1995, 14) and rightly so because the tree is one of our most venerable historians. It has long recorded planetary memories of abundance and famine. A recent PBS documentary, *In Search of Ancient Ireland* (Eaton 2002), filmed Irish scientists charting the tree rings of 3,000-year-old bog oaks taken from the peat that had preserved them. The history of the planet's climate recorded by these rings is amazing. Apparently Bronze Age Ireland was a relatively peaceful, agriculturally productive time, but according to the bog oak rings, a dramatic climate change occurred around 1180 BCE. For some eighteen years, these ancient oaks experienced a complete lack of sunshine. Due to what? Volcanic eruptions, meteor hits? Around this

time, Troy, Mycenae, and the Shang Dynasty all fell. The Egyptians reported invasions of Sea Peoples. And throughout Western Europe, hill forts appeared. Did climate disaster, famine, and the consequent uprooting of peoples force us out of the peaceful Bronze Age and into the increasingly militaristic Iron Age?

Iron Age violence spilled over into the Early Middle Ages with the Crusades, perpetuating a legacy of brutal conflicts. In my poem that follows, the Faery Queen chides a medieval knight questing after some distant goal for overlooking the Earth and its immediate, albeit troll-guarded, treasures. These forgotten natural resources are part of what Schama calls “the same dismal tale: of land taken, exploited, exhausted; of traditional cultures said to have lived in a relation of sacred reverence with the soil displaced by the reckless individualist, the capitalist aggressor” (1995, 13).

“Trolls”

*Watch out for trolls
on the road! One or other
of my troll keepers will
deprive you of joy!*

Parzival (Edwards 2004)

The Old High German *trollen*
means “running with small steps,”
rustling the undergrowth of a forest,
where a knight, mounted on a monumental,
high-stepping horse, hacks
far from his thick-walled stronghold.
The clop of the shod hooves over shale
drowns out the drier sounds
of leaves being crushed by feet like a mole’s.
Watch out for trolls!

As if long fingers were dropping coins,
there's a dull ringing on the barren ledges,
where a treasure trove, brought out to air,
can appear to be but a pile of dirt.

Dusty pebbles, loosened by something,
suddenly spill as if from a coffer,
their slurred clatter growing fainter,
further down in the leaf fall,
near trees that sigh and whisper
on the road. One or other

of the winds, camped on the muddy slope,
lends its gritty force for a time
to something huffing like a feral hound
through a nose bigger than human;
its nostrils flare as it leaps rotting
logs, crashing its way downhill
towards the knight who's expecting a leathery
winged, warty skinned, boney
snouted devil! "Thinking ill
of my troll keepers will

defeat you,” the Lady had warned.
The knight, lifting his fluted, iron
visor with its menacing narrow sights,
stares out of the plated helm,
steely eyes fix on some distant
vanishing point: a crusading convoy
to join, another holocaust to start,
or a melancholic witch to burn.
“Thoughts about whom next to destroy
deprive you of joy.”

My poem “Trolls” takes inspiration not only from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (Edwards 2004) but also from Albrecht Dürer’s famous sixteenth-century engraving *The Knight, Death and the Devil*.¹ Through the eyes of his Christian knight, Dürer seems to be overlaying the old pagan trolls and land spirits with a Christian reading typical of the early sixteenth-century. He has etched a stern-faced, impervious knight traversing a grim forest, haunted now by a swine-snouted Devil (the boar and sow were once sacred pagan animals) and his decaying, corpselike sidekick Death. Avoiding what he believes to be the surrounding horror of nature, the knight fixes his somewhat contemptuous gaze on distant goals—religious and/or military. Thus “Trolls” and my poem “Matter” that follows both critique this continuing schism between spirit and denigrated matter:

"Matter"

*And he saw the shield at his neck
great and black and ghastly at its centre.
He saw the dragon's head throwing out
fire and flames with a terrible force.*

Perlesvaus (Bryant 1978)

In Welsh bogs and English fens,
war gear is found ruined, drowned.
A wolf-embossed sword bent;
a boar, bulging amber eyes
crested a helmet, sheered off,
smashed; the raven shield decked
with raw, red stones defaced. These totems
harboured vengeful spirits, beaten,
sacrificed to the war gods and their cromlechs,
And he saw the shield at his neck,

as they collide. Pounded from meteoric
metals on an anvil's tempered horn,
its dragon-faced boss spits
an acid, scalding mist. Perceval
stabs into the flame-thrower's gullet
to kill the battle furor, the blood
of his enemy. Helms, twisting
torcs rattle under the sun,
they clash and clash again; their clamour,
great and black and ghastly at its centre,
awakens the banshee to glide
with her wolfhounds worrying the moor,
their phosphorous eyes, their fangs
sharp as the cold, clanging steel
Perceval drives through the toothed
flange of the scorched shield, routing
its battle magic. He thrusts, thrusts
into its copper throat where black,
smoking blood begins to spout.
He saw the dragon's head throwing out

its last volley, the enemy's shield
clattering to stony ground. Its matter
the same imploding cyclone of atoms
that pushes, tumbles and tears apart
a Hiroshima. Encased now in fat
metals, a gadget without remorse
self-destructs. Nothing's left to sacrifice,
just a scar burning across the land,
where blast winds run their course,
fire and flames with a terrible force.

In his book *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*, Stephen O. Glosecki (1989) explains that the boar on an Iron Age warrior's helmet held his battle manna, put there by spell-weaving smiths reminiscent of those of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Such totemic representations of dragon, boar, or bear were considered alive and needed to be ritually destroyed along with their warriors. Thus, across Western Europe, hundreds of Iron Age swords, shields, and helmets have been found ceremonially defaced and drowned so that their owners and their aggressive totemic representatives would not return belatedly as vengeful ghosts. But today, our atomic weapons of destruction have no such rituals to contain or exorcise them.

Being interviewed by Ekbert Faas, the British poet Ted Hughes pointed out that his own Western European ancestors had a much better understanding of the demonic forces of the universe than we do. Unlike us, our ancient relatives did not try to suppress their instinctive, predatory, wild

energies, but sought instead to contain them. Our denial of the demonic, stated Hughes, is only making it become much more destructive:

When the wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive—and that is the position with us. . . . In the old world God and divine power were invoked at any cost—life seemed worthless without them. In the present world we dare not invoke them—we wouldn't know how to use them or stop them destroying us. (Hughes, quoted in Faas 1971, 10)

Perhaps this, too, is why I have forgotten the silver branch on a dusty library shelf—the branch once borne by Irish master poets as a symbol of remembering, of otherworldly communication, and of inspiration. Due to “the massive disruption of traditional forms of memory” (Terdiman 1993, 5), I no longer remember, as these bards once did, how to summon, contain, and work with what Hughes refers to as the demonic, “the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe” (quoted in Faas 1971, 9). Going back to the future means, as Faery Doctor Foxwood suggests, listening to ancestral voices “in the River of Blood” (2007, 99), urging me to reconsider how earlier peoples used their folklore, rituals, and myths to call forth and control such irrational, violent, highly procreative energies. Taking up the silver branch anew, I need to imagine what I can't remember, in order to shape new rituals and myths to contain both demonic creation and destruction.

Note

1. This engraving can be found on page 14 of Francis Russell's (1967) book *The World of Dürer* or on the British Museum website at http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/a/albrecht_d%C3%BCrer,_knight,_death.aspx

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