

*Presentment
of Englishry*

SAMPLER

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The Red Queen

(The Bronze Age)

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1.

Where the morning light slabs off the water
a broken, blinding dazzle,
along the wharves the empty wooden ships
tug at their moorings on the tide,
like sleepy dogs testing their chains.
The sunlight coming off the bay
burns the eyes until at noon
a man finds shelter in a tavern
where the wine is sour, the bread stale
but the storytellers talk of Ictus:
hard travelling for the best of tin.
One trip will set you up for life
if the captain and his crew are bold.
'And you survive.'

Albion, island of fog and rain,
where the painted people worship their red queen.
'She eats men at the equinox.'
'Earth Mother', 'Earth Goddess',
'Nightmare bitch in barely human form.'
They pause and pass the wine.
'Torchlight, under the trees,
in her sacred grove by the stones of sacrifice
with the heads of her enemies keeping their blind watch,
impaired on the rings of blood-caked poles.'

Few have made the journey.
Sunbaked salted men, patient and watchful,
should one be present: nods, smiles, saying nothing.
Why spoil a story that keeps the fools at home?

Comes a merchant with some goods to barter
buying drinks in search of information

eager for hard travelling.
Addicted to the long journey,
the prize a flicker on the border
where the daylight world
blurs into myth and nightmare.

Panning for gold amongst the dross
knowing a well-told lie's as plausible
as the hesitant truth,
and often more believable.

'There are two ways to reach Ictus,'
says the local expert, 'both are long and hard.'
'And both are dangerous,' adds another.
Sail west through the Pillars of Hercules
into the raging swirl of Ocean.
Head north, keeping the coast in sight
until you see white cliffs to the west.
Run hard for them,
turn south and west again, along the fractured coast.

'Or, head inland; load your cargo onto mules,
hire muscle against sudden ambush.
From village to village, where you will be welcomed,
follow the rivers over the watershed
until you reach the sea, then find a ship
with a strong crew and a skilled captain.

Either way you sniff along the coast,
until you see the beacon lights,
lit when the season's right'.

Calculate profit against cost and risk.
What tips the balanced scale?
To measure everything
learnt and known, against the unpredictable

and succeed: the pleasures of its doing
salted by fear?

Courage without calculation is rank stupidity,
risk without awareness is a fool
blundering blindfold on a cliff edge.

The men whose ships
rot with their corpses on the seabed,
calculated risk, skill against circumstance.
Those who lose have nothing to regret.
Better to go down on the long voyage out
than grow old at home.

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He followed the trade route inland,
 pack mules and armed guards
 the excitement of beginning
 blurring into trudging.
 Over the watershed, risking the winter crossing.
 It was so cold that language froze.
 High on the pass, around their campfires
 lips moved but no words cracked that silence.
 Slaves perished. Some turned back.
 But sure-footed guides, their confidence a mystery,
 stepped into fog on the nebulous path.
 Their animals fearful, reluctant
 but leading down, out of the clouds,
 into the wooded valley.
 The river still frozen. Ice on the rocks.
 They shook with the fierce elation
 of surviving terror.

The wary hospitality of strangers
 in wooden shacks where hidden children
 watch the traveller's every move.
 Nights without sleep. Fear of robbery
 in random meetings on the road
 where journeys intersect, snippets of a story
 that move on.
 Huddled around inadequate fires at night
 remembering sunlight, but holding to the line
 drawn on the rough wooden table
 by a grubby finger.

To reach the unfamiliar coast,
 where the light comes off grey water.
 Here the wind carries the smell of recent rain

and the fading taste of winter.
Wood smoke stings the nostrils
cutting the dull stench of wool that never dries.
Here men huddle along the wharves
shivering for the sailing season.
For the storms to cease,
for the wind to die and turn.
Their myths are of the amber to the north
and the spice trail to the east.
The crossing to Albion their commonplace.
(A few have made the longer haul to Ictus).

How to choose a captain and a crew?
Athena does not guide his steps
nudge his elbow or whisper in his ear.

How to tell a brave man from the reckless fool?
The expert from the actor? Easy in a crisis,
but that's a bad time to learn that you were wrong.

Again the merchant patiently sips the stories.
Clatter of laughter, stale smell of wine,
the women for hire move around the tables
hover, moving on. Indifferent to their call,
hooked on the erotics of profit and risk
the subtle rhythms of movement over distance.
And once again there comes the time to roll the dice.

This captain was no different to the others.
He had been to the Amber coast
and was ready to try the dash to Ictus.
Intrigued by the challenge,
willing to step off the edge of the world
to see what lies over the lip.
Deal done. The sailing explained,
the course outlined in detail
'You will see two fires.

One on Ictus, one on the mainland.
At low tide a man can walk between them
If he knows the route and hurries.
Step wrongly, loiter and he dies.'

The rules of trade remembered and rehearsed
but then a softer voice, 'There are strange things
that happen there. Strange, gentle things,
you will remember and yet not believe.'

'Swift black ships on a wine dark sea',
My calloused arse, my cracked and bleeding hands.
Whoever sang that line never foundered
on the wrong side of a headland
with the wind onshore, a sludging swell
the colour of a hangover trying to retch them up
onto the rocks. All hands to fend her off, and pray
to whatever God was listening
to shift the wind around before her timbers stove.
Or moved, sun starved and shivering
when holding a course was wishful thinking
through the ash-grey fog, each ear-dip amplified
by the dense and sodden silence they were clawing through.

The painted people had been waiting:
 a vibrant hedge along the cliff top.
 Drums, horns, cries of welcome,
 to show them kindness helped them drag their ship
 up on the shelving beach and set up camp
 out of the wind, clear unobstructed views
 the grey sea, forever driven to the land
 which sends it back, unwanted,
 a halo of birds above the headland
 the dark green roll away beyond
 towards forest as a dark strip on the skyline.

In the shelter of the stones, on the gravelled space
 smoothed by centuries of trade
 they spread their wares.
 Tin, and food, and the trade was good.
 Both sides trusting to the courtesies:
 mutual pleasure, mutual profit:
 fair exchange, no robbery
 With death sitting, to one side,
 armed and patient,
 should the visitors betray their welcome.

On the night after they were done,
 the islanders appeared around their campfires.
 Fantasy made flesh, stepping from the shadow world.
 There was fresh food, strange drink,
 music and women, eager for sex.

But the Red Queen bade the Captain follow.
 Knowing his death was present he left the music,
 laughter, the naked bodies
 moving on the firelight's edge

the singing drunks.
Stepped into darkness.

Torches along the causeway. Water
lapping close, cutting against distant surf,
across the arrhythmic splash of their wading.
The headland with its beacon fire rising
upward shelving beach hard sand to soft,
and the steep path to the cliff top.
The wind shook fire and moonlight.
Passing through the ghost fence:
the dead face forward
dedicated to their watch.
Here, said the Queen, the sea will meet the land.
A group waited in silence:
two upright stones, one capping them,
framing the darker slit of an entrance.

She handed him a beaker full of wine.

A door of ivory is moved aside.
He stalled, confronting darkness.

Go in. Be welcomed.
We promise you no harm.
Refuse our gift,
insult our Goddess
and you die here.
The spears for emphasis.

Better to meet death going forward,
better to die knowing than stranded
on the outside of a mystery.
Stooping, he squeezed himself
between the fringe of grass and moss
smoothed stone against his fingertips,
roof closing in, the drag on his calves

telling him the floor was sloping down
unsteady as the light behind him failed.
He reached a narrowing and saw a dimmer light ahead.
Twisting he forced himself between the rocks
slippery with moss, the water dripping from above,
knew he emerged into space. Dizzy,
high above, a small hole admitted moonlight
the dim curve of the roof, falling circular space,
and the figure waiting at its centre,
moonlit shadow and warm flesh,
a female sitting on a bed of furs.
Between them a small brazier
picked out the mask she wore.
A hood, with slits for eyes, nose, mouth.
Her long hair, braided, falling down one shoulder
to her naked breast.

Welcome.
Rippling round the cave, delayed echo.
Small hands scatter leaves onto the coals.
Frail strands of smoke struggled to climb the light
and failed to reach the stars. A sudden taste of iron.
Lust slipping from the shadows, clawing at his throat
bent him double. On the edge of the whirlpool
he gave way to the drag that pulled him down
dissolved him as he flowed towards her.
Welcome, welcome, you are welcome.
She rocked towards him as though pulling at a tether.
Her words shimmering on the catch of her own breath.

An awkward blur of mouths, hands,
his, hers, hard to tell, delirium
moonlight flesh and shadows
turned to water. She smelt of fresh rain,
grave earth, spring flood.
Sinuous, turbulent, strong.
He held a river in his arms

carrying him as flotsam on its heaving surface
until the ragged sound of his own breathing
like a ship's timbers rubbing against a wharf
broke the steady sound of the nearby sea.

He will remember this night,
the way you'd remember a dream
twelve months after you woke from it,
but nothing
(except his own death),
would ever be so real.

At night, a man fleeing
from hounds and the hatred of his enemies,
through tangled undergrowth,
wading through streams, mired,
strength gone, breath lost, legs burning, shaking,
stands sobbing on the wrong side of a door
knows rest and safety are inches more than he can go
but cannot wake the watchman who will let him in.
He batters at the door. Is still battering when the dogs
drag him down and tear his flesh to gobbets.

Frantically trying to reach that place where desire
might be erased. Where indifference
might be possible.
Masked face turned away
the long curve of her throat, small sounds
pleasure-torn, like dark birds startled into flight
rising at dusk over bright water.

The morning familiar as cold stone.
 Rain drifting through the smoke hole in the roof.
 The chamber, damp and hard and stale.
 His body ached. Pain behind his eyes,
 a strange taste in his mouth. The wine?

He scrambled towards daylight, wondering
 if he'd died. But surely no cold rain fell in heaven.
 Outside, one man, leaning on his spear
 watching. Rain drops, beading on his nose
 dripped from the hand that clutched the shaft.
 Three women waited: Mother, Maid and Crone,
 patient as the stones they sat on.

He saw his own death flickering on the edges of the light
 but mother maid and crone
 gently lead him to a hut he hadn't seen.
 Inside the same sour smell of something on the brazier
 warm water for his bath, oil for his skin
 they washed and braided his long hair

This is how you prepare a corpse for burial.

Last night her hands, now theirs, the skilled indifference
 wondering if one of them was she without the mask.
 If the rhythmic sound he heard was his death being honed.

They sang as they worked, call and answer.
 He understood nothing.

Gold anklets and a necklace made of gold
 studded with amber. Gold torcs for his arms,

rings, bracelets. All this without a word to him.
This is how you prepare a corpse for burial.

The old one pointed.
When he saw the sack was full of tin
he took it and went on his way.

At low tide, in daylight, the causeway was no mystery.
The journey back much quicker than the journey out.
The bodies of his crew lay scattered round their camp.
No sign of any islanders, no sign they had been here the night before.

He bent and touched the merchant,
who groaned, clutching at his head.
They had no proof their wondrous night was not a dream.
He had no proof, except the sack of tin.
When they awoke, baffled, enchanted, bedazzled
he shared the contents of the bag, not surprised
there was one knuckle for each man. No more no less.

A wind to take them home was blowing steadily.
The light was gentle on the water, soft as her hands
where light and water meet, and something new is made
that still remains unnamed.

The Queen said: 'You may not come this way again.
We've made you rich enough to spend your life in comfort.
No need to risk the sea God's wrath or gamble on the wind.'
'I will return', he said, knowing he could not.

'It will never be the place you left:
the purest water can only be polluted.
A place of dreams that validates the risks you took
and measured what you are?
Once found, this is the place that you must leave.
The memory that will measure every other day
cannot itself be measured.

You'll sail for amber next time, if you sail at all.
Go with our Lady's blessing and our thanks.'
'And if I tried to stay?'

'We have already dressed your corpse.'

If after every storm, such shelter
men would sail in search of cyclones.

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