



**Castle
Ruins**

poems by
Jennifer G. Knoblock

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I'r Castell

To stand in this place is to feel not the weight of history, but the treasure of its humanity. Go on a mist-damp day in early spring; climb through the woods solitary, roofed and walled and floored in green. The gate, wood-massive and iron-barred, stands open. Pass through it and become part of the place's past. It is not whole, but propped up, unreconstructed. The wind scours and wears the stone but the footprint is still there; listen for the echo, trace it.

Pace the vast space of the bustling kitchens and see the girl trudge with sloshing bucket from the well. Climb higher on centuries-worn steps to the wall. The soldier huddles in his cloak, blows on numb fingers. Look over the parapet, see the line of carts and carters below, groaning, hauling grain and meat and fuel and fodder. Look up, to the tower. The lord in his solar gazes across the valley, self-satisfied or afraid; his pale daughter frowns at her needlework.

Now close your eyes and hold this, glowing, as if you've drunk the magic draught from a light-filled cup. Soon you must return to your workaday world, but here in this space you are someone and somewhen else, wonder-full. The birds sing in the nearing forest, the wind caresses the stone, the tattered flag flaps, the fortress stands empty and alone... until you come again.



Sometime Sacrifice

It is a clean place in the low countries,
all gleam, gold and azure between framing
cliffs, water-smooth reflection of white
town walls, sea-blue church spires, billow
clouds and distant in-sailing fleet.

What price, this peace?
What price, these burghers trotting
staid on horseback, wimpled wife
with her back to the half-door?
What price, the wide-open gates
and stream of people wending
curving path to crowning castle?

On the near green hill is violence.
It is a lonely scene, above the town,
screened from worthy citizens' view.
If they looked up, they might catch
a glint of sun on armor or downstabbed
spear. They don't look up.

The dragon is also blue and gold,
another part of the landscape.
Did he once come looming, blocking
the sun or kindling in the last glory
of sunset? Did they deliberate long,
in cliff-top towers, on the appropriate
sacrifice?

The princess prays but does not look
afraid. The knight dispassionately
does his duty, only his streaming
crimson sleeves a hint of where
this will end.

It is a clean town on the sea,
and for this the dragon must die.
The idyllic day continues unruffled,
like the water.

*After Rogier van der Weyden's painting, St. George and the
Dragon*

Old Sarum

A tourist visit running its course when
September mist rolls over
the plain, lapping at the
crumbled stone walls. Flowery-
spired in the distance, the new cathedral sharp
marks the town, but here within pasture's
buffering silence I stand at the edge
of the ruined castle, listening hard for spirit unseen—
a prisoned queen in impotent state, the
days of her scheming become salt
scribes and prayers for a glimpse of ocean.

This is a “golden shovel” poem: the last word in each line is a word from the first stanza of William Carlos Williams’ “Flowers by the Sea.”



To Those Who Made the Book of Kells

For your work, you had light—
as much as could be gathered
in that northern isle—and color
under the too-often colorless sky

In scriptorium silence the passion sang
from within; steady hand, pattern-vision
as much a gift from above as the word
you enwrapped for all the world

The times cannot have been so dark—
vellum glows with intertwinings
of lapis, vermilion, shimmering gold:
revelation for centuries of souls



At Saalburg

Romans were here
in these forested hills
lived and killed
built and loved
and left their shoes
fibulae spear-heads

Their trash they threw
down disused wells
water run dry choked
with the meaning
of civilization
one by one we retrieve
nails horse-bits broken
leather thongs those
second-century things
whose uses we can only
reconstruct

Romans are gone
and here I peer into
my own disused well
pondering muddy trickle
wondering what have I
to throw down this well
what have I to save
polish preserve present
like fine Samian ware?



Siren Song No. 1

In the wake of Odysseus
tide-washed smooth skin
soft sleek hair unbound
a singer and you've known
the words. The horizon
is empty all rocks submerged
nothing for it but to sail
into her arms and never
question (a gift horse, regret).

Siren Song No. 2

“When did you know you were lost?”
he asked. And I said, Is it wrong to feel
my life’s work is a vacation? Have I
succumbed to worldly temptation?
Once I thought I could spend my whole
life in endless farmland, open
prairie I knew like the back of my hand
and the flock (barring the occasional
black sheep) was mostly of a type—
familiar gifts, familiar sins. Then
I got the Call and found myself
here, all Europe at my feet: London,
Paris, Rome, beaches, mountains,
and my home overlooks a vineyard.
The wine is red and good. God help me
sometimes I feel I shut my ears
to all else, will be unable to hear
even the still, small voice,
the amazing grace.

Moorish Influence

I would leave this northern cool-clime,
find an antidote to delicate rose summer
nights that shiver still under the moon...

Give me a land of gold heat-shimmer, blaze-
blue sky and silent afternoons, reflecting
pools below pierced and carven screens,
ceramic tiles that mesmerize in endless
whorls of red, yellow, green. White walls
in sun-glare and hidden shady doors
drape themselves in bougainvillea
and lounging cats while inside I luxuriate
in striped silk cushions and spicy scents,
silver pot and mint tea. A mosaic fountain
plashes in the courtyard. The day releases
skin-scent; stars expand and breathe.



August Istanbul

destined to melt
between mosque and market—
cobble-sore feet, sizzling
döner-grill heat

(we drape treasure shops
breathless, swept tea-tide
of scarf hawkers, sea-glare)

then from prayer call
to thunder crack, sky blacks—
brief deluge on fountain square
unwelts us, rejoicing like tulips



Red Riding-Hood

The forest floor is carpeted
dimly autumn gold and black
This is fairytale land and alone
with the spiraling downfalling
broken limbs log bridge
across the creek I remember
one French-class sub
his inappropriate eyes
*Avez vu le loup?*²



Literary in the Forest

Miss Havisham, dear Ophelia, let us flee
this dark house, the cruelty of misplaced
desire, the paneling of which is suitable
only for our coffins. Let us find another wood,
a brighter home of our own choosing, lush
with fern, moss-hushed, honeysuckle glinting,
scenting the sunlight and the hill-born(e)
breeze. Let us step from the shade into glade
of pink foxglove, listen for rocks' water-song
and silence of trees.

There is no revenge in pity,
no sympathy in surrender, so cast off your wrecked
dresses, your sodden tresses; care not about full-
filling hours. We will study butterfly wings, speech
of birds. We will deck ourselves with wild roses—
or toss them at the b(r)ook.



How Poetry Saved My Life (in London)

in cars, airports, airplanes, trains
this tote carried me and my goods
in iambic pentameter, Wallace Stevens,
I wish that I might be a thinking stone

(to admire far-below surroundings
of fair-furrowed hay-gold,
corn-green fields: why
you prospered, why
Saxons wanted you)

holiday humanity at the wax-works
shouting and camera-flash but here
in his corner, Dickens, and yea verily
Shakespeare, standing

then after the kerfuffle over Baker Street
while hungry, footsore we rattled
in the packed train all subterranean
children on our way to who knows
where or why: a song of apple boughs
pasted on the wall, Dylan Thomas,
and *I was green and carefree*
under the new made clouds
and happy as the heart was long



Welsh Hills

I loved you before I knew you
deep-rooted, firmly based on legend
and childish dreams. No, not childish—
I loved you with steel of sword
and dragon's fire, for your crystal
caves and heroes' havens
your mantles of mist your still, cold pools
those crossing-places of darkness
where anything could be true

A lifelong affair—should I be ashamed?
I have met you, now
more solid and yet otherworldly
where princes once gazed
sheep now graze in grassy courts.
Your kissing gates, low stone walls
green valley views framed by moss-
crumbled doors broken stairs:
a trysting place for old souls



I Would Have

I would have taken you to Cymru, in the west
We'd rent a car and drive the wanderers' roads
We'd seek the house where Dylan Thomas lived

We'd walk the fields of summer sheep-cropped green
Through gates and gaps in criss-crossed dry-stone walls
In the heart of hilly Cymru, in the west

I'd carry snacks and guidebook; you, the map
You'd ask about my work, and deep in talk
We'd seek the house where Dylan Thomas lived

You'd stop and smoke and gaze up at the crags
We'd argue myth and Merlin and gray kings
In the heart of hilly Cymru, in the west

We'd stop for a pint and just at end of day
In a salt-scrubbed scruffy village by the sea
We'd find the house where Dylan Thomas lived

We'd hear the local singers spin their tales
Of loves and feats of heroes long at rest
I would have taken you to Cymru, in the west
We'd find the house where Dylan Thomas lived



Low Tide

First, pick your way across pool-wet rocks
or slip down the slick-seaweeded ramp

Find the sand ridged with last night's high tide
and walk toward the distant soft surf

Toes in the cold runnels—still wearing shoes?
Take them off, leave them here

a waypost
a beacon

Watch your feet as you walk
It shrinks the distance

Count the swirled sandworms
piles of sodden glow-green

(You will be there before you know it)

Here a high-dry sandbar—
an island it was

now one with endless wet-brown sameness
under cloud-weep blue-gray sky

You are tired my heart but don't sit
don't pause

No need to look up or back
You are plenty far from home

(The water slides toward you)



Abyssus Abyssum Invocat

There is a chasm between two souls
deeper than the deepest ocean rift
and more full of watered mystery

To have given birth is not enough
To have carried and nursed is not enough
To love with this whole fractured being is not enough

We have a deeper communion, perhaps
with Other than with each other
That knowledge is not enough

I've often dreamt of your drowning
torn from my arms and lost in black water
It is the deep calling to the depths in us

Shall we take the plunge? Shall we sink ourselves
to the very floor of the abyss—abandon all
claim to one another and therein find our kinship?



Laws of Nature

It is irresistible, this impulse to seek
the flaw in the diamond. I must discover
and tell anew that the first day of summer
is but first of long fall to darkling end.
It is the (s)matter of gray caught in corner-
eyed mirror, debate whether to get up
of a sunny morn (for the heat seeds
its own raincloud), sudden insight that I was
this child only summers ago and now
this child (long ago relinquished to earth's
spinnings and cunning traps) is the sought-
for fruiting. How we give way to the bud
when we thought only to blossom.
We shrivel, all energy spent in the making.



Moon

A sea-storm of cloud over just-dark:
brightness beneath, bats whispering
the air out of reach, breath held

a breeze rattles black cherry
and the moon-rim rises, pulls clear
quivering against blue-black

Something more than five hundred
full moons I've been alive and why
this one night it transfixes me—

How many of those hundreds have I
completely ignored, blind to looking,
blinder to not be transfixed?

If it were ten times brighter, twenty
times, would I not soon forget it
just the same? Take all for granted:

bat-wing silence, leaves unfurling
in daylight, the rise and fall of waves,
countless fruits dropping to the ground

What good is it to notice the fruit
if I don't look up to the tree? What good
is it to be transfixed by the moon

in a sea-storm cloud with you in bed
waiting for me to lower the blinds?



Tree Dreams

The distant hills are age-old forested in greenish black-
birds singing wind blowing at all points and one baby
inconsolably crying a dozen shades of green in the garden
leaves reaching to the open song-filled sky roses blown
and fading (beauty, too, in fading) and the garden needs
no consolation

I dreamed I was a hundred-rooted plant
deep-spreading in earth magnificent sidewalk-breaking
strength like next-door cherry fruiting bright red and blood-
red under cloud-bowed sky sheltering the blackbirds shading
the inconsolable



You seek flowers

Here, see: cupped in my hands
the last of them—spice-scented,
thousand-petaled, gold—
believe me

Friend, the world has gone
dust-dry, apostate
but I have a spring,
winter-heart hidden

These are the bloom
of all our life's fruit,
watered, deep-rooted:
have them



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