

Castle Ruins

poems by Jennifer G. Knoblock

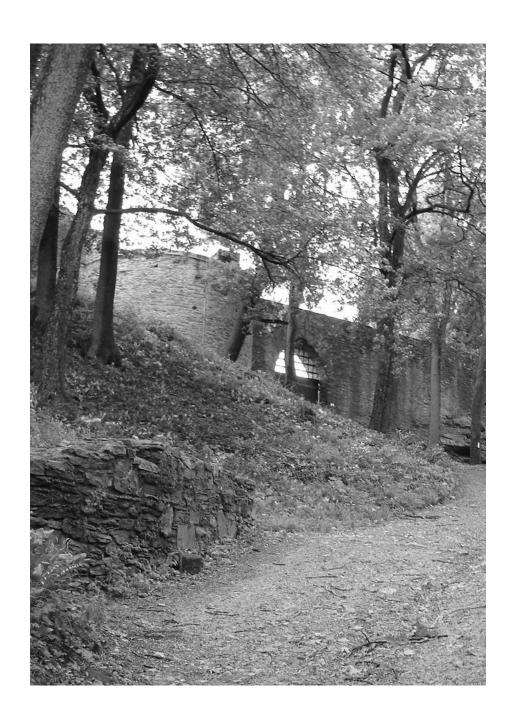
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I'r Castell

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.

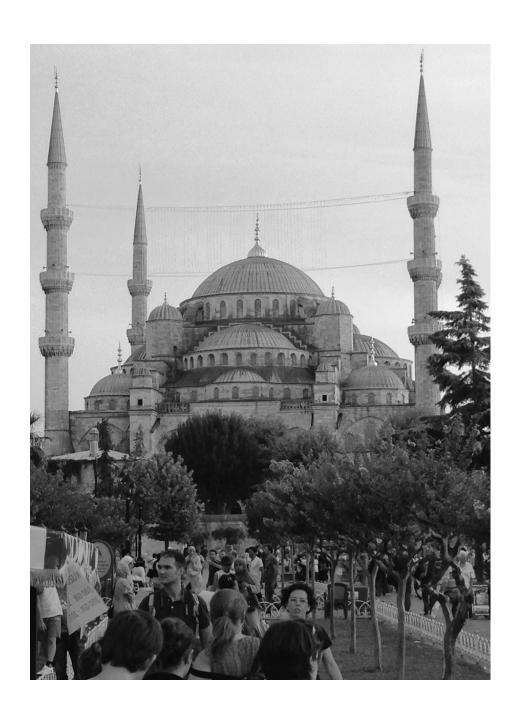


August Istanbul

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 unwilts 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?*



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.



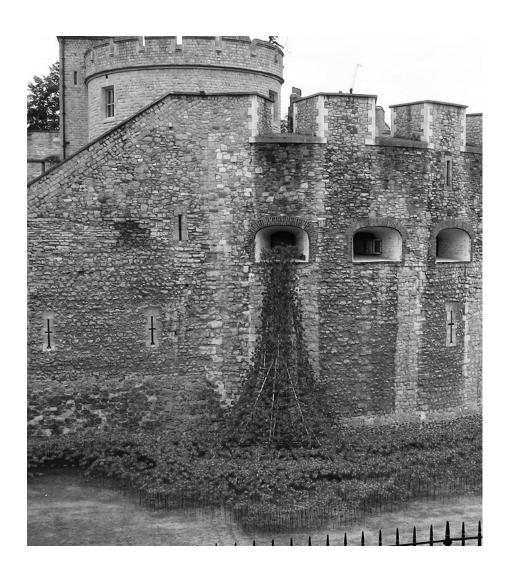
How Poetry Saved My Life (in London)

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

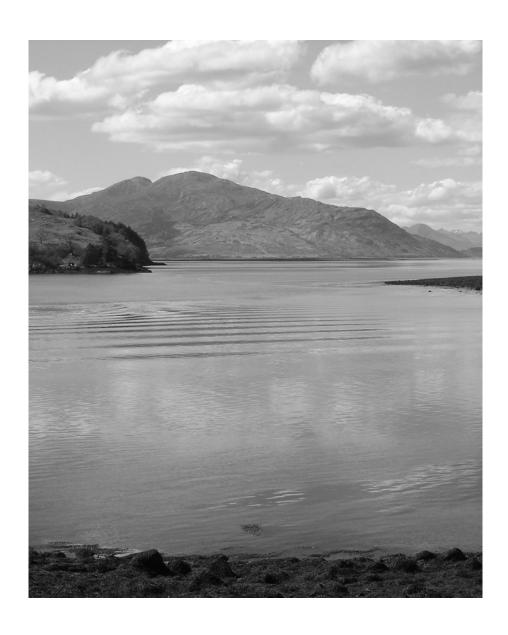
There is a chasm between two souls deeper than the deepest ocean rift and more full of watered mystery

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 cornereyed 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 soughtfor 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 blackbirds 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 bloodred 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



List of Photographs

Cover: Dinas Bran, Wales; July, 2013

Page 4: Ruine Falkenstein, Germany; May, 2013

Page 8: Old Sarum, England; October, 2013

Page 10: Valle Crucis Abbey, Wales; July, 2013

Page 12: Saalburg, Germany; October, 2013

Page 16: La Alhambra, Spain; February, 2014

Page 18: Istanbul, Turkey; August, 2014

Page 20: Fairy Glen, Wales; July, 2013

Page 22: Oberursel, Germany; February, 2013

Page 24: Tower of London, England; July, 2014

Page 26: Dinas Bran, Wales; July, 2013

Page 28: Cardigan Bay, Wales; July, 2013

Page 30: Burghead, Scotland; April, 2014

Page 32: Eilean Donan Castle, Scotland; April, 2014

Page 34: Heidelberg, Germany; July, 2014

Page 36: Prague, Czech Republic; January, 2014

Page 38: Black Forest, Germany; July, 2013

Page 40: Oberursel, Germany; September, 2014

