

Hawk Tongue

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You can be counting sheep when it happens,
in that friable terrain between waking and sleeping –
head heavy, shoulders drooping
(as though laden with a woolsack)

when in a sigil of summer lightning

the beautiful youth appears,
haloed with green life
golden limbed, quiver brimming
with keen-fledged darts.
Upon his wrist, a deadly weapon of
talons, pinions, beak, and eyes
of angry fire.

You don't know whether to rise to greet him,
this strange friend, welcoming foe, or flee.
You have known of him all of your life
and now you are terrified
for he summons you from
the slumbering hills.

Fist raised, he releases his feathered prayer –
death-line, as it swoops in for the coup-de-grâce,
straight into the O of your open mouth,
to small for it, spitting plumage,
as it burrows down your gullet,
exploding lungs, lurching stomach.
Your scream becomes a shriek,
and eyes burn with flame of a stolen sun.
Shuddering, you flap your arms uselessly.
but when you begin to speak

words like wings fly from your mouth.

This poem was inspired by a tantalising fragment of folklore recorded by the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan. I had first read of it in Iain Sinclair's psychogeographical evocation of the Welsh Borders, *Landor's Tower* (Granta, 2001), which dramatized the moment Vaughan received his vision:

He kept paper, a pen, ink, close at hand. He would question the spirits. He lay with his eyes open, under the dark beams of the low ceiling, hearing cattle move restlessly in the fields, hearing the river, the small, common noises of that thick night — and he saw himself reach out for the pen. He transcribed this non-dream, the story one of the vanished dictated. About a man in a bed. Reaching for his quill. (2001)

The original account was recorded by Vaughan in a letter to his cousin, the antiquarian John Aubrey, in 1694 (only 2 years after the mysterious death of the Reverend Robert Kirk). In the letter, Vaughan discusses the Bards of Wales, and their inspiration ('awen', Welsh, f. noun, 'inspiration'), before illustrating his brief account with this remarkable fragment:

I was told by a very sober, knowing person (now dead) that in his time, there was a young lad fatherless & motherless, soe very poor that he was forced to beg; butt att last was taken up by a rich man, that kept a great stock of sheep upon the mountains not far from the place where I now dwell who cloathed him & sent him into the mountains to keep his sheep. There in Summer time following the sheep & looking to their lambs, he fell into a deep sleep in which he dreamt, that he saw a beautifull young man with a garland of green leafs upon his head, & an hawk upon his fist: with a quiver full of Arrows att his back, coming towards him (whistling several measures or tunes all the way) att last lett the hawk fly att him, which (he dreamt) gott into his mouth & inward parts, & suddenly awaked in a great fear & consternation: butt possessed with such a vein, or gift of poetrie, that he left the sheep & went about the Countrey, making songs upon all occasions, and came to be the most famous Bard in all the Countrey in his time.

The account was written in the 'fading hours' of the poet's life, and was the last completed piece of writing of an illustrious career (Post, 2014: xv).

In all three instances – the original folk tale, Vaughan's recording of it, and Sinclair's retelling of it – inspiration and the creative act is captured. When I first read of the encounter, which seems to be another iteration of the trope of the divinely-inspired youth seen in tales of Lailoken, Merlin Ambrosius, and Taliesin in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (Carey, 2020), I was inspired to write down an outline for a novel. The initial burst of enthusiasm passed, and the novel remains unwritten – but years later I was to recall the fragment during the run-up to the Soundpost 2019 'Fairy Gathering' (see review in this issue). Having been depleted by the completion of my doctoral research project (discussed in 'Performing Kirk') I had not been able to write anything new for a few months. But when I visualised the handsome youth with

the hawk upon his wrist, the awen started to flow, and I composed the poem above, which I first performed from memory at the Fairy Gathering on the final day. By capturing the moment of inspiration in verse, and performing it, I found inspiration started to flow once more.

List of References

Carey, John, 'In Search of Merlin', Temenos Academy lecture, 27 May 2020. Available from: <https://www.temenosacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/In-Search-of-Merlin-Prof-John-Carey-May-2020.pdf> [accessed 6 June 2020]

Post, J. F., *Henry Vaughan: The Unfolding Vision*. Princeton University Press, 2014

Sinclair, Iain, *Landor's Tower*, London: Granta, 2001