

Taliesin's Escape From Cantref yr Gwaelod

*Inspired by, Assembled and Interpreted from translated fragments of Llyfr
Taliesin.*

Christopher Collier

Which was first, was it darkness, or was it light?
The drama of the nocturnal skies and visionary longing,
In the morning no one comes.
Caer Gwyddno is no more,
Cantre'r Gwaelod has fallen below the world.
Whence come night and flood?
And the reaping of heroes?

Who amongst you will measure the depths of Hell?
How thick its veil? How wide its mouth?
What the size of its stones? Or the tops of its whirling trees?
These seas bring salt.
Salt to season the tears of leaving,
To throw over my left shoulder and shower your face creeping up on me.
Thunder clapped all eyes on you that night.
Seithenin.

I am old. I am young. I am Gwion, a radiant brow.
I am universal, In the possession of incising wits.
I am a bard; I will not disclose secrets to fools.
I am a guide: expert in contests.
And before I desire the end of existence,
And before the broken foam shall come upon my lips,
And before I become fused with wooden boards,
May there be festivals to my soul!
Book-learning and scholarship tells little of grave afflictions beyond the death-
bed;
Yet those as have heard my bardic books, they shall obtain the country of
heaven, Paramount of all abodes.

That night comes to me now,
A fetch, luminous, quivering,
To hold me obsessed in seconds.
The way everything glitters when I think of them then,
Under great gleaming sighs, soft as bletted fruit, bled.
Dusk creeping under fingernails,
Crisp gusts off the fluttering, dark sea
As we buried our faces in perfect air.
Shrieking gulls, gulping and soaring,
Exhaling seas grated unceasingly, howling torn silence.
Whetting foam teeth on great black rocks, sparking spray, scattering salt.
Fathomless sky glowed stain-glass blue, needling stars,

Green-black sea chugged, the bay sprawled shaking on pause, trembling with
lights, snapshot puddles blink a likeness.
Bracing against the storms of centuries.
As shadows ebbed under the world, and its turned tide tables, like cursed
dogs.
From the western dark where the seas still spat at us.
Death waiting on the wings of the west wind.

But on this shoreline I sing an elegy for a thousand sons
A welt of tears where each eye should be.
A song that resounds in heaven, in earth, at the end,
In straits, in expanse, in foam,
I will declare it when I am in the gravel.
For I know in those sea-smashed ruins, fish linger like ghosts,
Hovering in wonder through the halls and galleries.
As today mist flocks like thistledown snagged on a barbed wire coastline
Flooding from a scentless bonfire under the breastfed sky.
Stars sink below the surface of that sky, whale-flank blue,
Baptised in the trickling light of the spray-laced blast.
Buffeted under the crystal brittle gleam.

I am steel; I am a druid.
I am an artificer; I am a scientist.
I am a serpent; I am love
Like sinking in a lake without swimming
Like reaching the sky with a hook.

Sea-gulls playing.
Gone the blossoms on the tops of the pear-trees.
That evening sorrow sat still as a fish in you,
Weeping atmospheres from her lidless, luminous disks.
Drowning in Mead.
Seithenin.
Eyes burning, you crushed them shut to dream,
Laid awake at night, drifting from waking to sleep like a grasping flower,
speeded up, Snapping its jaws at the hurtling sky.
An echo through a hall of mirrors.

That night were concealed the sea and stars,
Until the world was as desolate as when it was created.
Dark without lights.
The sweeping grace of ether drapes,
A shimmering world set empty
Unreal as a stage under the whirling zodiac.
Fading into a moon bleached beach,
Wrapped up in midnight lilac black,
Glistening in the exhalations of snow-soft, diamond-hard, frost stalked stars,
A glassless window to the universe in the deepening night,
The ceaseless seas torn with light.

Amidst the cries, doors flung open to the vast night,
Beneath blistering skies,
Emptied hollow eyes.
A huge moon hung one hundred and fifty feet above us,
Tremendous,
Immense,
The biggest,
The brightest,
I'd ever seen.

The Awen fortold the hastening of the tumult on the hill of the sea,
The blades and the shout,
And a fluttering banner that came, rough was its descent.
And like the budded blossoms they fell.
An army in the running of icy, black blood that surrounds them.
Others on their feet fled headlong through woods,
Through the ramparts of the city.

Return to me, whose bones are of mist.
Where cataracts of wind fall.
I have been a cobalt salmon.
I have been a roebuck on the mountain.
I have been a tear in the air,
I have been the dullest of stars.
I have been a word amongst letters,
I have been the light of lanterns,
I have been a coracle in the seas:
I have been a drop in a shower;
I have been a sword in the grasp of the hand
I have been a string in a harp,
When the trees were enchanted,
In the expectation of not being trees,
I played in the twilight,
I slept in purple.
Do you know what you are when you are sleeping?
Whether a body or a soul?

Much have I been, yet still that night haunts me.
Death above our head, wide is its covering,
High above the canopy of heaven the waves reached over us.
Night fell granite heavy,
Suddenly engulfed and gulped,
Puncturing a thirsting dusk,
Abstruse thunder buffeted us from behind dark as of a sudden gust.
Clenched lungs,
Hurdling the hurtling surge,
Vaulting shattering glass.
Riotous gush to throw the room to tumult,
Under neck-fracture,
Knuckle-rupture crush,
Splintering crash, pounding dull through thumping skulls,

Booming in the blood loud chambers of the ears.

Soaked, gashed and gasping, we spilt onto the shore.
Upward turned eyes, each a packet of crushed glass,
Everything swam.
My pulse thundering in bursting tides,
Breath sweeping ashore in vast, fast-forward storm waves straight out of the
blackness.
Frail flickering stars flocked in blood to crowd my punch drunk skull
To flutter up into the corners of the room like trapped swallows hungering for
the south, Dazed,
Sparks.
Man is oldest when he is born.
And is younger, still younger continually.

Preserve the heavens from the flood wide spreading,
The first surging billow has rolled over the sea-beach.
A torrent of longing
For mead and horsemanship
Still they come, iron their wings,
Like a light shield on the back of a shadow.

Brief is the breast of an astrologer
When he recites the Awen at the setting in of the evening.
On the fine night of a fine day.
When the dew is undisturbed, when the wheat is reaped,
When the bees are gentle and the slow golden pipes of Llew play
Behind a curtain of excellent silver and ruddy gems.
Exposed to the breeze of the sky, the coracle of glass in the hand of the
pilgrim,
With milk, and dew, and acorns.
Waves upon waves of the tender breathing seas,
Susurrations slowly washing faint and far away,
We beseeched the salient, ceaseless waves to sing us to sleep,
All night we lay alone in the world upon the restless shore of destiny.

I have been at the Battle of the Trees, with Llew and Gwydion,
I have been with Bran in Ireland, Over the seas with Arthur.
From Pen Rhionydd to Celliwig: the Cymry are of one mind, bold heroes.
The chief astrologers obtain wonderful gifts.
Absolute is my chair in Caer Siddi:
The Cauldron of Cerridwen, the Cauldron of Bran, the Cauldron of Annwn

Yet high is the horn of travelling,
High the kin in the evening.
High is truth when it shines, higher still when it speaks.
Twilight lingers, returning amidst burning frost.
Moon full as swell, bright as tides, dizzy as the seas.
Smooth shoreline eyes bright as wet pebbles,
Swimming and fizzing in the swash.

Let the billow cover over the shingle,
That the land becomes ocean,
So that it leaves not the cliffs,
Nor hill nor dale, nor the least of shelter,
Against the wind when it shall rage.
Bitter was the wind that night, created before the deluge.
A creature strong, without flesh, without bone,
Without veins, without blood,
Without head, and without feet.
It will not be older, it will not be younger,
Than it was in the beginning.
And we fled the snapping seas,
Fled like finches at the clapping of hands.
Shooting across rocks.
Stripped. Ripping, struggling.
Thudding into the slap of waves and – plunge.
Gulp. Swirl. Swallow.
Swept. Dashed. Thrown.
Utter. Chill. Clutching.
Breath. Crashing. Black.
Gratting. Roaring.
Spluttering thrill. Whirled, spun.
Stars wheeled. Foamed.
Until grasping Gwyddno thrust full-clothed
To wrench me by the guts from the thundering seas
And suddenly subzero I sank to the sand,
Throbbing, shaking. Weeping.

Daybreak with fire.
The fiery meteor of the dawn.
Above the high gale,
Higher than every cloud.
When we made an expedition to the land of Gwyddno,
There was a corpse delicately fair between the gravel and the pebbles on the
bank.
Seithenin.
From the foaming mead-horns, with the finest pure liquor,
Which the bees collect, and do not enjoy.
Mead distilled sparkling, its praise is everywhere.
Of the man that chained the wind.
Of the gravel of the salt sea,
Before it overwhelmed the strand.
The gravel of the salt sea,
Below the sand.
The star of magnificent stars.
Have I not disarmed the mystery?
He is a sharer of varied words,
The raven of the morning divining;
Soothsaying amongst the guts of the fallen,
That the tide washed in.
They tinged with blue the wings of the dawn;

Kissed with blue lips.
And sightless eyes.
They threw aside the futile spears.

There was a fair fort upon the ninth wave.
Relentless sea-spume came to me with far-reaching fingers,
Exploding atop the rock.
Inconsolable the swirling sea-birds.
Anger forsworn, let it flee beyond the mountains.

I have been a horn, I have been a wild sow,
I have been a shout in battle.
I have been a torrent on the slope,
I have been a wave on the extended shore.
I have been the light sprinkling of a deluge,
I have been a speckled cat on the high trees.
I have been a circumference, I have been a head.
Though never yet did I see such sights.

Through an inundation that drowns birds.
From where the sun rises to the west there was land.
Beyond the glass fortress, before the gates of the cold place
Flowing water and jet are mingled.
Monks howl like a choir of dogs,
Like the wave loud roaring over the beach,
I saw valiant men in battle array,
And after the morning, battle-mangled flesh.

That star soaked, foot crunch night,
Peeled moon-rind eyes, each a mash of tears,
Glum as puckered apples, pulping,
Crystalline with frost through winter's abrasive clutch,
Infested with rotting wasps.
Aeddon, is he lost? My memory is faded
A billow of fire over the seas,
A wave in which the brave fell among his companions.
A hundred received this attack on the earth,
Like the roaring of the wind against the ashen spears.
Dogs raised their backs at his presence.

Gloomy like the evening,
In the recesses of the mountain.
When should be the full length.
In the land of the lost ones.
Between the shafts of arrows and white iron,
A shouting on the sea, a lance-darting, trembling of slaughter.
They will languish in the ocean, beyond the broad lake.

We dragged our survivors from the seas,
Dropped like rocks into tar pits,
Limp-limbed mannequins as if every bone snapped at once,

We fell broken to the beach.
Yet we must go on.
Must survive.
The anchor of the country
Where is it now?
A cry of a journey over the plain,
To find a new place.
A cry in every meandering vale,
Let us raise a banner above the mountain,
Be my oak, the gleaming spirit of the Cymry.
Like the wheeling of a fiery meteor over the earth.
The earth quaking, the elements darkening,
And a shadow on the world,
Like Owain, the wings of dawn were the flowing of his lances.
For there will not be found a match for he in all the glittering west.

The dragon will flow around,
Above the places,
Vessels of liquor,
Liquor in golden horns,
Golden horns in hand,
hand on the knife,
The knife the rallying point.

Who has made for me in perception,
My seven faculties.
Of fire and earth,
And water and air,
And mist and flowers,
And southerly wind.

Since it is not told me
What supports the world,
That it falls not into vacancy.
Or if the world should fall,
On what would it fall?
Who would uphold it?
The world, how wonderful it is,
That it falls not at once.