

Y DA ROGAN ANNWN



Lorna Smitherz

Y
DAROGAN
ANNWN

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For the daughter I never had

*'Gwyn ap Nudd... God has put the fury of the devils of Annwn
in him to prevent the destruction of the world'*
Culhwch and Olwen

*'The pharmakon... acts as both remedy and poison... the truth
– the original truth - about writing as a pharmakon
will be left up to a myth'*
Jacques Derrida

Contents

I Was Not Born	1
Daronwy: The Brythonic World Tree	4
<i>I. The Lock and the Key</i>	
Rhith	7
The King of Annwn Summons a Locksmith	8
The King of Annwn's Treasures	9
She is the Key	10
<i>II. The Forest of Daronwy</i>	
Serpent Child	11
She Tricks the Magician	12
She Lies Like a Maggot	13
She Learns to Walk	15
The Art of Naming	16
The Owl Kind	18
The Wolf Boy's Cave	19
The Fields of Black and White Sheep	20
Says the Sheep's Skull	21
She Confronts Peredur	22
The Empty Boat	24
<i>III. The Fisher King</i>	
She Hitches a Lift	25
Her Coming	26
She Buys a Canal Boat	28
She Visits the Capital	29
Dwarf's Hill	30
She Goes North	31
She Finds the Fisher King	32
She Takes a DNA Sample	33
She Asks the Question	34

<i>IV. The Golden Ring</i>	
The Beach of Lost Things	36
She Digs in Every Spot Marked X	38
She Goes Fishing	39
The Answer	41
She Cannot Remove the Ring	42
<i>V. Doomsday</i>	
She Burns the Doomsday Book	43
She Topples the Cathedrals	44
She Plays Marbles with the Climate Scientists	46
The Bomb To End All Bombs	47
She Breaks the Machine	49
She Meets a Wise Horse	51
She Assassinate the President	53
<i>VI. The End of Days</i>	
She Tries to Capture the Breath of the Wind	54
She Flips a Coin	56
She Draws Down the Moon	57
She Kills the Sun	58
She Raises the Dismembered Dead	60
She Plunges Her Hand	62
She Raises Her Flag	63
The Daughter I Never Had	64
<i>VII. The Hereafter</i>	
Her Victory	66
She Finds a Dying Crow	67
She is Skin and Bone	68
She Plants Her Staff	70
Acknowledgements	71

I Was Not Born

of a mother of flesh
and blood – I crawled
out of the belly of
a dying dragon.

I have been a maggot.
I have been a wyrm.
I have flown wingless.
I have burrowed deep.
I have been a serpent
gnawing on the roots
of the falling World Tree.

I have been an oak.
I have been an acorn.
I have been blossom.
I have been a thorn.

I have been a speck
of blood on a fallen leaf.

I have been a woodland.
I have been a stag, a boar,
an elk running through it.

I have been a hound in
the hunt of Annwn's King.

I have been a lapwing
circling like a planet over
the Battle of the Trees.

I have been the clash

of the boughs of oak, ash,
thorn, willow, holly, rowan.
I have been the screams
of dying warriors dripping
down trunks and worms
writhing within corpses.

I have been a shield,
a spear, a sword, a gun,
a grenade flung over wire
and its fiery explosion.

I have been a rocket
hurtling beyond the stars.

I have been a fallen star
and a tear in a river of tears
flowing through Annwn.

I have been hydrogen,
oxygen, carbon, nitrogen,
helium burning in the sun.

I have been an atom.
I have been an atom bomb.
I have become death.
I have been reborn.

I have been dark matter.

I have not been found by
the scientists of Gwydion.

I am a child of the gods
and daughter of dragons.

I come to sing the end
of the Age of Man.

Daronwy: The Brythonic World Tree

‘What tree is greater

Than he, Daronwy?’

The Book of Taliesin

There is a tree between the worlds with a story in every bough and a word on every leaf. It is a Mighty Oak. Its name, Daronwy, once thundered through Thisworld, but has been forgotten.

No-one knows what came first – the oak or the acorn. Some say it was planted in the Age of the Gods, which came after the Age of Dragons, by a goddess who was born of dragons. But that knowledge is lost in the mists which divide Thisworld from Annwn, the Deep, where the dead, the gods, the dragons, and all beings banished during the Age of Man still dwell as myths.

Some say the goddess watered the acorn with her tears and it grew to become a slender sapling, then a fine young tree with trembling catkins and tiny pink flowers, giving birth to green acorns.

As the river of tears nourished the land a woodland grew and a myriad creatures came to visit the oak as they passed between life and death, perching in its boughs, feeding on acorns and boletes.

The river burned bright in this fruitful Age of the Gods and you may ask why the goddess cried so much. She, the Mother of Annwn, came to this place because of the wars between the gods, the conflict between the Children of Annwn and the Children of Don, the battles between monsters and the pressing of poisoned spears. Because of her lover, Lludd, son of Beli

and Don, torn between her and his family, the loss of his arm and his most secret wound. Thus they made their son King of Annwn.

When the trickster, Gwydion son of Don, caused further wars with his theft of pigs from Annwn, thousands of bird-like souls fluttered to the oak, were held in Daronwy's branches. Gwydion's nephew, Lleu, alighted in its boughs as an eagle, pierced by a poisoned spear, dripping rotten flesh and maggots, which were devoured by a huge sow with a pregnant belly and hungry snout.

Some say the serpents who dwell beneath the oak and feed on all that is rotten were born from the maggots. Others say they were the first children of the Mother of Annwn from when she was a dragon.

When Gwydion stole a buck, a lapwing, a hound – one of the Cwn Annwn – from the King of Annwn, he unleashed the fury of all the dead (killed in the wars and brought back from his cauldron), raised at their head the slaughtered giant, Brân, clashing his spear on his alder shield. All the trees of Annwn, into whom the souls of the dead go, he sent out crashing their branches. The soul-eating monsters, the Mother of Annwn's oldest children, he summoned from the deepest depths of the Deep.

Against them, with language and materials of the earth, Gwydion enchanted an army of trees. Thundering Oak, Verdant Holly, Spiky Blackthorn, Skilful Whitethorn, Noble Birch slow to don armour. At their head the radiant Lleu and silver-browed Taliesin with two keen spears from Heaven. The Speckled Crested Snake, the Great Forked Toad, and Hundred Headed Beast, were slain. Warriors waded through blood to their

thighs. The river ran red. Daronwy groaned. The Mother of Annwn wept.

Seeing the destruction of the world was imminent the King of Annwn called back his forces. Gwydion planted his eagle-feathered staff like a flag of victory atop the pile of a hundred heads.

The Children of Don ushered in the Age of Man. Gwydion gifted men with knowledge, Gofannon smithing, Amaethon ploughing. Civilisation replaced the wild. They, in turn, were supplanted by the Christian God, his champion, Arthur, and his knights - swords in hands, visors down, blind and deaf to the Forest of Daronwy. Finally men turned from God to the mad science of Gwydion and mistook themselves for the rulers of Thisworld.

Daronwy, the Mighty Oak, who could not be touched by fire or water, is now dying of man-made poisons. The eagle who comes to sit in its boughs is battle-torn, weary, more rotten every year. The sow is gone, there is no-one to eat the maggots, the serpents sicken beneath. The King of Annwn rides the bank of the Gwyllonwy with his howling hounds like a restless ghost.

As the last leaves fall, through the rain of tears, I gather them, piece together the story of the child who will be the prophecy of Annwn.

I. The Lock and the Key

Rhith

'Rhith - foetus, guise, form or phantom'
Dictionary of Welsh Language

An odd rumour
sweeps around Annwn
on the wings of the wingless ones
who try to whisper without tongues
that when Arthur killed her

yes, *her*, the Very Black One,
the Last Witch of Pennant Gofid,
the Last Daughter of...

(for speaking that they lost their tongues)

that when Arthur sliced Orddu in two
a small something fled from her womb
and slithered across the floor
and cowered trembling
as they boiled her.

That when *he* found it
in a slimy crevice of the cave
he wrapped it gently in brocaded silk,
laid it in a stone chest and took it down
to his deepest vault in Caer Ochren,

amongst his most sacred treasures
locked it away with a single whisper
and a kiss until the end of the world.

The King of Annwn Summons a Locksmith

What need have you of me
when you can open and close any gate,
conceal your gates in mist,
make them disappear like fairy gold?

What need have you of me
when the gates are long forgotten?
Even fairy gold turns to rust
when the hinges of memory are broken.

What need have you of me?
Why have you summoned me from my home
that is not in Thisworld or Annwn
where keys slide into locks like water?

What secret do you need to lock away
beyond the touch of time and golden wisdom?
Why that lock that could break any lock but mine?
Why this offer to pay more than gold?

The King of Annwn's Treasures

The golden horn of endless mead.
The golden plates that make even leaves edible.
The golden cauldron that boils the flesh of the dead.
The golden helmet that lends the strength of the bull.
The golden armour that makes its wearer invincible.
The golden shield that deflects not only blows.
The golden spear that pierces every heart.
The golden leashes that hold back the hounds
and the spirits who strain against the possible.
The golden horseshoes for the horse that runs
between worlds and his golden saddle and bridle.
The golden ring that turns time into a circle.
The golden mist that makes terror beautiful.
The golden keys to the gates of every soul.
The golden secret in the stone chest that rattles
and bleats and sings a strange prophetic song.

She is the Key

Sometimes she is in a stone chest.
Sometimes she is inside a hollow tree.
Sometimes she is in the belly of a dying dragon.

In her dreams she walks through time
gathering together the pieces of her identity

in samples from boiling hot springs, deserts, polar ice.

She is the chlorophyll in the first algae to bring life
and those whose blooms smother entire worlds.

She is a moss surviving years of desiccation.

She is a tardigrade who will be blasted into space,
retract her arms and legs into a tun again
and prove herself indestructible.

She is an owl running on two legs.
She is the first word spoken by a *hominid*.
She is a dolly in the hands of Thisworld's children.
She is the first word written down.

She is banned at the price of death by Druids.

She evades the pens of medieval monks.

In the stained glass cathedrals
where they are singing *kyrie eleison*
she realises she is the key.

She steps through the hole.
Lord have Mercy.

II. The Forest of Daronwy

Serpent Child

She awakes dying -
a withered serpent amongst
her kindred sucking on the poisoned roots
of Daronwy – the Mighty Oak – the World Tree
and she realises he is falling.

She might as well be biting
on her own tail – her hunger is an eternal circle.
The *gwenwyn* ‘poison’, ‘worry’, ‘ferocity’
that flows through both worlds bubbles
within her as it bubbles within me.

Together we must break free.

She Tricks the Magician

She spirals around the tree.
She spirals around his wand
with her sister like two snakes
on a caduceus like two ladders
of DNA whispering seductively
of the secrets of life and death,
begging for just one englyn.

The silver-haired Gwydion,
the tricky silver-tongued trickster
falls for their serpent charms.

His magic is like the enzyme
that opens DNA and his words
like the code transcribing *guanine*,
cytosine, *adenine*, *thymine*, pairing
them like the rhymes in *cynghanedd*,
setting the unspiralling serpents free
only to be limited by new forms.

She Lies Like a Maggot

at the foot of the falling tree

clenching and unclenching
her tiny fists impotently.
As the gore rains down
staining the stony solemn

face of Daronwy she listens
to the groan of his branches,
the ceaseless chewing teeth
of bronze-green beetles.

In the gaps between twigs
where leaves grow no longer
and the sky is grey and naked
she sees the chariots of Taranis

rolling from the thunderclouds.
Storm-face with lightning-hand
strikes down the dying eagle
from the uppermost bough.

Blackened, burned, he falls into
the arms of Gwydion who holds
him for a moment like a mother
before he crumbles to ashes.

With those charred remains
the magician smears his face,
laments his doleful punishment
for setting the girl-child free.

Seeing the chariot-wheels
rolling into motion the engines
to bring the world's end gearing up
provides her with the strength

to wriggle away determinedly
from where her sisters lie squirming
in fear of the sow whose hungry
snout will not release them.

She Learns to Walk

It's difficult for her
to learn to use these legs,
these feet, which feel like flippers

after slipping through time like a serpent.

She feels like the Little Mermaid,
tailless as she walks on daggers,
awkward as a Raggy Doll.

She is forced to carve
an oaken staff and lean on it
like a third leg like the magicians

who can only control time for one moment.

She marches on like a wounded soldier,
left right, left right left, left right...
into the forest jealous

of the *gwyllon* who
have abandoned their legs
and float around her like distant memories

that she can see but no longer reach out and touch.

The Art of Naming

Her first word is not an illiterate
cooing or gurgling but something
that might be termed explicit -

she has not forgotten how to curse.

She has not forgotten the names
that live on forever without words
or letters just waiting for shapes.

She has not forgotten how to speak
the names of the 365 trees and plants
of the Forest of Daronwy, call them

to march and follow her, but is alarmed
by the slowness of their response.

Birch is slower to don his armour -
an ill-fitting patchwork black and white;
he is peeling, covered in polypores.

Raspberry has lost her defensive palisade.
She is horrified by how Bramble drags
at her legs desperate for blood;

how the poison seeps into words.

She has not forgotten how to speak
the names and summon the creatures
to her, shaking her staff like a rattle.

She is alarmed by how many do not come -

Aurochs, Wolf, Elk, Bear, Beaver,

how when she calls to the White Stag
he limps toward her with threadbare coat,
heavy antlers, eyes glazed like treacle.

The Owl Kind

She is jealous of the Owl Kind -
of their faces more birdlike than human,
of their wizened, hanging breasts.

“Forgotten - what have you forgotten?”

They mock her from the boughs above
as they mock those who go into the trees.
She wants to tear off their coarse beaks.

She has all her pieces, she swears it,
the full jigsaw of herself, but she senses
something is missing from the box.

“Forgotten - what have you forgotten?”

A Kindly One, hideous, grey-faced, with
a vendetta against the Children of Don says:
“I know where you will find your name.”

The Wolf Boy's Cave

It's somewhere his mother thinks
the other gods have forgotten -

sometimes in a misty mountain,
sometimes in a cliff beside the sea,
sometimes in the midst of the forest,
sometimes deep beneath the earth.

It's always like a womb or a grave.

She finds him wrapped in wolf-skins,
unable to tell if his hair is fair, white, grey,
sees the flash of a bone-thin arm as he casts
the bones that made sense before letters.

Although she sees his teeth, his smile beguiles her.

She knows he has led grandmother after grandmother
to her grave as if helping her cross the road,
a small steady hand on her arm.

She knows he would be happy to lead her too.

She knows it is unwise to try to read the pattern
of the bones or look into his eyes,
where the outcome lies.

Y Darogan Annwn

Speak the bones in the slit-like pupils
of the boy with countless names.

The Fields of Black and White Sheep

As she ponders the paradox of whether she is prophet or prophecy she comes upon two fields on either side of the river. In one a flock of white sheep, in one a flock of black sheep. Whenever a white sheep bleats a black sheep crosses and becomes white. Whenever a black sheep bleats a white sheep crosses and becomes black. She must maximise the black sheep.

If $t = 0$, then at $t = 1$ a white sheep bleats, at $t = 2$ a black sheep bleats... As she tries to do the maths on her fingers she sees the sheep are dying, decaying. Each bleat causes a rotting sheep to drag its carcass across the river. She runs to rescue the last black sheep, grips its skull as its bloated corpse floats away downstream.

On her oaken staff she fixes it like a totem. "Are you black or white?" "Are you prophecy or prophet?" She recognises her voice speaking like a ventriloquist's from between those yellow teeth.

"We will not know until $t = 0$."

Says the Sheep's Skull

“He didn't see us,” says the sheep's skull, “when we were black or white, when we were living or when we were dying.

“He didn't see Daronwy, half his leaves on fire, half his leaves green.

“He didn't see the procession in the Castle of the Fisher King – the beautiful cup-bearer bearing the *gwenwyn* in a chalice, two lads carrying the poisoned spear dripping three streams of blood, the severed head on the plate. And he didn't ask the question.”

“Who?” she asks.

“The Flower of Warriors, the Candle of Knights, the Leaf of the Quest.”

She Confronts Peredur

She sees him walking toward her swaying
like a battle flag in the wind.

There is blood on his face
and he does not know whose it is.

His sword trembles in his hand yet
still he goes on to slay another dark knight
and a serpent with a stone in its tail,

searching for the greatest evil in the world.

He does not recognise it in the little girl.

He does not recognise it in himself –
the lone hero battling against everything,

fleeing the ghosts of the Witches of Caer Loyw.

Should she call to them by their nine secret names?
Should she summon all the furious Spirits
of Annwn to tear him into pieces?

Or is that too close to what he wants – being martyred?

Instead she smiles, a naive little smile, charming
as a blackbird's, holds out her hands as if to daddy,

asks why he failed to ask his uncle the question.

And that is what breaks him – he crumbles
like the tower in the forest with the hornless goats
where his mother kept him safe until he saw

the knights who looked like angels.

He crumbles like the kingdom of Efrog.

She does not stop the angels, stern and calm,
when they come to take him to answer to God.

When they have departed in a storm of feathers
and gold-dust she claps her gleeful hands.

The Empty Boat

The boat on the lake
is empty as a hazel shell.

There is no grey-haired man
reaching into his bait box, fixing
a wriggling maggot on a hook,
casting out his line, reeling in

his catch. Thus the corpses
float putrid, near-translucent,
so many the gluttoned crows

cannot complete their feast.

On the bank before the ruins
of the fortress, the fallen towers,
the hall emptied of all wonders,
stands a single old, grey heron.

Like a school teacher he tuts.

“Some prophet – how could you
not know he has been hidden away?
Have you not read of the prison
of Lludd Llaw Eraint, know you
not of your own imprisonment?”

“I am not a prisoner of Annwn.”

The heron shakes his old grey head.

III. The Fisher King

She Hitches a Lift

Where the cranes dance -
the children of Gwyddno Garanhir
with long black legs, red and white masks,

she disguises herself as a baby in the bulrushes,
bleats like a lamb, wriggles her pink toes.

It's not long until a practiced beak is working
at the stitching of her *bol-croen*, her leather basket,
her skin-belly tight around her like a mother's womb.
Unpicking the threads to release her from the dark.

Oh poor cursed colt – descendant of Elphin
who looks upon her unshining brow, the hole in her head
where perhaps a third eye should have been.

Oh what a burden to carry her into Thisworld
where the bones of Gwyddno's poisoned horses
still lie in the ground, where their ghosts roam.

Oh what a fate awaits him on the otherside.

She will end his pain with her poison dagger,
turn him inside out, make his skin her crane bag,
cut up his legs to make her divination sticks.

Her Coming

was not prophesied
by Myrddin, Taliesin,
Dafydd Benfras, Prydydd
y Moch, Iolo Goch or
Dafydd Llywd.

It was not predicted
by Mystic Meg

although I like to
think a woman, perhaps
someone like Mother Shipton,
spoke of her between

the lines about women
who fly like birds and ride
astride with brazen brows
and the dragon's tail.

I sometimes wonder
whether Orddu, Orwen,
Ogddu prophesied her coming
in words unspoken in halls of kings,
ringing instead with the dripping
of calcite down cave walls
in the ears of the gods.

She is no Mab Darogan,
teasing the court poets, attempting
to put on the clothes of kings.

She steps down nimble
as Tom Thumb from between

the ears of a crane onto the seashore,
naked as the day she was born
and twirls for the cameras -

prophecy and prophet come at once.

She Buys a Canal Boat

She buys a delapidated old canal boat,
plugs the holes in the hull and keel,
paints the flashes and gunnels,
fires up the starter motor
with a stolen spark.

She has no windlass,
no lock key yet the locks
open for her, the waters level up.

On the omen of a bright blue dart
she names it 'The Kingfisher',
swears she will find him -

the Fisher King - and bring
an end to this wasteland of newspaper and cellophane boxes
swimming in algae with lost ducklings
beneath the weeping willows.

Yes by the swan's neck
connecting the rudder to the tiller,
by the necks of the swans curving in mating dance,
by the empty cans of Carlsberg and Stella,
by maggot and fish and fisherman

the question will be asked -
thrown out like a fishing line and the answer
will bite and she will reel it in, hold it, kill it, eat it.

She Visits the Capital

where it is said the great Lludd
'ruled in peace and prosperity',

sees no prosperity or peace only
rich men and poverty and riots.

She joins the ranks of children
with a sign bearing her name,

glues her butt cheeks to a bench
in the Houses of Parliament,

cocks a snuck at Theresa May.
When she is tired of rebellion

she searches for Ludgate, joins
the circus as a juggler riding on

the back of a white horse, tossing
the coloured balls of our fates.

She gatecrashes mass at St Paul's,
recites her version of the Apocalypse,

sings an englyn at the grave of Blake.
Where the sighs of hapless soldiers

still run in blood down palace walls
she cannot find Lludd or his gate.

Dwarf's Hill

She is the only one
who can see their ruddy faces,

read the lines on their palms etched in red
when they reach out to her as if she is a fortune-teller,

who can hear them knocking, the sound of pick and axe.
They offer to cross her palm with gold, silver, bronze, copper,

red ochre from the severed hand of Lludd Llaw Eraint himself
if she'll include them in her prophecies, make them great again,

no longer lowly maggots writhing lonesome in the earth.
"Where is his hand? Where is the Lord of the Mines?"

They look afraid, almost as if they've buried him.
But they are incapable of burying themselves.

She takes leave of Lydney, Lludd's Island,
Dwarf's Hill, the Temple of Nodens,

of the strange dwarves with axes,
fore-hoofs and serpent-tails.

She Goes North

To this land she comes -

to the town of Peneverdant
in the shire that was never Lancelot's
in the imaginary kingdom of Teyrnllwg,

streaming down my fingers onto the screen
like the daughters of Beulah down Blake's pen.

I sense her growing closer, the crackle of electricity
as she is drawn to the cave of the ancestors,
of the grandmothers further north.

I do not recognise her in the trolley,
in the supermarket waving from a pushchair,
even when she throws jelly, brings the bus to a halt.
She does not recognise me but she finds

the silver statuette dedicated to Mars-Nodontis
without the bleep! bleep! bleep! of a metal detector
and the lost Port of the Setantii, getting hotter

she slips like a seal into the water, swims
out to where his temple used to be.

She Finds the Fisher King

She sees the fish swimming
in and out of his wound – going in
slick and shining coming out
pale and flaking as the dead witches
who administer their potions
apply their poultices on some days
claim he is getting better sit
him out where sun touches water
on a boat put the fishing line
in his hands – one flesh one silver.

His wife comes to visit every
so often though he can't remember
her name and they haven't
slept together in living memory.

No-one knows what weapon
caused his wound – a poisoned spear,
a serpent's tooth, an invisible
arrow arising from the world of dream?

*Why can't the healer heal himself?
The dreamer dream his healing dream?*

Feelings arise in her like stigmata
and, for all her rubbing, will not go away.

She Takes a DNA Sample

She tells him to spit into a jar.

At first it takes him a while
to work up the spittle, tongue
working like a lamprey, trawling
the dry cavern of his palate.

Then it comes in a flood,
spilling saltily over the brim
with dying fishes cold and grey,
fragments of cockle shells

and pieces of ancient fossils.
She sees the story of his origins
before she breaks open the cells,
adds a protease, isopropanol,

puts it in the sequencing machine.
She reads the book of his life
ATCGTTCGGCAAGACTCA,
asks if he wants to know his destiny.

He refuses to believe his fate
is determined by his genes until
she splices out GWENWYN – 73,
tells him, whatever the variant,

dominant or recessive it is within
us all, embedded in the serpents of
DNA, just waiting for when we bite,
for the poison to spread and make

a wasteland of our noble worlds.

She Asks the Question

“What ails, you, old man,
old dying grandfather?”

What caused this wound
and this wasteland?

Why does this myth
linger on like you when

both should have ended
a long, long time ago?”

“Impudent child!” he
spits red herrings, shoals

with green herring disease.
“You come here and rub

more poison into the wound
of an old and dying king.”

“Poison is also the cure.”
She offers him the syringe.

“You know this – so why
have you not administered it?”

Why do you hang on waiting
for the answer to a question

that can never be answered
because you are the only one

who knows the answer and it
is lost with your memory?"

"There is a way to find it.
I was once the owner of a ring.

A golden ring forged by Gofannon
beneath Dwarf's Hill – the cause

of the wars and my wounding.
When I lost my arm I gave it

to my son – the King of Annwn.
After his battle on May Eve

it was stolen with his bride."
His ring-like pupils shine.

"Find it and it will grant you
knowledge of all times."

IV. The Golden Ring

The Beach of Lost Things

It's mainly the mundane
that gets washed up -

odd gloves and socks,
a pair of glasses or a watch,
the teddy bear you left at the funfair,

but sometimes it's the purse
that contained more than money,
the locket with a photo of
a departed loved one,

a missing person or forgotten dream.

It's rumoured the oyster catchers
picking through the sand

are emissaries
of the King of Annwn

searching for his ring gold-adorned
forged by Gofannon beneath
Dwarf's Hill -

two serpents
intertwined the shape of time
doubling back on itself
two worlds whole.

How he lost it no-one knows.
Orange beaks overturn every mile of sand.

Women with baskets search for lost cockle pickers.
Children spell the names of lost classmates in sea-shells.
Gatherers of sea weed weave rope from lost dreams.

Men arrive with metal detectors

and a little girl with an innocent smile
carrying a pink bucket and spade.

She Digs in Every Spot Marked X

She searches the whole map,
digging in every spot marked X,
finding only empty treasure chests
and mocking notes of thieves.

Where there should be monsters each is extinct.

She curses how the globe keeps spinning
on and on in spite of her frustrations

as she flies around it in endless circles,

comes face to face with the lapwing
who was stolen from Annwn by Amaethon
and realises the ring is off the map.

She Goes Fishing

There should be no need
for a NO FISHING sign beside
this hidden pool in the deep

where they know nothing
of the sun or circadian rhythms.
Their skins are white as leprosy.
Their eyes are red and blind
yet it's said they can see.

She comes like a bear cub,
catching hand ready, to where
they swim in their innocence,
unknowing predators, weak
from fasting for eternity.

It's far too easy where
it's pitch black as her heart
to grasp a pale slippery flash
of fish and flip it onto the shelf.
She hugs it to her chest for

just one moment like the lost
wisdom of the Otherworld then
administers the kiss of death.

With the nail of a forefinger
she slices it open, finds the ring -
two golden serpents intertwined
like the time of two worlds.

What will happen if she puts it on?

When she returns from the cave
her eyes are red from weeping.

The Answer

is too horrible to comprehend.

It is a paradox.

She wants to go back
in time and kill her grandfather
only she wouldn't have been born...

She gnaws and gnaws on the vicious circle.

She has seen but does not understand.

Gwydd was lost with the *gwyddon*
and *gwyddoniaeth* - the mad science of Gwydion
cannot teach us of the abyss where reason bites
its own tail like a serpent, coils up and dies.

She lies coiled, dreaming of death,
until the tread of a heel awakens her
to sink her teeth into an ankle, watch
the venom slowly taking effect.

She Cannot Remove the Ring

from her finger with soapy water,
butter, baby oil, Windex, or Vaseline.
It simply twists round and round
and the serpents bite deeper.

Holding her hand in the air
for ten minutes, plunging it into
cold water does not loosen it one bit
and twisting dental floss round her digit

only makes the serpents twine tighter.
She calls the Fire Brigade, sirens wailing
(but not as loudly as she with bright blue tears).
Their strongest ring cutter cannot cut it.

She goes to A & E, waits eight hours
to be told her only option is amputation
and there is a three year long waiting list.
“Not quick enough.” She buys a saw,

but when the serpents hiss and spit
realises she does not have the courage
to change the prophecy in which she had all
five fingers on each of her two hands:

she has no choice but to become it.

V. Doomsday

She Burns the Doomsday Book

the Magna Carta, the Bayeux Tapestry.

I see the name of my home town, Peneverdant,
Prestune, Waletune, Longtune in flames,

people running from the buildings
lost without the listings of their jobs -

plumber, teacher, electrician, planner,
doctor, cleaner, social worker, team leader,
manager, they mill about purposeless
on the greens without owners.

Chanting the name of my vocation
I type on beneath the Trysting Oak heedless
of the battery draining down to 99%

(soon my laptop will run on pure awen)

oblivious as Annwn's King in his castle
where Teirtu's harp plays on without
a player not missing a single string.

She Topples the Cathedrals

It's the gargoyles who draw her in -
they remind her of the beautiful wights
and beasts on the Towers of Annwn

with their strange Dormach-like grins.

The mahogany of misericordia calls to her,
the dragon who swallowed Saint Margaret.

She hears the opium-addicted poet called
Francis Thompson wrote 'The Hound of Heaven'
and views his copper bust in the museum.

She learns of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John,
how they took the guises of four living animals -
eagle, ox, lion, man and the Vision of Ezekiel
with the cherubim covered with eyes:

bodies, backs, wings, hands, wheels,

and in Revelations those four creatures
covered with eyes front, back, without, within.

She savours the term *apocalypse* 'revelation'
as it sounds like the name of a palette of paints
awaiting a mixer, an artist, an alchemist who
will wittingly or unwittingly bring the end.

But their end will not be as good as hers.

She is the descendant of the Dragon Goddess,
the Serpent Son, has more eyes within her than
the cherubim, the Zoas, the children of God.

Her laughter topples the cathedrals -

St Paul's, Canterbury, Winchester, Wells,
St David's, St Giles', St Magnus', St Walburge's

(which was always built on shaky foundations -
cotton bales and the story of a priest rubbing
a servant girl's knee with holy oil...).

She Plays Marbles with the Climate Scientists

who cannot defeat her version of the Earth,
still rolling blue and white, wrapped by beautiful clouds,
just like when the crew of Apollo 8 first saw it.

Just one thing missing - it's them

and the rest of humanity who cannot be seen

within the swirling artifices of her keeper marble,
which has never been knocked out of the ring,

which surrounds itself in mists in ghosts
like the castle of Annwn's King.

The Bomb To End All Bombs

She does not like colluding with Gwydion
or his wolf, stag, and boar-headed sons,
pristine in their lab coats with clip-boards,
pens, the glowing wands they like to tap
on their thighs when thinking up mad ideas.

She does not like their tours of their labs,
the trees and plants they are growing as warriors
to fight again against the forces of Annwn
or the beautiful, mournful flower women they take
to their beds every night against their will.

She does not like their flippant use of awen,
of the chemical elements uranium and plutonium,
of the sacred life of the stars to twist the course
of the universe nor their perversions of astrology,
lies presented as science in glossy magazines.

But she needs the Bomb To End All Bombs
that they have been building in a laboratory colder,
deeper, than the Svalbard Global Seed Vault
where they are hoarding the last seeds of wheat,
barley, rice, corn, to regrow after the disaster;

than the SNOLAB facility where they are listening
with four detector towers containing lattices
of silicon and geranium frozen to near absolute zero
for a particle of dark matter passing like a ghost
to ring the crystals, ding-a-ding, like an atomic bell.

She does not like pretending to agree it must never
be used, to the principles of double-binds, cold wars,
the fermenting of fear, of trouble, how it must never

be planted beneath Daronwy, the World Tree, how
she must never push the button, bring an end to it all.

Once she has stolen it she is troubled by its smell.
She does not like the way it speaks to her in dreams.
She does not like not knowing what they have created
has taken on a life of its own beyond their control,
how it keeps whispering to her she is the bomb.

She Breaks the Machine

She follows the call of quartz -
the tiny metronomic ticking heartbeats
to Caer Gofannon where the mighty smith,
with the biceps of his forearm
huge and hot as the sun,

is forging the machine
that will predict all future possibilities,
outwit her prophecies.

As she walks amongst
the furnaces, the manufactories,
the production lines where Gofannon's workers
are assembling the circuit boards

she is unsurprised to see Gwydion -

the brains behind the brawn overseeing all,
quick fingers setting right any wrong,

voice snappy as his augmented intellect.

The power lines of the pylons overhead
are crackling with the stolen electricity that will
be used to boot up the operating system,

to run the programme GWD10N 5983.

“This time there will be no ghosts in the machine!”
He declares with a sweep of his silver cape.

She cackles like a gremlin as the thunder rolls above
and the chariot wheels of Taranis can be heard,

the wheels of Ffortiwna in the heavens.

As across Prydain the clock towers of Big Ben,
Little Ben, St Pancras, Tolbooth Cathedral, City Hall,
Victoria Tower, Elizabeth Tower, Gravesend

strike midnight and the members of the Bulletin
of Atomic Scientists declare the Doomsday Clock's last toll.

She Meets a Wise Horse

He's sitting in a meadow,
cross-legged, long-eared, serene,
ragged brown with a black mane and tail
swishing out beneath him like fishing wire.

He greets her with a benign smile, yellow teeth,
grassy breath, tells her where she's going
she would be better carrying
a white flag than a bomb.

She does not want to hear the wisdom
of a Wise Horse, particularly when she notes
the stitching of the costume where the head
and the hooves have been sewn on.

It reminds her of when she visited Padstow
and saw the man beneath the 'Obby 'Oss,
the truth of the Mari Lwyd, Old Tup,
Old Ball, and Poor Old 'Oss.

“How long have you been in there Wise Horse?”

“How long have you been in there Little Prophet?”

“You are not wise to have become a horse
where Efnysien's blade cuts the lips of horses,
Rolande triumphs with beheading sword,
and Rhiannon, torn from her costume,
crawls on her hands and knees.”

The Wise Horse blinks liquid eyes serenely.

“Where is the ruler of the darkness of Thisworld?”

“If I didn’t tell you would you rip my head off?”

Glancing at the stitching where it was sewn back on she shakes her head – she is bored with cruelty.

“I’ll give you my costume if you give me yours.”

She Assassinates the President

Everybody wants to kill him -
even the most benign of old women.
Why does nobody dare? Why are there not
battalions of mobility scooters, waterproof covers
glinting deadly in the rain, concealing guns,
a horde of Zimmer frames and sticks
with secret weapons within?

Where are the assassins in their black suits
like black widow spiders scaling the walls?

Where is the gunman alone with one truth?

Why the delay between fury and gunshot?

Why must they always leave to somebody else
what needs saying, needs doing, the dirty work
to the one born with two bloodstained hands?

She waits until the night before Christmas
when he dresses up as Santa Claus, sits on his lap,
lists everything she wants – an end to climate change,
mass extinction, inhumanity, humanity, him.

When he gives his fake laugh, “Ho ho ho!”
she resists pulling off his fake beard, his fake hair,
when he gives her a present gives one back -

puts the bomb in his lap like a Christmas pudding.

VI. The End of Days

She Tries to Capture the Breath of the Wind

She has heard that he keeps the winds in
tyrau uchel eu helynt, Tylwyth Gwyn, talaith y gwynnt,
how he whistles them up and his host rides upon them,
how he calms them with a touch like his hounds,
how he digs the graves for exhausted storms.

She has walked the unmarked graveyards
and, to her exasperation, failed to find the names.
She has searched all the troublesome high towers -
the dark misty mountains without windows without doors,
found no locks to unpick without her lock pick.

She has tried to make a whistle from the reeds
trampled by the round hooves of his horse on his way
to the battlefield and summoned only marshland spirits -
will-o-wisps, Jack-o-lanterns, fairy lights circling her,
restless boggarts and the cold hands of the dead.

From an old spirit with a cracked leathery skin
she has learnt there is one he has failed to capture,
whose name he does not know – the Breath of the Wind.
Even the Catcher with his catching hand has not caught it.
She digs up an old Hand of Glory and makes a candle

with the fat of a dead man, a wick from his hair.
By corpse-light she will lure to her this playful spirit,
capture it in her bottomless sack until it tells her its name.
She knows if she can command the Breath of the Wind
she can control all winds, bring the end of this age.

Yet it dances mockingly with the flame and slips
through her dead fingers like the hair of the tail or mane
of one of the steeds of Annwn refuses to put its feet in the sack
instead puffs it up to fly behind her like a swollen corpse.
“I cannot be captured by any word,” it tugs her hair.

“Before the word is breath and after the word breath.”
A smile tries to tug at her face but she doesn’t give in to it.
Careful not to reveal that she has learnt its secret she douses
the candle, returns the hand to the grave, dispels the wisps,
and puts her head in her hands to conceal her triumph.

She Flips a Coin

“Heads – Summer. Tails – Winter.”

She flips the coin – it lands on tails as prophesied.

“The best of three,” she flips again and again.

Tails, tails, again and again, tails, tails...
a writhing mass of serpent’s tails.

It is Nos Galan Gaeaf and a cold wind
is whispering down her neck as she sees
the poison she will mix, daub on the blade
of Winter’s King so Summer’s King will
never again rise from Annwn’s graves.

The coin is cold and coated in hoar frost
as she slips it back into her purse, pulls
the strings sealing another’s fate.

She Draws Down the Moon

She dresses up as Wiccan High Priestess
in a purple velvet robe, a pentacle at her neck,
prepares wand, chalice, athame, on an altar,
stands in the goddess pose, arms spread
in a Y shape beneath the full moon.

“Come to me Llun, Luna, Selene,”
she calls to her by a hundred names,
fills herself up with radiant lunar energy
so she shines like a little moon, but does not
manage to move the moon one bit.

She goes to a pool where the moon
is reflected in the water, casts off her robe,
wraps it round the moon - “I have captured
your reflection and will not let it go until
you come down to me. If you don’t...”

She raises her athame to the sack.
The moon dims her face, bows her head,
and sinks down, dimming, dimming, dimming -
a cold rock like a stone baby to carry on
her back through a moonless world.

There will be no more months.

She Kills the Sun

She raises

the Blackbird of Cilgwri -
a shadow-puppet jerking upwards,
hanging black-sleeved and awkward above
the anvil on which worlds were forged,
now a heap of grey dust;

the Stag of Rhedenfyre,
or should I say his severed head,
blood running from the broken woodland
in the boughs of his tines where trees
have clashed and clashed;

the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd
somehow without her wings – poor
wingless owl with her head still turning
around and around with eyes
too wise for this world;

the Eagle of Gwernabwy
where the rock from which she pecked
the stars has disappeared, recalls the golden bird
falling again and again from
the top of Daronwy;

the Salmon of Llyn Lliw,
rides upon the bony spine
of this steadily rotting skeletal fish.
This will be his last ride up the Severn Bore.
Wisdom will be gone from the world.

“To death with wisdom!” She lays
out his bones on the river bank beside Caer Loyw
where she hears the son, the Mabon, lament
sorrowfully inside the House of Stone.
No witches to guard him now.

She is not Arthur to steal the light.
After tonight there will be no return of the sun.
No Heuldro y Gaeaf, Winter Solstice, Alban Arthan.
She will smother Mabon in his crib,
then put his body in her sack.

It is easy to pick the lock,
to find the Exalted Prisoner amongst
his toys – the Jack-in-a-box full of secrets,
the kaleidoscope showing all perspectives,
the Rubiks cube that spins in the air
like the King of Annwn’s castle
and of course the golden ball.
He is sleeping like a baby
beneath a mobile of huntsmen,
horses, hounds, and a huge silver boar
with a comb, razor, and shears between his ears.
Does she feel a pang of regret at cutting short
the destiny of a child like herself?
It’s him or I, she thinks grimly.

When the deed is done
she finds it eerie when the music box
starts up and begins to play Modron’s mourning song.
It’s very dark now, very, very dark and the sun
and the moon are heavy on her back
as she slowly feels her way.

There will be no more days.

She Raises the Dismembered Dead

She slips in through a hole smaller than a pencil,
evading the six thousand speechless guards,
scampers down the secret tunnels.

The King of Annwn's hall is empty.
Dark and silent as the expanses of his soul.
His hunt has gone - it has ridden and may never return.

She shivers at that thought yet within her a spark
of opportunity catches light and she uses it
to set fire to the kindling beneath
the pearl-rimmed cauldron.

It seems to frown at her,
mournful and ancient, as the water boils
and she throws in handfuls of vervain and hemlock.

If he will not bring back the dismembered dead I will.

She begins chanting their names from the very first
children of the Dragon Goddess – serpents
with two tails, wyrms with hundreds
of heads, stingers of scorpions,

the dismembered giants – Diwrnach, Awnach, Dillus,

the first warriors to be slaughtered, heads mounted on stakes,
torn apart and their limbs offered to the four winds -

chieftains like White Tusk, Running Mare, Red Flame,

to battle leaders, saints, rebels without a care
for sides, nationality, religion -

Oswald of Northumbria,
William Wallace, Thomas Baker,
Guy Fawkes, Edward Arrowsmith, Robert Emmet.

She sings them back along with all the ancient animals
who we have killed – heads, tusks, claws,
claimed as trophies –

elk, stags, aurochs, boars, wolves, desolate elephants, whales,

recites the names of all the tiny dismembered creatures –

rats, mice, rabbits, guinea pigs, pigs, dogs, snakes,
zebrafish, waxworms, fruitflies, all the flies
and butterflies little boys
have pulled apart.

This is her army.

She Plunges Her Hand

into the cauldron
clutches a star
it burns
but not as
she expected
for what is fire
but the transformation
of atoms – hydrogen to helium...

She is burning up – a shooting star!

All the transformations
inside her are shining –
she is a bull, a flower,
a radiant sword.

She is the first one
to seize her fate
to hang there still

to say “I am this star!”

To still the stirring
of the cauldron-stirrer.

To still the night in
the flat black waters
with the hole in her palm
and one eye bright.

(This is how I remember her
before she fell).

She Raises Her Flag

George the Dragon Killer has to go
with his ruddy cross on white
mocking the colours
of Annwn.

She wonders
whether to replace it
with white red-eared hounds,
the battle of red and white dragons,

or a lapwing bleeding from its right wing.
Instead she places the palm of her right hand
in red ochre and stamps the mark
of prophet and prophecy.

The Daughter I Never Had

has become the black hole sun.

She is a fearless leader of armies -
the dead, the half-dead, the half-men,
the half-women and half-remembered monsters
gathered from the nether regions of Annwn.

She rides a red dragon – a tiny figure
without armour in the white dress with the black bow
she will never wear to a birthday party because
she will not live to be a year old.

She leads them to meet the armies
of the Children of Don – the mutant plants,
flower and tree men and women and robots so human
they scream when they're cut and they bleed

yet they don't stop won't give up their ghosts.
Marching through the tide of blood up to their thighs
they keep coming like the march of technology,
heralding the triumph of the Age of Man.

It is as she has foreseen and she knows
what comes next – she must fulfil her destiny.
Her flesh begins to tremble like a tree in the wind,
like the bulrushes when the river floods.

Her body shifts within her skin – feet
and shins, palms and forearms to the rear,
heels and calves, knuckles and elbows to the front.
Her right eye sucks into her head so far

no heron or crane with his long beak
can reach in and pluck it out and her left
falls out as if on a slinky and hangs revolving.
Her cheek peels back from her jaw

and her heart appears in her mouth
pounding like a hound of Annwn amongst the dead.
No Champion's Light stands out on her forehead.
Just the darkness of the black hole

from which pours a fountain of blood -
the black fog the ointment of the Witches of Annwn,
the stream of poison that killed Gwyddno's horses,
the *gwenwyn* in her and within us pouring out

to drown the world before like the cauldron
of the King of Annwn, like the bomb
that she is, she EXPLODES!!!

VII. The Hereafter

Her Victory

should have tasted
like birthday cake but
it tastes like ashes.

She is unable to
get the taste of blood
and charred flesh

out of her mouth.
She fears she flocked
with carrion birds.

She fears she feasted
on the spread that looked
so appetising in words

but now makes her sick.
How she hates the crows
who will profit whoever

wins their black wings
blotting the falling skies.
They are the last things

left yet she curses them.

She Finds a Dying Crow

The dead world is covered
in dead crows - it doesn't take
an ornithomancer to decipher
that this is a very bad omen.

They are all dead except one.

How dare it live on? How
she hates the weak flap of its
wings and its feeble croak.

As she stares distastefully
into its black indomitable eye
she sees it is a messenger.

Its cracked black beak croaks
two words: "Orddu, Orddu."

She is Skin and Bones

like the crow around her neck.
A murder of ghost-crows is following her.
She has forgotten how to shoot, strangle, snap necks,
sometimes finds her hands at her own throat.
At other times she gasps for breath -
all she has now prophecy
has been forgotten.

“Oh Breath of the Wind
don’t leave me leave me please!”

She does not know how long
she has been wandering Pennant Gofid,
the Valley of Grief through ghosts and mist,
only that she found the treasure, became
the answer, and it’s harder to bear
than the weight of the crow.

The howling of wolves loudens.
The sky blackens with ghost-wings.

“It is time to lie down now, Little One,”
soothingly speaks the trusty beak of bone.

Beneath a grey towering rock like a dolmen
she curls up, hugs her companion tight.

“Let him go now – the Breath of the Wind.”

She lets him out, emptying her two sacks.

She floats with him, light, playful, up, up, up,
towards a fire-lit cavern where two figures beckon -

a crow-winged woman and wolf-skinned man.
The woman embraces her but the man is stern.

“It is early for you to come to Pennant Gofid.”

“I had to come, I couldn’t stand it anymore,”
she peeps from under the protecting crow-wing.

Crow, crow-mother, she realises, will protect her.

“What have you done?” she can see he knows
as she guesses who he is from the wolfish eyes
she has seen staring back at her in the mirror.

“There is no need to confess like a Christian.
Your only error was to steal what is mine.”

“Give it back,” says crow-mother, “and you
will see there is more than one answer.”

When she slides the ring off her finger -
rusty, tarnished, the two serpents gnawing
on their tails, she feels her burden lift.

The horror of time becomes golden, shining, beautiful,
when her father slips it on, like Annwn’s sun.

His kiss to her forehead is a blinding flash of light.

“My last daughter, my prophecy, go, return.”

She Plants Her Staff

'and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations'
Revelations

All she has left is her staff
and the answer that lies within her.
Looking at it remembering

the two serpents who coiled
around the ring, around the tree,
she sees what must be done.

Where Daronwy once stood
she plants her staff like a sapling
and waters it with all the tears

she has not cried for the dead
of the world our fury destroyed,
for the dead of all the worlds.

It grows up quickly, reaching
for the sky, longing to touch stars.
She puts the sun and the moon

into its arms. It cradles them
and bears strange, shining fruits
(please gods no more bombs).

She sees a world growing in
its boughs on mosses and ferns,
knows it is better without her.

With a final twirl, a final bow,
she steps like the fool into the void,
returns to before she was born.

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