

TRISTRAM'S BOOK /

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The story of Tristram is one of the oldest and most frequently retold tales that has come down to us from Western European literature. One can take it from this survival that the story has some powerful and fundamental truth — lies seldom outlive their immediate purpose, and nonsense decays even more quickly.

In retelling the tale, I've ransacked it — just as all my predecessors did — to draw from it whatever it can speak to in my own time. If any violence is involved it is not against the tradition of poetry, but rather against the novelty so pursued by my generation of artists. History as a progressive, light-creating force may be an illusion, but that doesn't disqualify the past as an educational utility. It should, in fact, renew it. The tradition of poetry can nourish us in the experiential loneliness of these times, in which the search for novelty has stripped language of much of its invisible resonance and threatens to remove everything but style from the contents of our art.

The story of Tristram (and that of Isolde — although her story remains to be properly told after ten centuries) is one of the tension between sexual passion and public duty. This is Malory's real subject, and one which is central to English literature in general. Tristram and Isolde are victimized both by their passion for one another and by the public duties that thwart and contradict that passionate love. Those duties are to an unjust social order and culture, but the society and culture are nevertheless more profound than either their imaginations, or their abilities to change circumstances. The two lovers endure the tension for at least thirty years without loss of love and without being able to change the complex set of social, cultural and political imperatives that separate them again and again.

The main historical source I have used for this book is Thomas Malory, who devotes nearly half of *Le Morte D'Arthur* to Tristram. The other important variants I've used, particularly in revising my text, are Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210), which gave me alchemical and courtly structures, and Jean Cocteau's remarkable movie, *The Eternal Return*, which instructed me to the contemporary possibilities of the tale. The opera by Richard Wagner has not been a factor.

Another important source of my text derives from eight anonymous Middle English lyrics sent to me years ago by the English poet Alan Horewood. Alan found the poems in the Archives of the British Museum and sent photocopies to me along with a note asking what

was I going to do about them. Approximately four years ago, I decided to try to turn them into contemporary language. Very soon after I began working with them, I found myself beginning to embroider on them. Before long, I began to write poems of my own that contained lines from the originals and offered commentary on them. The original poet was no master, and so the violation of the text was not criminal. Eventually I discovered that I had about seventy-five poems and the original eight lyrics had all but disappeared. The text here is shorter than seventy-five poems because many of them collapsed during revision and were discarded. Despite the absence of the originals, there are times when those first lyrics *are* speaking, and, of course, at other points it's clear that I'm talking. Malory's voice can also be discerned, and, occasionally, the sonorities of Gottfried are audible. Finally, what interests me most about the text is the possibility of yet another voice — the voice of Tristram himself. There is a voice in these poems that isn't mine, and it doesn't belong to any of my literary sources.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Gordon Lockhead and Jack Spicer in developing this text, and the generous aid given to me at several stages by Karl Siegler, who not only taught me a great deal about this kind of translation, but also listened carefully to my blunders and offered editorial assistance. Similar thanks go to Lois Redman for her editorial intelligence on several major occasions. It is my hope, as it has been my ambition for several years now, that the voices in this book will rekindle for readers an old and truthful story, and by its light, allow us to see where we've been, what we are, and where we are headed.

Gabriola Island and Vancouver, B.C.
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Tristram was born in a small kingdom somewhere in southwestern England or northern France — some have it one way, others another, depending on their own cultural and geographic loyalties. It doesn't matter much, really, nor does the time of his birth, which was a summer afternoon around the time of King Arthur.

Tristram was born of a singularly vigorous and handsome young king and the beautiful younger sister of a middle-aged bachelor king of Cornwall named Mark. The story has it that Tristram's parents fell in love and eloped with Tristram already in his mother's womb. A few days before Tristram's birth, his father was killed in battle and his grief-stricken mother died in childbirth. Before she died, she held her newborn son and, looking out across a poppied meadow, named him Tristram.

Isolde was the daughter of the King and Queen of Ireland. Her mother, also named Isolde, was a powerful healer who taught her daughter that uncommon skill. The younger Isolde was called Isolde the Fair, and she was known near and far as an intelligent and extraordinarily beautiful woman.

The world of Tristram and Isolde was the Arthurian world, which is to say, a world of political and religious intrigue, small and vulnerable national kingdoms, and heavily structured systems of loyalty and commitment that were meant to provide human beings with the means to live within the maelstrom of war and venal ambition around them. Tristram entered that world when, after an education that made him a master of music, hawking and hunting, he came as a young man to live in Cornwall with his uncle. He was handsome, tall and muscular, and skilled in battle beyond his years.

A short time after Tristram arrived, a huge knight, the brother of Queen Isolde of Ireland, landed in Cornwall to extract from King Mark a tribute of money and young women. As was the custom of the day, the tribute would have to be paid unless this knight, called the Morholt, could be defeated in single combat. No one in Cornwall would fight with him — least of all King Mark. Young Tristram then offered himself as Cornwall's champion, demanding that his uncle allow him to fight for the honour of his adopted king and land. Mark accepted the offer.

A long and vicious battle ensued. It ended in victory for Tristram, who drove his sword through the Morholt's visor into his skull, where a shard from the sword broke off and remained. Tristram did not

escape injury either; the Morholt wounded him in the groin with an envenomed sword.

Lacking the expected tribute, the Irish ship departed the harbour at Tintagel, bearing the corpse of the Morholt with the shard still lodged in his skull. Tristram quickly sickened with his poisoned wound. No cure could be found for him, and a soothsayer made it known that a cure could be obtained only in the land in which the venom was brewed. So Tristram was transported to Ireland, put ashore and abandoned by men rightfully fearful for their Cornish lives. He waited there for what was to befall him, playing on his harp sad songs, songs to ease his passage into death's dark kingdom. But death did not hear him. Isolde the Fair heard him, and she marvelled at the lonely music, its sadness and its beauty.

Isolde the Fair took him in and healed his wound. He, in return, played for her pleasure and soon they were friends, walking together across the flowering heath day after day until his strength returned. It was in Ireland that Tristram first killed a dragon, one that had long tormented the land, and with that brave deed he paid the debt of his healing.

At length he thought of returning to Cornwall, and began to prepare for the voyage. Isolde came to his chamber as he was laying out what he needed for the passage. She saw his sword, which he had carelessly left exposed, and noticed the notched blade. She recalled the shards taken from the skull of her uncle, the Morholt, fitted them with Tristram's sword, and felt all her affection for the young man turn to rage and hate. She grasped the sword and would have slain him but was prevented by Tristram. Tristram was allowed to escape Ireland with his life, but only because the King thought it ill to murder a guest, no matter what the provocation. He then sailed back to Tintagel, carrying with him the enmity of Isolde the Fair and the knowledge that a return would mean certain death.

So Tristram returned to the castle of King Mark and to the rejoicing of Cornwall's people. Once there, Tristram sang the praises of Isolde the Fair to one and all, and especially to King Mark. Mark, for his part, quickly grew envious of this young man who had saved his kingdom and was more beloved by the people than himself. He therefore devised a cruel plan to rid himself of Tristram.

King Mark demanded, since this Isolde was so fair, and since he, Mark, was both queenless and without an heir, that Tristram return to Ireland to obtain the hand of Isolde the Fair in marriage for him. This was an apparently impossible task and certainly a hateful one in

the safest of circumstances, for Tristram's praise of the young woman who healed him grew out of desire and not merely gratitude. Yet Tristram had no alternative, because it was his nature and the nature of the times for him to do the bidding of his chosen King. He left in sadness and with little hope.

By a fortunate turn of winds, his ship became lost, and Tristram found himself in the realm of King Arthur, where, by chance, also was the King of Ireland, who had been summoned there by accusations of treason and commanded to do battle for his honour against Sir Blamor de Ganis, cousin of Sir Launcelot. The Irish King feared for his life until Tristram championed his cause and defeated Blamor, receiving as his prize an irretractible boon. The boon Tristram asked, after some hesitation, was the hand of Isolde in marriage — not for himself, but for King Mark.

From that time to the promised marriage, events passed as they were meant to, except for one. Isolde was unhappy at the prospect of marriage to an enemy, a middle-aged uncle of the man she had sought so lately to kill. Her mother, Queen Isolde, gave to Brangwen, the lady-in-waiting to Isolde the Fair, a potion made of wildflowers. This potion had the singular property of giving whoever drank it a lifelong passion for the person first looked on afterward. The Queen instructed Brangwen to give the potion to Isolde and King Mark in their chambers after the nuptials in order to seal their marriage with delight in one another.

But as the ship carrying Tristram and Isolde neared Tintagel, they grew thirsty, and, finding nothing to drink, they searched through the luggage and found the bottle that contained the potion. It looked and tasted like wine — a very good wine — and they drank it all in the presence of the other. They conceived a passion for each other they could not deny, then or ever.

There were resultant intrigues. Mark inevitably found them out, and began actively to seek Tristram's death. Tristram was exiled, Tristram returned and was exiled again. Directly and by stealth, Mark repeatedly sought to kill him, and each time was thwarted by Tristram or by fate. After each such attempt, Tristram sought reconciliation with his King. After one of the attempts, Tristram took Isolde from Tintagel into the forest. They discovered a cavern carved by giants from an earlier time, known in legend as the Cave of Love. This cavern had vaulted walls of alabaster, floors of grass-green marble, and a bed of crystal. There they stayed, sustained by their passion and what game Tristram could hunt up — very little, since

the forest itself was nothing more than a large glade in the wasteland of King Pelles. They remained there for some months, perhaps even a year, until, weak with hunger and illness, they were discovered by King Mark. A reconciliation was effected (for, whatever else can be said of King Mark, he too loved Isolde the Fair) and Tristram and Isolde returned to Tintagel.

Several years later, the two lovers again grew desperate with their life that was at once together and apart. They quarrelled, and Isolde told Tristram that he must leave and never return. At this, Tristram went mad and, for some seven years, roamed the moors and forests of England. Little of these years is known, except that, at length, Tristram was captured by King Arthur's knights and his sanity returned to him under the care of Guinevere and others at Camelot. The two lovers were reunited there, and both were greatly honoured by that fellowship.

More years passed, some in exile, some in Cornwall. Time and time again Mark tried to break the bond of love between them by seeking Tristram's death, and time and time again Tristram fended off the attacks and sought conciliation. On more than one occasion he saved the venal Mark from the ire of Arthur's knights.

The third episode takes place in France, where Tristram travelled to help a young Duke named Cariados. This duke had a younger sister who was also named Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands. One day, some time after the Dukedom had been secured from its enemies, Tristram, now a man of around fifty, sat by the seashore with his harp, singing songs in praise of his Isolde. Cariados came upon him and, thinking the songs were meant for his sister and wanting to repay the debt he owed to his much-loved benefactor, devised to have them marry. Tristram was too worn with care to refuse and, seeing no alternative save the gravest of insults to Cariados, married the young woman. Yet, true to Isolde the Fair, he came to his senses and did not consummate the marriage, revealing to the younger woman his lifelong love of the other Isolde.

News of the marriage travelled to Isolde the Fair, and she, half-crazed with love and rage, sent word to Tristram of her rage alone, and that she would not consent to see him ever again. Tristram grew despondent and, letting down his normal guard, fell prey to one of Mark's assassins, a dwarf cousin who had long dogged Tristram's way and, who, in the dark of night, managed to wound Tristram in the groin with an envenomed spear. Tristram wasted slowly away and, on his deathbed, asked that word be sent to Isolde the Fair, for he

had known for long that in her alone was to be found a cure.

Tristram instructed the messenger to raise white sails on the returning ship if Isolde the Fair was coming to his side, black if she refused. Isolde of the White Hands heard these words and, as a white-sailed ship came into harbour bearing Isolde the Fair, Tristram, too weak to rise, asked his unloved wife what colour sails the ship bore to the winds, knowing black sails would be his funeral shroud.

"The sails are black," she said.



Feathered Love lives in our days
a different darkness in the thicket
of our habits, the disguises
we believe and cohabit
from day to sunny day. This Love
has built a cave in us
in forest dense, so leafy, green
we believe it free
of prior human knowledge, the City
of Fulfilled Desire
we were told as children to expect.
But spread out across its streets
we find its contradiction, light
that has no warmth and frothing acid mists
that kiss each shrivelled leaf with rust
beneath which crowds of silent strangers
vent their rage on everything; each passing day
presents a constant threat of winter
empty thickets fill with sparrows
and beneath their feathered shelter
we cohabit in the darkness
of the cave.



Dark ships in the distance
and the search for home

which is no home, is
eternally unfamiliar, home

of hidden enemies and dragons.
In the old times

there was forest and meadow,
hearth and home. Nothing grew

or flew beyond the range
of heart or hawk. But now

these dark ships come and go
and heavens, oceans, lap this

foreign shore that is my home
where each familiar thing

is further exile. I
have sung, and harped, and held my tongue.

I have beaten on the earth
with mind and body. Yet every thing

comes down to distances and
ships. And they

go nowhere.



A lousy bargain I was given
Tristram sad in exile

in return for an eternal love.
Sadness takes the comfort from home

no love is possible
to have and hold

without home. Taken
from me, given

in return
this eternal return

looking for you where no love
can thrive. This

is the first forest
I lost you in.



Love blossomed
and within the petals blossomed
death, the upland meadow
by the sea let go
its sturdy flowers, wild and simple
and in my heart they
undermined my hearth and home.
You came from their midst
sought first to heal my wounds
then in anger sought to kill.
And from the gathering of you
and flowers no one else will ever know
came a storm, a love
where neither rage nor mercy had a place.
It broke into the world
and took us both.



Wake up staring as if
a dream, or nightmare

Rain in the forest, all things
cold and wet, May

This isn't supposed to happen.
Damn the defences memory makes

against the present
even those of the Beloved

against the rude love I bring
to this cave in the woods, my armour
creaking with rust, intact.



In a dream I see the threat
that brought me to this forest

finally brings me to leave. So
I go in and I go out again

now in white armour, now in black
riding a horse, or on foot and in rags.

Do you remember the tin woodsman?
He had no heart at all, looked everywhere

to find one because the source
and the sustenance of feeling

is always external, beyond
the immediate body, thru which

I recognize a growth
of feeling, not just

do you love me, can you prove it
but rather, loving you, in sadness, loss

of heart. Yes
Ladylove, the forest.

The forest.



In the forest
there was no one else to talk to
but you. Often
you seemed yet another
dragon, out to devour
life, love, forest and I to you
was often just a beast that strayed
into your private meadow.
So now we live alone,
unable to avoid these fears
that dragons, beasts
are part of life and love
of you and me.



I could run wild and crazy
all thru the forest
for love of you

and have. Now
I'm getting old
and savage
and let's see

are you fair
are your hands slim and white?

Ah yes
I'm getting old and savage
with remembering
the tangled paths of forest

where such distinctions
harbour dragons

and the memory
of you.



Tristram is destined for sadness, sadness
in love, sadness at each birth, the death
of the Beloved, each love born in sadness.
I'm getting deadtired of births

and rebirths. Can't I be done
being born, done with childhood.

Someone else is always king:
fathers, brothers, husbands, even long

lost lovers. All I do is
go on slaying dragons, ride by the lake

around my sad sad heart this
stupid always reborn armour.

Why can't I have what I want. Why
can't I be around you always.

Despite the sadness of my birth
I want to give my arms

to you, that land and body
surrendered to the joy

of you.



Fealty I swore to the King
my body & my land I gave
fealty to the goodness & cheer
of Arthur's honest knights
fealty I swore to the mystery
of Love's unearthly Light
& fealty now & almost always
to you.

Faith I broke
with King & land
seldom do I ride in company
of my chosen brethren
& Love's ways are a great
& marvellous bitterness.

Yet to you I look
with the eyes of a child
my Wife, my Queen
my Sister my



Necessity is all of our mothers
finally. There
is a certain comfort in her, rebukes
your passivity & my rage
& my passivity & your rage —
our daemonic passions common
as dust & motherlust.
She invented us, brings us
corruption. & now
she will desert me
in your form



The forest magic does not forbear
the shadows of the city

Each glade and leafy path
becomes a city street, a parking lot

and fears are neither foreign
nor absurd. Whatever else we have

I am no king and
never will be. His

venal rage is all around us
with His guile

I bow before the honor of His person
while before his loveless power

this and every other forest burns.
These fears can teach us nothing.

I wake up sweating from our dream
to find His sword between us

where I'd placed my own.



Dragons of Life and Death
are born and nest

in the things we say and do.
Thirty years is a long time to love.

I will love you
more than thirty years.

What evil has been done to me
I forget, but then I forget

much that was goodness. Sorrows,
moss, remembered pain

in the crotches
of these blossoming trees.

Yet I am neither hawk nor sparrow
and when the thousand sparrows mass

and swarm a single tree
I have nothing to sing, nothing

to do with Life or Death.

Only the tree knows the weight

of sparrows and of hawks, and of dragons
and the things we say and do.



I had great joy
of you. Had
great joy of you
alone, those lovely
lonely days alone
in the cave with you
each morning sitting by the doorstep
in the sun, our walks in the forest
far from everyone. There
was nothing and no one
but you. And now I think
if only all of it
could be true
great joy. But
alone. And
I am.



Three windows of the Crystal Cave
are Kindness, Humility, Breeding.

The light of enchantment is sweet
by which I read the cheap mysteries

left behind by others, stories of kindness
stories of humility. So

we aren't the first to come here
we won't be the last. The stories tell me

of how easily kindness and humility run
from the threat of pesticides

and from the ravages of wild beasts and strangers.
I turn over on the cold slab

to touch you, bored with mysteries
but the third window is gone.



Love's Cave is green crystal, brilliant
bottlegreen light around us, green forest

beyond, and beyond the pale green sea. Yet
our lovemaking merely drove us crazy

our groans and cries brought back the great beasts
from the age of magic.

But we were fearful of their heavy passage
and slaughtered most —

the magic potion overturned
as madness, meant for another time

the primal lovers long departed
before this mortal drunkenness began

before the practical problems
of meat and drink, and how

to live in caves.



In the real forest I've heard only
the sound of your heart quickening,
no belching dragons, no clatter of weapons
running my tongue along your blood

blossoming labia. Nothing in the forest
compelled me like your sweetness

like no other in my life
no other such

complex symmetry. Last night's
so recent memory

of bottlegreen light, dazzling
crystalline foliage opening into

the dark of your pink black muscle
of pleasure blossoming light

as pure as it can be, neon streets
and the endless arguments of living

subdued by the light from the cave
in the dark of it uplifted

in my hands, moving
mouth on mouth

into the sweetscented
lover's kiss.



Only a fool believes a single fire
can burn down a whole forest.

Yet in the face of ordinary logic, love
is a torch in the hand

of a pyromaniac. Or is it ordinary logic
in the face of love.

Between these, ordinary lovers hold hands
and build small fires to keep their love alive

believing in small fires and the existence
of the whole forest.

In the face of which
despite love and logic

it begins to rain.



If this is a Magic Forest
why is it raining? Love
this passion isn't magical, isn't
even fair. We can't go on
with our ordinary lives
and now we have to stay
inside this stupid cave
just to stay out of the rain.

Why don't Angels protect us? Where
are the police?

The only thing I can see in abundance
is the rain, which keeps coming
and coming, spreading mud and moss
across the marble floors.



Companionship at night, peaceful waking
in the morning's light, but now

I know too much about you to fool myself
with dumb delight

at what you say. Your form is changed
the smallness and the hard animal muscles

along your back and thighs are new
and these are the things I want to have and hold

as if holding you
will deny the pain

of your desertion.
I'm not fooled by anything

that doesn't consummate our ancient story
and my return to the forest

the streets
the other light



Out in the harbour
steel boats of trade and commerce
unload their slime and goodness from Eurasia
more wires and oilsucking junk
to mob our days with false reports
of capital gains and news
of trips to nowhere. I grow sick of listening
sick to death with talk of ships
of how we came to ground amidst them
how that wondrous thirst came upon us
how we drank up all the city's blossoms
how I touched your body
after months of waiting. Great
steel boats are rusting in the harbour
the wires and junk flower in a hundred thousand bodies
just like ours. I am sick
of blossoms, sick of memory,
sick of this thirst for you
that steers me far from thought
of human commerce, far
from what the harbour
really has to say
of how the city truly flowers.



June comes
following May

may June be followed
by more and more of you.

I can't get enough of you
each week, month, getting enough

gets more like the struggle
for simple sustenance. Each day

I see more in you, more to you
than I ever dreamed as a younger man.

But younger men see nothing,
drink poison willingly.

Freud believed there are witches in the cave.
Sixty years later, despite the evil

common traffic of bodies and souls,
I've seen no witches, rather

pain and plenty, and as the seasons pass
I see a green light

turn to red, and back
to green.



You weren't supposed to love
two of us, but

you do. That
isn't in the story.

These days you have to love yourself most
understand the limits to the forest & the story

as a play
upon our lives. Not words

but that our love is alive
& these words may or may not

outlive it.
Even if the story will.



You weren't supposed to love
two men.

That isn't the story. But
you do and despite

the confusion it creates, the story
is still true.

Oh well.

I'm no good at my job either —

most of those dragons defeat me.

But I do want to love you well — I want you

to love me

and to live with me in splendour.

Even if we have to kill the king.

That isn't in the story either, but

outrageous measures are needed, death
is the end

of both love and confusion
and the story.



It's been so long I can't remember
why sleeping with you was so great

I would spurn everything alert and alive
for the touch of your sleeping hand. Love,

what was it? It's been nearly a week.
The green crystal light

is a blue fog, Diana Ross
on the FM sounds like

the end of the world. Maybe
I killed all those dragons for you

for nothing, just heat
inside my helmet. Maybe

there were no dragons, no castles
not even windmills. Just

women and men, men and women
and infant dreams

of pure crystal.



Love stories grow into stories
of endurance. True love
endures
& so the story told right
lasts forever, is repeated
by a few bright lives & defeated
by many more in the dark.

There are wolves gathering in the meadow
and beyond the ridge of the wooded vale
missile silos threaten the coming day.

This world has grown old, old & bitter
from enduring the failure
of human desire. I turn to you for comfort
in the barest light of the new moon

to tell you all I know of love
& of endurance. But often
you're a brightness I can't bear
the glare of
or you are gone.



You're someone else's wife, wife
of no one. Along the way

I've forgotten
who it is I am

to love, who I am
to myself gets lost in

where and who I've been to others.

And who are you? I've lost

all memory of where it was
this secret ecstasy was born

and why we fled into this forest
grows more transparent and defenseless

every day. I read somewhere
we've come to find the mother in the woman

father in the man, and the meeting place
of all those things together in the sun.

Instead it's wife and husband
and unexpected terrors

seep from our desire: for me
that no one will ever know me

for you
that I am no one.



The exact formality of this forest light
locks us forever in the memory of delight

which prevents the darkening thought
of who we are, & how, & what

are the proper contents of a human life
where do we live

& how. How can I stay
with you without

thought of the surrounding world
that to our love is dark

locked up so formally
in the memory of delight.



Aw,
it isn't old age
or the clammy dullness
of a particularly lousy winter's day.

It's the times, & the single moment of drink
I wasn't even deceived
in the taking of. True love blossomed
like the memory of childhood
& I drank it in as a newborn babe
takes its first breath. & now

the times send me about these streets
looking for
not love
but the cause & source
of memory's delight.



Now you are gone
and memory fails me, anger
grows into darkness
draws from each and every thing
its light and colour. All substance
fades without your presence
even pain and pleasure are forgotten.
I am trying to remember
you, your hands
your arms your shoulders
your breasts your stomach your
body hair your buttocks your labia your
thighs your calves your ankles
your feet the soles of your feet
on my shoulders your
cries your whimpers your shudders your
smell your lips your eyes
your forehead your
hair your neck your darkness
your love your
absence.



I've forgotten nothing particular
of where and in what
I've sought and found love.

There is no Goddess of the Corn.
There are no tractors
that can plough and plant this meadow. Just
imaginary powers, dreams of peace
and our unending waste of time and heart.
As if our lives were endless in their acts.

But looking out across the barren meadow
there is little we can show, our meagre energies
are wasted, our stories untold or mistold

or pointless, as if we alone were there
as if there is no Goddess of the Corn
no endless lines of waiting tractors, as if

there are only endless acts
of love, and the particular hulks and wrecks
that rise up like statues to imaginary powers

and our unending waste
of time and heart.



Objecting to the quality
of the love you give me
is like complaining about the weather
in the middle of a blizzard.

On the sunny days
we've spent together, Beloved,

I was the King of all
I could see. The sky

the limit. And in the flight
it gave me I forgot

about the winter ice and snow
the sparrow that starves

thru each succeeding storm
living off pine cones and crumbs, complaining

to coyotes
of the weather and of

the quality of love.



God damn that silly bravado
gets me thru these ambushes.

I give it up to loving you & I give up
what caused you to love me

in the first place. I knew no one
in the way I know you, & now

I can know no one else
without the fear

of an ambush
& you.



Does desire remain
immediate, or does it
like the heart grow cold and skillful
in returning to the source
of its most hidden dark delight
like some once-wild beast
made tame by satiety and pleasure
or by drugs it doesn't see or fight.
How lonely and fated it is, how far
from the mysterious clean bodies bright
with other possibilities
since I drank of you
I can never quite get it up for.
In the heart of this forest we devised
a strange loneliness breeds
without desire
for the wildflowers
growing in the meadow
beyond its sight



In the Hall of Statues
there was one resembled you
but she was cold, unmoving
like the world before you came
& you constructed me & I constructed you
of flesh & blood & flowers at last
made real. But here
the bird I made to sit upon the slender
female arm I made
won't fly, won't leave the nest
of flesh & blood you are
made out of time
& memory gone bad
from sitting in the heart too long alone
for fear of flesh & blood
made real, and cold.



On this dreary winter's morning
I dream of your return and then awaken

to a snowy winter's morning
alone. *Good Morning*

Heartache, good
is the most rare of love's

few sane accomplishments.
Acts of dream or acts of will

mean nothing to the wind today, it
stirs the cold white mantle on the meadow

where once the blossoms softly . . .
Despite the dream, the acts of will

that never quite succeed, despite
this dreary winter's morning

I think of blossoms and what
they are and do, and

put an end
to heartache and to goodness.



Doing penance for a liberty
I can't use, for the absence
of things worth doing and for human love
struck down by life
sucking daemons even if they don't have licences
drive us to and fro
and sometimes crazy. Does anyone out there
know what I'm saying?
Save me?
No.
Help me make it thru the night? The night
is a pleasant place, rather
there is an emptiness
to this liberty
like being unemployed
in a general crisis. Every thing
is done wrong, or done
to pleasure someone else
not myself or my Beloved
and nothing tells us what it is, and what
it does to us. The struggle these days
is to care at all, will go on
for thirty more years
grows too difficult to continue
to ignore.



Do I Love You, asks Nina Simone
on the record player, moaning

for the fiftieth time this week
now it's true she does

love you and in the next cut
destroys the illusion by saying

Baby, get lost.
And I ask you

who listens to those lyrics
but a few fools

looking for the perfect symmetry of emotion
once found is denied by the next

perfect symmetry. The Perfect
Emotion is like the Perfect Poem

no stable vocabulary or subject
just language and a vague melody

you and I know all too well
as do the dragon-builders

and the flowers in the meadow.



Oh sure, personal idiosyncrasy
& the complex network of nerve & absence
of nerve, genetically reprogrammed
all in order
to wake up terrified at the possibility
of proper care & attention
to the tender rituals of love. I thought
“tendrils” & of my love of vines
& felt the entanglement of
fear & desire choking out
the things we are or
might yet be.



Tristram, tired of desire, desired
to go home. But there was no home

to go home to, his mother
a mossy stone in the meadow

the castles destroyed or imaginary
the forests burned & his people

dispersed by famine & greed.
Not a single familiarity left

for the sake of memory. For the sake
of himself & desire

he didn't go home.



Times of plenty times
of woe, as if every pleasure
isn't enough.

I tell you over and over I love you
love you, you woman I adore as no man
will adore you

and you're asleep,
having your period, grumpy at the absence
of meaningful work and the nights
are too damned hot for comfort
and I'm burning up

with lust for you long past midnight
as if our lives weren't separate
aren't falling away from the other
nearly as fast
as we draw them halfheartedly
together. As if we know

every pleasure
isn't enough. Times
of plenty times
of woe.



The Course of True Love
leads to sadness, uncovers rage
that makes the springtime blossoms
drop from the trees, & the trees
bear fruit that wouldn't tempt a pig.
Were it not for the products
of True Love's Course
I would beg you to live with me
in plain sight
of the bad eyesight of pigs
& men & women in pain.



The Crystal Cave is after all
imaginary, after all we've done
to make of it a fortress
for our love
or is it loneliness
and therefore why we are
so hungry all the time, so locked in
by the events of love everything else
storms against. If god is love
god damn the bits of broken glass
the weather washes back and forth
along the city streets
I walk each night alone
inside the Crystal Cave.



Crystal
is too fragile
for the crisis we face.
Each crystal of the cave
is unique, is
as permanent as snowflakes
are unique, recurrent.
I have no idea why I love you
as I do, as if
there would be no life possible
without you,
as there will certainly
be life without you.



Alas the brief day
of our love

long the endless nights
now you are gone. And

so on and so forth, also
endlessly. Go thru the formalities

I tell myself, it isn't you
but The Return is endless.

There will be others, many others
to grace my lust and life only

I don't believe a word I say.
I fear the brief day

and The Return which now
returns uneasily, or not at all

you haven't really left. So
pay no mind to the returns you get

and less to those of mine. Mere
formalities. Like this formality

is only to admit to you
who cannot know and may not care

I wake up in the night
covered with sweat and

the formality
of your absence.



Each leafy kingdom
falls, and all

that's ever settled is
I love you

and that there isn't heart enough
for love and duty both.

Alas, my Lady. Such
ancient words. They are

like dragons on these streets
where people talk of little

but the drugs and drink
that empty words

or join the roaring
clamour in the alley

or the nightwinds blow
and lost dogs whimper in the dark.

Leafy kingdoms
sodden in the rain

or stripped and ragged
from the crawling insect day

where summer strokes the meadow
with its ancient breath

and time is torment
or love's death.



*Still forest, leafy glade,
and something tells us*

*desire is near, is questing
always has
and there is nothing
you or I or anyone can do.*

*It brushes past us, stinking, sweating
howling all at once like forty hounds in heat
the Magic Questing Beast of Yore.*

I curse the Questing Beast.
I call a halt to such excesses
curse the forest
curse the Cave of Love itself.

I'm tired of that which makes a world
of only lust and love
and separates intelligence from both.

*Still forest, leafy glade.
Desire afoot and we
but sweating messengers
of what will not be held
or made to work an honest day*

Time on time I've heard
the eerie shrieks and whistles in the woods
felt every instinct reach for it
as music to the savage breast.

I've traced its scent
to oilslicks on the lake my heart has made
by damming up the things I've heard
and things I've done or chosen not to do.

I've seen the broken moments fall
until the hulks begin to dot the meadow

as much a part of it
as flowers are in spring.

*Still forest, leafy glade.
The Questing Beast is my delight
turned to mechanics, leads
to nothing, touches nothing.*

I can't find you in it, can't
find anything of warmth and sustenance

wake up in these cities
of mechanical desire.

No forest, leafy glade. You
have vanished and I am left
with a Questing Beast
and junk that overwhelms
the memory of delight
and of the wildflowers
and the meadow.



Enchantment that lasts an entire lifetime
is one thing, turns the world
into a single blessed
excruciating obsession.

But if it lasts only two years, three
the hangover is unbearable, the victims
become saints & madmen in tales told
by old men & women with bitter hearts.

So you tell me it's over, the enchantment
a memory half pain, half
pleasant walks on the beach
feeling lonely & good
about how much pleasure it all was. Nothing

anyone can make of the tyrant king, Duty
calls like the braying of donkeys, Vogue
magazines lie open on the table between phonecalls
from friends & clients, white wine
from France, dinner parties, trips
to the islands with new & pointless lovers.

& I can't shake off
the hangover, nor the fatal pride
that demanded a life-long enchantment
when all there was to it
was two human beings
in the opacity of a world
where no magic can be believed
drunk with smelling & touching
one another & the great beasts
of an ancient story

where human paradise & possibility
are a forest, a city, a drinking in
of the other
against the countless dragons
of everything else.



Axes in the forest, then
chainsaws, and the woodcutters
falling trees into the lake. They
always find us and ask questions.

Who are you? And
Why did you come here? Dante's

dark lake or Heidegger's
path of the woodcutter. Each
is a clearing grown questionable.
One leads to a singular willful

being and the other
is the darkness

ancestors rise within
to feed upon our pleasure
and drift away
disappointed at its mortality.

We all seek light
and so what? The lake

is thoroughly polluted and the chopping
goes on unabated. Chop, chop.

Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop.
Better to find a way

requiring neither drowning
nor this stupid lumbering.

Some harvest of light and goodness
together, and a decent city

that will last for years
in the dark forest.



TRISTRAM

sad at the impossibility
of satisfactory love

finally admitted. Like loving
a dragon — too many spines

too much foul air, slime in the bed
with the precious gems. After years

and what seem years and years of
relative hardship

what did he drink? What
were those wildflowers?

Did he drink anything
but a good vintage wine

that cost three times what it should have?
There is no triangle, no trinity

no threefold goddess
just a goodness

that is three times the agony
of its functional value. The

dragon
he woke up to.



But One Tristram, One Isolde

Each thing truly known
reveals a dark, each

loving moment truly asked for
finds its beam of light resolved

in treachery. Ah, Isolde, Isolde
across the variant ocean

grey as office buildings in the dead of winter
the dull mechanics turn their wrenches

back and forth across desire and purity alike
and neither of them dies

nor moves the vast enameled suckers
from our poisoned wounds

that vomit sadness which
bespoils the blossoms.

Instead of time, that
washing over time completes it,

a tide of bodies, eager lovers,
passing vagrants, drunks

the dragon eats. Enough
of featherbedding talk.

A new desire grows disrespectful
of the difficulty,
rolls and tumbles all my halfborn sadness
in the laughter of my children
growing up within the sunny days I make
that growing bold and certain
with their streaming flowers
ferment with simple memories
of pleasure and of goodness.
Ah, Isolde, Isolde,

There is no constancy,
no memory upheld except
by what can turn the dark
to truly know and ask again.

I have cared for others, I was touched
by others, more than one has held me,
yet another cured me, yet another
holds me in the crystal light.

I was a sparrow and a falcon.
I am a songbird in the end.

I see that each thing
truly known and asked for
drinks in the crystal fragments,
but one Tristram, one Isolde.



THE CAPILANO REVIEW

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TRISTRAM'S BOOK Brian Fawcett

COVER Joost Bakker

EDITOR FOR THIS ISSUE

Lois Redman

ASSISTED BY

Bill Schermbrucker

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BRIAN FAWCETT grew up in Prince George, B.C. and has lived in Vancouver since 1965. He studied English at Simon Fraser University and later worked as a community organizer and planner for seven years. He is currently teaching university English and Creative Writing in federal prisons. His important publications are *Permanent Relationships* (1975), and *Creatures of State* (1977). A major collection of verse, *Aggressive Transport* is forthcoming this fall from Talonbooks. (See also the Special Section in *The Capilano Review* #12). A sequel to *Tristram's Book*, entitled *Tramtrist's Book*, appears to be in progress.

JOOST BAKKER was born in 1945 in Curaçao. He grew up in Toronto, where he studied Architecture at the University of Toronto. He is a co-author of the Granville Island Redevelopment in Vancouver, and co-designer of the public space there. His preoccupation, both as an artist and as a professional architect has been to address the widening gulf between individual needs and public symbolism. It is this common interest which brought him in contact at both levels with Brian Fawcett.

Tristram's Book was recorded on June 23rd, 1980 as a radio performance for five voices and was subsequently aired on CFRO 102.7 (FM) Vancouver Cooperative Radio on June 30th, 1980. Voices were Jon Furberg, Alban Goulden, Penelope Connell, Brian Fawcett, and Bill Schermbrucker. Al Neil accompanied the voices with piano improvisations.



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