

the wooing of etain by Rosemarie Rowley

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creative writing

transverse 91

the wooing of etain

rosemarie rowley

I.1.

Never such a shivering tale be told
Etain bathing by the stream one day
Saw a horseman whose brooch and hair were gold
He was a man in beautiful array
His shield and buckle gold, his eyes were grey
His strap of silver and his five pronged spear
Gold as the barley at the turn of year.

I.2.

The rider told her of the fairy forts
Was this prophecy, or was it dream
Desecration of the fairy world imports
A nightmare of what we are or seem
And battle with kings who would deem
It honour to dispute her name
But peace within her beauty not reclaim.

I.3

The maidens shied away from such a man
Others made bold to hold his silver gaze
Then Etain remembered heaven's plan
Something that would haunt her all her days
The King's eye healed, another king to faze
The drowned horses, and the Tethbae birds
She to be swallowed in the big Queen's curds.

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I.4

The hooves danced with the cutting of the blades
In tunic red and cloak of deepest green
He turned his back to Etain and her maids
Heading back to lands as yet unseen
She would remember what such colours mean
Borrowed from her the green eternal world
The red was rowan berry, death unfurled.

I.5

The High King thought she was his to woo.
And won her after a summer's night
Her heart did not stir for him, as who
Rode in the memory like a vision of the light
The king possessed her, did not own her sight
Nor touch, nor hearing, she was yet another's
Whose mystery dwelt in the lives of others

I.6

He saw her unwind her plaited golden hair
Loosening the golden balls with a silver comb
Her tunic was red and green, each golden layer

Like the year's turning, handsome as they come
As sweet as life crammed in a honeycomb
Her arms, silken, slender, white
Her head a silver circle in the night.

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I.7

Years later, when all that was left was talk
In Tara there was held a loving feast
At such momentous meeting lovers balk
But Echu the King had his magic tryst
And sent out word the greatest was the least
Etain's famous beauty now enriched him
He had seen her bathing, it bewitched him.

II.1

The King's brother, Ailil, was stricken
The Druid said it was love or jealousy
So he pleaded with Etain that she quicken
His life, though he was vowed to celibacy
Three times a date was set, three times fallacy
Until stood before Etain her former prince,
Her husband, Midhir, not forgotten since

II.2

The day she saw him in his red and green
Reminders of the holly and the berry
The scent of wild flowers to the eye unseen
The secret of the eternal in the merry
Faultless land of the faery queen
Which she was, eternal, and he her mate
Living in an unfallen, unblemished state.

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II.3

"I was once your husband in a faery land
Where there is no birth in sin or pain
Only children born to a joyous band
With yellow hair, white skin, and foxglove stain
Not withering to age, but honeyed rain
Sweet water, mead, making a pleasant drink
Eternal life is promised at the brink

II.4

My first wife, Fuaimneach, was a sorceress
With a red rowan wand she cast a spell
Turned you into a pool of water, no less
Than what was between us, to create hell
She then turned you into a worm as well
And as a scarlet butterfly you flew with me
In a wild tempest across the sea.

II.5

Your father's wife swallowed you in a drink
You were born on Earth, and lost to me
How deep is Paradise, I can only think
It meant nothing when you weren't there to be
Loved by your husband, you know I am he
Come to reclaim you to your rightful place
In fairyland within a mythic race."

II.6

The earth-husband, Echu, had a visitor

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A stranger clad in purple and in gold
With a chess game challenged the Inquisitor
Let him win, fi ve fold and ten fold
Dark grey horses, broad-chested, with fi rm hold
Wide nostrilled, swift, dappled red ears
Enamelled bridles for the fi fty dears.

II.7

The next night there was wagered fi fty boars
Curly-haired, fi ery, contained in a blackthorn vat
Fifty white red-eared cows and calves without sores
Fifty swords, gold-hilted, ivory blades to follow that
Three-headed wethers, fi fty cloaks. He spat
Another wager to clear stones, lay a road
The fairy folk at night worked at such a load.

III.1

The fi nal stake was a kiss from Echu's queen
A month postponed, the hire of fi ghting men
But she had already dreamt the red and green
Her husband had to give permission when
Midhir asked for a kiss, and in that crafty ken
Their lips met, and when she opened her eyes
She was back in the fairy Paradise.

III.2

Echu saw two swans with a golden chain
Fly disappearing into the air

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And in the fairy land, life renewed again
Etain was to give birth to his heir
On the fi rst of May, the child was born, so fair
By Midhir's request, also called Etain
He didn't mind another's child to gain

III.3

By a silver stream mother and daughter dreamed
Their life eternal, beautiful and kind
Etain the younger, wondered how life seemed
So dull, when tales of mortal mind
Of feast and famine, light and dark combined
To her, an interesting, fascinating story.
Tara in its golden Celtic glory.

III.4

Echu, at home, longed for his wife
He dug up mounds to fi nd the fairy fort
Each morning not a blade of grass or life
Disturbed the rolling hills of Tara's court
While ravens came to stir anger, stayed to sport
Blind dogs and cats stood guard with limping hounds
Scleth and Samhair, Echu's anger knew no bounds.

III.5

Midhir came back to Tara, to ask
Why he was persecuted by the King
"I do not consider you wooed fairly in the task
You who sought magic ways to bring
My wife Etain to the world of eternal ring"

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"I will by tomorrow Etain return

If you desist from deeds, my name to burn".

III.6

By the third hour on the morrow there were fifty
Etain in the mist surrounding the mound
An old hag whose age count was quite thrifty
Stood before him without a single sound
Which of them was his true love in the round?
He saw one with a genuine aura
Who appeared to be a skillful pourer.

III.7

That night, with Etain sleeping on his arms
He found love, remembering his youth
And he was quietened by her fairy charms
Her freshness, with her show of ruth
Till Midhir mocked him with the awful truth
Confessing his joy to him across the water
Learnt he had slept with his own, and Etain's daughter.

IV.1

Such treachery broke the heart of the earthly king
He now looked at his daughter-wife with pain
How he was saddened in this golden ring
Had lost his soul his bitter heart to gain
Sick at heart that he had with his daughter lain
She was now pregnant with his child
So he banished her forthwith to the wild.

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IV.2

Etain was faced with the cruelty of the world
She who already had been to Paradise
Now in the wild wood, with the king's anger hurled
At her beneath the stormy, earthly skies
She would have to grow old in pain, be wise
The infant to whom she would give birth
Snatched from her, to be cradled in the earth.

IV.3

The men came and snatched away the child
A beautiful girl, with embroidered cloth
The name, Etain thrice-born was now defiled
She was going to be destroyed through wrath
As the evening hour drew upon the moor
Wondering which men were angels, which were weak
To smile on a little girl, not vengeance seek.

IV.4.

Her mother, stricken, wept both night and day
Mourning her daughter she never would see
She who was beautiful, was now bereft
Of gladness, grace, of joy that could not be
A desert life as dry as dust, no glee
But mourning like the grey and bitter hag
Who brought her to earth, the burden of a nag.

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IV.5

There were no more feasts at Tara, now deserted
The King died, his mind and heart oppressed
Etain searched the mounds, they were converted
Against the Sidhe a borderland undressed

To which rough soil her silken face was pressed
And so to death, it seems for being a mother
The king her husband, to whom she was wife and daughter.

IV.6

Mind against mortal raged and won the day
Death was a cup as bitter as the gall
When offered life, no one seemed to pay
The end foreclose, to live or not the pall
Death had such sting, why do we live at all
Only the fairy folk know the answer
To live forever as a golden dancer

IV.7

Who can choose to be mortal or immortal?
A fairy love that can last forever
A threshold on this earth that has no portal
Choosing can mean from those we love we sever
All healing love bands, as if never
To the wildwoods ringing our departure
Never signaled by the one-eyed archer.

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V.1

With her tunic embroidered at the breast
Young Etain was taken to the woods
The men stopped at Findlam's for a rest
Resolved to go no further the bud
Where rested the green and red royal blood
To a guard-dog puppy she was given
To a humble cottager, at last forgiven.

V.2

Her existence brought a blessing on the couple
Her beauty all over gained renown
Her face was fair and full, her body supple
In beauty, she was given Nature's crown
And all who knew her loved her, not a frown
Lived on her handsome forehead, but a glance
As she embroidered made hearts dance.

V.3

The years went by, untroubled rural calm
The mortal parents were bursting with pride
The king forgot the child, the dreadful sham
And soon to mortal doors, which opened wide
And closed again, as he, his story died
But in people's hearts there remained a story
Of Tara, its blight and its glory.

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V.4

Eterscelae was a new king in the province
He heard of Etain's beauty, and resolved
To go and woo her, he would convince
Her parents that with her was dissolved
All harm, all evil, problem not yet solved
The world with love and wonder would not cease
There would be a beginning of a peace

V.5

She had been brought up in isolation
Now to learn the touch of human hand

A bird flew above in exaltation
Rested his breast on hers in loving band
Eyes closed, he stroked her as the land
From whence she came, from dear earth as a child
Would come the son of Eterscalae, bound in geasa, smiled.

V.6

Born with three gifts, the greatest gifts to see
What could not be seen by any of sight
Nor judgement, that brought good to be
But his father's sins were endless as the night
Not to shoot birds, in Tara, around in flight
There was hope that harm in Etain be undone
Not a stranger be admitted to the dun.

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V.7

So Etain birthed a new hero who grew only to die
Between times, carved out a noble life
Loved and honoured, though neither could fly
Back to the end of youth, the end of strife
Conara, son of Eterscalae with promise rife
Broke geasa, his heroic antique vows
The night he was slain in Da Derga's lodging house.

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