

Tam Lin Transformed

Kat Peddie

I first discovered *Tam Lin* through the folk band, Fairport Convention, who recorded the folksong in the late 1960s and still perform it. I loved it for its story, its insistent beat, its sly verbal tricks and slippages. The story is as follows: Janet is warned not to go to Carterhaugh, home of the elf-man Tam Lin, for '[t]here's none that go by Carterhaugh but they leave him a pledge / Either their mantles of green or else their maidenhead'. As Janet not only goes (who wouldn't on such strict instructions not to?) but reties her 'kirtle green' as she leaves, something else, unstated, has been left. A pledge indeed it seems — we soon discover not only that 'Janet goes with child' but that she must complete a challenge to 'win' the man or elf who is now her 'true love'. The fairy queen (this is a folk tale after all), having saved the life of Tam Lin seven years ago, now wishes to sacrifice him to pay her Hallowe'en tithe to hell. To save Tam Lin, Janet must steal him off his horse from the queen and hide him under her mantle, holding him tightly, whilst the queen transforms him into various animals considered both repulsive and dangerous. Janet does so, and Tam Lin, and the family unit, is saved. The queen's curse hangs over the end; possibly, or possibly not, powerlessly.

As I was walking (the beginning of another Fairport song), not along a highway but the road to my house, I was singing this song to myself and noticed that I was syncopating the rhythm of the song and my footsteps other around the line 'I so fair and full of flesh', a heavy right foot step on every 'f' alliteration. When I returned home I tried in text to rewrite the line as it now appeared to me as stepped. Having thought about how my body had responded to the song and how it had then altered its cadence, I began to think of the bodies of the song itself.

It seemed to me that the sex scene so literally skirted over bore some relation to the scene conveyed in more detail — the metamorphosis of Tam Lin, in the arms of Janet, into a transformative bestiary, as she, to win her love (his love), must prove herself by holding tight to his changing form(s). Something to do with how strangely, transformatively, one experiences one's own body in the act in which one is most intensely experiencing it; abandoning control over it; even losing consciousness of it through its responses. How the boundaries of one's body are necessarily permeable. I had been reading Bataille's *Eroticism* at the time. This bled into the poem and its processes in a way that I was not fully conscious of.

In keeping with my interest in the song and the fact that I was reading Bataille in order to develop a theory of an erotics of collage, the idea was to create a poem almost entirely composed of words from the song — words and phrases rearranged and newly positioned in a cut-up, transformed to an extent but not at a far remove from their original context. Some words are stolen from elsewhere. '[L]i / on limbed' echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'lionlimb' in 'Carrion Comfort' — his religious agonies of 'that night, [...] / of now done darkness' when he 'lay wrestling with (my God!) my God' being not so far removed from his struggles with desire. '[H]and' comes from Robert Lowell's 'Near the Ocean', a point of contact 'a hand, your hand, then!' — the isolated and desolate speaker's attempt to touch another, his wife, a 'Monster' in her alterity, yet 'loved for what you are'. The frog, I believe, came from a fairytale, not far removed from folksong.



I so fair
and full
of flesh
am feared
it be my self am phibian
am newt / snake
a hand to hold frog flesh
Janet li
on limbed (what I) me in your arms your hair your mantle your
kirtle above the knee your maiden head
the bridle ring
and you will love
flesh father flesh
your son out of
sight.

had I known Tam Lin
this night. naked knight.