

Written before and after an Expanding Inward intensive in which we worked with this story...

TAM LIN: The Story Before

The Ballad of Tam Lin is an old story, and as is true of old stories, it is told in many different ways.

They all begin the same, though. They all begin with a warning.

*O I forbid you, maidens a',
That wear gowd on your hair,
To come or gae by Carterhaugh,
For young Tam Lin is there.*

*There's nane that gaes by Carterhaugh
But they leave him a wad,
Either their rings, or green mantles,
Or else their maidenhead. (Child Ballad 39A)*

Don't go into the Wild, children! There will be a price! The Dream is in the Wild, and the Dream is costly. But the Ballad is a story, and in stories we always do the thing we are warned against...

Jennet was safe, as most Tellers tell it. Safe as one can be, on the edge of the Wild. She had a King for a father and a fine, secure tower room with a lovely view, and the time to sit there quietly and watch the seasons change and stitch stitch stitch on a meticulously-made, luxuriously warm mantle of radiantly green cloth.

Safe as she could be on the edge of the Wild. Because what is the Wild? It is Life. There is nothing wilder. Life is a roller-coaster ride and you have very little control and it ends with your death. You can imagine you have tamed Life, but in a heartbeat it can turn and bite you, slip away from under you, turn everything you know upside down. Jennet sat in her tower room on the edge of Life, about to step in. Waiting to be ready to step in. Maybe when the mantle was finished. Stitch stitch stitch.

Until one day she suddenly threw down her sewing and hitched her skirts up above her knees and ran. She ran into the Wild. She ran into the heart of the Wild. She ran to the place everyone warned her about. She ran to Carterhaugh.

We none of us have a choice about entering the Wild. Not really. But not all of us *run*. What makes us *run* into life? A dream. A love. A Call.

Jennet heard a call. Some say it came to her as a scent, the seductive scent of a rose in Winter. Some say she heard the trees calling her name. She heard a Call, and she

ran to answer, and in the dangerous place at the heart of the Wild she met Tam Lin, and came back changed.

Some say she came back with child. She came back pregnant with something, that's for sure. When your Dream calls your name, when you touch It and know, no matter how impossible-seeming, that It wants to be yours too, when that happens something is planted and growing and forever a part of you.

There are trials, in this story, for Jennet. She confronts her powerful father and rebels against her "safe" Life on the edge of the Wild. She trades the comfortable Cloak of Convention, and all the nice approving nods that go with wearing it and being a good girl, for a mantle of her own making, green to hide the grass-stains. She does all of this for her Dream and then her Dream shifts like smoke and disappears. Tam Lin cannot be found and time passes and she despairs. She tries to end the urgency that is growing inside her. She tries to rip the Dream free from her body, where the anguish of separation from what she glimpsed - that was all she ever wanted, and now can never have - is eating her alive.

But the Dream yearns for reality just as reality yearns for the dream. And she hears the Call again, in Tam Lin's voice, whispering of a prophecy (*every seven years, a sacrifice*)... and a plan.

This is an old story, and the Tellers tell it in many different ways. Some say Tam was brought as a baby to the land of Faerie - that he was a sacrifice, or a gift, or that he was stolen from his cradle. Some say he was hurt - fell from a horse or lost a battle - desperately hurt out in the Wild, maybe near or even in Cartherhaugh, that borders the Faerie lands, and they took him in and healed him when no other magic would. Some say he walked to Faerie on his own two feet, following the sway in the hips of a Faerie lass. Some say that lass was their Queen.

The Tellers differ on how long he stayed there. If he loved it there or if he felt himself trapped (both can be true). If he had been sent away, or was running away, or just wandering along the borders - the thin places - when he met Jennet, when his hand touched hers as her fingers reached for the rose whose scent had brought her running.

But all the Tellers agree he heard a prophecy. Whispers on the breezes that cooled the long sweet lotus-laden nights of Faerie revelry. He heard a prophecy (*every seven years, a sacrifice*), and he made a plan.

"On Samhain's Eve", Tam Lin said, "there will come riders three. We will come from the West. We will come from the point on the horizon where the sun gives itself to the earth. We will come from the place where the sun gives up its light and enters the world beneath our world. The riders will come galloping. On great horses, we will come.

"The first horse will be red. It will be the red of sunset, the red of blood, the red of a red, red rose, the red of passion's glow; the first horse will be red and . . . Jennet", he said, "let

that horse and rider pass you by. Passion will come. It will come with thundering hooves and the clatter of power. Passion will come riding by and your challenge is to let passion pass you by."

"The second horse will be white—the white of snow, the white of a white, white rose, the white of purity; the second horse will be white and Jennet," he said, "let that horse and rider go. Innocence will come. It will come with an aura of hope. It will come with the promise that is hidden in every story that has not been told. Innocence will come, stardust in its wake, and Jennet, your challenge is to let innocence pass you by."

"The third horse will be black—the black of night, the black of the earth that feeds the roses, the red ones and the white. The third horse will be black, the black of mystery, of secrets unrevealed, of a shadow's shadow; the third horse will be black. And that rider," he said, "dear Jennet, that rider will be me. Pull me from that horse and hold me close. Hold me close, and remember me as the one you love." (Cynthia Jones)

Hold me, he told her, and cover me with your green mantle, and I will be safe and I will be with you and the sacrifice will go unmade and we can live together forever, the Dreamer and the Dream.

And so there comes a misty night, and a crossroads (or maybe a bridge) where a Dreamer waits, holding the green mantle that is her preparation and protection, ready to grasp and to hold tight to her Dream.

And a Dream comes riding who is also a man, and a lost child, a lover and a prisoner, wanting to be whole and himself again, ready to give himself to the process of transformation, and to trust the integrity of the Dreamer to hold him true.

This is an old story, and the Tellers tell it differently. Most don't say much about the Faerie Queen. Did she love him? And was it mother-love, or woman-love? Was he simply a commodity? Meat for the market, soul for the hell-fires? Was he a pet? A project? Did she send him away or reel him back as he was running? Most say only (and in different ways) that he belonged to her, and she wanted to keep him (for any of a number of reasons) and so she used her magic to make him impossible for Jennet to hold and, when Jennet did the impossible anyway, the Faerie Queen cursed them both and disappeared from the story.

Maybe it was this simple:

Jennet wanted Her Dream. Tam Lin wanted Himself. The Faerie Queen wanted her lover - child love or friend love or romantic love - the Faerie Queen wanted The Other.

Jennet listened to her Calling. Tam Lin listened to his Self. The Faerie Queen listened to her Heart.

Is one more important than the other?

We know Jennet heard a Call. Don't we think the Faerie Queen did too? And what about Tam Lin? He was Jennet's dream, he was the Faerie Queen's beloved, but he was also himself. How do you hold onto yourself while everything changes around you?

TAM LIN: The Story After

The beginning of a story is a delicate thing. The breath before the first word is spoken - that is a portentous moment. No matter how many ways the story is told, it will never again not have been told like this. The telling shapes a piece of the world in a way it never was before, and never now will not be. Words are our most powerful magicks.

So breathe.

Forever ago or yesterday or just now, a group of people came together in the liminal lands between the mundane and the marvelous. They thinned the veil and they lived a tale... it takes a village to tell a story. Each left with a piece of that story under their tongue, and this piece is mine:

There is the Wild, and the Safe, and the land in between. This story ends at a crossroads just there, on the edge of the "real" world, at the corner of Chaos and Probably OK.

Next to a little creek just deep enough to burble.

This story ends with a naked man - pale, perfect and dead - lying half in and half out of the water. Cradled by Water and Earth, he too is liminal. In womb-space. Coming from and returning to the Mother. Standing on either side of him is a woman. The one on his right is young, swelling-bellied, holding a long warm mantle of grassy green. The one on his left is older. Sadder. Her right hand holds an object of power we can't quite see clearly. It seems to shift and waver in our sight. A blade, or a rod, a branch or a long crooked finger - we only know the push/pull flavor of potency it prints on the air.

Long ago when this story was just beginning, the man and the young woman were children, playing together in the fields surrounding the town surrounding the castle of her father the king. Indistinguishable as puppies they tumbled together with the farmers' children and the friendly wild creatures in the peculiar, particular widespread way of young things. As they grew they played less with the creatures - who began to whiff the man-scent on them - and then less with the busy-ing children in the fields and finally less with each other, as he set about the work of being a knight and she about the work of being a princess.

Her name is Jennet, and she sat in the castle tower sewing a fine seam.

His name is Tam Lin. He disappeared into myth.

I'm not saying she loved him. He was one of the playfellows of her youth and her youth was behind her and she did the women's work now of stitching stitching stitching but she noticed when he vanished. He rode out one day, in a knightly way, and didn't return, and the town began to whisper stories. Dead, some said. Or gone with the Fey. Or, some asked, what's the difference? Haunting Carter Shay, they all agreed. Ghost or changling, prisoner or procurer, he haunts that place on the edge of the faerie lands and don't go there! Particularly you maidens! There'll be a price to pay! Our Tam has passed into dreams and become a Dream. He is lost to us. Don't go into the Wild, Children! The Dream lives in the Wild and costs a pretty penny, like dreams do. He'll take a treasure from you and, if you've none other to offer up, the price will be your maidenhead.

Because this is a story, we know it is just a matter of time until Jennet does the thing she is warned against. How much time doesn't matter. Not really. Nor do we need to know exactly what Called her. Was it her name, or the scent of a rose that the wind carried to her? How long had she been listening? When did stitching turn to waiting? How long did she set her heart against the lure-song rising in her blood? What made her give up the fight? All of that is for another story. All we need to know is that one day she threw down her sewing - a puddle of grassy-green cloth at her feet - hitched up her skirts and ran to Carter Shay. She ran right at the thing she was told to fear.

Fear and excitement are chemically identical in our bodies, you know. Which we feel depends on what story we tell ourselves about the feeling.

Jennet ran to Carter Shay and Tam Lin was there and she came back changed. Something new and wild growing inside her. "Pregnant" is a large word but the town was full of small minds and one of them was her father's. She returned to a community that didn't see transformation and wisdom in her new shape, they just saw the shame of a baby without a father. Misunderstood, reviled, ostracized - in desperation Jennet returned to Carter Shay to pick the bitter herb that would cut her free from the unwelcome new wildness within her. Tam spoke to her, stopped her. "I want to come back with you," he told her. "To be the baby's father. Help me."

He told her his story. On his knightly rounds, that fateful day, he saw, as knights will do, a fair damsel. Thinking she must be in distress, so far from the Safe, so deep in the Wild, he followed her still deeper. It happened so gradually - the treebark turning silver-blue and the sky the pink of a baby's blanket - that he didn't know he'd entered the realm of the fey-folk until they thicked around him.

"There is beautiful music," he told Jennet, "and wondrous wisdom and strangely sweet pleasures to be had there. The food is elixir and the days pass like slow water." If he didn't tell her that the sway in the hips of the fair damsel he followed had a deal to do with his missing all signs of a border crossing, if he didn't tell her that the damsel, in no distress at all, had smiled at him and shook her hair, that there had been more of eagerness than of duty in his following, that the damsel he

followed into Fey was in fact their Queen, and became his lover... well stories are tools, are they not? And some tools are keys. Tell the story that fits the shape of the lock you need to open...

After all, how he spent his seven years in Faerie was not a part of the story Jennet needed to hear. That was a long telling for another time, safe before a fire on either side of a rocking cradle. What was vital, in that moment when she reached for the bitter herb and he stopped her, was the story of why he wanted to leave. Yes, love of Jennet, and of the baby to come, homesickness and the longing to bring the things he'd learned in the Wild back to the town of his birth but also...

He'd heard a story. Whispers on the wind. Caught the words in the Queen's mouth when she didn't know he was near. "Every seven years a sacrifice."

"On Samhain Eve," he told Jennet, "the Faerie ride out into the between-lands. If you pull me from my horse, and hold me tight no matter what happens, and cover me with the green mantle you have sewn so long, then I will be free to stay with you when they ride home again. It must be now," he told Jennet, "because every seven years the Faerie make sacrifice, and this Samhain will make seven years since I came into their keeping. I fear the sacrifice will be me."

We're back again at the crossroads. Almost back to story's end. Almost midnight. Samhain Eve. A mist rising from the fields at the edge of the Wild lands. Jennet waiting at the crossroads, carrying Tam's promise in her heart and in her belly and, in her hands, the green mantle that she stitched stitched stitched.

We hear them before we see them, hooves dull thunder before the sweat-shined breasts of the faerie steeds break the mist apart. Their Queen rides at their head, and Jennet lets her pass, along with one or two more riders until she sees Tam Lin following fast behind. With signs he gave her (the color of his horse, the manner of his clothing) she picks him out from the horde and pulls him from the saddle as he passes, holding him tight in her arms.

And in her arms he turns, and twists, and coils into a snake that strikes at her with venom-beaded fangs. But she holds on. And in her arms he turns, and swells, and rounds into a bear that rakes at her with claws that stink of carrion. But she holds on. And in her arms he turns and turns again, into shapes that frighten her, repulse her, threaten the integrity of her body and her mind, but she holds on.

At last he turns, dissolves and puddles into an armful of fire-y molten lead. She cannot hold him, but throws him into the creek then scrambles down to pull him out - naked, pale, perfect and dead - and lay him on the bank, half in and half out of the water.

The Fey and their horses have vanished back into the mists, but the Queen swirls slowly out of them, the air around her right hand still shimmering with the remnants of powerful shape-shifting magic, to stand on the other side of Tam's

body. And we have closed the circle now. What follows is speculation. Or is it hope? It is a truth, if one of many. It is a truth because we tell it.

Perhaps she tells Jennet her story. Perhaps she doesn't need to. She may not need to say that, as Tam Lin called Jennet into the Wild and so set her on the journey to herself, She herself called him. She may not need to say that the story of the sacrifice was how she persuaded him to call Jennet - to reach back to the Safe, to overcome the uncertainty of the return. She may not need to say that, knowing the journey is for naught if the journeyer goes back unchanged, she wrenched his shape apart and through transformation after transformation until he - and Jennet - could hold and make solid his essential self again.

She may not need to say how it hurt her to do it. Jennet may be able to see all of that in her eyes. And when Jennet lays her mantle over Tam Lin's body - imbued with her patient labor, her daily discipline, and the accumulated wisdom of the work of the women of the Safe lands - and when he opens his eyes, lives again, returns home with her... The Queen may not need to say that the sacrifice is hers, and that it is worthy.

This story is called The Ballad of Tam Lin because he is its hero. In the sense that he is the one who makes the hero's journey. His is the complete cycle. He goes into Faerie and returns. His is the essence that maintains its integrity throughout its transformation as he is called into the Wild by the powerful shape-shifting, world-changing magic of the Faerie Queen, then called back again by the faith and the love and the labor of Jennet.

But it takes a village to tell a story, and we told it to ourselves, and each other, as the story of Three Magicks. The Magic of Transformation, the Magic of Manifestation, and the Magic of Integrity. We invoked these magicks with questions: What is my power? What am I bringing into life? Who am I? And we lived the mystery, the key that unlocks the secrets of stories and dreams... all of these selves are one self. Everything I see is me.

I am Jennet who waits, and works, and holds on while everything changes. I am the Fey Queen, with the power to transform, to shift and change and shape my world. And I am Tam Lin, the changed one, remembering myself in all of my guises. I Make, I Act, and I Am. All three magicks are mine. This is a truth because we have told it.

So mote it be.