

The Lay of Brian Bluehand

by Kenneth Lifshitz

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As it was foretold, in the days of the latter kings,
That peace, like a green blanket folded over the land
And covered up the sore and caviled plains where late
The war horses in frightened haste did chew destiny
To a bloody fodder, and dark clouds of fell fortune
Limned away like corsairs into the vast deeps of sky
And tales of massacres slept upon vanquished tongues
As mountain lilies poked a hesitant head through armor
Holes where warriors once glowered out from now vacant visors

On the hills from which they glinted a mock chorus rang
"Oh come ye men of spirit and --let us rush full upon
the enemy like the unveiled floods of spring,--
Silent they are and like anchors of vessels filled
To creaking with cargo of anticipation and dread
They now but scrape a tune upon the rusted bow.. Proud rows
of flesh-less phantoms who supped their last upon this hill
And whose blood did swell the rivulets where now the
melted snows of 'winter run to ground like frightened hares.

This fleet of fallen trenchers not fleet enough
To scale the weighted course of angers well worn ford
That their lives barely over-swam themselves when
Escape was done and death set down a smorgasbord.

And Duncan, son of the blindfolded king was one of these
That struck down as many sons of mothers as fulfilled
The prophecies and then himself sat down to die
In a small pond into which from his body ran blood
From many holes as if he were a garden sculpture
And there his eye sickened to extinguishment
and life seemed no longer a prize to be taken,
But rather a quietening storm that lost itself
upon a too vast horizon, slipping into unconsciousness
like an old slipper so slept he amongst the trappings
of his authority, as time wagged on like a dog come to supper
There he lay like a crumpled piece of paper upon which
Much has been writ and writ over as if the scribe's hand
Trembled too much at the first pass, his father's armor
Bright glinting in the spring sun, caught in the throat
Of that afternoon like a half hearted shrug.

Likewise, the symbol of his blood, the Proctor's sign
Did dully make its way across the blank'ed page of
his forehead, banners and ribbons of foreign campaigns
littered that armor, like a school of fish in a shiny sea grotto
and in bold writ on his sword's hilt silver letters proclaimed
his motto.

When the council of the singing kings had
Called him to the catacombs he had come,
This now many years ago, for he then was but
A stripling lad, who hung about his father's
Tunic straps like a favorite pipe, and he
Was caught up at a moment like a pipe to be
Enjoyed at a moment of leisure, a lad, unseasoned
But of promising temperament, and the singing kings
Observed all this in their crystal lit catacombs

Beneath the earth, many a cough a wink and nod
Portended this lads future to be bright,-
And he to no other business was enforced
But that which made straight the limb and quick the eye,
and all seemed like play,- to fight like play
to fight like, the armor fitted well to moulded sinew
The counsels of men, sat upon him and childhood he did eschew.

In another age, he would have been called a
Pericles, a golden light seemed about him always
and he basked in it, like a frog in a hollow tree
He was too content to seek for battle and
Did not like to meddle, --but hated compulsion he,
Beyond all else,-and with his sword bought
A station that was no retreat but allowed him (if he chose)
To stay just a bit apart from other men, but not aloof,
Always ready to enjoy good fellowship without the oily
taint of condescension to mute the gurgling stream
of Companions well met on the way. In short neither
was he reluctant nor eager upon the field to whet
his sword but went to battle as another man might wear
himself to dinner,-and lay a napkin across his loins,
Relishing more the fellowship than the fare.
Each to his own, was his motto, but such laissez-faire
Broke upon the councils of war like a hireling storm

Eager to do damage on a reputation for tranquil temperament
was an easy target

in turbulent Times and like that noble bird
that wings it way

Far above the dog's noisy fray, happenstance has
Made it prey and his nativity was no longer
Vouchsafe unto every ear of loyalty
for

A dark clamor had made the ends of loyalty far too frail,
Like wine dark cloth tread to a swineherds trail.
And though, -the deeds of this reluctant warrior shone
Opalescent before, they were not worn by many a tongue now
And as most often, men with small traffic in arms were
more loudly touted upon the old kings' ear, and as always
Men whose deeds die before them have from smaller
Men much to fear, -as if they trod on adder's backs
Or made quicksand their only In Terrum Pax.

And like a well worn warrior, he felt no urge
To chip away the clay that caked his heel
Too generous a nature had he to kick away
These dogs that lapped at his boots besmirching
Them with the grey dust of animosity, that
Dries to a hard leash,
dragging better minds
To poor conclusions,
he would not bestir himself
To catalogue his deeds before his accusers
As if valor were to be found in J.C. Penny

But he merely shrugged and said justice needed
No further polish than that of its own character
And he bowed to the inclination of their ambitions,
And turned his heel upon his fellows to
Go and meditate a while on the ingratitude
Of those he had served so well, trusting that
His fellows would spare him too protracted a death
And he snorted as he sat himself down to a bath,
For he was weary from the sound of steel
He said to himself I'll leave to Donald Trump
the art of the deal.

And lo, what he saw then made him reel for
his right hand was no longer flesh but blue
the color of tempered steel.
And soon with praise made brittle by repetition
Each and every of his accusers came to him

And cried we were blind till now Brian Bluehand
Our minds were wrapped in some disease
For you are the one to fulfill the prophecies,
And truth like a small ribbon once more flowed
Into their perceptions. like the trickle of
Ravensleg creek which flows but once in seven
Years time from the foothills of Pir-groven
To irrigate the flat plains below, their
Hearts were refreshed by truth and the bitterness
Of the long years of war now seemed but a dream

For the Queen the color of wine had engraved
Upon the walls where they dwelt that the Bluehand
Would come, the lion of the crystals and the long
Years of war would melt before his arm like the
Snows upon the mountaintop, and the land would
Shed it's cloak of suffering, and they cursed their eyes,
Those who had accused him and made offerings
Of sweet thyme and myrrh, but Brian said be off now
Your dull functions and fragrant offerings pall in my nostrils
And I prefer the smell of honest manure.
I will plow your fields of death, be assured,
I, like a lover, I will come to the battle
For I am born to the sword so save your entreaties
Wax up your ball of string, a heel serves nowhere
but beneath a boot, so I must serve the singing kings.

And so saying he flung his own boots high against
the city wall and one caught upon the spire of their tower
where the kings held their councils
and it hung there by the hour.

“There is your standard” he cried and here your standard bearer
And he turned his back upon the city gates and walked away.
How many days he wandered were counted only by the blisters
On his feet which made the unrelieved monotony
Of his tread a solace forged in blood and dread
Which mixed with the mire at each of his steps until,
He came again to the city gate, his vision now clouded with pain
Not recognizing the familiar spire with its' cobbled peak

And from his throat escaped a strangled cry that slipped
From his throat like a cur from it's leash an unmaster'd hound
Having lost the scent of it's prey in the mud,
a pitiful Confused sound,--

ye gods on high he muttered low
What boots a quarrel with you,
you who bestow your gifts
Where you will, not bothering to inquire
of those you honor so,
Whether the gift's desired or no

and so it was and so-.it shall be,-each man's doled out his destiny.
So thought Brian - these thoughts careening round his brain
Willy nilly,-as if his skull were a pinball game
--and darkness fell upon his mind like a raging flood
And he fell to his knees amidst the mud and blood
--and all his vain efforts, to cover his hand with
This black mixture, as black as his mind,--was washed away
By a summer shower--to plainly reveal to his sight
the sign which proclaimed the hour of his destiny was nigh
So there he sat outside the city gate amongst the beggars
That congregated there, like them, angry at his fate,

Thrusting in and out, accusing pairs in mute inquiry, like them
Their existence a rebuke to those that mirror marched
Day by day,- in and out,--from workaday lives and workaday fates
Those masses unwilling to find a new course to a careworn purse
Scarcely noticed amongst the varied deformity was he
His blue hand'd not even shaken a glance from that fruitless tree
Eyes shaded and hearts pruned to blind, mistrusting mutuality.

As for hidden hands that shaped the cathedral's spire
Making massive stone skate from out gravity's grasp
We are grateful then for things that to earth pay no homage
Nor tax, like the bird's remembered flight that our memory
Anoints with the freedom our own will lacks though,
From stronger wills great purpose may be moulded
Purposes are forgot and soon it's tents are folded
Things that have little care for destination soar
To their pointless point becoming something we adore
So when nature outreaches nature to contend with fate

The echo lives, the voice buried with its' beseeching
So, though Brian chafed before that he was but a pawn
E'en stranger now was his estate, to be reborn to anonymity,
The people longing to forget the years of strife
Set to put away the fears that had haunted long nights
Of war, settled into a hazy peace with a wink and a yawn
Trusting the higher power would bring yet another dawn

His hand, his mark,-- once well regarded by the throng
Now an oddity, subject of an unrelenting scorn

By a thousand pair of eyes, unseen, the one who had this
Respite bought, a cypher, the rusted hulk of his humanity,
The storm now spent made invisible by the setting amber sun's
Decree, spurned by those now full bellies he had served
Their sympathy for themselves reserved, he really had the blues,
They set out once again to ply their wares their consciences recused
The eyes' reports by the heart refused, unstitched from sense
And new heeled opinion firmly glued on the present tense

Sight now an orphan to this pretense found no succor
Their ungrateful breasts willed this blind perversity
And it like the messenger barred from returning
to earnest dispatch, stood all undelivered of their news
new ranked with the enemy and deemed of their stench,
he sat unhatched
In their regard like a hockey player who had never left the bench

Kenneth Lifshitz

Thus when two mighty rivers whose courses are conjoined
Will strive each the other to devour, their fury spent
Will wend further onward without a murmur, so now emptied
The floodgates of Brian's heart leaving behind a continent
of confusion, where the offending spray beat against deaf shores
And he was like a pilgrim come upon a new and fresh place
Which he claimed for himself, "this is my plot" he proclaimed

So saying, he once again--flung his boot high in the air til it came to hang
From that same spire beneath which the singing kings held council
And it hung there by the hour,
as he turned his back upon the city.
And as in a dream he trod uncounted miles, the blisters on
His unshod foot catalogued the hours,
while the monotony of his tread
made red the mire where he stepped
His unbalanced gait bringing him back
to that same portal he had left of late,--
and when he looked up with pain clouded vision
at the familiar spire he fell upon one knee and
from his throat escaped a strangled cry
That slipped like a cur from it's leash,
an unmastered hound that having lost

the scent of its' prey gave forth a pitiful sound
'Ye god!--what boots a quarrel with you, you on high
Who bestow your gifts where you will not bothering to inquire
Whether or no the gift's desired,--,

And with him the drought returned again,--
Ravensleg creek flowed no more
from out the foothills of Pir-groven
Where now gathered once again their enemies
Wilting his resolve and parching his cries so none could hear
Now double bent in agony how he sought to show his sign
Now hid well with clotted dung,--his pride and shame all rolled in one
He longed for a summer shower to render once again plain to any's sight
That cared to look, his blue hand, unobscured by mud's despite
And rise he could not, though he tried as though a colossus lame
bestrid him there forcing him to wallow in his pain, too late
To make his rendezvous with destiny, --his first blind date

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But one amongst the begging throng, fixed one good eye
Upon him there,--for he had but one good one,--the
Other paying homage to gravity ever earthward bent
Miles Lazy Eye, was his name and he owed allegiance
To the Queen of Jive, his mistress who had here
Dispatched him to spy upon her enemies, the singing kings
And it was his lazy eye which now served him well
Fixing upon Brian's bloodied feet while the other good one
Spied the hand though caked with mud,-- and saw he was the one
That could make good the singing kings boast
To withstand the darkening storm and the power of the
Queen of Jive's host,--he grasped Brian then
in his false embrace, proclaiming we are brother
outcasts,--without shelter, and without hope we
Stand at the portals of wealth and esteemed
at less than yonder Post,--the kings have filled
their granaries with golden wheat,--while we have naught
but mud to eat. "Is there a grain of wheat fit for
Such as we?", --"all wheat's the same" Brian replied,--

Then is not each man the same,--said Miles,
his one eye fixed upon the hand, and equal in his
deserving do we not all have mouths to chew the bread
And stomachs to fill,--why are some left empty
Men are like the land,--some like mountains are full
Of themselves and soar to the sky,-

While others like the valley remaining empty to the end of time
----- those on high hold a mighty
force for,--the gentle rain from off their slopes will
a might river form and cut it's will through the plain
But the valley,--can only make a puddle that has no-where to go,-
but into it's bosom,--so we lowly men must swallow pride
lest it drown our utility.

And just then the sun strained forth from corsetted night
He looked up to see the Proctor there framed in coronets of light
The friend of his youth looked gravely upon him and spoke
These words,--"Yonder stands the Queen of Jive with her troops
Arrayed atop the noble headlands of Ravensleg which flows no more
For engines they have brought to dam its' course
And now stands the city parched upon these--salty shores
We must fight now or die,- for we cannot drink the sea.

So saying, he tipped the cistern which stood between them
Its' muddy dregs spattering his boot and drying in a moment
Though the sun stood yet but two fingers from the hilltop
Heaven has stoppered itself with a cork of unrelenting blue
The last of all our water now stands drying on your shoe.,,
"I should kill you where you stand", said Brian,"though friend
I once called you,-"Perhaps a better end that would be
Than to die of thirst-" Replied the Proctor angrily,-

Your shoes were besmirched but your honor was still bright
Til you curse your friends when yonder stands the fight
And these words last spoken found their mark like a blow
Struck true,--Brian--- looked to the mountains below the
Remorseless blue,--like a boy's first gaze into a window
Of an ice cream store and the words, like hungry fingers
In an empty pocket, traced the unraveled lining of loyalty once more
And the shields of the enemy glinted in the morning sun
Like the backs of a thousand shiny spoons set out for him
To eat his fill of glory, --such was the power of the Proctor s words
That spoke to the boy words the scar-red man scarcely heard

"Our men stand ready all, to fight, each muscle strained taut
To lend its' might,--and every ear attuned to hear the hue
That Brian has come to lead with his hand of blue
While here stands Brian, with all his mighty will
Bent upon a bit of mud spilled on his shoe."

And seeing that his will was ratcheted tight once more
The Proctor put his sign upon Brian's brow as he had before
And the city's army with Brian at the fore swept from the valley
Like a dry hot wind whose fury wilts everything before
And when they reached Pir-Groven, lo, the storm clouds
Gathered overhead and from their growling throats belched forth
A storm that burst the pediments set in the river's way
And down from the cantilevered cliffs is crashed to fill its' bed
And filled it like a lover fills the air with words unsaid
And lo e'en when the day was won Brian hardly paused in his labor
The sweet rain that fell upon his lips to savor
And the hilltop was turned to a sea of mud
That seemed to swallow men whole in a surging brown flood

And there the son of the blindfolded king
That had struck down as many sons of mothers as fulfilled
The prophecies sat himself sat down to die
In a small pond into which from his body ran blood
From many holes as if he were a garden sculpture
And there in that pond as he bethought himself of
Immortality he was so loath to look on the god
that light from his eye sickened to extinguishment
and life seemed no longer a prize to be taken,
But rather a quiet'ning storm that lost itself
upon a too vast horizon, slipping into unconsciousness
like an old slipper so slept he amongst the trappings
of his authority, as time wagged on like a dog come to supper
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Likewise, the symbol of his blood, the Proctor's sign
Did dully make its way across the now blank page of
his forehead, banners and ribbons of foreign campaigns
littered that armor, like a school of fish in a shiny sea
and in bold writ on his sword's hilt silver letters proclaimed
his motto, 'Death is the Price of Immortality'

Kenneth Lifshitz, 1969