

7-15-2013

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Alexander Dove Lempke

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Recommended Citation

Lempke, Alexander Dove (2013) "*The Pale Wanderer*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2013: Iss. 35, Article 11.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2013/iss35/11>

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The Pale Wanderer

The Pale Wanderer

by

Alexander Dove Lempke

I walked into a purple dell
between one hill's voluptuous swell
 and one's hard, craggy face—
and there were fourteen head-sized stones
 scattered around that place,
that sang a song whose mournful tones
grew loud and keen as I advanced,
and all throughout the vale they danced.
I came in close, and saw each rock
 had finely-lettered words upon it,
written carefully with chalk.
I read them all, and saw they bore
 the fourteen lines of some strange sonnet
that no man had read before.
I picked one up and set it down
while all its fellows danced around,
and with a firm command I tried
to make the dancing stones subside
so I could place them in a row
and read the sonnet; to my woe
no sooner had I one in place
 and went to fetch its rocky brother
but the first one off would race
 while I was grappling with the other—
finally, I brought them all
and made a tower, near as tall
as my full height—and read the song
that they had jumbled up so long.
And once I read it, no more will
infused the stones, and they were still.

I left the valley wistfully,
because the rocks had given me
no knowledge that I had not known
and now were lifeless lumps of stone.
And as I traveled on, I came
into a forest old in name—
an ancient wood, beneath whose shade
there waited many a peaceful glade.

I found a clearing in the wood
and thought the air was sweet and good;
the scent of the surrounding pine
was heady as an anodyne.
But then I caught the fainter whiff
 of something sweeter—sickly-sweet—
and as I took a deeper sniff
I frowned and vaguely wondered if
 I neared a heap of rotten meat.
Across the silent dell there stood
a bush of gnarled and knotted wood,
among whose leaves of ocean-green
lurked berries of incarnadine.
I neared the bush and underneath
 there lay a boy with hueless skin;
 his face was wan, his hair was thin,
his snowy forehead wore a wreath,
 and last my glancing eyes took in
the berries his right hand did hold.
I took his hand; his hand was cold,
and through his lips there blew no breath

but the unseen, silent wind of death.
I walked up to a nearby tree
and, whispering an apology,
I broke a branch I thought looked tough,
broad, long, light, strong and straight enough
to serve me for a digging tool
to put to rest the dead young fool.
And so I dug a little pit
 beneath an old and angry tree,
and laid his body into it,
and laid the brown earth over it,
 and soon his spirit came to me.
He was a thin, transparent child;
his face was wan; his hair was wild,
and, placid as a cat, he smiled.
“Stranger, you have my thanks,” he said,
“for else among the sleepless dead
I now would wander without rest;
but into Earth's warm, welcoming breast
you have returned me; for this deed
I give you knowledge that you need—
there is a hill just east of here
 from which a cold spring flows,
and by that water, cool and clear
 there blooms a bright blue rose—
 amid three jagged rocks it grows,
and if you pluck it, it will burn
blue-hot in your hand and turn
into whatever you require—
indifferent what you most desire.
You may pursue it, or refuse—
I only give the chance to choose:
go seek the rose upon the hill
and pluck it—or another will.”
I bowed my head, and calmly waited
as the spirit dissipated.

A half-mile east I found the hill
from which the rampant-splashing rill
ran clear, and by its side, among
three craggy rocks, the blue rose sprung—
and slowly as a creeping fox
I plucked it from its cradling rocks.
And in my hand, the rose of blue
burned like the sun, and burning grew
 into one shapeless, azure flame,
then, settling into shape anew
 grew hard and gleaming, and became
a peerless sword whose glancing blade

was deadly as a heart betrayed.
I held the sapphire-pommeled hilt
and, moaning, felt my spirit wilt,
because the wise and ancient hill
had given me a sword to kill.

Back down beneath the forest shade
I walked, and my blue-gleaming blade
 was heavy in my hand;
I passed a stone that marked a mile
that wore a roughly chiseled smile
and suddenly the sword of blue
 grew weightless as a wand.
I heard the scrape as someone drew
a heavy sword from a heavy sheath,
and from the shadows underneath
the circling trees a man stepped forth
whose skin was tinted as the earth;
his beard was long, and antlers spread
their fearful branches from his head,
and looking on my face, he said:
“You trespass here, for every pine
that branches in these woods is mine,
and now you pluck a rose to bring
a wicked and a withering thing
into my wood; well I too hold
a deadly sword whose name is old;
and I will fight you blade to blade
for bringing yours into my glade.
Here are my terms: if you are slain,
 that sword you hold which blue-gleams
no more so withered shall remain
 but shall become once more a rose,
and I shall plant it once again
beyond the meddling touch of men.
But should you lay me in the dust
into your hands will I entrust
my magic cloak of black ram's-wool,
which renders form invisible.
If you accept the terms, attack;
or else depart, and come not back.”
I nodded, bowed, and took my stance
to start the great soul-severing dance.

The pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to hear the ring of blade on blade;
the passing wind drew still to look
on what red course our battle took.

I struck; the tip of one great horn
from his great hairy head was shorn.
He struck; the sound of parting air
was all his seeking broadsword found.
I struck; and from his side left bare
the blood ran purple on the ground—
and the pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to see blood dripping from my blade.
We clashed again, and sword on sword
made echoes scream the voice of steel;
I struck; I dealt the forest lord
a blow that three men could not deal,
and the pines, onlooking, stood dismayed
to see my savage might displayed.
He stood; I knew not what great will
kept him alive and standing still,
but he was more than mortal, and
he held the power of the land
in one strong, slowly weakening hand.
He struck; I blocked the downward swing—
he drove me nearly to the ground.
I struck; around me echoing
I heard the soul-disquieting sound
of pine wood creaking without breeze
and needles weeping from the trees,
for calm, serene, and antler-crowned,
the tall, the brown, the strong lay dead,
a purple pool around his head.
His more than mortal blood outflowed
upon the shady woodland road;
before my feet the warm blood pooled,
and, changing strangely as it cooled,
it blackened, and my puzzled eye
witnessed the blood solidify,
until the dark and sanguine pool
transformed into a cloak of wool.
I picked it up and put it on,
and to all vision I was gone;
the faintest shimmer on the air
betrayed that I still lingered there.
I walked, a whisper ill-defined,
until I left the trees behind,
for when they felt me passing near
the branches shook as though with fear.

Beyond the woods, the dusty road
reached where a hill-creek rushed and flowed,

and near the ford, a sapling pine
held one end of a washing-line,
and downstream, at the water's bend,
an ash tree held the other end.
There was a woman, gray and old,
that knee-deep in the water stood,
and in the stream, so sweet and cold
she washed a tunic stained with blood,
scrubbing at clothes but wearing none,
her skin all brown from years of sun.
And from her old and weathered chest
each heavy, brown, uncaptive breast
did nearly to her navel sink,
weighed down with milk that none would
drink.
She saw me not—the raven wool
had rendered me invisible
to even such a one as she,
who all things otherwise would see.
I scanned the dripping washing-line;
I scanned it twice, but on it spied
no clothes I knew; I faintly sighed,
because some other death than mine
the washer-woman prophesied.
With careful footsteps I drew near
the rushing water, cool and clear,
determined I should make no sound,
for only thus could I be found.
I stepped into the stream, and made
the slightest splash; I froze in place,
but found my presence unbetrayed;
no hint of hearing marked her face.
I stole in close, until I stood
a step from where she scrubbed at blood,
and then I lunged! I seized one breast
that nearly to her navel sank,
and like a starving man I pressed
the nipple to my lips and drank.
The woman cried out in surprise,
but tightly shut I kept my eyes,
and sucked the breast until its store
was empty, and it flowed no more,
and since I thought the milk was good,
I drank the other vessel dry
before I stepped away, and stood,
and opened up my misting eye.
The washer woman said, “Reveal
yourself, whoever dares to steal

my precious milk; whoever snuck
upon me, by great skill or luck;
reveal yourself! Your presence show,
and tell me what I must bestow.”
Before her last word's echo died,
I cast the veiling cloak aside.

The washer woman said, “I see
you are the one who's plundered me.
And now your wish, as you must know,
it is my burden to bestow;
so tell, what do you most desire,
or wiser, what you most require?”
I said, “I wish for what I want;
let this hard chaos be my haunt
no more, and let my memory
 be vacant as the void, and clear;
and no more let me feel nor see,
 and no more taste, or smell, or hear.
Yes, take my flesh and blood and bone
and make of it a standing stone,
and let the moss grow over it,
and put no spirit into it,
and let the rock not bear my name,
but let me die to future fame.
Then take my soul, and set a flame
as cold as hell upon it; burn
 my spirit into nothingness,
and let my mind and reason turn
 oblivious, blank, and conscienceless.
Yes, end my unrewarded role
and utterly unmake my soul.
Or if it cannot be destroyed,
but send it hurtling through the void,
and slowly, let that standing stone
by moss and wind be overthrown.”