

8-5-2023

## A Circle of Dragons

A. J. Prufrock

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle>

### Recommended Citation

Prufrock, A. J. (2023) "A Circle of Dragons," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2023: Iss. 45, Article 20.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2023/iss45/20>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mythic Circle by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



---

## Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

### More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



## A Circle of Dragons

### Additional Keywords

Mythic Circle, Mythopoeia, Dragons, Fantasy, Fiction, Poetry

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

# A Circle of Dragons

by A.J. Pruffrock

*Continued from issue #44, 2022*

## [7] Thelma, Thia, and Thekla

*A shirt, some shoes  
Some silver slacks  
And golden buttons  
Are all he lacks  
All her teeth  
And uncrossed eyes  
She cooks, she sews  
At least she tries*

Hilda took a deep breath when she reentered the cabin, then exhaled in the sweetness of familiar surroundings. The thought of being alone, which had haunted her earlier that day, now seemed wondrous. Knowing she would need her strength, she forced herself to eat several bites of jerky though she felt no hunger. Story after story might still be demanded of her.

She did not tarry too long, wanting to return before a dragon summoned her. For though her guests were beginning to treat her as a servant, she was determined to play the part of hostess. Hostesses did not leave their guests unattended. Hilda took a long slow drink of ale. Straightening her dress and rebraiding her long chestnut hair, she stepped back out into the fray.

When the young woman retook her seat among dragons, she had thought this time to bring a blanket for warmth and cushion against the cold stone. Her three guests, talking among themselves, neither paused nor altered their conversation when she rejoined them.

The fire needed no tending, so she sat, hands folded, and waited.

"I still say," Loretta was asserting, "that if Geraldine were here she would NOT have moaned over the loss of three adolescent



ninny muffins, dependent on an old biddy. Some of our kind never do grow up if they aren't forced to."

"That is not my point," shot back Wynona. "Of course Geraldine wouldn't care about the three fools cared for by Auntie Maximilla. I was only saying it was interesting how there were only two human matrons in the story, and they were both sorry pieces of work. One old wench pampered dragons who never grew up. The other tortured Tobit. And though I have no affinity for a dragon murderer, mind you, he had no proper mothering. This could very well be the people-given excuse for the young man's violent nature."

All eyes now turned towards Hilda.

"Do you have, my dear, any stories with proper mothers?" said Jolene, voice dripping.

"And don't drop out the dragons, of course," growled Wynona, "that goes without saying."

Hilda understood both what was stated and what was left unsaid. In the next story she chose, it would be best for not a single dragon to meet with a violent end. But the two parameters—a good mother and the survival of dragons—limited her array of choices. And Wynona had expressly forbade the changing of canon.

Hilda stood, paced, poked the fire. Genuine lore in which dragons were not slain was scarce. Tales with a nurturing mother were scarcer still. Combining the two limitations narrowed her mental search down to one possibility, and it would have to be tweaked on the sly. Hilda hoped Wynona would be too enthralled to notice.

"Enough fidgeting and prodding, young human," said Loretta with an impatient undercurrent. "We know how to keep a flame going. You tell us another tale."

Hilda sat, took a huge breath, and began.

#

*ONCE UPON A TIME there lived an emperor who had half a world all to himself. On the edges of his eastern wilderness dwelt a widowed shepherdess with three daughters—Thelma, Thia, and Thekla.*

*Thelma, the eldest, was so beautiful that when she took the sheep to pasture, they forgot to eat. Thia, the second, was so beautiful that when she was driving the flock, the wolves protected the sheep. But Thekla, the youngest, with hair as soft as the finest lamb's wool, was as beautiful as both her sisters put together.*

*One summer day, when the rays of the sun were pouring down on the earth, the three sisters went to the woods to pick strawberries.*

Three beauties," sighed Jolene. "Like us."

"A couple centuries, and it fades," quipped Wynona. "Do you have anything to fall back on?"

Jolene scowled.

"How big were the strawberries, Hilda?" said Loretta. "Were they ripe and red and dripping with juice?"

"I don't know. But I suppose they could be. Miss Wynona, do you mind a small change for Miss Loretta?"

Wynona rolled her eyes and breathed a barely audible, "Whatever."

*As the three sisters gathered plump strawberries—red and ripe and bursting with nectar—they heard the tramp of horses approaching. The girls were so used to the quiet of the hills that they thought a whole army was riding by, but it was only the emperor going to hunt with a handful of his trusted attendants. All were fine handsome men, who rode upon their horses as if they were part of them, but the finest and handsomest of all was the young emperor himself.*

*As the entourage drew near to the three sisters, the hunting party noticed their beauty and reined in their horses to ride by at the slowest pace possible.*

*"Listen, sisters!" whispered Thelma as they passed. "If one of those young men should make me his wife, I would bake him a loaf of bread that would keep him young and brave even as he advanced in years."*

*"And if I," said Thia almost inaudibly, "should be chosen, I would weave my husband a shirt that would keep him unscathed when he goes to battle, undrenched when traveling through water, and unscorched when passing through dragon's fire."*

*"And I," said Thekla, "would give the man who chooses me two boys, twins, each with a golden star on his forehead, as bright as those in the eastern sky."*

*Though the sisters spoke low, the young men heard and turned their horses' heads.*

*To Thekla's surprise, the emperor himself took note and, before she had time to draw breath, he swung her on his saddle before him, saying, "I take you at your word. You are chosen, my lovely future empress!"*

*"And I will have you," said a strapping young man to Thelma.*

*"And I you!" exclaimed another to Thia.*

"Exterior beauty standards even applied to the males," said Wynona. "Like a trio of peacocks."

"Dreamy ..." sighed Jolene.

"Did the girls spill the baskets of strawberries? Are they taking the berries along?" Loretta wanted to know.

"Shall I continue?" asked Hilda.

"Do!"

*All the horses were now turned back towards the palace. Thekla knew their mother would cry, sitting at supper alone, and she wished to bid her goodbye and gain her blessing. But it was the emperor's saddle she rode upon now, and who was she to instruct him?*

*In less than a week, the marriages took place, and for three days and three nights there was nothing but feasting as the news spread over the whole kingdom.*

*When the rejoicings ended, Thelma sent for corn. In the presence of all, she made from it the loaf she had promised at the strawberry beds.*

*Next Thia sent for flax, dried it, spun it, and wove it into linen. To the amazement of the watching courtiers, she sewed the shirt she had promised at the strawberry beds.*

*Thekla's promise of twins (a guarantee that could not be fulfilled in the presence of all) required patience. She was thankful to find the emperor was as loving and kind as the father she remembered. He insisted she call him by his first name, Cormac, instead of Lord Most High Emperor Husband, as was tradition.*

"How kind of him," hissed Wynona through gritted teeth, "and how is it human women allow themselves to be lowered thus? Sister one cooks, sister two sews, sister three promises babies. We dragons are not chattel."

"Isn't it beautiful?" interrupted Jolene, not processing a single one of Wynona's words. "And each girl will be made rapturous by a husband who adores her. I wish we dragons had more happily-ever-afters."

Loretta, while wondering to herself how magic bread might taste, voiced a concern of a relational nature. "Thekla, the youngest, has been chosen by the emperor, we shall hear plenty about her. But I would bet my eye-fangs that we will hear not a word more about Thelma and Thia. The middle-born will be shoved aside. It is the way of the peoples to do so according to birth order. Yet Thelma will also fade—first-born AND a cook! It makes no sense! Yet, mark my word, we will hear no more about her and her baking exploits."

All three fell silent. Hilda found it befuddling that each dragon, having now spoken her mind, seemed to possess something akin to contentment. None seemed to recognize the dearth of feedback. They craved no more than what was offered. Sputtering disjointed speeches counted as communication. It was very human.

"Shall I?" asked Hilda.

“Go on, go on.”

*Emperor Cormac's father, like Thekla's, had died long ago. He too had left behind a widow. Cormac's stepmother insisted Thekla call her Mother Nefary, instead of Most High Glorious Dowager, as was tradition (or so she said).*

*Mother Nefary had a daughter, Princess Perfidy, by her first husband (a lower duke). She had always dreamed that her daughter would be empress one day. With all her heart, the older woman hated Thekla, the child of a mere shepherd, but could do nothing under the watchful eye of Emperor Cormac.*

*To unsettle the placid calm of the palace, Princess Perfidy and Mother Nefary began to spread rumors. Soon all in residence whispered of a dragon roaming the outskirts of the kingdom, besieging small frontier towns, and eating up livestock. The young emperor sprang up in wrath the moment he heard the news, vowing that nothing should hinder his giving battle. Thekla suspected something was amiss but also feared. If a dragon were truly afoot, her aging mother might be in harm's way.*

*Cormac assembled a cadre of soldiers and set off at once to meet the beast. Much to the tale-bearing women's surprise, there was indeed a dragon traumatizing the citizenry on the frontier. But before Emperor Cormac had the satisfaction of running it through with his lance, the beast laughed merrily and flew away.*

“Sounds like a Zendino to me,” muttered Wynona. Only Hilda heard and sighed inside with relief. The fact that Wynona was guessing at speciation, rather than scrutinizing for any deviation from canon, eased her anxiety. The laughing dragon flying away from Emperor Cormac was not a part of oral tradition ... until now.

## [8] Two With Stars

*Only the aspen and old beech know  
Whatever wife and daughter say  
What direction the cold winds blow  
All blowback is but delay*

*During the weeks the emperor was away, early in the morning when stars grow pale in the sky, two little boys with golden hair were born. Each had a star on his forehead. Thekla, much exhausted and just escaping death, had not noticed Mother Nefary had insisted on playing midwife. The cruel woman took the babes as soon as they were born, and, with her own hand, dug two graves. She buried both of the emperor's newborn sons right outside the palace under his bedroom window.*

*Into the bassinet, Nefary placed instead two large golden salamanders.*

“Double frack. You peoples overdo the evil stepmother genre,” yawned Loretta. “I thought this story was supposed to contain proper mothering.”

“The girls did have a good mother at the beginning, remember?” said Jolene.

“Where the flaggnard is she now?” said Loretta.

“It will be explained soon, I promise,” answered Hilda, stamping her foot.

“Sorry, I'll shut up and listen,” said Loretta, making a show of biting her tongue.

*As Cormac rode back towards home, news reached him that his wife had given birth. Straightway he galloped full speed to the palace and bounded up the stairs to Thekla's room. He was happy at first to see his wife alive, but all pleasure was consumed in horror when he looked upon the contents of the bassinet.*

*Nefary and Perfidy, feigning great sorrow, produced streams of crocodile tears, mourning the insanity of Empress Thekla.*

“Oh, what a horrible twist to the promise she made at the strawberry beds!” they wailed. “How the heart of the emperor must be torn!”

*The emperor's heart was at first torn indeed, but then it grew cold and hard. He recalled how Thekla's sisters had kept their promises of a loaf of bread and flaxen shirt. And his bitter disappointment was compounded by the fact*

*that his betrayal seemed somehow foretold in the way the dragon, with its golden skin and slanting eyes, had laughed at him. He gave orders for his wife to be put out of the kingdom. He could no longer bear to look upon her.*

*Perfidy kissed the ring of the king and offered herself as solace.*

*Cormac, mind darkened, took up the offer of comfort.*

*Nefary exulted.*

*In a single day, all the Most High Glorious Dowager's wishes had been fulfilled. She took personal charge of Thekla's punishment and had her buried out in the wilderness up to her neck. By this, she declared, every citizen would know what happens to those who dare to deceive the emperor. Thekla's sisters, Thelma and Thia, longed to go and give her aid and comfort, but each was prevented by her husband. Each man had sworn obedience to the Lord Most High Emperor. His enemies were theirs.*

*"I would never abandon you, sister," Jolene sniffed to Loretta.*

*Loretta rolled her eyes and breathed a barely audible, "Whatever."*

#

*UNDER THEIR FATHER the emperor's window, the poor little baby boys found no rest in their graves. In the spot where each was buried sprang up two beautiful young aspens. Nefary hated the sight of the trees for they ate at what remained of her conscience. She gave orders that the trees should be uprooted, but the emperor heard of it, and forbade them to be touched. He sighed in the midst of his command, "Let them alone. They are the finest aspens I have ever seen."*

*The trees grew as no aspens had ever grown before. Each day and night added one year's maturation, and at dawn, when the stars faded out of the sky, they grew a foot in the twinkling of an eye. As their branches swept across the palace windows, and the wind moved them softly, the emperor would sit, and listen, and grow peaceful with melancholy.*

*Nefary was bent on destroying the aspens, and though a woman's will can squeeze blood out of a turnip, her cunning was thwarted by the king's love of the trees. Nefary turned to her daughter to employ soft words of coaxing instead. Perfidy was well trained in the use of feminine tears.*

*Empress Perfidy sat on the edge of the wide soft bed she shared with Cormac and began to entreat him with a purring voice: how an allergy to aspens bothered her, how the view from the palace was blocked, how she imagined their future children running in the space taken up by the ever-thickening trunks.*

*Cormac refused. Cormac ignored. But emperors are only men, and, in the end, Cormac caved. At last, exasperated, he blurted, "Have your way. Cut down the trees. But out of one shall be made a wooden bed frame for me and, out of the other, a second and separate bed for you."*

*The aspens were cut down the next morning, and by evening beds made of their timber were placed in separate royal chambers.*

*"Classic mistake," said Wynona. "Human female fool! To spend one's power for the making of a bed and losing the power of sharing that very bed in the process. Congratulations, Perfidy, you won a battle and are now weaponless in the war."*

*Hilda did not understand and sat in silence.*

*Loretta understood but cared very little.*

*Jolene did not want to understand but cared very much. "Go on with the story," she said in irritation. "It feels so sad, and I must find out what happens."*

*That night, when Cormac lay down in his new bed, he felt he had grown a hundred times heavier. With the great weightiness came a calm that was quite new to him. Perfidy, in contrast, felt as if she were laying on thorns and nettles. She had to snatch an hour or two of broken sleep upon the floorboards.*

*In his new bed, the Emperor Cormac had dreams in a language he could barely understand. A small voice called from a distance down the hall, "Is he too heavy for you, little brother?"*

*And a voice nearby, so close it seemed in the bedroom, answered "Oh, no, he is not heavy at all. I feel nothing but joy now that our beloved father rests over me."*

*Later in the night the nearby voice called out, "How goes it for you, my brother?" And the same distant voice answered back "Her evil soul is very heavy for me! I am thankful she paces most of the night and sinks often to lie upon the floor."*

## [9] Hilda Interrupted

*One fish two fish  
Golden new fish  
Examine every shimmering scale  
Sparkling bright from head to tail*

*Within the week, Perfidy was determined to get rid of the beds. She had two others identical in every measure made, and, on a day when the emperor had gone hunting, she placed them instead in their rooms. The offensive aspen beds were burnt in a large bonfire behind the stables, until only a little heap of ashes remained.*

*Nefary stood by her daughter and watched the aspen burn. When the fire died away, the two stooped, gathered up the ashes, and scattered them to the four winds. Neither woman noticed that where the fire burnt brightest, two sparks flew up, looming above them in the air for a few moments, then floated down into the great river that flowed through the heart of the country. Here the sparks turned into two little fishes, exact in form down to the detail of each golden scale.*

*The next morning, the emperor's fishermen went down to the river to catch fish for their master's breakfast. They cast into the stream just as the last star twinkled out of the morning sky. Among the multitude of fish they drew in, two were covered in golden scales such as no man had ever looked upon.*

*All the fishermen gathered round and wondered at the beauty of the twin fishes. After some discussion, they decided that they would keep them alive to give as a present to the emperor. To their surprise the fishes spoke to this suggestion with one voice, "Do not take us to the palace, for that is where we came from. To return would be our destruction."*

*Upon these words, the men drew back, seeing that fearful sorcery was at play. Only one courageous fisherman leaned in to ask, "What are we to do with you, then?"*

*The fishes gave clear and specific instruction as the fisherman took notes: "There is a young shepherdess abiding with her aged mother along the eastern wilderness. She never smiles, but if you speak to her of twin golden fishes, she will grow radiant and give you a lock of her hair. Soak her long tresses in the morning dew, lay the two of us in the sun, and then circle the lock round us tip to end. Do not come near again until the sun's rays have had time to dry our mother's hair."*

*The group of fishermen, glad to support their friend's brave and strange endeavor, agreed to tend his nets while he attempted this most unusual quest. The man did as he was instructed, and the journey unfolded just as the fishes predicted. The only surprise was that, after her initial jubilation, tears flowed from the woman's eyes as she cut her long hair. Also strange (at least to the fisherman) was her silence. Never before had he met a woman who had nothing to say.*

*By the time the traveling fisherman returned to the golden twins, he could not tell if the lock held more tears or more dew. He had done his best to gather condensation from the leaves he had passed by on the way back home. All he knew, in truth, was that he had done his best to follow instructions.*

#

*THE FISHERMAN'S efforts produced an amazing effect. When the sun burned hot that afternoon, he went to where he had lain the ring of hair and, instead of fins and scales, he found two beautiful baby boys with golden hair and golden stars gleaming on their foreheads. Each was so like the other that the fisherman's wife, who took them into her care, could not tell them apart.*

*The boys grew as no boys had ever grown before. Each day and night added one year's maturation, and at dawn, when the stars faded out of the sky, they grew a foot in the twinkling of an eye. As their height increased, so did*



*their wisdom and knowledge. When three days and three nights had passed, they were twelve years in age, twenty-four in strength, and thirty-six in wisdom.*

*"Kind fisherman," the two said one morning, "we must now go to our father." The fisherman nodded, for he had nothing to say about the matter.*

*Each lad donned a cap made of lambskin sewn by the fisherman's wife that hid the golden hair and stars upon their foreheads. Thus disguised, they headed towards the palace.*

## [10] Some Proper Mothering

*We sang to you, father,  
from bark of the tree  
From bedpost as ashes  
flowing down to the sea*

*It was dinnertime when the twins arrived at their father's home. In spite of the porter's attempts to bar their entry, the two youths pushed through and made their way to a large hall where the emperor was dining surrounded by his court.*

*"We desire audience," said one prince to a servant standing near the door.*

*"Quite impossible," buffed the servant.*

*"Is it? Let us see!" said the second prince, pushing forward.*

*"What is the matter?" demanded Emperor Cormac, glaring up and across the room from his favorite dish.*

*The princes stopped as if frozen at the sound of their father's voice.*

*"It is two boys," called out the dining hall butler, "who want to force their way in!"*

*"To **force** their way in? Who dares use force in my palace? What boys are they?" said the emperor all in one breath, growing red with anger. "Thrust them out! Set the dogs after them!"*

*"Leave us alone. We will go," said the princes. Both stepped backwards, cut to the heart by Cormac's harsh words. They turned to depart.*

*"Why?" whispered Jolene.*

*"Why what?" asked Hilda.*

Jolene went silent, so Loretta filled in her sister's thoughts, "Why were they cut to the heart? The emperor neither knew nor loved them."

"He is their father whether he knows it or not ..." began Hilda.

"So?" said Loretta. "I do not see how, in any of this, the twins could know or love either father or mother. How are they connected or attached to either when deprived of both? Does not a wish of the heart die when it is not fulfilled? How do the tree-boys turned fish-twins have a concept of either parent? This tale is complete nonsense."

Loretta crossed her short arms, hawked a loogie, and launched it into the fire. The flames danced, well-fed.

Wynona sneered, "It is a weakness of the warm-blooded, to have a taste for things they can't even name. Theirs is the way of bitter dissatisfaction—to crave more than what is offered, to want validation from those who sired and birthed them. Then young grow up and birth their own whelps, hoping to extract through parenthood what still feels lacking. Parents live through offspring; offspring resent parents.

"Glean another lesson, lady dragons—be glad for your base ability to hatch and crawl out on your own. Peoples are crippled for life, chasing after the wind. Not so the mighty dragon."

Wynona had stood to finish her speech. She looked round at her staring audience and slumped back down into her seat. She seemed to Hilda all at once self-conscious, at least for a dragon.

“Shall I go on now?” said Hilda.

Wynona nodded.

*The twin princes had almost exited the emperor’s gates when their soft answer struck a chord on their father’s heart, resonating with the memories of the aspen trees. A servant was sent in great haste, and the two were brought back. This time their entrance was not blocked. They were ushered in to where their father sat at the head of a long table covered with flowers and filled with guests. Beside him sat Empress Perfidy, supported by twelve cushions.*

*When the princes entered, one of the cushions fell down to the floor, and there remained only eleven.*

*“Take off your caps,” ordered one of the courtiers.*

*“A covered head is, to some, a sign of honor,” replied the boys.*

*The crowd gasped at the brazenness of the two, but the emperor motioned everyone still. His heart had lost all anger in the golden tones of the boys’ voices. A great weightiness came upon him, and with it a calm he could not understand. “Stay as you are, but tell me your names. Where do you come from? What do you want?”*

*“We are two shoots from one stem,” came their answer. “One shoot was broken and buried in the eastern wilderness. The other sits at the head of this table.”*

*The king’s brow furrowed, but he motioned for the two to continue.*

*“We have travelled a long way, we have spoken in the rustle of the wind, we have whispered in the wood, we have sung in the waters. But now we wish to tell you a story in the speech of men.”*

*A second cushion fell from under the mighty rumpus of Empress Perfidy. “Let them take their impudent idiocy home,” she ordered for all to hear.*

*“Oh, no, let them go on,” said Emperor Cormac. “Speak, boys. Sing or say to us your story in the speech of men.”*

*In strange chanting harmonies, the princes outlined the story of their lives—*

***There was once a king  
Who pulled a young maid  
Out from the strawberry fields  
He sought neither motherly blessing nor nod  
What could the maid do, but to yield?***

*Two more cushions fell down. And the boys continued—*

***One promise kept—a loaf made from scratch  
Two promises kept—new shirt made from flax  
A third promise kept out of view of the throng  
Treachery, envy, wrong upon wrong***

*Three cushions fell. The boys continued—*

***We sang to you, father, from  
bark of the tree  
From bedpost as ashes flowing  
down to the sea  
Our mother was buried still  
alive in the soil  
You asked not you sought***

*naught, but remained in the coils  
Not of the dragon, who laughed  
and then fled  
But the woman who offered you  
comfort in bed*

*Four more cushions fell to the floor, leaving only one. Seeing this, the two princes repeated the initial lines—*

*There was once a king  
Who pulled a young maid  
Out from the strawberry fields*

...

*The performance was interrupted by Perfidy jumping to her feet. As the last cushion fell to the floor, the twins lifted their caps, showing golden hair and stars upon their foreheads. The eyes of the emperor and of all his guests were so bent on them that the two young men shrank under the intensity of attention. Both walked backwards towards the door.*

*Such a tumult arose that not many noticed the visitors had slipped from the palace. The screeching of the empress was enough to pierce eardrums.*

“Well, cuss that poor she-devil,” interrupted Wynona. “I knew she was a lost cause, but I had hoped for more dignity from her.”

“I know that screech,” said Loretta, wincing. “It rang in my eardrums all through my hatchling days ... what happened to the wench of an empress, Miss Hilda?”

“Some say she was demoted to a scullery maid,” said Hilda. “Others say she screamed until her heart burst, or she threw herself off a cliff. There is little agreement, so I do not usually include that part. Would you like me to add one of the many options in my telling?”

“Screw her,” said Wynona.

Jolene, unlike her companions, remained quiet. There was nothing for Hilda to do but finish the plot.

#

*ONCE OUTSIDE THE PALACE, the twins turned to walk eastward. Halfway to their destination, under the light of a full moon, their father caught up with them. He rode alone with the reins of two additional mounts in his hand. With horses under them, the three continued on, neither stopping nor speaking until they came to the spot where Empress Thekla had been buried up to her neck.*

*It was here, years before, that Thekla’s mother had found her half-dead. It was here, not long after, that Thekla repented leaving her home without a word and was forgiven. It was here, that very morning, that Thekla had buried her old mother and found herself all alone in the world. The men dismounted and ran their fingers through the soft earth of a new grave.*

*Thekla stood under the shadow of a nearby beech, long dusky shadows hiding her from view as she watched her three loves ride up. Now she walked out to join her two sons and her husband where they knelt. And here, upon his mother-in-law’s grave, Emperor Cormac begged for forgiveness from the strawberry maid who had enamored him with a beautiful promise—a promise she had kept.*

*Thekla nodded but did not speak. But when Cormac swung her on the saddle before him, and the four rode westwardly back towards the palace, she sang a song her mother once sang.*

Hilda stood now. She had heard the tune from her grandmother’s own lips and felt as if the old lady, long passed away, was singing through her. She now, for the first time, knew why and how these particular lyrics latched on to the end of Thekla’s tale. The reptilian audience stared and listened as the young maiden looked up at the stars and rendered a melody clear and sweet—

*My four go out from me to play  
 Bags packed, I send them on their way.  
 Sent out from me, apart from me  
 Derived from me and wrought  
 Within my skin, blood and bone,  
 My very own, yet not  
 My teachers, yet by me once taught  
 Love ties to home in upward growing  
 Down to a silent shrouded knowing  
 Soul to soul  
 Soul to soul  
 The more I lose you all my four  
 Entwined our lives grow all the more  
 Fly back through the open door  
 the always open door.*

*Emperor Cormac, for the first time attuned to his wife, leaned in and asked, "Who wrote that?"*

*"My mother made that song, Lord Most High Emperor Husband."*

*"But why four? There are just three sisters—Thelma, Thia, and you, my beloved Thekla."*

*"There was a boy once, a brother . . . then he was no more."*

*And though the ride was more somber after the song, a young husband held his wife more closely than ever before as the four rode back to the few remaining fires kept burning in their stately home.*

## [11] Edna Tells All

*Children in the rafters  
 Babies on the floors  
 Toddlers on my apron strings  
 In and out of doors  
 See a need and meet it  
 Again again again  
 If they'd but give an hour's sleep  
 I might call them friends*

Overcome with her own thoughts and emotions, Hilda did not notice the lack of applause this time around. Having finished the story and given her heart to the song, she sat, eyes closed, savoring. Memory, campfire glow, and evening breeze made up for the unchosen company.

Hot breath on her face brought her to her senses. Opening her eyes, she stared nose to snout with Jolene. The dragon's eyes were all flame.

"I do not feel happy. That story started happily and ended miserably," growled Jolene. The timber of Jolene's rumbling ire resonated long and low in Hilda's chest (who described the sensation later as the inverse of a cat's purr—times ten).

The maiden felt both shoulders gripped by claws barely sheathed.

"Sit, sister!" ordered Loretta.

Jolene did not budge.

Loretta crossed over and grasped her sibling by the forearm, pulling with all her sinewy strength, and returned Jolene one slow step at a time back to her seat. Wynona, watching unmoved, turned to their hostess and explained, "She doesn't do emotional long-suffering. Actually, none of us do. But Jolene is acutely allergic, always takes it personally."

Jolene stared across the fire, rocking herself and muttering, "make it happy make it happy make it happy make it happy make it happy." Her eyes were aflame, never leaving Hilda, never blinking.

Hilda sensed that it would be best for the next story to be light. Who knew the effects of pathos on dragons? A funny story came to mind, but she wondered if her three listeners would find it as humorous as the men in her clan.

"Would it be okay," Hilda asked, after drawing several deep breaths, "if the next story begins sad and ends happy?"

"Start and find out," grunted Loretta.

#

*ONCE UPON A TIME, on the outskirts of a village, just where the oxen were turned out to pasture, and the pigs roamed about burrowing with their noses among the roots of the trees, stood a small house. In the house lived a man named Simon who had an inconsolable wife.*

*"Dear wife," Simon often said, "Why must you go about like a drooping rosebud? You have everything a husband can give a wife. Why cannot you be merry like other women? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved?"*

*"Leave me alone," his wife, Edna, would always answer through tears. "If I were to tell you, you would become just as wretched as I am. It is far better for you to know nothing."*

*Day after day, year after year, the husband would inquire about his wife's sadness, only to get the same reply.*

*One day, Simon decided to outwit and exhaust Edna by listing instances of good fortune. "Your cow is the best milker in all the village," he said. "Our trees are full of fruit, and our hives are full of bees, yes? No one's cornfields grow straighter and taller than ours, correct?"*

*With each instance, Edna nodded. With each of her husband's listings, her head bobbed up and down, and big tears fell upon their hardwood floor.*

*Simon stood defeated, crossed the space between them, and placed a tentative right arm around his wife's shoulder as she trembled. Then, quite against his will, a tear welled up in Simon's left eye. He wiped it away, hoping his wife did not notice.*

*"Yes, all that you say is true," Edna sputtered, "but ... (sniff) we have (snort) ... no children."*

*Then Simon understood. His eyes were opened, and he could no longer be cheery. Starting that day, the little house on the outskirts contained a man whose unhappiness matched the sorrow of his wife.*

*At the sight of her husband's misery, Edna became more wretched than ever.*

*Some weeks passed, and Simon grew desperate enough to seek outside consultation. He had heard of a wise man who lived eastward over the hills and took leave without saying much at all.*

*Simon had expected a long journey, but before evening he found the man he sought sitting on a front porch, pipe in hand. Simon was overcome. Not realizing before that moment how deep was his desperation, he felt himself sink to his knees. He began to beg, "Give me children, lord wise man, give me children."*

*"Take care what you are asking," replied the wise man, unflustered. "Will not children be a burden to you? Are you rich enough to feed and clothe them?"*

*"Give them to me, my lord, and I will manage somehow!"*

*A moment later, Simon had a sign and blessing from the wise man and was sent on his way.*

#

*SIMON REACHED HOME that evening tired and dusty, but with hope in his heart. As he drew near his house, the sound of young voices struck his ear. He looked up to see the whole place full of little ones: children in the garden, children in the yard, children looking out of every window. It seemed to Simon as if all the children in the world must be gathered before him. None seemed bigger than the next, all seemed terribly small, and each one was more noisy, more impudent, and more daring than the next. Simon gazed and grew cold with horror as he realized that they all now belonged to him.*

*"Good gracious! How many there are!" he muttered to himself.*

*"Oh, but not one too many," said his wife smiling, coming up with a crowd of little ones clinging to her skirts.*

*By the next day though, even Edna found that it was not so easy to look after the three dozen plus four that had magically appeared calling her Mama, and Simon Daddy. Children were in the garden, the sitting room, the kitchen, and even roamed in and out of the now half-empty pantry.*

*By the second day, the children had eaten all the stored-up food and had begun to cry, "Daddy! I am hungry—I am hungry."*

*Simon scratched his head and wondered what he was to do next. In a single day he had found his life overbrimming with the joy of fatherhood, but now came a crisis. He did not know how he was to feed them. The cow was drying up, and it would be weeks before the fruit trees would ripen.*

*Simon turned to Edna and announced, "I must go out into the world and bring back food somehow."*

*The road to finding a way to feed three dozen plus four hungry children is long. It is made even longer when a man himself travels on an empty belly.*

*"This is not happiness!" complained Jolene, "just an impossible quandary. Would it not make more sense for the man and wife to eat a few, culling the brood down to more manageable size?"*

*"Hush, idiot," Wynona interrupted. "This is a peoples story, not a dragon one. Do you forget why we are here? Do I have to spell it out in front of ..." Wynona's eyes shot a sideways glance towards the girl-human.*

*Suddenly each dragon hushed, straightened, strained, and sniffed the wind then cocked their heads. All three, on point, listened in high-strung expectation.*

*"Let us be found doing our duty when she arrives," whispered Loretta.*

*Wynona nodded and motioned for Hilda to go on.*

## [12] Simon Sets Out

*Who are you?  
so sad and tired  
As soon as courage is required  
Who are you?  
though growing old  
To do exactly as you're told*

*SIMON wandered far and wide. At last, he reached a place so close to the end of the world that that which is mingles with that which is not. In the foreground he saw a sheepfold with seven sheep. Dozens more grazed in a field in the distance. In between stood a shepherd's hut. The idea entered Simon's mind that perhaps a single sheep would not be missed among so many... that one small insignificant sheep would make a fine meal for his hungry family. Then Simon thought better of turning to thievery, though his stomach rumbled in protest.*

*As he walked towards the hut, racking his brain as to what he might offer in trade, a rushing noise swept over the field and drowned out the grumbling of his belly. Through the air flew a dragon. As Simon stood still and stared, the beast dove down and took as prey one full grown ewe in each claw.*

*Just as Simon began to register that he was not seeing things, out came a shepherd from the hut flailing his arms and yelling, "Every night?! Every night?! A pox on you and all your horrendous reptilian clan!"*

Jolene giggled. Hilda relaxed into the enjoyment of storytelling.

*Simon thought perhaps that this was not the right location to get food for his family. The competition looked fierce. But the hunger of his children back home clung to him like a burr, so, to his own surprise, a question tumbled out of his mouth addressing the shepherd, "What will you give me if I rid you of that beast?"*

*The shepherd had a ready answer. He had dreamt so often in his long hours of isolation of a hero appearing that he had written a little poem as a ready response—*

*Rams, one in three,  
I will give to thee  
Ewes, one in two  
I will give to you.*

*"It is a bargain," said Simon, though he did not know how (supposing he **did** come out of the battle as victor) he would ever be able to drive home so large a flock.*

*Simon was suddenly very tired. He was thankful the shepherd offered shelter and he would think of how best to fight a dragon later. Tomorrow, after all, was another day.*

*The lonely shepherd found the presence of Simon so encouraging that he presented his guest with wine and an entire block of well-aged cheese. Of this, Simon had but a small bite, for he could not enjoy a full belly knowing the cow at home had, by this time, run dry. His children most likely were crying.*

#

*SIMON SLEPT WELL, but the next night, as the sun sank, so did his stomach. A horrible feeling overcame him. He was sorely tempted to give up and take the shortest road home. He half started, then remembered his children, and turned back to the challenge.*

*"It is he or I," said Simon to himself. He took up position on the edge of the flock.*

*As the sun began to set, the air was filled with a rushing noise.*

*As he could think of nothing else to say, Simon called out, "**Stop!**" in his most commanding tone.*

*The dragon lowered himself to the ground and exclaimed, "Who are **you**, and where did you come from?"*

*"I am Simon Oliver Bolovan, who eats rocks all night and in the day feeds the flowers of the mountain with carrion! If you meddle with these sheep, I will carve my initials on your back!"*

*The dragon (unused to having his pattern of fly-snatch-and-return interrupted) stood like a statue in the middle of the road. "You will have to fight me first of course," he said hesitantly. It had been decades since the dragon had reviewed the etiquette between dragons and challenging knights, and he was sure none of his half-remembered lessons had mentioned a Simon-Oliver-Rock-Eating-Bolovan.*

*Simon noted the serpent's pause and upped his bravado, "I fight **you**!?" he bellowed. "Why, I could slay you with one blow!" Simon went into the shepherd's hut and retrieved the uneaten cheese. He laid out a challenge, "Go and get a stone like this out of the river and let us test strength against strength!"*

*The dragon did as Simon bade him, and brought back a stone twice as big as a man's head.*

*"Can you squeeze buttermilk out of your stone?" asked Simon.*

*The dragon picked up his stone with one hand, and squeezed it until it fell into powder but not one drop of buttermilk flowed from it. "Of course I can't! You idiot!" the beast roared. "Milk does not come from stones." As the dragon brushed the dust off his claws, he cast about to remember where buttermilk **did** come from. "I always hated school," he thought, "and now I am paying the price. Mama always said ..."*

*"Well, watch and learn," shouted Simon, interrupting the dragon's ponderings. Then, without hesitation, Simon-Oliver-Rock-Eating-Bolovan pressed the block of cheese until buttermilk flowed through all ten of his fingers.*

*When the dragon saw the oozing yellow, he felt it was perhaps past time for him to return home. But Simon stood in his cowering path.*

*"We have an account to settle," Simon growled. "You owe hundreds of sheep to this field and a year's back pay to the shepherd." (Listening from within the hut, the shepherd teared up and smiled at Simon's thoughtfulness).*

*The poor dragon was too frightened to speak, lest Simon should slay him and bury him among the flowers in the mountain pastures. But, in remembering his mother, he found an ounce of courageous inspiration.*

*From a nearby tree, the dragon tore a great branch and, as if it had been a feather, whirled it round his head and flung it three hundred yards across the field. Over the shepherd's hut it sailed, landing with a thud and scattering a group of huddled sheep.*

*"Beat that if you can, rock-eater!" he taunted.*

*Simon sauntered to the spot where the branch lay. The dragon followed, a single step behind. Simon shuddered inside as he felt the great beast's breath upon his shoulder.*

*Together they arrived, and Simon stooped to feel the branch. A great fear threatened to overcome him, for he knew that he and all his children together could not lift that limb from the ground.*

*"What are you doing?" asked the dragon.*

*"I was thinking," answered Simon, "what a beautiful branch this is, and what a pity that it should cause your death."*

*"How do you mean ... my death?" asked the dragon.*

*Simon did not answer but stood and stared up into the night sky.*

*"Just throw it," huffed the dragon.*

*"I must wait until the moon gets out of my way."*

*"I don't understand."*

*"Do you not see that the moon hampers my trajectory? Before the limb pierces you through the heart, like an arrow into a bull's-eye, it will arc high and take down the moon."*

*At these words the dragon grew uncomfortable for a second time. Not only did he not like the idea of being pierced through, he loved the moon and could not hunt without her light.*

*"I'll tell you what," the great serpent said, after thinking a little. "Don't throw the limb at all. I concede."*

*"No, certainly not!" replied Simon. "We will wait until the moon sets."*

*Simon would not budge, but while he stared the dragon slunk away to the road where he spread his wings and took flight. Before he soared aloft, he mumbled a promise over his shoulder that he intended never to return.*

*"I bet he lives with his mother, or an old wench like Auntie Maximilla in the Tobit story!" Jolene puffed up with the glee of insight. "I bet his mama makes him bring her ewe's milk to keep her looking young."*

*Jolene glanced back and forth at her compatriots, clicking her claws together in delight. They stared back at her through narrow slits and furrowed brows. Both motioned for silence.*

*Hilda continued.*

### [13] Dragon à la Carte

*Can you burn me down a village,  
Dragon boy? Dragon boy?  
Can you scoop me up a maiden like no other?  
I could if I'd a mind to  
And if I were in the mood  
But I am a young thing and must go ask my mother*

*Simon took the dragon's promise to the shepherd and reminded him of their agreement.*



*The shepherd was grateful but was also having second thoughts. He did not want to let a valuable guardian like Simon slip away. The shepherd hemmed and hawed about the uselessness of a dragon's word while Simon frowned.*

Wynona, Loretta, and Jolene frowned also.

*The shepherd, noticing his newly dug stock pond was dry, added a condition. "If the dragon is really under your control," he challenged, "if you truly have him cowed ... prove he is your servant by making him fill my pond with water from the nearby brook."*

*Simon opened his mouth to protest. The shepherd popped into it a bit of bread and fruit and showed him to his bed saying, "If the dragon does not return in three days' time, I will send you on your way with all the livestock promised and a wagon to boot."*

*Simon was more than weary. He was thankful for the food and would think of how he would get a flock of sheep and a wagon home later. Tomorrow, after all, was another day.*

*Two nights later, as the shepherd feared, the dragon did return. The beast was hoping that Simon had left and the sheep fields were guarded by a lesser man, as they had been before. Instead, he found Simon scratching in the earth near the brook with a little knife. The dragon's curiosity gripped him, and he landed nearby to ask, "Why on earth are you digging about?"*

*"The shepherd begged me," answered Simon, "to fill his stock pond, and I do not feel like hauling bucket after bucket like a servile water boy. In a minute more, I will have redirected the entire brook, and the job will be done."*

*Now the dragon did not like the idea of any of his beautiful waterways being redirected. He loved the streams and found his way by looking down upon their coursing eddies. By the waterways he tracked the wide land below as he flew mile after mile.*

*"I will fetch the water myself. Do not change the brook's course!" the dragon begged.*

*Simon stood up from his work and pondered in silence for a long minute before saying, "I will allow you the honor of this task on two conditions."*

*"Agreed. What are they?" sputtered the desperate lizard.*

*"One, you will never prey on this shepherd's field again, and two, you yourself will pull a giant cart with my new flock aboard, wherever and for how long I direct you. When I am out on quest, I usually return with a dragon's head as a trophy. I would be shamed to return to my palace if I did not at least make a show of having tamed one to the point of doing my bidding."*

*"Most certainly!" agreed the dragon, relieved the terms were simple. He had heard from his mother's bedtime stories about demands of weaving straw into gold and other impossible feats. Men could be quite unreasonable but Simon-Oliver-Rock-Eating-Bolovan was not.*

*Minutes later, the pond was brimming. The dragon filled it in three trips and three mouthfuls.*

*The shepherd could no longer delay or argue. Simon had kept his end of the bargain twice over. Before them stood a dragon self-hitched to the shepherd's largest wagon. What could the sheepman do but fill it with the promised rams and ewes?*

Hilda looked at her still and silent audience. She knew them well now by shape and shadow, how often each one blinked, how deeply each one sighed. During their visitation, her vigilance had never waned, and now she was all at once very, very tired.

Hilda yawned, but before her lips came together again, she was brought up short. A fourth shape was sitting in the circle, a new shadow dancing in the flame. A great Zendino was poking the fire with a long beech branch, listening to every word with eager intent: Geraldine had slipped in unheralded. Hilda gulped. There was nothing to do but proceed.

#

THE DRAGON, the wagon, and Simon set forth. Still a mile from their destination, Simon thought he heard his children's voices. He did not wish the dragon to know where he lived, but what could he say to get rid of the monster?

Simon stopped in the road. The dragon, one step behind, stopped as well. The sheep began to bleat and Simon said, "At this juncture, I do not know what to do."

The dragon was panting, for the sheep were a toilsome load. Simon continued, "I have a hundred children, and I am afraid they may do you harm. I will do my best to protect you."

A hundred children sired by Simon-Oliver-Rock-Eating-Bolovan! The dragon lay down in terror. "Please release me from my harness," he begged. "I will leave and never again be seen in the lands of men."

Simon began to undo the dragon's bonds, extracting from him oath upon oath which were sealed with threats of great vengeance should he ever return. Just as the last strap was unbuckled, Simon's children appeared on the road before them. They, who had had nothing to eat for days, came rushing towards the great serpent, waving knives in their right hands and forks in their left. They cried out with one voice—

***"Yummy, yummy!  
Dragon for our tummies!  
Thank you, Daddy, take your rest  
Dragon giblets are the best!"***

At this dreadful sound and sight, the dragon took off in adrenaline-fueled flight. So terrifying was his imagined fate that he never dared to show his face in the world again—even on its edges where that which is mingles with that which is not.

Hilda stood and curtsied, and this time there was clapping. Geraldine even whistled before stating flatly, "I've heard that one. You tell it well."

"Miss Geraldine, I presume?" asked Hilda, acting the hostess with all the confidence she could muster.

Wynona, Loretta, and Jolene sat trembling, but to Hilda, four dragons seemed no more threatening than three—an innocent mistake.

"What a darling young human!" Geraldine said, glancing at her troop. "And so good at weaving a plot line!" Turning back to Hilda, she added, "Would you like to hear the dragon song that goes with Simon-Oliver-Rock-Eating-Bolovan? I hear humans like to sing round a camp fire."

"Please," answered Hilda, glad to give the floor to someone else. She almost wished she hadn't, though, for Geraldine sang off key and some of the lyrics were quite bawdy—

***Simon cleaves to barren wife  
Then for children risks his life  
Though of the odds he's terrified  
His heart can do no other  
I doubt a man can love his brood  
With half the heart that women do  
Grateful babes are far and few  
That call out thanks to father***

There was more. But Hilda, sitting upright, sank into a deep sleep. The last lines she remembered hearing went something like—

*Fetch ewe's milk to keep her young,  
Living with mama is awfully fun.  
Balls cut off one by one ...*

Unlike Hilda, Wynona, Loretta, and Jolene dared not drift off. They sat in full attention as Geraldine crooned song after song, verse after chorus after verse, long into the lonely night.

*To be concluded summer 2024!*

# The Penultimate Dodo

by Geoffrey Reiter

He peers through plumage, grey like clouds of storm  
At sunset, toward his mate—her arc-prowed beak  
Is parted in a dull half-honk, a weak  
Alert, a warning from the placid warm  
Wide margin of the pond. A prowling form  
Appears from waging west, a streak  
Of straw-brown fur, across the creek,  
And followed by its fellows in a swarm.  
He dumbly gapes and gasps, then fleetly flutters,  
A feather-flurry fleeing from the pack  
Attacking with foam-frothing jaws, and fast  
In flightless flight he runs. But now, he sputters  
Bile-blood from out his beak at canines' wrack,  
and sees his mate, and knows she is the last.