

Janet and Tam Lin II
Awakened By Bird Song Retreat
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It's not a perfect night to tell a wee Scot's border ballad. All we're missing is the wolf hounds and the whiskey.

Let me say just a couple of words in introduction to "The Ballad of Janet and Tam Lin." Then I would love it if we could go through it one by one while there's still light.

The ballad was collected at the end of the 18th century by the great Scottish poet Robert Burns. There are versions of it in Scotland, Ireland, and the border area of Northern England. Some of the elements of the story go back to pre-Homeric times. And those of you who have worked with me on the myth of Psyche, Greco-Roman, you might have picked up some parallels with that story.

We were talking last night about the importance of freedom and love in this meditation tradition, and the inseparability of the two. And I want to add a third term tonight which, in some ways, makes those two possible and that's courage. Courage comes from the word for heart. It is a quality of the heart, as love is, as freedom is. Another thing I was talking about was the necessity to steal the dharma for ourselves. I hope this story will help explain what I mean by that. Because Janet steals Tam Lin, she steals him back from the fairies. There's something very important about that reaching her hands out into the world, rather than just passively receiving, this practice.

Let me say a couple of things to explain a little bit of the setting of the story. As the footnote says a *haugh* is a place near a river. In this case, there really is a place called Carterhaugh in Scotland near Selkirk. It's at the confluence of two rivers, so it's an area which is underwater part of the year and so was left wild the rest of the time. And that introduces another of the great themes of this story — mixing. The elements mix. Disparate things are always coming together and making something new, and borders are always being crossed. Rules are always being transgressed.

The fairies in Celtic tradition aren't the little Tinkerbelly creatures we think of as fairies now, they're more like the elves in the Tolkein literature. In appearance they were tall and ethereal; and in demeanor they were powerful and unpredictable. And they were the original inhabitants of the land and as human beings moved in, they pushed the fairies further and further toward the margins of things until the fairies went to live in the hills. And by 'in the hills' I don't mean among the hills, I mean *in* the hills. There were great fairy cities inside the hills. There are many Celtic stories of people being abducted and taken into the hill by the fairies.

In our own part of the world in Central and South America, there are the stories of Los Encantados who live in ponds and pools of water. There are many stories throughout Latin America of people stopping by a pond to drink and meeting a strange woman or just being taken under the water into the realm of the Encantados. Usually a person would reemerge after spending time underwater with them, with some kind of shamanic power. So this is a widespread human theme. That's everything I want to say by introduction.

The ballad begins with the King speaking, Janet's father who's the king of a small Scottish kingdom. If we could start at one end and go around the room :

[Retreatants take turns reading stanzas. See Janet and Tam Lin pdf.]

Oh, I forbid you maidens all
That wear gold in your hair
To come or go by Carterhaugh¹
For young Tam Lin is there.

And those that go by Carterhaugh
From them he takes a wad²,
Either their rings or green mantles
Or else their maidenheads!"

So Janet has kilted her green mantle
Just a little above her knee,
And she has gone to Carterhaugh
Just as fast as she could flee.

¹ A haugh is wild land next to a river that is under water part of the year | Carterhaugh is near the confluence of the Yarrow Water and the Ettrick Water in the Scottish Borderlands

² A wad is a pledge or fee

She had not pulled a double rose,
A rose but three or four,
When up and spoke this young Tam Lin,
Crying "Lady, pull no more!

How dare you pull those flowers!
How dare you break those wands!
How dare you come to Carterhaugh
Withouten my command?"

She says, "Carterhaugh it is my own;
My Father gave it me.
And I will come and go by here
Withouten any leave of thee!"

He's taken her by the milk-white hand
Among the leaves so green,
And what they did I cannot say;
The green leaves were between.

"Now since you've had your will of me
Come tell to me your name."
But she nothing heard and nothing saw,
And all the woods grew dim.

Janet's kilted her green, green skirt
A little above her knee,
And she is to her father's hall
As fast as she can hie.

There were four and twenty ladies gay
All sitting down at chess,
In and come the fair Janet,
As pale as any glass.

Out then spoke an old grey knight
Lay over the castle wall,
"And ever alas, fair Janet, for thee,
But we'll be blamed for all."

"Oh hold your tongue, you ill-faced knight,
Some ill death may you die!
Father my child on whom I will,
I'll father none on thee."

Up and spake her father dear,
He spake up meek and mild,
“Oh alas, sweet Janet,” he cried,
“I fear you go with child!”

“And if I go with child,
It is myself to blame!
There’s not a lord in all your hall
Shall give my child his name!

If my true love were an earthly knight
As he’s an elfin grey,
I would not give my own true love
For any lord here today.

The horse that my true love rides on
Is lighter than the wind.
With silver he is shod before,
With burning gold behind.”

Out then spoke her mother dear,
“And ever alas,” said she,
“I know an herb in the merry green wood
That will scathe thy babe from thee.”

Janet has kilted her green mantle
Just a little above her knee,
And she has gone to Carterhaugh
For to pull the scathing tree.

“How dare you pull that herb
All among the leaves so green,
For to kill the bonny babe
That we got us between!”

“You must tell to me Tam Lin,
Ah you must tell to me,
Were you once a mortal knight
Or mortal hall did see?”

“Oh, I will tell the truth, Janet —
A truth, I will not lie.
It’s truth I’ve been in holy chapel
And christened as well as thee.

But once it fell upon a day
As hunting I did ride,
As I rode East and I rode
West Strange chance did me betide.

There blew a drowsy, drowsy wind
And sleep upon me fell.
The Queen of Fairies, she was there
And she took me to herself.

And pleasant is the Fairy Land
But a strange tale I'll tell,
For at the end of seven years
They pay a fine to Hell—
And I so fair and full of flesh,
I fear it is myself.

Tomorrow night is Halloween,
And the Fairy Folk do ride;
Those that would their true love win
At Miles Cross they must hide!"

"But how shall I thee ken, Tam Lin,
And how shall I thee know?
Among so many unearthly knights,
The like I never saw?"

"First you let pass the black horse
Then you let pass the brown,
But run up to the milk white steed
And pull the rider down.

First they'll change me in your arms
Into some esk³ or adder,
Hold me close and fear me not,
For I'm your child's father.

Then they'll turn me in your arms
Into a lion wild.
Hold me tight and fear me not
As you would hold your child.

Then they'll turn me in your arms

³ An esk is a small snake

Into a red-hot bar of iron,
Hold me close and fear me not,
For I will do no harm.

Then they'll turn me in your arms
Into some burning lead,
Throw me into well-water
And throw me in with speed.

Last they'll turn me in your arms
Into a naked knight.
Wrap me up in your green mantle,
And hide me close from sight."

Gloomy, gloomy was the night
And eerie was the way,
When Janet in her green mantle
To Miles Cross she did gae.

About the middle of the night
She heard the bridles ring.
Janet was as glad of that
As any mortal thing.

First went by the black, black steed
And then went by the brown,
But quickly she ran to the milk-white steed
And pulled the rider down.

And thunder rolled across the sky,
And the stars they burned like day
And out then spoke the Queen of the Fairies,
Crying, "Young Tam Lin's away!"

So well she did what he did say
She did her true love win,
She wrapped him up in her mantle,
As blythe as any bird in Spring.

Up and spake the Fairy Queen,
And angry cried she,
"If I'd have known of this, Tam Lin,
Before we came from home,
I'd have plucked out thine heart of flesh
And put in a heart of stone!

If I'd but half the wit yestereen
That I have bought today,
I'd have paid my tithe seven times to Hell
Ere you'd been won away."

There are two ways to consider this story. One is esoteric and one is exoteric. The exoteric, or the extroverted way, is as a story that says something about what our lives are like and in particular what meditation practice is like. Maybe you recognize some of the passages, they feel familiar as being symbolic of the kinds of things that happen with meditation.

The other way to think about the story is the esoteric, or introverted way, where you take it as you would a dream. You take every character in the story as being one aspect of a single psyche, for instance, *your* psyche. So that Janet, Tam Lin, the King and the Queen, the knight over the wall, the Fairy Queen, and the ladies playing chess, each of them is some aspect of your psyche and they're interacting with each other.

Think for a moment whether there were any parts of the story that particularly lit up, things grabbed you, even if you don't know why. Were there things that seemed familiar to what you're doing now? Were there things that seemed opaque and puzzling? Things that bothered you?

Over the next two nights, I'd like to go over the story and talk about it part by part. I'll say a few words to introduce each part, but I'd love to hear how things seem to you.

So in the beginning the King, her father is speaking, and there's a sense of probably a peaceful land, the knights leaning over the wall with nothing to do when Janet comes back from Carterhaugh, so there's no immediate war going on. The King has enough energy and attention to put on the virtue of the women of the court. So he's obviously not fending off bandits or dragons or anything. There's a sense of a peaceful, well-ordered place. The gay women playing chess in the court.

So that beginning in a peaceful, well-ordered kingdom, does that remind you of any other story? Shakyamuni, for instance? It's the same story, right? It's the same story in the sense of an enclosed world and the same kingly injunction, *Don't go outside the walls*. Do you remember Shakyamuni is told *Don't go into the city*, and Janet is told *Don't go down to Carterhaugh* — it's the same thing.

In the story of Shakyamuni it's clear that astrologers predicted at his birth, if he leads a worldly life he'll be a great king, and if he leads a spiritual life he'll be a buddha. His father wants him to be a king. We might understand that as a kind of desire for dynastic continuation, but maybe there's something there that his father's worried that if he chooses the spiritual life, he'll be unfit for the world. He won't be able to be a king. He won't be able to have a common, worldly, effective life. There's something there about who's the King, who's the King in us, outside of us, who's the King that says, *Stay here, stay safe. Stay in this peaceful, lovely place.* Is that a recognizable place inside of you?

Q1 : I can't imagine being in such a peaceful and wonderful place and deciding to consciously wreck it. I'm more likely to if I know that I stay within the borders that things will be okay...

JIS : So, that's the question that gets raised in you.

Q2 : The King says to all these maidens including his own daughter, *If you go there, you will lose your maidenhood. And so you're forbidden to go there.* And so she goes there as fast as she can!

JIS : Yeah.

Q3 : Anyone whose had a teenager... [Laughter]

Q4 : Or been one...[Laughter]

Q5 : I have two daughters. It's a human thing, not a father-daughter thing. It's the acting out against authority, her parental authority, and pushing out against restrictions. And also making space for forbidden pleasures.

Q6 : To me it's like home when you're a teen-ager or young adult. You want to get away.

Q7 : Leaving the haugh could be leaving the cocoon, a courageous act of going out into the world.

JIS : I think the issue of transgression is really important. If she doesn't transgress her father's injunction, which is made out of concern for her well-being, you're going to give something up, you're going to lose something if you do this, *So just don't.* If she doesn't transgress that, the story stops.

If the story is going to keep moving, she has to transgress as Shakyamuni did. He transgressed three times in really big ways. The first was against his father's will when he insisted on going into the city and he saw the things that made him transgress the second time,

which was to abandon his family and leave to follow his spiritual path. And the third time when he was living as an ascetic and he accepted the food from Sujata, the woman who came and brought him the food under the tree when he was dying. That was such a huge transgression that the ascetics all left him, they said *You're impure now*. And they left him. But we know that was the moment that made Buddhism possible. So that's interesting — that it's necessary to cross the boundaries, to cross the frontiers.

Q3 : She had to leave in the first place, and then she returned to Carterhaugh to find supposedly the herb that her mother had suggested she use. Although it's pretty clear once she gets there she crashes around in the bushes and says, *Here I am!*

Q8 : You started talking about courage. For me, without fear there's no courage. I don't see her fearful at least not in the beginning. She has a youthful boldness. I don't see courage in the first transgression.

JIS : It's a transgression of innocence. She's incredibly innocent. I don't even think she can imagine what might go wrong.

Q2 : It's like "quickly, quickly, without thinking"

JIS : Yeah.

Q3 : It's her curiosity. What is out there exactly? Again, this innocent curiosity that just holds her.

Q4 : Why did she pull up her green mantle. I thought she was showing a bit of leg.

JIS : Well, I was thinking so that she could run more easily.

The green mantle is interesting because in Celtic tradition, green is the color of new life and spring and all that. But it's also the color of fairies and of death. Again, you have this mixing going on where she's wearing the color of new life and spring but also of fairies and death. And that reminded me a little of the Psyche story. Everybody misreads the oracle that Psyche will be married before all the gods whom quail, and they all think it must be a monster. But she's so desirous of getting out of the palace, getting unstuck, getting away from the perfect life, that's she's even willing to marry a monster in order to do it. So she dresses as a bride, but it's a funeral procession that takes her to the top of the mountain.

Q8 : We have power.

JIS : We have power. The power of myth. [Laughter] So there's that mixing, the bride going to her own funeral. Janet wearing green, the color of life and the color of death. There is some meaning there.

Q9 : What is a mantle?

JIS : I always thought it was a cloak. They say she's hitched it up. Maybe it's a long cloak.

Q6 : She also "kilted up her skirt."

JIS : Tied it up in a belt.

If we think of this as a kind of quest story and maybe something about meditation, this idea of the necessary transgression, it's very different from the American idea of meditation as therapeutic. It's good for you like flossing or exercise, you know? This is something darker, riskier, maybe something more interesting than that therapeutic idea of meditation practice.

Q4 : I guess my meditation practice has never been therapeutic to me. [Laughter]

JIS : Kind of wish it would be sometimes! [Laughter]

Q4 : It's always lead me into those dark places that I would not have gone to otherwise.

Q8 : I've never heard of it as therapeutic in Christian parameters. If you do, you do it in a little group and you don't go outside the parameters. [Laughter]

Q6 : That's why we're all here! [Laughter]

Q5 : Don't meditate beyond the lines.

Q8 : Don't go beyond the borders.

Q4 : You hear more movement towards contemplative prayer. We are in a Benedictine monastery.

Q7 : I'm trying to reach for the parallel between meditation practice and the poem and the role of transgression, and how it's depicted and symbolized in the poem. It does make sense to me. What makes sense is that my mediation practice is not therapeutic either, but it causes me to see bodies of belief and social systems as illusory and to not want to buy into them anymore. And I can think of several examples in the last couple of years that I really believe my meditation practice has been a key element that has gotten me to opt out of whatever the system was at the time that stopped making sense anymore. Is that along the lines of what you're thinking is the parallel?

JIS : Yeah, definitely.

Q9 : I can see a parallel between Janet pulling Tam Lin off the horse and the metamorphosis that humans go through to become human again. A lot of people, including myself, experience something where life kind of pulls you off your horse and you're left with no choice but to go through metamorphosis to regain your life, and you end up getting much more than you bargained for.

Q7 : Then mountains will become mountains again. Didn't it come from Dōgen? Mountains will become mountains again, and then they won't be mountains, and then they become mountains again. That's the path of awakening. Things are going to get all screwed up, and then you'll find out that ...

Q4 : Who knows? [Laughter] But, that's why it's dangerous.

Q5 : Nobody's gonna tell you the end of the story. [Laughter]

Q8 : I think there's an obvious challenge of stepping out of your life. Because culture is so hooked on speed and accomplishment, that I actually always get a little anxious before going to sesshin because it challenges my values. What do I value? Where am I going? What am I getting myself into? What am I separating from to come here? It's a little bit courageous, just that in itself. And what am I not going to come back to?

JIS : Yeah, it's interesting from that perspective. [Janet] starts doing something right away. She starts picking flowers right away, as if there's some comfort in the doing. Even in that place. I would add that actually as another transgression, to your list. She's transgressing the spirit world there. She doesn't own those flowers yet, she's picking them too soon. And yet, that transgression invokes Tam Lin. It brings him.

Q10 : She actually says that they are hers, so she makes the point that she's not transgressing. She has every right to pull the flowers.

JIS : Okay, let's talk about that. She says, "My father gave them to me." So what's that claim she's making?

Q9 : Most superficially, it's her birthright.

JIS : That's not superficial, yeah?

Q9 : Deeply.

Q3 : I don't know. I thought it was a boldfaced lie. [Laughter] Her father had said, *Don't go there.* [Laughter]

Q10 : Is that the first time that you know she's the King's daughter vs. just one of the women of the court?

JIS : Yeah.

Q10 : I thought she was lying. I wasn't sure if it was really her father.

JIS : *Mom said I could!* [Laughter]

Q9 : Later it becomes *Those aren't my cigarettes.*

JIS : *I'm just holding them for a friend.*

Q11 : I get caught on why 'Father' is capitalized there. It did make me think of the guide within.

Q9 : Something about birthright. If she really believes that she owns the whole countryside, that relates to where you might start meditation. You know how the whole world works, you know how it'll be...

Q4 : Yeah, the first months of meditation was euphoric. Then it hit me in the face with shadow.

Q6 : *How could anything in my father's territory really be dangerous?*

JIS : The assumption that *This is still my father's territory.*

Q8 : Why is he the protector? He's kind of saying *How dare you?* as if he's Tam Lin's, the protector of the plants.

JIS : Yeah, who's Tam Lin?

Q9 : He's a lost spirit who remembers being human, but got lost in the fairy world. It's reminiscent of pieces of self that one finds when meditating. Pieces you left behind and thought you safely got away from, still lurking about in the closets. They all own a piece of the world.

JIS : That's my sorrow. You can't fix that.

Q10 : This Saturday, I found myself, when we were sitting, saying Hail Mary's in my head. I haven't done that for twenty-five years.

Q9 : And then the Pope died. He's very bossy. *How dare you do that without my lead?* Like he's a little brat saying *All these marbles are mine.*

Q12 : He's also kind of a prisoner of the fairies. He's been captured and they won't let him go. Now they're afraid they're going to lose him. I think we become prisoners of our own

boundaries that we set. We introverts, anyway, set boundaries that we don't think we can safely cross. So we're really prisoners of our own fences that we've built.

Q11 : Well, so in a way, to weave freedom back in here, Tam Lin represents freedom to Janet, because he is outside her father's kingdom. And he's a fairy. He's been co-opted by the fairies and has been living with them for seven years. He's not one of the knights hanging on the wall. And the reverse is true, too, because Janet is freedom for Tam Lin, because she pulls him away from the Fairy Queen, and so the two together, the synergy they create is a synergy of freedom for both of them.

Q10 : Well, it seems like he's trying to get back to living.

JIS : And she's trying to ...

Q10 : I see her as being really deluded. She thinks that's living under the hill.

Q15 : I'm reminded of the scene in "The Secret Garden" where the two, the fairy and Colin, have an out-and-out battle in the middle of the night, calling each other horrible names, and become fast friends. So they're both standing there saying, *How dare you? and how dare YOU?* and then immediately go off into the bushes. [Laughter]

Q14 : It's like they call out each other's courage, and that's what gives them the courage to go on to that next step of freedom. Because if they didn't have each other, the courage would not have been called out.

Q15 : Courage or rebellion? Where does one become the other?

Q14 : Sometimes it starts as rebellion and then molds into courage. Courage seems to be more of a conscious thing and rebellion is ...

Q11 : Well you have to have courage to rebel.

Q14 : You've got to have passion to rebel. In the course of the story you see the passion develop into courage. By the end there's courage going on.

Q8 : I think there's courage even when Father said *Don't go in there, this will happen* and then he pops up. Instead of going *Argbbb!* She's like *Well, who are you? This is my property.* I think that's the first glimpse of courage that I see.

Q9 : Well anyone who's directly been told *Don't do this or else*, it takes some courage to do it even though it's an act of rebellion. There's some fear there.

JIS : Okay. So inside our selves, who is the king? Who is it we're rebelling / showing courage against? What is that?

Q7 : Ego. Well, just that we think that we're in control of our lives so we continue to rebel. I'm seventy-something years old and I'm still rebelling in some ways. Well I think that is ego that causes that rebellion. An ego used to the advantage of the person becoming mature. Becoming who they are, knowing who they are.

JIS : So who's the king?

Q7 : The self with a small 's'. I can't find another word for it.

Q8 : *I always thought I'd be this when I grew up and I keep going towards it.*

Q13 : The illusory boundaries. That's what the king is. So the king inside of me is the illusory boundaries.

JIS : *I'm this kind of person. I do this. I don't do that.*

Q11 : The story of *This is who I am and that's not. I'm not the kind of person who would run off into the woods to check it out because that's not me. I'm not that kind of person.* That inner voice, that story of who I am.

Q14 : The shadow.

Q13 : That's what my meditation practice does for me. It helps me recognize the illusory boundaries and it also helps or allows me to or gives me the courage to then go into the woods. I wouldn't have done that years and years and years before.