

George Mackay Brown (1921-96)

4 *Three Songs from a Play*

I

THE BALLAD OF JOHN BARLEYCORN, THE PLOUGHMAN,
AND THE FURROW

As I was ploughing in my field
The hungriest furrow ever torn
Followed my plough and she did cry
'Have you seen my mate John Barleycorn?'

Says I, 'Has he got a yellow beard? 5
Is he always whispering night and morn?
Does he up and dance when the wind is high?'
Says she, *'That's my John Barleycorn.'*

One day they took a cruel knife
(O, I am weary and forlorn!) 10
They struck him at his golden prayer.
They killed my priest, John Barleycorn.

They laid him on a wooden cart,
Of all his summer glory shorn,
And threshers broke with stick and stave 15
The shining bones of Barleycorn.

The miller's stone went round and round,
They rolled him underneath with scorn,
The miller filled a hundred sacks
With the crushed pride of Barleycorn. 20

A baker came by and bought his dust.
That was a madman, I'll be sworn.
He burned my hero in a rage
Of twisting flames, John Barleycorn.

A brewer came by and stole his heart. 25
Alas, that ever I was born!
He thrust it in a brimming vat
And drowned my dear John Barleycorn.

And now I travel narrow roads,
My hungry feet are dark and worn, 30
But no-one in this winter world
Has seen my dancer Barleycorn.'

I took a bannock from my bag.
Lord, how her empty mouth did yawn!
Says I, 'Your starving days are done, 35
For here's your lost John Barleycorn.'

I took a bottle from my pouch,
I poured out whisky in a horn.
Says I, 'Put by your grief, for here
Is the merry blood of Barleycorn.' 40

She ate, she drank, she laughed, she danced.
And home with me she did return.
By candle light in my old straw bed
She wept no more for Barleycorn.

II

TINKER'S SONG

'Darst thou gang b' the black furrow
This night, thee and thy song? . . .'
'Wet me mooth wi' the Lenten ale,
I'll go along.'

They spied him near the black furrow 5
B' the glim o' the wolf star.
Slow the dance was in his feet,
Dark the fiddle he bore.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in gray. 10
No mortal hand had woven that claiith
B' the sweet light o' day.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in green.
They're taen the fiddler b' the hand 15
Where he was no more seen.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in yellow.
They're led the fiddler through a door
Where never a bird could follow. 20

They've put the gowd cup in his hand,
Elfin bread on his tongue.
There he bade a hunder years,
Him and his lawless song.

'Darst thu gang through the black furrow 25
On a mirk night, alone? . . .'
'I'd rather sleep wi' Christen folk
Under a kirkyard stone.'

III FIDDLER'S SONG

The storm is over, lady.
The sea makes no more sound.
What do you wait for, lady?
His yellow hair is drowned.

The waves go quiet, lady, 5
Like sheep into the fold.
What do you wait for, lady?
His kissing mouth is cold.

1970

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