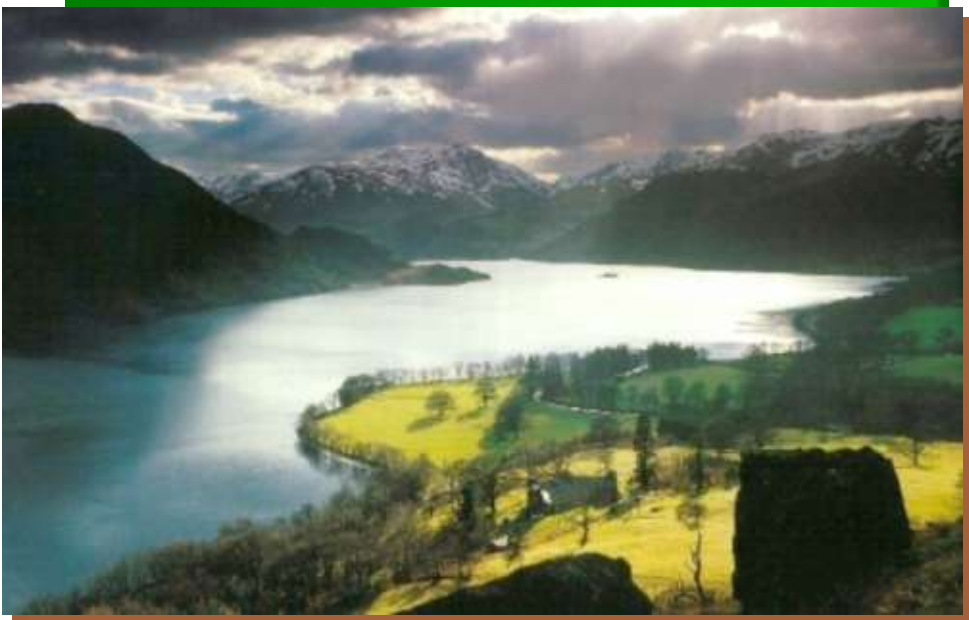

MEL KEEGAN

Twenty Poems

A DreamCraft
Special Download Edition
Yuletide, 2004

MEL KEEGAN: Twenty Poems

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The verse in this volume is an "earlybird preview" of a tiny portion of the upcoming Mel Keegan fantasy opus, Lords of Harbindane

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Merry Christmas 2004 to readers,
from Mel Keegan and the crew at DreamCraft.

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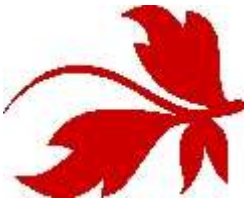
Mel Keegan:

Twenty Poems



DreamCraft

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A legend is told of the men from the north --
The story is older than time.
He came from a place that no longer exists,
Though if you were willing to climb --
A day and a night over Thunderbird Heights,
Where the wind strips the skin from your face,
You'd glimpse a far valley as if in a dream,
And you'd know you had reached the lost place:
The land where your grandsires
made magic as old
As the roots of the mountains are deep,
And just as your life ebbed away in the dark
You'd cleave to the secret, to keep
A covenant, ancient and filled with the fire
That passed e'er the last song was sung --
For this is but legend, just stories we tell
Of the time when the mountains were young.

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He turned to his cohort with steel in his eyes.
He said to them, 'Come, gather 'round,'
And they came to the firelight, eager to hear --
As if for the last time -- the sound
Of the voice that had rallied them here, to this place
From which there could be no escape,
For the legion from Hel was camped up on the moor,
For slaughter, for pillage and rape.
'Come, gather near,' he said to his men,
'And there is a song we shall sing:
'The song of the warrior, the poet and mage --
'The lay of the chieftain and king.'
For every man there on the moors, in the mist,
Every pale face, every sword,
Would lay down his life in the field before dawn,
And every man there was a lord.

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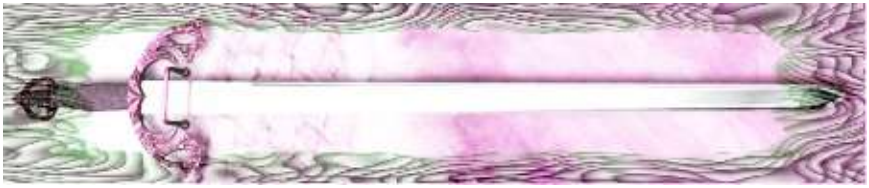

"Come to the fires," he said, come and dance,
"Dance while the spirit is living,
"Dance for the gladness of being alive,
Sing for the joy of love-giving!"
So I took his young hand and went to the fires,
Supped of the sweet ale he gave,
And I've hunted the years of my life ever since,
To win back that joy, which I crave:
For I tasted it once, and never again:
The trumpets soon called me to war.
In fields deep with mud,
spattered with blood,
I will long for that night evermore.

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I have passed by the gull's way
and the whale's way — free;
I have cross the Wyld, of ocean
and of sky,
I have heard St. Coreollus speak
and seen St. Aylmer's light...
Seen the whale's wake
and the draque's fin
and the gull's flight.

I am here by the dawn star
and the morn wind — home;
I have come by the mist,
the mountain and the sea.
I am come back to settle now
as every rambler must —
Wanting hearth's heat
and love's light
to welcome me.

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Down came the word,
and the word was War
And we fought till none
was left standing.
Up went the flag,
and the flag was red,
And here is my understanding:
The Reds killed the Blues...
or the Blues gave up ...
Else, the Red and Blue kings
grew tired.
A pact was made
while the widows prayed
And a thousand-odd songs
were inspired.
Loud were the songs:
they glorified War,
Of honor and courage
they'd prattle.
Not a word about love,
or horror and pain,
Nor the innocent shattered in battle.

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All along the backwaters of my
willful mind
Come whispers of the songs that I
rambled as a boy;
Some are myths, or legends of the
wild and primal kind;
Some are mother's ballads, from
her mother, bringing joy.
And then comes the other song
from out the well of Dark:
Bloodsong, swordsong, lays of war
and strife --
Swift raises up the soul,
to such songs, many hark...
And, knowing it, the Dark wells up,
and hearty drinks of Life.

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You can hear tomorrow singing
If you give the wind your ear --
You can see the future shaping
In the turning of the year;
Only listen to the nightsong
Where the mountains
raise their peaks,
Where the vastness of the heavens
Is the gem the adept seeks --
The future, there, is singing
Though the song is long unheard,
For no one hears its whisper,
Nor understands a word.

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Darkling I listen
And oft have I heard --
In the still of the night
In the shrill of a bird --
The voices of places
No man's ever seen:
They're not in our spaces,
But angles between,
Where the junctures of
Future with present and past
Are barely divided --
And sure, at the last,
When all of the cosmos
Descends into night,
The last soul remaining
Will sing of the light
That banishes evil,
Extinguishes doom,
And defies every Fate
With her hand on the loom.

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When I was young...
When I was young...
So many years ago
That I have near forgotten
All the things I yearn to tell you!
When I was young
The world was young,
And everything seemed possible,
'Ere the world grew old and blue!
Or...
Did I grow old?
Did I grow old?
So many years have passed
That I can scarce believe
The face that greets me
Every morning in the glass!
Now I am old
The world is old,
And all things seem too difficult,
That have not yet come to pass!

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From distant shores
and troubled heights
With joy I am returned
And hoping for fond welcome
From the kinsmen once I spurned --

Boyhood's restless dreams robbed me
Of the land from which I sprung!
One smile, I beg, from one old heart
Who smiled when I was young!

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A half-drawn sword
in a shadowed nook,
A face half-seen
and a sidelong look,
A strange little bottle
of a liqud, green,
A whispered word
and a note that's been
Tacked to a door
in the dead of night,
Not even a knock
to say who'd write
Secrets of statecraft --
dangers and lies:
For this is the realm
where princes and spies
Rework the future
like molding in clay,
And a thousand lives
can be lost in a day
With charts gone missing --
or secrets to "share" --
This is Destiny's Forge,
.... and mortals beware.

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When I set out, my mother said
(as nearly as I can recall),
"The world is wide, so you be as wise
In spring as you were in fall.
The moon grows round,
She shrinks back thin,
The tide runs low and high --
So fortunes change, but as you range,
If your dreams should ever die
Consider this: there's no real bliss
In reward without endeavor.
So forge your fame and
Make your name
One they'll sing about forever."

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"Here,' said the mouse,
hiding in the wainscoting,
"Here, can't you see me?"
he mocked the hunting cat;
And the cat did what cats do,
listening to his wilder side ...
He couldn't see the wolfhound
who was waiting just for that.

the moral of this story
(if it has such nous at all)
Is: 'Seldom trust the lackey,
On his master, always spy!'
For the mighty mostly
need their mice,
While mice need taller friends,
And between them these rodents
have torn castles from the sky.

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When they came in the night
The old man was dead --
Winter and old age'd
had their way.
The Thane of the Valleyfolk
In fear then hung his head --
For, sure, it was his people's
bleakest day:
Without any voice
To sing runes to the sky
The dragons would be
swift wreak all Hel...
Then out of the shadows
Crept a shy little girl,
And of her -- what a tale
there's to tell!
For she was Elbecca,
Whom nobody knew,
Save that Ewan, the Thane's
Guard, had caught her
Just a moment before she
spellbound them all...
Aye: she was
The Runsinger's Daughter.

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Here spins the future,
The past is a skein
Of threads both tangled and free;
There spins forever –
The future is far
From set or decided, and three
Truths, say the Old Ones,
Are graven in stone,
For captain, king and for colonel:
Life's but a verse,
The Soul is the song,
But only the wind is eternal.

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A whimpering wind and a quiet of stone,
A stumbling horse and a man alone,
A loping wolf where the snow lies deep,
A watchtower, dark, with a granite keep
Where, once, the wind-tossed banners streamed
Along these walls where
the spear-points gleamed,
Where eagles flew and battles would rage
In the time of warrior, poet and mage --
'Tis eons ago and the memory's dim;
The tales are told and the verses are grim,
For the battle was won at a terrible cost,
The mountains were scarred
and the valiant were lost --
The bards still recall, for their art is in verse,
Recording the past, the best and the worst:
Those days filled with fear --
with glory, with gold ...
Lest e'er we forget:
fortune favors the bold.

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Can you hear the wind? It whispers
Of a place that is no more;
It whispers, as the night sings,
Of a long-forgotten door,
Of a gate that led to other realms,
Where 'dreamspace' writhes and curls,
'Round the sanctum of the wizard,
Called 'The House of Many Worlds.'
Can you hear the wind? It sorrows
For a people who are lost;
It sorrows as the rain weeps
For the bloodshed and the cost
Of many lives, all squandered
In the bitter years of war,
And who remembers now, about
The world behind the door?
For the House of Many Worlds
Is dark, deserted, cold;
The mage no longer lives there:
He is feeble, long grown old,
And when he's gone, the story
Will ne'er be told again --
Of a people who are lost now,
And a world beyond all ken.

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At the moment of birth
The gods touched your soul,
And this is the mark you will carry:
Warrior, hunter, mother or scribe,
From the hour of birth,
so don't tarry!
Listen, just listen --
your heart will reveal
The life it is longing to strive for!
Don't bother envying
what others have --
Another's lot's nothing to cry for.
What you were, what you are,
what you shall be:
These are the things
that are reckoned
Vital as breath to the life
you will live
When into this world
you are beckoned --
For the gods of your fathers
see over the heads
Of your siblings' bold revolution --
Already they've seen
your life's winter's eve,
And it's there you'll make
your contribution!

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The wind in the west brings
the smells of the sea --
Of harbors, of ships and the brine;
And, smelling its scent, how oft I recall
The sting of the wind, and how fine
Was the freedom to roam,
to live and to love,
When the sea and the wind
were my trade --
The faraway places and strange,
unknown lands ...
I've grown old, but the memories don't fade.
I recall every line of the face I once loved;
In dreams do I still hear him sing,
Though he has been gone all
these twenty long years
And, on my hand, only his ring
Proves to young doubters:
I once had a love --
Even I! For, once I was young ...
'Cross the landscapes of youth
our fires burn bright,
And, even when that song's been sung.
For all of the rest,
while the silver sets in,
As Fate has her way with us all,
Nothing can tarnish the joys of the past,
The vast, golden range of recall.

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How shall I say that I have never known
A thing more fair than life, than love, more rare?
Yet shall I say, more precious, still, than these
Is friendship's very soul, and mateship's care.

A lie would pass these lips, were I to claim
That I have never wooed -- nor loved, nor lost;
Yet my lost affections leave me thus:
Cherishing frindship's pleasures, and its cost.

For, seldom do the years fetch out this joy:
Two hearts, two souls, around one cause entwined,
Where friendship, courage, joy and all the rest
Yield such sweet sorceries as soothe the mind...

All this is surely true. Yet, still say:
When friendship turned to love, I bless'd the day.

This sonnet appeared in THE SWORDSMAN and is the only poem in this collection which is not part of THE LORDS OF HARBINDANE

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