

Arthur Rackham (1867-1939),
'The Entrance to the Witches' Castle'.



The Castle that is the World

Marly Youmans

1.

She met a king's son in the dark of woods
And begged him, fetch my shining golden ball
That fell and wavered down the well: my goods,

My gowns, my gear I'll give, and all-my-all
If you will dive the frog-cold, frog-dank well
That holds my sunshine toy in rayless thrall.

He looked as if he knew some secret spell
To show as in a glass her inward self
But stripped and sprang into the shaft of hell,

Sank deepward, hurling wyrm and water-elf
And eft aside; ransacking with his hand,
He closed his fingers on the glowing wealth ...

And now, will she begin to understand
The dark, the gold, the resurrected man?

2.

The dark, the gold, the resurrected man:
It's trees that sway at night, it's leaves that fan

The sunshine gold of noon, it's wood that held
Unbroken Christly limbs when darkness spelled

The air in broadest day and circling hawks
Unspiralled to their nests as ancient rocks

Cracked open with a shout – and so we trees
That root in clay or sand yet comb the breeze,

Upraise new sap with spring, and store the sun
In leaves that die and come again in one

Unending ring still stand memorial,
Remembrancers arboreal

That drink the snowmelt, light, and streaming cloud
To make the buds of May from winter's shroud.

3.

To make the buds of May from winter's shroud . . .

So ran the challenge from a queenly witch,
But nowhere could be found a girl endowed
With fingers delicate enough to stitch

A tapestry from winter's brittle straw
And snow, its icicles, its sleet and rains –
Long winter ruled without a yielding thaw
While witches played ice-castle chatelaines.

Ten thousand years unspooled and reeled away
Before a wand-straight, saintly girl was born
Who could transform the shroud of silver-grey
To foxglove, sweet pea, larkspur, rose-and-thorn:

Her spindle gathered light from paradise
Till hand-loomed May-buds broke a curse of ice.

4.

Till hand-loomed May-buds broke a curse of ice,
Till agate pebble-stones began to sing,
Till birds elected elephants as king,
Till cats renounced their trembling love for mice,
Till *Abba, Abba*, cried the edelweiss,
Till east flew west, till winter married spring,
Till fur-ruffed bears danced in the fairies' ring,
Till medic eels learned how to faradize:

Till all these things were ours, we hardly knew
The meaning of our realm – the way a coin
Foreseen as hiding in a fish may show
Up Caesar's taxing head, the way the true

And strange in tales and miracles conjoin
To prove the world is more than what we know.

5.

To prove the world is more than what we know,
She flew to woods and chicken-legged hut,
Scratch-scratched herself a crooked plot to grow
Fanged cabbages, and fenced with bitternut
Raw edges of her queendom . . . Severed heads
She slammed on pikes; on looms she harnessed silk
To tangle blue-eyed mountain boys in threads;
She proffered bowls of poisoned buttermilk
To lost, unwary Hansels in the wild.
The all she ever feared was shimmering,
Saintly, seldom: apparitions of mild
Ascetics, their repentance simmering
 As if by some not black but golden art
 Stirring in the cauldron of a heart.

6.

Stirring in the cauldron of a heart,
Passions rouse, the rowan tree of veins
Burns and blossoms, logic flies apart

Till no shred of modern mode remains;
Giants stalk the lands, the fairies swarm
Farm and forest, dragons haunt the lanes,

Mothers beg hedge-witches for a charm,
Children cross a threshold silled with spume,
Fathers forge a sword to strike at harm.

Surely soon we'll breathe a far perfume,
Sense a cataract of godliness,
Snare a falling star or angel's plume,

Tremble at a rampant, wild caress –
Spellbound by the mysteries that bless.

7.

Spellbound by the mysteries that bless,
She tested every mirror with her hand
And looked into each thicket, mere, and stand
Of ancient trees for elves, with some success:
Might've glimpsed their gauzy, trailing dresses
Half-hidden by the leaves; once found a strand
Of glittering that could've been the band
To bind in light some wildwood fairy's tresses.

But most of all beside a rosy fire
She felt enchanted presence in the pins
And needles of a fairy tale, her childhood's
Word-door, stepping stone to something higher;
As in some portal story that begins,
She met a king's son in the dark of woods...

.....

Marly Youmans

