

Once the siege and assault had done for Troy,
And the city was smashed, burned to ashes,
The traitor whose tricks had taken Troy
For the Greeks, Aeneas the noble, was exiled 5
For Achilles' death, for concealing his killer,
And he and his tribe made themselves lords
Of the western islands, rulers of provinces;
And rich: high-handed Romulus made Rome
Out of nothing, built it high and blessed it
With his name, the name we know; and Tirus 10
Father of Tuscan founded towns;
And the Lombards planted a land; and Brutus
Split the sea, sailed from France
To England and opened cities on slopes
And hills, 15
Where war and marvels
Take turns with peace,
Where sometimes lightning trouble
Has struck, and sometimes soft ease.

And noble Brutus' Britain grew rich 20
In battle-bold knights, who loved to fight
And fought, and often brought pain to their people.
Far more than in any land in the world
Wonderful things have been worked in England.

25 But of all her kings Arthur was always
Most glorious, as the tales tell—and knowing
A strange adventure, told of Arthur
And his knights, as surpassingly strange a tale
As even Britain has spawned, I'll tell it
30 Here and now, as I've heard it told,
If you'd like to listen to the poem I'll read,

Spun
Out of ancient stories
Set down by honest men
35 With bold words
And faithful pens.

At Christmas the king held court at Camelot,
Surrounded by gracious lords, worthy
Knights of the Round Table, brothers in arms,
40 Reveling in that rich pleasure. Noble
Knights day after day rode
In tourneys, jousted gallant and well,
Then galloped to court, and sang, and danced—
For Camelot's Christmas feast was fifteen
45 Days, as full of food and laughter
As feasting could be made, loud and happy
And glorious to listen to, noisy days,
Dancing nights, lords and ladies
Rejoicing in their rooms, and in Arthur's castle,
50 Coming together in the height of delight,
The most famous warriors of Christ our King,
And the loveliest ladies in the world, and Arthur
The noblest of rulers, reigning in his court.
It was springtime in Camelot, in the Christmas snow,
55 In that castle

Most blessed on earth,
With the best of vassals
And a king of such worth
That no time will surpass him.

60 With the New Year drawing close, courtiers
And ladies sat to a double feast;
Mass had been sung in the chapel, the king
And his knights came to the hall, and priests

And laymen called "Noëll! Noëll!"
And shouted and sang, and nobles ran 65
With New Year's presents in their hands, noisily
Passing in a crowd, calling: "Presents!
Presents!" and loudly disputing gifts,
While ladies laughed when kisses were lost
(And whoever won them found it hard to weep), 70
And till dinnertime came they ran and laughed;
Then they washed and sat at that stately table,
The noblest nearest their lord, and his queen,
Guenevere the gay, seated in their midst:
Arranged around that priceless table 75
Fringed with silk, with silk hung
Over their heads, and behind them velvet
Carpets, embroidered rugs, studded
With jewels as rich as an emperor's ransom—
And the queen 80

Watching with shining
Gray eyes, seemed
As beautiful a lady
As a man could have seen.

Yet Arthur, boisterous and merry as a boy, 85
Refused to eat till the others were served:
His blood ran young, and his brain was restless,
And he liked to be gay, he hated lying
About or sitting long at a time.
And a point of honor held him back, 90
A vow he had taken and meant to keep,
Not to be seated at a festive table
Until he'd been told a tale of adventures
Or marvels, some mighty story to remember
Of princes, of battles, of perils or wonders, 95
Or a courtly visitor had begged some knight
Of the Round Table to rise and ride in combat,
Fight for his life, man against man,
As fate determined. Wherever he held
His court the king was ruled by this custom, 100
Whenever he sat with his knights around him
And feasted.

His face proud
 He remained on his feet,
 And his laughter was loud
 As he waited his New Year's treat.

So the fearless king stood in front of his table,
 Talking of elegant trifles. And Gawain
 The good sat beside Guenevere, and Agravaine
 Of the hard hands on her other side,
 Both Arthur's nephews, faithful knights,
 And Bishop Bawdun at the king's right
 And Urian's son Ywain with him.
 This central table sat high in luxury
 And around them lesser knights in rows.
 With a flaring crack of trumpets the feast
 Began, trumpets all hung with bright banners,
 And drums beat, and glorious bagpipes
 Rumbled and shrilled their quick-step tunes,
 And hearts beat quick with the music. At the signal
 Rare and delicate dishes were served,
 And venison in great slabs, and so many platters
 That there was almost no place to set them in front of
 The guests, broths and stews in overflowing
 Abundance.
 All ate as they pleased
 And as much as they wanted,
 A dozen dishes apiece,
 And beer and wine flowed free.

I've nothing more to tell of their feasting:
 Any fool knows with what splendor they were fed.
 And to send the prince to his dinner, a different
 Sound approached—the trumpets and pipes
 Were barely still, the drums silent,
 The first dishes set in place,
 When a ghastly knight sprang through the door,
 Huge, taller than men stand, so square
 And thick from neck to knee, thighs
 So broad around, legs so long,
 He seemed half an ogre, a giant,
 But clearly the biggest creature in the world

And the fairest, the gayest for his size, as thin
 In the waist, as flat in the belly, as his back
 And chest were grim and immense, from cheek
 To chin fine and elegant, with an easy

Grace
 And stunning the court
 With the color of his race:
 A fiery, snorting
 Fellow, and his hands were green, and
 his face.

And his armor, and his shirt, were green, all green:
 A short tight tunic, worn close, and a merry
 Mantle, sewn-in with fur that rippled
 As he rode, trimmed rich at the edges with bright
 White ermine, both his mantle and the hood thrown
 low

On his back, below his flowing hair;
 And his smooth-webbed stockings, stretched taut
 on his legs,
 Were green, all striped with embroidered silk,
 And his shining spurs were gold, and he wore
 No shoes, rode peacefully to that prince's court.
 Everything about him was an elegant green,
 From the colored bands on his belt to the jewels
 Set in his clothes and his saddle, woven
 Around with silk designs: birds
 And butterflies flew in that embroidery, beautifully
 Worked and fine, decorated in green
 And with gold scattered across them. His horse's
 Armor was enameled, and the saddle and its straps
 And the bit in its teeth were green, and the stirrups
 For that knight's feet were green, and his saddle
 Horn, and the shining leather hung
 From the saddle, glittering and gleaming with green
 Stones, and his stallion too, as green

As its rider,
 A huge horse,
 Headstrong, decisive

And quick, but caught up
By his hand's touch on the bridle.

His clothes and his armor were glorious, this green
180 Knight, his hair the color of his horse
And waving down his shoulders. A beard
As thick as a bramble-bush grew from his chin
And fell in front as far as the hair
In back, hair and beard cut
185 At the elbow, like a king's hooded cape
Enclosing his neck and half his arms;
And his horse's mane hung long, combed
And curled, braided strand for strand
With gold thread, a strand of green hair,
190 Another of gold; and his forelock, and his tail
Were braided to match, bound in place
With a green band, dotted with precious
Stones the length of that flowing tail,
Then laced with an elaborate knot; and strung
195 With dozens of bright gold bells that rang
As he rode—and rider, and horse, stranger
Than anything seen on earth, before
That day.

200 He seemed to glow
Like lightning, they say
Who were there: who could know
The force of his blows?

And yet he wore no helmet, no mail-shirt,
No neck-armor, nothing against steel or arrow,
205 Nor carried a shield nor swung a spear,
Had only a branch of holly in one hand
(Holly that grows greenest when the woods are
bare)
And an axe in the other, monstrous, huge,
A vicious weapon four feet wide,
210 Hammered of green steel, and of gold,
With a polished blade, a bright cutting
Edge, and long, and stopped like a razor
Ready to shear, and his hand held it
By a thick staff, strong and straight

And wound round with iron at the end; 215
It was carved with lovely green symbols and designs
And hung by a strap run through the head
And down the handle, looped around
And tied with delicate tassels and embroidered
Buttons, green and rich. This knight 220
Stalked in the door and through the hall
To Arthur's high table; afraid of no one,
Greeting no one, ignoring them all.
And when he spoke: "Where," he said,
"Is the lord of this company? I'd like to see him 225
In person and exchange some words." He stared
At the knights,

Rolling his eyes up
And down, then stopped
And squinted, hunting the knight 230
Of noblest renown.

And they themselves sat and stared,
Wondering, bewildered, what it meant that a knight
And his horse could have such a color, could grow
As green as grass, or greener! and glow 235
Brighter than emerald enamel and gold.
And those who were standing watched, and walked
Carefully near him, not knowing what he'd do—
They'd all seen wonders, but nothing like this.
And some said he was witchcraft, a phantom, 240
And were afraid to answer him, then gasped at his
voice
And trembled, sitting motionless in that noble
Hall, silent as stones, as corpses;
All speech was swept away as if sleep
Had dropped 245

From the sky—but some
Surely stopped
Their tongues in courtesy, to do honor
To Arthur, whose words should come
first.

And Arthur stood watching the strange arrival 250

And greeted him gravely (for he knew nothing of fear)

And said, "Sir, you are welcome in my house,
For I am Arthur and I rule this court.

Step down from your horse and stay, let me pray
you,

255 And whatever you've come for can be talked of
afterward."

"No, God help me," said the green man, "I have
No interest in lingering here! Yet you
And your court are so famous, prince, and your
castle

And your knights are praised so widely—the proud-
est,

260 The boldest soldiers to sit on a horse,
The bravest and best of men, eager
To compete in noble games—and your courtesy
Is told in such terms, that I came to see
If these tales were true. You can surely tell

265 By this branch here in my hand that I've come
In peace, not seeking, not giving offense:
Had I ridden with my men, intending to fight,
I've a helmet and mail-shirt at home, and a shield,
And a sharp spear, shining bright,
270 And other weapons meant for war.

I intend no war, what I wear is in peace.

And if Arthur is as brave as his fame, in the name
Of this Christmas season you'll grant me the sport
I've come for."

275 And Arthur replied,
"Your wish is done, sir.
If you've come to fight
We'll fight and not run, sir."

"No, not fighting: believe me, prince.

280 These benches are filled with beardless infants.

Wearing my armor, riding to war,

There's no muscle in this hall to match me. It's a
game

I want to play, a Christmas sport

For the season. Your court sings of its daring:
If they'll dare it, any of these eager knights,
285 Rise so boldly, so fierce, so wild,
And give a blow and take a blow,
I'll offer this noble axe and let them
Swing its weight as they like, and I'll sit
Without armor and invite them to strike as they
290 please.

Anyone with the nerve to try it, take
This axe, here. Hurry, I'm waiting!
Take it and keep it, my gift forever,
And give me a well-aimed stroke, and agree
295 To accept another in payment, when my turn
Arrives,

But not now: a year
And a day will be time
Enough. So: is anyone here
Able to rise?"

300

If he'd stunned them at first, they sat stiller, now,
All who followed Arthur, noble
And knave. That knight swiveled in his saddle,
His eyes rolling fierce and red,
And he wrinkled his bristling brows, gleaming
305 Green, and switched his beard from side
To side— And no one rose— And he reared
Like a lord, and yelped, and laughed, and said:
"Hah! Is this Arthur's house, hailed
Across the world, that fabled court?
310 Where have your conquests gone to, and your pride,
Where is your anger, and those awesome boasts?
And now the Round Table's fame and its feasting
Are done, thrown down at the sound of one man's
Words—and you sit there shaking—at words!"
315 And he laughed so loud that Arthur winced,
His fair face flooded hot with shame,
And his cheeks;

He flared as angry as wind,
And all his people

320

Burned. And the bold king
Strode toward the green

Knight: "By God, fellow, this is foolish
Stuff—but you've asked for folly, and folly
325 You'll get! No one's afraid of your nonsense:
For God's sake, give me your axe, I'll grant
Your request!" Light and fast, he ran
And clasped the green knight's hand. And proudly
The green man dismounts. And Arthur lifts
330 The axe, and whips it about, gripping it
Firm in his fists, grim, determined.
That haughty knight stood huge at his side,
A head and more the tallest in the hall;
Stroking his beard, his face set
335 And still, he quietly pulled down his coat,
As indifferent to Arthur swishing his axe
As if the king were a waiter carrying

Wine.

Gawain was seated near
340 The queen; he leaned
Forward: "Hear me,
My lord. Let this challenge be mine."

Then Gawain bowed to the king. "Release me,
My liege, from this bench, and let me come to you,
345 Permit me to rise without discourtesy,
And without displeasing your queen. Let me come
To counsel you, here in your noble court.
It seems wrong—everyone knows how wrong—
When a challenge like this rings through your hall
350 To take it yourself, though your spirit longs
For battle. Think of your bold knights,
Bursting to fight, as ready and willing
As men can be: defer to their needs.
And I am the slightest, the dullest of them all;
355 My life the least, my death no loss—
My only worth is you, my royal
Uncle, all my virtue is through you.
And this foolish business fits my station,
Not yours: let me play this green man's game.

If I ask too boldly, may this court declare me 360
At fault."

The knights whispered, buzzed,
Then all
In a voice said it was
For Gawain; the king should halt. 365

Then Arthur ordered his knight to rise,
And Gawain rose and came quickly
To the king, and kneeled, and accepted the green
man's
Axe as Arthur yielded it, lifting
His hands to bring God to Gawain, commanding 370
That heart and hand must be steady and strong.
"Be careful, cousin," said the king, "to strike
But once; offer exactly what he asks
And his stroke will be easier to stand." Axe
In hand Gawain approached the green man, 375
Who waited patient, calm, unmoving.
Then he spoke to the knight: "Before we proceed,
Friend, we ought to make everything clear.
And I ask you, first, your name: speak it
Openly, and speak the truth." "In truth 380
It is Gawain who offers this stroke, and agrees,
No matter what happens, to accept a stroke
From you, in exactly a year, with whatever
Weapon you choose—from you, and only
From you!" 385

The green man smiled:
"Sir Gawain, no one could do
What you'll do, and delight me
More—no man alive.

"By God," he swore, "Sir Gawain, I'm glad 390
To have what I wanted at your hands. You've spoken
Our bargain beautifully, and spoken it fair,
And omitted nothing I asked the king
Except, knight, your word to seek me
Yourself, to come to me there where I am, 395
At home on this earth, and to take the same
Reward you'll give me today in this court."

"And where will you be?" asked Gawain. "Where
Is your home? By God, I've never heard
Of your castle, or you, or your court, or your name.
Tell me, teach me, give me your name,
And I'll come to you, however hard the road,
Wherever you are: I swear on my word."

"That's oath enough, at Christmas," said the green
man,

"I need no more. Once you've swung my axe
Neatly and well, there'll be time to tell you
Where my home is and my house, and to tell you
my name,

And you'll test my castle, and me, and keep
Your word. And perhaps I'll say nothing, once

You've struck, which is better for you, you could
stay

Here with your king and not hunt my door—
But stop!

Take my good axe
And show me a chop."

"Exactly as you ask,"
Said Gawain, ready to strop.

Still smiling, the green man bowed, and bent
His head a bit, baring his neck,

His lovely long hair tossed back, leaving

The naked flesh open, exposed.

Gawain hefted the axe, swung it high

In both hands, balancing his left foot in front of him,

Then quickly brought it down. The blade

Cut through bones and skin and fair

White flesh, split the green man's neck

So swiftly that its edge slashed the ground.

And the head fell to the earth, rolled

On the floor, and the knights kicked it with their
feet:

The body spurted blood, gleaming

Red on green skin—but the green man stood

A moment, not staggering, not falling, then sprang

On strong legs and roughly reached through thrash-
ing

Feet, claimed his lovely head,

And carrying it to his horse caught the bridle,

Stepped in the stirrups and mounted, holding

His head by its long green hair, sitting

High and steady in the saddle as though nothing

Had happened. But he sat there headless, for every-
one.

To see,

Twisting his bloody, severed

Stump. And the knights were wary,

Afraid before he ever

Opened that mouth to speak.

And he held that head high, slowly turning
Its face toward Arthur and the noblest of his
knights,

And it lifted its lids and stared with wide eyes

And moved its lips and spoke, saying:

"Gawain, be ready to ride as you promised;

Hunt me well until you find me—

As you swore to, here in this hall, heard

By these knights. Find the green chapel, come

To take what you've given, a quick and proper

Greeting for a New Year's Day. Many men

Know the knight of the green chapel:

Seek me, and nothing can keep you from me.

Then come! or be called a coward forever."

With a violent rush he turned the reins

And galloped from the hall, his head in his hands;

His horse's hooves struck fire on the stone.

And where he rode to no one knew,

No more than they'd known from where he came.

And then?

Arthur and Gawain grinned

At the joke, and laughed at the green

man,

Though those who had seen him

Knew miracles had been sent.

70 SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Arthur's heart whirled in wonder,
Yet he showed nothing, turned to his beautiful
Queen and spoke courteously, but loud:
470 "My love, let nothing of this disturb you.
These are things right and proper
For Christmas, and for courtly ladies and their
knights,
Miming and plays, carols and laughter.
But now I can dine, I admit it; the marvel
475 I awaited has come." Then he glanced toward
Gawain:
"Sir," he said slowly, "hang up
Your axe: it has cut enough for one night."
And servants hung it high against
A tapestry, a trophy for everyone to stare at,
480 True evidence of marvelous things.
Then knights and ladies returned to table,
And Arthur and Gawain, and good men served
them
Double portions, as rank demanded.
They ate and drank and listened and watched
485 And the day was delight, and was long, and was
finally
Done.
And now, Gawain: think.
Danger is yours to overcome
And this game brings you
490 Danger. Can the game be won?

PART TWO

The green man began Arthur's New Year
 With the marvels he loved to hear of. But the men
 Of the Round Table sat silent at their meat, stuffed,
 Now, with grim business. Gawain
 Enjoyed the beginning of that game, in his king's 495
 Court, but no one would laugh at the end—
 For men may be cheerful, mulling their wine,
 But a year runs fast, and always runs different;
 Start and finish are never the same.
 So Christmas goes by, and all the swift year, 500
 Each season racing after the other:
 Christmas pursued by uncomfortable Lent,
 Trying men's flesh with simple food
 And with fish; then fair weather fights with foul,
 Clouds fill the sky, the cold shrinks away, 505
 Rain falls clear in warm showers,
 And the flat earth opens into flowers
 And fields and plains grow thick and green,
 Birds start their nests and sing like angels
 For love of soft summer, creeping across 510
 The slopes;
 And hedgerows swell tall,
 And blossoms blow open,
 And glorious woods are all
 Echoing joy and hope. 515

And after summer's soft winds, Zephyrus
 Whistles quietly with seeds and herbs,
 Sprouting delightful plants, painted
 Wet with dew falling from leaves,
 520 Waiting to be warm in the bright sun.
 Then autumn comes rushing, calling the plants
 To watch for winter, to grow while they can;
 And he dries the earth and drives dust
 Swirling to the sky, and wild winds
 525 Run to wrestle with the sun; leaves
 Are thrown from trees and lie dead on the ground,
 And green grass withers. And everything
 Slender and new ripens and rots,
 And a year runs away in passing days,
 530 And winter winds back, as winter must,

Just so.

Till the Michaelmas moon
 Promises snow—
 And Gawain soon
 535 Recalls what he has to do.

But he stays with Arthur till All-Saints Day.
 And the king makes a feast in his honor, the court
 And their ladies merry around the Round Table,
 Gracious knights and lovely women
 540 Grieving for love of Gawain, but laughing
 And drinking his name, smiling and joking
 While their hearts sank gray and cold. And Gawain
 Feasts, then sadly approaches his uncle
 And speaks of his journey, and bluntly says:
 545 "Lord of my life, I ask your leave.
 You know my promise: I've no pleasure in retelling
 it,
 Spelling my troubles, except just this:
 Tomorrow I go to the green man and his axe,
 Tomorrow without fail, as God guides me."
 550 And the best of Arthur's knights came to him,
 Iwain, and Eric, and many more,
 Sir Dodinel de Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence,
 Lancelot, and Lionel, and Lucan the Good,

Sir Bors, and Sir Bedivere—strong men, both—
 And other proud knights, with Mador de la Port. 555
 They came to the king, all of them, to counsel
 Gawain, but their hearts were heavy. In secret
 Thoughts, that day, Arthur's hall
 Rang with silent lament, sorrow
 For so good a man as Gawain, on so hard 560

A quest.

But Gawain only smiled:
 "Should I waste my time
 With fear? Whether pleasant or wild,
 Fate must be put to the test." 565

So he rested that day, then rose the next morning
 And at dawn called for his armor. It was brought,
 But first a rich red rug was spread
 On the floor: gold armor gleamed where it lay.
 Then Gawain stepped forward, took steel in his 570
 hands,

And over a doublet of Tharsia silk
 Fastened a hood, tied at the neck
 And lined inside with thick fur. Then hammered
 Steel shoes were set on his feet, and his legs
 Wrapped all around with well-hinged metal, 575
 With armored knee-plates, polished bright
 And fastened tight by golden cords;
 Thigh-plates, elegant and thick, closed
 Around his strong muscles, and were laced
 In place. And then his mail-shirt, metal 580
 Woven like silk, hung shimmering on his chest,
 And polished arm-pieces, and beautifully bent
 Elbow joints, and steel gloves,
 And all the equipment he needed, and owned,

For that ride, 585

Draped with heraldic designs—
 And gold spurs on his feet,
 And his good sword at his side,
 And a sash-belted neat.

And Gawain's gear shone rich, the smallest 590
 Laces and loops glowing with gold.

Ready in armor, he stood at the altar
 For mass to be chanted, then came to the king
 And the assembled knights of Arthur's court,
 595 And took courteous leave of lords and ladies,
 Who kissed him, commended him to Christ, then
 walked him
 There where Gringolet stood ready, his saddle
 Of gleaming leather, hung with gold,
 Studded with new nails, and a striped bridle,
 600 Trimmed and tied with gold. And Gringolet's
 Breast-plates, and shining saddle-skirts,
 And tail-armor, and the cloth on his back, matched
 His saddle-bows, all set on a background
 Of rich gold nails that glittered like the sun.
 605 Then Gawain lifted his lined helmet,
 Sewn like steel, and quickly kissed it;
 It sat high on his head, clasped behind,
 With delicate embroidered silk on the neckband,
 Decorated with jewels along its length
 610 And with birds stitched on the seams, parrots
 Perched among painted purple flowers,
 And turtle doves, and lovers' knots
 So thick that ladies could have sewn them for seven
 Winters.
 615 And around the top
 Of his helmet were a crop
 Of diamonds, brown and white, sprinkled
 In a magic knot.

Then they carried in his shield, striped with bright
 red;
 620 A pentangle star, painted pure gold,
 Shone at its center. He swings it by the belt,
 Then tosses it across his neck. And the sign
 Of that star, its perfect points, fitted
 That prince, and I'll tell you how, though it hold up
 625 This tale. Solomon shaped that star—
 Triangles blended in triangles—as a symbol
 Of truth, for each of its angles enfolds
 The other, and fastens the other, five

In all and everywhere endless (and everywhere
 In England called the infinite knot). 630
 And Gawain wears it by right, on his bright
 Armor, faithful five ways and each way
 Five times, a noble knight, as pure
 As gold, as good as any knight in any gleaming
 Castle 635
 And worthy of that star,
 The noblest of men in asking
 And telling, the hardest
 For words to baffle.

His five senses were free of sin;
 His five fingers never failed him;
 And all his earthly hope was in Christ's
 Five wounds on the cross, as our creed tells us;
 And whenever he stood in battle his mind
 Was fixed, above all things, on the five 645
 Joys which Mary had of Jesus,
 From which all his courage came—and was why
 This fair knight had her face painted
 Inside his shield, to stare at Heaven's
 Queen and keep his courage high. 650
 And the fifth of his fives was love and friendship
 For other men, and freedom from sin,
 And courtesy that never failed, and pity,
 Greatest of knightly virtues—and these noble
 Five were the firmest of all in his soul. 655
 And all these fives met in one man,
 Joined to each other, each without end,
 Set in five perfect points
 Wholly distinct, yet part of one whole
 And that whole seamless, each angle open 660
 And closed, wherever it end or begin.
 And so the pentangle glowed on his shield,
 Bright red gold across bright red stripes,
 The holy pentangle, as careful scholars
 Call it. 665
 And Gawain was ready,
 And his lance steady

In front of him, wished them all
Farewell, and then rode from that hall.

- 670 He spurred his horse and rode strongly away;
Sparks flew from the stones. And Arthur's
Court watched him, and sighed, all Camelot
Sad at his fate, men saying
One to the other: "By Christ, what a crime
675 To lose Gawain, whose life was so noble!
How many men on this earth can match him?
Better to have been more prudent, to have made him
A duke before this could happen. He seemed
A brilliant leader, and could have been,
680 And had better been than this—his head
Lopped off by an elf, and only for pride.
What king has ever allowed such games,
Playing such stupid sport at Christmas!"
Warm tears rolled in their eyes
685 As they watched that lovely knight riding
Away.

And he never delayed,
Rode on his way;
And books say
690 That he rode where men go astray.

- And he rode through England, Sir Gawain, on God's
Behalf, though the ride was hardly a happy one.
He was often alone, at night, in places
Where the path ahead of him could please no one.
695 Only his horse rode with him, through woods
And hills, and the only voice he heard
Was God's, until he reached the north
Of Wales. The Anglesey Islands were always
To his left; he forded rivers near the highlands,
700 Crossing at Holy Head and landing
In the wilderness of Wirral Forest, where few men
Lived whom God or a good man could love.
And Gawain asked, as he rode, if anyone
He met had heard of a green man, or a green
705 Chapel, anywhere nearby, and everyone
Said no, never in their lives, neither seen

Nor heard of a man whom heaven had colored
Green.

Gawain's path
Wound through dreary scenes,
And his head leaned
First this way, then that, as he hunted
that chapel.

- He climbed over cliffs in many strange lands,
Nowhere near home, friendless now.
And at every ford over every stream
715 He found himself facing enemies so foul
And wild that they forced him to fight for his life.
He met so many marvels in those hills
It is difficult to tell a tenth of it—dragons
Attacked him, and sometimes wolves, and satyrs,
720 And forest trolls, running out of rocks,
And bulls, and bears, and ivory-tusked boars,
And giant ogres leaping from crags.
His strength saved him, and his courage, and his
faith
In God: he could have died a dozen times
725 Over. And the fighting was hard, but the foul
Winter was worse, so cold that rain
Froze before it could fall to earth;
Sleeping in his armor, sleet came close
To killing him, lying on open rock
730 Where icy rivers charged from mountains
And over his head icicles hung,
Sharp and hard. In danger and hardship
Gawain stayed alone, riding until Christmas
Eve,
735 When he prayed to Mary
To end his grief,
To guide his weary
Steps to relief.

Next morning, more cheerful, he rode down a hill
740 To a deep forest, incredibly wild,
Set into mountains and surrounded by hundreds
Of huge gray oaks. Hazel and hawthorn

Were snarled and tangled together, and shaggy
 745 Moss hung everywhere in ragged clumps;
 And sad birds sat on the bare
 Branches, piping pitifully in the cold.
 Gawain hurried his horse, crossed swamps
 And mires and bogs, acres of mud,
 750 Afraid, now, that he'd lost all chance
 Of hearing Christmas mass and honoring
 Mary's son, born to end
 Our sorrow; and sighing, he said: "Oh Lord,
 Oh Mary, gentlest Mother and dear,
 755 I beg you to send me some lodging, to let me
 Hear mass before morning; I ask meekly,
 And in proof pray swiftly my pater, my ave,
 My creed."

760 He prayed as he rode,
 And wept for misdeeds,
 And shaped the sign of the cross
 And called Christ in his need.

Three times he shaped that sign, and suddenly,
 On a hill above a field, set deep
 765 Among massive trees, he saw a moat
 And a castle—the loveliest ever owned,
 In the middle of a meadow, with woods and lawns
 And a thick palisade fence, and grass
 And grounds running more than two miles. And
 Gawain

770 Stared at those stone walls glittering
 Through tall white oaks, towering around
 A steep moat, and removing his helmet
 Gave courteous thanks to Jesus and Julian,
 Patron of travelers, for the kindness he'd been
 shown,
 775 For the answering of his prayer. "Lord, grant me
 Good lodging!" he cried, and spurring Gringolet
 With his gilt heels he hurried along
 The path and luckily aimed at the main
 Gate and quickly came to the end

Of the bridge. 780
 And waited, the edge
 Of the moat in front of him, the gates
 Bolted tight, the bridge
 Up, the walls cut huge and straight.

He sat on his horse, who had halted on the bank 785
 Of the deep double ditch in which
 The walls were set, towering immense
 Out of the water, hard stone
 Hewed in the noblest style, topped
 With rows of battlements, and turrets, and beautiful 790
 Towers for sentries, and lovely loophole
 Windows, shuttered now—he'd never
 Seen a better fortress. And beyond
 The walls he could see a high-roofed hall,
 And pinnaced towers along it, fitted 795
 To the walls, carved and crafted by ingenious
 Hands. And high on those towers he saw
 A host of chalk-white chimneys, gleaming
 Bright in the sun—and everywhere the stone
 Painted and cut, bowmen's notches 800
 And watchmen's places scattered across
 The castle, so it seemed scissored out of paper.
 And resting on Gringolet, Gawain thought it
 A pleasant place to lodge in, while the holiday
 Ran—if ever he could manage to get 805
 Inside.

He called, and a porter
 Quickly appeared, polite,
 Standing on the wide
 Wall and greeting the knight in good order. 810

"Good sir," said Gawain, "would you carry my
 words
 To the lord of this house, ask him for shelter?"
 "By Peter, I can speak his heart: you're welcome
 Here," said the porter, "for as long as you like."
 He bowed, went down the wall and came back 815
 In a moment, with men to greet Sir Gawain.
 They dropped the drawbridge, came courteously out

And knelt in the snow, welcoming on their knees
 That noble knight, honoring his rank;
 820 They begged him to ride on that broad bridge
 And he raised them with a hand and rode across.
 They held his saddle, and helped him down,
 And ran to stable his horse. And squires
 And knights swarmed from the castle, happy
 825 To escort so excellent a soldier to their hall;
 When he lifted his visor they hurried to take
 His helmet from his hands, anxious to serve him;
 And they took his sword, and his shield. And one
 By one he greeted them all, courteous,
 830 And proud men pressed forward, glad at his coming.
 Still in his armor they led him to the hall,
 Where a huge fire crackled on the hearth.
 And the lord of that company came from his
 chamber
 To honor Gawain, the guest in his hall:
 835 "Everything here is yours, use it
 As you please; accept it as your own, for as long
 As you like."

And Gawain replied:
 "Thank you. May Christ
 840 Reward you." And like brothers they
 kissed
 And embraced and were glad.

And Gawain watched his gracious host
 And judged him a worthy knight, tall
 And strong and experienced, in the prime of life;
 845 His beard was heavy, all beaver-colored,
 His face as red as fire, and more fierce;
 He stood firm and forbidding on thick legs;
 But his words were courtly, and Gawain thought him
 Worthy to lead a host of good warriors.
 850 And the lord of that castle led him aside,
 Commanded a man to serve him well,
 And others led Gawain to a glorious bed
 In a noble room, hung with strips
 Of shining silk, trimmed with gold,

With a bedspread sewn in the softest fur,
 Gleaming ermine, and around him curtains
 On red-gold rings, with a rope to pull,
 And silk tapestries spread on the walls
 And floors, red and white silk. Then his man
 Removed his armor, and his mail-shirt, pleased
 860 To work with so noble a knight. And he quickly
 Brought him rich robes, and Gawain
 Chose which he liked, and changed his clothes,
 And wore that lovely long-skirted gown—
 And all at once it seemed to be Spring,
 865 As his face shone, and that fair robe
 Glistened with color, and Gawain walked,
 Gracious, among waiting knights, and they thought,
 Each of them, that Christ had made no better
 Man.

Whatever his land,
 He seemed a matchless
 Prince, meant to attack
 In the center of battle.

In front of the fireplace, where coals glowed,
 They set him a covered chair, its cushions
 Quilted and beautifully worked, embroidered
 In silk; and a brown mantle, richly
 Sewn, and bright, a gay cloak
 Furred with the thickest skins, was thrown
 880 On his shoulders; his hood, too, was ermine;
 And Gawain sat in that splendid place
 And soon was warm, and his spirits rose.
 A long table was laid on trestles,
 And a white cloth hung on it, and across it
 885 Another cloth, and silver spoons,
 And a salt-dish. He washed and went to his meat.
 And men hurried to wait on him, brought him
 Savory stews, and broths, seasoned
 And hot, all double-sized portions, and fish
 890 Of every kind—baked and breaded,
 Grilled on charcoal, boiled, and in spiced
 Soups—and sauces sweet to the tongue.

And Gawain called it a feast, graciously
 895 Praised their table when they begged him to excuse it.

"This is food
 And penance together; refuse it
 If you will; tomorrow's will be better."
 He laughed and was gay, and used
 900 Their wine so well that he stuttered.

Then quiet questions were asked, tactful
 And discreet: where had he come from, was it far?
 And Gawain explained that he rode from noble
 Arthur's court, that glorious king
 905 Of the knights of the Round Table, and that he
 Was a soldier named Gawain, sitting in their hall,
 Come to their Christmas, as chance led him.
 (And the lord of that castle laughed with delight,
 Later, hearing that Gawain was with him.)
 910 And the knights in that castle shouted with pleasure,
 Proud to stand in his presence—Gawain,
 Eternally praised, bearer of excellence,
 Most able, most knightly, best on earth,
 Most famous, most honored of men. And each of
 them

915 Whispered to his fellow: "How sweet it will be
 To see such easy, virtuous skill!
 What lessons we will learn in noble speech,
 What marvelous words, what practiced methods
 Of converse, now that we welcome this model
 920 Of perfect breeding! God has been good,
 Truly, to grant us a guest like Gawain,
 In this season when men sing and rejoice
 In His birth.

925 This knight will lead us to the meaning
 Of manners, will work
 Miracles for us to see
 In the soothing of lovers' hurts."

When dinner was done, and Gawain rose,
 It was nearly night. And priests went walking
 930 To their chapels, and rang out loud and merry
 Chimes, as rightly they should, calling

Holiday vespers for the faithful to hear:
 And the lord came, and his lady, she
 In a beautiful pew, gracefully at prayer.
 And Gawain hurries happily after them; 935
 The lord takes him by the sleeve and leads him
 To a bench, and greets him, and calls him by name,
 And tells him no man could be more welcome.
 And Gawain thanks him, and they throw their arms
 Around each other, sit side by side 940
 For the service. And the lady looked at Gawain,
 And afterward, her women around her, came
 To her lord, her face the fairest white,
 And in all things the softest woman on earth—
 Lovelier than Guenevere, in Gawain's eyes. 945
 She walked round the altar, to greet him. Another
 Lady led her by the left hand,
 Older than her, ancient and old
 And honored by a host of good knights. And how
 Unlike they were, that pair, the young one 950
 Fresh, the old one faded yellow;
 Rich red cheeks on the one, rough
 And wrinkled jowls on the other, loose
 And dangling; coverings hung with pearls
 On the young one's throat and breast, showing 955
 Skin whiter than snow on the hillsides,
 While the old one wrapped a kerchief on her neck
 And hid her black chin in white
 Veils and muffled her forehead in latticed
 Embroidered silk, and left nothing 960
 Bare but her black brows, two
 Eyes, and a nose, and naked lips,
 All awful to see, bleared and sour—
 But a lady honored here on earth,

By God! 965

Stumpy and short,
 Her buttocks broad:
 There was better sport
 In the lady she towed.

And watching that lady watch him, Gawain 970

Went to meet them, with her lord's consent:
 Bowing low, he saluted the old one,
 But the pleasanter woman he wrapped in his arms
 For a courteous kiss and chivalric words.
 975 And the ladies asked to know him, and he quickly
 Pledged himself their servant. Each lady
 Took an arm, and held him, and talking as they went
 They led him to a room and a fire, and called
 For platters of spice-cakes, and her lord's people
 980 Carried in cakes and pleasing wine.
 And her lord leaped to his feet, over
 And over, urging them to mirth; he tugged
 At Gawain's cloak, and pulled a spear
 From the wall, challenging the knight to win it
 985 From him, make Christmas a merry time:
 "And by my faith I'll fight to keep it,
 Myself and my friends, as best I can."
 And he laughed and jested, to please Sir Gawain
 With jokes and games, there in his hall
 990 That night,
 Until the hour
 When he called for lights,
 And they left that bower
 For sleep's delight.

995 On that morning when men remember God's birth,
 His descent to earth to save our souls,
 The world rejoices for His sake—and that castle
 Ate and drank God's name, dishes
 Of dainties and sweets on tables and at meals,
 1000 Brave men celebrating in proper style:
 The ancient lady at the lord's right,
 And the lord come courteously to his seat beside her,
 And Gawain and the gay lady together,
 Between the others, when the table was laid;
 1005 And the rest sitting where they thought it best.
 And when everyone was seated in good order, there
 was meat
 And drink and mirth, laughing and joy
 So free and full that to tell it all

Would trouble my pen, however it tried.
 And yet I can tell you that Gawain and the lord's 1010
 Fair lady sat gaily side by side,
 Relishing each other's laughter and courtly
 Speech—private, but courteous and pure,
 A surpassing sport, fit for princes
 And their ladies. 1015
 Trumpets and drums
 And pipers played;
 Each man minded his own,
 And so did the knight and the lady.

That day, and the next, were spent in delight, 1020
 And then the third came as happily, as crowded
 With joy: the Feast of St. John rang
 With pleasure, and all of them thought it the end
 Of their sport. And expecting to be sober, in the
 gray
 Morning, they danced to the gayest music, 1025
 And laughed, and guzzled wine. And as late
 As they could, whoever had to took
 Slow leave and left, finally, to stumble
 Home. And saying goodnight to his host
 Gawain was grasped and led to his bedroom, 1030
 Beside the fire, an arm across
 His back, and thanked for the honor he'd shown him,
 Gracing his castle at that holy time,
 Adorning his house. "By God, while I live,
 Gawain, I'll be a better man 1035
 For this season you've blessed." "My thanks, good
 sir,
 But God almighty knows that honor
 Is yours—may the Lord reward you! I sit here,
 Ready and willing to do as you ask,
 In anything large or small: so duty 1040
 Requires me."
 And the lord tried
 To tempt him to stay,
 And Gawain sighed,
 Knowing no way. 1045

Then the lord asked him about himself,
 What heavy burden drove him, in those holy
 Days, away from Arthur, riding
 Alone in the wilderness while the world of towns.
 1050 Feasted. "True, true," said Gawain,
 "A heavy, pressing errand takes me
 To a place, somewhere, I don't know where
 Or how to find it. But find it I will and
 I must, by New Year's morning, with God's
 1055 Help. By England, I'll find it! So let me
 Ask you, sir, here and now,
 If you've ever heard of a green chapel,
 Anywhere in this world, and a green knight
 Who holds it as his own. For he and I
 1060 Have agreed to meet, made a solemn exchange
 Of vows, and I'm to come there, if I can,
 By New Year's morning, which is almost here.
 If He would let me, I'd be happier to see
 That green man—by God's own Son!—than gold
 1065 Or silver or jewels. Which is why I can't stay
 In your castle: I've three days' time to keep
 My word; I'd rather be dead than fail."
 Then the lord laughed: "Ah, now you'll stay;
 I know the green chapel, forget that part
 1070 Of your trouble. All in good time I'll tell you
 Its place. Rest in your bed, ride
 At New Year's, but not too early in the day,
 And you'll be there by noon, you'll see that chapel
 And that knight.
 1075 Rest till the new year, friend,
 Then rise and ride
 Away. We'll set you on the right
 Road—a mile or two, then the end!"
 Then Gawain was glad, and laughed: "My thanks,
 1080 Host, for this above all! My adventure
 Is certain: I can stay exactly as you like,
 And please you in everything, perform what you
 ask."
 Then the lord took him and set him at his side,

And sent for the ladies, for everyone to rejoice.
 And how happy all of them were! The lord
 1085 Babbled—all for love of Gawain—
 Like a mad man never knowing what he said.
 And suddenly he cried to the knight, shouting:
 "Do as I ask, you'll do as I ask:
 Now, will you do it now, what I ask?"
 1090 "Sir, exactly," said the honest knight.
 "Your servant for as long as I stay in your house."
 "Well, you've traveled hard, and far,
 Then sat up feasting with me: sleep
 And rest are your needs. I know that, knight.
 1095 So lie in your bed, high in this house,
 Till mass is sung tomorrow, and eat
 When you please, and with my wife: she'll keep
 You company, amuse you until I make
 My way home. 1100
 I'll rise at dawn
 And spend the day with my hounds."
 Gawain bowed,
 Agreed, and waited. He went on:
 "And more: we two can make a bargain: 1105
 Whatever I earn in the woods will be yours,
 Whatever you win will be mine in exchange.
 Shall we swap our day's work, Gawain? Answer
 Me plain: for better or worse, an exchange?"
 "By God," said Gawain, "I agree, and your pleasure 1110
 Pleases me, I like your game." "Then bring us
 A pledge, and the promise is sealed," cried
 The lord of that castle—and they laughed together
 And drank and made delightful talk
 With the ladies, for as long as they liked, and after- 1115
 wards
 Said goodnight like Frenchmen, with soft
 Words and courteous speech, standing
 And exchanging gracious kisses. Then they climbed
 To their beds, each of them led by a crowd
 Of servants holding torches high 1120

And bright.

And still their eyes
Met, as they climbed:
That lord relished delight
And could spin it out fine.

1125

PART THREE

Long before dawn the castle woke:
 Departing guests called for their grooms,
 And men came running, saddles in hand,
 And tied up their gear, and packed their bags,
 And the guests came, ready to ride, 1130
 And leaped on their horses, shook the reins,
 And rode where they wanted, each to his home.
 And the well-loved lord of that castle was not
 The last one ready, he and his men;
 After mass he ate a hasty 1135
 Meal, and blowing his bugle galloped
 To the hunt. He and his knights were set
 In their saddles before the sunlight gleamed.
 Huntsmen leashed up hounds, opened
 Kennel doors and called out dogs, 1140
 Blaring long notes, and loud, on their horns.
 And beagles bayed and barked and snarled
 And were whipped and shouted back when they
 strayed
 Aside, a hundred wonderful hunters,
 They tell me. 1145
 And keepers took up places
 And dogs ran free,
 And the forest swelled
 With horns and hooves and chases.

1150 At the cry of the hounds, wild animals
 Shook, dazed deer in valleys
 Bolted for hills—and were shut in their woods
 By a shouting ring of beaters. Stags
 With arching antlers were allowed through the gates,
 1155 And flat-horned big bucks, for that noble lord
 Had ordered that the law of the season be observed
 And no man touch a male deer.
 But hinds they hallooed back—"Hey hey!
 Watch out!"—and they drove does deeper
 1160 Into valleys, and arrows slanted down,
 Great broad arrows flying at every
 Turn, cutting deep in brown hides.
 Hah! They screamed, and bled, and high
 On slopes they died, hounds hurrying
 1165 After them, and hunters with horns, blowing
 So hard that the echo seemed to crack
 Cliffs. And deer that escaped arrows
 Were caught by keepers, cut down and killed,
 Hunted back from the safety of high ground:
 1170 These men all knew their trade, and their grey-
 hounds
 Were so huge that leaping on a deer from behind
 They tore him down, right there, as fast

As the telling.

1175 And frantic with delight
 The lord rode and yelled
 And ran, till night
 And darkness fell.

So the lord plays at the edge of the wood,
 And Gawain lies in a lovely bed,
 1180 Quiet until daylight comes creeping up the walls
 And over the coverlet and around the curtains.
 And sleeping in peace he heard, suddenly,
 A noise at his door, and heard it swing to—
 And pulling his head from the pillow he parted
 1185 The edge of the curtain, and peered carefully
 Out, wondering who had entered. The lady
 Of that castle, beautiful to watch, silently

Shut that door behind her and approached
 The bed. And Gawain, embarrassed, dropped
 His head and pretended to close his eyes,
 1190 And the lady came nearer, and quietly lifted
 The curtain, and softly entered, and gently
 Sat at the edge of the bed, and waited,
 And watched, for Gawain to awake. And he kept
 her
 Waiting, hiding his head, wondering
 1195 Why she had come, and what she meant
 To do. He thought it a strange adventure
 Indeed—but said to himself, "Better
 To ask, and know, than hide in sleep."
 So he tossed, and stretched, and turned toward her 1200
 And opened his eyes, and played at surprise,
 And crossed himself, as though to bless
 His words.

Her face was sweet,
 Her skin was white and pink;
 1205 She spoke like birds
 Singing, and her small lips laughed.

"Good morning, Gawain," said that beautiful
 woman,

"Your sleep is so innocent that anyone can catch
 you—

And now you're caught! If no one arranges
 1210 A truce, I'll tie you to your bed—I will!"

Laughing, she teased him with a flurry of words.

"Good morning, lady," said Gawain gaily,
 "Whatever you please will please your servant

Here: I surrender at once, I beg
 1215 For mercy—the best I can hope for, now."

And he laughed with her, as they juggled words.

"My lovely captor, release me a moment,

Order me to rise and dress more properly,

So I can leave this bed, as I'd like to do.

And a walking knight would please you more."

1220 "Good sir," said that lovely, "stay where you are.
 You're not to rise: I've better plans,

I'll lock you where you lie, and sit where I am,
 1225 And then I can talk to this knight I've caught.
 For I know who you are, Gawain himself,
 Honored all over the world. I've heard them
 Praise your perfect chivalry, pure
 To lords, to ladies, to everyone alive.
 1230 And here you are, and we're alone,
 My lord and his men away in the woods,
 All men asleep, and my maids too,
 Your door shut, and locked with a bolt—
 And having in my house a man so loved
 1235 I refuse to waste my chance, for as long
 As it lasts.

Now please us both,
 Decide our path.
 Your arms are too strong,
 1240 I bow to your force."

"Lord!" said Gawain. "How lucky I am,
 Lady, not to be the knight you speak of:
 To take that kind of honor for my own
 Would be sinful; I know myself too well.
 1245 By God, I'd be glad, if it pleased you, to offer you
 Some different service, in word or deed:
 To serve such excellence would be endless delight."
 "Indeed, Sir Gawain," said that lovely lady,
 "You own such excellence, such surpassing power,
 1250 That to slight your ability would be lack of breeding.
 How many women there are, my gentle
 Knight, who'd rather hold you in their castles,
 As I hold you here, and hear your courteous
 Voice, and comfort their sorrows and cool
 1255 Their grief, than keep their gold and treasure.
 My love for our Lord who rules in Heaven
 Restrains me, though His grace has given me what
 all women

Want."

She spoke so well,
 And looked so well,

That Gawain gave her honest
 Answers, free of cant.

"Madame," said that modest man, "may Mary
 Reward you: your noble words, like many men's
 Deeds, assign me honor and virtue 1265
 That in fact I've never deserved—indeed,
 When you speak such perfection, you speak of
 yourself."
 "By Mary," said that wonderful woman, "no!
 Even if I were worth all women
 Alive, held all the wealth of the world 1270
 In my hands, if I had the choice of a husband,
 Ah knight, I've found you out—and now, for
 Your beauty, your grace, your cheerful ways
 —Exactly what I'd heard you were—nothing
 And no one on earth could come before you." 1275
 "Thank God!" said Gawain, "your choice was
 better.

But I'm proud to be priced so high in your eyes,
 For you are my queen and I your servant
 And your knight: may Christ repay you, lady."
 Till the middle of the morning they spoke of many 1280
 Things, the lady pretending to love him;
 Gawain was cautious, walked with care
 And tact.—"Were I the most beautiful on earth,"
 She thought, "his heart would hang slack, thinking
 Of the reason 1285

For this journey, and the blow
 This season
 Will bring him." And knowing
 It was time, she took her leave.

But saying farewell, looking back 1290
 With a laugh, she suddenly stunned him: "By Him
 Who blesses our speech, repay me! If Gawain
 Were Gawain, he'd settle his debt." "For what?"
 He asked quickly, afraid that he'd failed
 To frame some suitable phrase. But she smiled 1295
 And wished him well: "Because," she explained,
 "If Gawain were as good as his name, with every

Courtly virtue lining his heart,
 He'd never have stayed so long with a lady
 1300 And left her unknissed: courtesy cries out
 Against him! Surely some sly word
 Was missing." "Your pleasure is my command,
 Lady: I kiss as you wish, as a good knight
 Must. Ask me only once."
 1305 She walked toward the bed, wound her arms
 Around him, bent to his face, and kissed him.
 With flowing words they commended each other
 To Christ; she closed his door behind her,
 Silent; and Gawain swiftly rose,
 1310 Called to his man, chose his clothes
 And was dressed, then walked happily to mass,
 And then to the worthy meal that was waiting,
 And then all day, till the moon shone,
 Made merry.
 1315 No better hosts sported
 With a man: every
 Moment the young lady, and the old,
 Made laughter roll.

And the lord reveled in his own pleasure,
 1320 Hunting deer in meadows and woods:
 Before the sun sank down he'd killed
 So many no one could count them. Huntsmen
 And keepers came together, proud,
 And quickly collected the bodies in a pile.
 1325 And the noblest knights, with their men around
 them,
 Chose the sleekest deer for themselves,
 Ordered them neatly quartered and carved:
 (When they sliced the animals, and measured them,
 the leanest
 And thinnest was two inches thick with fat).
 1330 First the throat was slit, and the gullet scraped
 With a sharp knife, and tied; then they cut
 The legs and skinned them; then broke the belly
 Open, and carefully hauled out the intestines,
 Leaving the gullet knotted in place;

Then taking the throat they quickly separated 1335
 Esophagus and windpipe, and flung out the guts;
 Then carved the shoulder-bone loose, pulled it
 Through a small slit, and kept the hide
 Whole. Then they cut the breast in halves;
 And starting to cut at the throat they ripped 1340
 The carcass to where the front legs fork;
 Emptied the edible guts; then cut
 Away the membranes around the ribs:
 They carved along the backbone, down
 To the haunch, so the meat held together, 1345
 Then lifted it up all at once, and cut it
 At the end (properly called the numbles,
 I know),
 And the folds of the hind legs
 And the meat on those bones, 1350
 Were quickly cut, and the spine
 Laid open.

Then they cut off the head, and cut off the neck,
 And carved the flanks away from the spine,
 And threw the ravens' fee in a thicket. 1355
 Then they ran a hole through the ribs and hung
 The carcasses by the hind legs, each
 Taking the parts proper to his rank.
 They set out liver and lungs and tripe
 On a fresh-flayed skin, mixed with bread 1360
 Soaked in blood, and fed their hounds.
 Then hunting horns blared, and dogs bayed
 As, taking their venison, hunters turned home to
 High staccato bugling, loud
 And clear. By sunset they had come to that castle 1365
 —And there was Gawain, quietly waiting
 Near a bright
 Fire, at peace.
 The lord came to that knight,
 Joyful, and they greeted
 Each other with delight. 1370

And the lord ordered all the household
 To his hall; both ladies came, with their maids;

And when everyone had gathered he commanded
that his men

1375 Bring his venison to him; and he turned
To Gawain with a gracious laugh, asking
That he note the bushy tails of noble
Deer; and he showed the bright flesh
From their ribs. "Does it please you, this sport?
Have I earned

1380 Your praise? Have I won appreciation with my
skill?"

"Most certainly," said the knight. "These are the best
Game I have seen in seven winters."

"It's yours, Gawain," said the lord: "Our agreement
Lets you claim it as your own." "You are right,"

1385 Said that knight, "and I say the same, for here
In this house I have won a worthy prize,
One I am proud to make yours." He put
His arms around the lord's neck
And kissed him as courteously as a knight could:

1390 "Here are my winnings, I won no more;
I would give it gladly, were there more to give."
"I am pleased," said the lord, "and I thank you.
Perhaps

Your winnings are the best. And perhaps you can
tell me

Just where your skill won you this prize?"

1395 "No," said Gawain, "we said nothing of that.
You've had what I owe you: there's nothing more
To claim."

They laughed, and were gay,
And exchanged sweet words. And again
1400 They sat to supper and ate
Famously.

And then they sat by a fire, in a private
Room, and the best of wines were brought them,
And again as they sought their beds they agreed
1405 To make the same bargain for another
Morning: whatever their winnings they'd exchange
them

In the evening, when they met once more. Everyone
In that court heard their vows; they drank
One final toast, laughing, and took leave
Of each other, gracious to the end, and both 1410
Hurried to their beds. When the cock had crowed
And cackled for the third time, the lord
Had leaped from his blankets, and his men were
around him.

They ate their food, and heard their mass,
And all were gone to the wood before light 1415
Had gleamed;

Huntsmen and horns ran loud
Across the fields,
Following hounds
Racing in the leaves. 1420

Quickly they caught a scent, along
A marsh, and the master of hounds encouraged
Their baying, shouting wild words,
And the hounds that heard him, or heard the
barking,

Forty at once, hurried to the chase, 1425
And such a babbling uproar of dogs
Whirled up that the rocks and cliffs rang:

The huntsmen urged them on, blowing
Bugles and yelling, and they rushed along
In a pack, between a forest pool 1430

And a high cliff—and in a knoll, near the marsh,
At the foot of the cliff, with boulders tumbled
About, men and dogs stopped,

Then nosed around that knoll, in the rocks,
Until they knew he was trapped, the beast 1435
That bloodhounds had run to the ground. And they
beat

On the bushes, and called him out, and he crashed
At a line of men, came rushing through,
The most marvelous boar, driven from his own
Herd by old age, but the hoariest, 1440
Fiercest, hugest boar in the world,
Charging out, grunting. And he drove

Three of them to the ground, and they shouted and
cried out,

But he ran past, quickly, not anxious

1445 To fight. "Ho! Hey! Hey!"

They hallooed, and rallied the hounds with their
horns.

And men and dogs lifted their voices

And ran behind him, noisily racing

To a kill.

1450 And often he spun about,
And stood, and sliced with his snout,
And ripped a yelping,
Leaping dog, and routed

The rest. And hunters rushed as close

1455 As they dared, raining arrows on his back,
Hitting him over and over, but hurting
Nothing: the skin on his shoulders was like steel,
And no point could pierce his forehead. The smooth
Shafts shivered and broke, the metal

1460 Bounced away. And after a time

The blows began to bother him, and foaming
At the mouth he rushed at the men, and hurt them,
And many drew back in fear. Not the lord:
On a light horse he galloped behind him,

1465 Sounding his horn, calling his hunters,
Riding boldly after the boar

In the thick brushwood, till the sun sank low.

And all day long they raced through the wood,
While our gracious Gawain lay quiet and com-
fortable

1470 In his bed, lay easy in bright-colored blankets
And sheets.

And the lady remembered, and came

To greet him

Early in the morning, seeking

1475 Some change in his frame

Of mind. She peered through the curtain, and
courteous

Gawain gave her a warm welcome,

And she gave him back as good as she got,

Sat softly at his side, laughed lightly

And said, with a cheerful glance: "Ah sir, 1480

Can you really be Gawain? Your soul reaches

Up for Goodness and Holiness, nothing

Else. Polite manners escape you;

Taught the truth you carefully forget it.

Yesterday I gave you instruction in the greatest 1485

Of love's lessons, and today it's gone."

"What lesson?" he asked. "Tell me again:

Whatever I've lost the fault must be mine."

"And yet," said that lovely, "what I taught you was
kissing:

Whenever a lady's looks ask it, 1490

Claim it. That is courtesy, knight."

"Oh no," said that soldier, "you're wrong, my dear.

I cannot dare where I might be denied:

How wrong I would be to ask an unwanted

Kiss." "By our Lord," said that lord's wife, 1495

"You're far too strong to accept a 'no'—

If anyone were boorish enough to deny you."

"You're right!" Gawain exclaimed. "Except that

Force and threats are indecent, with friends,

And unwilling gifts are given in vain. 1500

My lips are yours, to kiss on command,

Lady, as long as you like, or as short:

Just tell me."

She bent to his face

And kissed him well, 1505

Then they argued sadness and grace,

Love's heavens and hells.

"Tell me, knight," said that noble lady,

"Without being angry, just why so young

And bold, so vigorous a man, so knightly, 1510

So courteous—and your name is known far

And wide, and a knight's good name rests

Most on his loyalty to love, his learning

In its weaponry (and stories of love's true warriors

Are title and text inscribed in their love-deeds, 1515

Risking their lives for a beloved, enduring
 In that great name great grief and pain,
 Finally finding revenge and destroying
 Sorrow, earning happiness in their true love's
 1520 Arms)—just why so young and handsome
 A knight, so famous in your time, could find me
 Sitting at your bedside, not once but twice,
 And never reveal that your head could hold
 A single word of love, not one?
 1525 A knight so ready with gracious vows
 Should eagerly open his treasures to an innocent
 Girl, teach her some signs of true love's
 Skill. Hah! Is your heart unlettered,
 Despite your fame? Do I seem too stupid?
 1530 For shame!
 I've come alone, tame
 For the study of love's high game:
 Come, while we're still alone,
 Teach me till my husband comes home."
 1535 "Christ reward you!" said Gawain. "I can't
 Tell you, lady, how delighted I am
 That one so noble and knowing as you
 Would come here, would care to sport with so
 humble
 A knight, would grant me a single warm glance.
 1540 But for me to try to tell you true love's
 Rules, repeat romances to you,
 Knowing that you know everything I could say
 And more, are wiser in love than a hundred
 Like me could be if I lived to a hundred,
 1545 This would make me a hundredfold fool!
 As best I can, I want to obey you;
 This is my duty, now and forever,
 To serve you, lady, so help me God!"
 And so she tested him, pushed and probed,
 1550 Trying to tempt him, pretending love,
 And Gawain was so gracefully evasive that he
 seemed
 Always polite, and nothing happened

But happiness.
 They laughed and fenced,
 And at the end,
 Offering a courtly kiss,
 Off she went. 1555
 And the knight rose, made ready for mass,
 Then sat to a splendid dinner. He sported
 With the lord's two ladies all that day,
 While the lord was racing over fields, 1560
 After the ferocious boar that rushed up
 Hillsides and broke the backs of his best
 Hounds, holed in till arrows drove him
 On, out of shelter, to run 1565
 In the open—arrows falling like flies
 On his hide. He held them off, leaping
 Wild, until at last running
 Was over and, weary, he worked his way
 To a rocky hole over a river. 1570
 The hill was behind him; his hooves pawed
 At the ground, foam grimaced on his snout;
 And he sharpened his tusks, waiting. Tired
 And still afraid, the hunters stood safely
 To the side; they wanted to annoy him, but no one 1575
 Came near:
 So many had been gored
 By those tusks that fear
 Of being torn
 Held them: he seemed wild, he seemed 1580
 weird.
 And then the lord rode up, urging
 His horse, and saw him holed in and his hunters
 Watching. He jumped lightly down, drew
 His bright-polished sword and began to approach
 him,
 Hurrying across the ford to his hole. 1585
 And the boar saw him, saw his bright sword,
 And his hackles rose, and he snorted so loud
 That the hunters were afraid for their lord's life.
 Then the beast rushed out at him, straight and quick,

1590 And man and boar blended in steaming
 White water; but the boar had the worst, for the lord
 Had measured his charge, and aimed his sword
 Into his throat, and planted it deep,
 Down to the hilt, so the heart was cut,
 1595 And snarling as he fell the boar surrendered
 And dropped.

And a hundred hounds
 Leaped as he stopped,
 And hunters pulled him to the ground,
 1600 And dogs bit him down.

And the horns sounded a hundred victory
 Calls, and the men who still could shouted
 In triumph, and the master of hounds made
 His beasts bay and bark. And a hunter
 1605 Trained to the art happily began
 To carve that boar. He cut off the head
 And planted it high on a post, then tore
 Deep along the backbone, hauling
 Out the intestines (broiled on coals,
 1610 Dressed with bread, they were fed to the dogs).
 Then he cut out the meat in gleaming slabs,
 Removing the edible guts for later
 Roasting, and hung the two halves together
 And roped them to a heavy rod. Then they hurried
 1615 Home, carrying the carcass; the head
 Was paraded in front of the lord himself,
 Who had battled the boar to death with his own
 Strong hands.

The trek to his hall
 1620 And Gawain seemed longer than all
 The long hunt. He came, he called,
 And there Gawain stands.

Laughing loud, shouting a merry
 Speech, the lord exulted, seeing
 1625 Gawain. His ladies came, and the court,
 And he showed them the thick flesh, told them
 How huge a beast he had fought, how fierce

When they'd finally cornered him deep in the
 forest.

And Gawain gave him the praise he deserved,
 Told him how well he'd proved his worth;
 1630 So immense a beast, such massive slabs
 Of meat, he'd never seen before.
 They hefted that huge head, and Gawain
 Admired it, and admired the lord's fierce courage
 In cutting it off. "Now Gawain, it's yours;
 1635 We've agreed, you know our game. That's settled."
 "I know," said the knight, "and just as truly
 Let me give you, once more, everything I got
 For myself." He embraced the lord, and kissed him,
 And immediately kissed him again. "We are quit," 1640
 Said Gawain, "here, tonight, as we agreed
 To be; the bond has been kept, to the letter
 And complete."

"Ah by Saint Giles," swore the lord,
 "I can't compete;
 1645 There's nothing you won't afford
 If you always trade so sweet."

They set up tables on trestles, covered them
 With cloth, and kindled a clear bright light
 With waxed torches, mounted on walls;
 1650 Men rushed about with platters and meat;
 And around the blazing fire they laughed
 And were happy, singing (both at supper
 And after) a host of beautiful songs,
 Christmas part-songs, and untried carols, 1655
 As merry as a man can tell of, and always
 The lord's lady was seated beside
 Gawain. And so loving were her glances, her speech,
 Her winks, her secret marks of favor,
 That the knight was stunned, and angry with himself, 1660
 But courtesy kept him civil, he made himself
 Gracious and kind, no matter how twisted
 Things turned.

And when food and laughter
 Had ended together, 1665

They gathered where a fire burned
In a private chamber,

And chatted and drank, and wondered whether
To make the same agreement for New Year's
1670 Eve, and Gawain asked to leave
In the morning, arguing that his time had almost
Come. But the lord argued against it:
"As I am a knight, I give you my word,
Gawain, that you'll get to that green chapel
1675 And your errand there, early on New Year's
Day. You rest high in your room,
I'll hunt in the forest, and we'll hold our agreement
As it was, trading profit for profit,
For I've tested you twice, and you've proved your-
self true.

1680 The third throw will come up best, cast
The die, drink while we can, and rejoice,
For sorrow we can have whenever we seek it."
And Gawain agreed, and agreed to stay,
And they drank it in wine, then walked behind
torches

To their beds.

Gawain slept
Peaceful and quiet;
But the lord dressed
Early, he had tricks to try.

1690 He and his men heard mass, gulped
A morsel, then sought their horses in that sweet
Morning air. All of his huntsmen
Sat ready mounted, in front of the hall.
The world was beautiful, hung with frost,
1695 And the huge red sun rose through clouds
And came, white and gleaming, to the sky.
Beside a wood they unleashed their hounds,
And rocky hillsides rang with their horns:
The fox's trail was found, they followed it
1700 Close to the ground, keeping it warm;
A beagle bayed, the huntsman hallooed him,
And the rest of the dogs rushed where he'd called,

A snorting pack running in the fox's
Footsteps, as he ran in front of them; they found
him,

Saw him, and ran as fast as they could,
1705 Crying his fate with fierce yelps,
While he dodged and doubled about in bushes
And thorns, stopping by hedges to listen.
And then he leaped a fence, by a little
Ditch, and crawled across a bit
1710 Of marsh, hoping the hounds would miss him,
And suddenly, before he could stop, he found
That three of the snarling greyhounds had leaped
For his throat.

He swerved in his tracks,
1715 Ran swiftly back
Where he'd come; loaded
With grief he raced to the wood.

How good it was to hear those greyhounds,
Gathered around him, ringing him in:
1720 The curses they called on his head clattered
As if the cliffs had fallen. A man
Would find him, and shout, and snarling tongues
Would follow his feet across the forest.
They labeled him "thief," threatened his life,
1725 And he could not hesitate, the hounds ran fast:
If he left the wood they were waiting, but he knew
How to hide and ran in, swift and clever.
And in fact he led them by the heels, the lord
And his men, past midday, dodging in the hills,
1730 While gracious Gawain slept at peace
In those noble curtains, on that cold morning.
But the lady—for love!—refused herself sleep.
Not expecting to fail, her purpose firm,
1735 She rose from her bed, and quickly went to him,
Wrapped to her feet in a gay mantle
Furred with perfect blended skins,
And her hair held in a jeweled net
Set with stones by the dozen; her beautiful
Face and her throat were carefully bare,

Her dress cut low in front and in back.
 She came to his room, closed his door
 Behind her, opened a window and called him
 Awake, laughing and scolding with cheerful

1745

Words:

"Oh! How can you sleep
 When the morning's so clear?" He was
 deep

In a miserable dream
 But that speech he heard.

1750 He'd been mumbling and tossing, lost in his night-
 mare

Like a man deeply troubled in mind,
 Remembering how fate was scheduled to come to
 him

Tomorrow, at the green chapel, with the green man's
 Stroke, and he could not fight: he recovered

1755 His wits, hearing the lady's words,
 And struggled awake, answering quickly.
 And she came to the bed, laughing sweet,
 And bent to his face, and gave him a graceful
 Kiss; he composed his face, and welcomed her

1760 Warmly. And seeing how beautiful she was,
 And how dressed, and her face, and her body, and
 her flesh

So white, joy welled in his heart.
 With gentle smiles they started to talk,
 And their talk was of joyful things, they spoke only

1765

Of bliss.

Words came flowing free,
 Each was pleased
 With the other; and only Mary
 Could save him from this.

1770 That beautiful princess pressed him so hard,
 Urged him so near to the limit, he needed
 Either to take her love or boorishly
 Turn her away. To offend like a boor
 Was bad enough; to fall into sin

1775 Would be worse, betraying the lord of that house.

"God willing," he thought, "it will not happen!"
 He parried, with a loving laugh, her passionate
 Speeches, her talk of special favor.
 She told him: "Shame is all you deserve,
 Refusing to love a lady who lies
 Beside you, her heart weeping openly,
 Unless there's a lover your heart likes better,
 To whom your faith's so firmly tied
 That nothing can loosen it. And now I know,
 And pray you, sir, to tell me truly:
 Love's not love that hides the truth

1780

From love."

He said: "By good Saint John,"
 And smiled to prove
 His claim, "I've none,
 And none will have for now."

1790

"And those," she exclaimed, "are the ugliest words
 In the world! You've told me the truth, and hurt me
 Hard. Kiss me, and I'll leave you here
 Alone. I'm a woman with sorrow, not love."
 Sighing, she stooped and quietly kissed him,
 Then left his side, saying: "Now dear,
 Here at this parting grant me this,
 Give me something, your glove, some gift
 Of your own, to remember you with, to soften
 My sorrow." "By God," said Gawain, "I wish
 The daintiest thing in the world were here
 In my hand, to match my devotion; but you're
 worthy

1795

Of more, lady, than I'm able to give you.
 Some trifle, some worthless token, is infinitely
 Less than your honor deserves—a simple
 Glove is no keepsake I could bear to give you.
 I'm empty-handed, here, alone

1800

On a pilgrimage to an unknown land; I've no porters
 With gifts. It wears at my heart, lovely,
 Not to oblige you, but a man must do

1810

As he must.

Do not resent it, sweet."

1815 "Never," said that lusty
Lady. "But see:
If I've nothing from you, you'll have this
from me."

She offered a red gold ring, richly
Worked, set with a dazzling stone
That shone like the sun—a gift suitable
1820 For the ransoming of kings. But Gawain refused it,
Saying at once: "My lady fair,
In God's own name there's nothing I can take,
Not now, when I've nothing to give in return."
She offered it again; he declined, gently
1825 Vowing he could never accept. And that noble
Woman, pained, tried once more:
"If my ring is really too rich a gift,
Then be less in my debt, but take my belt,
Neither as costly nor as good." She quickly
1830 Drew it from around her waist, knotted
Over her tunic, under her cloak:
Trimmed with gold, it was green silk
Embroidered with stones, but only at the edges.
And she held it in her hand, begged that he take it,
1835 Worthless, unworthy as it was. He refused,
Explaining that until, by the grace of God,
He was able to end the adventure he'd begun,
He could never touch either gold or treasure.
"And I beg you, lady, not to be angry,
1840 And to give this over, for I cannot and I will not
Agree.

For your kindness I owe you
A knight's fealty,
And I'll always show you
1845 The service I know you

Deserve." "You refuse this silk," she said,
"Which seems such a trifle? So it may seem.
See how small it is! And how slight.
But whoever knows what's woven in its threads
1850 Would value it rather more, I suppose:

For any man bound with this belt,
This green lace locked around him,
Can never be killed, here under God's
Own heaven—no blow, no trick, nothing
Can hurt him." Gawain hesitated, his heart 1855
Reached for protection, like a thief for a gem:
He could come to that chapel, and take that stroke,
And with this glorious device walk off
Unharm'd. He held his tongue, allowed her
To speak—and she pressed it on him, urgent— 1860
And he was ready to surrender, then smiling,
surrendered,
And agreed, as she asked, to stay silent, to hide
The gift from her husband, agreed that only
She and Gawain would share the secret
Forever. 1865

And he thanked her, happy
And gracious as never
Before. And she tapped
Three kisses to his cheek all together.

Then she took her leave, and left him there; 1870
Her games with Gawain were over. And after
She'd gone that knight quickly got himself
Up out of bed and properly dressed,
And he hid her love-gift in a safe place,
Covering it carefully so he could find it later. 1875
Then he went swiftly to the chapel, walked
Inside and sought a priest in private,
Asked to have his confession heard,
His soul instructed in the pathways to heaven.
And he told his sins, small and large, 1880
And prayed for the mercy of almighty God,
And begged the priest to absolve him, and his soul
Was anointed so completely clean that the Day
Of Judgment could have come with the sun, and
been welcome.
And he pleased himself with the lord's two ladies, 1885
Singing carols and making merry

As never before in that house, until night
Fell.

1890 And all the lord's men
Were pleased: "How easy to tell
That he's happy again
At last, and we've treated him well."

Now leave him in that comfort, where love had
come to him!

1895 The lord is still in the fields, hunting
His pleasure. The fox is finally at bay:
Leaping a fence, the lord spied him
Cutting across a thick grove,
The sound of hounds hurrying him along
And behind him the pack, yelping at his heels.
1900 Seeing him come, the lord waited,
Drew his sword and swung it. And the fox
Swerved, and as he swerved pulled back,
But a hound had him before he was free,
And in front of the horses' hooves they fell on him,
1905 And the barking grew fierce as they bit him to death.
The lord dismounted, quickly lifted him
Over his head, shouting to the hunters,
While the hounds leaped and bayed like wolves,
Slobbering with desire for meat. And his men
1910 Ran up, sounding their horns, signaling
Hunters to come where the beast had been caught.
And after everyone had come, whoever
Bore a bugle blew it, and whoever
Had no horn hallooed, and with hounds
1915 Baying the merriest music on earth
They roared a royal flourish for Renard's

Soul.

1920 They stroked and rubbed their dogs,
And rewarded them all,
Then keeping the fur whole
They stripped it off.

Then they turned home, in the twilight glow,
Sounding their horns as they rode. And at last
The lord arrived at his beloved home,

Where a fire was burning, and Gawain was seated 1925
Beside it, waiting, smiling and at ease,
Happy at the sport he'd had with the ladies:
His rich blue mantle reached to the ground,
His jacket was lined with lovely soft fur,
Like the hood that hung across his shoulders, 1930
Both of them bright with ermine. And Gawain
Met the lord in the middle of his hall,
With his men around him, and greeted him gra-
ciously:

"First let me keep our agreement, made
Last night and sealed in such flowing wine." 1935
He threw his arms around his host
And kissed him three times, three vigorous kisses.
"By Christ," said the lord, "getting these goods
Must be merry hunting, if the price is right."
"Who cares about cost?" said Gawain quickly. 1940
"What I've owed you I've paid you, here in the
open."

"And I," the lord replied, "pay you
Less, for in all this long day's hunting
This miserable fox skin's my prize—may the devil
Earn as much!—and three such kisses 1945
As you gave me are better than a dozen bedraggled
Hides."

"Enough," said Gawain, "by God
I thank you for the fruit of your ride."
And the hunt, and the hard 1950
Chase were described.

And they sang and were sung to, and ate as they
liked—

The lord and Gawain drank to the ladies,
And the ladies laughed, and jests were exchanged— 1955
Enjoying themselves as much as men can
Except in halls neither sane nor sober.
Everyone joked, knights and nobles
And their lord, till the time for parting, and they
finally
Rose and made their way to bed.

- 1960 And Gawain took humble leave of the lord,
 A courtly farewell of grateful words:
 "For this marvelous visit I've had in your house,
 Your Christmas grace to me, may God repay you!
 Enroll me forever as one of your knights.
- 1965 Tomorrow, as you know, I must ride on my way:
 Assign me, please, the guide you promised,
 To show me that green chapel, where God
 Has decreed that on New Year's Day I must meet
 My fate." "By my faith," swore the lord, "you'll
 find me
- 1970 Ready to give you everything I agreed to."
 And he chose a servant to set him on the road,
 Lead him through hills as quickly as could be,
 Guide him on good paths across
 Woodlands.
- 1975 And Gawain thanked him, and kissed
 His hands,
 Then turned to the two grand
 Ladies, and wished them
- Farewell, sadly exchanging kisses,
 1980 Urging his gratitude with polished grace—
 Which the ladies returned as good as they got,
 With sorrowful sighs commending him to Christ.
 And courteous to all, he left them all,
 Thanking every man he met
- 1985 For his kindness, the particular pains he'd taken,
 Serving Gawain as his lord's guest.
 And every man regretted his going,
 Almost convinced they'd relished his honor
 All their lives. Then they led him to his room
- 1990 And brought him to his bed, where rest waited.
 But whether he slept or not I dare not
 Say; he could have remembered many
 Things.
- 1995 Yet let him lie as he will,
 His adventure ringing
 In his ears. Sit still
 A moment more, and I'll sing it.

PART FOUR

Now New Year's comes, and the night passes,
Daylight replaces darkness, as God
Decrees. But storms crackled through the world, 2000
Clouds tumbled their bitter cold
On the earth, northwinds freezing the poor;
Snow shivered in the air, and animals
Shook; the wind whistled from the hills
And drove snowdrifts down in the valleys. 2005
And Gawain listened, lying in his bed;
His eyelids were closed, but he slept little.
Each cockcrow told him what hour had come.
And just before dawn he rose, dressing
Quickly by the light of a lamp; then he called 2010
His groom, who came running, and ordered him
To bring his mail-shirt and Gringolet's saddle.
His weapons and all his armor were brought,
And Gawain was made magnificently ready:
First wool, against the winter cold, 2015
And then his brightly polished war-gear,
The belly shield, and the steel plates,
And the gleaming rings of his mail-shirt, all ready,
Shining as when he'd worn them to that castle.
His groom 2020
Had wiped and rubbed them
Inch by inch. No man

Was handsomer from Rome
To Dublin.

2025 And though he wore the most glorious clothes
—A heraldic vest embroidered over
In velvet, with magical jewels mounted
In front, and seams sewn in color,
All lined inside with the softest fur—

2030 He also wore the lady's gift,
Well aware of his own best interest:
When his sword hung at his side, he wound
That belt twice around him, wrapped it
Quickly, happily across his waist,

2035 The bright green silk shining beautifully
Against the royal red of his tunic.
But Gawain was indifferent to that rich glow,
To the polished stones gleaming at its fringe,
To the gold glittering at either end,

2040 Determined to save his neck when he bent it
Toward death, tamely taking an axe-blow,
A knife-stroke.

Dressed,
Armed, he left
2045 The castle, quickly walked
To his horse, thanking the noble folk

Around him. And Gringolet was ready, stood huge,
Waiting, well-fed, well-lodged, when his master
Rested, now strong and ready to gallop.

2050 And seeing his sleek flanks, Gawain
Quietly exclaimed, his words sober:
"There are men, in this castle, who care about
courtesy,
And their lord maintains them—may they live in
joy!

May love be his lovely lady's reward!
2055 When they open these gates, when they welcome a
guest,

Honor flows from their hands! May the Lord
Of us all reward them, who rules in Heaven.
And if I survive, here on earth,

May I live to reward you myself!" Then he set
His foot in the stirrups and swept to the saddle; 2060
His shield was brought, and he took it on his
shoulder,

And with golden heels he spurred Gringolet,
And he stopped prancing, leaped forward
On the pavement;

His rider was mounted, 2065
Spear and sword waved
In the air. "May Christ save
This castle," Gawain pronounced.

Then the drawbridge came down, and the thick
gates

Drew back, swung open, unbarred. And the knight 2070
Crossed himself and rode across;

He blessed the porter, who kneeled before him,
Wished him Godspeed and God's good will
For Gawain; then almost alone, rode off,
Following in his guide's footsteps, leading him 2075

Along the dangerous road to that axe-
Stroke. Trees stood bare, on the slopes
Where they rode, and the rocky cliffs lay frozen.
Clouds blew high, but the sky was ugly;
Mist drizzled, melted on the mountains, 2080
Every hill wore a hat, a cloak

Of fog. Brooks foamed at their banks,
Splashing on the shore, bright, where they flowed.
Their path wound wild, around a wood,
Till the time when the winter sun rises 2085

In the sky:

Snow covered the high
Hill they rode on, white
And cold; and the guide
Drew up, asked Gawain to halt. 2090

"I've brought you this far; now you've come close,
Knight, to that place you've been hunting, scurrying
And prying so hard to find. Let
Me speak to you privately, for I know who you are,

2095 And I speak as someone who loves you: if you'll listen

To me, you'll manage this business better.
That place where you're hurrying is dangerous,
knight:

The most horrible creature in the world lives
In that wilderness, a grim wildman who loves

2100 To kill, the hugest creature on the earth,
Bigger and stronger than four of Arthur's
Best knights, or Hector, or anyone else.

He waits in that green chapel, grim,
Determined, and no one rides by, no knight

2105 Proud of his sword, but he beats him to death
With one blow. A ruthless man, born
Pitiless, who kills priests or peasants,
Monks or abbots, anyone who passes:
Killing is as natural as air, to him!

2110 And so I say to you, sitting in your saddle,
If you go there, you're dead: it's the simple truth,
Knight—dead if you'd twenty lives

To lose!

2115 He's lived there for years,
He kills as he chooses:
Fight without fear,
Gawain, but you're bound to lose.

"And so, good sir, leave him in peace,
In the name of God pick some different

2120 Path! Ride wherever Christ takes you,
And I'll hurry home, and I promise you, knight,
I swear by God and all His saints,
I'll swear by any oath you ask,

That I'll keep your secret, conceal this story
2125 Forever, keep it from everyone on earth."

"By God," said Gawain, grimly polite,
"I'm grateful, fellow, for all your good wishes;
I believe you'd keep it secret, I believe you.
But however loyally you lied, if I rode

2130 Away, fled for fear, as you tell me,
I'd be a coward no knight could excuse.

Whatever comes, I'm going to that chapel,
And I'll meet that wild man: however it happens
It will happen, for evil or good, as fate

Decides; 2135

However wild

He may be,

God can see,

God can save."

"By Mary!" said the man, "you've said so much 2140
Of your bravery that the blame will be yours when
you lose

Your life. You want to lose it: proceed.

Your helmet's on your head, your spear's in your
hand:

Ride along the rocky side

Of this path; you'll come to a wild valley;

On your left, a little farther down,

You'll see exactly what you want, that green
Chapel, and the green oaf who owns it.

Gawain the noble, go in God's name!

I wouldn't join you for all the gold

In the world, not a foot further through this wood." 2150

And he swung his horse around, dug

His heels in its side, and raced away,

Leaving Gawain with no guide, alone

In that wood. 2155

"God is good,"

Said the knight. "I'll not weep

Or complain: I keep

My trust in Him, I'll do as He would."

Then he spurred Gringolet down the path,

Across a slope, beside a grove,

Riding a rough road to the valley

Below. Then he looked about. It seemed wild,

No sign of shelter anywhere, nothing

But steep hills on every side,

Gnarled crags with huge rocks,

Crags scratching at the sky! He stopped,

Pulled back on the reins, held Gringolet ready
 While he stared this way and that, seeking
 2170 The chapel. He saw nothing—except
 A queer kind of mound, in a glade
 Close by, a rounded knoll near a stream,
 Set right on the bank, beside the brook:
 And that water bubbled as though it were boiling!
 2175 He sent Gringolet forward, stopped
 Near the mound, dismounted and tied his horse
 To a lime-tree, looping the reins on a branch.
 Then he walked closer, walked around
 The knoll, trying to think what it was.
 2180 He saw holes at the end and the sides,
 Saw patches of grass growing everywhere,
 And only an old cave inside—
 A hole—a crevice in a crag: he couldn't
 Tell.

2185 "My Lord, my Lord," said that courteous knight,
 "Can this be the chapel? At midnight,
 Here, the devils of hell
 Could pray their prayers quite well!

"By Jesus, it's lonely here: this chapel
 2190 Is ugly, gruesome, all overgrown.
 But a good place for the green knight,
 He could serve the devil properly, here.
 By Christ, it's Satan who struck me with this
 meeting,
 I feel it! He's sent me here to destroy me.
 2195 What an evil church: may destruction end it!
 The most cursèd chapel I've ever come to!"
 His helmet on his head, spear in his hand,
 He climbed across to its rough roof—
 Then heard, from a high hill, on a boulder,
 2200 Beyond the brook, a violent noise—
 What! It clattered on the cliff, as if
 To split it, like a grindstone grinding a scythe.
 What! It whirred like water at a mill.
 What! It rushed and it rang, and it sang
 2205 Miserably. "That's meant for me," said Gawain,

"A kind of greeting. By Christ, I'll greet him
 Better.
 God's will be done!—"Alas, alas!"—
 What good is wailing? It never
 Helps; I'll never gasp,
 2210 Though my life be severed."

Then he raised his voice, calling out loud:
 "Who lives in this place? who's here as he promised
 To be? Gawain is walking right
 On your roof. If you want him, come to him quickly, 2215
 Now or never, let's have it done with."
 "Just wait," said someone up over his head,
 "What you're waiting to have, you'll have in a
 hurry."
 But he stayed where he was, working that wheel
 With a whirring roar. Then he stopped, and stepped 2220
 Down across a crag, came
 Through a hole, whirling a fierce weapon,
 A long-bladed battle-axe, sharpened for the stroke,
 Its massive blade bent to the shaft,
 Filed like a knife, on a grindstone four feet 2225
 Wide; a leather strap hung at
 Its length; and the green man looked as he'd looked
 At the start, his skin and his beard and his face,
 Except that he skipped like a dancer, setting
 His axe-handle on stones and leaping along. 2230
 At the brook, to keep dry, he leaned on the handle
 And hopped across, and hurried to Gawain,
 Grim on a broad battlefield covered
 With snow.

And Gawain waited,
 Not bowing low;
 And the green man said: "You came:
 I can trust you now. 2235

"Be careful, Gawain! You're welcome," the green
 man
 Went on, "here in my home, you've made 2240
 A difficult journey, and you came on time,
 You've kept your faith. Now keep the rest:

A year ago I gave you your chance;
 Today the turn is mine. We're completely
 2245 Alone, in this valley; no one can come
 Between us, however fiercely we fight.
 Take off your helmet, and take my axe-stroke.
 Hold yourself still, as I did when you slashed
 My head from my shoulders with a single blow."
 2250 "By God," said Gawain, "may the Holy Ghost
 Grant me the power to begrudge you nothing.
 Keep to the bargain, swing just once,
 And I'll stand still, and you'll do exactly
 As you please."

2255 And he bent his neck, leaned
 Forward; the white flesh gleamed.
 He tried to seem
 Fearless, but his knees

Were weak. And the green man got ready, lifted
 2260 That huge axe in both his hands,
 Swung it up with all his strength,
 And pretended to swing straight at his neck.
 If he'd hurled it down as he swung it high
 Gawain would have been dead forever.
 2265 But the knight looked to the side, and saw it
 Coming, glittering as it fell to his throat,
 And he pulled his shoulders back, just a bit,
 And the green man jerked the blade away,
 And poured a host of proud words on that prince:
 2270 "Gawain? You can't be Gawain, his name
 Is too noble, he's never afraid, nowhere
 On earth—and you, you flinch in advance!
 I've heard nothing about Gawain the coward.
 And I, did I flinch, fellow, when you swung
 2275 At my neck? I never spoke a word.
 My head fell, and I never flinched.
 And you, before it can happen your heart
 Is quaking. Who doubts that I'm the better
 Man?"

2280 "I flinched," said Gawain,
 "I won't again.

And this much is plain:
 My head, if it falls, won't talk in my hands.

"But get it done, let it be over.
 Bring me my fate, and bring it quickly. 2285
 I'll stand like a stone: on my word of honor
 My neck will be still till your stroke comes to it."
 "Have at you, then!" he cried, and heaved it
 Up, and glared as fierce as a madman.
 He swung it sharply, but not at his neck, 2290
 Held it back, before it could hurt him.
 And Gawain waited, stood like a stone,
 Or the stump of a tree tied to the ground
 By a hundred tangled roots. And the green man
 Laughed and told him, gaily: "I take it 2295
 You're ready, now, and it's time to strike.
 Let Arthur's knighthood save your neck,
 That noble rank protect you, if it can."
 And Gawain replied, angry and ashamed:
 "May the better man strike. You talk too long: 2300
 Perhaps you've frightened yourself with these
 threats?"
 "Ah well," said the green man, "you've turned so
 brave
 That I need to delay no longer. Your time
 Is now."

He took up a stance, 2305
 And his face scowled,
 And to Gawain his chances
 Of living seemed scant.

He swung his weapon swiftly up,
 And down, the blade toward the bare flesh; 2310
 And he struck hard, but hurt him only
 With a nick, that snipped the skin. The edge
 Grazed Gawain's white neck, and bright
 Blood shot from his shoulder to the ground,
 And as soon as he saw that gleam on the snow 2315
 He leaped forward a spear-length or more,
 Throwing his helmet furiously into place,
 Jerking his shield around in front of him,

Drawing his sword, and speaking fiercely—
 2320 Never since his mother bore him had he known
 Half the happiness he suddenly felt:
 "Stop, green man! Don't swing again!
 I've taken a single stroke, and stood still for it:
 No more, or else I'll repay you in kind—
 2325 Believe me, fellow, I'll pay you fully

And well.

You've had your stroke,
 And one was all
 We agreed to, in Arthur's hall.
 2330 And so, sir, stop, halt!"

The green man stood listening, leaning on his axe
 (It was upside down, he rested on the blade),
 And watching the knight, how bravely he waited,
 How unafraid, armed and ready,
 2335 Standing alert. And he liked what he saw.
 And then he spoke, with a cheerful, booming
 Voice, addressing Gawain: "Warrior,
 Soldier, no need to be fierce, now.
 No one's used you badly, shown you
 2340 Discourtesy; what was done was what we agreed.
 I owed you a stroke, I've paid you a stroke:
 I release you from any and all obligations.
 Perhaps, if my hands were quicker, I could have
 Dealt you a better blow, and done harm.
 2345 I pretended one stroke, a threat, a joke,
 But left you whole; I had the right,
 Because of our other agreement, in my castle;
 You kept it faithfully, performed like an honest
 Man, gave me everything you got.
 2350 Except that you kissed my wife: I swung
 For that reason—but you gave me back her kisses.
 So all you got, for that, was a puff

Of air:

An honest man
 2355 Need never fear.
 But still, the third day, there

In my castle, you failed—and you felt
 that, here.

"That belt you're wearing: it's mine, my wife
 Gave it to you—I know it all, knight,
 The kisses you took, and gave, and all
 2360 You did, and how she tempted you: everything.
 For I planned it all, to test you—and truly,
 Not many better men have walked
 This earth, been worth as much—like a pearl
 To a pea, compared to other knights.
 2365 But you failed a little, lost good faith—
 Not for a beautiful belt, or in lust,
 But for love of your life. I can hardly blame you."
 And Gawain stood silent, stood a long time,
 So burdened with grief that his heart shuddered:
 2370 His blood ran like fire in his face,
 He winced for shame at the green man's words.
 And finally he found words of his own:
 "A curse on cowardice and a curse on greed!
 They shatter chivalry, their vice destroys
 2375 Virtue." Then he loosened the belt, unfastened it,
 And grimly threw it to the green man. "There!
 Take the faithless thing, may it rot!
 Fear of your blow taught me cowardice,
 Brought me to greed, took me from myself
 2380 And the goodness, the faith, that belong to knight-
 hood.
 I'm false, now, forever afraid
 Of bad faith and treachery: may trouble, may
 sorrow

Come to them!

Oh knight: I humbly confess
 2385 My faults: bless me
 With the chance to atone.
 I'll try to sin less."

Then the green man laughed, and courteously ex-
 plained:
 "The damage you did me is cured, it's gone.
 2390 You stand confessed so clean, you took

Such plain penance at the point of my axe,
 That I hold you cleansed, as pure in heart
 As if from your birth to this day you'd never
 2395 Sinned! And Gawain, I give you this belt,
 As green as my gown. Remember your challenge,
 Here, as you walk your way among knights
 And princes, keep this token for chivalrous
 Men to know your adventure at the green
 2400 Chapel. And now, in this New Year, come
 To my castle again, and we'll finish this festival

With good cheer."

And he pressed him to come,
 Saying, "My wife will be there,
 2405 You can make her your friend, who was once
 Your bitter foe."

"No, truly," said Gawain, taking
 Off his helmet, and thanking the green knight
 Courteously. "I've lingered long enough.
 2410 May happiness come to you, from Him who decrees
 All honors! And convey my wishes to your gracious
 Wife, and that other honored lady,
 Who cleverly tricked their knight. No wonder:
 There's nothing remarkable in their making a man
 2415 Foolish, in women winning men
 To sin, for Adam our father was deceived
 Just so, and Solomon, and also Samson—
 Delilah was his death—and later David
 Endured misery for Bathsheba's beauty.
 2420 Women ruined them: how wonderful if men
 Could love them well, but never believe them!
 And these were the noblest knights of their time,
 The best, the very best, who walked

The world

2425 In those days—and women tied them
 In knots, whirled them
 In circles. I've been beguiled,
 As they were: this excuse should be heard.

"But your belt," said Gawain, "may God reward
 you!

I'll keep it, gladly, not for its gold,
 Nor its lovely silk, nor its polished stones,
 Not its cost, nor for honor, nor the glorious craft
 That made it, but to see it, often, as a sign
 Of my sin: if I ride in glory, to remember
 The weakness and error of this feeble flesh,
 2435 How easily infected with the filth of sin—
 And if ever pride for my feats of arms
 Stirs me, this belt will humble my heart.
 One thing let me ask you, without offense:
 You rule that land where I lived, where I rested
 2440 In your castle—may He repay you who keeps.
 The stars in the sky and sits in Heaven!—
 Tell me only your name, nothing
 More." "Gladly," said the green knight. "I am
 Bercilak de Hautdesert. Morgana
 2445 Le Fay, who lives in my house, a famous
 Witch, with wonderful magic learned
 From Merlin, the master of that art—for she shared
 His bed, once, that noble wizard
 And wise man, who knows the knights of Arthur's
 Hall:

Morgana the goddess she's called,
 And no one in all
 The world could resist her call
 If she bade him come—

2455

Morgana sent me to your king's castle,
 To test your pride, to determine the truth
 Of the Round Table's fame, and the tales that tell it.
 She hoped my lopped-off head would addle
 Your brains, would frighten Arthur's queen
 2460 And kill her with fear, a green ghost
 Standing at her table, speaking, head
 In hand. And that ancient lady, Morgana,
 Is also Arthur's half-sister, your aunt,
 Daughter of the Duchess of Cornwall—that Duchess
 2465 By whom Uther Pendragon had Arthur.
 And again I ask you to come to your aunt,
 Be merry in my house; my men love you,

And I want you there, by my faith, for myself,
 2470 As much as I've ever wanted anyone."
 And Gawain again said no, he could not.
 They embraced, and kissed, and commended each
 other
 To Christ, and parted, there on that snow-covered
 Field;

2475 And Gawain and Gringolet rode home
 To Arthur's castle, and the green
 Knight rode where he pleased,
 Alone.

Now Gawain rides in the world's wilderness,
 2480 Alive by the gracious mercy of God.
 He slept under roofs, he slept under trees,
 And he knew adventures, and won victories,
 That I hope to tell some different time.
 The nick in his neck had grown whole;
 2485 He wore that gleaming belt slanted
 Across his tunic, tied beneath
 His arm, as a sign and token of the sin
 He'd committed, and his sorrow and shame. And so
 He arrived at court, safe and sound.
 2490 And the king, when he heard, called to his knights,
 Laughing, delighted, that Gawain was home.
 And he kissed his knight, and the queen kissed him,
 And a host of noble soldiers greeted him,
 Asked his adventures; and he told them marvelous
 2495 Things, never concealing his hardships,
 Told them of the chapel, described the green
 knight,
 Talked of the lady, and at last of the belt.
 He showed them the faint scar on his neck,
 Sign of his treachery, given as a loving
 2500 Warning.

He groaned, admitting it,
 Suffered torment;
 Blood flooded the skin
 In his face, as he mourned it.

2505 "My lord," said Gawain, lifting the belt,

"This band and the nick on my neck are one
 And the same, the blame and the loss I suffered
 For the cowardice, the greed, that came to my soul.
 This sign of bad faith is the mark of my sin:
 I'll wear it on my waist as long as I live, 2510
 For a man may hide an injury to his soul,
 But he'll never be rid of it, it's fastened forever."
 The king consoled him, and all that court,
 And they laughed and resolved, then and there,
 2515 That lords and ladies of Arthur's Table
 Would each of them wear a slanted belt
 Around their waists, woven of green,
 To keep company with their well-loved Gawain.
 And that belt was the glory of Arthur's Round
 Table;
 Its knights wore it forever more, 2520
 As the best books of romances tell.
 And so in Arthur's time this adventure
 Took place, as the Book of Brutus bears witness,
 After that bold Brutus appeared
 In Britain, when the siege and assault had done 2525
 For Troy;
 And other adventures as well,
 Of great and loyal
 Knights. Now may the royal
 King of the world keep us from Hell! 2530

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE
 [Shame to him who finds evil here]