

The Redemption of Daeron

by Paul D. Deane

This poetry is part of a cycle of alliterative epics that I wrote "in character" as the Avarin poet Rhunedhel, a resident of Imladris during the Third Age, while I was playing on Elendor MUSH, an online roleplaying game, in the 1990s and the first decade or so of the 2000s.

When I wrote these poems, I was working my way toward an original alliterative stanza form only loosely patterned on traditional alliterative verse. The form I ended up with is what I call the "Daeron Stanza", characterized by 4-stress accentual (mostly iambic tetrameter) lines alliterating in the pattern AA/BB, with a final rhyming couplet. It demonstrates the possibilities of alliterative forms not based on the traditional Old English and Middle English metrics.

In the Silmarillion, Tolkien tells us how Daeron, one of the greatest elven singers, twice betrayed Lúthien and Beren, her lover, to Thingol, the king, her father, for he loved her, and was jealous that Beren, a mere man, should have the love he had failed to win. But the third time, he remained silent, and when Lúthien escaped, he thought he had betrayed her to her death. And so he wandered into the East of Middle Earth, singing grief-stricken of his lost Lúthien. This poem begins in the East, when at long last the true tale of Beren and Lúthien reaches him. Other poems in this cycle include The Song of Marwen and Fithurin, The Song of Woe, The Song of Returning, and The Song of Shadows. This poem was originally published on the Imladris Poetry Page.

Book I: By Dark Waters

Dark waters washed on a beach as bare,
Empty, abandoned as desert sand.
Or almost empty: a boat was there
And two men mused aloud at length
Over murmuring waves
-- where they should sell --
-- their Elven slaves. --

Eyes wide, aware, hands bound behind,
Two captives crouched in helpless hate.
Their forms were too fine, like dancers' dreams,
Their beauty too breathtaking, perfect and pure
To leave much debate
-- what their captors intended --
-- as their ultimate fate. --

Wide eyes widened, stiffened, were still:
Past flickering flames stared out into space.
The men raise mugs but with sudden splash
They tense and start.

-- One crumples, with hand --
-- clenched to heart. --

The arrow's arc from the buzzing bow
Is swift and certain, sharp and sure.
One crouched for cover, feebly fell,
Transfixed with terror gasped for breath.
An elf approached
-- with sword for argument --
-- and final reproach. --

'It is well that I walk here,' their rescuer declared.
'No Elves now live in this barren land,
While men have multiplied.
Such a strange and desolate place
-- To find two born --
-- Of Western race!' --

'Corúwen they call me, sir,' one said,
'A healer of hurts, an Elf-maid of Eregion.
And know Nèhaléni, kin to Celebrimbor,
A smith and shaper of gems and jewels.
Whose bow, whose sword
-- Should we thank for rescue, --
-- Most noble lord?' --

So strange a smile, so fixed to his face!
As if flowers, frozen in winter winds,
Silently stood and swayed in the snow.
With grace he bowed
-- yet seemed a statue --
-- still and tall and proud. --

'The name I am known by,' he softly said,
'Is Daeron of Doriath, minstrel of Menegroth.
But long have I lived in the Utter East
And walked these waters to sing under star
In solitary memory
-- Of Lúthien's face, form --
-- spirit, grace, and beauty.' --

The silence stretched; Nèhaléni's hand
Clenched, unclenched as she quietly quenched
Untrickled tears lest they find her face.
'I see,' she said, and sought to smile.
'So through pain, through dread

-- We who sought Cuivienen --
-- Find an exile instead.' --

The dark waves dashed; the surf kept surging,
Sounding, resounding, swift scouring the sand.
'The Waking Waters? They are drained and dead.
It is pointless to return.
-- For time at last erases --
-- Every hope for which we yearn.' --

So Daeron declared, eyes distant, dark
Oblivious, and unaware. Not boat on beach
Nor sand blood-soaked nor crumpled corpse
Could draw his least attention
-- Instead he stared across the sea --
-- In memory or vision. --

'Enough!' cried Nèhaléni. 'Corúwen is cold,
We both are bruised, this shore lacks shelter!
Have you no haven? No hidden home?
No refuge from the weather?
-- Our needs are now, --
-- But grieving lasts forever!' --

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If hearth makes home, a home he had,
A cavern chamber. The fire's flames
Illumined little. The bed was bare.
The floor unfinished. No care for comfort
Stood revealed
-- But warmth there was, --
-- And shelter well-concealed. --

Silent they sat and ate unspeaking:
Quiet Corúwen, light-limbed Nèhaléni,
Daeron, dark of hair and hue.
The hearthlight half-revealed
-- What shifting shadows --
-- But half concealed. --

What voice dares venture to dwell on disaster?
Silent sat Nèhaléni holding in hand
A ring retrieved from her captor's corpse.
Its twin still twined enfolding her finger:
In silent reminder
-- Of memories lying --
-- Forever behind her. --

That ring removing, she stood face stark
In firelight flickering: fingers unfolding.
The rings released fell amid flames.
'Fool, farewell!' – So violent her voice –
'You tore me from kin and hearth and home,
-- and now I must bear –
-- your child, alone!' –

Then Daeron raised his eyes, met hers
That delicate, desolate, grim with grief
Stared back with silent, shocked disbelief.
He stood, his fingers found his flute
Then played with savage arts
-- music to break –
-- immortal hearts --

She stood unspeaking, features fixed:
All lost, alone, engrossed in grief.
His fingers flexed, and trilled a tune
Whose sorrow in immortal art
-- recalled the pain –
-- of lover's heart. –

She swayed unspeaking, caught in chords
Whose framing, fashioned great with grief
Swept past sorrow to beauty past belief:
A beauty caught in elvish art
-- whose dance enralls –
-- the hearer's heart. --

With sudden swirl her limbs unlocked,
Unminding mirrored dancing dreams
Whose flames reflected amber eyes.
Her auburn hair about her swept:
-- She sudden stopped –
-- and knelt, and wept. –

He swayed unspeaking, caught in cords
Whose framing fastened grief to guilt.
He might with music help to heal
Those whose grief might find an end.
-- But heal himself? His music opened –
-- All the wounds he sought to mend. --

Book II: The Hollow Hills

A candle crawls through hollow hills,
Barren bleakness, inner earth,
Quiet coldness, darkness dim,
Eery echoes, barren bones.
The dark doors gape,
-- the hallways stretch --
-- and yawn before each passing shape. --

The candle quivers, as spirits seek
And welcome warmth in liquid light.
Up winding ways, down steps and stairs,
Past quiet caves, subsurface streams --
Whose footsteps fall
-- and echo once, --
-- or not at all? --

'What's that? Who's there?' - Alert, unseen
A sentry speaks in challenge changed
To quavering crowds. His swift soft whisper
Harsher sounds
-- like shattering shards --
-- or baying hounds. --

The shadows shake as lights are lit
Framing faces, haloing hair
Auburn, ebony, red as rust.
The sentry staring, smiles, struck mute:
-- Who stands there armed --
-- with sword and flute? --

'Daeron? I dream! In our hidden halls?
Such art unbidden, honor undreamt-of,
Unlikely laughter, heart's grief healing!
What draws you down from the upper land?
-- Some urgent errand? --
-- Some oath's demand?' --

'Mercy.'

'Their captors killed by arrow's arc,
These ladies live, and living, grieve,
To loss unreconciled.
-- And widowed one yet bears --
-- her husband's child.' --

'Welcome to Gonnmar!' the gate guard cried,
'Secret stronghold of the Eastern elves.
Though wary or weary, though hunted or harried,
Or by memory haunted,
-- Here there is peace, --
-- and beauty undaunted.' --

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The cavern opened to endless expanses
Unseen, silent, dripping, dark
Yet fragrant, fresh, perfumed and pure.
So sweet that air
-- but how could flowers --
-- blossom there? --

A ghostly glimmer spread and shimmered.
On soaring ceilings grey light glanced.
The glimmer grew. Pink and pale
It spread and shone
-- for dawn had come --
-- beneath the stone. --

A mountain mass with crystalline crown
Reflects, refracts the dawning day.
The liquid light comes pouring slow,
Its radiance streaming
-- translucent down --
-- like roses gleaming. --

And safe under stone lie tree-clad slopes,
Graceful gardens, fruitful fields.
And high on a hill white Gonnmar glows,
All walls and spires,
-- a pastel picture drawn --
-- in glittering fire. --

Up stairs and steps, on winding ways
They climbed and came to high-roofed hall
Where Lord and Lady sat in state:
Its eight walls strewn
-- with emblems radiant --
-- of sun and stars and crescent moon. --

The king and queen enthroned, uncrowned
And bare of brow sat side by side.

His grey eyes gleamed, hers glinted green.
As wild as wind she seemed, he still as sea
Until they smiled.
-- Then wind and water joined --
-- As sea-surge reconciled. --

'Cordil the King, and Fèhaglin the Fair'
Hail you as hosts, grant haven here.
Daeron of Doriath: welcome once more.
Name now our guests,
-- welcome to sustenance --
-- shelter and rest. --

And so they stood and were known by name:
Corúwen whose skill was once well-known,
Whose gardens grew, who healed deep hurts
While Hollin's towers endured:
-- Her voice was soft and low, --
-- Her hands were swift and sure. --

Nèhaléni next, as fluid as a flame:
Dream-dancer, song-smith,
Stone-setter, ring-wright
While Hollin stood entire
-- But fleeing strife she'd staked her life --
-- On a wager with desire. --

'Welcome! Well met,' declared the king.
'Here gardens grow, and hurt is healed.'
'The child shall be cherished,' Fèhaglin foretold
With outstretched hand.
-- 'Remain, find joy,' --
-- 'Lend beauty to our land.' --

Book III: In Gonnmar's Gardens

Where vines enveloped, trellis-trailing,
She sat, eyes melting, memory-misted.
Then birdsong ceased. 'Hail, Nèhaléni!'
With wary eyes
-- she turned, intent --
-- In swift surprise --

Bent to bow, a stranger's smile:
Black eyes bright, skin tawny-tinted:

Strong as steel and leopard-lithe:
A hunter's silent pace:
-- a stance assured --
-- such feral, feline grace. --

'Your leave, my lord! I would know your name!
He frowned. 'Morfindel, the king's near kin.
Mine are the hunters who haunt the hills above,
Stealing - stalking - slaying such men
As by folly or greed
-- dare enter our haven, --
-- the land of our need.' --

She stared, half-stood. He smiled, reassuring
Held out his hand. 'Such men need no mercy:
Mere vagabonds, vagrants, landless outlaws,
Slave-taking soldiers for cruel kings.
But enough now of men!
-- You have strolled in our gardens --
-- Come see them again!' --

Then pacing the path soft footsteps fell.
The lady looked, her eyes alight:
In wordless welcome raised her hand.
Morfindel frowned, eyes glittering glanced
From side to side,
-- falcon-fierce --
-- with passion and pride. --

A second's silence: Morfindel's mirth
Released itself wryly in lilting laughter.
He strode from the scene: elegant, graceful,
Casual, cool, silent, strong.
'A business before me has grown quite pressing.
-- To Daeron I leave --
-- the garden's blessing!' --

She shrugged and shifted her seat to one side.
Daeron sat beside her. 'I am glad of Gonnmar,
Of this Hidden Home,' she sighed. Soft
There shone a faint sheen, opal-pale
That filled her face:
-- An air transcendant, bright --
-- with glowing grace. --

The minstrel's mind was elsewhere, absorbed.

At length he stirred, looked up, then spoke:
'Soon I depart,
-- For dark waters woo me --
-- and draw me apart.' --

She stood. 'So soon?' she stammered, then stopped.
He nodded. She sat. Her cheek's bright blushing
Faded slow.
-- 'I'll miss you,' she said, --
-- 'And regret you must go.' --

Abstracted, he stood. 'Come Nèhaléni,
At feast I'm invited
To sing a song.'
-- She nodded, then numbly --
-- followed along. --

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Now high overhead the dying light dimmed
As evening awakening stole the soft brilliance
That had streamed from the stone. The crystalline quartz
Whose folded facets had glinted and glittered
Till day grew old
-- now faded from view --
-- like a love gone cold. --

In Gonnmar's gardens bright lamps were lit
Whose glimmering glow like a starry sea
Illumined the land as faint but fluorescent
As dim yet luminescent
-- as the new moon's thin --
-- yet shining crescent. --

The Gonnmarim gathered in quiet crowds
Though children chattered, pranced and played:
Amazingly many, bright-eyed, bold.
The adults' eyes, though, haunted, hard,
Were filled with savage battle-lore
-- from ancient, hopeless --
-- years of war. --

He paused, then passed where lamps were lit
And streamers burst from ribboned trees.
She stopped. Morfindel, faced away from her
Was speaking swiftly. Across, arms crossed,
Was Corúwen. Her eyes moved on.
She shadowed Daeron's passage through

The light
-- in quiet study --
-- as a wild thing might. --

Through the crowd he came to the King and Queen.
On a dais where Daeron bowed before them
He stood yet silent, harp in hand,
A figure carved in living stone:
-- unmoving, hard --
-- and set alone. --

He moved: A motion sudden, small,
A flicker, fingers stirring strings.
Each tone intense, precise and pure
Impaled their hearts with sudden thrill
-- that held them tense, --
-- intent, and still. --

He sang of starlight on tangled trees
In Melian's maze, the depths of Doriath
Guarded and green. He sang of silence
That spread from branch to root
-- a solitude shattered --
-- by the sigh of a flute. --

In his song it seemed that a phantom formed
That glided glimmering, shining, shimmering,
Fragile, fine as waving wings.
So Lúthien, lithe, in dreamlike dance,
Emerged, evoked by Daeron's art:
-- a virgin maiden --
-- veiled and set apart. --

His words now wove not song but spell
That held the heart and ears and eyes,
Revealing visions: Gaily graceful,
-- Beautiful, bright --
-- Her hair about her swirling --
-- dark as night. --

His song swept on. She stood, she sang;
His pipe pursued her soaring song
As high as heaven's silent stars.
Through all the wood her clear voice trilled
-- And all was silent, --
-- Listening, stilled. --

The grassy glade was wreathed and wrapped
In muffling mist. A footstep fell.
The singer stopped. So Daeron sang.
His eyes were bright
-- as he sang of a shape --
-- that emerged from the night. --

'A stranger stalks the forest! Flee!
The wild words echoed through the wood.
The flutist fled, but Lúthien looked
And watching wondered
-- what strangeness through --
-- the forest blundered. --

And with those words his chanting changed
As a stream over stones may plunge in a pool
And stop: a stallion with hammering hooves
That turns at bay
-- teeth bared at a wolf-pack --
-- to drive them away. --

He sang ever softer of the madness of a maid
Mad with desire, mad for a man.
He spoke of the spell that Elven beauty brings
To mortals doomed to die,
-- condemned to relinquish --
-- earth and sea and sky. --

He sang of silence, song suspended,
Grief and anger penned in pain.
The music mad, he whispered words:
Of lovers' laughter --
-- Too blissful to heed --
-- Or care what comes after. --

His features fixed he cried of a king
He was sworn to serve: Whose daughter disobedient
Lived a lie: Elu his lord, Father of the maid
-- whom his love betraying --
-- his hot words betrayed. --

Now see the song with vivid vision!
The king confronting Lúthien's lover,
Who holds her hand without shadow or shame!
How can her heart be so bound to a man

That they would wed
-- Though she lives forever, --
-- And he soon is dead! --

'I'll not bestow blessings on fanciful frenzies,
For my daughter's too dear to be wed on a whim!
I too seek a treasure as perfect and precious
As my daughter's hand:
-- A gem from the crown --
-- of Morgoth I demand!' --

The harp rang out hard and cold and clear,
Its music moving ruthless, relentless,
Soft as sorrow, dark as death.
The passion and pain of those long-distant days
-- Were mysteries locked --
-- In Daeron's gaze. --

Néhalèni listened with wide-open eyes,
Hands gripped together, trembling, tense.
The song proceeding, she shifted, unsure;
Leaned forward frowning. The music might move her
Yet brought her no pleasure,
-- Instead, her face flushed --
-- and she fought for composure. --

And suddenly standing she stumbling turned,
Poised among passions: Grief, fear and fury,
Anger and shame. As a deer may dodge
The hunter's hound, her eyes sought the singer,
Her face the floor.
-- And swift as a whisper --
-- She stood there no more. --

Book IV: The Burden of Love and Memory

She stood on sheer tower that thorn-like thrust
From hall on high through the inner airs.
Her face half-frost, cheeks torn by tears,
Poised in profile, silhouetted alone:
-- She stood unmoving --
-- like quivering stone. --

A sound, a step: the queen came out,
Her green eyes glinting, soft, severe;
Hair black, unbound, as wild as wind.

She stopped, unsure:
-- face still, serene –
-- stance shy, demure. –

Face to face they stood, were still
Atop the tower. And quiet the queen asked,
'What is wrong? You fled the feast
Like a doe that dreads the hunter's horn!
In safety here know rest and peace,
-- where grief's tight grasp --
-- may find release.' --

Nèhaléni laughed. She held her hand
Unconscious close where babe in belly
Snugly swam. 'The grief I am given,
I have born and will bear,
-- But grief's not the madness --
-- By which I despair! –

'How strange! I see that phantom Fate
Yields haunted hopes: How grief brings gladness,
Gladness grief! Dare I follow my heart
Though by folly led?
-- Yet I love him, whose heart
-- prefers the dead!' --

The queen was quiet. The gardens' gleaming
Framed her face. The sound of song
Rose drifting dreamlike, pure, compelling,
Faint and far away;
-- A glow rose above –
-- the bud of day. --

The queen stood quiet, breath on breath
A pulse of passion veiled, overlaid.
Nèhaléni turned, met turquoise eyes:
Sorrow's compassion, sisterly pain.
With sudden sob, in awkward embrace
-- they clung arm to arm –
-- and face to face. --

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Hesitant, soft: a nervous knock.
Silent steps, a door drawn wide.
'I come to see you,' – 'Sir, come in,
Welcome to my widow's bower,
-- My refuge, free –

-- Of ring or dower.' --

Highlights, hollows, candle-cast
Flicked her forehead, chased down cheeks.
'Be seated sir. And try some tea?'
She smiled a smile that flashed as false
As trophies trimmed with glass and gilt
-- The teapot trembled, --
-- Droplets spilt. --

'I came: the queen said we must speak,
Of what I wonder.' Silence stood
As thick as thorns in fallow fields:
-- the fruit that thought --
-- unspoken yields. --

She sat and sipped her tea, and turned,
Her head set high. 'Of Lúthien's love,
And yours, and years long set to song.
And how it can be that any maid
-- dare love with a heart --
-- by love betrayed.' --

He stared then stood, frowned then faced
The window, watching dust-motes dance
Through empty air. 'Of Lúthien's love
And mine, my lady? You speak of subjects
More distinct than stars and sun,
-- That never meet --
-- No matter where they run.' --

'But ask, I'll answer. Private pain
Once song is solitude no more.
Yet lady, pray be brief:
-- Such questions stir hot embers --
-- from the ash of grief. --

She looked about, and bit her lip,
Stood uncertain, steeled resolve,
Then step by step approached, her pace
Precise, a metronomic knock
-- steady, relentless, --
-- a ticking clock. --

'Is love, my lord, a jealous joy
Whose savage splendor burns, whose beauty

Rules or ravishes the soul,
-- and ruins what it --
-- cannot savor whole?' --

'Is love, my lord, a cruel king
Who binds his daughters from their birth
To dance or dally at his will, to wed
The one his word should bless
-- yet gives no thought --
-- to happiness?' --

'Is love, my lord, a gemlike jail
That softly sways atop the trees,
Cooled, caressed -- a seat of ease,
Yet ringed with locks and bars and seals
-- to bind the beauty --
-- it conceals?' --

'If this be love, my lord, why then
I'll hail the hour my heart grows hard!
I'll live alone by a silent sea
Untouched, untouching, a fool but free!
By Manwe -- No! -- By Iluvatar above,
-- Seal up my heart, --
-- If this be love!' --

His face went flat, his nostrils flared,
His fingers flexed on open air.
He breathed one breath, then let it loose,
And turned until
-- his gaze met hers, --
-- level, still. --

'Lady, love's no jealous joy
But loss may lack the secret strength
That helps the heart with calm control
-- 'relinquish what it --
-- 'cannot cherish whole.' --

'Much less is love a cruel king,
Though fairest fondest doting dreams
Adrift may dash, a sullen surf
Of rage,
-- the clash of willful innocence --
-- 'with proud and stubborn age.' --

'And least of all is love a cell
Sealed, secure though flower-filled.
Yet madness marches fleet with fear
For those we cherish
-- fears to free them,
-- lest they perish.' –

'Alas! Alas! Heroic hearts
May live by love for love alone!
So Lúthien lived – so Lúthien loved:
A single-minded soul
-- implacably devoted –
-- to her single-minded goal. --

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'Enough! Enough!' Nèhaléni cried.
Her fingers found the sill and stopped;
She grasped it gazing onward, out.
'Not love would lead you to reveal
-- Beren whom Lúthien –
-- would conceal.' –

'Not love, not love, but rival's wrath
Would call a hero's haven crime.
Yet you – yes, you –
Called for his head.
-- Is this your love,
-- To wish your rival dead?' --

'Not faith nor friendship – love far less –
Would tell the tale a friend confides.
When Lúthien looked and asked your aid,
Her love for Beren burning in her eyes,
You told the king.
-- Was this the love –
-- Of which you sing?' --

Turning towards him, amber eyes
Set wide, she waited. He searched for signs
Of anger on her face but found
There no disdain.
-- Her gaze reflected gentleness, --
-- Her features, pain. --

'Ah lady – Nèhaléni –' His sudden smile
Flickered, faded like sun through snow.

'So Lúthien looked at me, so she spoke,
With words that wilted, blasted, broke
What pride might well condone:
-- The empty deeds of bitterness --
-- I never can atone.' --

'Alas, the longing hungry heart
May live for love yet hate its hope!
For twisted, torn my heart was home
To duty, love and envy,
-- and of the three but one --
-- is prone to mercy.' --

'To Lúthien in Hírilorn whose leaves were long
There came a quiet melody, a murmur
And a song: regret begun,
My sorrow spun,
-- 'Forgive my shame, --
-- the wrong I've done.' --

'Ah, Lúthien in Hírilorn, her princess-prison!
Pale and proud though worry-worn
With longing love for Man late-born,
Yet free of hate:
-- gentle in her loveliness,
-- gracious, great.' --

'Ai! Lúthien in Hírilorn! A terrible task
To hold her at the King's command,
To hold her from her heart's demand,
To hold her there alone, unarmed
But for her beauty.
-- It broke my heart, which yet must stand --
-- To do its duty.' --

'The loom of life's a frame we fill
With deeds and dreams we tangle till
Our sight is stunned as patterns pass
Like flashing beams
-- too bright to last, --
-- and nothing's as it seems.' --

'If duty's dark and love is loss
Our souls are storms where tempest-tossed
We spin uncertain webs whose warp
Unraveling

-- we grasp in sudden –
-- incandescence dazzling.' --

'Lúthien! Ah, Lúthien! Weaver of dreams!
What a web her soul must spin!
What a web her fingers form!
'Dazzled, my heart
-- divines dark purpose –
-- in her art. --

'Lúthien! Ai! Lúthien! Weaver of dreams!
A song of sleep – a net of night – A cloak concealing shadow flight.
My soul suspects but fears to free
The sullen surf of violence,
-- and proves its love –
-- for Lúthien by silence. --

Like waters that waver, that border belief
Over pools as profound as bright moonlight through mist
She stared at him smiling. He turned, she turned
In speechless regard:
-- two quiet Quendi, --
-- a silent bard. --

'Daeron –' she dared, then suddenly stopped.
'Daeron – why death I would call less cruel
Than life that loves by living loss!
Better the bitter, caustic kindness,
Crying
-- that sears and seals and soothes the heart, --
-- than anguish never-dying.' --

'But still – yet still – I cannot comprehend
When matters had moved to their ultimate end
Why you left the land whose hollows and hills
Had echoed your art
-- to live in the East –
-- by dark waters apart. --

'Was your grief so great that the land you loved
In memory mirrored pent-up pain?
Did your bitterness burning fear to face
Beren beside Tinuviel returning?
I cannot conceive it:
-- Daeron, please, Daeron, --
-- Must I believe it?' --

As the scintillating sun may loom through a lens
Too bright to bear: so he frowned in his confusion
As if at an illusion's flaming focus
Unaware.
-- As if the sun were silenced --
-- by the starkness of his stare. --

'No man – none! – can boast of besting me
In courage, strength of spirit, courtesy!
And if alive one born of Barahir
Returned from dread
-- with Lúthien I'd welcome him –
-- no matter whom he wed.' --

'But no man – none! – can dare that dark
And ghastly gloom, brave Angband's
Deadly doors where shadows loom
And hope for life;
-- much less to win –
-- that perfect gem, a wife.' --

'But I – yet I – released brave Lúthien
To dare those doors, a maiden-moth
Constrained to seek a fouler flame
To help her hero's helpless hand!
And thus I am forsworn:
-- remiss in duty, for my lord's –
-- bereaved, betrayed, forlorn. --

And so I stray in the East alone.
Landless, lordless, loveless I live
To walk dark waters, to sing under star
Of Lúthien's life and beauty:
-- Until we meet in Mandos' halls –
-- A solitude of memory.' --

Book V: Nèhaléni's Tale

Nèhaléni looked at him, stared at him; stunned.
'Do you not know? Have you not heard?
Is her tale untold? Not a whispered word
Of Lúthien's fate
-- who sang at Hell's –
-- and Mandos' gate?' --

Have you not heard of Huan the Hound
Who bore her to Beren? Her friend unforeseen
Yet grim, her guard on a blackened bridge
By Sirion's stream? How she stood, how she sang,
Defying the night
-- with a song of the stars --
-- and their music bright?' --

'Is the tale untold how one by one
The wargs and werewolves fell, till fate
Brought forth the foulest, great Gorthaur?
How Huan the valiant hound of Valinor
Triumphed, so that pinned there prone
-- he pled for mercy --
-- who'd never mercy shown?' --

'Not a whispered word of dark disguise?
Of Beren, beast-like, wolfskin-wrapped?
Of his fair one flitting, batwing-born
To mountain-tower:
-- Thangorodrim, throne --
-- Of shadowed power?' --

'Do you not know her song of sleep?
How they passed the pit's fierce-guarded gate
Unscathed, unseen where dreaming deep
And slumber-soothed lay Carcharoth,
Vast hound whose might
-- lay felled, enspelled --
-- in nets of night?' --

'Know it now! My tongue must tell
Of a hollow hall in the heart of hell!
Furnace flicker, red lights roar:
Beat of Angband's works of war!
'Demons, dragons, orc-lords round
-- 'their King, three Jewels --
-- 'in his iron crown!' --

'Hear, give ear! Past shapes of fear
In armed array, in ghastly gear
They came, and cold each searching stare
That waited, watched: a hall of hate
They walked alone
-- to stand revealed --
-- before that throne.' --

'Listen, learn! The frailest fire
Though dim, may dare, may flare, aspire
To crown, consume the tallest trees,
To hail the heavens, a breeze whose burning
Kindles fortune's candle,
Fame,
-- the hero's due, --
-- a shining name.' --

'Just so I say was Lúthien, and Beren
Born of mortal men! No braver'—
Ever — under stone yet stood,
A minstrel-maid, or so she said.
That dark king smiled,
-- bemused by beauty —
-- undefiled.' --

'Lúthien! Ah, Lúthien! Weaver of dreams!
A song of sleep, a net of night,
A cloak concealing shadow flight!
The bright stones blaze, the kingly crown
Is bowed, as hate
-- succumbs to slumber's —
-- weary weight.' --

'Spent, she settles; Beren's blade
Pries a perfect stone unset
Then snaps; a sliver cuts the king
Who stirs in sleep.
-- They rise, they flee —
-- dark mountain-throne and cavern deep.' --

'They gain the gate, but late, too late
They see the savage wolf awaits!
Cruel Carcharoth, whose red maw gapes
Stands now, sleeps no more:
-- Incarnate terror —
-- holds the door.' --

'What a crown is courage! The battle-brave
May call theirs courage, to face the foe
Certain in strength, fearless, fell!
But when hope as hollow as a booming bell
Grips the heart with the grip of hell,
To leap alone at the jaws of death

Is courage!
-- That, and that alone --
-- 'Is courage!' --

'He stood, the stone upheld, defiant --
Its light a lance of beauty brilliant --
The stone his only sword and shield --
And yet he took, he held the field --
But then -- but then --
-- Oh, Beren, born --
-- Of mortal men!' --

'A leap, a lunge, a sudden snap
Of tearing teeth, of jaws on jewel
And holding hand. The beast's great belly
Glowes as bright
-- as if a star --
-- were swallowed by the night.' --

'Hunger, hatred, ravening rage;
Savage strength that turns to tear
And bite at Beren suddenly -- stops.
The beast bolts off. Mayhem's madness!
Peril's pain!
-- Its belly burning, --
-- death itself, insane.' --

'And by the door
-- she seeks to staunch his wound --
-- and nothing more.' --

~

'What then? What then? Of Beren and of Luthen?
The name of Beren bursting slipped
Past all limits, through his lips
And languished, lingered on the air
-- so that she stopped, suspended --
-- in his care. --

Suspended, in the pulse that throbbed against his throat.
Suspended, in the poise he held against all hope.
She stared with fingers pressed to face
With cheeks on which the dawn awoke
-- Then found her balance, --
-- Breathed again, and spoke. --

'Beneath them sudden thunder stirs,

The clamor of confusion. Above unbroken
Soaring space, a spiral silence.
'Below them beat of deep-voiced drums,
Above them blow the watchful winds.
Below, unleashed the hell-hounds howl,
Bell, and bay:
-- above an eagle stoops, --
-- and bears them both away.' --

'Away, unbound, in boundless space,
From hell to hope in a rushing race
Of wings and wind and sun and sky
Where day and darkness fleeting fly
They pass, and gain the ground
-- by the waiting feet --
-- of Huan the Hound.' --

'But Beren writhing gasps, groans,
Cries unconscious moaning mutters;
Waking works for stillness, so
Tendons tense and strain
-- as if he walked unwilling --
-- through the palaces of pain. --

'So Lúthien looks for healing herbs.
With tender touch she bathes his brow,
And wraps his wound. She whispers words
And gently tends him;
-- without a wedding, --
-- still would wed him.' --

Nëhaléni bit her lip, looked up,
Stricken, but Daeron did not stir.
His thoughtful eyes
-- regarded her inscrutably, --
-- silent as the skies. --
She paused, her pulse resumed its pace,
But she told her tale in hurried haste
As if eager for an end she feared to face,
As though each murmured word
-- bore poison whose antidote --
-- was to be heard. --

'Should Lúthien outlawed wander wild,
A pauper princess with a landless lord?
Should Beren relish, hoard her love?

Without her father's favor wed
-- by sharing shelter, --
-- board and bed?' --

'Beren refuses. Wiser to win
Her father's favor,
-- to act in faith, --
-- and open honor.' --

'So to Doriath where dubious their hopes now hinge,
To Doriath where dolorous lush gardens grow
Deserted, silent, they go through flowers
Where Thingol stands and stares the hours away.
Gaunt and gray he turns:
-- his features are shadowed, --
-- but his grim gaze burns.' --

'I see you survive. Is your quest complete?'—
'We live, lord king. You judge the gem
My hand holds even now:
-- Decide, answer if --
-- the price has paid my vow.' --

Beren lifts his fist, unfolds it.
'This is not the hand that holds it.'
Beren lifts the other arm.
'This is the hand, that past all harm
Still holds the bride-price you demanded.
-- So call me now --
-- the empty-handed.' --

'Elu Thingol laughed aloud!
So this is how you end your quest,
With gay defiance and a grim jest?
Come tell your tale, each feat confess,
And teach me that madness is happiness!
-- I've a suit to consider, --
-- A daughter to bless!' --

~

Above a bell announced the noon
With a laughing, liquid tune that tolled
From the topmost tower, rolled, rebounded
Cave to cave, confounded returned:
A million magic bells
-- whose chimings cast --
-- harmonic spells. --

Nëhaléni lifted up her head: not he.
She turned and taking well-aged wine
Poured out, placed a fine-stemmed glass.
'Daeron, drink: wine lessens heartache,
Lulls despair,
-- For in the tale I tell --
-- is grief enough to spare.' --

He nodded numbly, drank it dry,
Then waited, watched in silence sitting,
The glass held in his hand
-- as if around an hourglass, --
-- concealing drifted sand. --

Her hand upheld, with eyes intent,
She gazed through glass where ruby-red
Her face refracted as she turned and tossed
Her head.
-- 'You know, of course, --
-- 'That they were wed.' --

She took a taste, then grasped the glass
Cupped close as if it held her heart.
'In times of grief,
-- of course, --
-- such bliss is brief.' --

She licked her lips, then downed her drink,
And spoke in swift staccato tones.
Beren died with Huan the Hound
Killing Carcharoth. Lúthien lived
But her spirit Westward fled,
-- to bow in supplication to --
-- the ruler of the dead. --

'They say she sang at Mandos' door
Of life and love with soaring voice.
That calm, collected, poised she passed
Alone,
-- to stand revealed --
-- before his throne.' --

'They say she sang as none have sung
Since song first shaped the circles of the world,
As if the air unfurled and framed

The love her lyrics named anew.
I hear that Mandos' will is hard
As stone.
-- Yet pity clothed his face, --
-- who'd never pity shown.' --

Beren reborn, with Lúthien alive
Walked through the winter of Thingol's thought,
Which turned at her touch into sudden spring.
But her mother, Melian, saw on her soul
The mark of Mandos, his grievous gift:
For mortal man must have mortal bride
-- who shall die forever --
-- to live at his side.' --

Book VI: Moment of Truth

She looked at length, and saw him smile
With fragile face, and while she wondered
Seemed to speak. She strained to understand.
So she is gone,' he whispered. 'Lost
Beyond the world.'
-- And on one cheek --
-- a droplet pearled. --

Suddenly he seemed to notice Nèhaléni,
Straightening, stepped back. Many minutes
Lapsed. He laughed. 'I must admit it!
Love is cruel!
-- And fate has played me --
-- for a fool!' --

She shut her eyes.
Across the floor
-- his footsteps echoed --
-- toward the door. --

'Stay! No, stop!' she cried and quick
Past Daeron darting on flickering feet
She set herself to meet her match
In anguish and despair:
-- The lamp behind her limned the door --
-- And framed her hair. --

She stopped: her staring agate eyes

Met his. Mute, surprised, he stood
In shock. `For shame! I could be cold
As thee, my lord, and call it love!
Or court a dream, and call it constancy!
She shook her head. `Yet what a tale
My tears could tell!
-- For my daughter's name --
-- would be Fíriel.' --

‘Oh, what a fool I was, to love
A son of men!
-- He was no Beren, --
-- And I, no Lúthien!’ --

‘Better, better far had my father
Not met my mother in Ost-in-Edhel
Far from Lórien that he loved!
Alas for life!
-- If hope must end --
-- in heartbreak, war, and strife!’ --

‘Better, better far had I but fled
Death and darkness, and never met a man
Who dared to live and love and dream
Beyond his nature's narrow bounds!
Must I be faithful to a tomb?
-- Live a widow till --
-- the Day of Doom?’ --

His breath unbated rasped. He raised
One hand; hesitant, drew it drifting back.
‘Thou too?’ She lacked for words. He trembled.
He set his arms about her, sought
Peace perhaps to comfort her: could not.
And so they wept:
-- Each for griefs --
-- the other kept. --

~

Slowly she stepped back, broke
His arms' encirclement, raised both wrists
To hold her hair back from her face.
‘Alas, my lord, my tale is not full told;
Nor have I named my folly fully
Yet:
-- I dare to dream again, you see, --
-- And now my heart is set --

-- On thee.' --

'How can I help myself, silence
My heart? How then deny what now
Pulls me apart? Pity me, pardon me,
Call me half-crazed: dazed or a dreamer,
I plead no defense!
-- Either fate made me love you, --
-- Or lack of sense!' --

'I have sense though to see your courage to care!
For where would I be now if grief and despair
Were as strong in your soul as they seem in your words?
How can I help that my heartstrings are stirred
Like a harp in your hand, like the wind of your voice?
How can I stand
-- What a heart strung with steel --
-- could hardly withstand?' --

'How long, my lord, will dreams be your drink,
Your food a fantasy of love, your life
An echo of passions past? I am,
I live, I love!' Touch me, I tremble!
Speak, and I hear!
-- Forsake the dark waters! --
-- 'Leave Death on her bier!' --

He stood as still as absence. Over them
The moments moved like sails against the sun
Where red horizons run past solemn seas.
Her face before him oval might have veiled
The moon, or mirrored in his eyes
Become a pale yet perfect star.
Time changed: his fingers framed her cheeks,
His lips burned lightly on her brow
And head,
-- and all else stopped --
-- until he said: --

'Nèhaléni, no: you ask too much.
Is there love after Lúthien? I cannot stretch so far
Past hurt with a heart so scarred, and numb.
Perhaps -- perhaps -- yet I stumble on old griefs,
Pick my way past painful reefs of memory
And find myself a stranger to the scenery of joy.
Passionate, compassionate, beautiful, brave,

Thou art these and more. If only –
No, Nèhaléni! Raise your child,
May life and laughter piled together
Be your blessing whether I am far
Or near – enough, I cannot face farewells.
Take this, for thou wilt keep it well,
For mirth, for merriment, for celebration
While healing years and seasons turn,
-- and then, perhaps, --
-- my heart return,' --

She felt his hand upon hers, felt
Something light, metallic slide there
As she blinked back tears. He turned:
She stared irresolute.
-- He was gone, so she stood there, --
-- And cradled his flute. --

Book VII: A Mother and a Daughter's Song

'Fíriel! Fíriel!'

She called the name she knew so well
In vibrant tones that rose and fell:
Around her rose the city and its spires
Like wonders woven in a song inspired
To rejoice
-- within the splendor –
-- of her voice. --

Now dashing down the sudden stairs
With flashing feet and haloed hair
-- In grace a gazelle, elemental as the earth –
Gamboling, dancing, gay with mirth
She came, her mother's daughter
-- eyes bright as gems --
-- or fresh spring water. --

They turned together, hand in hand
Past quiet courts, down arches, avenues
Whose white walls lit by rosy light
Glinted and glowed like ethereal things.
Theirs was the beauty which makes men
Sing:
-- mother, daughter, --

-- summer, spring. --

Up stairs and steps, on winding ways
They climbed and came to high-roofed hall
Where Lord and Lady sat in state:
Its eight walls strewn
-- with emblems radiant --
-- of sun and stars and crescent moon. --

Morfindel stood there, and Fíriel smiled
To see how close he stood to Corúwen.
He bent to bow: tawny-tinted,
Strong as steel, leopard-lithe:
Yet all his grace
-- was in his arm about her --
-- when his eyes strayed to her face. --

Fíriel felt all eyes upon her:
Stood straight, a solemn tree
While silence spread.
Just as the air may bear a blossom
Past a garden wall,
-- so step by step --
-- she crossed the hall. --

If our lives are like banners blowing,
Turning, tossing on the wind of time,
Then Fíriel before them was a flag unfurled.
The king and queen rose to receive
Her who came
-- a daughter grown --
-- to wear a woman's name. --

'How the flowers unfold in this city's spring,
How children change!' declared the king.
'No child now, choose your name anew;
Choose well, choose words that suit your soul's
Intent,
-- for trees will grow --
-- as they are bent.' --

Suppose a butterfly could be reborn
A hawk, and come forth fierce and heavy-winged,
Bold of eye, still bound to earth
But eager for the air: so Fíriel seemed then
To her mother's mind

-- and mother-love though fond --
-- is seldom blind. --

'Then call me Cemniel!' she cried
As sudden in that silence as an unexpected
Drum. 'I'll name my nature, I'll declare
My birth:
-- though heir to stars, --
-- a daughter to the earth!' --

Suddenly she smiled, met her mother's eyes
As if mirth moved in her from unseen springs.
Her gaze caught the king's half-hidden smile
That matched her own.
-- She turned then,
-- set alone, --

And sang of joy in gentle things:
Starling, songbird, hummingbird hovering,
Trout in streambed, salmon spawning,
Fawn in forest, cattle lowing,
Fire on hearthstone, children laughing,
Mortal mirth swift-passing
Perishing
-- like morning mist --
-- yet cherished, cherishing. --

She sang of starlight, trees, and time;
Of seasons swinging in ritual rhyme;
Of moonlight, mountains, cold cascades,
Rivers running -- beyond, the sea.
And while her word still held the hall
There came a quiet counterpoint:
Tones, a tune. Each birdlike, liquid,
Tremulous trill
-- pierced the air --
-- and held it still. --

Imagine music like the rain
Building beauty out of pain,
Coming closer. Who can fathom,
Who can chart
-- immortal longing --
-- fixed in art? --

Nëhaléni held stock-still,

Eyes aflicker, poised in place.
The music moved. Singing softly,
Daeron came,
-- weaving wonder --
-- on a frame --

Of silence. Fíriel smiled.
He bent to bow before them.
Welcome, music's master!
Cried the king. 'I thank you,
First to bless
-- Fíriel Cemniel, --
-- and wish her happiness!' --

One by one the other elves approached,
Bearing blessings, giving gifts,
Then stepping out in silence. Silent,
Last, Néhalèni came. She stopped.
Quietly, Fíriel kissed her, slipped away.
The king and queen embraced her, both
Without a word, and left. Néhalèni
Trembled. Above them glowing emblems
Shone
-- where she and Daeron --
-- stood alone. --

~

'Why?' she whispered. 'Who called you here?
Why have you come? I have tried to teach
Myself philosophy, fortitude, strength
To leave the past in peace, to live
On the wave that washes me foaming forward.
But no! Now, the wave withdraws,
My daughter, delight,
-- eclipsed where you stand, --
-- occluding my sight.' --

'Why? Why have you come?'
-- If only my heart --
-- and my hope were numb!

'Why? I wonder too,' he told her.
'I have walked by the waters where seabirds circling
Call in raucous chorus on the edges of the world.
At night there were nets of stars strewn
Across the combers, and the bare beaches
Were grey glimmers before my feet.

And I thought of Lúthien, but her name brought nothing
To mind but memories washed out like echoes
Of a whisper in a dream. It seemed so strange.
And I thought of thee, and walked through woods
Where fireflies flickered like amber eyes,
And wondered why I thought of thee.
Then the king called, asking me make music
Fitting for thy daughter's name.
-- I rose, and left the waterside, --
-- and came.' --

Her stare softened. 'I am honored, for
Thy music could move the stones themselves
To dance, or drive the waves to weep.
My thanks for thinking of my daughter
And of me.
-- What now? For surely more --
-- Weighs on thy heart than harmony.' --

'Alas, I do not know,' he said.
'Nëhaléni, my soul is strange to me,
As if around me mountains moved,
Assuming strange, fantastic forms.
It would please me though, to hear thee play
My flute.'
-- He stammered, stopped, --
-- Irresolute. --

Nëhaléni lifted up her eyes,
Met his, that held and framed her face
Like mirrors mixing grief and grace.
She fumbled at her neck, pulled out his flute,
Then played with gentle arts
-- music to heal --
-- immortal hearts. --

He stood unspeaking, features fixed,
Half-lost, half-lured, half-grieving yet engrossed.
Her fingers flexed, and she trilled a tune
Whose glory in immortal art
-- recalled the joy --
-- of lover's heart. --

He swayed unspeaking, caught in chords
Arranged to etch in sharp relief
A love transcending loss and grief:

A love portrayed in Elvish art,
-- whose beauty eases --
-- broken hearts. --

With sudden sob his lips unlocked,
Moved mutely, as if reading runes
Inscribed in stone, that told a tale
Of secrets sought, of answers earned,
Of life renewed, of love returned,
And then he wept
-- for griefs released --
-- he long had kept. --

She swayed unspeaking, caught in cords
Whose framing harnessed hope and fear.
She might with music move his heart
Past sorrow's end,
-- Yet only he could help --
-- Her own heart mend. --

Slowly he restored his self-control,
Straightening, stepped back. Many minutes
Lapsed. He laughed. 'Mandos must
Enjoy a joke! The hollow hills
Still echo every tone and trill
So that the city stands silent, serenaded
By the music you have made. Come!' he called,
His hand held out. 'Some place more private
Would be wise!'
-- She took his hand, and walked with him, --
-- In blank surprise. --

~

They stood on sheer tower that thornlike thrust
From hall on high through the inner airs.
Faces half-fire in lingering light,
They stood together, they stood alone:
-- Two flames atop --
-- A torch of stone. --

She held his hand still. He stirred,
Turning toward her. 'How strange,' he said.
To stand beside thee and to be content.
I know no names to fit this feeling,
Nor do I care
-- what words apply, --

-- if only thou art there.' --

She laughed. 'Is love too simple or too strange
A word for what we feel? No jealous joy,
No cruel king, no gemlike jail
Deserves the name, for no such love
Is blessed!

-- But perfect love continues on --
-- and passes every test!' --

'I've never known such love,' he said,
'And fear my heart shall fail. But if you can accept me,
Nëhaléni, love me, call my feelings love,
I shall attempt it. Shall I follow my heart,
Though by folly led?

-- If so, I must learn --
-- what it means to be wed!' --

Like waters that waver, that border belief
Over pools as profound as bright moonlight through mist
She stared at him smiling. He turned, she turned
In speechless regard:

-- two quiet Quendi, --
-- a silent bard. --

'Daeron -' she dared, then suddenly stopped,
Slipped close to him. Her fingers touched his face
And he leant closer. Whoever thinks a moment
Far too short to miss

-- has never known eternity --
-- in a kiss. --