

The Song of the Jolly Headmen

by [Mark Gullick](#) (May 2023)



At the First Clear Word, Max Ernst, 1923

Now the year turns
Like a mill-wheel
Grinding the chaff away.
The river's up,
The doors won't close,
Puffed with moisture.
Or is it fairies, little Mabs
And Hobs and bottle imps?
Mischiefs, the old bicycle's flat tyres,
Mud spooned over Wellingtons.
In the lop-sided hall
The fairies wash their babies in the beer.

Dreams without people.
Sandbanks. A grey silvered sky.

The hearty tramp on the moors,
The springy heather, the golden retriever
Bounding ahead, happy to be happy.
But there is something in the gorse.
It is the same shape as the gorse.
But it is not the gorse.
It is in the gorse
But not of it.
There is something in the gorse.
The dog stops and listens.
Grass wet with hovering mist.
The ticks climb the blades.
Shellacked buttons, feelers
Twitching morse,
They speak of tick affairs.

Conspiracies. The world
Is all cogs and springs and clicking gears
Run and maintained by grotesques.
Who rules a queenless hive?

Each soul has its wetlands.
Knee-deep in filmy water,
The murrain suck and pull
Of depth and marshy ooze.

She stands in storms.
She is motion and its consequence,
A woman caught in movement,
She plays with time,
Or time plays with her.

Keelhailed, roped and plunged,
This fear of winds
In a world not old but young,
Swimming in the dreaming brine
We fish together
Strung with weed.

Feed the feathered arrow through the torso.
Never pull. The raggedy flesh,
Slippy blood and gristle.

Stag's teeth and a charm bracelet.
Your mood like fur stroked the wrong way.
Let the moral contortions commence.

The teller's smile
A copper-wire crescent
Set in dough.

Chile powder on a horseshoe
Of pineapple,
Her hair disgraceful,
A heron's nest of reds and aubergines.
Champagne and cigarettes,
An origami cat
Weakened by two fat raindrops.

Swill it around the mind.
Troubled blessing.

Torch the pretensions.
Let ideals smother in the crib.
We need no thinkers here,
Just pragmatists. Log-splitting men,
Cabin builders, calloused hands
And minds. For thinkers
There are crosswords and cribbage.
These hang and pluck no pheasants
Nor slat the shutters
'Gainst the wind.

Love hides but waits to be found.
One hundred counted. Look
In the pockets of your scuff-sleeved coat,
And behind the Japanese screen
And in the coal scuttle
And in your heart last of all
Because you never want games to end.

We never met.
An echo in each other's thoughts.
Corridors untaken
And doors untried.

After all the bright manifestoes
They still hang the prisoners.
Thirteen loops, thirteen steps,
The trapdoor surprises with its speed,
The vertebrae traumatised,
A mangle of gristle,
The spine's perfection compromised,
Its question-mark answered.
Crane marionettes,

All-gallows eve.

There is a woman on the roof,
Astride the gables,
Set against the peat-black sky.
The thunder-heads roll in.
She holds a bird's head
On a bamboo cane,
Shakes it in a palsy-dance,
Come, lightning.
And strike us all dead.

Tiny monkeys swarm
On beached and rotting palanquins.
The old empires pass,
Dowagers in a sick-breathed room,
Never to rise again.
Time smooths the blankets
And combs the straggled hair.

Plants and puppets.
Unfurl the flags,
Hang them rightways
And have the village girls
Take Death down to the river.

Don't whistle in the house, mother.
You'll whistle away the luck
We never had.
The luck my father wished for
But never had.
Luck is a lady in the restaurant
But a harlot on the streets.

Ceremonial attire
Shaken out for wearing.
Confetti of dead moth-wings

Strew the tiles.
The ceremony is late starting,
Late finishing.
It is late now
All over the world.
The time zones come together,
The wicket-gate closes
On the dog-rose garden
Where we left our shadows.

There are eight jolly headmen.
Phobos, stripe-faced, pink-eyed,
A bobbing albino.
Kurtz, there in the heart
Of darkness.
Faustina, wife of Marcus,
The kind, wise emperor.
The wood-sprite, juju man,
With his matted coconut face.
Next Beppo,
Black head, nodding,
Red dashes for eyes.
Little Kätschen with her twig arms
Held up in glee.
Odilon with his one eye
And carven grin.
Jack the cartoon man,
Crosses for eyes,
Railroad teeth.
The shard
Of black-daubed tile
Digs the earth.
Eight jolly headmen.
Will there be more?
Hear them sing
And regret nothing.

Chickens in the church-yard.
They are the quick, and the dead
Sleep on and dream of loam
And trinket and flint.
The stolen church-bell
Was Domesday Book scriven.
Inside the church the mural,
Terracotta devils' tongues
Of flame, the *croix patée*
Skewed in its corner.
The land a Templar's,
A knight in absence,
Gone to the Holy Land.
Sir Stephen something,
Supping with Saladin
On mulled blood and old wine.

Born to be a dilettante,
Now I work the night shift
At the doll hospital.
The graveyard shift.
The dollies have no graves
But live again, remade
and recycled. All the little
Plastic arms and legs,
The eyes, the squeaky joints.
Clock in, clock out.
As I go about my work,
The dollies watch.

The fan-dance has commenced and now
The town of devils must be rid.
The *pharmakoi*, the four bad men
And woman one in number
Outside the township limits
Must be driven. Point of order.
What of the names?

The names, the names.
In every log-book, almanac,
Or registration form,
Certificate of birth or marriage,
Bill of sale for Hackney-carriage.
All the names and signatures
Remain. The printer's devils.

Vespers, Angelus, Domesday.
All the bells sing
And the overtones hum
and quiver.
Water-boatmen dimple the pools.
The water table's up,
The underground river
Seeks a place in the sun,
Brings all its secrets with it
From the inky black,
The moss-slimed walls and runnels.
Artesian wells, Cartesian bells.
They ring therefore thou art.

The young daughter fears blindness.
A squint from a childhood illness
Brings twilight in like tarpaulin.
The edges of things blur and bleed.
Now she edges blindfold round the dark house.
Tap, tap, tap.
Learning the alignments and edges
For when the light fails.

You were told
Of the false lights,
Warned, cuffed once, twice.
Stay on the path, Will.
Gaseous exhalations
Sparked into a life

To flit and course the dead peat.
Thus science. Miss Abby
Says Will o' th' Wisp
Is come. Red dots
For eyes.
Stay on the path, Will.
Your namesake flickers,
Leads you on
To the graves of the bad children.
Unquiet
In the marshy ooze.

Down the causey.
(Ware the slimy steps
Do not pitch you in the Thames!)
The ghost of Bruno
Passes you
On his way up to The Strand
To the ambassadorial house.

In the end all endings
Are beginnings.
The old hallway clock
Strikes to end one hour
And begin another.
Wheel moves wheel,
Cycles, seasons and a turning.
And so the year turns
Like a millwheel
Grinding the chaff away.

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America. he has a PhD in philosophy and is working on his first book. Mark has written for *Counter Currents*, *Taki's Magazine*, *The Occidental Observer*, *VDare*, and *American Renaissance*.

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