

Woodsong

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Contents

5	<i>Argument</i>
6	Dramatis Personae <i>Cast in order of appearance</i>
7	I. Duet
8	II. Sweeney Alone
9	III. Sweeney Learns the Language of the Birds
10	IV. Sweeney Meets a False Friend
11	V. Sweeney Abroad
14	VI. How Sweeney Ends
15	VII. Unwritten
17	VIII. Kind Earth, Cold Night
18	IX. Sweeney Notices a Theme
19	X. Eorann
20	<i>Afterword</i>
22	<i>Borrowed Lines</i>
24	Acknowledgements

For Jenny

‘These have been some of the tales and adventures of Sweeney’
– *Buile Suibhne*, 1197 AD, closing lines

These are some of the others.

Argument

How Sweeney, king of Dal-Arie, that northeasternmost tip of Eire,
weary of his cursed state – of the fire in his mind, the loneliness,
of his transformation into a naked fluttering thing by the spite
of a vengeful preacher, and all those famous afflictions of which you are,
no doubt, aware – sought guidance in unhinged, unlikely places.

How the riddling birds of the wood sang of his past to cut through his madness;
how a future linguist taught him to unriddle the wood of his madness in song;
how a mad companion showed the future to be riddles written on wood;
how all that is written on wood is sieved by the forest's humblest creature;
how a humble written creature is saved by firewood and love.

Dramatis Personae | Cast in order of appearance

Ronan Honest cleric. Robe, sandals, large bell around neck. His church was invaded and razed by lying King Sweeney, a local landowner who tried to kill him with a spear. Saved by the bell. Prayed for a miracle. It worked: the cruel tyrant was reshaped into a form better fitting his soul.

Sweeney Honest Ulsterman. His land was invaded by Ronan Finn, a lying priest who tried to build a church on it. The cruel zealot cursed him. It worked: the kind king was turned into an insane, feathered bird-beast. Now lives in the air and sleeps on branches, his wretched clawfeet barely able to touch the ground.

All the birds of Ireland *fteewit-fwiwit-twu-chikchik-wit?*

Prof Etymologist; from *-logia* (a speaking of), *etymos* (true).

Tom or Turlygod. Four-piece suit, no shoes. Mad seer & singer. Poor poor Tom.

Woodlouse *warm small ear to the ground*

Eorann Estranged wife of strange Sweeney. Love, come home.

I. Duet

i. Roman's Prayers

In the beginning was the Wood.
And in that Wood I built my Church.
Into that Church came Sweeney, nude.
Give it him, Father. Make him hurt.

*

Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms,
Who threw his Wooden Spear to strike my Bell,
Who tore my proud Erection to the Ground,
Give it him. Lord Almighty, give him Hell.

ii. Sweeney's Song

*sing a song of Sweeney
Wood's halfpenceworth of rye
that lurching, weeping manbird
exiled in the sky*

*true king of Dal-Arie
noble mind diseased
driven from his wife and hearth
cursed by a priest*

*naked, frightened, beaten
who'll sing my song for me?
is feathered, fading Sweeney
forgotten, finally?*

II. *Sweeney Alone*

knows the name of every tree in Ireland;
not every kind of tree in Ireland,
every tree.

This whitethorn, where a stretch of quiet path
bends in the shape of the small of her back,
is called Eorann.

This cherry, where she counted every dot
on a tame bird-cherry ermine moth,
is called Eorann.

This willow, where he perched and called *Eorann*
till it became a sound *Eorann*
without a face

his birdmind *Eorann* only knowing Eorann
as the word for something lost
or misplaced,

III. Sweeney Learns the Language of the Birds

Utterly barking, up the wrong
tree for the season, thorn and brush
piercing his naked skin, Sweeney
halts in his howling, listens. Hush.
Caught on the wind and held, a song
fainter than breath, and cold. Sweeney
embraces the little melody, takes
to the air, and raises
his ear:

*who killed cock robin, cracked his bell,
broke his quiet chapel?
twig-boned, he flits from brook to dale
a shivering clotheless cripple*

*who lost his lover, lost the land,
lives by his wits and has none?
whose life is pith and bitter rind
and teeth too sharp for wisdom?*

And Sweeney, listening from the sky
to the lark's soft voice below, remembers
Ronan's curse, and Eorann's kiss,
Dal-Arie's hearth of golden embers.
Since every question starts with why,
and every answer comes to this,
he shrugs a gooseflesh shoulder, shakes
from his cheek, as it freezes,
a tear.