

FROM *THE BOOK OF THE RED KING*
Marly Youmans

DEFINITION OF FOOL

What does it mean to be a fool?

Is it to reel about the world
Like stars made out of icicles,
Dangerous and breakable?

What does it mean to be a fool?

Is it to make the things no one
Can recognize or put to use?
For the beautiful, for hurt joy?

He spins around, wanting to learn.

The Fool is dreaming that he lies
With truth—across a grave like glass
He lies, the shaft shoaling with leaves.

What can he do with schooling dark?

Each minnowed leaf says *leave-taking*.
He shakes his rattle at the dark
And fills his antic hat with leaves.

A STAR IN A BOX

In a green seed
Hidden in a shell
From the first walnut tree,
Wrapped in threads of Tensan silk,
Tucked in a giant wentletrap,
Placed inside a golden treasure box,
Swallowed by the roan-red bull on the hill,
In the precincts of the Red King's castle lands,
Inside a kingdom held against barbarians,
In a world that cares so little whether we outrage
Or whether we are bred to honor and civility—
In the out-rushing universe, the nursery house of stars,
Inside the multiverse with other worlds, each with its own Red King,
Inside the envelope that cauls all time and space in one conundrum,

The Red King keeps
His infinite,
Starry
Love.

FROM
 THE BOOK OF
 THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

SELF-PORTRAIT AS DRYAD, NO. 8

Riven, scorched to the root,
 I offered my palm, sprout-pale,
 And caught one bloody drop.
 It splashed up like a crown
 Conjured for a Red King,
 Then pooled on my life-line
 And spilled, swelling, pouring
 Magic from my fingers,
 Making rose-wine rivers
 On the bleakness. Waters
 Lapped the corkscrew forest,
 Turned sea in which I swam,
 Even my eyes rubied
 With seeing under waves:
 The gardens in their pales,
 The phoenix-headed ships,
 The trees of singing leaves,
 And folk that burned with light
 In the streets under waves—
 City of the Red King!
 In spring those memories
 Slide in my veins like sap.

The ocean died in whorls.
 A nub, a leaf was born.
 A flock of greenness sprang
 To ruined limbs and twigs,
 And palisades of red
 Like spiny bramble shoots
 Spired up around my tree.

THE FOREST FOOL

The forest Fool, all geared in green,
 A slough of blackened leaves his bed,
 His rags as tattered as the leaves.

By light of the wentletrap moon,
 The runic letters on a stone
 Gave birth to dreams of golden paths

That led the Fool to the Red King.

FROM
 THE BOOK OF
 THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

THE TAROT WITCH

On the Fool's long walk to the King's city,
 He met a gypsy in a rowan grove
 Who told him how he rooted in the woods
 Like a leaf-strewn burrowing animal,
 How he was lone, a zero in the world,
 And he should stay and be the gypsy kind.
 Mother Crone would lay out his fate in cards;
 He laughed and shook his tinsel cap in *no*,
 Even when her daughter took his fingers
 And curled them round the stem of a white rose.
 Dizzy blossom: he wandered in its maze
 Till flecks of pollen kissed his precious beak.
 He sneezed. And ditched the gypsy caravan
 Without another word, dreaming of pale
 And far intangibles where land meets tide,
 For seas were rumor to his ignorance:
 Unweeing wantwit, he could not compass
 Sand castles, spirals made of calcium
 That clasp and yield an undertone of waves,
 The sea-roiled bones of world, flensed and floured,
 Or strands of foam on glitterings of quartz.

"The Earth is nothing if not labyrinth,"
 He said, "and I'm the lost and drunken bug
 Who would discover at its heart the gold
 Of alchemy to dust my leaden mind."

THE BLACK FOOL

*(Black letters, through and through, were wound:
 The names of sins, the years, the crime:
 The thorns that pinned the words to flesh.*

*Even the whites of eyes went black
 With lettering. Even the nails.
 Even soles of the Fool's bare feet.)*

He stood convicted in his sight.

FROM
THE BOOK OF
THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

THE KING IN THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

The little cottages
And churches huddle close
Around the castle-flanks.

The citizens shouted
Only an hour ago:
Barbarians have come!

Blue-streaked and horned, they splash
Against the city gates:
The stars bow down to see.

The folk hunker in jars,
Go spindle-thin to hide
Sideways in the shadows.

Alone, the Red King goes,
Unknowing what will be,
Unknowing what to say.

He holds a flowering wand
All leafed in peaceful green.

HORTUS CONCLUSUS

Dashing along the pebble paths,
Sending up sprays of white: the Fool
Is chasing the Red King's shadow.
They are little children in a maze.

The Red King: he is old, he is old,
And his beard trails on the ground.
The bent Fool wheels the riotous beard,
Else beard and king in a barrow.

Just yesterday the Red King died
And was sealed in the grotto walls,
But now he walks the garden dusk,
Wondering why the Fool has gone.

A white peacock floats like a ghost
Before him, shivering its tail.

FROM
THE BOOK OF
THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

SONG OF THE FISHER-FOLK, NO. 2

The Fooloon Song

The minnows in the sea
And brittlestars that bite
All laugh with the Fool's glee:
The minnows in the sea
Are nodding; all agree
The loony way is right
For minnows in the sea
And brittlestars that bite.

The rabbit in the moon
And shiners in the sea
All shrill a foolish tune
The rabbit in the moon
Was tendered by a Loon.
All pompous peacocks flee
The rabbit in the moon
And shiners in the sea!

THE WHITE FOOL

The wind came rustling in the leaves.
The rustles sounded like a fire.
The Fool was burning in the sound.

Out of his mouth there came a cry,
Out of his hair the white ash fell,
Out of his eyes came snow-white tears

When Fool walked in the rustling fire.

THE RED KING AND THE STARS

The Red King goes with magnifying glass
And kneels so long he whitens in the snow:
The winter wind is tossing the big firs
So that they seem to be clapping, and each
Clap sends an avalanche and rills of snow
To air that gyres and juggles crystal flakes.
With equal justice, sky awards its stars
To children making castles in the snow
And merrows shrilling on the crests of sea
And even to the panicked Fool who flies
Into the cold bareheaded, birthday hat
Forgotten in his haste, to seek the King
In every hillock, drift, and weighted tree.

FROM
 THE BOOK OF
 THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

But he is gone, and when the Fool despairs
 And listens to the wolfishness of wind
 That cares for nothing, neither him nor kings
 Nor sparking or not-sparking snow from trees,
 He knows the King is gone to nothingness.
 Tears make waverings that jail his face
 In bars of ice, and yet he laughs and laughs
 When the Red King shoulders from a snow bank,
 Hand-glass in hand, spilling streamers of snow
 And blundering forward like a moving hill.
 The Fool is trembling with the cold and something
 More and yet he laughs again to see
 The crystals dilating and melting, gone.

THE CHRISTMAS BONFIRE

Bewitched, the Fool is watching acanthus
 And oak—the bristling leaves of Christmas flame—
 When the Royal Alchemist empties salts
 From bags and bottles, raising up chartreuse
 And emerald and yellow, orange-red,
 Like a sorcerer who summons demons.
 Dangerous salts of lithium awake—
 The crimson leaves erupt from walnut grain,
 Exploding upward, battering the air,
 And change to silver. Sound's sea-constant, wind
 Fluttering and folding, origami
 Of one substance rumpled, crumpled, bent.

And afterward the Fool stares in a cave
 Of magic rippling like a cuttlefish,
 A secret place where Lord and Lady shine,
 Coalescing in their blazing castle,
 A tiny Red King and his glowing Queen,
 Two salamanders glorying in flame.

RIDDLES OF THE KING

Made by the Fool

The Mirror King
Just the same: contrariwise.

The Birthday Cap
The Red King makes the Fool a crown.

The Rhododendron Throne
A seat carved from a blood-red tree.

FROM
THE BOOK OF
THE RED KING
Marly Youmans

The Wentletrap Stair
White-gold, to where the red dwarfs burn.

The White Queen
A winding petal-fall: the world.

The Hanged Man
The Fool who grips a greening seed.

The Red King's Burning Stair
Darkloam: moonfire, sunfire, rosefire.

A Wentletrap
A whisper held to the Fool's ear.

His Crown
A red gold washed in laughing tears.

The Red King's Dream
Matreshka of the spinning worlds.

The Tower Called the Spear
Where even stones are murmuring.

The Cinnabar Throne
A chair of crystal: "dragon's blood."

The Secret of the Red Kingdom
A silence wrapped around a name.

Who is the Red King?
Who puts a name to mystery?

The eighth book by Marly Youmans is *The Throne of Psyche*, a collection of poetry just out from Mercer University Press. She is the author of books of poetry, novels, and several Southern fantasies; her awards include The Michael Shaara Award for *The Wolf Pit* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and The Ferrol Sams Award for *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage*, forthcoming in 2012. Also headed for publication are four other books, two of them poetry—*The Foliate Head*, forthcoming from P. S. Publishing, and *Thaliad* from Phoenicia Publishing (Montreal.) She lives by the mouth of the Susquehanna with her husband and three children.