

The Naked Knight

By Richard Paul

In the cold and lightless witching hour
Of a night whose hues promise evil,
The Knight is stirred from his bone-wrought bower
To quest for a fight, and someone to kill.

And a fate-cursed fool too far from their door
Shall find the Knight in his raiment of skins
Which from a score of victims he's torn
And formed into the armour about him.

Standing thus naked in the grim night air
With only his one red eye to be seen
Which down on his trembling opponent stares
Whilst his sword hand twitches, restless and keen.

'Duel!' commands a voice by no means human
Through the bloated fingers of his visor;
Does the opponent stand and fight, or run?
There's no chance they'll not die, and most will suffer.

Of those who would stand, few enough have more
To fight with than the closest rock or branch,
Yet not even with armour and a sword
Would a wayfarer have the slightest chance.

With the dawn shall a bereaved family
Find left at their door a sack of gold,
Along with a lifeless, sword-slain body,
Slain honourably, and worth the weregild.

Yet those who think, and not unreasonably,
To turn and run from the meat-clad monster
Shall thus be judged a coward, and cruelly
For such cowardice shall their flesh suffer.

As none can overcome the Naked Knight
So too are there none who can outrun him;
If his foe satisfies not through a fight
They shall give satisfaction with their skin.

For two days hence might a wanderer
Taking in the air of the distant hills
Hear from 'neath the Earth what the Knight's guest earned
As strip by gamey red strip they are killed.

The skin is dried and twisted to armour,
Replacing that which has grown putrescent.
When a breastplate rots, he must find another,
The need for meat and lust for blood are constant.

So if you fain avoid so foul a fate,
Venture not beyond you door in darkness,
But huddle by your fireside and wait
For that sensible realm by sunlight blessed.

And yet, as if by fate's malicious hand,
Some circumstance oft seems to cast someone
Out of their house, alone about the land,

For the knight's slice, or slices, to be won.