

xiv. *The Legend of the Wounded Snake.*

Beside a lone and windswept lake  
to the sound of lapping water  
warriors, bewitched and ill at ease,  
are searching for the wounded snake.

The women laugh and tease,  
whispering that blood and slaughter  
are in truth his hiding place.

Whoever meets him face to face  
(or so the ancient story goes)  
will vanquish their foes  
and thereby hangs a tale of grief,  
because the tribes of ancient days  
fought with a warlike proud belief  
in the legend's holy power  
until that shameful hour.

They saw the armoured horseman raise,  
to roars of victory,  
the captured crown - '*Our task is done*' -  
and holding high the royal wounded one  
they carried him across the sea.

A pitiless dawn had come  
and the dip of an oar like a broken drum  
moved toward the shadow in the mist  
where, with slow and stately list  
and tattered remnants of pride,  
defeated warriors set sail.  
Those remaining on the shore  
saw the gap grow wide  
and felt the tearing of a veil  
woven from the sacred store  
of ancient memories.

A voice from the shadows and the mud  
called out in sorrow:

*We who struggle scrape and borrow  
dedicate our tears and blood,  
calling on the wounded king to save  
us from a cruel grave.*

Others came and saw the sign unfold

of a severed bloody hand  
with warlike deeds of old  
and royal command:

*Though we were few,  
with foes on every side, we knew  
the holy champion would bless  
our covenant and banish wickedness.*

In the Valley of the Kings  
where ancient wounds come face to face,  
the call of rival gatherings  
found a likely halting place  
and the rising sun revealed  
two swordsmen, Cain and his twin brother,  
each with a mirror for a shield  
holding the image of the other.

With the flash and clang  
of the sword many a restive glance  
hovered like a thirsty fang  
waiting to sink.

The swordsmen clashed repeatedly  
in unrelenting dance  
till blades in fearful symmetry  
opened up two glamorous ink  
rivulets of red.

The brothers bled  
their souls into the ground.  
No corpse was found  
but through that night the tribes remained awake  
remembering the wounded snake  
and the sombre call:

*Cain, the Protected One, is dead.  
On whom does sevenfold vengeance fall?*