

Not Exactly Macbeth

by Andrew Mackmurdo

Imagine yourself as a soldier,
serving the king of your land:
Imagine you're keen on promotion,
more power, more influence and,
If only the fates would decree it,
a chance to take over command.

What if you beat some invaders,
from somewhere like...Norway, let's say,
And, travelling home from the battle,
you meet three weird hags on the way?
What if they tell you you'll make it -
your dreams'll all happen some day?

They greet you as "Great Lord of Cawdor",
but you know that that isn't you.
They tell you, "You'll be King of Scotland -
but so will your buddy's kids, too."
You're spooked by these spooks in the heather
but as for their prophecies? Pooh!

Just say King Duncan is pleased
by the number of Norsemen you've killed;
In fact, though he's quite a cool ruler,
he can't hide the fact that he's thrilled
By the brave, loyal service you've done him -
not to mention the blood that you've spilled.

Suppose that he gives you a present
to show just how grateful he is
For the risks to your own life and limbs
that you've taken in doing the biz.
He kills off the traitor called Cawdor
and gives you what used to be his.

As soon as you hear your new title,
you shiver and turn ghostly white.
Your comrade-in-arms, trusty Banquo,
is quick to take note of your fright:
The first of the old witches' forecasts
has quickly turned out to be right.

It seems the old biddies weren't joking.
They've certainly thrown you a bone:
You're Lord of a big chunk of Scotland,
you may yet inherit the throne.
You listen to Banquo and chuckle:
"And you? You'll have kings of your own."

Dunc says he'll do you the honour
of staying at your place next day.
You rush off a note to the Missus
to tell her the king's on his way.
Rashly, you mention, in passing,
the crones and what they had to say.

As soon as she hears of the visit,
your wife starts to plan and devise
A method of gaining advancement
to Queen through the old king's demise.
She's really impatient to see you,
to make sure you reach for the prize.

You're, deep down, quite reasonable, really.
You know that old Duncan's been kind
But once your wife starts to persuade you,
your better side slowly goes blind.
Not that you take murder lightly,
the thought of it tortures your mind.

The wife really lays it on thickly.
She taunts you the way women can:
Wagging her tiniest finger
and doubting if you're a real man.
By the time good King Duncan is sleeping,
you're ready to go with her plan.

Is it you that goes up to his bedroom and
slaughters the king and his men?
Is it you that forgets to leave traces of
blood so it looks like it's them
Who stabbed their unconscious master
who'll never see Scotland again?

Your wife smears the blood on the faces
of Duncan's dead guards, just in time,
Before others discover the bodies
and swords at the scene of the crime.
That blood will remain on her fingers,
she'll never be rid of the grime.

And you? Your better side suffers,
it keeps you awake every night.
It's you that takes over in Scotland:
the King's sons have run off in fright.
You're able to make out that they
killed their dad, bottled out and took flight.

"It's all going pear-shaped," say people
who reckon you're not a good king,
(Some say you were better than others:
it's a histo-political thing).
Whatever the truth, in the story
your temper's as tight as a string.

Sometimes you get pangs of conscience,
sometimes you're focused and clear.
One thing becomes quite apparent:
friend Banquo must soon disappear,
He knows far too much of the meeting
that bred Scotland's climate of fear.

It's easy to order his murder,
as easy as writing a cheque
And persuading a couple of victims
of some washed-up, financial wreck
That Banquo created the forces
which toppled their dreams to the deck.

The malcontents slaughter brave Banquo,
but botch up part two of the scheme:
Banquo's son, Fleance, escapes them,
dashing all hopes that your dream
Will survive, not by dint of dark spirits,
but under your own wicked steam.

You've given your life to such forces
that rob you of all right to choose,
You saw what the witches foretold
as a challenge you couldn't refuse.
Perhaps if you'd just let things happen,
you'd have found you had nothing to lose.

Now, in your torment you panic.
Your brain starts to tickle your hair.
You see ghostly Banquo before you:
your friends see just emptiness there.
Your wife sees how far your ambition
has turned to exhausted despair.

She tries very hard to support you,
to get you to catch up on sleep
But you know you cannot rest easy,
the blood round your bed's far too deep.
You're up to your pillows in bones
but what's one or two more on the heap?

You need help to bury your secrets,
to make yourself safe on the throne.
You call once again on the powers
which seem to have left you alone
To do all their dirty work for them
and work out your fate on your own.

In one sense, they quite reassure you:
they prophesy comforting stuff,
Things that can't fail to protect you,
things that are more than enough
To keep you in power for ever -
but they warn you: "Watch out for Macduff!"

They predict you'll be safe in your castle
until Burnham Woods up and go
Nor can you be killed by a person who -
get this - isn't able to show
That he wasn't born of a woman!
That rules out everyone. No?

On your way home, you meet Lennox,
a loyal and trustworthy Scot,
And, strangely enough, he has news
that Macduff's fled to England to plot
With Malcolm, the son of old Duncan,
to take back the throne, crown - the lot.

Now, just as a sign that your power
has made you invulnerable to
The laws of all decent behaviour,
in an act of cold cruelty you
Order Macduff's wife and children
to lengthen the long, ghostly queue

Of victims and heroes you've slaughtered.
You see them as part of the price
To be paid for your power and glory
to forces who've now told you twice
You'll be safe in your castle for ever.
No-one said that you had to be nice!

The fact is, the witches have blundered.
The chief witch has given them stick
For choosing a king who is stupid,
not to say plain, downright thick.
"This guy just doesn't get it:
he seems to be taking the mick."

Hecate, boss of the spirits,
thinks you're dead wrong for the part.
"You three should have picked someone
who goes with the flow for a start,
Not someone who tries to trick fortune
by acting against his own heart."

But your heart seems just wicked to people
who've suffered your madness of late,
A madness Macduff turns to anger
when he learns of his family's fate.
He marches with Malcolm to Scotland
and camps down the road from your gate.

Meanwhile, the woman who gave you
the steel to set out on this course
Which has led, beyond guilt, to insanity
has suffered the pain of remorse.
She can bear no more heat in her kitchen
and takes her own life - with some force.

The news that the forest is moving
just adds to the feeling you've got
That, perhaps, just perhaps, you're in danger -
in danger of losing the plot.
You feel like a bear, trapped and tied-up
with dogs at your ankles. Not.

Who in the world's gonna kill you?
Which soldier behind which dead tree?
After all, as the witches assured you,
no man born of woman can be
The one that will finally kill you.
You're laughing! You're safe! You're home free!

Now, tough Macduff stands before you.
Defiant, you boast to his face:
"Even *your* burning rage cannot give you
the power, the strength or the grace
To avenge your wife and your children."
But then tough Macduff plays his ace.

"You say you cannot be defeated
by one who came into the world
In the usual way that a mother
gives birth to a boy or a girl?
Well, get this, you creep, I was born
in a way that would make your hair *coil*."

(At this stage, it ought to be mentioned:
De Niro is best for Macduff,
It's hard to imagine that others
are really sufficiently tough.
Mel Gibson was quite good as Braveheart
but just not quite 'Brooklyn' enough.)

You fight and it's clear from the outset
that you've met your match in the ring
But, then again, maybe you blew it
by badly predicting one thing:
Macduff's brought a sword to the duel,
not gloves, you great ding-a-ling!

Imagine yourself as a soldier,
putting your own king to death
In order to gain that promotion
for which you would give your last breath.
Imagine yourself as that killer:
imagine yourself as ... Macbeth.