

George Mackay Brown (1921-96)

3 *John Barleycorn*

I stirred in a cell deep underground
Blind, no taste or smell, no touch, no sound.

One day I slid the bar from the door.
I poked a pale nose into the air.

What was to be seen? 5
My hair and hands in the sun were green.

I saluted a canty old creature -
Mister Scarecrow, a stick and a tatter.

I was very poor, but then
I could dance to the pipe of the wind, the thrummings of rain. 10

The lark with its fluttering sky-weary breast
Was often my guest.

One morning I brightly awoke -
I was wearing a prince's yellow cloak!

I thought my dancing days would never be done 15
Under the sun.

A mud-coloured knave with a crooked knife
Stood before me, he threatened my life.

He severed me from my root.
He bound me hand and foot. 20

He beat the flesh from my bones.
In a double circle he tapped me, thundering stones.

O bitter hurt,

The graining and ooze of the heart!

'Can you sink, John, can you float?'

25

He scattered my dust in a seething vat.

The torturer

Finished his work with the red sign of fire.

In furrows born,

Forever I flush the winters of men with wassails of corn.

30

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