

modern poets on viking poetry



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an anthology of responses to skaldic poetry

edited by
Debbie Potts

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Introduction

In Old Norse mythology, poetry is a slippery substance. Poetry is translated through various states, enacting a liquid metamorphosis from spit, to blood, to mead, then vomit and excrement. Poetry is extracted and brewed, consumed and regurgitated. It emerges from the skaldic bard's mouth to be re-consumed by the gaping ear-mouths of his audience. When this mythological moment is re-imagined in skaldic verse, poetry becomes a fierce mead-sea, a storm in a wine-cup, compulsively stirred up by the poet's tongue, cascading over the bank of his lips:

*the wave of the primal sea of the song-stirrer
rushes over the rocks of sung-spells*
~ Einarr skálaglamm (from *Vellekla*)

This anthology stems from Modern Poets on Viking Poetry (MPVP), a cultural translation project run by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, from February 2013 to April 2013. The poems collected here comprise of contemporary poets' responses to skaldic verse, drawing the ebb and flow of poetry's fluid transformations into an intoxicating blend of Viking tradition and modern poetic sensibility.

Skaldic poetry encompasses verse composed in Old Norse (medieval Scandinavian) between the early-ninth and late-fourteenth century. The 'classic' skaldic style is generally characterised by its elaborate metrical structures, complex syntactical arrangements and the liberal application of riddle-like circumlocutions known as kennings (for readers wishing to furnish themselves with a deeper understanding of skaldic verse, *A Short Introduction to Skaldic Poetry* can be accessed on the MPVP website). This much neglected genre has a great deal to offer in terms of the intricate acoustic spaces harnessed in its metrical forms and the richly surreal imagery propagated in kennings.

Part of MPVP's objective was to imbue modern poets writing in English with an understanding and appreciation of a culturally specific literary medium – to extend the aesthetics of skaldic verse into the contemporary poetic consciousness. It also sought to cultivate a dialogue between academic research and poetic practice, where participating poets were encouraged to creatively engage with commentaries and basic translations of skaldic texts provided by Old Norse scholars. And lastly, the project aimed to nurture a

wider public interest in Viking poetry and the cultural context surrounding its production. It is hoped that the poetry showcased in this anthology will contribute a great deal towards this latter intention.

Participating poets were offered complete creative freedom in their approach to the skaldic material, and this is born out in the wonderfully diverse set of poems to emerge from MPVP. One unifying factor is the obvious enthusiasm of these poets when it comes to engaging with the poetics of an unfamiliar cultural mindset. Their poems are regurgitations of Óðinn's mead in the very best sense, mixing the themes and aesthetics of skaldic verse into a brew which will no doubt prove more than palatable to the discerning tastes of a modern audience.

after The Waking of Angantyr

how the earth increases

she is awake and
how the whole
awake at the same
that case a moment

thinking about
world is never all
time and how in
can never truly be

global and how
interesting for more
people at a time.
to be an assemblage.

things are rarely
than two or three
Really, our inability
She imagined a gong

with the power
everybody, a gong
everything. She hates
the sleeping fall open

to wake the world,
of unimaginable
how the mouths of
like the mouths

of the dead. She
with keys to the
next to her on the
from the streetlight

thinks of her friend
garden in Soho
grass, the bright orange
across his face. She

thinks of the heart
visualises a silver cage
anger that the signs of
always Someone &

as a mind enclosure,
around it. She feels
small businesses are
Son. She thinks of

aubergines as the
vegetable kingdom.
as horses of the sea.
video in biology of

horses of the
She thinks of ships
Seahorses. That awful
the male giving birth.

The word spasm.
of the sun will be
in the sky, as always
Her teacher once

Tomorrow, the tent
pitched somewhere
ready to be rained on.
suggested that the

girls should pay
the boys conduct
don't fuss. You think
human being until

attention to how
themselves. How they
of yourself as just a
something happens.

Rebecca Perry

THE WAKING OF ANGANTÝR

EXT. THE MOUND - NIGHT

HERVÖR approaches the mound slowly. She wears **DARK ARMOUR** and her thick hair is bound in **TERRIBLE BRAIDS**. We hear a low **GROAN** that might be from the wind. **BLUE SMOKE** licks the ground. The **GRAVE FIRES** are awake.

Hervör

(in a ringing voice)

Angantýr awake! Hervör your only daughter commands you! Come! Give up from your grave that sword, forged for Svafrlami by the dwarves. Hervarðr, Hjörvarðr, Hrani, Angantýr! Hear me, all of you, writhing in the roots, with thin blades and iron mail, with helmets and the stuff of war, with this blood-scarred spear. You sons of Arngrímr were once terrible men, but now your bodies are mouldy in the earth. Will not one of the sons of Eyfura speak with me here at Munarvágr? Hervarðr, Hjörvaðr, Hrani, Angantýr! May ants eat out the cages of your ribs if you don't give me the sword that Dvalinn wrought! Precious weapons don't belong with draugs.

The mound RUMBLES and SHAKES. GREAT FLAMES are everywhere. Then a VOICE:

Angantýr

Hervör, daughter, why do you disturb us? Bursting with curses, why hurl all these mad words? Hysterical, unhinged, is your reason hiding somewhere? Why make this headache for the sleeping dead? I was not buried by a father, nor by family. They kept Tyrfingr, the two who lived, though later it belonged to one alone.

Hervör

Don't spin riddles from your lips! May god spit you whole from the ground right now if Tyrfingr doesn't hide with you. Would you deny your daughter this fiercest of gifts?

The mound OPENS. The FIRES burn all around. TERRIBLE SOUNDS are heard. Hervör flinches but stands her ground.

Angantýr

Hel grinds open! The mounds have loosened their jaws! See how the island is edged with fire and terror has begun to stalk. Go while you still have time, girl. Quick, hurry back to your ships.

Hervör

(draws herself tall, brandishes her SPEAR)

No fire in the night will ever frighten me. My breast stands firm as metal even when ghosts appear in grave mouths.

Angantýr

(wheedling)

I tell you, Hervör, sweet daughter of a prince, listen to all the horrors before you. Tyrfingr will make a banquet of your family. Heiðrekr, the son you bear, will hold that sword and know its force. And he will become the most powerful man to ever stand in the hall of the sun.

Hervör throws her spear down before her.

Hervör

(roaring, impatient)

I swear to you, you ruins of men, that you will find no rest, that you will blister in the pit, unless you give me the terrible sword! I want the slayer of Hjálmar! I want that brilliant edge! I want that famous butcherer of shields!

Angantýr

How unnatural you are, you little girl, walking amongst the mounds at night. Arriving at the hall with your bitten spear, this helmet and your cruel chains, made up in the metal of the Goths.

Hervör

Before tonight I thought myself quite human, before I resolved to seek your hall. Give me from the mound that hater of mailshirts, all that magic forgecraft of dwarves! It will not help you to hide it.

The wind rushes. The fires FLARE.

Angantýr

(above the noise)

Hjálmar's assassin lies deep beneath my shoulders. Its borders all are etched by fire. I know of no girl anywhere on earth who would dare to take this sword in her hands.

Hervör is furious. She makes to RUSH through the fire.

Hervör

I will take that sword and own it with my nerve. I do not fear the burning fires! See, I command this blaze with my gaze!

A great roar from Angantýr. Hervör pauses and looks up. The FLAMES SUBSIDE somewhat to smoke.

Angantýr

(quieter)

You are foolish Hervör, but you show great courage. I would rather give you the sword from the mound, than see you rush into the fire with your eyes open. I will no longer refuse you.

Then the SWORD is in Hervör's hands. She draws a breath. Grasps it to her breast. She looks back to the MOUND.

Hervör

(triumphant)

You do the right thing, beautiful warrior, to give up this sword from the ground. Much better, my lord, to hold this now, than to cradle all of Norway.

Angantýr

You do not know what you've been given, you wretched woman. Remember my words, you little girl, Tyrfingr will destroy all your family.

Hervör

(relaxed, half to herself, half to the sword)

I will return to the sea-horses now. This prince's girl is in good spirits. I don't care, you son of kings, how my children will fritter their blood.

Angantýr

This power lies with you now. But keep the killer covered. Don't touch the edges, dark poison twists through them, far worse than any fever or disease. Farewell to you my daughter. If only I could gift you the life of twelve men. You would carry all the strength and goodness that passed through the sons of Arngrímr.

Now beginning to back away.

Hervör

A safe sleep to all of you, long buried in the mound. How I long to make my escape from here. Here where the edges of the world caught against me, where I felt the anger of a complex fire.

EXIT HERVÖR

Sarah Hesketh

Hear My Heart

I wish I was away
from here. Two worlds should not
collide. Fires burned bright
before my eyes while I
asked Angantyr for my
prize. "Away!" Said he, "You
cannot see that which killed
Hjalmar." "I could not move"

Said I boldly, "because
I know you lie. Barrow
dweller don't tell me false,
Dvalin's work lies with you.
Tyrfing in truth is mine
to take, and so, having
the blade is better to
me than being Norway's queen."

What have I done? Why did
I take this weapon of
Fate? Resting now, rotfiend
repeated the danger
it holds for Hervor.
How? It lies in my hand,
silent in sheath, this flame
of spear-play deceives me.

What icy hand has grasped
my heart? This feeling new
was not with me before,
when fires leapt and dead men
spoke. Now I am alone,
again I hear those words.
The sky so dark, they dance,
those words, deep in my mind.

Doom foretold for Hervor
and kin, fear struck me not.
Yet I wonder whether
wormfood's vision contains
some truth? A child conceived...
could this be so? Flesh of
my flesh, blood of my blood,
bravest of all princes.

It comes to my mind how
much this life would change if
children came to me. A
closing door, this mail and
sword I'd put to sleep to
see my little ones grow.
They would not lack for love,
my heart would live for them.

“Fear of what my sons face
in future I have not.”
I told this tale just now
before the flaming tomb.
But now I see these babes
before me, my eyes are
threatened by tears, and lumps,
choking, form in my throat.

What tale has Tyrfin in
store for them? What ill fate?
Heidrek he said is one,
Hervor's inheritor.
Are there any others?
Prophet Angantyr kept
silent. Said nothing more.
What sorrows lie in wait?

I sought and sued for this
sword, and told the demon
I would walk through his flames
to win Tyrfing. No heed
paid I to prophecy,
pain floods my thoughts, this image,
a future family
fated to destruction.

This trickster demon is
my father, tried only
to help Hervor and kin
avoid harm. My ears closed.
Danger I carry, death
in sheath. Deep the curse lies.
My children need not fear,
nor I, of Tyrfing's wrath.

I turn, and see the tombs.
Why these tears? He is mere
dust and these children dreams.
Dare I listen to them?
I came to take Tyrfing,
and carve my name in time.
Why should I weep for dreams,
and worry about Fate?

Bright blue piercing the night.
Before the tomb his eyes.
Encased in scabbard she
thirsts for blood. I see my
family's fate in hand.
What of my own future?
What would become of me,
were I to take it back?

Might I find happiness?
Maybe, or not at all.
A caged up, confined wife?
I could not live that life.
Fierce flames burn in my heart,
fires hard to quell. Spirit.
I'm taking Tyrfing still,
tempt Fate to have her will.

Adam Kirton

after Kormáker's lausavísur: on sex and slander

Kormak and Steingerd – a conversation

Luna eye-lash, hawk sharp,
shone at me from under
its bright sky brow, linen-
decked Hrist, waving her herbs.
But that glint in the gold
ringed valkyrie's eye-moon
will soon bring us sorrow,
me and this ringed goddess.

*Born to this, braiding gold,
yeast, herbs. Bedecked, adorned
in linen and limestone.*

*My sea-flame necklaces
wet from their fire-eyed hearts
wait here, still as hoar-frost.
I'm your harbour and hearth
when the horse chaser sleeps.*

Surf screams, Haki's blue cliffs
dip. The roar of the snake-
ring rolls across the sea.
Unlike you, I don't rest,
engrossed by Hildir's gold
waves. If I slept, I'd wake
and grieve for the goddess
of the gemstone necklace.

*Dusky dark-moon sky eyes
his tufted-duck arse hair,
he tripped on his long tongue
blustered away some place
a frail twig in the wind.
Left wanting, a full moon
brimming with salty mist.
My price – eternal dawn.*

The scum that seek me out
won't silence my skald tongue.
I've got the daughter's gift.
I'll give them Gauti's feast
then the tested trees will
hear reports from god's rain.
I'll spread the smelter's fame,
Unless they slay me first.

*Sloppily spewing mead,
Odin's trees give battle
as if it were sea spray.
But I could not care less.
I braid gold, brew yeast, wave
herbs. The only eye-moons
that see me now are those
of my thirsty rock doves.*

Anna Robinson

Kormákr in Love

Under her brow's brilliant firmament,
an eyelash moon, hawk-bright
on this mead princess-in-linen –
a light that locks on me.

But one glimpse of lidded moon
from the gold-throated goddess
will soon bring sorrow to me
and to this ring sorceress.

*

Surf roars, the steep cliffs
of the sea-king crash into blue
and all the din of the island chain
drifts out to the shoreless depths.

I'd not be snoring like you, if I lay
with your lady of the stone-necklace,
her skin golden as the water's shimmer.
If I wake from this daydream, I will lose her.

*

The bastards won't silence me.
Because I took the muse's bounty,
there's a price on my head,
but I'll repay the god of poetry –

see my fame spread as I rain down
barbs on those witless saplings,
but only if her man, the spear-maker,
doesn't steal my life from me.

Emma Harding

Translation

Love's transfixed, and the spell:
it's in the time, place and
person. Susceptible
as you to candlelight
or cheap chicken under
neon lights and dawn, love's

particular. Therein
the isolation: love's
one thing, not another –
and is all things, and can't
be had outside itself,
and it spooks translation

off. It knows the wrong thing.
And they might not do, a
gentler man, a woman
free, alone beneath the
moon. Let them alone. Eat
your own meat. Light your lights.

Okey Nzelu

Kormáks Sonnet

The girl seared deep into the lights of mind,
my cheeks burned oh so bright and oh so red.
Her slender form called out to me to find
her from the threshold as she beckoned me to bed.
The wood smoke rose out from her house of fire,
it curled and rose a wispy slender form,
but from *her* came the smoke-filled odour of desire,
it was *her* heat that kept me oh so warm.
Her ankles were her pedestals so slim,
so beautifully proportioned was this girl.
I longed beyond all longing to go in,
and knew beyond all falling I could fall.
My yearning it will last a thousand years,
without her I will weep a thousand tears.

Tony Harris

after Gísli's lausavísur: on dreams

Six Dream Verses

In this copse,
the dead queue by name;
saints and devils
fight in our smiles.
They've put a god in our wounds,
think hawk tracks,

after the bird has flown.
Someone rid me of this afternoon nap,

monstrous hound women;
war-zones, unless my rapport changes,
unless my knotted hair unravels
into new clauses of speech.

Her accent is a banjaxed curse,
a phantom and warning
a prophecy into unopened scars.

*

As if to say *what a mess*

she was wayward,
this Valkyrie, choosing me,

hooding me into death,
scant messages
thrashing my hedge hair,

stained hands upon me
small tiny blood rivers,
a pique of disorder.

I wake near a vault
searching for grave names,
blood pacts, dirty as hell.

*

The arms of blood pass;
flooded arches, shock veins,
hot-wood, soak me in misery-

if misery will outlaw me further.

Hood me with voiceless arabesques,
breathy and mute, hacc, hic, ha;
since if I should speak,
I am by her laughter, outlawed,

steam breath, hunker down
storm spikes, let's not be human,
in hardship, lay resigned,
arm with hand clenched,
even dogs don't urinate here.

*

Naturally, I think of my brother;
fists and cobras,
clean girls with hair in plaits.

Death as carrion
for the falcons, by mischief
of their feeders.

To die by keen sword,
bleed from the widest part of me.
Orange food, pumpkin, squash,
everything good for the spleen,
to die, and never grey,
nor wonder at elegance.

The family will argue,
constant, tautological,
round and round, a cry in my mouth
rising up, like a canyon.

*

Skull cap, skull song,
axes wielding, call to my mother,
I will definitely, definitely suffer.
Men, born to be warriors
remove both my arms
by bevelled cut.
It's a hindrance living,
a cipher in a sword reflection,
I imagine my good woman above,
twine or clove flitting,
fingers pinching the split,
crystallising my cuts.

*

Born with a scar,
I am first words, a valley of crime.
Ruined by wanton prophecy,
by eclipse,
she drops her stitch.

I long for my feline coil;
my wife's velar plosive,
hard as in gravel, soft as in gesture,
ginger, giddy for me at midnight.
My existence remains a question
mighty oak, or fading lake,
her face written in flagstone, my mute footnote,
encumbered by here and now.

Dorothy Lehane

Dream of Blood

i

I thought the wealthgoddess washed me with godsfire sprung from the long sharp, lathered my hair red, that wristbandflame-wearer her hawkholder blood-red in the woundshower of handglow-spending men.

ii

I thought the watching warflame goddess hooded me with a gory headdress over my roughmown raking, hands bathed in swordrain. So the quilting queen woke me from dreaming.

iii

I thought the axe-ogress-shakers' long steel chopped my fingers, hands, both my arms to huge wounds, then sliced a gash, my twinmaiden, in my skulltop, my helmetstump.

iv

I thought, armringprincess, the carrioncatching gods shed my blood from both broad shoulders with their sharp swords, great mischief of falconfeeding. Mercy like theirs, my leekleafhealing lady, makes my life grow grey.

v

I thought the blood ran down both sides, such woundflooding was mine to endure. I dream, my goldenlady, I am their forces' outlaw, awaiting the spikestorm, now as I go to sleep.

I thought in my sleep stood a silverbanded goddess, giant's daughter, grieving
with wet lashes, glorious seafiregold girl suddenly – what do I make of
this – binding my wounds.

Peter Daniels

Garage Door Verses

Dreams Gísli might have had...

one.

I dreamt an empty drop___
drying, scraping, washing___
of blood from her blade (while
the bleeding of men feeds
buckets pouring brightly
on my hair) there: handed
henna-stained stripping rain
and, strong, she drowned it on.

I dream her dropping on___
drifting on hair, uncombed___
a hat, a bloody hood,
her hands all red and kind,
my eyes all bare and blind
from blood she strokes, a flood
as she wakens me – woken
from wasting dream alone.

Dream: blood running, dripping
its drowning wynd downwards
with pain pouring to drains
forever painted red.
I sleep slow clapping pain
never slaked, girl, taken
for outlaw, without Lord,
and battle due through me.

two.

I dreamt some troop draining
blood, driving and knifing
my gnarled shoulders; nearly
grey, my life, not delayed
as they uncolour eyes
and attack and bleach them.
So it goes... how it sows
serenity, pity.

I dream dread, arms lying
(dropped by sword) and soldiers__
image, magic, a head
cut by men's blades and paid
for by anger, by force
by framed scenes__ fame, girl,
is when a head is worth
a wound, open, gaping.

Dream: tears drizzle... my hours
of blood drowning, sudden
- ly over, you stood obv
- serving me unswerving
- ly blinding my dreams, bund
- led, banished clear, vanished
all my dreams__ now let's dry
a future draught for me.

Then he made this rhyme about their daughter:

Our blood-cup: her crap-bag
abounding in Thor-sound.
Her voice-box: it vixens,
vacuums and shtums wildly.
But life-bag, our bug-wail:
she bats eye-jewels fully,
delighted smiles later,
eye-lashes dashing love.

Note: *blood-cup* > *baby*
 crap-bag > *nappy*
 Thor-sound > *thunder* > *fart*
 voice-box > *larynx*
 eye-jewels > *palpebral*
 eye-lashes > *cilia*

Then he made this rhyme of good-riddance:

Leave now! You live silent
as lambs crammed in frying
panned-laughter, an unplanned
slaughter on the sleeper
train to England. Glad rains
will glide your tide rising,
unhappy, on – hyping
no heart, no art: pointless.

Then he remembered their times in bed and made this verse:

Dream-field drowsing__ let's build
a drop of unstopping
perfect time tented home
and turn the diurnal
love to night and leave our
knotted limbs, wrought iron
dreams on roads, in draped heads.
We soft dry perfect lie.

*After he had listened to the girl's story about the extinction of the Vikings on the 2
October 1269 he made this verse:*

Extinct – a death-field stank
of stale sword-mounds, cordless
skulls, coffin-scratched pillars
telescoped to hopeless...
shield-trees stooping shadeless.
Shiver of earth, river
flooding earth to float them
flying... women crying.

After thinking about poets, he made this:

Catcher of words, watch
as they wing the day's light
to hiding: the hidden
insect horde; the best word,
the wing rattle whining
west to the sun, the one
skeleton sound flying
skull caught in your word pot.

With a dull head he made this verse:

Bomber of skulls: bullet
set for eyes, bold as cries
in the light of lava
leaving minds and the grind
-ings of thoughts and of things
sent to burn, meant to blaze
the eye-holder to Hell
where heads ache like the dead.

Filled with bitterness, months later, he made this verse:

Forget favours never
offered? Can I, wet eyed,
angered, hungered, axe them
and ask them, task them cold
with ice? I can... face with
a wipe of snow-cold ripe
bitterness – a battle.
Then blame my memory.

David McKelvie

after Egill's Sonatorrek

Lingua Franca

Translate this word as *wagon man*;
wagon man must mean Thor.
Snorri means that Egill
has no praise
for this god any more.

The scribe understands
that the scribe before him understood
what Snorri says
Egill felt.

Egill found his son drowned
on the beach.
Egill found his son's joints
long seized up

like his own tongue
when he swung the coffin on his shoulders
and stumbled it from home.

Now Egill trusts in Odin
for a new song.
Egill trusts in Odin
for the words
to loosen up his son's limbs
so he walks by Egill's shoulder
through the never-ending future
of the verse.

And soon Egill – the boy who split
his schoolmate's skull,
the raider and the warrior –
unbolts his door
and allows himself to eat again.
He lives to be an old man.

A thousand years on,
neither of them are missed.

But the reader's stomach
still twists
when Egill discovers that his son,
the only son left to love,
can no longer be spoken with,
only spoken of.

Rachel Piercey

The Lost Boy

im Alexander Glenday died November 4th 1918

November,
and nothing said.
The old world
whittling down
to winter.
Ice on my tongue:
its wordless,
numbing welcome.

We bloody
believed in war
once; we cheered
when our children
sailed off for
the Front. But now
all language
fails me. Listen:

Army Form

B. 104.

November

1918.

...a report

has been received

from the Field,

France... was killed in

Action. There.

Alexander

has been killed –

my couthie boy.

Nineteen, looked
more like fourteen.

They told me

his howitzer

was shattered –
a shell ‘cooked off’
in the breech,
and the blast tore
them apart.
They were too keen
of course, boys
blown to pieces

with the Great
War, days from won.
Boom. And gone.
I’m a blacksmith.
I’ve seen what
white hot metal
makes of flesh.
My wee Alec.

I’m to blame.
I was the fool
who signed, and
him still far too
young. Fifteen!
His mother flung
her mug at
me, mute with rage.

Each morning
she makes his bed;
lays fresh clothes
across a chair.
She’ll not speak
his name again.
Her stare is
a hard, black sloe.

If fine rhymes
rang like iron,
hammered bright,
hot with meaning
they might weigh
more in my heart.
Brave songs don't
bring the dead home;

they damn them
to cross that dour
black stream where
yon pale boatman
waits and foul
foundries spit and
silence is
their only song.

When we go
to his grave, I'll
bring sorrel,
because I know
the dead are
always drouthy –
their dry mouths
clotted with dust.

I'll say, son,
I'm sorry, this plant
slakes only
the one small thirst;
let its brief
white blossom
linger upon
your grave, like snow.

John Glenday

The Bear of the Moon

The tongue is a set of scales weighing up language.

The poet is tongue-tied, blocked in the face of grief.

Words are difficult to draw out from this sorrow.

Yet some words come.

*

word stuck

tongue locked

taste blocked

laugh struck

mead mucked

ale suck

luck taste

life lock

the light touch

tongue luck

letter lust

word dust

the word run

the right now

the word is also

just

a word

*

No man is happy who carries the corpse of his family.

There is a natural order to things where a man buries his parents.

When a child dies before his parents, a hole is made in the world.

The sea has broken a hole in the wall of my family.

*

Other relationships pale and disappear in the face of this loss.
I wish it were not impossible to fight the reasons for death.
But I know it is impossible to fight death. If only
I could take revenge on the sea, I would be the greatest poet.

*

*to fill a hole in the head with oceans
to call a shape to the clouds in metal
to raise steel to the seas for carving
to turn days into wind for cradling
to steal mead from giants for telling
to give dogs to the tongue at twilight
to bring bears to the heart by moonlight
to draw bears to the head*

*

I must commemorate and share the memory of my son.
My son, who was lost from the world before he became a man, was a good son.
I am reminded of loss, of death, in the midst of life's most urgent moments.
"It often comes to me in the moon's bear's fair wind."

*

*the moon
the moon the bear
the moon the bear the fair wind
the moon the bear the fair breath
the moon the bear the fair wind
the moon the bear the fair breath
the moon
the moon
the moon*

*

I am wary of men who appear resolute and unyielding.
It is hard to find anyone to trust, anyone to talk to.
You cannot replace a son, though you can try to look to your family.
You can try to rebuild your family.

*

The cruel fire of sickness took another son from me.
I remember when God took yet another son from me.
I remember when I had confidence and trust in God.
I remember what it was like before my God's friendship wavered.

*

Now I am bad company for all men.
But I am not angry. My son has gone to join my ancestors.
Thoughts of my grief and my grief's expression weigh heavily on me.

*

I HAD THIS BEAR YOU KNOW
LIKE, A BEAR IN MY HEAD
THAT I CARRIED ROUND WITH ME
AND MORE BEARS EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT THE SOFT KIND
I MEAN WITH TEETH, SO LIKE
YEAH THEY WERE ALL “ ”
LIKE A BEAR WITH TEETH
DO YOU EVER STARE AT THE MOON LIKE IT'S A FACE?
DID YOU EVER SEE A BEAR MOON SMILE?
I LIKE, DON'T KNOW FOR SURE RIGHT, BUT
I THINK THE MOON MOVES THE WATER
IT, LIKE, RAISES OCEANS

THEN CRUSHES THEM WITH A SINGLE LOOK
EVERY NIGHT
I FEEL THE BEAR BREATHING
WARM AIR ON MY, LIKE, NECK OR SOMETHING
I'VE NEVER BEEN AFRAID OF BEARS
AND I'M NOT NOW

*

I acknowledge the gift of language which has been given to me.
I acknowledge the skill in language which has been gifted to me,
the language with which I can uncover truth.

*

Now, in facing these difficulties I see death.
I see death standing before me on the hill.
I shall gladly, unconcernedly and with goodwill
wait, smile for her.

Chrissy Williams

after Egill's lausavísur: on booze

Mansǫngr

'Gleeful serving wenches'?
Only one third of that
is fair, or true. Serving
I have no choice about.
Spare us your battle rap
and just get down to it;
bloodshed's what you really
came here for, after all.

The end's the same for me,
either way. Tomorrow
I'll be just another
notch on your horn, or worse,
subject of another
bloody maiden-song, make
my mother weep for me,
father threaten murder.

Let me mop the blood, ale,
spew, and go on, waiting
the next hero who gets
upset by bad manners.
Tell me, these troll-women.
Were they? Really? Or were
they just sisters of mine
who dared say what they thought?

Kate Wise

Xenia

...ἐλθὼν τῶνδ' ἀνδρῶν πειρήσομαι, οἳ τινές εἰσιν,
ἢ ῥ' οἳ γ' ὑβρισταί τε καὶ ἄγριοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι,
ἢ φιλόξενοι, καὶ σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδής.

I will go and make trial of yonder men, to learn who they are, whether they are cruel, and wild, and unjust, or whether they love strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts.

[Odyssey Book 9]

A trope as old as song itself, hubris avengers.
The blind-of-poem-father spilled out his wine-darkness
where fingers of the rose warmed Chian dolphins-wash:
a man of many wiles, sacker of cities, siren
-summoned, tested the cave-dweller, and found him wanting;
refused wine, stunned with honey-sweet-red, and drilled the light
of the jewel of the brow with hiss of sizzling olive
and humours. Across colder paths of seals, selkie
-drawn, wolves of the dark-as-the-violet sea cut watery
ways, calling on the Gatherer of clouds, Earth-shaker,
for their mead. Wrath will be poured out; barbs will be flung.
It will repeat itself, while there is breath in man.

Kate Wise

ókunna þér runna

there are dead in countries
who will never know how
little I despised them
I wanted the penblade
not the bootsplatter trenchlife
the night I ran there was
sky concealing thunder
a white feather of moon

*

the words give heavy page
the words bleed out of me
bullstrong I like to think
of guns the sound of rain
Hemingway's forearm thick
as tree root men are dead
who never wondered what
I thought or why or not

*

I am deadheavydrunk
sharpen penblade moonglint
now think of Hemmingway
swallowing a shotgun
now think of bulls enraged
now think of men who can't
be men without dying
of rain of Thanés of Hárr

Andrew McMillan

Pub

I.

The man who ruined this pub last week, tore up the floor,
you told him, didn't you, that you were out of beer?
And that bloke who always kills it on the fruit machine,
you lied and cruelly ran him out of here.

Those women who drank down death like shots
– yes, shooting Death! – you turned them away too,
and the guy who likes the girls with thunderous thighs.
He who doesn't get his round in is no friend of mine.

All these famous drinkers are coming back for you.
Easy to track you, Bard, through the snow;
they'll just follow the maze of false words to your tomb
and what your fate will be then, I don't know.

II.

Red rune run
through the root of the tree.
Red rune run
between the beasts' ears.

Drink men, drink
but not of poison ale.
Drink men, drink
with the giggling girls.

Red rune run
through the root of the tree.
Red rune run
between the beasts' ears.

Drink men, drink
down the lines I've carved.

Drink men, drink
we'll see how it goes down.

Red rune run
through the root of the tree.
Red rune run
between the beasts' ears.

Drink men, drink
and cough up bleeding vowels.
Drink men, drink
pledge your puke to verse.

II.

I'll spray to mark this spot,
I'll get drunk when you're gone!

My beard will be wet with laughs
– and my spear wet too, by dark!

An ox can take booze better than you,
I'll ram its horn through your gut to show!

Cower in my showers of victory,
your pale spirit running from Olvir and me!

Colette Sensier

My Poison?

Spare me your Californian cock.
A wine that whines and tries to twirl
before collapsing on my tongue –
is that the best that you can do?
To spit or swallow? Well, with you,
there's no dilemma: better just
to wipe it up and flush. A blush?
(Gamay? Grenache?) But now I must
serve you with something in return:
this saucy number, full and long,
with hints of farmyard, sweat and dung.
All Gallic charm – and you should learn!
Go on, give it a little swirl –
then pucker up and suck.

Annette Volging

Grin

Sit, *please* — this victual vat,
vast as marshlands of past
slung inside a tramp's song,
sings the heave I hold in.
But, this, as guest, as gist,
gold-seen, dear friend of old,
drips in honeyed drops,
dregs us these beards of mead.

Ryan Whatley

after Egill's lausavísur: on old age

verses on old age

a knacker's yard of neck
the boiled egg barnet
hairline crack
a third leg jellied eel
rests soft
cock robin dead
as sexless nights

no tits or groan
of horns thrust
up to cause
the slap slap slap—
the cut-short waves
on an intact craft...

i am blind!

fireless as a nook
my tips stretch out
toward the smouldering
wicker wench
for warmth and coos
to smooth
my clashing-vales
with rise not set—

to think
i once in golden rings
took giant bites of
Ymir's flesh
and spoke her up in
skull and sky—
corporeal
yet soon...

i die!

*olden as spinsters
in a tumulus of sheets
my feet
lend me no hand*

Emma Hammond

after Einarr skálaglamm's Vellekla



The Kept Sea

The moon does most of the work, pulling and tuning the ocean's strings, keeping her tended as a public garden. The rocks collect beach-wares; reel in what the sea spumes of speech that day, including human-reply. They line themselves daily with the salt, wood and plastic of tidal chat and by the pearl-dive of the moon, a foaming hem thickens to bursting. Quashed bottles, boat-splinters, bird-bones and feathers, fish-crippling waste and all the world's confessions nudge, moan and kick inside the tobacco-stained fur of the margins. Gulls take scaled-residents and marine-enemies away in carefully timed intervals; the eye of the stomach dictates wings and beaks, while clusters of wind toy with the sea-searcher's journey back to its young. High in their floating-homes, diamond-mouths sing hunger in unison; their lives depend on the listener feeding back what they have said. They are a storm in a tree's cup, sending their mother to steal from kept seas; ill or well, at their beginning the food's death is nothing to them. The sea contains the word they want and the mother is the messenger; their bridge between here and elsewhere.



Jane Monson

after Sigvatr's lausavísur: on mourning and melancholia

The Sorrow of Sigvatr

In the high Alps, staring
at a sea of snow, word comes
Óláfr is dead. Killed in battle. I
recall the good king, conflicts, victories.
My father, warrior and poet,
served King Óláfr before me.
I was raised in his court.
He too was as a father.

I see a man, lost a loving wife,
now in mourning madness.
He tears his clothes, beats his chest,
wishing to die and be reunited.
The flight shy hero
whose lord has died
will shed tears of blood and water.
When a King dies a kingdom falls.

Returning to Norwegian soil I see
ravens ricochet across the harbour.
They followed the Valkyries
to the storm fields, the feasts.
Then I was Óláfr's right hand,
happy to serve in court or war.
Godfather to Magnús, his son.
Critic when one was needed.

Ordered to serve conquering King Sveinn
(I served his father once in England)
I decline
return to my farmstead home.
Walking, I saw the King's men
practising war, as we did of old.
My chest heaved, face as birch bark
I turned from shouts and laughter.

I hear men say I deserted Óláfr
in his time of most wanting.
Loki of old must have started
this baseless rumour.
I went to Rome for Óláfr the holy.
There are many good men
will bear witness to that.
May Christ send me to hell if I lie.

When Óláfr lived, the high
sloping cliffs, the inland seas,
all Norway seemed to me
full of laughing joy.
Now the mountainsides
and the towering pines
appear to share in my sadness.
Now, I have lost the favour of the lord.

John Grant

6 lausavísur on the death of Saint Óláfr

The Alps; dawn assaults me –
armour broke asunder –
brings back those broad shields smashed,
beneath the fort-walls' first watch.
I long for the Lord of
our lands, his hallowed rule.
Father – Þórrøðr – flourished
under its first bloom.

Wife laid out – without her
he's willing to die. If all we
can do is curse what comes after,
caring's a hard bargain.
But from the bravehearts course
battle-tears – those averse
to fear feel a worse remorse
for their fallen leader.

Ravens tack to harbour, trace
carrion-trails, enticed back where
our fierce Lord of leaders scoured
the fjord in times before.
Only eagles' empty cries
echo off Hille – those,
now famished, once familiar
at feasts held by Óláfr.

Can't face the forces of
this false King exercising –
sobs start to swell in my
chest, I cinch raw as bast.
I'm stripped back to spring years –
the spry wargames my
esteemed Lord engaged in
on his retainers' estates.

White Christ! Cast me to Hell,
condemn me to burn if
I abandoned Óláfr –
but I'm absolved of that.
Pilgrim, clearly impelled
by my imperilled soul –
others will stand witness,
abundant as water.

Noted through his navy,
even Norway's mountains
seemed exultant to me
whilst Óláfr was with us.
Those same cliffs came to seem
completely hard-faced –
I'm in such a sad state,
since my King's service ceased.

Andrew Sardon

Looser Verses

Morning in mountains.
Alien as memory.

I remember when everything flew apart
like an eagle shattering a murmuration.

Everything was lost.
I stood like a rock

remembering the land the way it was
from the point of beginning.

*

What would you die for, reader? What
would make you weep, or proud to bleed?

A lover? A cause?
A sense of yourself

as the one who could hold it all together?
What does it cost to grieve?

*

Ravens, black arrows on sky, directing
the eye to the harbour. Outlaws of nature.
They remember scraps of fear they picked at
when lost ships floated on calmer water.

Every day at the city walls
eagles shriek in high greedy voices
demanding the people continue to feed them
with the recycled carrion of their lives.

*

I walk away, grief a wave
I can't hold back. I am white as bast,
my pale inner bark on show.

Say I am a tree.
Sorrow has stripped me,
peeling my skin off in long thin strips.

I am weeping from my chest.
I am raw with sorrow.
I have nothing left to play.

*

White-Christ, hotter than fire. Dip me
into your flame and I will not burn.

I am clean of everything. Witness to this
overflows like my tears, like salt from the ocean.

This is a metaphor that signals abundance.
I am clear of guilt. I am open to judgement.

I left in the searing danger of the soul.
I could never conceal that from you, from the world.

*

When you laugh, the dirt,
the rocks of the earth,
take your laugh and throw it about –
mountains shout it aloud, valleys
echo it, one to another, lucky
land! The highest furthest misted
peaks of the distant summits know it.
Every raindrop is a tear of joy.

You want to scratch it on them, write
happy happy happy on
the radiant slate of the earth.

When you grieve, waterfalls weep,
dragging the sky down with them, fells
hide their faces in cloud, and the cold
cliffs slope away, bleak, gloomy.
Nothing sprouts from the ground but sorrow.

Better that you never loved a place,
better that you kept your salted heart floating
on the restless ocean, than to drown it here
so far from the sea, the heights repeating
your slide, your fall from all grace.

Polly Atkin

after Sigvatr's vísur: on travels to the west

Journey to the West

Ship of speech, word-wave,
sails westward, and I, speaking,
hold hard to wind's unfolding
across air's parchment, writing.

Lords and lackeys murmur and mill
and I, outside, stoop and supplicate,
seek king's councillors, crave
access and audience, a prince who pays
for tongue's treasure, mind's unfolding,
richly wrapped in iron rings.

Earls of earth's serpent spend
safety, scorn stability, senses
stripped; proud proclaimers, power-drunk,
cast kings' cares to the wind's casket.
Let warriors wait hard on heath;
hope under heaven favours flight.

Broad battles rage bitter,
brave lords drain heart's mead,
unstinting drink the wine of ravens,
speak soft words, plough hard rows.

Mine is the gift of gold, speaking
strong lines; yours is steel,
a sharp sword, a worthy weapon.
A wise warrior weighs God's words.

Wind's servant, across the shifting hills
I return, richer in words and welcomes,
giving gifts undiminishing, gaining
grace of place, proud amongst peers.

I have fared far, fought clinging coils
of earth's duplicitous dragon, found
home, the giver of true gifts;
one word resolves all riddles.

Oz Hardwick

Spin

I speak the tide, my ebb and flow
gently rocking the ship of state
on waves of words, my soft susurrations
belying my steady, implacable pull.

Sails billow, steersmen strive,
their courses plotted by chart and star,
but my merest murmur casts chaos,
forces flight to unknown coves.

Waves rage, skies hang dark,
boil the colour of blood, until
my one word cuts the cloud,
stills the storm, bestows calm.

But never forget: mine is the voice
of the deep, and I always claim my price.

Oz Hardwick

Blade

I am sword, the gold of kings or men,
generous, with precious stanzas to give away.
I come of men whom fame should reconcile
with danger: precious matter for my pay.

The magnificent king demands iron thought,
entrusts his people a to greater strife. But
his son is furnished for his brave deeds:
royal, generous, and he may speak with Gods.

No, he gave a task but I explained
that I can serve only one lord. Behold,
old farmers fear such undertaking
but the defender stands with his back to you.

Look at this: your kinsmen wait on the fells
with rich rings. I place words frankly
among your supporters: *Mark the snake's earth.*
My oath comes later than I intended. Send them back.

Oz Hardwick

Earth's Snake

She nearly killed me when first I had her.
She wrapped herself around my neck and coiled
over my mouth, kissed me
with the soft slip of her scales
as she is often wont to do
to whichever poor soul finds himself
lost in the wealth of her.

A temptress.

I have seen her wend her way through many
a man's heart: his faith and his fidelity,
slinking away and leaving him rotten,
crumbling around weeping holes
creeping where his courage was.
Holes that he stuffs with promises and daydreams:
the hollow bounty left lying
behind in the dust.

This lady is wise
and older than the yellow gleam
of her eye that whispers of sunset
tripping on the Western tide.
She does not wear her age
in the silk of her skin.
There is no rust, no wrinkle,
it hides with corruption
which she carries like disease.
She was built for pleasure, her curves
hum with a life of ease.
Yet she was born of mountain blood, rolled
in the quick pant of fire, twisted
in the roots of a forest
and made bright
by the bite of our desire.

And she is not only poison,
though there is venom dripping
like honey from her tongue.
There is a splendour in her danger
that has had a million fools and I, no less,
stumbling after the guilty glimmer
of her echoes as she curls away
from our fate and into another's, beguiled
by fortune and the tricks of our stars.

She bites out blood and soul, both,
rips away our substance, fills
our empty skins with obsession.
She aches into our now mercenary
bones and dances
with the tough scarred leather
of hearts which no longer soften
for a tear or for a touch.
She teases them faster,
presses them with hunger
until they cannot
move even to live.

And in this sudden frenzy, lord,
the poetry must also fall.
For it rushes in our veins like myth,
knots over ropes of love and hate,
trailing greed which drags
the fat, sumptuous weight
of temptation ahead.
So our words like hounds,
and our allegiances,
their masters
are forced to call the hunt onwards,
singing out and chasing

that sleek mistress
whom once you gave me,
in your hall by the roaring fire.
That cold mistress who consumed me,
who stole my thoughts
and my dreams away from the night,
until all that lay in the darkness
of my mind, and lingered
bitter on my tongue
was the weight of gold,
and no life
left with which to love it.

Gabrielle Watts

after Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's Sexstefja

Til Konungs

The Prince will pour his riches
upon his loyal followers'
outstretched, obedient arms,
and my own unparalleled king
will likewise shower me,
as though a field of wheat,
with sun-spun drops of gold
that burst from his glorious sky.

My king will nobly cause
the spike-drawn crimson to seep
between the steel shrouds of
his scattering, tumbling foe.

The blood-beaked kites will strip
the bones of their fleshy-clothes
as my king's scythe slices through
the field of enemy sheaves.

John Canfield

battle owa turf

The lad from owa the waal throws
his bonny-pieced metal
doon t'show wor just how it is
now. Sprinkles pennies half-nicked
from arcades where the gulls yell.
Makes us watch, like. An' we can
close wor eyes and let wor minds
gan. Let w'think about life's lotteries.

'Cause he wants w'ter fall hard –
like stuffed scarecrows stumblin.
Bite t'ground and let the gulls snap.
Let them drag us oot ter grimy seas.

And if the gulls were his they'd aal be
blood-grouse. Each of 'em.
An' he'd be dancin
on me head, like. Dancin red. Like he was yem.

Jen Campbell

Coda

The king is portioning out his cache to the kinsmen.
Ingots, urns, votives, bowls,
bracelets, coins, scraps of bronze.
Chisels. Battleaxes.

Lightlessness. Each man's hands clutch
at spears and amulets. My own fill
with hacksilver, its small grey fragments
like slithers of a fallen moon

or a dropped crab-apple, split in my palm.
The field around us is quiet except
for the sound of clinking metal
and the slow padding of loaded feet

through acres of corn and wheat
as we enter the territories of the hawk.
My legs, bowed under the heft of the stash.
My head, thickset with star-drift and cloud-ash.

My arms, warm-soiled with flesh
and my eyes, upwards, cast like nets,
as I cross through the field of limbs.
Everywhere, mail-coats lie in tatters

their linked bronze loops left out
to molder under the gathering weather.
Above, two birds are rounding on each other,
as if they might somehow be knotted together.

They are coming closer to the ground,
to the thrown-off bones and torn spearheads.
Even now as we cross below them
they make smaller and smaller circles.

The stalks of wheat around us
glisten like weapons driven into the earth.
They absorb the light in the sky
pass what's left of it around between them.

I can sense the king at my back, hear
his sword as it cleaves the air in two clean halves
and he treads in darkness the line between them.
Counting his footsteps, I measure his tiredness.

I can hear the slow twinge of muscle
as his sword pierces first rib-cage then gristle,
and its worn edge meets the hearts of those
he has already killed once, as if to make sure,

as if, in death, he doubted them more.
I can see, without turning, blood puddling in the corn;
a promise of their once-breathing bodies,
a swansong in their now-silent mouths.

For the first time in hours I am aware of the others.
It is only in walking together that we are quelled.
The silver in my fingers has turned my hands numb
so that they feel they are made of silver themselves.

Laura Webb

The Aftermath of the Battle from the Perspective of Corvids

They pick at pieces
Dull gold amid black mud and red
More than lust, a hunger.

We circle in the grey mirror above
Watching as they become flock
Soon we will land and take what is ours by right.

Amongst the feeding is a man unfed
He holds not his treasure but ours
Gently, as if it were a fledgling.

Alex Clements

The Ring of Brodgar

This: Dark loch — now marshland again — harsh

with the mirage and echo of men.

Thirty-six stones transform into thirteen horses

cantering round the central hearth.

Sparks flying as Þórr of the forge-bellows

swings his heft-hammer.

Landscape rebounding language — sounds

from twig-trees chiselled in stone.

This: Vision recedes, re-forms. Thirteen horses merge

into one: Sleipnir the eight-legged steed.

'Slippy' flies between earth, sea and sky

bearing the dead to the underworld.

Der Schimmelreiter riding the dyke —

scorch-orbs flare from the horse's face.

Invicta Rampant resisting William in 1066.

Not *hooded hide boaden*. This is Wōden.

This: Hear the gallop that now fills space — an Arab
stallion carries the Angel of Death.
Earth reveals distinctive green hooves —
cirrus-chevrons shape-shift wings.
Lightning mimics iron-cast shoes —
clatter-chip-splinter a thousand sparks.
Sun smiles from the mane of its rays —
fine tail, sharp eyes — flick between stars.

Lucy Hamilton

after Sneglu-Halli's lausavísur: on pigs etc.

Halli's quickfire poem on the King's dwarf dressed in an enormous mailcoat

Armoured, imposturing
afront the horde – this Frisian's
helm's overwhelming him –
titch hoofs his frisky schtick.
Feisty, flame-proof Túta's
totally used to filching loot –
this sawn-off rye-loaf chomper
totes a low-slung chopper.

King Harald tries to call time on dinner service

Who gives a shit how hard
Harald hammers?
My jaw won't stop gnawing
till I settle back snoring!

King Harald challenges Halli to compose an impromptu poem about a roast pig or forfeit his life

Harald's handed this poet
the whole hog – no porkies
from him. Seeing a plated pig
approaching, well-roasted,
I knock out my neck-verse
in the nick of time and beat it
by a nose – the boar's snout's burnt off.
Now I'll pig out. Cheers, Boss!

Andrew Smardon

after Plácitusdrápa

Christ as a stag, the cross caught in his antlers

Plácitus, master of the moss-caulked sea elk,
dwindler of lies, returned to the place
where God had appeared to him.
Unmatched in courage, the carrion's comfort
locked eyes once more with He who chooses
retainers carefully, stood on the cliff in the shape of a hart.

The benevolent Cataloguer of angels
would not let that dredger of fishfield's fire,
still unlearned in evil, remain a heathen.
Mankind's sole Lord, loathing falsehood,
guided His wise spear-darkener onto
the path of true faith through a miracle.

'Don't be afraid, glory-seeking pilot
helming the ski down Von's whitewater; though
you come into trial through me, be steadfast.
My consolation will lessen your sorrow:
a herald of war's shrine, it will be love
which finally purifies you into triumph.'

*

The scatterer of gold disembarked
from the ship with his two sons;
his life was resting heavily on him.
He brought his children to a broad river;
that brave tree of the gem of the gunwale
didn't dare carry both over at once.

The seeker of love hauled his firstborn across.
That wielder of the Valkyrie's shimmer
left the second son sat on the bank.
Starting back to fetch him
the wealth-sharer paused midway through the river,
looked over his shoulder.

The stainer of spears saw a lion
approaching his boy; spinning back round,
he watched as a wolf snatched the other.
Howling and flailing, the ring-giver
couldn't reach either child in time
and the beasts dragged the brothers into the wood.

*

When his sons were lost, the sorrow-dumb
peacemaker, witness of Christ's glory,
leaned up and spoke to the Lord like this:
'Now keep your promise,
famous ruler of the stormland;
I've been tested harder than old Job was.

'I've heard that flamekeeper of the hawkperch
sat at home; was visited by friends;
his wife was with him.
I've been driven into outlawry, distraught,
far from my friends, my wife gone;
wild beasts have seized my sons.

'God, although I speak out of turn
don't be angry; I beg for mercy
from the goose road's glorious sovereign.
Since I remember your gifts of friendship
set a sentry before my mouth, Lord;
give me pardon, Emperor of mankind.'

John Clegg

Returning from the river

*It starts with the sea,
waves overrun with mead-freighted horses
running one land into the next.
Loaded with more than stories, more than tongues,
these ships carry something else,
a softer song.*

*See before the golden sun at day's end a silhouette.
See it step ashore
then still as a tree of certainty
whisper this new song
and see it stretch across our land
pummelling the earth as it rides unceasing.*

*Watch the sword-harboured warrior pause
and lift his hand
away from the ravenous hawk, watch him kick
the wolf
into the woods
and listen, stooping lower as each syllable
berates his ear with love.*

*As he stoops he changes, sheds himself
until he becomes a snake,
jaws full of the new song,
so much it oozes out, and stains
the earth more deeply even
than ravens' blood.*

That mouth is mine. Now hear my song.

I begin with Saint Eustace, born the pagan Placidus.

Virtuous, heathen, an honourable man.
Let me demonstrate:

Each morning from his house on the Capitol
he brought a basket of gold
to the forum in Rome,
stood aloft upon the rostra
and poured it out to soak the poor.

That same spot he had taken
on days of victory,
when the streets ran red with bulls' blood
in pale echo
of the feast they had fed the wolves in war.

Then the air had shone with the fire of iron
and he
had been their sun,
their spreading canopy of light.

It was spread around
that he had killed the chieftain of the enemy,
one half-cut blow to the neck
that left his head hanging by his shoulder
until his legs gave way.
They say his body floated down
light as cut grass.

What glory could be greater
for a demander of renown?
In that single silent moment
when the stunned notes of iron clashing
stopped ringing through the field,
as each face turned to see
their saviour, hail the victor -
how could a man's existence
sail higher still than that?

But stop. Eustace chose for himself the very best life.

This is his tale, let me be brief.
Out hunting in the woods near Tivoli
he came upon a hart alone in a clearing.

The largest of the herd, it bore a cross
between its horns. This hart was Christ
who lives with angels.

The sky is a dome shaped like a helmet
and its face is God. His tongue spoke through
the beast: "Warrior, you have a new calling.
Suffer, and be great."

Though he had stood on a tower of dead Dacians
and pissed upon their corpses
so the urine trickled down like overflowing beer,
these words, just soft tongue and air,
cut through and felled the heathen.

Like a fresh widow
he tumbled and wept.

With my own eyes I have seen the same:

Returning from the river with my brother
the first time we saw a priest:
his simple cloth
how bodiless he was -
this was no Odinn, no wielder of storms.

He held no blade as cold and sharp as icicles
no weapon but a cross.

Yet my father was crying.

Once he had drunk wine with wolves,
now sipping rainwater he turned to my splendid mother:
"We must change, woman, cast off our evil ways.
No, be not proud, be humble.
God crushes the arrogant man as simply
as the hunter takes a puffin from his net."

For weeks I would not change. In the village,
the same faces as before

but the eyes within them different.
For the first time people looked at me
in fear – as if I, who could barely wield a sword,
could hurt their new-tongued souls.

Their meekness, it disgusted me,
the way they walked like him, heads bowed,
feet shuffling so they tripped, the same heads
that once had strained to see beyond horizontops,
that only weeks before had shown themselves
the descendants of Leif Ericson

but stop. This story is of Placidus.
His trials:

As soon as God had breathed on him
his wealth began to wither
his servants to die.

So he left Rome
taking his baptised family in train
and struck out for anonymity.
He got his wish,
but not before he'd lost his wife
and both his sons.

A warrior, who once would quake at his command,
took his wife,
a lion and a wolf his sons.

The past it seems is loathe to say goodbye.

Though God saved them all and settled them
in lonely villages
he did not tell his servant.

Placidus, sorrow-muted,
pressed hard upon his wrath
and strained to keep it sheathed.

Finally the old demander of swords spoke to the Lord:

“Listen to me now with pity,
who was once a birch, but now that I am a sapling
I need the light you promised.
I know you can help me,
you who sow the plains of the sky with storms
in seconds. So help me, God.”

The Lord listened and the man moved on.

That night he dreamt of the shine of shields
dulled by blood, of war-cries
slit to gurgles.

The next day he came upon a village
where he was welcomed in
and his life began
to turn.

Like the first fire of evening
spotted on the crest of a mountain's wave
shimmering wealth
began to grow.

Soon his house was filled with gold
and he could again
scatter the bright rings of his fingers
to the poor.

Yet every morning his banked sorrow burned brighter.
Life, I know, is hard without a wife.
I have buried two.

But the mercy-granting king
for whom the earth is but a temple
does not forget us in our misery.

In Rome war began its slow and building song.
It reached Placidus even in his wilderness.

Found and summoned
by messengers of the emperor
he recognised God's recompense
and this hater of men's sinfulness
boarded their ship.

As its hoof-beats stroked the sea in time
the rhythm of war grew loud in him
until its song came bursting from his mouth.

This was the reward of he who is purer than all.

This is the part of the story I find hard to tell.
It will help me if you let me reminisce.
After all, the picture of men arming
was no different then to when
I first saw it
through the smoke of my uncle's house,
men lining the walls
the glint of mail-shirts
a forest of spears outside
awaiting
a forest of men.
That day my brother rode out to victory.

The first and last time I heard warriors speak of Valkyries.

Yet however the light of fires
caught their blades, as it must have done
for Placidus, face drawn beneath the gleaming helmet,
and lit up their early-morning breath,
the peace-promoter, God, shines most radiant in victories.

He seemed to give Placidus a victory not lowly
through the brutality of swords
but in the virtue of a holy man.
His face menaced out the suppression of sin –
the heathens fled, their wolves went hungry.

Yet as they fled, he chased after them.
He cut them down
and ravens drank dark wine
there on the field.
And God was in this too.

My brother, victorious in battle,
did not win his war with God.

Still, he lasted longer than me,
lasted to his death,
which they all put him to
tied to a skerry in the sound
until he waned. You could hear him
calling out to sea-king Byrfill
even in the long house
with the crackle of the fire
stoked as high as I could make it go.

Placidus, on his knees,
was hailed by God,
and picked out for glory,
yet what had there been in him, this holy man,
that wasn't in my brother,
the generous man, feeder of the eagle?
Why was he not chosen
to suffer for glory?
He suffered for the stubbornness of the past
and in that
grey blue watery land
there is no glory.

George Maude

after Oddi inn litli's lausavísur: on art

Untitled

Light in his hands, the hafts
of head-splitters, as ink of the heddles.
As settling of the mead-fee, his shuttling
insults our tranquil culture.

Cut his staining cotton
crimson on the salt-loom,
before the fire of terror
fashions market-ashes.

Andrew Bailey

Tapestry

Your own giant's footstool
wielded by Greek Thor's world-
encircling foe, your doors
to Roman begging-Ran's
new Tyrian temple,
the wall-hanging on which
you hung your precious words.
Not because he moved you,
the thread stoop-shouldered man
with the sword in his hands,
anonymous, without
expression, you conjured
with your words only an
empty portrait, painted
not to remember him
but to remember you.

Kate Olley

In the dyes

Who stands stoop-shouldered and grim,
stitched in dark hues by the doorway?
Eager for ambush or some sly seduction,
destined to threaten unendingly.

What surface-skidding ship in lurches and rolls,
skirting round the sea-king's speckled lair
with a pick of carousing sword-men,
can never touch shore on the loom ahead?

The tapestry is a rich and puzzling trawl –
tinctures from woad, madder, rocket, ash –
harvesting a dreamland in its holey jaws:
a who's who of monsters/gods/galumphant men.

Having clung fast through long winters and risk,
how lucky to be here, marooned in today's light.
Antique-web of interlacing yarns,
handled now with an artisan's care.

Threadbare fragment, accidental as an inkblot,
shares its runes like a dice-throw: man + ship + sea
from which we twist together some new text,
our history – vital as sand or a sun-glimpse.

Lavinia Singer

after Fragments from the Third Grammatical Treatise

Plough of the Sea

Your deep hull lifts and leaps
for leagues: toil forth. Whale-earth
tears to foaming furrows;
you scythe a keel-fine line.
Nestled in the surf-field
sea-mice spurn bow and stern.
Storm-steady, tiller firm,
be ox-strong: prow-ward, plough.

Quench

Brave King, listen, listen!
Raise this loaded praise-cup
brimful with grim glories.
Gear up your dry hear-lips!
Swill the pulsing draught-song,
fine as spurt-warm corpse-wine.
A lush clash-of-spears kick,
King, will crimp your chin-sock.

Sun

Jewel Queen
of the giant
cosmos-hall,
just hanging fire,
sky-mirror
hoards your silver;
spears of cloud
ransack the surf.

Beverley Nadin

Number 38

He walked to where the princes fought,
held up a head. 'Here's treasure
for you, Sultan,' he said. 'No more
will his spectre rant within these walls –
see how his door's unhinged,
his mouth's undone. Enjoy the silent
silk of this tongue, this architecture
of skull. Relish these bubbles of bone,
globes of ruby-gore lipped with jet.
Yours to keep, to cache.

Pile it with the others!
Make a wall! A city people shun –
a place where only worms explore.'

Pen Kease

The battle-glad Ingolfr travelled abroad...

I was battle-happy too that day –
Such joy –
to command an empty road;
articulate that voice –
my own – into blue sky.
Growling, alive, alone.

Pen Kease

Skaldic Fragments

Listen, listen Lord to this commissioned verse!

Inside the King's warring topography
a decorated veteran rouged his polearm in flow;
subjects sank into the Soft Brome.

The russet vulture dived,
feathering towards a sucking chest wound.

The stone-nymph is unarmed
but I know the mind of a whore;
she is a wild dire-wolf.

Moon-man, who beat the heavens from gold, help us!
Our King would rather stab than dig.

Listen, listen Lord to this commissioned verse.

Richard Scott

after Einarr Gilsson's Guðmundarkvæði

UMBRELLA

or, VERSES ABOUT KWEKU ADOBOLI, WHO WORKED IN A BANK

Quickly up the windy
shin of leaves, young Kweku;
quick from Ackworth's stranger
rain, the rain uncurdled
yet by any rain-skin
strangely waxed, to the hem
of the shivery birch -
the keys of UBS.

They were four musketeers
betting European
equities, each quaffing
cocktails at the Coq of
windblown leaves. There, in the
sinless grip of vertigo,
rose in Kweku's gut a
shutter-eyed worm of graves.

Beneath the three keys his
spree was hid beneath a
wax-skin of tears. Trading
shade for shade – not on the
thing itself but on the
long-spoked umbrella of
its associations –
made Kweku his shelter.

How much in a trader's
shaded loss betrays a
hushed, unconscious will for
spillage? The worm of the
ceaseless market-grave grew
brave in Kweku's gut, while

in the shadows listed
his heinous poetry.

Yes, the market-worm had
turned in him; hidden on
Delta-1 swelled Kweku's
dreck-bond acquisition.
It's a shit-fight out there.
Gout puckered him a scowl.
Then the vertigo – a
low upon the Swiss franc.

*It brings so much joy, a
cloying Kweku writes of
Jerome Kerviel, lauding
fraudulence. And to think,
he did just what...I do.*
Shy of two billion
hands of the rustling birch,
winless Kweku was right.

*How many zeros will
go in a billion?*
Queasy with maths sat the
hapless sergeant of the
custody night desk. Ten
restless months on, Kweku,
tight-gutted, took his oath.
His trial was to begin.

1.2.3.0.0.0.
*No, said Kweku. My own
personal gambling loss
sings not of the addict
trying vainly to slake
too deep a thirst. Instead,
see a taxi driver
driving his taxi home.*

The judge was not moved; she
shoed him gut-wrenchingly.
So was Kweku's worm wrenched
squirming from its home. As
any thirst for justice
must always be slaked; so
Kweku must fall from his
dominion of the leaves.

Satisfied, the canteen
banter of bald gentry
subsides. And the lewd bark
rudely flaunts its blossom.
See how the taxi driver
drives his own taxi home.
The market-grave seethes as
the snake devours the snake.

Joseph Turrent

The Snake-Swallower

Slender she went to the river to dive,
drinking water that was cool and clear—but unclean.
Her dress heaved itself along after that, heavy,
as the harm-eager curl went cutting,
curving itself through her sore guts,
sounding in a ground of gold.

Then the lady lay oppressed,
the plague of swelling pressed against her,
(*how she's let herself go*, the sword-men said)
her trunk grew and grew, six seasons long
by my telling. The tongue of her belt stretched
as the worm twisted inside her, an eight-span woman
sprung with pain.

The gentle men
called on the gentle bishop, Guðmundr,
begging for a cure for her sickness;
and a cure they got quickly. In her mouth
he put bone-washing water, chalk-thick,
and the bless-brewer watched as she drank it down.

Then from the bowels of her purging belly
a birth came creeping, a fire-serpent
boiling her breath, melting out of her mouth.
We all saw the snake stick-dead,
along with her grief and twisting need.
Even she had to bow to his bright virtue.

We stretched to see its spine, a curled fist
convulsing on the earth-floor, which she—
now deprived of that sorrow—had fostered
in her flesh.

Gold-growers will gloat
to hear of Guðmundr and his history,
how he shepherded his groves of golden men.

Meghan Purvis

Woman with snake inside

They carry her across the
worm's table,
a swallower of lace,
a fir tree afire.
She's to be presented,
to her healer,
his liquid smoke,
his oven-cleaner.

Belly full of cord,
she's a wearer of rings
on the inside. Rings that
move and squeeze, swell.
He's swilled his bone-rinsing
stuff in her gut and she spits
out gold wave of snake.

And the people, God's pickles,
are ready with their potkins.
They will tickle the tummy raider
into their rustic reliquaries,
for a piece of latter-day
miracle stuff, a relic-to-be.
Willingly clasp into their pots
a piece of this clasp,
like a braid of her hair,
a blooded knot.

Nia Davies

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Debbie Potts

*The ash of the arrow-squall went
with the witless Rökva of ribbons
– Gautr soon had a hankering
for trouble – and the heathen child.
They stuck the infant –
they couldn't care less – by a stone
while they got right down to genital jousting,
that god of pricks and the girdle-ground.*

~ Einarr Gilsson