

modern poets on viking poetry



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selected poems from the cultural translation project

edited by
Debbie Potts

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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

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

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

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

Rebecca Perry

after Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's Sexstefja

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

after Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *lausavísa*

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 hoaden*. 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 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.

Beverley Nadin

after Sneglu-Halli's lausavísa

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

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

after Gísli's Dream Verses

from **Six Dream Verses**

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.

Dorothy Lebane

from **Garage Door Verses**

Dreams Gisli 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.

...

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

David McKelvie

after Oddi inn litli's lausavísur

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/galumpling 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 Kormáker's lausavísur

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 Hildr'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

after Egill's Sonatorrek

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

Xenia

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
Hemmingway'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 Thanos of Hárr

Andrew McMillan

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-cripling 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

Afterword

These poems were written as part of the cultural translation project *Modern Poets on Viking Poetry*. The project sought to cultivate contemporary poets' awareness of the skaldic aesthetic, nurturing a dialogue between academic research and modern poetic practice. Poets were encouraged to creatively interact with commentaries and basic translations of skaldic verse provided by Old Norse scholars, drawing on Viking poetic traditions in refreshing and innovative ways. A full list of participating scholars and poets is given on the project's website.

As this pamphlet shows, some incredibly powerful, surprising and playful responses have emerged as a result. This could not have been achieved without the open-mindedness and intellectual generosity of scholars, nor without the boundless curiosity of poets, who are constantly looking for new ways of understanding and translating the world around us.

Debbie Potts

<http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/resources/mpvp/>

*so the draught of Óðinn came raining down
into each man's mouth of hearing*

~ Egill Skallagrímsson