



## SWEDISH CHRISTMAS

*A Braid of Legends, Stories, and Echoes  
a Father tells his Daughter,  
one generation tells another*

*by Linnea Johnson*

Swedish Christmas



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for my Father and my Mother, their Fathers and Mothers,  
and the Fathers and Mothers before them.

## My Father's House: I. Freya and Frey, and the Valkyrie

Dark the early evenings, blue-black as a raven's wing,  
and before the grownups in the ancient low red house  
drink their last cups of coffee, light from the candle  
casting chin shadows sharply up their ascendant faces,

I am put to bed against my will, visiting here since summer,  
my Father's union on strike back home in Chicago, ten years old,  
me in sturdy flannels buried under home hand-woven wool covers.  
I lie flat to a linen-covered straw mattress which is fitted  
to a carved daybed in a low little alcove with an illustrated ceiling,  
between weaving room and main room where now  
there is furniture but where then

there were narrow raw pine troughs lining the walls.  
Benches during the day, nightly they were filled with straw  
onto which one, two, nine, ten, eleven children were put to bed,  
head to toe, head to toe, head to toe.

These long cold nights I doze next to a moon-silvered four-pane window  
in this, my Father's house, in this, his Father's house before him,  
in this house of fathers and fathers and fathers before them.  
house of mothers before that.

My bed is across pine floor and rag rug from the tall green kakelugn,  
the glazed tie stove which radiates heat left from the day's fire,  
fathers' and my Father's stories and paint, apostles and gods,  
seeming to seep down from the ceiling into me, steeping in me  
like tea leaves in a pot of warmed waters these winter nights through.  
Before ever I can hope to sleep, my eyes, big as dark platters  
heaped full of alarm and invention, look out for gods and guides and trolls,  
spirits, sprites, ancestors, stories of ancestors, and drawn apostles any of whom  
– or maybe all – might fall from the ceiling onto me, crush into me,  
smother me, squeeze my chest shut, or ferry me away  
as I hear tell such beings do –

or so my Father says by the glimmer of a single candle  
held towards the ceiling, lighting his stories  
each night just before I am tucked away goodnight,  
sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite.

Painted all together on these beams and ceilings are figure stories

of ochre Freya, gold Odin, blood red apostles, green water guides,  
 some azure windy-looking white gods, primeval ice fog, and a huge gnarled  
 Tree, roots like the veins on my Father's large hands. All together  
 the paint story characters swarm the old wood as if  
 they were all comrades, neighbors, were all cronies,  
 at once shamming and frisking the same woods together  
 and as if in the same story.

Look, there's Freya, my Father says, pointing up and just over my head  
 to her picture story. And Frey. They're sister and brother.  
 She is where music comes from, how Spring and flowers arrive.  
 He makes it rain and shine and brings in Jul. Frey and Freya

were here before Odin; certainly before any god you are supposed  
 to pray to now was more than smoke and reflection, he whispers.

Odin borrowed Freya's prophetic raven. He is yet to give it back to her.  
 Odin bartered some and stole the rest of what he learned  
 of magic and divine powers from Freya. Friday is Freya's day.  
 Friday the thirteenth is lucky for women, unlucky  
 for me, because thirteen is Freya's number and the number of months  
 in the lunar year. Nothing can be lucky without Freya's presence. You

are lucky, he says, to have her in your room, over you like this.  
 But it might make you too strong and too powerful ! Think about that,  
 he laughs softly, my Mother and his brother's wife calling him, like light  
 from another room. Your Mother wants you to be a good girl.  
 Can you be strong and powerful and be a good girl, too?

Best of all, he says, Freya is the leader of the Valkyrie. Do you remember  
 seeing the Valkyrie in last summer's bright night sky? You remember.  
 Stories say that it is the Valkyrie women riding their horses  
 who are the Northern Lights, he says, though light, he says,  
 came long before horses, Valkyrie, or memory, he says,  
 puffing out the candle's light and with it  
 disappearing the redgoldazure ceiling stories,

my Father's hymns like the four-patch moonlight  
 ebbing from wool coverlet, pine floor, green stove.

## Slaughtering the Christmas Pig: Christmas Eve Is Dipping Day

Fresh meat Christmas.

All you have been eating is salt pork,  
 all but one or two pigs slaughtered in the autumn.

If those one or two pigs saved in Fall survive  
 until Winter Solstice, 13 December, this is what to do:

By first light and with the pig and your knife,  
 face all four corners, swear an oath, make a promise,  
 pour brandy over the pig's bristly back as it breathes its last,  
 complicit in the sacrifice.

Hang pig by its neck in a noose from a beam over the hearth to roast,  
 a hook for the kettle already in place. Dip a finger into the pig's running blood  
 and paint the sign of Freya, goddess of fecundity, onto your head,  
 between your brow and hairline. Later, catch the quick,

the vitality, the life and truth which runs from the pig as blood and fat,  
 into your large kettle. Dip small bits of rye bread into the pig fat and eat.

Horses are invited into the house at Christmas. As family.  
 Goats, too. At the dark of the year, gorge all whom you live among  
 with life, bread, and good food. Life transfers from pig,

onto bread, into yourself. Catch and eat the life of the pig,  
 its blood shed for you, its life given for you. Delicious life. Delicious pig.  
 Always bread, now at Christmas, and before, at the dark of each year,

the thousands of blood and pig and bread, hoping for fat years  
 before any such thing as Christmas. Of course, the roasted pig  
 is not the saw-toothed sow who, if you are mean to her,  
 refuses slaughter and, instead, lies glaring under your table.

She is to be left in peace and you should be nicer to her  
 than you have been in the past. Feed her and apologize to her.

She is Freya, the Great Sow wedded to the sacrificial boar,  
 goddess of fertility, love, the moon, the sea, the earth, the underworld,  
 deity of death and birth, of music, Spring, flowers, and love ditties. She is  
 virgin, Mother, ancestress, queen of heaven, ruler of fate, of the stars,  
 of magic. Odin learned all he knew of magic and divine powers from Freya.

She is the Mistress of cats, the leader of Valkyrie. She is the Saga, the “sayer,” who inspires all hallowed poetry. Freya

married each of the early Swedish kings, the kings regarding themselves as husbands of Freya. The kings saw their duty as being honored to die for the land and for the people,

while the goddess never dies. Freya keeps the spirits of slain kings and heroes in her marsh halls.

Only after spending a cycle of time in her wet, fertile earth womb can they be reborn. Remember, too,

the Boar, Schrimnir, who lives in Valhalla, who is cooked every morning and who becomes whole again every evening.

Just before New Year, then, and not until then, you may gnaw at the roasted Christmas pig’s un-split bones. To split the bones at Christmas would be to split luck, the marrow disturbed, running out and away.

At Spring sowing, scatter the Christmas pig’s bones on the earth to insure a good harvest, the Freya-sow from under your table walking beside you into the fields.

## Freya’s Ravens

They are not, I am told, Freya’s fortune-telling ravens, these chickens on my Father’s farm in Sweden. This year I am ten and visiting, and I am, Faster Karin says, to learn this, as well as to learn to stop talking with her chickens.

Older than Odin, Freya is leader of the Valkyrie, my Father’s stories tell. Odin borrowed, then stole, Freya’s prophetic raven; bartered some and stole the rest of what he learned of magic and divine powers from Freya.

The birds who live on this farm are divinely sleek, iridescent black, and they do seem to me prophetic. They do not wait until Christmas Eve midnight, for instance, to prattle to me, to tell me how it is, here on this ancient place, these years since the farm’s child – I am her namesake – is dead, the rye as bitter as the orphaned Father and Mother who grow it still.

It is, Faster Karin thinks, the birds’ futures she foretells. If they do not start laying eggs soon again, she says, her arms all leather red, skin like butter wrapper paper, they will no longer be hens, but stew. Keep her, meaning me, away from them, she instructs my Father,

then goes to add her tears to the vinegar in the filebunke which is gathering spores into its milky self for tomorrow’s pre-dawn breakfast. She has seen me in the henhouse and suspects things about us, the birds and me.

This is not the side of my family who likes me best, these people, keeping ravens they think to be chickens, these people who will neither listen to nor tell the old stories, who will talk to almost no one about almost anything but past, poor rye, and old abiding bitterness.

My Mother’s Father’s sister, Rut, gathers me up into her lap like an egg into an apron, and calls me “Min lilla höna,” “My little hen,” poaching me away to be her own fortunate daughter for an afternoon or two of Swedish songs in her imaginary parlor at her bogy piano, a voice like a boiling Jussi Björling, stories like spangled summer nights.

Tonight my Father and I will watch for Northern Lights to blaze at the edge of the Kattegat, so near the old dark farm. He will promise me a horse like Freya and the Valkyrie women ride. He will tell me stories until I fall asleep like a raven on his shoulder.

What if these birds are not Freya’s ravens and are actually Karin’s chickens; so what, my Father will say. You know as well as I do that ravens and chickens are just each other inside out. If you learn anything else, he’ll say, fine, but don’t stop talking to chickens.



## Christmas Baking: The Days Before Christmas Eve

Christmas baking must be done in the light of a new moon and under no circumstances when the winter sun stands above the horizon. Strangers

are not welcome in the house now. Or ever, really. Not even friends are allowed in after the stove has been cleaned and polished for the baking. If the dough rises well

a good year can be anticipated.  
After all, a house warm enough  
to raise dough

is a house warm enough to keep young bones and the old ones from chill, warm enough, perhaps, to allow old and young health enough to defy whatever cold

loiters the corners  
like spirits obsess the forest.

Rye being more nourishing than wheat, make the cakes from rye. Make an enormous cake which will crown the Christmas table, which will sit upon the Christmas table like heaven's crown upon an altar.

## Christmas Sheaf: Winter Solstice

The last of the grain cut from the fields is wrapped at the waist into the figure of a woman, then set between Mother and Father at table on the darkest night of the year. Life

is most powerfully stored in the last of things, in this last grain of the harvest, in the last bit

of fat from the pot. Mother and Father feed brandy and the best food of the dark night's dinner to the Sheaf –

roast pork, pot fat, rye cake, and beer.

After dinner, the grain Sheaf is lifted up, set up on the rooftop. If

the birds eat all its grain,  
next year's harvest might be

– will be – good, no waste, nothing left over,  
the strongest used up completely, fully, absolute.

## Making Christmas Beer

Mount two crossed scythes  
over the main door to the house.

Place into the bottom of the brew vat  
two green wreaths. Use neither

knife nor steel.

Use a thunderbolt flint ax, instead.

Lay a silver ring in the hop vat.

Add glowing embers and three drops  
of melted sulfur to the hops before yeasting.

Ferment. While fermenting  
the beer, yell, whistle, and dance. If

the beer bubbles and simmers, Christmas will  
bring fistfights. A clanking kettle hook sings of death.

## *Lutning Av Fisk: Lutfisk*

Two and a half pounds dried Spring Ling Cod fish.

Half pound slaked lime.

Half pound soda.

Water.

Place dried fish in cold water for a week, changing the water each day.

Remove fish and brush clean on both sides.

Divide fish into two or three pieces.

Sprinkle a little lime into the bottom of a crock and place the fish in layers,  
fleshy sides touching, a trace of lime between each layer. Dissolve  
the soda in warm water, then add enough water to cover the fish  
completely. Cover tightly by placing a weight on the lid.

Keep in a cool place for a week.

Stir the liquid daily to prevent the lime from caking. After a week,  
when the fish is soft and swollen, discard  
the liquid and rinse out the container.

Again place the fish in the container with enough cold water  
to cover it completely. Change the water daily for another week.

The more frequently the water is changed, the sooner the fish is ready for use.

On Christmas Eve,

remove the skin from the fish, sprinkle the fish with salt, and steam it for 15-20  
minutes.

Serve the lutfisk with white sauce, boiled *potatis*, salt and pepper.

Eat.

## Meatballs and Brown Beans

Home in Chicago, three kinds of meat  
my Mother had the butcher grind together as she watched the grind  
and taught me to watch. A child, one day soon, and alone, I would know  
how to choose the cheaper cuts of pork and beef and veal,  
the run to the Jewel nothing for me as it would become a chore for her,  
even in the Dodge. I will remember her grey cloth coat,  
clean white gloves, her leatherette pocketbook.

Before the meat was even purchased, at our house already, the stony  
brown beans would be soaking, then simmering most of two days,  
their last cooking spent stewing in black syrup splashed with *ättika*,  
vinegar sharp as distilled tears and, like the beans, shipped to our  
house in Chicago from Home, from Sweden, *ifrån Sverige*.

The bits of meat she would mash together with birch spoons  
her Father had made at Home, in Sweden, handles long as  
forearms, ladle the dimension of a big cupped hand.

In her mixing bowl, color of gingerbread, size of a wash tub,  
she added to the dab meat, an inconstant blend of cracker crumbs and flour,  
stale bread, grated raw potato, milk and eggs, cinnamon, cardamon, nutmeg,  
allspice, onion, salt and pepper, recipe from the doctrine of using whatever  
was at hand, cheap, or free. Pigs however scrawny and cows however bony  
they had even on poor Swedish farms like the one my Father grew up on,  
then escaped from, at Home, in Sweden, *hemma i Sverige*.

For holidays, especially for Christmas, and for company  
my Mother would take to the cooking of brown beans  
and the customary rolling of small meatballs between  
her stiff, flat palms, in cooking, roundness maintained  
by shaking and shaking the pan in which they cook.  
“Like this,” she would say, early and urgent, “like this,”

engraving in me something I had to learn. Had to,  
tradition in her hands absolute as arthritis and playing the piano,  
as embroidery, penmanship, crocheting, and typing.

My Father, who would not eat so much as one bite of meatball,  
not so much as one brown bean, remembered his sisters grating  
potato, too, for the meatball mix, “*Potatis* all they had at Home. And these  
damned, *forbannada* beans like stones,” he’d say. “Meatballs and brown beans  
always together, like church and State,” and as hated as those hollowed out  
alder poverty shoes. At thirteen his first leather shoes, for Confirmation. He  
would angle away from us in the kitchen, scenting memory,

him in his sleeveless undershirt and green workpants. He’d go read  
something in English, his bald head set hard into the embroidered  
couch pillows. He would go paint something, fix something, three flights

down and away in the basement. “Food like this!”  
would be about all he would say aloud, his right arm  
pushing down and away something invisible. So little meat  
in meatballs, and the beans virtual stones cajoled into being supper.  
If he had not got gone

by the time the beans finished simmering, the meatballs  
spattering the walls, filling the kitchen with the smell

of fried onion, cookie spices, starch meat,  
my Father would glare at the frying pan and think “pig fat:  
is what they cooked meatballs in at Home. Plenty of that  
there, at Home, in Sweden. Plenty

of nothing. Like cheap cod. Like stretching scraps of meat  
with starch until it is hardly meat, more a raw hope for  
meat, some daydream faith in a future when  
maybe real, full blooded red meat might  
muscle the flimsy body.” Why

would eating meatballs and brown beans be any way to celebrate  
Christmas, my Father would say, the slap of vinegar in the brown beans’ syrup  
maybe his Mother or Father’s angry smack on his open mouth.

Buy a beef roast. I can afford it here, he’d want to say, My whole life  
until I left Home, until I left Sweden, I ate those beans and meatballs.  
I slept on straw in troughs underneath small and drafty windows  
in that thatched roof excuse for a house. Should we sleep  
on straw with snow blowing in open windows  
to celebrate Christmas, too?

Home is kept, my Mother believed, by cooking certain foods  
at certain times of the year at home, where home is, memory  
an ingredient like salt, she might have said. Like vinegar,  
he would have said, stomach to memory as brain is to thought,

the kitchen like a steamy, maybe broken heart, pounding like a headache.  
“The good with the bad,” she would say, “all the same together.”

Someday, some dark blue winter afternoon, I know I will find,  
grown and alone, that I will make my Mother’s Swedish meatballs  
for myself, as if they were charms, amulets, talisman, a kind of currency.  
Enough of them, I know I will hope, will buy me passage Home,  
perhaps, my tears caustic as any vinegar. I know

I will grip maybe four stony brown beans and count on them:  
 one, two, Mother, Father, dead and gone. Three, four, Daughter and Son,  
 gone if born and if not dead. I will add the four beans to other beans  
 to eat with meatballs, the journey of beans soaking, beans simmering,  
 beans cooking the best way Home when times come I may no longer know  
 where Home is except in the steam of my kitchen, beans, parents,  
 bygone children mixed, me wishing us all spiced warm and sweet and Home  
 together for supper, Swedish meatballs and brown beans  
 sharp and sweet, small and rounded on all our tongues again.

## My Father's House: II. Nightmare

The night I wake up crying, it is my Father who hears me. Little girls,  
 he says, don't have nightmares. Can't have Nightmares. I should  
 be not afraid. Nightmare, he says, is a woman transformed  
 against her will and who would never hurt a little girl,  
 who rides only men alone in their bed at night,

quash of her thighs to back and chest so hard he can hardly  
 keep breathing. My Father sweeps his arm up toward  
 the Nightmare fable painted onto this ceiling.

He points out Nightmare, the Mara, the Crush, who, beautiful,  
 rides crushing a sleeping bull and marries a man whose chest  
 she compresses every night in his dreams. Men and not little girls  
 are pressed between Nightmare's thighs squeezing them  
 empty of breath. You can feel sorry for her, he says.

Sometimes Nightmare does not know what it is,  
 how it got that way, or what it does at night. And who can see

Nightmare unless, a man, you wake abruptly, or marry one.

My Father says be not afraid, that Nightmare is a woman like a diviner,  
 like a huge constricting snake around men's lungs. Being pressed  
 by Nightmare is like being pressed into the earth or onto  
 the bottom of a stream bed or lake, eyes wide open asleep  
 unable to move to save yourself. Nightmare,

like the Skogsrå, holds tight to the erotic dreamer, my Father says.  
 In this house she held tight to his brothers, Karl and Anders,  
 as young boys especially, he says. This house

and the things of this house, my Father early renounced, returning  
 of late only to visit, and, visiting, seeing now through fresh eyes.

My Father does not mention himself in this Nightmare story and I do not  
 fall back to sleep after he leaves me in the dark, stories on the painted  
 ceiling, breathtaking, blue-black, green and passionate. Nightmare  
 scribing me with her own excited and exciting parabolic parables,  
 regarding taking hold, concerning hanging on, about change  
 and changing and tenacity, her swirling, alluring

incantations from the ceiling paint, the early driving roll of distant  
 moiling thunder over this dry, sandy, swarmed, overrun farmstead,

my Father and his Nightmare stories new to me as this house  
 is old, and in me now like meat, blood, and marrow.

## Näck

There are three sorts of stories you hear about the *Näck*, who, it is said, live like splashings and gurglings alone in brooks.

ONE STORY is where the *Näck* is a workhorse and maybe it is a wild horse, a stranger horse, and so, one to be wary of, one to be feared. Maybe

it is only the story that a poor, tired farmer desired to ride the horse instead of pulling a plow behind the horse. Perhaps the farmer ascended the horse. Perhaps the farmer only desired to ascend to ride the horse. This, then,

is a story of the test, a story of the farmer failing the test, a story of the lesson the farmer suffers and that you will not have to suffer if you learn the lesson which the dead or maimed or humiliated farmer did not learn in time, concerning

that which inevitably happens to those who fail to know their place within the structure of things. Certainly the farmer, like you, should

know his place, and his place is not now nor is it ever on the back of a horse like so much nobility structuring things.

ANOTHER STORY is from southern Sweden where the *Näck* is called a *Bäckhäst*, a Brookhorse. Riding the *Bäckhäst* often leads to the disaster of being carried off

and away from where it is you should be, and stay. Carried away to the mountains, perhaps. Certainly, to a somewhere where you, yourself, will be the stranger. More than you know anything, you know

what a stranger means. Worse even than encountering a stranger would be to be a stranger yourself. You belong here, not away.

After all, strange places are filled with strangers, with more strangers than you ever have encountered in your woods, on the sea, or on your own farm. Often, though, there is escape promised in these stories. However,

in the stories you hear tonight, if you hear of the promise, likely you will not hear that escape was achieved, or achieved successfully. Nor will you hear, should something like this happen to you, how exactly you might achieve escape.

THE THIRD *Näck* STORY is one concerning ceaseless dancing, the christian's devil accomplice as a musician to the pagan *Näck*, the dancers helpless in the sway of music, and dancing themselves to death.

The *Näck* approaches the devil, maybe challenging him, maybe

one replacing the other, maybe one indistinguishable from the other. More caution along with less dancing is advised in these stories, christians scared into a moderate pleasure, pagans tending to ignore stories with christians in them.

Christian versions of *Näck* stories say that, at least you know when the christian devil is around, while the *Näck*, well, he could be not a *Näck* but just a stranger, as if that weren't bad enough. And, if more caution and less dancing weren't bleak enough,

the lesson persists, warning that it is not good to have a knack for anything. Such is a form of bedevilment. Is it this confusion which plummets curious children to sleep

wondering, perhaps, what was used to frighten those who came before christians, pagans, farmers, and rulers? Whose stories are these, anyway? Who would steal away your calm

by telling you these things, and why? After all, it is not the *Näck* who tells you to know your place, that if you are not razor's edge careful you will be carried away to strange places to ricochet off strangers, that merrymaking is sin. Narrow trickling water

has no wish to frighten you, to control you, to make you worship it, to have you work for it. A brook will not steal your cow even if your cow drowns.

Who are you to a brook, anyway? These stories are not water's stories. Listen to water. If it has a skin, still it does not have a body. A brook sings. What do you hear? It does not tell menacing stories, does it?

## Hunting Gods: The *Skogsrå*

Wings cut the current. Flights of birds rush up behind you.  
Wind is corkscrew whistling in the dense alder, tall pine,  
switching birch. It is wind and birds? Or is it

the *Skogsrå*, beautiful as the limbs of trees, wings  
of birds, she

out hunting beings like you. She is  
dangerous as falling dead trees. It is she

who is to blame for lost sheep and cattle. It is she

who is able as a path to lead men astray in her forest,  
bed them easily as sinking into a pile of leaves. It is

she who endows men with pointed weapon success or  
with flaccid failure in their own hunt. How have you

wronged her? Have you but tried to detach her,  
visible or not, from your bed, from your body?  
She can hunt you down,

though in the mad, swirling Wild Hunt, she is  
the pet quarry of the other turbulent rampant hunting gods.

She is a solitary being who,  
like everything else which inhabits the forest, can and likely will  
have its way with you, toys and quarry and target that mortals be,  
which their gods made their mortals be. Wind or birds

or does she say, "Run mortal, but I will spin you like a bright pinwheel  
if it will amuse me. Hunt or bed you to wile away an afternoon".

## Sjorå

There are stories of a fisherman now and then marrying one of the *Sjorå*,  
beings who are said to inhabit the waters of Sweden. Perhaps

a *Sjorå* had warned a fisherman of impending storm,  
though those *Sjorå* who live far out to sea are less hospitable to humans  
than those who live in your Father's brother's pond or stream.

Still, perhaps a fisherman had appeased a *Sjorå*,  
fallen in love with one who had stanchd a rival's fishing success  
or even a *Sjorå* who perhaps drowned an adversary for him, or so he'd said.

Some tell that around *Göteborg*,  
there are people with especially ugly faces, eyes dark  
as they are deep, hair wavy brown as seaweed. The *halvalen*

– half ones – are great at catching fish.  
They are openhanded and charitable as people. Still,  
*halvalen* are descended from a mix between humans, who can be  
evil enough, and *Sjorå* who, like trickster Trolls, can be as menacing  
as they can be innocuous. And so,

there was this fish a *halvalen* was said to have caught and cooked  
which, when eaten by my Father's Father's brother, came back alive,  
purling, reeling, swimming, and twirling inside him until, berserk  
and twisted, my Father's Father's brother threw himself

onto the breast and mercy of the sea,  
saying he had to go into water to seek a *Sjorå*  
who could tell him what to do. There,  
all who tell this story end it here, laughing!  
The joke is here and it's on you! Weren't you listening?  
or aren't you a true Swede,

because while no Swede denies the existence of *Sjorå*  
– fish revived and swimming a gut – or marriage  
between water guides and men,  
or stories of despondent people  
slinging themselves onto the sea,

all true Swedes will doubt any story you can tell  
which includes the idea that mercy  
has ever so much as saluted a Swedish sea.

## My Father's House: III. Creation

One night when everyone else is in church, my Father tells me this story: They say that once there was no heaven, no earth. Only a deep emptiness and a glut of vapor and fog, in which gurgled up a fountain. They say

twelve rivers flowed from this fountain  
and when the rivers got far enough from the gurgle,

the rivers turned to ice,  
one layer over another and another  
until the great deep emptiness filled up.

South from the world of cloudy mist was, they say,  
the World of Light, from which a warm wind rolled over the ice,  
melting it. Vapors rose, looping high into the air to form great clouds

from which appeared a giant made of frost

and the giant's offspring, a cow  
whose milk nourished the giant.

The cow fed herself by licking frost  
and salt from the ice, they say. One day

as the cow licked the salt stones, there appeared  
the hair of another being just below the surface.

On the second day, an entire head appeared.  
On the third day appeared the entire person,  
beautiful, agile, and powerful. They say

it was the body of the frost giant  
from which springs the Universe Tree,  
whose roots support the earth,  
whose trunk passes through the world's axis,  
whose branches stretch over heaven, hung with the stars.

They say that when the frost giant tries to shake off the weight of the Tree  
the earth quakes. They say that the frost giant sacrifices body. From the giant's  
blood come the seas. Of the giant's bones are fashioned the mountains. They say

the giant's hair becomes trees. From the giant's skull come the heavens.  
They say that of the brain, clouds are charged with hail and snow.

O, salty seas. O, giant sacrifice. Wonderful though it all was, they say,

still it was incomplete until the giant's eyebrows formed into *Midgård*,  
Mid Earth, the region of people, such life and soul, you and me, some reason,  
motion and emotion, the five senses, smiles and tears, speech, stories, and sleep.

But where, I ask my Father, is the cow, the cow,  
the cow who sacrificed nothing but who could  
still feed a giant. O, sweet cow of giant gifts.

My Father laughs that, well, the sweet cow  
is now, now likely tucked into a cow bed of her own  
inside a little red house in which the giant maybe grew up.  
Sweet how now cow is likely listening to the giant tell stories

of a red-haired girl kissed and tucked and story told goodnight  
into a little girl bed inside a little red farm house in which her beautiful,  
agile, powerful Father grew up.

But after he is gone away, thinking me asleep, I say,  
giant or not, nothing is born of a man, and I ask the ceiling paint

what was before the cow, the giant, sacrifice,  
fog, sleep, and vapor...o, no heaven. O, no earth.

## Upfreezing

It is because frost works unevenly in a field  
that there are boulders to harvest every Spring.  
Before the body stretches to the tilling, the planting,  
before anything else, there are the boulders in the field  
if you farm such land. Years ago, one man in carved shoes,  
stripped tree trunk for lever, was my uncle. Boy to man,  
he would brood, waiting inside at four-pane windows, watching  
boulders crown through snow, the ancient drowned ones  
birthing, breaching the surface. My Father tells this story again

at a kitchen table, his wrestler's body core to the steelworker's.  
Fifteen hundred years at those same fields, my Father was  
the first in his family to leave Sweden, hands clean,  
back put to other things, if none less hard.

Trunk snapped as if it were twig, he says,  
your uncle's spine nothing but a ringing in the ears.  
Exactly in half – they could have buried him in a three foot coffin  
but they didn't. Your grandmother said leave him there, right there  
in the field, that field which would grow only rye and potatoes, boulders  
and pine, and resentment.

Six men from the parish along with my grandmother took a team to the boulder,  
released him, then pick-axed a grave for him, head to the top of the boulder,  
this grave their way of cursing a god they would not speak against, a god  
who would birth boulders from their farm; boulders but not wheat for them.  
By fall the stonemason had inscribed the rock into headstone, my  
grandmother dead at the birth of my Father, his head like a stone

and stuck there until someone pulled him loose:  
the whole family hard-headed, he says, knocking his head, mine,  
with his knuckles. If he gave up the hard wrestler's body to the bricklayer's,  
then to the steelworker's, he retains a head that looks like stone, frosted  
with the white hair of cold age. He says

he wonders how many frosts it would take for my uncle  
to surface. Frost works unevenly in a field, my Father says. It is  
the unseen becoming visible, a birth of the formerly immutable about to become  
subject to change. About my uncle – my Father wouldn't be a bit surprised:  
the fields, the frost, resurrecting a crop of their dead alongside  
perpetual Spring boulders.

## My Father's House: IV. The Living Dead, Ghosts, and Spirits

The Living Dead live not only under the varnished paint on the ceiling  
of my little alcove here in the house of my Father, this house of all known  
fathers before him. The Living Dead live in paint on board, as portrait,  
under glass on walls, ghost and spirit and witness.

Afternoons, after fish mongers are gone home to mend wagons,  
meat and rag sellers, gypsies and fortunetellers are gone, too,  
hiding from ministers, family, employers, and sheriffs,

artisans' horses and carts pull into the oblong farm yard,  
into the cobblestone inner *gård*, the low red board and batten house  
to one side, the greying red barn an 'L' opposite the house,  
the dusty red chicken house, the fourth building of the enclosure.

Artisans offer paint to board, ceiling, and wall, painting  
stories and family alive past death. It is true though,

my Father says, that not all the Dead stay neatly painted to ceiling  
or to board, nor do they stay stacked passively into generational graves  
inside the churchyard. Not all leave this world

for some other world, either. instead,  
the Dead cleave to family as to walls, in paintings and out,  
as they can. They're here same as you and me, my Father tells me,  
but invisible. Usually invisible to humans. It is they

who are repeatedly blamed for puzzling noises. And who knows if  
the rag man or the artisan or the gypsy really was  
a rag man, an artisan, or a gypsy and not  
a *Gäst*, a Spirit, an unknown dead person  
walking among us and who, for no reason we can know,  
sometimes and suddenly, we can see. They are not of either world,

of the living or of the dead,  
but frequently they can be trusted to stay out of our way  
while we are in the woods picking berries or digging potatoes or carrots.

They most often can be trusted  
to leave you and me to our chores, to our sorrows. But,

did the horses have trouble pulling a cart in the field today? Maybe  
it was a *Gäst* who climbed aboard for a free ride. Many *Gästar*, so they say,  
and so my Father tells me, roam our farms trying to find their way. Maybe  
they have not been given a proper funeral, or maybe



it is only that the *Gäst* is someone who was lost at sea, or maybe  
the *Gäst* is one who perished in the forest and of whom the animals made a meal.

But how do we know who it is? What are we to do?

Maybe something has gone wrong here among the living  
so there appears a Ghost to help out. Or maybe the creature

is a *Spök*, a Ghost, a known dead person  
who continues their evil ways after death. Or maybe  
the *Spök* is someone whose quarrels fail to end with death.

Another story of the *Spök* is of the Dead having a piece of information  
for the living, something left they still have to say to someone maybe  
about this world, maybe about some other world they know of and we don't.

Another story of a *Spök* is of a suicide  
returning to the place where they made a waste of their life.

Sometimes it is the hanged criminal returning to the hanging tree. Often  
they have facts which would have cleared them of the charges against them,  
which would have saved their life. Sometimes

they return laughing at all of us, guilty  
of more than that with which they were charged. That  
and so much, much more, they'll laugh. Hang me again and again  
and again. I'm here, you fools, they'll yell. You

hear it in the autumn wind, particularly, their voices sounding  
to some human ears like dead and dying leaves.

But let me tell you, my Father tells me,  
that not all the Dead are treacherous to the living.  
There are hauntings crafted to put an end to superfluous mourning,  
the ghost like a mother, enveloping the mourner with comfort. When I die,  
my Father says, that is how it will be for us.

Though now it has been a dozen years and more since he died,  
a dozen years and more of extravagant mourning, my Father absent,  
stories ended. Christmas Eve, I remember him saying, is one night

when all spirits of every sort are everywhere,  
what curtain there is between the worlds of the living and the Dead,  
flimsy and tenuous as ever it is. Trolls and long dead Giants roam the forests  
and mountainsides, the Wild Hunt roaring overhead. The Dead usurp  
everything for themselves that night, including your own bed  
and your church. You sleep on the floor that night.

If the living are foolhardy enough to arrive too early to church  
for Julotta Christmas morning, they'll likely witness the service the Living Dead  
hold inside the church, a giddy party, fist-fights and bawdiness and beer and  
oratory  
loose as crazed ball lightning between the pagan and the christian Dead. To see  
this,

I promise, is to risk being snagged off by the Dead, whose business this is,  
being snared by Trolls, abducted up by Witches, or pocketed by Giants.  
They'll take you to their homes, they will, as if you were  
a dazzling little bauble of a Julklapp, as if  
you were a toy or a piece of marzipan

or an orange. Greedy as anyone is for Christmas toys,  
they will fashion you into a dart, a ball, or a shuttlecock.  
Greedy as anyone is for oranges, for Christmas candy,  
they will eat you up.

## Creation, Figment, Firmament

Sleep, little human, here is your dream!  
Suppose the universe is like a tree, is  
an Ash Tree, stars and clouds, sky, moons, and planets  
hanging deep and glittering canopy from the branches.

Great Ash Tree has three roots. Can you see?  
*Asgård*. Jotuhem. Nifflehem.

*Asgård*  
is home place of Freya, a congregation of deities,  
silver and gold palaces, and the chambered Valhalla.

Jotuhem  
is the home of giants!

Nifflehem  
is the region of darkness and cold, and of a Worm  
gnawing and chewing, chewing at the root of all Creation.

Little human, the trunk of the Great Ash Tree  
passes through the world's axis and axioms. Here  
there is *Midgård*, where you live with blaze and breath,  
ocean and loam, fire and air, water and home. No home of gods  
here. Just you and guides, instead.

In *Asgård* there is the Spring of All Life at the root of the Tree. You  
can almost taste it, can't you? Cold and silver live water.

The Spring is tended by three Noran  
who are older than the oldest Father, Mother,  
and any deity who hold sway over all other believing  
entities. Do you see them? Do you believe? If

you do not believe, what happens to the gods then?

This Noran female trinity is Urdur, Verdund, and Skuld.  
Urdur is the High One, being of Become. Fate. Past.  
Big, breathtaking, and shocking, body of light and dark.

Verdund is Just As High, being of the Becoming. Being. Present.  
She is like a mouth opening to speak. And then, speech.

Skuld, the Third, being of Shall Be. Necessity. Future. Mother of Sweden and  
womb to which we all return. Instigator and asylum for cursing women,  
and poets.

What to learn, little human! To know where you are, who, and what you  
are, and are not. Not eternal but elemental. Like oxygen, love, and stars. Here

what you need to know, you can know directly. Here,  
you may ask the icy stream, "Where  
was I before I was born?" What  
will gurgle to you will say, "Where

you will be  
after you die.  
You and all life." Here,

you may ask the birch fire, "Where will I be  
after I die?" It will crackle back, "Where you were  
before you were born, sapling, log, fire." Here

the blue breeze through white trees says, "You  
weren't. You are. You won't be. You

are not the beginning. The soil in your nailed  
can tell you this much. You are not the ending. There is

no beginning. There is no ending. What is, is,"  
says the day, the night, the east, west, north, and south.

The Great Is  
Is.

Here, to know fire, observe fire. It will guide you  
if guidance is what you need. Or heat. Or light.

To know air, fathom air. Pull it in and push it out of you.  
To know water, ask water. Do not ask gods,  
who are not even as old as water, about water.

Clouds and stars you can know from where you are. Are you not  
similar particle and wave? If dirt you wish to understand,  
fill up your hand. Dirt becomes you. And you, dirt.

Though stories of gods play among you, here,  
ideas and not gods guide you...giant ones, sometimes, gnawing  
wormy ones sometimes. There's a reason gods  
have their own realm. There, not here. Here

is great counsel, sustaining ideal, and all the guidance  
gods provide without need to bend the knee except to scoop water  
from stream, add log to fire, dig dirt. Here, you are

life among life, full breath, consummate blaze, vast ocean,  
and lush loam. Wake, and know what to ask, of whom.

## My Father's House: V. Odin and St. Paul

A squall from the nearby Kattégatt screams one night  
at the seams and sashes of this ancient red house within this pine woods,  
which has strained for fifteen hundred years to overtake this stony farm.  
For now, snug inside, my Father tells me of Odin and St. Paul.

Odin, who is gold-painted onto my bedroom ceiling,  
learned the secrets of wise blood in the Earthmother's uterine cauldron  
in the cave of Grandmothers full of the murmur, rumble, roar  
which preceded both of them, came before anything named, before names.  
It is the roar of the Grandmother's stories that is, in truth and legend, the winds,  
the wild squalls, the gnarl, spiral breath which  
carries you away on nights like this one,  
my Father says, if you are not careful. Or lucky. Or Home. It is Odin

who sacrificed one of his eyes  
for the privilege of drinking from the Female Font of Wisdom  
at the stream of the eldest Norn, and it is Odin

who then learned to read the runic characters the Norns write,  
who learned the oldest wisdom, Freya's wisdom,  
the wisdom of old women. "Like me," he says;  
"of old women like me," he says, and laughs.

My Father says that my mother will not tell me these stories.  
And I know this. She is Swedish, too, of course, he says, but  
these are not her stories, not the guides to her more modern gods.  
She will tell you more about St. Paul than about Freya and Odin  
and the tomten. My Father points to the ceiling's

painted St. Paul who, here, has dark blonde hair and dark blue eyes. Here,  
behind and above the kakelugn, Paul is depicted  
walking along a Swedish-looking road like the one  
leading to the carrot field on this farm. Here,  
somehow, Paul's road connects to a road  
which leads him to Damascus. Who painted these ceilings

and beams lived here in Sweden, my Father says,  
and never saw the Middle East, not even in a book.

Your Mother wants you to be a good girl  
and not be the dreamer she thinks you mostly are,  
not be the dreamer I was and am again telling such stories to you.

But, you know, if I had not been a dreamer I would have never left this house,  
never left this country, never met your mother, never had you. So many things  
only dreamers get done that others never do. Never think to do. Never want to do.

About where these old named gods live, my Father tells me this: To get to  
*Asgård*, the home of the gods, one must cross the Rainbow  
down to the first root of the Great Ash Tree.  
In *Asgård* there are magnificent gold and silver palaces,  
one of them being Valhalla, where Odin still lives. Upon

Odin's shoulders are two ravens  
who voyage the world, flying nights black as they are,  
back to Valhalla to tell Odin tales of all they see and hear.

Who else lives in the many story palaces and mansions of Valhalla  
is the Boar, Scharinnir, who is cooked every morning but who becomes  
whole again every evening. And Iduna, keeper of Apples,  
the taste of which restores youth to the old.

St. Paul is crazy black print on onionskin,  
and an unnamed murmur, an un-gods rumble, a pre-god roar.

The Valkyrie, my Father says, you know them, don't you!  
On your pillow your red hair looks to me like a blaze of Northern Lights.

## Giants, Trolls, and *Vättar*

### GIANTS

My Father finds me straddling the back of the ancient furry broad bull penned securely inside the old barn to keep him from hurting everyone and everything around him. I say that we were only talking with one another in the Swedish I have learned this visit, “*Vi bara prata med varandra,*” I say.

My Father has come into the barn with his red-cheeked older brother, Karl, to look for me. My Mother has not seen me all morning and has asked them to go take a look around. “A city child,” she said, “on this farm. And only ten years old”.

“So, you can talk to animals,” Karl says, turning away to feed the pigs, but I answer him anyway, “Ja visst!” Yes, I say.

My Father bends in over the bull’s pen, his steelworker hands hoisting me up over the boards, out and away from the pen, from off the bull. “They talk

back to you, you say,” my Father says in English.

He does not turn me around and dust off my red pants as my Mother would have done, but takes me by my hand past Karl, out into the cold blue air, the bright yellow winter sun. “Sort of like when you talk to me in Swedish and I understand you anyway,” I say to him. My Swedish is sparse, bony as this farm’s winter cows. “Do you know,”

my Father asks me, “that there are still Giants in Sweden! And *Jätte!* Others may tell you that *Jätte* have died out, that because they are not seen much now that they lived only a long time ago. But,” he says, *Jätte* and Trolls and *Vättar* are all around us even now.”

*Jätte*, Trolls, and *Vättar* all have families, farms, and weaknesses just like us. They work their land, tend their cattle, and brew their beer just as humans do. Feeding grain to the skinny chickens now, my Father tells this story in his admixture of English and Swedish I always understand, his voice always sweet and welcome in my head, as is the ocean in sea shells.

Once a Giant and his daughter who lived in the mountains went out for a walk. The Giant sat down to rest on a boulder but his daughter went to have a look around. When she returned happy, with toys in her apron, the Giant saw that his daughter’s playthings

were a farmer, a plow, and oxen. The *Jätte* said to his daughter, Take them back where you found them. Those are people who will come after us. Of course,

my Father says, the Giant’s daughter did as her Father suggested even though she was not happy to do so. By the end of his story, my Father

sits upon a rock. I run from pine tree to pine tree disappearing like sun behind ocean waves, quick light, quick shadow, aching to see some Abominable Swedeman, a Yeti !

“*Förstår du ?*” ‘Do you understand,’ my Father asks me. I understand nothing of what he means and ask him to tell me another story.

### TROLLS and *Vättar*

This time my Father tells me, “The difference between you and me and Trolls is that Trolls are people you don’t know. They are

“strangers neither larger nor different looking than the people you do know. They are strangers.

“Here in southern Sweden, in *Halland*, there are also underground beings who are not christian and some say” (but not my Father), “that is why they are possibly very dangerous.

“But Trolls have been in this country long before christians and to my way of thinking,” he says, “Trolls are not the ones who have done so much harm here.

“Sometimes Trolls are wanderers lost in the forest. They have no home and certainly no church. “Christmas,”

says my Father, “is the time Trolls like most to visit. Now is the time Trolls are most likely to overrun a farm, to swipe human children right out from their beds, substituting their own unwanted Troll children or other abnormal or deformed children. Trolls have been known

“to kidnap a person who becomes lost in the woods. Trolls take lost people into a Troll mountain, and even if Trolls let a person go, someone who was kidnapped by Trolls

“might suffer from lameness, like your Mother’s Father, might suffer from a lack of wits, like your Mother’s brother,” he laughs.

I look around this snowy pine woods for Trolls. Later, if I can, I will dig through snow for *Vättar*.

## Grishuvud: Pig's Head

One salted and smoked pig's head, cabbage, apple, mustard.

Clean and scrape head.

Scrape off bristles.

Brush teeth clean.

Keep open the mouth with a stick so that an apple can be placed there when ready to serve.

Place the head in a pan.

Cover it completely with cold water.

Boil three hours.

Cool in the stock.

Place head on plate.

Around the head, arrange cabbage leaves.

Place a red apple in the mouth.

Serve with mustard.

Listen.

## *Inlagd Sill*: Pickled Herring

Two salt herring

Dill

Three red onions

Black pepper

Whole Allspice

Cloves

*Coriander seeds*

*Bay leaf*

*Sugar ättika*

Skin and filet the herring, removing bones.

Place in water overnight.

Dry the filets.

Lay sprigs of dill on the inner side of the fish and roll up each one firmly.

Place the rolled fish in a jar with a layer of sliced onion in the bottom and between each layer of fish.

Grind the spices.

place the spices and sugar in a pan.

Add *ättika*, the vinegar, and boil with the lid on until the sugar is melted.

When cold, pour the liquid over the fish and cover the jar for at least 24 hours.

Serve the herring cut into small pieces on a dish with some of the onion and vinegar.

Eat.

## In the Cauldron over the Fire: *Västerbotten* Cheese

*Västerbotten* province helps holds back the most northern realms and beings – Lapland, Finland, and the Nightmares racing headlong the darkest Swedish nights.

*Västerbotten* is where hide the Northern Lights; perhaps, light itself. It is the land past which live stranger strangers than those with whom you now live. Reindeer hooves ply *Västerbotten*, and lost love, or worse – unwanted, flightful love.

Here, tears, deep-rooted tears go unheeded, unnoticed, and even still unwanted; they wax and seal a cold cheese once hot and miscooked in the cauldron over the fire. They heal into salted rind on a cheese forgiven on shelves if uneaten.

Like the men themselves, the cheese is untasted, bitter.

This was my bitter Morfar's favorite tear-soaked cheese, my Mother's father. He had to have *Västerbotten* ost at Jul or it wasn't Christmas, wasn't Jul, wrist deep as he was then in vinegar and herring, onion, and peppercorns black as his moods.

His cheese this is, but this is not his story of his cheese, the story of some attentive suitor distracting a young cheese maker so thoroughly that she kept forgetting about the cauldron over the fire, in which bubbled the spirited milk. The fire went out, was lit again, went out, was lit again, and yet the suitor not my Grandfather would not leave, though she shooed him with her cloths and yelling.

So, the cheese was unevenly cooked and cooled, cooked and stirred ever so much longer than ever before.

No, my Morfar was more sour than bitter. He would have ruined the cheese, neglected to age or not. His stories were tearful but were of his own lost fortune, as if it and he had bubbled away in the cauldron of his life. He was a butcher anyway, not a milkmaid cheese maker: more loss, if not the maid, his profession.

In the *Västerbotten* cheese's story, the ill-made cheese was not thrown away but was shelved to be forgotten. Years and Juls later, even the mice had left the cheese alone and, sweet, strong, sharp, and not unlike the maid who created it, someone braved to sample the shelved cheese. Perhaps it was the milkmaid's daughter or her granddaughter by that time.

Who knows what accidents bring forth what my Father once said,

of a Christmas dinner after Morfar had died, yet we were still eating the *Västerbotten* cheese at Jul. It is gold and crisp like the last apples. It is strong and holds its own on the darkest of breads on the darkest of nights, gritty mustard cushioning its seat on rye thick with molasses and old coffee.

## My Father's House:

### VI. Catechesis

*“Så går en dag än från vår tid.”*

(So a day passes away from us)

Before Odin and St. Paul,  
before armies,  
before laws,  
before war, writing, kings, emperors, warlords, Sweden, and Christmas,  
thousands of befores ago...

what was belief then, Father, what was believed? What  
was known? What were the stories painted to ceilings then?

Daughter! Fog, gooseberries, stones, juniper. And oak.  
How fish is caught. Which greens to gather to eat, to heal.  
Who before you could make this into that. Moonlight  
through bird wing. What is before your eyes, at the threshold  
of your ear, pungent to your nose, story handy to memory  
as dirt is to hand. Rain falls. Who is

before you, who before them, before them, before them, stories  
painted like stars in the telling on rock, on the earth's ceiling.  
Save belief for what you don't witness, can't recognize. You  
don't have to believe in what you see. Seeing relieves believing.

Is that science, Father, that knowing?

Daughter, science and conscience is cognizance that when you hear  
wind howl but cannot see it, still there is wind. You comprehend  
weather from weather. You understand wind from wind.  
See the constellations, daughter. Consider the lilies, the stars.

But, Father, if I wish to know what a birch ponders, what stories  
a wolf tells its cub, which plant to swallow to ease my pain, invoke  
ancestors dancing my brain, heal bone, toll away a stone, how  
can I know that?

You can, daughter, ask the birch of you, the wolf in your wit,  
you must remember stories you have been told as a cub,  
the greens you have seen eaten. Wolves, birch, greens, dirt, wit, and bone  
are all the same, know-how available to the inquisitive, more certain  
than gods revealed to oracles, mystics, and prophets, knowledge to scholars.

Where, after all, are principles or divinity revealed  
but in greens and bone, dirt and water? The red ox  
with its white forehead and meaty smell is as likely to charm  
and move and educate you as is parson, scholar, or governor.

Daughter, before Odin and St. Paul and Christmas, thousands of befores ago,  
before Church created belief, worship, god-authority, riches, and sin, before  
State created law-authority, armies, kings, emperors, criminals, warlords,  
and wealth,

before, when we and the herring, insects, gooseberries, wolves,  
and leaves lived among one another as tribe and food and dirt  
belief was stories was knowing was all.

Belief was stories was knowing was all.

## Goblins: Christmas Eve

Not only the Living Dead, but Goblins inhabit Christmas Eve night. Clumsy, awkward, foul, horrible, hairy beings, Goblins have long pointed noses, tufted ears, little piggy eyes, claws, and a tail.

They could be cripples or idiots or the remains of hostile tribes driven from their scraggly homes into the gnarled woods, into the forbidding mountains. How is it that Goblins disappear at dawn, as if they are made of dew? They rupture when they encounter sunlight.

It could be that Goblins are comprised of that which rises up before drunken christian Christmas eyes, the human body saturated, this time of year, with too-yeasty Christmas beer or with ill-distilled wine, or with searing *Brännvin*.

Whatever Goblins are, be certain always to carry with you something Goblins fear, something made of steel, or a cross, if being outdoors after dark is unavoidable. Preferable is to do whatever you must do outside in the dark quickly. Better yet, stay indoors at night. It is so dark for so long, winters in Sweden.

If you have to, bribe the Goblins. On Christmas Eve, put out food for them but keep them away from the house. Put the rice pudding in bowls in the woods near the streams. Such salutations fuddle the stupid creatures, and whatever else they are, they are stupid. In this we rest blest. Do not, nonetheless, let them hear you say that they are stupid. They're not that stupid.

In the southern Swedish lowlands where my Father is born Goblins are malicious though said to be funny. Stupid, malicious, and funny, it is said that a Goblin riddle asks, "Which group, Goblin or royalty, is bigger bane to commoner and farmer?" A conundrum, really, though an answer is said to be, "Whomever most recently stole your coin and cow."

Goblins at least steal openly – milk, butter, livestock, a child left alone in a crib. A human child left alone in its crib, Goblins frequently exchange with their own squally, hairy monsterbabies, leaving nothing but naughty, unruly changelings, ingrates, or stepchildren.

On Christmas Eve you can see Goblin tracks beside the garden. Maybe Goblins have dropped a neighbor's gold wedding band or something else of value, which, if kept to yourself, brings good luck to the house of the finder-keeper, though any loser-weeper Goblin will make attempts to recover the goods.

Once a talisman is lost from the house  
luck changes and always for the worse.

Many Swedes have paid for the grasp at luck  
with a Goblin's Wild Ride to dark, unfamiliar mountains,  
Goblins taking Swedes prisoner, Goblins taking Swedes away

from farm and family and ancestor, so  
from any chance at ancestral life, eternal life,

to, instead, live and die with the piggy-eyed unbaptized,  
pointy-nosed evil ones, and with all manner of dead and hairy  
pagans. Captured Swedes are ridden on the Goblin's wind

into stone halls to face malevolent Goblin kings  
who are blindingly rich, and richer even than Sweden's kings,  
rich from all their pillage, their halls opulent  
with purloined farm animals, casks of human ancestral copperware,  
your grandmother's missing silver spoons, and golden vats  
filled with fresh pink internal organs of children,  
their subterranean halls lit brightly by lamps filled with burning fat  
rendered from the bodies of hapless Swedish farmers, luckless christians.

Children, believing in Christmas and Goblins at once,  
dare the Goblins by running out into the darkest dark  
before faint light to chop enough Christmas wood for the holiday  
so that they can kindle Christmas fires to keep away  
Goblins, to keep warm. At first light Christmas Eve morning

whip vitality into children with birch twigs.  
Then, blotchy children open the front door of the house,  
welcoming Christmas, crying, "Enter dear Christmas." Be careful

to have enough wood on Christmas for otherwise the Julsvennen,  
the monster with one eye in the middle of his forehead,  
will come into your house. And stay. A look from an eye

like that can boil babies and freeze time.  
The last of enough chopped wood brings in prosperity instead.

At Christmas, the Goblin is the one who follows into your home  
the fat Santas, the Jultomten, and the other more recent and more  
well-tempered holiday creatures, follows them in with a switch  
to beat the children and to yell at them, cursing. If you put out rice pudding  
and milk for all comers, for the Goblins also put out strong drink and tobacco.  
Goblins come for the gifts you offer. They will leave nothing  
unless you are lucky and then they will leave  
you alone.



On Christmas Eve, if you are brave – or foolhardy – you  
 can bribe Goblins to leave you and your livestock alone for an entire year.  
 To do so, dangerous as it is, you must put out all the candles,  
 which, by all other rules, you must leave burning all night.

Then, into your dark house, invite the Goblins and evil spirits  
 to celebrate their own inverted Christmas. Your neighbors

will not be surprised if you and your family  
 and your dead ancestors are later found dead,

nothing left of your house  
 but a bamboozle smolder of sticks and stones,  
 your rice pudding spoiled, your ham and sausages  
 rancid, and your copper disappeared. But who are you

to believe what about what,  
 and such chances can sometimes be taken successfully.

This time of year when what of god there is stands with you  
 if ever god does, god and you warding off Goblins, maybe  
 this is the time of year to take a chance with any rite  
 which might cause or help to cause

a next harvest, with any ritual  
 which could maybe protect frail, pale skin from freezing,  
 any ceremony, custom, belief, or doctrine which might be able  
 to bubble fecundity from stony earth, any observance

which inveighs against crazy humans screaming as if they were icy winter  
 tempests, sounding as if they had swallowed keening Goblins in the dark.

Maybe there is protection against fires going cold, candles going out,  
 against evil powers which are winter dark, which cause winter dark,  
 and which inhabit winter dark. Christmas

arrives for you anyway, if you live,  
 even if it arrives in disguise and dodging Goblins and Trolls  
 and Werewolves and Witches and *Vättor* and Nightmare and *Näck*,  
 thick in the forest as the forest itself is thick. Is it

a Troll or a wolf or the clergy or  
 the Dead or the cold or belief or the dark

or Goblins garroting night into day  
 as if it were a thin throat in the grip of a leviathan?

## Christmas Eve Dinner

On the table now as on the altar then,  
 cooked and burnt offerings are piled up,  
 boards and Swedes groaning from the amplitude  
 – cakes in the shapes of pigs, bucks, and sun wheels,

rice pudding thick enough to hold a ladle upright. Before  
 helping yourself, chant an incantation, ring a rhyme, sing  
 a stinging song of complaint, judgment, opinion,

this one night of the year. Chant, ring, sing,  
 zing even Father, Mother, Father's Mother, Mother's Father. No  
 angry response from elders or gods, guides silent, too, tonight,  
 this one night: no authority's reprisal allowed.  
 Tonight. Be careful, though,

of the *risgrynsgröt*; make no hole in the rice pudding  
 because whosoever does will surely

die during the coming year. If  
 careful with the rice pudding you will live awhile longer. If

it is you who finds the bean from the pudding in your bowl, you will  
 be married within the new year. Whoever eats the most will  
 live the longest, while whoever eats the least will

surely die soon. Eat, eat this time of the year when it is now  
 sinful to take too much. At this time of year  
 you will not want for food.

On Christmas Eve, though, you are not the only one eating.  
 There will be tomten and migrant strangers and hired hands eating  
 their share of the rice pudding you have left for them in the stable,  
 in the barn, in the sheep or goat shed. Sacred to Thor, the goats will make  
 a terrible commotion until you feed them their rightful, timely dinner,

hooves through the pine planks, if  
 you do not hurry. What do they care that it is Christmas

they are sacred to Thor. The Goblins know it, the Christchild  
 knows it, and so should you. Know it and honor it. And hurry up.

Add lutfisk, meatballs, and brown beans, and a pig's head tonight  
 to eat with ham and sausages simmering in their fat; blood  
 sausage, especially. Herring pickled in vinegar, inlagd sill. Salt herring:  
 salted for months, now softened and cooked in cream thick as blood.  
 Thick butter, too, sweet, golden and white and fitted to copper molds  
 to shape it to look like lambs and pigs and bucks. Butter

to press into everyday potatoes. Sometimes you think potatoes are more plentiful even than stones on this farm. This dark night you will have butter and lots of it mashed into mundane potatoes, making them better,

butter mashed into potatoes like Sunday school lessons mashed into you to make you better, although you are not yet better and wish never to be better in that way.

Sneeze at table for a good night's sleep. The wise will know to present a gift to the house's oldest tree, its ancestral tree. Out in the orchard, shake the apple trees to insure the success of the next crop. Notice if your shadow includes a normal-looking head. If not, what will happen to you?

In memory of the Christchild, some say – and some don't – strew straw on the floor on which you will sleep tonight. Tonight your bed is for the ancestors, the Living Dead,

who will visit during the dead of these dark nights, forebears dead longer than Sweden has been a christian country, some forebears dead longer even than that, more ancient than peat or coal.

Sleep tight against one another as protection from the dead, from the Goblins, from the cold, cold floor. Press yourself into the breasts and between the thighs of whomever you lie near and, warm as you ever are, dream, dream, dream and do not think. After all, you know

why Goblins would hurt you, kill you, if they could; what good is it to speculate about what mayhem your ancestors might commit against you. It is now the night to dream of what might become live and warm and wet inside what is so cold and hard and dry. Leave the candles burning all night until first light when we will ride off to church, to Julotta.

Is it the care taken or is it the *risgrynsgröt* or straw or bean or candle or tree or sneeze upon which your life depends?

Eat as much herring, beer, bread, and pressylta as you can tonight. Eat. Eat. Eat. Eat. Eat. Eat. You will be a year older before anyone says this to you again.

Above all, during these brooding darkest nights of the year hurt no living thing you will not be eating. You are free just

now  
from ordinary worries. The gods and their guides and gods bid you this nominal peace.

## Christmas Tree, Christmas Eve

In a castle in *Södermanland* in about 1741 someone brought a pine tree inside. Perhaps

someone of that castle had been to a German town in Alsace where Christmas pine trees had long been strung with roses, communion wafers, barley sugar animals, paper shapes, and the year's remaining apples. Twelve years into the twentieth century and now you, too,

have a Christmas tree. There's certainly no shortage of pines sticking up out of the sand around your home farm although why, your Father wonders gruffly, loudly,

does your Mother bring a tree inside. Your Mother says

it is to dance around. Or it is, if your Father prefers, the ancestral tree. Or like it. "Johann," she says, "you can stay inside this Christmas to shake the tree".

With a tree or without one, dancing around one or not, you are awake through all of Christmas Eve night. Even a child young as you are dances Spirit Dance, the dance with the Living Dead of the farm, your ancestors back for the holidays.

The Cake Dance danced celebrates the fatted rye cake before it goes under the knife and is devoured.

This, too, you dance, young as you are, dancing itself dangerous, as you know it can be. During the dances,

with or without a Christmas tree, with or without a quarrel about a Christmas tree, the ancient straw goat Julbok enters, though sometimes it is the old Julgubba who enters, a Father Christmas, a Santa, a jultomten

bearing gifts for you children. Sometimes the gifts are thrown into the house, an anonymous sharp knock first to the front door. A small hard orange – perhaps a sailor brother brought it back from China and gave secretly to the Julbok, tomten, or Julgubba to give to you. Red and white peppermint candy bites,

maybe he brings. Or ginger biscuits and bits of ribbon. Marzipan for you, too, if dreams and prayers come true, that oily almond once a year potato paste candy. More things

and different than you usually get,  
 than you will ever remember getting here at Home.

To decorate the Christmas night, to burn tonight on or off a tree,  
 the farm's daughters, your sisters, have made stearin candles. Everyone

but your Father and elder brothers dance and sing. You Father says  
 trees belong outside. It is the Christmas table which is central to this  
 holiday, if anything is important, all this superstition

deep as the sky and the snow and the night outside.  
 And outside is where religion and state and trees belong.  
 He has repeated that enough times so that everyone should have already

understood his meaning. "Josefina, do we bring in the Maypole at Midsommar,"  
 your Father says. "Answer me that," he says to your Mother. "Do not  
 abandon the table for a tree," says your Father, "a dead stick  
 instead of an altar. Burn extra candles on family graves."

Tonight your Mother answers back,  
 saying that her family for a hundred years put up a Christmas tree. "Get drunk,"  
 she tells him, "get drunker and sing songs tonight. The tree will stay Christmas  
 right on past New Year and Twelfth Night until Knut's Day".

You know that you and everyone else will be punished for that tree.  
 But not tonight. Tonight you will sing and dance with your Mother  
 and your sisters, your brothers, older, siding with some god somewhere  
 and with your drunken Father. Tonight your Mother will hold your fist  
 in her hand to help you light one of the candles on your first Christmas tree,  
 but forever it will be your Father's fists you will remember.

## The Return of the Dead on Christmas Eve: Midnight, the Animals Speak

Who is out there babbling, blabbing, burbling, wailing in the dark?  
 Youngest and most sound of this farm's thin-limbed daughters, I am  
 not afraid. The other animals chatter to me every day

in my red polka dot dress, my warm red sweater. Often  
 it is me and my braids out there bellowing in the dark. If it is

someone else, a stranger or a Troll calling, speaking, saying,  
 surely I will understand them. I know what it is to bark in the dark,  
 growl and howl a music, gods, a spiderweb to the face.

At midnight Christmas Eve, the Living Dead swarm the unheated,  
 candlelit churches, my Father tells me. Who are they

that we must be afraid of them,

my Father's Mother's shadow comes back to whisper me stories?  
 I visit her grave. I can't wait to see her.

But wait, I am told, don't go to church too early. Wait  
 until first light glints open night like a lever a Giant's eye. The dark,  
 one more treacherous ocean, is nothing to be out in, this of all nights

when all Nightmares, Werewolves and Man-Bears, Witches, *Vättar*,  
*Näck*, *Jätte*, *Skogsrå*, *Gardsrå*, *Sjorå*, Tomtar, and Goblins are present,  
 exposed and quick-tempered. I am quick-tempered, too, when exposed  
 naked as hunger, ancient as the oldest of them. Show them all to me!  
 I think I may have already met them and I tell this to you, unhurt.

I may be one or more of them already,  
 an obscure ancestor nobody speaks about, unnamed  
 as everything before any of the guides or gods, perhaps  
 having once mated with *Näck* or Nightmare, Tomten or Troll.

There are so many stories. Maybe this is one of them.

The Living Dead return to their mortal homes on Christmas Eve night.  
 Cattle, horses, lambs, and pigs, kin to me as Ghosts, speak Christmas Eve  
 midnight, as I to them constantly. Of whom shall I be afraid?

Protect yourself, they say. Have a bath, they say. Clean house  
 in preparation for the return of the Dead. Strew straw on the floor  
 of the house in which you will sleep. Read it in the morning, straw  
 next to straw, straw crossing straw, straw on straw. Your bed tonight  
 is for the ancestors, the Living Dead who will visit during the night.

On Christmas Eve, put out food for the Dead. Good food. Lots of it. Heat the bath house to steaming. Before anyone called this night “christmas,” these were yet the darkest nights of the year. Then, too, animals spoke and the Dead came home to roost. Moreso then

when more saw  
and fewer believed.

Maybe this unnamed talk is Ghosts gibbering advice.  
Or pagans laughing. Or cholera. Maybe it is Trolls,  
moody and whispery for summer light and for one another. Maybe  
it is the dark wind spiraling itself into configurations of ancestors.

This Christmas Eve night I slip out to the barn  
after we have eaten starch pudding, beer, cakes, and sausages.  
I hear what is said and, like whispering to girlfriends in bed in the dark,  
when we are all supposed to be asleep, I chatter with cow and horse and pig.  
Animals say what any captive says – a certain mumble of resentment,  
along with murmured prayers for more food, for stories of other lives  
elsewhere, a certain urge for flight, a certain resigned contentment.

Tonight, in the piney, birchy woods at midnight,  
or in the barn, all of us chattering and lowing,  
or in the ancient house with the ancient people,  
living and Living Dead, I am everywhere at once.

This Christmas Eve night I am Troll’s eye dark as Nightmare.  
I make a howl like those in the throats of Werewolves and Man-Bears.  
I am Easter Witches skiing the wind, *Vättor* wet with mud, a *Näck*,  
*Jätte*, *Skogsrå*, *Gardsrå*, *Sjorå*, Tomten, and a great clever Goblin  
tricking myself out of a ride on a farmer’s fat horse. When, finally,

I am put to bed, I look up and I see myself painted in to the stories  
on my ceiling above my bed. “Father, Father,” I call out in the dark, “read me  
about when I am Freya, about our chariot pulled by cats!”

## Swedish Christmas: Candles Burning

Candles gone dead before morning portend, indicate,  
herald, signify, augur, bode, presage, prophesy, foretell death.  
Yours or maybe not yours, but someone’s death.

You had every opportunity to know this,  
to keep candles burning  
Christmas Eve through Christmas morning.

Pagan, old-Catholic, Lutheran,  
this trinity coil together like ropes of hair in an uneven braid,  
like old pattern woven into linen, like layers  
of stearin dipped one onto another. Everyone  
has told you this. Someone

older than you, someone larger, someone wearing  
a robe and praying or judging, or both. Some one  
else, some one other than you – priest, parson, practitioner –

knows and has told you the meaning of candles  
burning through this night. Someone

else, above you, is closer to the source of truth than you are,  
closer to god, to the instrument of god, to the spirits,

but you had only to listen, to observe a tradition  
which has kept your family alive these past centuries. Listen  
and obey or you will surely die

uglier or more violently or sooner than you might have  
had you been listening, observing, and obeying. If

your oats go sour, your horses go hungry,  
then your rye will go unharvested and you and your family  
will starve, lose everything and die,

for who will take you in, you stupid fool  
who lets oats go sour, horses go hungry. If

it is your fault that the gods or guides or goblins  
are displeased, that god or guide or goblin  
has visited upon you this rightful punishment, that you  
have not done enough, paid enough, prayed enough, given enough,

obeyed enough, then it is only right  
that the goblins or gods or guides shine the glare of tragedy  
brightly upon you to admonish you.

Why is it, though, you are a fool  
 when your Father was not a fool, nor your Mother,  
 nor were their parents before them  
 fools. But you are a fool.

You did not listen,  
 though you say you did. You did not  
 listen correctly, though you say you did. You  
 did not listen to the correct authority, though you say  
 you did. You did not listen correctly to the correct authority  
 and interpret correctly what was said, though you say you did. You  
 were not diligent enough in observing,  
 righteous enough in listening or obeying  
 or you would nor have lost everything, watched your family  
 starve, drown, or be carried away by goblins, flames, or winds,  
 you, a fool, and the last one standing so you can witness, helpless.  
 If only you could but keep candles burning Christmas Eve night  
 through to Christmas morning.

## Christmas Day, First Light

First one awake before first light,  
 this brooding still night of Christmas Day, must  
 invoke a god, guide, ancestor, candle, or straw  
 and its accompanying blessing. Must  
 shout to the house, shout to those awake in the house.  
 Upon awakening, each person in turn must do the same. To forget

god, guide, ancestor, and blessing  
 is to lay open oneself to whatever  
 remains in the house, the Dead, grumpy  
 ancestors, evil spirits, goblins, or worse. To forget

to say god's name and blessing is invitation to be punched  
 by every one and any one, pummeled, birched, and ridiculed,  
 and worse. Everyone in the house must

demonstrate whose side they are on, god's or yours.  
 Remembering a god's name and blessing, they say,

can bring to the lips drink and a bit more apple cake,  
 emblem of health and happiness in the coming year.

And you'll need all the emblems, tokens, signs, symbols, icons, and amulets,  
 all the representative nods from all the gods and guides and whatever else  
 that you can invoke to keep you alive through another year.

So, now that you're up, awake, and in the company of guide  
 and under the influence of ancestor, read the strewn straw,  
 as if they are Runes, on which you've slept. Do the lines of the straw  
 lie propitiously? Will your land and your neighbors' land and all the land  
 around all your land and your neighbors' land be fertile, fruitful, and productive?  
 The straw will divulge answers to the Mystery, although by now you  
 cannot change the evidence revealed in angles of straw.

Straight away, see if the candles are still burning. If not,  
 one of the people of your farm face certain death. During the coming year,  
 someone will surely die.

A few people of the farm perhaps may face death  
 anyway, unfailing cold-hearted wind penetrating roof thatch,  
 board and batten, the scrubbed, worn pine floor planking. This is not  
 much of a house, this low red ancient house of yours. Certainly

there is plenty breath of Giants and gods here to blow out  
Christmas candles, despite what you represent as your best efforts.

Certainly, there is plenty of breath of ancestors to occupy or to overwhelm  
the youngest chest, the sickest, the oldest bodies on this farm. Eat now.

No one should leave the house for church unfed, the table  
still spread with pork and ham and sausage, porridge, breads, and cakes.  
There is no reason to go hungry  
today.

And, there is Christmas beer left. A lot of it. It will take  
a lot of beer to get through the cold to the barn  
to do even a minimum of chores,  
though one is not supposed  
to work on Christmas Day

– but tell that to the livestock.

Hitch up the horses in metal and leather and bells,  
the darkness cold, recalcitrant, and loath to give in to first light.  
Gather everyone at once into a sleigh to process to church.

## My Father's House: VII. Christmas Eve Night to Christmas Morning – Julotta

My Father is piled into the sledge, he remembers,  
blanketed by his nine fat or bony older brothers and sisters:  
Anna, Hulda, Karl, Hannah, Anders, Ida, Rut.

His Mother, rosy faced from being slapped a good one,  
and from last night cooking lutefisk and rice pudding  
close at the white-washed open hearth,  
and from the Atlantic squall sling of grit beach sand and  
cold snow swiping at her exposed fresh skin, Josefina

holds the burning flare, traveling muffled, wrapped in covers she loomed.  
She sits next to my Father's Father, Johann.

Forbidding as the pre-dawn cold, face bristly as the high pines  
which surround the yard, he holds square rough leather reins loose.  
With the jostle of the saunter to church, the reins box at his raw  
cupped bare palms.

Whatever emanations are usually conspicuous Christmas Eve  
into Christmas morning, my Father can't recognize now. What is it  
which causes barnyard animals to talk Christmas Eve midnight? How  
has the foreign orange appeared round and promising in the carved heel bed  
of his alder shoes? Tomten, useful and kind, live on the land under  
the house: where are they tonight? Ill-behaved trolls live in streams  
and rivers: you can count on it. Tonight, my Father says,

all spirits seem truant,  
the night alert as a reared back ear listening hard  
for any tone, noise, or sound. Tonight, he says, whatever

might, should, or could be in the night,  
blends into the paint on the slats of the chicken house, bleeds  
into the stones cobbled together in the courtyard: perhaps the stones  
are really only so many snow-buried bald heads. The wind and the shadows,  
the swirls of angled snow are maybe

neither devil voice nor fairy gown or giant's eye.  
"Tomten never go to church," my Father boils up. "After all, they  
were here before the church." He likes them better, though  
he doesn't like them much.

Maybe he believes in them more than he believes in church gods, though  
he doesn't like mentioning any such existence. Remembering them at all

tonight seems to embarrass him in a way, but tonight he is summoned to recollection as if again to the cold Lutheran church, the harsh, unforgiving cleric.

Once again he is goaded through a knife frigid night, iron bell in the tall, open steeple, a hard, unfinished, punitive god or two baiting him, hailing him.

My Father, calm now, remembers for me that the sledge is a box which Johann, Karl, and Anders sawed from fallen pines, then set atop iron runners he himself sanded again just yesterday. Sand on a cloth, my seven year old Father rubbed and rubbed and rubbed hard against the metal. Then, he waxed the runners using candle ends and pieces to slick the pre-dawn trek to Julotta, 4 a.m. Christmas morning.

“Christmas Eve midnight the dead return everywhere. In church, maybe you’re safer. Maybe that’s how the animals talk. Maybe those dead who aren’t in church are in barns yaking and tattling and burbling as animals. By 4 a.m. maybe

the dead are supposed to be fitted back into their graves. But who believes such foolishness anymore?” says my Father.

Scumping to church Christmas morning, heavy round hooves cuff at snowdrifts, falling snow silvery in the light of the burning flare, the air absolute around us as if we were inside a shaken snow globe, or reeling within a tight school of silver-white herring.

The bell on the old workhorse accompanies the chuffing hot breathing, breath chilling, breath evaporating into the white dark, the sky the color of seals, day distant as China, or absolution, ten children packed together warm as a litter of pups aside their elders.

My Father remembers to tell me that no one celebrates Christmas, except in their parents’ house, as heathen children jumbled in with tomten and changelings and trolls. Christian parents snatch whomever they can to church, stinging and cold as goblin, spirit, ghost, empty kettle, cold candles, and the un-resurrected. “Remember,” he says,

“the *Asgårdsreienen*, the Wild Hunt, of whatever mad devils you believe in – whatever mad spirits believe in you – carried on the sharp stony winter air. As Head of the Winds, it is Odin who leads the Wild Hunt. It’s one-eyed, white-bearded Odin even Christ can’t kill who rides, rides, rides the night.”

Whatever you fear, that’s what it is, that wind. “Get out of its way. Stay covered. Goblins move about during Christmas in church or out.” He says he thinks it is the horse bell and not the church bell which has the greatest chance of scaring off wind and the devil, of scurrying the dead back into their stolid graves.

Julotta is no relief, he tells me, the Christmas service “long as death itself,” he says, “And as cold,” songs sung slow. Slow, slow singing, the church organ an icy block of frozen metal, splintering wood, and cracking bellows, stiff cold fingers panging music out of it one note at a time.

After church it’s “first home on Jul, first in with Fall harvest,” he says. Or so goes that story. The race home is as fast as the hymns and service is slow. he says, “First home, the hell with the harvest.” Home is not-church,

is *brännvin*, ale, oranges, bread, and a long Christmas nap. “Even for the children. Even for us,” he says, unwrapping me, carrying me towards home, my name the name of his dead baby sister.

“Don’t be afraid,” he says, his big blue eyes big as my head, big as any ocean anyone ever crossed, big as the sky, as heaven. “When we wake up, there will be all we’ll ever want today.” As he speaks

a biting wind rises up as if from under the snow, an oceanic draft with pointed shoulders caped in clouds, fog, and ice, trolls hanging off the grizzled white beard as if ornaments on a tree, survivors on a raft. Something speaks saying something

and maybe it’s the wind tide, the white, dark air. Maybe it’s the cows, the pigs, the night barn. Maybe it’s trolls, horses, fortunetelling birds, or ancestors. Almost

certainly who is speaking now is not my Father who still holds me, even though I can no longer see him, me, a spineless baby, unwrapped and cold though still held in still warm arms, but for how long now. It is Christmas. If

it were my Father speaking, certainly, certainly I would understand, the night itself articulate, white and dark at once, fat and bony, into the rosy bristling first light.





