Flinders University

A Monstrous Mother?: Revising the Story of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir

By

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

Guðrún Gjúkadóttir of *Völsunga saga* and *The Elder Edda* is the focus of this investigation into portrayals of 'monstrous' women in historical fiction. Through the production of a creative work, *A Cup of Dark Wine,* and accompanying exegesis, this project explores how Guðrún represents female monstrosity and monstrous motherhood within her own cultural environment before exploring how these ideas have changed over time, and unpacking what these changes mean for writers retelling stories of historical women today.

My exegesis examines ideas of gender, motherhood, and monstrous femininity in the Old Norse context, focusing on theories of gender and motherhood posited by Carol Clover in 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe' (1993) and Jenny Jochens in 'Old Norse Motherhood' (1996). I argue that Old Norse views of gender and motherhood differ from those of other early medieval European societies. As a result, Guðrún is perceived to be a less monstrous figure within her own society, but might nevertheless be considered monstrous by our Western twenty-first century standards.

I also explore the difficulties of addressing modern concepts like feminism within historical fiction and consider the significance of "accuracy" and "authenticity" within these narratives, using Lucy Holland's *Sistersong* (2021), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2019), and Genevieve Gornichec's *The Witch's Heart* (2021) as case studies. Christa Wolf's *Medea: Stimmen* (1998) is a touchstone for discussing inclusions, exclusions, and changes to Guðrún's story in my own novel. Finally, I argue for the importance of writing complex historical women as a means of moving beyond the angel/monster binary typical of such characters. My novel, *A Cup of Dark Wine* is a practical engagement with these ideas, illustrating the responsibilities and considerations writers of historical fiction have when representing historical 'bad' women.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date: 22/09/23

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A Cup of Dark Wine

Prologue

By the bright blue light of the moon, I go into the water to die.

Night on a cold day of an even colder year, and the world has been lulled to sleep. The sky is black but the sea beneath it shines. The waves thump and sigh in the beat of their swash, the pop and fizz of their foam. Above, a lone gull cries and wheels out to the horizon, where tomorrow the sun will crack itself wide like an egg and I will not be there to see it.

I have done and I have done and I want to never do a single thing again.

I am weary, I am heavy with it. I am covered in blood and I want to be clean. I want the water to scour my lungs and the soft flesh inside me, to banish into nothing every awful thing I have done and that has been done to me.

I am scared.

I tremble as the sea swallows my ankles, thighs, stomach, chest. And then, when it can swallow no more, I am no longer afraid, and my mouth opens and the water rushes in. It is greedy. It burns my throat. My body shudders and balks and then is suddenly still.

And now I can see.

I see that once I was a girl and the same wide sun was dimming and shimmering into nothing and the sky was golden. The day a horse rode into town, and how after everything was different. I see how my life was laid out before me. How it was written before it began.

I see how I was born to die.

I

1

I was born on the banks of a river, an olive smudge that rippled and wound and gushed its muddiness into the sea. In the fleeting summer, this land was green, impossibly so, the flowers waking and stretching up through the soil, the trees fat with leaves, and all creatures humming – the dippers, the squirrels, the barking moor frogs. Then a frigid wind whistled down from the north, and the world hunched and drooped into winter, stark and stiff with rain, with snow, all the colour sucked away.

If you followed the river west, you'd soon come to the sea, sometimes grey, sometimes blue, the mountains above all draped with snow and mist like women huddled in white fox fur. Turn east to the forest, where the daylight dropped golden and soft through spruce, rowan, alder, oak, and the evenings were purple, and where, at night, strange fell things lurked – the towering jötunn, the bearded trolls, the silver-backed wolves, all crying out to the moon.

It was here I would grow up.

When I was born, the midwife lowered me to my mother's quaking breast, and the women clucked and cooed and waited for her to weep, because it was a blessing – thank the gods! – a great wonderful gift, that I was angry and wailing, that my body had not slid out silent and blue.

Two years before and another before that, two boys had been born, and each one she'd clutched, but she had not wept. No person ever wept for smugness, and though a man's seed created the child – the woman's body merely the vessel – my mother thought different; nine long months and those greedy suckling boys would grow and grow and one day become kings, and was it not her womb that had moulded them?

When my mother took me, she dropped me in her lap and looked down first at the cleft between my legs, then warily up at my father. But he, Gjuki, only gave my head a disinterested pat. Daughters were undesirable, it was true, no person wished for one, but he was a benevolent king; he would not condemn me to exposure. They would make do with what they had. After all, a girl could be useful if she was beautiful – which I certainly would be, he declared, as if he could see such a thing in my red scrunched face.

But not even this prophesising could please my mother.

If he was certain, she sniffed, and handed me back to the midwife.

My mother's name was Grimhild, and she herself was beautiful, if in a sharp pale angular way, all cheekbones and black hair. My father, sweating by the hearth beneath her aloof stare, asked my grandfather if she was betrothed.

The answer was no, though this was not for lack of trying. Only a middling daughter of a lesser jarl, but she was fussy, ambitious, mocking her suitors until they scurried away. My grandfather was full of sighs. So when Gjuki asked, he smoothed his face to hide his delight, shrugged and said calmly, no, but he could have her, if he liked.

When her father shared the good news, my mother only nodded. Gjuki was twice her age, a great giant of a man with a woolly beard; a once sharp warrior gone thick with fat. Perhaps she would have chosen a handsomer king. But she was shrewd; she saw the fine red thread in his cloak, the silver brooch that fastened it shut, the bulbous rings slid down to the knuckles, and her eyes shone. Because yes, she was the pretty warm well-fed daughter of a jarl while peasants starved and shrunk down to their bones and died shivering in the cold.

But it was not enough.

He returned a month later. Then the wedding, the stiff consummation. And on the day they were to finally depart, my father hoisted her high onto his mare and away they went, until the small grey village and its small grey people could only be seen as a puff of smoke, and then not even that. She didn't take a single thing with her.

For those first quick years of my life I was of little interest to my mother. Suckled by wetnurses. Tended by thralls. She was a rush of hair and skirts that swept in and out, leaving behind only her rosemary stink. In the night before I slept I would turn this distance over, nurse it into something that grew only larger, because it is true that when we love something that fails to love us in turn, we only bite down on it harder.

And so I longed and I ached with longing, but I was never lonely; my father was one of seven, three sets of twins and him the eldest, so there were aunts and uncles and a parade of cousins, the hall teeming with children who squawked and tugged and giggled and screeched.

Then there were my brothers: Gunnar, Hogni, and I the youngest, until Guttorm rushed in with a summer storm. The rain churned the parched earth to mud, the thunder breaking so loud that it hummed through your teeth. I peered up over the lip of the bed where he lay, a red squirming round-bellied thing. I was frightened by his screams, his hunger and the black hole of his mouth. But he was so small, so strange, helpless like a bug stuck wriggling on its back. I could not look away.

When he grew, he was not like our brothers, who shoved one another into the mud and laughed. Guttorm was gentle, tender as a bruise. In the forest he crouched over wood anemone, windflower, tall thimbleweed, and invented for them names that he muttered into the dirt. And whenever he found a cold dead thing – and there were so many, too many, a bird with its neck snapped, a fish cruelly left to suffocate on the bank, a lamb born too soon and spilt crooked into the grass – he would sob and hiccup with grief.

At night we lay on beaver skins and I told him tales of the gods. Close your eyes, I would scold, and he squeezed them shut. He loved most the stories of Loki, the nimble trickster, who snipped Sif's golden locks and made her weep, who whittled the spear of mistletoe and killed Baldr, most beloved of the gods' good sons.

Why had he done it? Guttorm asked.

Well, I said, we all did things we weren't supposed to. Why, just the other day he'd been riling one of the dogs, the sweet one with the lolling tongue. He'd yanked her tail and the bitch had yelped and snapped and he'd whimpered and scrambled away. What else? Pinch a ladleful of supper from the cooking pot before it was served. Poke at the wasps' nest sagging like fruit from a tree. Put a foot on the ice when it was too new, just to see it crack underfoot.

All these things and more.

Guttorm sighed. The gods confused him, and how was he, a boy of five, to make sense of their strangeness?

And then I was twelve and no longer a child, set to work with the other women, the circle of our looms around the hot hearth, hunched over the wool, our fingers plucking, hands sliding, bodies stepping back and forth.

The world of women was strange; so many jokes I didn't understand. The bickering, the gossip. Women whispering in pairs, mouth to ear, to the one beside her and the one beside her, until finally it was my ear and into it was asked, had I heard how Estrid was caught in Arne's bed? Well, now we knew why her children looked so entirely unlike their father, who was not their father after all; dark-haired and dark-eyed, while Olaf was red-headed and freckled from head to toe.

I shook my head, no. I didn't know. And my rumour-spinning aunt would go soft with pity, pat my hand and say that one day, I would.

I hadn't known who I was until I knew these women, who fought with barbed tongues to snuff every other flame so that theirs might be left burning the brightest.

This was true of my cousins, too, all fledgling women with budding breasts. They would marry well, of course, for they were the king's nieces, but well was wealth and wealth was too often a sagging old jarl, heaving and wheezing over their small bright bodies.

In the summer we bathed in the river, then lay prone on the rocks, the sun licking and pinking our skin, and my cousins begged, would I tell them again what my mother had said? Who was the man I would one day marry? Because it was said that my mother knew a great many things, and this was one of them: a man of songs. Hero of heroes. The greatest warrior.

My cousins all sighed and I was warmed by the sun and warmed by their longing. How sad, I thought, that they must rely on good fortune. Not a birthright among them. I dipped a toe in the water for the fish to nibble and smiled.

2

We see him coming before anyone else,
his horse's hooves thunder-thumping.
and we cluster to ogle
unabashed.
Did you hear how he slew the dragon Fafnir?
Ate its heart, tore its flesh.
Other men can only dream of his strength, his prowess in battle, his wisdom, his fame–
must we go on?
If we dip down to his shoulder, saddle ourselves to his horse's rump,
we can smell his manly stink, his unbathed musk.
Leather iron dirt smoke.
It is almost too much to bear!

(And in the night, a girl dreams.
of feet tickled by grass,
of fires gorged down to embers.
She dreams of a stag stepping out from the trees,
his pelt shining,
nose gleaming,
antlers tilting.
She wants to touch him.
She has never wanted anything more.

But then
he is falling.
Then there is blood.
(Is that an arrow in his flank?)
She is gasping, trembling.
There is a golden-haired woman
and in her arms something writhes,
something with a muzzle red with blood.
The blood of men in viper pits,
and of women with daggers plunged through their flesh.
And her hands –
look down.
There is blood on her hands.)

He is so tall and broad,
His beard thick and dark,
his shield red and gold.
The world spins and night becomes day becomes night again.
One place and another, and another after that.
But now he has arrived in Gjuki's kingdom.
They are sure to hear of his arrival soon;
news travels fast, even here.
Sigurd,
slayer of dragons, speaker of birdsong.
He is coming.

3

His was a name known by all.

Sigurd. Dragonslayer, mighty warrior, legend of legends.

And this was his.

He was the son of King Sigmund, himself a son born of great turmoil, and one day in battle struck horribly dead by the spiteful King Lyngvi. Then his big-bellied wife, now widowed and weeping, saved by, Hjalprek, another king's son. Then Sigurd sliding from her womb clear-eyed and without a peep. Hjalprek sprinkled him with water and declared that none would be his equal. He was right. Years later, Sigurd avenged his father's death, defeated Lyngvi and his thousand men. Then to top it off he slew Fafnir, the great low-bellied worm who slithered through Gnitaheath, and won the dragon's great golden treasure hoard.

What else was said? That he spoke all the languages of lands known and unknown. That he drunk of the dragon's rotted blood and from that day on could converse with birds. That he was a descendant of Odin himself and all the bickering gods smiled upon him.

They said he could never die.

It was late afternoon; whaling season and the air was thick with the stink of boiling blubber and the stink of people, because the entire village was clustered outside the hall. Elbows gouged stomachs. Feet trod on yet more feet. Everyone jostling so that they might catch the first glimpse, the wink of sun in the horse's eyes as it rounded the bend.

We six stood by the tall doors. My mother frowned and fussed and smoothed the frizz poking beneath my cap, sticking in a pin and pricking my scalp. Then her fingers giving my neck one final pinch. A warning: do not embarrass yourself.

The sun was sinking slowly down, the light thick and golden and its shine making even the ugly faces look somehow lovely, all lit up.

I nudged Gunnar's foot beside mine. So it was true then? I whispered. He was really here? I'd heard my aunts spout so much nonsense it could fill the sea, but this time, it seemed, they'd been right.

My brother smirked down at me. Short and destined to be short; that's what we'd thought, until at seventeen he'd sprung up like a cornstalk, overtaking our father and complaining all the time of the ache in his legs, how it woke him from sleep. Now he was twenty years old, his shoulders wide and voice low, and hair everywhere but the patches by his mouth where it refused to sprout. That summer just gone, he and Hogni had their first raids, returning laden with trinkets and stories of how they'd whetted their swords and the ones between their legs. I'd gagged loudly over my supper.

Gunnar mocked. Who did I think we were waiting for, then? I fought the urge to stamp down on his boot.

Suddenly there was a shout from a child running back up the path: his horse had been seen! His horse was now coming round the bend! On its back a dark rider inched closer, the sound of hooves thudding in the dirt, a hundred hearts thudding in their chests.

And then finally. There he was. The crowd parted for him like a river cleaved in two by a stone.

Up on his horse his face was a thunderclap, his body tall and wide and casting a shadow that smothered ten men. My fingers itched. How badly I wanted to touch him! To stroke the scruff of his beard and the nubs of his braids. To probe his skin and feel that it was soft, that it gave when touched, that there were veins in his throat and inside them something rushed.

Then my father was booming, welcome Sigurd! Welcome to his kingdom, his hall, and their big hands slapped together like hunks of meat. My my, Gjuki said, what a beautiful horse. And indeed it was, eighteen hands tall and brown like a nut.

At last, Sigurd spoke. It was an honour, he said, and my father shivered with delight, and I did too, and so did every person there, because his voice was luscious like rich honeyed wine, dripping sweet from his throat and into our ears.

My father introduced us one by one. My mother, simpered and dipped her head. Then each of my brothers, who puffed their chests to swell themselves up bigger. All three looked like fools, like boys playing at men, because who had they killed but weak peasants and lowly rabbits and poor gentle deer? A giddy laugh rose in my throat and I bit down on my lip to trap it.

My mind was so faraway that I didn't hear my father speak my name. Then my mother hissed and I was startled and I looked at Sigurd and found he was already looking back at me, eyes dark and deep as winter night, when the god Mani in his chariot tugged the waning moon from the sky and the stars gave up and all was black and endless.

My mother kicked my ankle and I quickly bowed, grateful for the hair that covered my flushed face. When I straightened, he had already turned away, swept beneath my father's eager wing. Gjuki lowered his voice, as if they were already confidantes, and said that he hoped the peasants, with their gaping mouths, had not bothered Sigurd too greatly. He knew how they fussed, how they touched things they ought not to. There was a grave shortage of manners among them, it was true, but wasn't that the case of all peasants anywhere in the whole wide world?

As we followed them into the hall, Gunnar bent sideways to whisper and a little shiver shook my spine from root to tip. What he whispered was this: apparently after Sigurd slaughtered Fafnir and rode triumphant into the town by Gnitaheath, he had been so covered in blood, his horse sagging beneath the weight of so much gold, that the village people cried out and mistook him for a god.

We gathered in the hall, for there was to be a great feast. Already the thralls were darting back and forth, stoking the fire and rolling in pot-bellied barrels of ale, all the while their bodies hunched over, like fearful dogs waiting to be struck.

My father sat wide-legged in his chair up on the dais, my mother and brothers clustered around him, and I perched on the step by his feet. Sigurd stood before us. Even in his dull leather vest, he somehow glowed like hot iron, and I burned a little with shame, because our hall, which I usually thought so grand, with its blazing hearth and soft lambskins hanging from the walls, suddenly felt dim and dirty.

Hands folded over his belly, my father bragged of the harvest just gone, and of his two new ships which sat swaying in the harbour downriver, at the sea's gaping mouth. He could have sat at a bench, across from Sigurd, but he was an insecure man; he would sit above this man, if only for a moment, who towered over him, half his age and twice as rich, but already more famous, more beloved than any king.

Gjuki threw up his hands and said that of course we'd all heard of Sigurd's exploits. Those travelling bards loved to sing of his adventures – couldn't get enough, it seemed. Each one who passed through our hall had some new verse to sing.

Then the poets had very little to sing about, Sigurd said wryly, and those huddled by the hearth twittered with laughter.

My father's smile was large but false. It seemed Sigurd could also outdo his charm, though this was not so hard. So what, he asked, changing the subject, were Sigurd's plans now? Where was he headed?

Sigurd shook his head and said he had none. No destination to speak of. He was led, rather, by fate.

Fate. I could see my girl cousins swooning and clutching one another in the dimness.

Well, my father said, and clapped his big hands together, then he should be welcome as long as he wished. His hearth was Sigurd's. His stores, his thralls. Whatever he required, he would have.

Then he flicked his wrist and a thrall lurched forward like a ghost from the shadows with a jug and horn. These were for my mother, who instead touched my wrist and asked loudly, why didn't I pour Sigurd a drink? Surely he was thirsty after his journey.

It was my mother's honour to pour for Sigurd, and so I hesitated, but she narrowed her eyes and I shot swiftly to my feet, taking the vessels and hastening to where he stood. The liquid sloshed dangerously in the clay jug. I was suddenly terrified that I would trip over my own clumsy feet and send it all spinning over the floor.

He took the horn and I carefully poured. And when he took his first gulp I dared to look up and examine his face. So close now I could see where the dust kicked up by the horse's hooves had stained his cheeks. What was more, I could smell him: the over-ripeness of sweat and the equine funk of his steed. My brothers often smelt the same, and I would pinch my nose and beg them to bathe, but smelling Sigurd, I only breathed deeper. He could roll like a pig in the shit and muck that caked the streets and I knew, I still would.

I stepped back and he thanked me, and from the way his voice dipped I knew he'd forgotten my name.

Gudrun, I said, my voice catching like a fishhook in my throat.

Then he smiled and there was a sudden warmth in the hollow of my ribs. Gudrun, he said.

The hall glowed amber, full of shadows and smoke and the smell of wood charring, of meat roasting. Fat from the crisped hides of suckling pigs dripped and popped and spat and sighed. Men and women drank and laughed, stumbled and slurred, ale spilling and slapping the floor.

The hall's great doors heaved open and shut as men staggered out to piss, and the cold night crept inside and fumbled at ankles, only to be stamped out by the bodies dancing.

My cousins were gathered around me, draped over the benches like scarves and babbling like geese. About Sigurd, of course. They stared, then giggled when he glanced their way, bickered over whose eye he'd caught and tossed their heads to show their slender swan necks. There had not been so much excitement since our cousin Agnes had been married two years prior to a stocky nobleman from a kingdom nearby. He was forty – not so old as they came – and you could see he'd been handsome in his youth. But his hair was grey and, what was worse was a rumour spread by a woman he'd sought to bed in his time at our hall. He'd had some trouble rising to the occasion. Looked down at her bare breasts but not a twitch. Perhaps he preferred chests a little flatter than hers, someone whispered.

He'd come for my hand, but my mother had heard the gossip and her nostrils twitched. She shook her head at my father and that was that. He'd wed Agnes instead, for that was my poor cousins' lot.

I couldn't help but watch Sigurd too, from the corner of my eye, sucking the meat from blackened ribs, his fingers black with sooty grease. He wiped the fat from his mouth with the back of his hand and my stomach stirred.

The hour was late. The crowd was blurring with the drink, words sliding into other words. Men pulled women onto their laps and the women slapped their shoulders and leapt away. Most though were thralls, who couldn't resist. My mother had long since gone to bed, and so now even my father had a girl perched on his lap; a pretty quivering thing, whose eyes stared at something far away, or perhaps nothing at all, as his thick hands rubbed her thighs.

Sigurd did not seem to notice these women who adorned the hall like many-coloured jewels, who paced back and forth, hair loosed from their caps and batting their lashes so hard they might fly away.

He was betrothed, my cousin Gerde murmured. Or so she'd heard.

Oh really, I mumbled, my voice bland as soot, though inside my stomach sank like a stone through water.

Gerde drank from her cup and nodded, a smirk on her face. Yes, she said, to the shield maiden, Brynhild. She turned to sit facing out from the bench, pleased as a wasp that had delivered its sting. Had I really not heard?

I had heard, of course, many stories of Brynhild – so many they became blurry, ran together in my mind. She was the daughter of King Budli, who ruled a neighbouring kingdom, and was so wealthy and so vain that he had once commissioned a tapestry to be woven in his

own image – a tapestry so large it could not be unrolled and fit within the breadth of his entire hall, and so was resigned to be rolled up and moth-eaten and squeezed into some storeroom, never to see the light of day unless it was unfurled outdoors. Brynhild was not famous for her vanity. She was known for her skill in battle, her gleaming golden sword that razed men from the earth. And her beauty, of course, which was a weapon itself, as it was said that men, so stunned by her face, would drop their weapons and be easily killed.

Well, I said, that was good for them.

Gerde's voice burst out from her in a half shriek like a snare snapping shut: don't pretend! She'd seen how I stared at him. They all had – though I pretended I didn't.

She pushed at my shoulder, a little too hard, and I hushed her. Must she speak so loudly? I was only curious, that was all. And she was too. She'd made that clear.

Of course, she tittered. Curious was one word for it.

I ignored her. A small sour ale-burp pushed silently between my lips. Well it was strange, wasn't it, I said, to see him here in our hall, the legend made flesh and all that. It was difficult not to look.

She repeated the word: flesh, drawn out like she was tasting it. Across the room Sigurd gulped from his cup. His throat bobbed and my skin grew hot.

Gerde set her cup down. Maybe we'd be lucky, she said. Maybe he'd consider taking a second wife. She raised her eyebrows. Or even a mistress.

I rolled my eyes and she laughed, then grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet and we skipped into the crowd, dancing and stamping to the lyre's jaunty song. I closed my eyes. I was spinning in circles and spinning with the drink, and I felt good – it felt good to be between all those hot damp bodies. I made a quick bargain with myself then, that if I counted to ten and didn't peek, I would open my eyes and find him watching, and that watching would feel even better. But when I finally blinked and looked over to where he'd sat, the seat was empty and he was gone.

4

Days spun into weeks and my mind was always wandering away. A worm had crawled through my ear into the soft meat inside, and that worm was Sigurd.

He spent his days with my brothers, doing the things that all men did: sharpening their swords on millstones. Scraping barnacles from the hulls of the boats. Riding out into the forest to set snares and hunt, then riding back as the purple dusk came down with the bodies of rabbits, small and stiff and dangling in bundles like onions, or the carcass of a deer slung over the horse's neck, its tongue lolling from its mouth like a fat grey slug.

Each night, my brothers would stamp their filthy boots over the clean swept floor and demand their supper and with their mouths half-full tell how Sigurd had shot five rabbits – all clean through the eye! And a little stoat too, scrambling up a tree that he would strip for its fur.

Envy nipped at me like a fly and I swatted it away. I was stuck indoors with the women. This was bearable, at first, for all they wished to talk about was Sigurd. Every day another woman insisted he had smiled at her on the street – but not a smile of politeness, no, don't be mistaken. It was a smile of invitation, one that said come hither. Then some of the women would hum with delight, and the others would sneer and tell this woman not to flatter herself, that such a thing could not possibly be true, because in fact he had smiled that way at *them* just the other day. And the woman's face would fall and then grow angry and they would bicker themselves blue. And so on and so on.

One girl, only fifteen, confessed in a rush that she had spied on him once as he bathed in the river. She'd only gone down there to wash her one good shift, she said. She hadn't followed him. But he'd stripped down to nothing, and she couldn't run away for fear he might hear her and know that she'd seen. So she'd waited there, all those minutes, until he was done

and had dressed himself and was finally gone. She grew entirely pink and added that he was built like a horse, then giggled and quickly covered her mouth to hide it. One aunt toppled from her stool from the shock.

After a while though, even they grew tired of my questions. They'd moved on to newer gossip: a woman widowed when her husband was thrown from his horse and his neck was snapped like a branch. A man who'd been caught stealing milk from his neighbours cows in the dark secret hours of the morning.

My brothers snapped their fingers in front of my blank face and asked what was wrong with me. I asked my cousin, had she seen Sigurd today? He'd not appeared that morning for breakfast. She sighed, and did not even turn her blonde head from her loom when she said, no, she hadn't.

I grew careless with my work. My mother, weaving beside me, scolded me for how I tangled the thread. How slowly and stupidly my fingers moved! she said, exasperated. She slapped my hands away and said, go find something else to do, useless girl.

So I went to the animals to pass the time, because I could ask them questions and not care when they didn't answer. I tore clumps of hay from the bales and leaned over the rails of their pens and held them out. The cattle snuffled my palms with their soft wet noses and the kids, with their velvet ears, chattered and sprang about. A dog trotted in, close to whelping, its teats sticking out pink from its round belly. I scratched her ears and asked where she lived, but she only panted happily, then waddled away.

It was one of those days that I saw the stag.

The sheep had been let out to graze and I lay amongst them. In the sky the sun had smothered the clouds and so I had taken off my cap so the heat would not make my scalp itch, and my hair was spread out over the grass. I had been dozing, the sun on my face, and I knew my mother would scold me when I returned home red and burnt, tell me how ugly my nose would looked when the skin peeled off, but I didn't care. I woke when a little breeze prickled my skin with cold, sat up and squinted my eyes against the brightness of the world. Then my vision cleared, and there it was: standing at the treeline, its body half in shadow. Then it came fully into the light and it was golden brown, its antlers curved like branches. It was magnificent, but there was something wrong, something about its great body standing out in the field, about the space that surrounded it. The blood began to beat in my ears. I was afraid and I didn't know why. Its nose twitched. There was smoke in the air. It looked at me and I looked back, and then suddenly, as if it had grown tired of so much looking, it turned back to the forest, the trees ushering it inside. Then all of it was in the dark. And then it was gone.

I stood on the beach in the pale yellow light.

Soon twilight would come down, and all would be dipped in blue.

Sigurd sat on the sand, close to the water. For now, he was still; he hadn't heard me come over the dune and stand there breathing, each breath a silent question: would I or wouldn't I?

But for the first time, in the great openness of the beach, before the vastness of the sea and the flat line beyond, and sideways to the sand stretching on and the rocks further down where the waves crashed and spat their spume, and away from people, anyone at all, he did not seem so big – so difficult to contain with only your eyes. For I saw then in his solitude that he could never be so big as the great wide world.

I decided I would.

I called his name and his head whipped back. I stifled the strange high laugh that welled in my throat. How silly he looked, bundled there on the shore in his cloak and startled like a child. He said my name back, and it was not an invitation, but still I lifted my skirts and trudged down the slope. I felt giddy, my head full of air. How bold of me, I thought. Too bold, perhaps. But it was too late now.

I went to sit down beside him.

Be careful, he said. The sand was damp.

I waved a hand and tucked my skirts beneath me. But still when I sat I could feel the chill stinging up from the ground, cold down there and cold in the air now that the sun was slumping towards the horizon like a bright tired beast.

There was a silence, then, stretching thick and cramped. I'd been puffed up with courage before, but now I dithered. Surely I'd had something to say? Something witty, something interesting.

The tide was turning, I managed, nodding down at the water, the spill of the waves creeping slyly towards us. Not witty, I scolded. Certainly not interesting.

Indeed, he said, tapping his boot on the sand. You could see where it reached by what it left behind. See? He gestured to the soggy weed, the shells, the driftwood scattered higher up.

And I nodded thoughtfully, as if this was something I'd never thought of.

Overhead, a gull circled and screamed at us, as if we might have food but were hiding it away. A tiny crab pushed free through the sand and scuttled sideways towards us; thought

better of it and returned to its hole. Far in the distance, there was a white burst of sea and the black plunging shape of a whale breaching and sinking back down.

I breathed in and let it sink down in my chest. Released. What was it like? I asked.

He smiled in the flat way one does at a child who has asked a silly question. What was what like?

The serpent, I said. Fafnir.

Ah, he said, and then his spine straightened and he cleared his throat and began: he was a great worm, spitting poison as he slithered. The fight had been fierce, but in the end the dragon was no match for his skill with a sword, and when he thrust the blade into the beast's belly, it spilled vile blood and –

No no, I said, and his lips drew together like a hole tugged shut by thread. I realised then that perhaps I'd been rude, and so I smiled, because I knew that men preferred a woman who smiled. What was it *like?* I asked, for you see, we were told these stories as children, tales of trolls and jötunn and dragons and dwarves. But they were only stories, and this was just another. No, tell me how it was to feel it breathe and breathe its last. To smell its stink, its blood. To meet its eyes and know that it knew things he never could. And when it choked and died had he felt it? A strange hollow sadness, to have killed something so magnificent.

He was quiet for a moment. The first words came slowly, as if he was drawing them up from a well deep down. It smelt of rot, he said. The blood. So red, it was black.

He looked at me to see if he should go on. I nodded.

Its breath was hot and foul like char, like soot. Its skin looked tough like leather, ridged over the spine, but when he'd touched his hide its scales were smooth like polished glass. And when he sliced through its chest and tore its heart free, it was the size of a boulder and still pulsing, for hours after, as if it still believed it was keeping the great snake alive.

And its voice?

Voice? he repeated.

Well yes, I said. It hadn't spoken to him?

His eyes looked into mine, squinting, as if a fog wafted between us and he was trying to see.

Yes, he said. He'd spoken, of course, but. No one had ever asked him what the beast had said.

Something pleasing like smugness flared inside me. So then, what did it sound like?

Like nothing of this world, but perhaps of the next. Like the gods, he imagined. Like mountains moving with a crack like stone splitting and the earth shuddering into being.

And what did it say?

It had warned him, Sigurd said, not to take its hoard.

I frowned. Why? What did it say would happen?

Then he smirked, because he was Sigurd, the dragonslayer, and no creature, however wise, could predict his fate.

What Fafnir said was this: that if Sigurd took the hoard, then it would certainly bring about his death.

We met often after that.

Once, a week later. Another the next. Then three times the week that followed.

No agreement was made; he went and I came, and that suited me fine, because a spoken thing was brought into being and so became a thing that could be squashed.

He liked to talk, liked the sound his voice made as he sent it out into the sky, but that was okay, because I did too.

He told me tales of his travels. Of men with swirls of dark blue imprinted on their skin. Of the nomad Sami, who herded reindeer, and whose gods were strange and different to our own. Of the things a man saw out on the sea: great fish with rows of jagged teeth that looked up at you from the water and hoped you might slip and tumble in. Waves taller than hills. No. Taller than *mountains*. Selkies who appeared as lovely women and called out from the rocks, so that you might steer your ship over and dash into to sinking. He told me how it felt to kill a man, to feel his body grow limp like a glove with no hand to fill it.

It seemed there was nothing he hadn't seen, I said.

Almost, he replied. But the world was vast, vaster than I – for how old was I? Seventeen? Well, I couldn't possibly comprehend it – and there was more to discover.

I looked at him sceptically. Stories trickled in from the east, from lands steamy and scorched, of people with skin dark like walnut shells, an exotic creatures, nasty creatures, and with these stories came fine trinkets, fragile glass and buttery silk, precious jewels that bulged like ripe fruit. And the world must come to an end, mustn't it? Surely there was little more to be found.

He looked at me then with something like pity, the way one looked at a dog born with three legs.

Perhaps, I said quickly, if he sailed far enough then he'd reach Jötunheimr, the land where the giants dwelled, and at that his frown turned to a smile and he nodded and lay back on the sand and began to tell me of the time he had disturbed one such giant in its cave: plunged

his sword into its great eye, and when it fell dead to the ground the mountain rocked like a boat bobbing on a wave.

I felt sorry then, for the giant, who had been surprised while cooking its supper and shrieked when it was blinded. But giants were like squalls, Sigurd assured me. Wild and unreasonable. Impossible to bargain with. He would have been killed. Then he sat up and looked me full in the face and for a moment I thought he might grasp my hands. If a giant appeared, he said, right then on that beach, he would not hesitate. He would kill it before it could harm me.

I turned my head to hide the blush that streaked down my throat.

Weeks unravelled. Then months. And then the summer was done, winter slowly creeping in; frost on the morning grass and damp mists hanging over the river and nasty little winds that pricked you like knives. I shook out my thick fur-lined coat and tugged the hood over my head to shut out the cold.

And still Sigurd came. He brought pieces of birchwood to whittle as we spoke, flicking the blade with his thumb and revealing horses, birds, lumpish men that he tossed into the sea. When the women were too busy gossiping, I would climb quickly into the loft and swipe dried cod from the rafters for us to nibble with cold lips.

Did he ever get lonely? I asked one day. Evening was coming down, the air so crisp it seemed it might break, and Sigurd was building a driftwood fire, striking his flint and coaxing the flames to flicker lavender with the salt. In between the towns were stretches where a person might not encounter another for days – only the deer leaping away and the twitch-nosed rabbits scampering from sight and beneath him his horse plodding steadily on, breathing out mist into the quiet empty air. I envied him that. My whole life I'd been surrounded by family and the villagers who streamed steadily into our hall, seeking my father's judgement on their feuds and affairs. It was so difficult to escape the stink of bodies and latrines and meat and smoke, the chatter and shouting, the clanging of metal, the lowing of animals, and my brothers bickering and shoving one another. It was a wonder that people didn't lop their ears off for want of some peace.

Sigurd thought for a moment, then shook his head. No, he was never lonely, because one should never be lonely in one's own company, and I'd be surprised, he said, that many people were not as interesting as they themselves thought. Why, he would take solitude any day over some of the conversations he'd had with supposedly *interesting* people.

I said nothing, suddenly small, suddenly wary of my bones sliding inside of my skin and the way I sat and how strange it might look and my breath whistling through my nose. Was *I* interesting? More so than my brothers, perhaps. Than my cousins, definitely. But that was no great feat.

Sigurd fanned the flame, almost lost it, then blew on it with great puffs, as if he could breathe it back to life, and finally it surrendered its fight, sputtered and steadied.

Of course, he said, not everyone was boring. He looked up at me and smiled. Me for instance. He liked talking to me.

And at that pleasure trembled in my belly and I bit down on my tongue to stifle the joy inside me that threatened to spill out.

That night my brothers pouted over their supper, because Sigurd had abandoned them and now their days were slow and boring once again.

Perhaps he'd taken a lover, they speculated.

There was something in me that wanted them to know, something small and spiteful that would delight in their dismay. But then the secret would be known, and in being known might be spoilt. And there was pleasure too in the secret, wasn't there? Maybe even one that was greater – a satisfaction in watching them wonder, in holding that warm thought close, all to myself, that I had been chosen over them all.

5

We padded through the forest, picking herbs. My mother and I. The trees were half-dressed, their leaves dropping to the forest floor and gagging us with the smell of their rot.

My mother knew well the things that sprouted from the ground and the hidden powers they possessed. She could mix tinctures that sealed wounds shut or seared warts from the skin, draughts for fertility and ones for good luck. She knew how to pull things from the ground: what should be tugged from the roots and what leaves must be picked. If you blindfolded her and waved those things under her nose, she could tell you each one: sage, wild garlic, thyme, rosemary. And in watching her I had taken such lessons and learnt them myself.

There was dirt under my nails and my back was sore from stooping over, digging through the red to find the green. My basket was full, sagging from my arm; mostly with mushrooms. I walked by a cluster, stopped and peered down, but the little things were too pale, cap gills stem, all of it white, and so I stood and let them be. There had once been a thrall who, aching with hunger, had stumbled into the woods and spotted the fungus, stuffed a fistful into her mouth, then hurried back to the hall, a little more full. She'd been found the next day, out in the storehouse where she'd been sent to retrieve more butter, slick with her own vomit and shit, and muttering butterflies dancing in her eyes. She was dead not an hour later.

When my mother and I went foraging, we rarely spoke; only to remark on the work before us. But that day my mind was churning; there were thoughts zipping through my head like wasps.

Mother, I said.

She was crouched low, her skirts trailing on the ground, inspecting a tight cluster of speckled mushrooms that in their huddle seemed to cower beneath her gaze. She grimaced at my voice, croaking through the quiet forest. Yes, daughter, she said.

I cleared my throat, planted my feet in the dirt like roots, as if I was scared she might blow me away, and asked, when would I marry?

She didn't bother to look at me, violently plucking a mushroom from the soil. That, she said, was for my father to decide.

If I was bolder I would have scoffed. Hah! As if I didn't know what sway she held; my father could refuse her demands whenever he wanted, but always in these matters he seemed to yield. As it was, I rolled my eyes because she had still not turned, and said, but *who* would he choose?

My mother held the mushroom up to the pale light. Who would he choose? She shrugged, put it in her basket. That she couldn't say.

The rosemary I was holding was now crushed and growing sticky in my fist, its scent squeezed out between my knuckles. I swallowed the saliva pooling beneath my tongue. Wasn't it obvious to him who the perfect match would be? My voice slid a little high at the end and I pressed my lips together to catch it before it soared.

Finally she looked at me. And who, she asked, might I suggest?

Sigurd.

His name hung there between us like fog and inside my heart thumped a nervous little cry; I'd offered it to my mother and now waited to see if she would squeeze.

She was silent a moment, then said slowly that yes, Sigurd would be a fine husband for me, it was true. But I knew as well as she that he was promised to another.

Then she turned from me, as if to signal that the conversation was done, but my face was hot and I cried out, had she not always told me that I would marry a hero? My voice was shrill and whining and startled the birds, who rose from their branches and flapped quickly away. And not only a hero, I continued, no, but a *great* one, a man who in his splendour trod upon the heads of other men who called themselves heroes and stamped them into their rightful place. Were those promises only stories? Was she not the seer that she claimed herself to be?

This last a little barb that I threw in the hope it might sting, and clearly it did, for she turned and in three great strides was upon me, basket swinging wildly from her elbow. She pinched my cheeks and wrenched my face up. Her fingers pressed into my teeth, and I was afraid I might laugh, because I knew that I'd won.

I *would* marry a great hero, she hissed, and she *had* foreseen it - portents in dreams from the days after my birth, and dreams of my own, or didn't I remember? One whole month at the age of five when I'd dreamed each night of golden stags. Who was I to question her? I was only a child.

She released me and turned away. I would leave it in her hands, she said. She would not have me meddling in matters I did not - could not - understand.

Then she returned to her mushrooms, ripping the rest from the earth and striding away, deeper into the forest, and from the way she stomped through the leaves, I could tell I was no longer invited to follow.

I rubbed at my jaw, at the crescent moons where her nails had dug into my skin. I stood beneath the trees as the quiet returned, touched them and smiled.

I asked him to tell me about Brynhild.

We were walking in the forest because he had spent that whole day on his horse and couldn't sit a moment longer; his legs were sore and needed to be stretched. And so we strolled between the same trees where just the day prior my mother and I had fought. I swallowed, suddenly anxious, as if he might somehow be able to hear our voices still echoing.

He was surprised by my question. He'd never offered and I had never asked, and so it had been easy, too easy, to pretend she didn't exist. But I was curious, in a strange morbid way, like a child poking at the carcass of a long dead thing. My father wasn't wise, but the one wise thing he had said was that it was better to know your enemy than not.

From the beginning, then. How did they meet?

She was cursed, Sigurd said, kicking at a bright little mushroom. Crossed the wrong god. Odin himself, to be exact. In a battle between two kings she had slayed the wrong one, the one to whom Odin had promised the victory. A mistake, but. He shrugged. It was known: the gods were like children, thin-skinned and prone to tantrums. So Odin swept in, pricked her quick with sleeping thorn and declared that she would marry. It was Sigurd who woke her.

I blinked. She didn't wish to be married?

Oh, she was stubborn, he said. She lusted not for babies and other such womanly things, but for battle, for the swiftness of it and the heart thumping inside and the glory that came after, the hot sweet rush, and of course he was the same, so he couldn't begrudge her, but still.

But still.

His voice dwindled down and he looked to his boots, as if they held the answer to some question.

But she had promised to marry him? I prompted.

He nodded slowly. Yes. A bargain had been struck: Brynhild would be wed, but only to a man who did not know fear.

And that man was him?

He looked at me as if to say, of course. Yes, he said. That man was him, his vow sealed with the ring Andvaranaut, a famous ring from Fafnir's hoard.

The pain I felt was new to me, though most pain was. I'd felt so little in my life, and nothing before like this; not the sharp slap of surprise but an ache, slow and worrying at my insides. It was horrible. I curled my hands up into my sleeves and dug my nails hard into my palms to feel the difference.

I opened my mouth to say something foolish, something desperate, then thought better of it, but he'd heard the breath in and turned to look, so instead I asked flatly how long would he wait? A question good for nothing but rubbing salt in my own wound. I felt hot now with displeasure, irritated, as if it was he who had broached the subject.

Again, he shrugged. Whenever it was fated, though that was for the Norns to decide, not him. But I shouldn't misunderstand; he missed her, he did, her beauty a salve to all the bleakness he encountered. But out there was a whole wide world and its torrent of men. It called to both of them, and neither could say no.

And there it was: a sweet seedling of doubt. Never mind that he missed her; it was still not enough, it seemed, for him to race to return, and I, a girl of seventeen who had never loved and been loved in return, thought smugly to myself, what kind of flimsy devotion was that?

I was grinning and jumping in my skin and I skipped ahead into the amber leaves, piled like snowdrifts, scooped them from the ground and tossed them his way. They floated down and he smiled.

So what was it like then, I asked, to not know fear?

He considered, then shook his head. He could not say; he had never known any different. How could he describe a colour I'd never laid eyes on? Such a thing was impossible.

He could try, I said.

And on we walked.

The days passed as days do. Shorter now, the sun fleeing the sky and the night flooding in. Now I wore my woollen mittens, and in the mornings I breathed out and saw it hang in the air. In the forest, an ash tree loosed its final leaf.

I found Guttorm by the harbour, sharpening his sword. Boats bobbed in the water, their hulls creaking. A gull snatched from a net a fish too big for its body, and sagged and wobbled as it flew through the sky.

He didn't look up. Shouldn't I be off dawdling somewhere? Strolling with Sigurd?

I wasn't surprised that he knew; he'd been watchful as a dog, even as a child, and wasn't it true that the quiet ones always saw what others did not?

Yes, he said, he'd seen us. But I shouldn't worry. He'd never eavesdropped.

This he said without bitterness and it disappointed me a little. Truth be told, I would have enjoyed his jealousy, savoured it, because my secret was not the shadowy shameful sort but the smug kind that one hid like stolen fruit, too good to share.

I crossed my arms and said it was a pity he hadn't - he might have learnt something important, because surely *this*, and I gestured down at his hands, this mindless work only made fools more foolish.

He smiled and said not so much as weaving did, and I smiled too and we were friends once again.

I sat down beside him and watched as he dragged the sword down, the scrape against the whetstone. There were scabs on his knuckles from who knew what. A fingernail gone black. Not five years ago if he'd suffered so much as a scratch he would run to me sobbing, and now he had cheekbones and scabs I'd never seen.

He wouldn't marry me, he said suddenly. Sigurd, he meant.

I felt a sting between my eyes like a wasp's, but I'd become quite skilled at hiding what I felt and my face barely twitched. Who said I wanted to marry him?

Guttorm sighed and pressed his finger to the blade's edge and said that he saw how I looked at Sigurd. Did I think him blind? And everyone else in our hall for that matter?

I winced. I looked to the sky for something, though I didn't know what. Looked down, then said that it was to be expected that my brother could not understand what a friend was, as I knew he didn't have any, and a shadow passed over his face and I knew that I'd hurt him.

He blinked, then steadily said, Sigurd was promised to another. Whatever I believed. He paused. I was wasting my time.

Promised to who? I snapped. To Brynhild, who would snub love in favour of war? Ha! Only the gods knew when she might return. Their marriage was doomed before it began.

Guttorm laughed. What did I know about marriage?

I stood and kicked the brown mud at his boots. How confident he was! Barely fourteen and his prick bone dry, and yet somehow he'd come to know all about marriage - more than myself in fact! Tell me, I said, under what rock had he happened upon such wisdom?

His mouth opened sharply and moved but his words were lost, the world all silenced, because there, over his shoulder, was Gunnar, down the hill, perched at a ship's prow and tugging at ropes. And there beneath him and all around I saw it: the commotion, the great cluster of boats bobbing and milling in the harbour like a great herd of cows, and the crates and bundles being boarded by men like ants hauling crumbs to their nest.

Where? I stuttered. Where were they going?

South, he said. My brothers three, and Sigurd of course. To trade. To raid. He waved his hand. Yes, the raids were not usual in the winter, what with the icy seas and the swells and, on the worst days, the barely being able to see your own nose for the snow and sleet. But they would pass through the fjord before the ocean froze over. Journey south, then east, where the weather was more forgiving. He stood and sheathed his sword. They'd be gone a long while. Many months in fact. Possibly longer. After all, they were in no rush to return.

My mouth was wide like a fish about to swallow a hook.

Had Sigurd not told me? Guttorm asked.

I shook my head and felt that a hand was slowly squeezing my throat.

No, I said. He hadn't.

Two days later, they sailed away.

They carried wool and furs, barley and iron. Everyone gathered to watch them go. Women sobbing. Dry-eyed women for whom this was the hundredth time. Jealous old men who wished they were not so stuck, that they could go out and die in a glorious way.

My mother clutched Guttorm tightly. His first voyage. She'd never been apart from him for more than a day. He pulled himself free and raced onto the ship.

I'd said goodbye to Sigurd that morning, outside the hall. I couldn't sleep the night before, and the night before that, so sad he was leaving. Then beneath that sadness some excitement had stirred, because what would happen when we said goodbye? Would we touch? I shivered. There would be some kind of embrace at least. And so until morning, I nursed that hope, that small consolation for his leaving.

But when the time came, there was nothing. No touch for me to covet the whole long time he was away. I said goodbye and he slung his sack over his shoulder and in his eyes I could see he was already gone.

The ships began their slow slide downriver, Sigurd at the prow, eyes shielded by a hand against the bright sun. The boats cut through the greenish water, churned towards the river mouth. In only seconds they slid round the bend and were hidden, and so we didn't see them slide into the choppy sea, raise the sails to snare the wind that would drag them south. We did not see them become small, the size of a thumb, then the size of a gnat. Then nothing at all.

Sigurd left and winter came.

The wind cut the last leaves from the trees and stripped them bare. Their gaunt limbs reached for the grey sky, pleading.

The descent into darkness. The fight to keep it at bay. The hearth fire kept burning day and night. The oil lamps guttering, spitting, threatening to blow themselves out. And in all that firelight, the hall was full of shadows.

The animals were brought inside, and though they lowed and stank, their warmth was welcome, their bodies hot and giving off steam, the breath of every creature rising in a mist that clung to the walls and slid wet down to the floor. We woke and slept in darkness. There were no crops, nothing green from the earth to eat, everything outside burned by the frost, buried by snow. We pillaged the storehouses, ate dried pork and fish and goat and flatbread, our jaws sore from the chewing, so much chewing, our tongues shrivelled by the salt.

When the weather was kind, we stepped outside, poked our heads into the cold air like turtles peeking out from their shells. We stuffed our boots with moss around the socks to warm our toes. In the short daylight we took shovels and cleared paths to the byres, the storehouses, sweating inside our coats, our shoulders crying out, then growing, swelling into new flesh, new muscle, and soon we didn't breathe so hard.

When the wind and sleet screamed us inside, we squeezed all together by the hearth and wove and wove until we were cross-eyed from staring at the yarn. And then we sat. Ate. Went to our beds. Time stretched into one long endless thing, so that when the trees finally began to bud with their fragile green shoots, it felt as if we'd lived a single day, and within that single day, a whole year.

The sun reappeared and apologised meekly by straining through the clouds. We went outside and closed our eyes and let it pat our heads, kiss our cheeks and chins. A whole crowd of us, all quiet but smiling, and sending those smiles out to all the living things: the plants ready to push out from beneath the soil, the animals huddled in their winter holes and beginning to twitch. The world finally waking up.

It was a boy who spotted them. He flew from the shore, raced into the village, huffing and puffing and shouting: finally! They had returned.

We tripped over ourselves to run to the harbour, stood there waiting as if we'd never left. I peered into the distance, wishing my vision could bend around corners and see miles ahead. Then they came round the bend, a fearsome fleet, gliding upriver. The children skittered along the banks, cheering and waving and the men waved back.

My brothers were the first to leap to the deck, their faces flushed, hair long and pulled back from their faces and their beards overgrown. And I was happy to see them, yes, happy to see that they'd returned alive and with all four limbs – and Guttorm in particular, though he pulled up the leg of his trouser to show where a little chunk had been hewn from the flesh, gouged out by a broken branch sticking up from the dirt. My mother tutted and stroked the wound.

All this was good. But where was Sigurd? I was searching, my eyes flicking between each boat, between the people embracing and children tugging at skirts and, just once or twice, a woman shrieking because her husband had not come home.

Then I finally saw him, rising out of the ship and stepping heavily onto the deck. He pushed through the crowd, and I did not know until I saw him that I'd not been expecting him to return, to have been tempted away by the world, and I felt a relief so great it raced through me in a warm, shivering rush.

He was looking out over the many heads, at the people all reunited. Then he found us and over he came, grasping my father's forearm and kissing my mother's hand. When he saw me, he said ah, and reached into his sack, pulled something free and pushed it into my hand.

I looked down. It was a stone. Flat and bluish in its blackness.

No, he said, not just a stone, but one taken from the beach they'd moored at the very day before they'd turned around to come home. This was a stone from very *very* far away.

I stroked it with my thumb and the rock felt hot. My joy was radiating out through my fingers, but I would not let it show. I smiled and thanked him and said I would keep it close, somewhere by my bed. And so that night I put it in my mouth and rolled it around, tasted the salt all over and sucked it clean. Then I put it beneath my pillow, so that it was close as could be, and I closed my eyes and began to dream.

6

We see that Grimhild has a plan.

We have peeked beneath doors and lurked in shadows.

We know she's plotting things in that storehouse,

where she mutters all day,

and she pounds and dices and slices and boils those herbs and bones,

and grinds them to dust,

reviving them with water and blood.

For Sigurd is not like other men who would ride into their kingdom,

kneel and ask for their daughter's hand.

(As if they deserved it)

(As if they too had songs sung in their name)

Ha! We would scoff at them too.

So Grimhild goes to her husband, slings her arms around his neck and

in a voice treacle-sweet

she says

Sigurd is the greatest hero ever known, and there he was, of all the kingdoms in the world,

and would it not be wise to offer him their daughter so that he might stay?

So he might offer his allegiance?

So he might be bound to them?

King Gjuki squirms in his seat,

and says of course.

Of course he's thought of such things, but there are other offers.
Grimhild sneers and we do too.
Weak man. Pathetic man. Which proposal could usurp the dragon slayer's?
Certainly not one that has come from an old wheezing men who has seen better days,
or his son like a feather that might blow away with the wind.
She nuzzles his thick neck.
Imagine the support, all those who would come when he beckoned.
Power is everything, and his mind is slower than hers,
(and ours)
but even he knows this.
And so eventually, he nods,
and Grimhild is satisfied.
She's clever, we'll give her that.
But there's one obstacle still before her: the shield maiden. Brynhild.
We raise our eyebrows, nudge one another.
One of us giggles nervously.
All of us anticipating what is about to unfold.
Oh, Brynhild has beauty and power, and her bravery is well known,
but doesn't she know you can't just leave your things lying around?
Someone might steal them.

7

We feasted to the voyage's return. Or as much as we could, because winter was only just finished, the stores run dry. Two pigs were quickly slaughtered and put on to roast. Herbs were dried and revived with water. Someone rustled up some of the nicer cheese that had fallen behind a barrel and been forgotten. And there was never ever a shortage of ale.

I scooped the meat into my mouth, another bite and then another, too quick, but how good the juice, the slippery fat, after so much that was dry. My belly cried out. I would have a stomach ache before the night was done.

My brothers were quiet, all the stories wrung out of them. They sat back calmly and looked at the women going past. The women looked back. One girl with a little mole on her cheek walked by slowly and smiled at Guttorm and he went suddenly red and choked on his drink.

It was loud in the hall, the noise and the drone of men abrasive after so long in the quiet dark, hearing only the sweet high voices of women. Every ten minutes or so, another drunk would stagger to their feet and raise another toast, though the reasons for these pledges became less clear as the night dragged wearily on.

Sigurd took his cup, drank it all down and reached for the jug, but my mother put her hand out to stop him.

Please, she said. It would be her honour to serve his drink. After all, it was he who had watched over her sons, and now here they were, returned to her still breathing and better yet, with no limbs lost - not even a finger! A marvel, really. Thank the gods. She smiled and flicked her wrist and a thrall skittered swiftly away to fetch a new jug, hurrying forward then slinking back. She poured until Sigurd's cup was full and he nodded and drank until it was all gone.

It was true, my father said, waving his spoon, mouth full and grey with half-chewed pork. His wife did not flatter Sigurd. No, if anything her praise was wanting, given he'd returned so laden with loot the ships sagged in the water. And yes, his sons too, of course, brought home in one piece – and one now a man, now he thought of it! He slapped Guttorm on the back, and Guttorm inhaled his stew and began to splutter.

Gjuki laughed and took up his cup to drink. Set it down and sighed. Ah. Well. Guests came and went, their bellies full and his pockets the lighter for it – the host's burden. Certainly he'd never had a guest who'd so earned his keep. He leaned forward over the bench and said so tell him, then, what could he offer the great Sigurd, the man who wanted for nothing, to remain there in his kingdom?

Sigurd smiled, tapped his fingers on the wood, and finally said that depended, of course, on what the king had to offer.

My father cleared his throat loudly so that all in the hall would set down their cups and lend him their ears, and when the slurping and chatter had ceased he stood and said, what had he to offer? Only the king's ear; the command of his armies; the richest lands and the men to toil upon them. A pause. The silence grew and grew, until he finally said: and of course, his daughter.

Gudrun.

The world tilted, as it sometimes did when I drank too much and lay spinning on my bed. Everything slowed down, then suddenly sped faster, my heart shuddering and beating hard, oh no oh no. I wondered how swiftly I could run through the door and into the sea and swim and swim, or perhaps just sink, sink down so my ears would be covered and I would not hear his polite refusal: oh, he meant no offence, but he was betrothed you see. Would he look at me when he spoke? And if he didn't, would that be better or worse?

But then he did speak and what he said was that he accepted.

Then it was settled! my father crowed and clapped his great hands together, and I was certain I'd misheard, but I hadn't, I realised, the thought slowly growing. Then my father raised his cup and my brothers theirs. A whole sea of cups raised. My head was filled with air. I looked to my mother, her thin arm held high, and saw that her eyes were black and gleaming.

To Sigurd! my father boomed.

And all the room joined his cry.

We were married a week later.

But surely we must wait a little longer, my cousin Ingrid said. In only a month the world would be fully green again. And who wished to get married without the sunshine? She could never do it. When she was married it would be the middle of summer and she would do it barefoot in the grass and have flowers in her hair. She sighed happily.

Easy to say when she had not a single suitor, another cousin remarked, and Ingrid's face suddenly fell and she bent over her spindle and didn't say another word.

This was what I heard all week long and on the wedding day as they crowded around, fussing and slapping at one another's hands. I hissed because someone had stepped on my foot, and another had fastened a brooch to my front and pricked the skin beneath. Then my mother pushed aside the curtain and they were suddenly still.

Leave us, she said with a flick of her wrists and they scattered like geese.

She sat down beside me, tugged at the limp end of my braid and sighed. This would not do. She brushed my hair, pulling hard so that my eyes watered. Then she began to braid, her fingers softer now, her breath fluttering against my neck.

I closed my eyes. And in a half-whisper, afraid to startle the beast, asked, did she remember her wedding day?

Oh yes, she said, her voice strange and hollow. She remembered it well. Then she paused and I held my breath. But she would say nothing more. She took a pin and slid it in place. Then on my head she placed the band of silver she'd worn herself, and her mother before her, and her grandmother before that; a whole long line of mothers and daughters, stretching backwards through time.

My hands were shaking. Every day of that whole long week, I was happy, my shock transformed into arrogant certainty, into something I could grasp, because why shouldn't Sigurd want to marry me? Then night would come and I would lie stricken in my bed and think of her: Brynhild. Not one person had said her name aloud, and so instead it finger-tapped itself up my spine and into my skull. I dreamt of her each night and each night was the same: I walked through a dark forest, and though I never saw her, I knew she was there, hidden behind every tree, all at once.

My mother looked at my hands. She reached down and for a moment I thought she would hold them, but she only slapped them from my lap.

Stop that, she said. Then saw my face and softened. Oh, I should not be nervous, she said, shh, no no. She put a hand on my shoulder and through the pale grey fabric I could feel it was cold. No, she said, I mustn't fret. There was not a thing in the world that could take this from me.

Then came the ceremony, going by in a rush, the hall, strung not with flowers but with branches of spruce, because the saxifrage and poppies were yet to bloom. The air was thick with warmth from all the bodies crammed in. A sea of pale faces. A few of the women wept and none from happiness. My underarms began to prickle with sweat.

Then I was quickly swept up the long narrow aisle, ushered onto the dais, and there was Sigurd. All other things were suddenly absorbed from the room; all sight, all sound. My own body, gone. His beard had been trimmed and brushed with oil. His eyes beneath his brow were black-rimmed and shining.

We exchanged the marital swords and he took my hands so they could be bound together with ribbon, his fingers thick and startling in their warmth. When the goat's throat was cut, it squealed. The thin birch twigs were dipped in its still-warm blood and spattered on our faces.

There. It was done.

The whole crowd cheered and it echoed to the rafters.

Then came the feast: heavy pots hanging low from the ceiling and steaming with stews of lamb and pork; fatty slices of duck and whole fish boiled with butter and sage; creamy brined cheeses with thick rinds, red and black berries, and bread to soak it all up.

I was so hungry, hadn't eaten all day, but had not swallowed two mouthfuls before I was pulled into the crowd, for there were people to greet – important well-wishers invited by my father, mostly to boast, all touching my hands and saying how lovely I looked, how lovely the feast, everything lovely, but still I could see the thought spinning in their eyes, that yes I was a king's daughter, but who was I really? Was I worthy enough? Was I worthy of marrying such a hero?

Another woman came to me, her hair red like daybreak. She took my hands and kissed my cheek, her breath very sweet and smelling of mint. Her lips slipped against my earlobe and she whispered, well well, wasn't I the luckiest girl? Then she smiled and stepped back and took the arm of a man.

My father introduced them: Jarl Hakon and his wife, Thora.

Hakon was handsome, though his nose was askew, had been broken perhaps, and his eyes slightly too small and pale for his face. But Thora was radiant; not the radiance of perfection no, not with the crooked tooth that peeked out from beneath her upper lip, and the lips themselves being quite thin, and her face sprinkled with freckles like the spatters of mud thrown up by a horse's pawing hoof. But there was something warm, something that shone out

of her like the midday sun, so that when she laughed it rang through the hall, and all those who heard peered over with a strange and curious delight.

I was grateful, I said quickly, that they'd come to my wedding, though I certainly wasn't, didn't know who they were, did not know half my father's guests.

Well it wasn't every day they attended a wedding so auspicious, Thora said in her high clear voice, and when she smiled her gums gleamed pink.

My father's smugness was hot like a fever. He told us then how he and Hakon had come to meet, a tale I forgot as soon as it was told, because noblemen were common as flies and often as interesting. When the men stepped aside, Thora touched my arm.

How pretty I looked, she said. My hair, my dress. Tell her, how did it feel to be Sigurd's wife?

How indeed? My thoughts were slippery and darting in my skull like minnows and I could not catch them.

She sipped her drink, then tilted her head like a bird's and said, an easier question, perhaps - a silly one, even. Did I love him?

Yes, I said quickly, yes I did, because what else could that hot sweet rush between my eyes and down deep to my stomach be but love?

She smiled and said ah, she could see it. It glowed out from me like moonbeams, and who could blame me, for everyone who crossed his path came to love him at least a little. Then she bent closer and said in a low voice that I should know that people were jealous. She could see that half these smiling women were really sour like bilberries, and there were those who would make me feel I was undeserving. I must not let them.

Then the men were finished and Thora stepped back.

Congratulations again, she said, and if ever I was in Denmark, I must be their guest. In the spring was best, the flowers so lovely in bloom. Absolutely. No, it was no burden. I would be most welcome.

As they were absorbed into the crowd an ache winked into being beneath my ribs. Women populated my life like birds did the skies, and I would need more fingers than I had to count all my cousins, yet how many could I have truly called a friend? How many would not be a little pleased if the next day I tripped over and cracked open my skull and left Sigurd widowed and wanting for a wife? Not a single one. I felt suddenly very small. Alone. And angry for it, because these were not feelings one should suffer on their wedding day. But then I was tugged at by another pot-bellied nobleman and the feelings were quickly stifled. I was

Sigurd's wife, without a care in the world, concerned only with peeling off the fingers of these ugly leering men. And I was certain I would never see Thora again.

So suddenly it seemed we were both ushered from the feasting, from the song and dance, and into our bedchamber. The curtain in the doorway was pulled back, then draped once more. We were alone, yet not, the feasting sounds still ringing but out of sight. It was bright and blazing in the hall, but in there the light from the tapers was soft and flickering.

The sweet wine I'd sipped was dragging my limbs, pulling me down, the heaviness so good. I was not afraid. I tugged my dress over my head; how relieving the air on my sweat-damp skin, all that horrible smothering fabric gone. Then I lay back on the bed and the room spun and my body was no longer heavy but flying away. There would be blood, I remembered suddenly; thought then of my cousin Agnes, who had wailed through her own consummation as if being skewered, which I suppose she was.

He was undressed now too, trousers and shirt and belt on the floor. I could smell the river water he'd bathed in and see the scars on his bicep shoulder back thigh, a pale pucker below his collarbone that I thought I might like to bite. He lowered himself onto me and I almost gasped with the pain; snapped my teeth together and waited for it to pass, because surely it would, or how did women bear it again and again, and mercifully it did, and then I was strangely stretched open, a wide vessel. Was this what my cousins had meant when they spoke of pleasure? No they'd spoken of tongues, they'd spoken of rising, of crashing, and that was not this, but there was something, something that slipped away when I reached for it. In his throat there was a humming growing louder, everything suddenly faster and painful again. I bit down on my thumb.

And then it was done.

Was that it? I thought. So quick. And there had been no lightning sparking through my body as I'd been told it might, but the feeling was still not entirely unpleasant, I supposed, the seeds of it there, waiting to grow.

After, he lay back and caught his breath. Outside, the sounds of the feast had grown quiet, dwindled down to murmuring. I shifted my head slowly from goose down pillow to chest, from chest to shoulder, nestled warily there, not used yet to the feeling of his body, of any body beside mine, pleasing but strange, did not know what was allowed, for I'd never been so close to another, not since I'd been weaned from my wetnurse, and his skin was so different from hers – from my own – not soft and plump but thick with hair and knotted and hard.

I breathed in. Did he ever wonder what it was like to die?

He laughed a short quick laugh. Oh, I'd missed it, missed his face all those months, now golden in the lamplight. What a morbid question, he said, to ask on our wedding night. Then, after a pause, said of course he had. Tricky to avoid when warriors bore down on you like beasts and men wailed twisted in the mud, their blood drunk up by the earth. And even before that, when he'd killed his first rabbit, his first breathing thing, shot it through the eye with an arrow and sat and watched until it stiffened and became cold and had known then that he was no better - that when he too died, it would be no different.

Didn't it frighten him? I asked. A useless question. He was fearless; hadn't he told me so? Hadn't the songs and the poets who wrote them praised that very thing? But what of the pain of death, the scent of meat close to rot and the blood and the blackness?

He frowned. Honourable men were not afraid to die. No, they welcomed death. *He* would welcome it, would welcome meeting Odin again.

I sat up and looked down at him. Again? I asked. Was he telling me a lie? Or did it make a strange kind of sense? Had the great god felt an almighty tug at his loins as Sigurd's body slid into the mortal world?

No, Sigurd said, it was true. But just the once, when he was a boy. He was to choose a horse for himself, a steed, led the herd into the forest and drove them out into the deep river. It was there Odin found him.

Really? I said sceptically. Well then, what did he look like?

To tell the truth, he said, just old. A very old man, face wrinkled like a days-old apple and his beard frost-white. But it was the eyes: one puckered, the other gleaming - that was how he'd known. But really, he'd always known that Odin watched him. Even then. For when he walked in the forest the ravens were always perched and brooding in the trees above, and they never scattered. Only watched.

He tucked his hand beneath his ear and his eyelids fluttered closed. I thought he would say no more, but then he asked, did death frighten me?

I breathed in to say no. To impress him. But I was thinking of him lying cold and dead and the cruel wound that thought began to scratch open in me, and so I said into the dimness, sometimes. Sometimes it did.

Well, it shouldn't, he said. What was the point? He yawned and rubbed his face with his knuckles. Whatever my fate would be, the gods had decided it long ago, when I was but a speck inside my mother's womb. Then he rolled onto his side and I could not see his mouth when he said, we all died one day.

But that was easy for him to say, because I knew as well as he that he would never die. Not truly. His name would live on, a blazing fire that had scorched the earth and scarred it black to its marrow so he could never be forgotten. And I only his wife. As my eyes grew heavy and I sank down into sleep, I wondered, who would remember me?

8

The springtime world bloomed in all its vivid colours; spun into summer and with it, a streak of bad luck.

A sickness swept through the village, the adults all struck with a dry hacking cough that clung to the chest and lingered for weeks. But the poor children it took hold of with a terrible fever, their small bodies hot from the sun and then too hot from sickness, yet their lungs so wet that they struggled to breathe. Twelve little bodies laid to rest in the ground. The earth parched and hard to dig. The men sweated and coughed because they too were sick. Grateful in the end, however terrible it was, that the dead were only children, the graves far smaller and quicker to dig.

Then an aunt who bore triplets, all three boys, and all of them dead, born too early, too small, and on one's back a sack where the spine poked through.

Then a blight that struck the barley, the green husks spotted with brown, the fields all burned to stop the plague from spreading. Smoke one warm night rising up into the clear black sky, and the fire sizzling, devouring, until it had nothing more to eat, every last stalk burnt to ash.

But all this I scarcely noticed, because I was in love. And love itself is an affliction, a sort of blindness.

We lay without blankets on a mild quiet night, and I asked him to tell me about his family.

Silence. I turned my head sideways to peer up at him sleeping, but his eyes were open.

He never spoke of them, I murmured.

A noise in his throat. That, he said flatly, was because he had no family to speak of.

But every person had a family, I said. A mother, a father. He did not come from nowhere. Yes, I knew his father had. Well. That he'd died before Sigurd could be born. But what of his mother? And his stepfather, Alf?

He didn't know them, he said, fostered as he'd been by Alf's father, King Hjalprek. His mother, dropped him on the king's doorstep, then had gone far away. She visited, once, but would not touch him. Looked at him, then looked away. Still, she'd loved him deeply. Or so he'd been told. Though, he added drily, what measure of depth the tellers' used, he was not sure.

I couldn't imagine why she'd abandoned him. Surely even as a child he'd been radiant. Surely the seers had crowded her birthing chamber, frantic and white-eyed with their visions and spewing their prophecies, and hadn't she wished to witness their fruition?

The answer was no. He'd brought her too much sadness; an unbearable amount. That was what his nursemaids had whispered when they thought he couldn't hear; when they'd tucked him tight into bed and doused the tapers, then huddled by the hearth with needle and thread. His ears peeked out from beneath the blankets. A reminder, they murmured, of her husband's death. After all, it was as he lay dying, his entrails spilling into the dirt, that she'd touched her own belly and known she was with child. They clicked their tongues. Shook their heads. How could she love a child born from such heartbreak? Three sad sighs. She couldn't.

I swallowed. And King Hjalprek?

Sigurd plucked the blanket beneath him. Hjalprek was kind, yes. Put a roof over his head and clothes on his back and food on his plate and so on. But he was no father. Did not teach him the lessons a father teaches his son. No. It was his tutor, Regin, who'd taught him such things. To read runes, to play chess, to hunt, to fight. A short hard laugh through his nose. And he was quick-witted, sharp as a blade. Sigurd paused. He had loved him.

His eyes were shining and with a little rush of panic, I thought he might weep. But he only sniffed and his eyes hardened and he said tightly, *loved*, for it was Regin who had goaded him to slay Fafnir, who had coveted the serpent's bright gold hoard, plotted to murder his dear foster son. Sigurd sighed. It was regrettable. But what choice did he have? His hand was forced. What choice did he have, but to kill him?

Sorry, I said quickly, but he waved his hand. It was but a memory now. An echo. All in the past.

There was a silence so long that perhaps he thought I'd fallen asleep, but I was only turning him over, every sad word, the cold secret desert hidden inside.

I would never betray him, I said finally, pressing the words firmly into the dark.

Well, he said with a laugh in his voice, he had killed every person who had ever betrayed him, so for my sake, he hoped not.

And though I laughed too, I knew the truth of what he said, and even drawn up beside the warmth of him, I shuddered.

It was a cold wet autumn, the warmth snatched away. Bright leaves crunched underfoot, then grew soggy and black with rot.

World trickled in from afar that a new battle was being waged between two arrogant kings. A story old as time: one seeking to snatch the lands of the other, though a quiet little rumour flitted about that they'd once been friends – that the war was not waged over property, but was over a lover stolen long ago. But who could say, when the news came so slowly by sea or horse or foot, so that by the time it arrived, it was already overtaken. My father was not worried; the war didn't concern us, the battle too far away, our allies not involved. But still at the dinner table he picked the subject apart like a crow did a corpse. How dull, I thought, squeezing the soft white of my bread, because how different was this war from any other? Men were like children, not knowing how to use their words, instead crying and flailing about with their swords. If women were kings, I thought, then the wars would be far fewer.

But still I saw how Sigurd's ears pricked up like a dog's, how he fidgeted in his seat when my father dusted the crumbs from his fingers and said with a pensive sigh that for every day they sat there, all of them warm and full-bellied and unbloodied in the comfort of their hall, out there fighting over the churned up earth, a new hero was born.

One night I sat on the bed's edge, took off my cap to brush my hair, and said to him what I knew: that he wished to join the war.

For a moment he was silent, and the silence swelled and grew until he said, with no great enthusiasm, that no, it was not his war to fight.

I looked at him, laid out on the bed, his face half in shadow, and said he forgot that I knew a lie when he spoke it, and that was certainly a lie, his voice flat like the moon.

He flung an arm over his eyes and sighed and said he hadn't fought a war since his battle against King Lyngvi.

This was a tale I'd heard a hundred times: the one in which Sigurd avenged his father's death. Gutted an entire roaring army of men. Not a single one spared. And when finally he reached Lyngvi, his arms were bloodied to the shoulders. Then, like all men who opposed Sigurd, the king died.

I beckoned to Sigurd and he came and I took his long hair in my hands and began to braid.

Well, if not this war, I said, then another?

Of course, he said, hard and swift, he would not become an old man, slowly desiccating until a breeze blew him into death. No! Give him a sword through the heart any day, and until then give him the possibility, for nothing made one feel so alive as coming so close to death.

My fingers suddenly stilled. Teach me, I said.

He laughed and my cheeks grew hot and then his laughter dwindled into silence and he said, oh. I was serious.

I yanked his hair. Yes, I was serious. What? Did he not think I would make a good shield maiden?

No, he said carefully, he hadn't said that. But had I ever even wielded a sword?

Well, no, I said. Wooden toys, yes. No weapons of steel. But what did that matter? If he was such a great swordsman then surely to teach me should be no great difficulty.

He turned and looked at me like a mother at a child who will not give up the thing hidden in its mouth. I looked calmly back until at last he nodded and said, fine. If that was what I wanted, then fine. He would teach me.

The sword was so heavy.

I had watched men spar with quicksilver blades, so graceful, and that grace startling, because men were heavy like rocks, all muscle and fat and hair, lumbering creatures that belched and groaned and itched and dragged the weight of themselves through the world day after day. But with the sword they were nimble, darting like rabbits, like birds. They spun and twisted and leapt, the clash of blades a song and they the dancers.

I did not dance. I barely walked. The sword dragged my arm down with its heft. My shoulders ached and my wrists cried out. My breath wheezed through my nose and blisters bubbled and burst on my palms. Both hands on the hilt. How much strength I would need to wield it with only one. And I wasn't graceful, my limbs tangled and clumsy like a foal's.

At first, he was patient. He waited when I stopped to catch my breath. Helped me to my feet when I was knocked to the dirt. Then one day I fell, and I was panting and so hungry and asked for a moment to rest, and he suddenly said in a frustrated voice, that in battle there was no rest! They would be coming, one hundred angry men! They would run at me, they would holler and the white spit would fly from their mouths and all around me would be wailing!

They would drive me through with their swords, they would spill my insides into the dust and leave me choking to death in the mud! And what would I do then? Would I cry?

I thought I might, my eyes hot and stinging and I turned my face into my sleeve and pretended to cough. I did not ask for rest again.

And slowly, I grew stronger. The sword was not so heavy. At night my muscles twitched and in the morning they would ache, but in a pleasing way, and when I dressed I would cast my hands over my skin and feel hard flesh where once there had been only softness. Pulled apart and stitched together again. My body made anew.

Then something else was growing.

It was morning and I was carrying wool from the storeroom, all fat and grey bundled up in my arms, to be wound into thread on the women's many spindles, when suddenly my belly began to churn. Bile rushed up, sour in my throat. My stomach lurched and I heaved my porridge in a lumpy puddle onto the frosted grass.

Women often said they knew – that they felt some prophetic twinge in their bellies as the thing took root, but I was missing whatever maternal instinct they possessed, and three mornings passed in the same terrible way before I finally understood. By my bed, I tugged my dress over my head and looked down at myself. Too soon to see. But when I fumbled for my breasts they were tender, and when I counted back through the months I couldn't remember when I'd last bled.

I hurried to the hut where the men butchered the animals. The air inside stank of slaughter, thick with the fug of wild frightened beasts, throats slit and the blood drained into wooden buckets. A fly dove into the pool and spasmed and drowned. I thought I might be sick again.

Sigurd's eyes widened. Was I sure?

I nodded and he fell to his knees. He reached out for my stomach. His hands were bloody and would leave stains on my skirts that I would need to scrub and rub with salt, but I didn't care. Something was budding inside me.

I took well to pregnancy. Truthfully, though, I'd not ever heard a woman complain. Except during the labour. Then all women complained at the tops of their lungs. Even my poor aunt Kara, who through all six pregnancies had been unable to go anywhere without a little bucket to vomit into. She'd only wiped the spittle from her mouth and smiled weakly and said that it was only fair, given her good fortune that each child she birthed had come out a boy. But were they thick-skinned or merely afraid? One aunt warned me quite solemnly that if I

complained too much then the gods would think me ungrateful and my baby would come out with a tail or third eye.

Fortunately, the sickness swiftly passed and then, my body all purged, it began to grow. My breasts, which had never been large, swung pendulous beneath my tunic, and my belly grew round like a full moon – so large I feared the skin could not stretch any more, would split open down the middle like an overripe cherry. My mother mixed wormwood and mint to banish the nausea and sent the thralls to reluctantly rub soothing balms on my spine and my ugly swollen ankles.

At night, Sigurd stroked my belly and whispered into the flesh that our child would be a giant among men. And I smiled and nodded, but inside was so nervous that I was sure even the child inside me must be curled up with dread. Sigurd demanded a son, as all men did. But what if I birthed a daughter?

But but but, my mother mocked. Absolutely not. There were ways, she said, secret tricks that a woman might use to help a child sprout something between its legs: a bowlful of sour unripe bilberries; the misty wet eyes of six fish; a terrible muddy stew made from the guts of a stillborn lamb. Each one worse than the last.

In the final weeks, my body grew too heavy, too clumsy to work, my fingers thick and fumbling and my breath sometimes becoming trapped somewhere in my throat. The midwife commanded me to stay in bed.

And so in flocked my aunts, my cousins, all chattering and prodding my belly, and each one with her own solemn word of advice. Was I listening? they asked. It was important that I listened.

Oh, they must forgive me. I was so tired, I said, and closed my eyes.

Then my mother hurried in and shooed them away. Shuffled herself stiffly onto the bed beside me and fussed at the furs draped over my heft.

It wouldn't be long now, she said, not long at all, then added that I looked a little pale. All that time indoors without the sun had left me peaky. She pushed the hair from my brow, a little roughly, her fingernail catching my skin, but still some longing long-repressed welled up inside me.

I was afraid, I said softly, afraid because that day or the one before, one of my aunts had thought it prudent to warn me in her singsong voice, as if I didn't know, of the mothers who perished in childbirth, their bodies ripped open and bled dry - oh and one could not forget the babies too, born purple and grey and with cords about their necks or their lungs dense and

useless as sacks of grain. Then she patted my belly and the baby inside me wriggled deeper, recoiling from her touch.

But my mother, who had squeezed seven babies from her body, four breathing and three limp, and lived to tell the tale, only shook her head. I shouldn't be afraid, she said. They were nervous old women. And anyway, would I not die for my child? Would I not rip myself in two if it meant my baby would live? Of course I would. She smiled. I mustn't be worried. I would never do anything so important as this.

The pains began in the dark hours of the morning. By the hearth, bent on all fours, I moaned. The thought swept through my mind that this was how the sows and the mares and the ewes all felt: all those cold eyes, the hands fussing between my legs, the poking and prodding and urging me to push until I could push no more, until I was weeping from the pain and saying I could not. The thralls mopped my forehead and winced as I screeched and slapped at their hands and cursed them and every other person who stood in that room, because my insides were being wrung, twisted and tightened and knotted like rope.

Push, my mother urged, but I couldn't, couldn't muster the strength, the will. How did other women do this a second time, a third, again and again, the suffering endless, the agony endless, it was horrid, it was madness, then *push* again and with one last scream, a gasp, there was a slippery sucking release and my baby slithered from me at last into the harsh bright world.

A girl, my mother said, nostrils twitching, and the midwife set the tiny wriggling thing, wailing and milky with the ooze of birth, into my arms.

I looked down at my daughter, with her yawning red mouth and swollen eyes and love bloomed bellflower bright inside of me, a great warm swell soaring up from my stomach and into my throat.

Then Sigurd was ushered in, and that love turned suddenly sour and my skin prickled with dread. I clutched the child close so that for a moment her body might be hidden, so that she might not yet be called worthless.

But Sigurd only cupped our daughter's soft skull in his great wide hand and said in a knowing voice that she would be a great beauty, just as my father had once said of me.

And so she would be; so lovely she would enchant strangers and stun the scowls off the sourest of faces. But such things lay far in the future, and then she was only minutes old and formless, fleshly and wrinkled and curled up like a snail. Nine nights after the birth she was named: Svanhild.

Then a year flew by and I was again with child. By the hearth one day an uncle sighed and removed his boots and socks and began to scrape at the thick yellow skin on his heels with the blade of his knife and I was so overcome with dizziness that I had to go to my bed. Then the second day I smelt the fat and grease popping off a lamb as it roasted, and ran so fast through the door to vomit that I almost tripped.

I did none of those silly things I'd done before. I went straight into the forest, where not a soul would hear, where my whispers would be taken up and swallowed by the rustling of the trees, and asked the gods to bless me with a son.

A labour of twelve long terrible hours. In the sky the moon rose sickly and yellow, the room all dark but for the close circle of light around my body. A scream so loud that the animals sleeping in the barn all lifted their heads. And finally he was born. A boy.

His name would be Sigmund, I panted, sweat sliding down my nose. After Sigurd's father.

I was even more exhausted this time; something had torn open, the midwife still fumbling around below me and muttering into her slick red hands that this would all need stitching, and there was pain, but I could barely feel it. Could only feel the wet warm child in my arms.

Sigurd touched the back of my neck and for the second time, I saw how we forgave it, us women, all the suffering and pain for that sweetness, so thick, that rose up like a tide. It was strange and enormous and frightening. It swallowed everything.

9

Years have gone by since Sigurd lay with Brynhild;
slid the ring Andvaranaut onto her finger.
But still, we see, she awaits his return.
She is a little too melancholy for our taste,
a little *too* serious.
But has been known to occasionally bestow a wise word,
and we will never say no to rubbing shoulders with celebrity.
She has seen heroes made and felled, and become one herself,
and this was all she desired,
until Sigurd crossed her threshold,
sliced through her armour,
and she'd known
(a little arrogantly, we thought)
that she would marry him or no other.
Her father does not question her,
but her brother, grim Atli, digs his fingers into her flesh,
because one day too soon, their father will die,
and he will become king.
What he tells her is this:
if she doesn't marry then when that day comes,
all his wealth will be forbidden to her.
His words don't surprise us. We observed him as a child –

how he would pinch her skin in hard-to-see nooks,
rip clumps of hair from the scalp,
so that one day she held a knife trembling to its length,
but could not follow through.
These memories leave unseen wounds.
But she is craftier now than she was back then.
And so she agrees. Fine, she will marry. But only to the man who surpasses all others.
Atli is confused,
(so are we)
but at last says, of course. He would not allow his sister to marry any filthy common man.
We scratch our heads, because we still don't see,
until she returns to her hall and speaks words of magic,
and before her rises
a great wall of fire,
that flickers and laughs,
for only the most courageous man can pass it by.
And we see clearly her clever plot,
for Brynhild knows that man is Sigurd.
And before our congregation of eager ears,
she swears this vow:
come Hel or high water,
come fire or flood,
she will marry the man who crosses these flames.

And here they come!
Riding in on the wind;
two men,
though only one who is strong.
Only one who might be called great.
The weaker man spurs his horse to leap over the fire,
but the horse will not.
The horse shakes its head,
stamps in the dirt.

So he mounts the second horse,
but it too will not run.
Perhaps, we think,
(though we wouldn't dare say it)
the problem at hand is not the horse,
but the rider.
The stronger man agrees.
He's been taught a little trick,
by the weaker man's mother,
a trick for him to take the weaker man's face,
and ride in his stead.
Perhaps, he shrugs, the flames will part for him.
The weaker man pouts like a child,
but finally gives in.
And so one man takes the face of the other.
We hold our breath.
Drumroll please!
And the horse is whinnies,
it runs towards the fire,
and then he leaps,
(we scream!)
and there is no shout,
no smell of charred flesh.
Our eyes are squeezed shut.
We open them, all at once.
But there are no shapes burning down in the fire.
The strong man and his horse
are gone.

10

We ate by firelight. Outside winter was waning, the trees shrugging the snow from their boughs and the snow melting grey and wet into the ground. But the world was still bleak, everything green still struck by the cold, roots curled up beneath the chilly earth.

By the hearth we huddled, Svanhild perched in her father's lap; four years old and whispering a secret into his ear. That day he'd hoisted her onto a horse's back and she'd shrieked with glee, her body so light that the horse only blinked, and with the sight something unexpected had rushed up inside me and I'd gone to lay with my face down on the bed and wept, because one day she might ride far far away.

In my lap sat Sigmund with a sticky fingerprint of stew smeared on his cheek and a thumb stuck in his mouth. His body drooped into sleep, head sliding down, convulsing when he woke. He took hold of my finger, as if such a small anchor might stop him from toppling to the ground.

All of us were quiet and weary of the cold, the darkness, the life leeched from our bodies like the colour from the sky, no energy for a thing other than wake work sleep.

Until my mother set down her spoon loudly on the table and we all looked up, peered out from the quiet caverns we'd made of our minds.

It was time, she said, that Gunnar chose a bride.

Gunnar pushed a tongue into his cheek and skewered his supper and said mother, tell him, what need did he have for a wife? A wife would only nag him as she did now.

And with this, Hogni and Guttorm pressed their hands to their lips lest they spit out their mouthfuls with laughter.

Our mother took up her cup. How funny, she said. He jested now, but he wouldn't laugh, no no, not when his joints ached and his bones were brittle and he cast his eyes about and found no heirs – not one – to remember his youth. His legacy would die in a puff of smoke, and who would remember him then? Who would care? She smiled. If a king had no heirs then perhaps it was because he was not worth remembering.

My father nodded and burped and beckoned a thrall to refill his cup. Our mother was right, he said. He'd had his fun. He stuffed more pork into his mouth and added that a peasant might drink and fuck and cavort all his short meaningless life, but Gunnar would be king, and a king had his duty. *He* should know. Did we all think that if kings could forgo a wife and children that he himself would not have done so? He laughed a long while at the thought, looked down at his plate and shook his head.

Gunnar set down his spoon and folded his arms. These girls they brought him, he said, they were very fine, of course. Beautiful, some of them. But they were only the daughters of jarls and chieftains, so common you couldn't turn a rock over without finding another dozen clustered beneath it. And surely in their commonness they were not worthy of a prince, a future king?

Grimhild tapped her fingers on the benchtop, considering, then finally said that perhaps he was right. If his own sister had wed a hero then why should he be offered any less? She leaned forward. She could think of only one woman who would be so worthy.

Gunnar's nostrils twitched. Who? he asked.

And our mother's eyes shone when she said, why, King Budli's daughter: the shield maiden, Brynhild.

With that name all the world grew suddenly small and silent and cold, the blood and breath inside me seizing up. Then, just as swiftly, a strange calm, like a dying wind that whispered: what did I have to fear, when beside me Sigurd sat and bounced our child so calmly upon his knee? And when that night and every one before and after we would go together to our bed? It was right, I thought. After seven long years, what did I have to fear?

Across the table, Gunnar was wide-eyed, because men far and wide would strike themselves dead for one night in Brynhild's bed, and my mother added sweetly that he would not find a nobler woman, not under any rock; she was worth a hundred concubines. No, a thousand.

Gunnar drew shut his gaping mouth and tapped his chin, feigning thought, then said slowly, yes, he would agree to the match. After all, Brynhild's wisdom was well-known - and

her beauty, for it certainly wasn't her wisdom that excited him. And her father, he said, was a great ally. He shrugged, as if to say, it would do.

Then he would leave tomorrow, Grimhild said. The journey was long, and he must be quick, he must fly. She sat back with her cup. Sigurd was quick. The quickest. He would ride with Gunnar.

A sudden screaming urge rose in me then to leap up and slap my mother hard across her white smiling cheek, but there came a noise from Sigurd's throat, and he said, yes, he'd like nothing more, for that winter, stuck inside, had been truly insufferable. Let him stretch his legs - and his lungs, for the animals, cooped and snorting and shitting inside, *stank***.**

Then it was done, my father said and slapped Gunnar's back, and Gunnar laughed and my brothers murmured and Sigurd yawned. My mother smiled, and I saw then a blackening at the root of her incisor that she quickly smoothed over with her tongue. There was rot growing there, deep inside.

When dawn came with its muted light, I rose and helped Sigurd dress. His trousers, leather belt, thick coat, shoes – not the old ones through which he'd worn a hole so large a toe might poke through, but the pair I'd had newly made, the leather soft with tallow and shining. Then finally his sword, strapped to his hip. He hugged the children. Kissed my cheek. We three waved goodbye and they galloped fast into the glum winter day. Then the weak sun dipped behind a cloud and everything grew suddenly dark. The wind whistled down from the sky and all the trees shook. The smile dropped from my face. There was something uneasy inside me, a voice hissing, and not that same windswept one that the night before had told me not to fear, but another, quieter one, hidden in a shadow. It was hope, I realised; the shameful hope that when my brother offered Brynhild his hand, she would refuse.

The day they came home all of us were sad because one of the children's favourite dogs, gone missing two days earlier, had been found that morning when it hobbled out from the trees and into the town, dragging with it a nasty trap laid for a bear. Its leg was split open to the bone, the wound already white and wriggling with maggots. The creature had suffered enough. They slit its throat and let it die. Sigmund pressed his hot red face into my skirts and wept. Svanhild stared into its open eye and her lip quivered. I too looked down at the poor dead thing and heard one aunt beside me mutter that it must be a sign from the gods. A sign of what? another woman nervously asked. The aunt shook her head and quietly said, nothing good.

When they galloped into the village we all went out to greet them. My heart was leaping like a frog in my chest. Sigurd's eyes were bright, his cheeks red with the cold wind from riding. He slid down off his horse and kneeled and the children flew to him; Sigmund still snot-nosed, his body heaving with a single wet sob. Svanhild reaching out to touch a cut on her father's chin.

Then Gunnar leapt down into the mud and nearly slipped and fell, quickly grabbing the mane of his horse and the horse gave a whinny and jerked itself away and he stumbled again. Behind me, a child snorted cruelly. But Gunnar did not hear, or pretended not to; his excitement was so hot and clear that it sparked from him like lightning, and he rushed forward to declare the good news: Brynhild, daughter of Budli, shield maiden and Valkyrie, had agreed to marry him.

Murmured congratulations. Several eyebrows raised, and at least one wager begrudgingly paid out. There was a sharp little stab of pain in my gut. My mother smiled. My father grabbed Gunnar's shoulders and shook them and said in a loud voice that now we would celebrate.

Over supper Gunnar swiftly downed three ale horns and set to boasting. Those stories we'd heard, he slurred, they were pale. Flaccid. They did not do her justice. He waved his spoon, his mouth full to bursting. Surely poets were meant to have a way with words, he said, or perhaps the poets who graced our halls were simple halfwits. It was criminal, really. They should be flogged! But never mind. Soon enough we would know. We would see for ourselves. And perhaps that was the problem at hand, that a person who had not laid eyes upon her could not truly imagine it.

The men were all crowded round to listen, the jealousy naked on their faces, and just as plain the thought that the whole arrangement was not fair, not fair at all. There was delight in the men, but something angry too. I was worried that if my brother didn't stop his boasting then a man might suddenly leap up and stick a spoon in his eye. Clearly my mother thought the same, for she came round by his shoulder and said he must be tired from his journey, was it not time for bed? And he nodded and rubbed his eyes and bid the men goodnight.

Later, in bed, I turned to my side and roused Sigurd from his dozing and calmly asked how his journey had been. He yawned and told me of the mountains they'd scaled and the valleys they'd traversed and the rivers they'd crossed to reach King Budli, who had chuckled and bid them good luck, for Brynhild was stubborn as a horse. And so on they went, to Brynhild's hall. The whole long story. The fire. The skittish horse. Gunnar and Sigurd, then becoming Sigurd and Gunnar.

How interesting, I said flatly. I didn't know he knew such sorcery.

He didn't, he said. But Grimhild had taught him a trick or two the day before their departure. A lucky thing, really. She was a healer, was she not? A seer, too? He shrugged. Perhaps she'd foreseen their difficulties. At first, he continued, he couldn't see, his vision wiped white by the bright firelight. Then it cleared, and there she was, perched up on her bed, though perhaps perched was the wrong word; she was poised like a lynx, disturbed in its den.

And she agreed? I asked doubtfully. Just like that?

She couldn't refuse, Sigurd said, for long ago she'd vowed to marry whatever man could vault her flames. So he took the ring she wore, his own betrothal gift, the ring Andvaranaut of Fafnir's hoard, and put Gunnar's there in its place.

And where was the ring now?

Oh, stuffed in some crevice of some bag, Sigurd said and closed his eyes. It was mine, if I wanted it.

My heart thrummed a dizzy beat inside me. Of course I wanted it. Of course I should have it. Who else's could it be, but mine?

And so when day broke, the sky bleeding yellow, he fished the ring from where it was carried, precious and gleaming, and slid it onto my finger. There it slipped, a little loose below the knuckle, until my fingers grew hot and swelled with the day, and the band clung tighter and seemed one with the flesh, seemed, somehow, like it had always been there.

They arrived a week later, a long line of men and women on horseback and foot and slumped like sacks in the backs of wagons, and all the townspeople gathered in the cold streets to watch them march. A small child excitedly darted out in the way of a carriage and was wrenched back by an arm. Such a strange amazing sight hadn't been seen since the great Sigurd had first trotted through the streets.

At the head was King Budli, with his wild black beard. A short, thick man, perhaps once with muscle, but who now gave the impression of a round, well-fed dog. His horse was too tall; it was a long drop to the ground, and he twisted and grunted, waved away a thrall who darted forward to help, and finally slid down. He and my father embraced like two burly bears, red-faced and chuckling and thinking, undoubtedly, of years gone by, of wars fought together when they were not so old.

Then behind Budli came Atli, Brynhild's brother, straight-backed on his horse and looking down his nose at the townspeople. He was thin and grey like a wisp of smoke, his hair short but his beard long and braided into a thick rope. Atli the Bloody they called him, for he

was famed for his ruthlessness in war, his terrible cruel traps. Once, it was said, he'd filled a deep pit with branches sharpened to a point, and covered the hole over with a net shrouded with leaves. And so, in the dark, when the enemy came galloping through the valley, they had seen only the detritus of the forest and all plunged into the hole to be skewered.

In the crowd as he passed, a child began to cry.

He came down off his horse to greet us one by one, gripping the hands of my father and brothers in turn. When he bent to kiss mine, his mouth was slick and my skin crawled. He saw this and smiled. I opened my mouth to speak, but he said quickly, oh no, he knew my name: Gudrun.

I'd always liked my name, but then, rolled about in his mouth, it suddenly seemed a dirty thing, grey and cold like the sun smothered by a cloud.

Yes, he said. That he knew. What he didn't know was my loveliness. Somehow they'd kept that from him.

My smile was stone stiff. He went to stand by his father, but still I could feel his gaze nipping my neck like a bug fallen from a tree beneath one's collar that wriggled around.

Then finally came Brynhild. Evening was coming down, the clouds in the sky like smudges of soot, but when she pushed her hood back, the radiance shone out of her so bright it was as if the setting sun had changed its mind. Her hair was golden and gleaming, loose without a cap, her cheeks pink with the cold. She stepped down from her horse, floated, so graceful. She was too good to stand in the muck on the ground where the animals snuffled and left their waste, by the townspeople coughing and sending their miasma into the fine air that she breathed. I suddenly felt very small, my hair too dark, my skin too dull, my dress not embroidered with such lovely colours and smeared with dirt where Sigmund had trod on its hem. Beside her horse she was tall, taller than Gunnar; a long-limbed warrior, and though I could not see her body beneath the heavy wool of her tunic, I could feel its strength from afar, how her muscles tensed and shifted beneath the flesh. I had the startling thought that if she'd had an axe she could have sliced every man there in two and inside I shivered.

Gunnar was almost dancing, leaping out of his skin. He rushed to help her but she was already dismounted, and so he ushered her over to my mother and father, waiting by the doors.

Brynhild dipped down, her hair sweeping out from her hood and over her shoulders, and her voice was deep, surprisingly so, when she said politely what an honour it was to meet them.

My father's eyes were wide and gleaming white and probing somewhere beneath her cloak. No, he said, fingers twitching, the pleasure was all his. Or theirs, rather. For it was

wonderful, just wonderful, her father, his oldest friend; this marriage an alliance, long overdue. A better match, certainly, could not be conceived.

Then Gunnar clapped his hands together and said loudly that they must tell the thralls to prepare the wedding feast! Bring the cellared wine, the cheese! He slung an arm round Brynhild's waist and tugged her to his side. Be quick now! he said, for he could not bear another day unbound to his betrothed.

Did she flinch? Her smile splitting quickly down the middle, then stitched back together again. The weight of my gaze must have pressed down on her so hard that she finally looked up and found me, and behind me Sigurd, and our dark-haired children, one clinging to his hand and the other to my leg.

I looked back and held my breath, transfixed like a rabbit caught by the eyes of a fox, and like a fox her eyes were cold and still. Then the wind whipped up and blew her hair so that it covered her face and her eyes were hidden, and before it had stopped, she had turned and taken Gunnar's arm and allowed him to swiftly whisk her away.

The celebrations were greater than even those of my own wedding feast; money spilt from the purses of two great kings, Budli was even wealthier than my father, and so the drink was poured and the food served until we were sick with it, all of us, the guests of my father, and those brought by Budli, that long parade of men and women, all come to gawk at his famous daughter.

They spoke our language but with a strange lilt, their words rounder and rising from deeper down in their throats. The women rimmed their eyes with kohl so that the whites gleamed, and many of the men had shaved heads, their scalps white like eggs and shining in the firelight.

Gunnar was already drunk, the red flush of it gone from his face down to his neck and his eyes looking happily into something far away. He swayed and stumbled into a thrall carrying a fresh ale jug. The ale spilt and soaked all down her front and the men whistled, hoping the liquid might turn her dress transparent, and it began to be so, and she quickly hurried away from their leering.

Brynhild shone from her bridal bench, her hair braided and woven with winter flowers, violas and cyclamen blushing against her flaxen hair. The guests flocked to her in disbelief, for she was a story that circled the world, and stories existed in the mind and on the tongue but not in the eyes, and so to believe they had to open theirs wide and fix them upon her, they had to reach out and brush the hem of her dress, the thin wisps of her braids hanging down by her

hips, they had to be bold and touch her hands, the same ones that had killed the unkillable, had mingled with gods.

I twisted the ring round my finger and watched Gunnar as he bent to kiss Brynhild's cheek, and she smiled as one does at the dog that licks one's hand. I thought suddenly then of the consummation to come; how that night he would writhe and sweat, a pale flaccid being heaving over her radiant body. It wasn't right, the image unclear. Yet how easily could I imagine her and Sigurd? How they would move like serpents, ebb and flow likes the tides. The thought left me dizzy.

Then suddenly Atli stood beside me and my bones leapt up in my skin with fright.

She was beautiful, wasn't she? he said.

I swallowed and said only, yes, because he was like a snake wending its way through the long grass to nip at a bare ankle, and I wasn't foolish enough to antagonise such a creature.

He set his shoulder next to mine, looked long and hard, then sighed and said, a pity. He couldn't see it himself.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing and hoped he would slither away, but he only came to stand before me.

Was I worried, he whispered, that his lovely sister might whisk Sigurd away?

So close now, I could see his cheeks were pitted like the moon, his eyelashes thick and dark, and though his breath was ale-sour, his eyes were clear and shining.

They were lovers once, he went on, though of course I must know. He smiled. How could I not?

Anger flared in me then and I swiftly said that of course I knew, and thank you, but no, I was not worried. I lifted my hand and the ring snared the torchlight and gleamed.

He didn't laugh, but I could hear where the sound sat behind his smirk. How lovely, he said, but jewels meant little to those who parted with them so easily - and certainly not love. Why, he gave even his whores little trinkets if they pleased him. And did he love them? He shook his head.

A marriage would not survive without love, I replied, a little weak, because if I'd rapped my knuckles against those words even I would have heard their hollowness.

Atli looked at me and I was suddenly small, reduced, like a bug beneath a shoe. Oh no, he said. There were other ways. Many more. He didn't think my imagination would be so weak. Well, just think of a wild horse that bucked its rider. It wouldn't obey. It did not want the rider upon its back. What must the rider do? And with this he smiled softly and said, he must break it.

Then he reached suddenly for the hair that had come loose from my cap and hung wispy beside my cheek, and I flinched as if he'd struck me.

It was a shame, he said, and I thought he would say something more, but at last he turned, and then he was gone.

I went in search of Sigurd, quickly hurrying away, weaving between men clapping and women dancing, spinning, their skirts billowed out like mushrooms, until finally I found him. He was sat in a dim corner, and when I came upon him he looked up and peered into my face; looked down at my hand, there on his arm, as if he might like to shake it off. And on the bench was his cup, the wood rim dry, the froth bubbled down to its yellowish skin. Not a drop sipped.

Had someone swapped his ale for dog's piss? I asked with a laugh in my voice. Then, more seriously, was it a bad batch? Because there was, sadly, every now and again, some imperfection in the barley that spoiled the flavour, turned it, made it vile like vinegar. A shame, I said, for it to be brought out on that night of all nights, and Sigurd made a noise in his throat, but said nothing, his gaze turned ahead, and I knew before I followed it where it would rest.

There, where she sat, still poised at her bench, and still they came, a whole long line lingering by the feasting tables like worshippers at a shrine. She'd finally drunk of her wine, her lips purple-red like lingonberries and her eyes black-rimmed in her white face and searching.

It was difficult not to stare, I said, my voice too loud, and inside whispered, banish it, crush it, flay it from your mind like a wart from the flesh, but the thought was nagging like an itch, nestling there like a weed in the dirt, and I was trying to rip it free before it could wend its way deeper.

Something sharp flickered across his face, quick like a fish, a trick of the light, there and then gone before I could catch it. Then he shrugged, finally took up his cup and gulped it down. All of it. He set it on the bench so I could see its emptiness.

11

I sat with my spindle and watched her.

All of us did. Twenty pairs of eyes all looking. And when she turned they all looked down at their knees, at their feet in their boots. Never had their weaving, their spinning, their sewing, been so interesting; suddenly they worked so fast that their hands were a blur. At that pace they could weave a hundred blankets, stitch together a thousand shirts. Until she turned away and they could stare and let their hands be idle once more.

Weeks gone by. Months. Time folding in on itself, over and over. And every day I watched. First Sigurd, waiting for something – a twitch in the eyes, the mouth. But I saw nothing at all. Then, Brynhild. There she was plucking berries from a bowl, her fingers purple with their juice and sucking that juice from her fingers while my brothers drooled. There she was in the harbour, standing and looking at the boats as if she might like to sail one, and a man grinning and asking if she'd like a ride, they could go somewhere less crowded, he knew just the place, and her looking at him hard and not smiling back until he grew quiet and turned his eyes away. There she was sitting and picking at her supper with one hand and with the other fingering her necklace of periwinkle beads as if they were a noose chafing her neck.

There she was at the loom. That very moment. Not as skilled as the other women were, she was usually left to card the wool, tugging the comb through the raw coarse fleece. But that day one aunt complained that her back ached too much. She couldn't possibly stand; she would card the wool. This aunt was old and blind in one eye, the vision slowly gone from it over three long weeks like a hood being pulled over the face, and she didn't care who was a hero and who was not. Brynhild could weave, she said. After all, the girl had to learn some time. And the women all looked at one another out the sides of their eyes, because Brynhild's fingers were

thick and slow and fumbling. It would be miracle if even a thumb's length of fabric was produced.

I could see she was struggling, her brow knotted and tongue pink and peeking between her lips as she tugged the shuttle back and forth. I glanced at the other women, hunched over their bundles of wool like snowdrops over the earth, and knew not a single one would offer their help; some from bitterness, but most out of fear they would offend her, because what woman didn't know how to weave? The woman who tapped her on the shoulder might find her head suddenly cleaved from her neck by a nasty weapon hidden beneath the shield-maiden's skirts. Yet there she was, brought low by a loom. If not for our fear, we might have laughed.

Before I could bridle my tongue, I'd said here, let me help, and she turned, surprised. Behind me the eyes of the other women snapped up to see whether she would smite me where I stood, but she only stepped aside and watched as I found where she'd tangled the thread and began to unravel the knots, pulling the shuttle back, then plucking at the weft, stroking, coaxing it free. For me, weaving was senseless; my hands moved without thought, and so it was strange to teach another – strange in the way it was to remember that you breathed and blinked and swallowed, though your body's labours went quite unnoticed.

When the wool was straight and taut again, I gestured for her to return and watched until I could see that she had the rhythm.

It had taken me months to learn, I said, being of no natural talent, the loom such a finnicky instrument and my mother an impatient teacher. Once, I'd tangled the thread so badly that she'd punished me to unpick every cursed knot. Six long aching hours. My poor soft fingers had bled.

Behind us the women had grown quiet. I could feel their bodies tilting our way like saplings bent by the wind.

Brynhild's smile was small but still it was there, and she said drily that she hoped I would not make her do the same.

I thought that was that and I would return to my stool, but that smile had set something simmering inside me. I stayed where I was, silent as she pulled the heddle bar back towards her, then set it down in the frame with a hollow sound.

It was a little different to a sword, I said. The loom, I meant.

She bent forward to tease the thread up with her fingers and said with a shrug, yes, but didn't they each bear their own weight?

How so? I asked.

Well, she said, if she did not fight, then yes, others might be slaughtered, enslaved, raped, homes sacked. But if women didn't weave. Well. Then those warriors would freeze

where they stood in their frosty boats and the women and children shivering in their homes, and the ships would fly no sails, and what little we would have to trade, and so on.

I only nodded. Impressed. How sure I'd been that she resented the work, thought it idle, easy, but the songs always belaboured her wisdom, didn't they?

She took up the shuttle and went to pass it leftwards, but hesitated until I nodded and she pulled it through and through again.

After a time, watching and nodding, I said that perhaps I'd mentioned the sword because I'd heard that to see her fight was awesome as watching the gods themselves. Who had taught her?

Only herself, she said. Her brother had a tutor, because all sons of kings were somehow destined to become great warriors, as she was sure I knew, having brothers myself - and not only great but the greatest. She shook her head. But never their sisters. She was young and a girl, but she'd heard stories of shield maidens. Her own aunt had been one, in fact; had died, sadly (sadly because it was before she was born and it was not from a sword but a horse's swift kick to the head), but she'd heard the battle tales. And then her brother practiced and she watched and wished and wanted nothing more than to learn too.

Had she not asked her father? I said. Surely he would have obliged.

Oh, he would have been happy enough, she said. But Atli would not have liked it.

No?

A small sad smile. If only I knew him, she said, I would understand; her brother had never been one to share.

Anyway, I said quickly, she was the better warrior now. Certainly the stories I'd heard always said that no man could outmatch her.

She was, she said firmly, her hands dropping to her sides. She was better than most men. And like most men, it did not please her brother to know it.

Then her lips drew together and she said no more, though I was sure she had more to tell. But not to me, not yet, and the strange ease between us that day felt thin and I wanted it and I didn't, the admiration and jealousy wrestling inside me.

I should like to see her fight one day, I said instead, and she nodded slowly and pulled the shuttle through and said perhaps one day I would. But I should be careful what I wished for.

And so it went. Easier, after that.

Every day weaving, stitching, spinning. The other women shuffled together in a whispering huddle so that there was an empty circle around our two bodies, and within that circle some agreement was made. We talked slowly at first – cautious, because to speak with her was to tiptoe through a dark room, unsure where one might bang their shin. Then a little more. But never too much. And always only there, by the hearth, where our hands and eyes were busy, where the silence was not so full of discomfort. Though still it crept it.

One day we were speaking of a thrall whose leg had become trapped beneath the wheel of a cart, the meat and the bone inside all crushed. They'd had to cut the flattened leg off at the knee. I said it reminded me that once, a year or two ago, the men had gone out hunting, and a boar had gored a man's leg. It had been Sigurd then who, there in the forest, had brought down his sword and cut the limb off.

That was the first time I'd spoken his name to her and I was so afraid I almost slapped a hand to my mouth. But her face was smooth as butter, and, as if I hadn't spoken, she only said that she hoped they'd had the sense to immediately burn the wound so that the bleeding would stop.

The conversation went on, and inside I thought, yes, it was better not to pretend. And soon the cold dread I'd suckled since the day she'd come began to seep slowly away.

I didn't flatter myself. Brynhild was like any other person who did not wish to be lonely, and her options were few among women who revered her yet resented her for it, because jealousy was certainly a strange and irrational beast. Still, at night I stared blind into the dark and wondered what she thought of me. I sometimes caught the tail-end of her gaze and it filled me first with light, then with doubt, and then, at last, with a kind of pity. How painful it must be to watch Sigurd with another. The thought made me shudder. Outside the owls hooted and searched for their dinner and frogs in the reeds down by the riverbank croaked, and I turned over to Sigurd's slow-breathing body beside mine. If I were Brynhild, I was sure, I would not be able to go on living.

She wielded the sword as the best sailor handled his oar: like her arm elongated, joined on at the wrist, the elbow, the shoulder. A thing completely natural. On the grass behind the hall, coaxed to lushness by the soft summer rain, she sparred with Gunnar, clad not in her shift, dress, gown, but in breeches, a shirt. So unencumbered, free to move. I felt then the swathe of fabric about my legs, its excess, its weight. How did we women live with such heaviness?

When Brynhild had asked, Gunnar had agreed, but at its tail was a smirk, and I knew what arrogant thought was spinning in his head: that she was skilled. For a woman. But a

woman was no man. And in his eyes women were helpless things, and so, therefore, was she. Always he was checking that she'd eaten her fill, that she was warm beneath her coat, that she was comfortable where she sat, because she was no longer a warrior who fought and rode and hunted and flew, but a lady who weaved and sewed with other women who gossiped and sighed and could only dream of such fast bloody things.

My brother was a fool.

Now, he cowered behind his shield as she forced him back, her arm swinging down, blow after blow, the breath pushing through her nostrils, lips pulled back from her teeth.

A crowd had gathered; villagers unleashed their hums, their hisses, their sounds of awe. And Guttorm too. Beside me he stood wide-eyed and asked in a voice thick with awe, was she not the most incredible thing I had ever seen?

Gunnar could not recover. He panted and gasped. His foot slid back in the mud so that he almost fell, and then suddenly he did, his backside thudding painfully into the muck. When Brynhild went to help him to his feet, he looked at the hand reached out as though it were a dead fish, but he knew that to refuse would make the humiliation worse, and so he took it. The crowd clapped for his humility, but mostly for his defeat.

Soon the sky was bruised purple, the air growing chilly, and all those gathered rubbed at their goose-fleshed arms and scuttled back to their homes.

Brynhild lingered in the clearing, looking out at the murky forest and the saw-toothed mountains beyond, and the birds flying like black spectres to their nests. Then Gunnar called her name, and when she turned her eyes were bright, bright as the half-moon that winked into being in the distant darkening sky.

By the hearth, she curled her sore fingers, flexed and unflexed, turned her palms over to show the tender white blisters bubbling beneath the skin.

Let me help, I said, and went out into the cold night to fetch the salve from my mother's storeroom, then back to the hearth.

She shouldn't breathe too deeply, I warned. The smell; it was awful. Strong enough to strike a man down. I remembered as a child how I'd gagged as my mother lathered the paste thick over my scrapes. She'd seemed immune to its foul odour, and rolled her eyes when I gasped.

I wasn't sure if Brynhild would allow me to touch her, but she held her hands out and I rubbed the balm into her skin, thumbs sliding over her knuckles and down to her wrists. Her hands were warm and a little swollen from the day, the veins bloated on their backside, and the blisters were bad; if she wasn't careful they would burst.

It was funny, she said, looking down, how swiftly one's hands could forget what they once did every day, and though she quickly laughed, it had a jagged edge.

There, I said and released her. They would heal quickly now.

Then Svanhild suddenly came shouting into the hall, braids swinging down her back. She was five now; small with fat cheeks, yet already so pretty with her fine dark lashes and puckered mouth. She stood there and huffed and said indignantly that Sigmund would not share his toys.

Sigmund coveted his toys as a dragon did his gold hoard. Small wooden things, whittled by his father; a horse, a boat and four tiny warriors, though I'd never seen him take them to battle. They were always only conversing, taking their boat to sea and back and lining themselves up before the hearth, but never fighting. No, there was not a single sword in his games, not a drop of blood spilled. And this exasperated Svanhild, for whom every day and the games played inside it must be a spectacle, toys flung across the room, the wood chipped and mangled, a leg broken, an arm lost. Such things were only the losses of battle. It was no wonder her brother was reluctant to share.

I sighed and asked, did she not have her own playthings?

Her brows drew together and her gaze slid Brynhild's way. She loved the Valkyrie, eyes always on her like the moon's beam trained on the sea.

She did, she said and crossed her arms, but an army needed more than only five warriors. Everyone knew that.

Not true, Brynhild said. The skill of the warriors that was far more important than the number.

Svanhild looked at her with an expression both cowed and awed.

She looked like her father, Brynhild said when she'd hurried away.

I didn't hear any bitterness in her voice, but by then I'd begun to stop looking for it.

I smiled. That was what everyone told me. And certainly she hadn't inherited her temperament from me. She was so like her father and so little like me that it was sometimes a wonder she'd sprung from my body at all.

I looked up and saw that Brynhild's eyes had grown soft and were shining in the light. I leaned forwards and said in a low voice that I was sure she would have one of her own soon enough.

I didn't see the pain that flickered whip-quick over her face, a flinch that split her brow like a crack through ice. I saw the glistening of her eyes and took it for longing. I didn't know then that she'd known motherhood long before me. I would only learn that in the weeks to

come, when a cousin let it slip to her sisters, and then they all went silent because they'd forgotten I was there, and I'd stared hard at the shirt in my lap as if I hadn't heard, but inside was stung.

When Brynhild and Sigurd had lain together long ago, something had bloomed inside her womb; a daughter, Aslaug, clever and golden, who was fostered away. She would never know her parents, though she would hear of them wherever she went, standing behind her like two great mountains. But I knew none of this then. Perhaps if I had, things would not have unfolded as they did.

12

When autumn came the leaves blushed and leapt to the ground, the trees undressing themselves. I remember that day not just for what happened, but for the weather, because though it was the middle of the season, the air was mild, the clouds fat and white. It was surely a trick of the gods, someone muttered, peeking their face out of a doorway to squint at the bright blue sky. One long week of rain and wind, everything cold and wet. Our bodies drooped with sadness because the dark time of year had finally settled in. Then suddenly, this; it couldn't be true. Surely we would step out into the sun and the clouds would suddenly swell up and turn grey and empty themselves onto our poor foolish heads.

But the warmth and the light were so lovely. We would take the risk.

We hurried to the river, around the elbow-bend and out of sight of the men. Women stripping down to our skins, soft and tight, wobbling, wrinkled and bunched up white, wincing when we stepped into the water until the cold passed and the body tricked itself warm. We flocked like seabirds, splashing and preening, scrubbing the grime from our fingernails, our napes, the sun winking off the water bright enough to blind.

Brynhild stood at the edge and took in her hands the heavy hem of her gown and pulled it overhead. Then her fingers unfastened the brooches that clasped together the apron, the wool shift, until her body was free, hard with muscle and knotted with scars, but also painted too with silver at the hips, the dimples, the breasts, that all women bear. She dove beneath the olive water and rose from it slick and glistening like a seal.

I waded in after her, my feet sinking into the slimy river bottom and collecting pebbles and the tiny bones of long dead creatures in the curl of my toes. The water rose to meet my

body, tasted my ankles, thighs, stomach. One deep breath and I plunged my head under, the water a cold slap and my ears flooding, opening my eyes to the strange blind murk beneath.

After, we lay on the riverbank, let the sun suck up the wet and turn our skin pink, before we donned our clothes. One by one, the other women ambled back towards the village, their high voices carrying through the air like birdsong.

Brynhild stood, tall and hard-eyed, her hair dancing about her cheeks, whipped up by the breeze that now came in from the south and had blown in new clouds that hung thick and grey like the beards of old men. She waited until the women disappeared before she spoke: I took her for a fool, she said, but she was no such thing. She knew what I'd done.

Her words didn't strike me, not at first, because I was certain I'd misheard, or heard someone else, another strange conversation, but all the women were hurried away and we stood alone on the bank. From the river there was a splash as a fish leapt towards the sky, and a crow burst screeching from the bough of a spruce nearby.

The silence swelled and she had her hard gaze turned on me and said, well? Would I not admit it?

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again and said that I didn't know what she was talking about. And it was true, but I'd been told that even when I wasn't lying, I sometimes looked as though I was for how my hands fidgeted at my sides. I could feel them then, tugging at the fabric of my dress.

She scowled. Don't pretend, she said. She could see the serpent that lay beneath.

Now my pulse was beginning to beat in my head, annoyed now because how dare she corner me like an animal, how dare she speak to me this way. I said, really, I didn't know. Not a thing, and my hands fell open as if to show her their emptiness.

Still her rage boiled over, and she snapped that she knew what that witch Grimhild had done. She'd tricked Sigurd, served him some enchanted drink. He'd forgotten who she was, the vows they'd made. With that last her words caught like a choke in her throat and she breathed in and out and then said coldly, he'd agreed to marry me.

Her words were like a bolt of lightning in my chest and Brynhild saw it and her eyes grew wide. Did I really not know? She laughed. Had my own mother lied to me?

No, I said, to Brynhild and myself. My mother hadn't lied. She was meddlesome for sure, and talented with herbs, but surely not so talented, not so deceitful. Brynhild had let her envy fester and grow until this moment when it had finally burst. Nothing more. She'd treated Brynhild like her own daughter, I said, welcomed her to our hearth. And now she tried to drive a wedge between us.

Brynhild's eyes narrowed and she said that my mother sat like a wolf, greedy in her den. My own brother said so.

Then Gunnar had lied to her.

Not her husband. Guttorm, she said, waving her hand, as if it didn't matter.

Something was ebbing out of me, some truth I'd once known, and something sinking into its place. My face felt unbearably hot and my head had begun to spin but I pushed my feet into the rock and lifted my chin, as if she couldn't drown me right there, plunge my head beneath the water and crack it against the rock. Sigurd had chosen me, I said. Sigurd loved me.

She laughed again. I'd thought that he'd chosen me over her? Who was I? The daughter of yet another fat king, a whole world of fat kings willing to sell their daughter's wombs so that a hero might put his seed there and lounge in their hall and fight for their army? Then softer, she said, I was no shield maiden, no sorceress. I was not even a queen. I was no one. No one but a child, and children knew nothing of love and nothing of honour. She'd sworn she would marry a man who knew no fear, who conquered her flames, and that she had done. Without honour, what were we? Nothing.

Then she turned to storm away, her head whipping back, her hair scraggly and half-damp, hurrying down over the sun-warmed stones and onto the grass.

For a moment, I watched her go but then anger rose up through my stomach and into my throat. How dare she, Brynhild, the liar, my brother, the liar - was my mother a liar? It could not be true, it couldn't, and the words burst out of me and I cried: she said she was honourable, but she'd broken her oath!

She stopped. Turned.

I let the words linger, let them settle down inside her, let the silence grow. Then finally said that it was not Gunnar who had ridden through her fire. It had been Sigurd. Then I thrust my hand forward and the sun strained and winked off the gold that circled my finger, and Brynhild's face blanched like the winter sky.

But she said nothing.

After all, what could she say? The ring spoke a thousand words.

She didn't look back again and when she was gone I looked down at my arms, at their soft white skin, sure I would find welts or bruises or blood, but they were smooth and clear, bearing only the first of many scars that no eye could see.

I found Guttorm with the ewes, brought down bleating from their summer pastures, their winter wool half-grown. When I seized him I was surprised, though I shouldn't have been, to find that my fingers gripped not a child's spindly limb but the thickening arm of a young man.

What lies had he been spouting? I snapped. What misery had he brought down upon us?

He pulled himself free, nose twitching like a rabbit's, and asked what did I mean? He'd done nothing!

Oh he knew he exactly what I meant. He'd always been a dreadful liar, even as a child, and I could see the lie, see its fat bloated shape, black as coal in his eyes. And he'd lied to Brynhild, too. Told her that our mother had tricked Sigurd, that she'd used some enchantment. Tricked him into marriage.

Guttorm said nothing.

I pushed his chest. Was it true?

And finally he nodded, his eyes and voice flat. It was true, he said. He'd seen her do it.

Oh.

There went the breath from my lungs, my legs from beneath me – or almost. I trembled, whole body, my voice squeezing out in a rasp: how could he keep this from me?

He frowned. Was this not what I'd wanted? To be with Sigurd?

I shook my head, my tongue a great fleshy lump in my mouth and when finally it could move I asked, why? Why had he told Brynhild, but not me? His own blood? His own sister? Who was she but an outsider?

He held his chin high. She was his friend.

A strange high laugh wriggled out like a fish from my throat. His friend? Ha! She was nobody's friend.

He frowned and said swiftly that I shouldn't speak about her that way. She'd been wronged.

And *me*? I snapped. Had I not been wronged?

He didn't answer, and there was silence until finally my legs could take it no longer and I sank to the ground, my fingers curling into the grass.

How? I asked.

He kicked at a fuzzy-headed weed and sighed. She'd found him, one day. In the fish house. Or not found. An accident. She hadn't thought he would be there, looking, as she was, for somewhere to be alone. But she'd stumbled in, and there he was, gutting a fish, and he'd been ashamed of the smell, of the blood on his hands, when she was so lovely in her dress. She

could have left right then, but she hadn't, and they'd spoken a little. And the next day. And the one after that. She was sad. Sad to be taken from her home. Sad to be married to a man she did not love. He sniffed. No one would listen. Not her brother, her father, not Gunnar, not any single person in that entire village, in that whole wide kingdom. No one but him.

Then all at once I understood and the shock was like a slap. What a fool I'd been all those long months, how blind - and yet, how easy for him to hide, what, when everyone fawned and ogled and wanted her as they did. When everyone else loved her too.

And so what if he did? he snapped. He was angry now. What did it matter? It didn't change what had been done.

It was painful to look at him, so I didn't, and said tightly that I hoped he understood the choices he'd made, because no amount of pining, no listening, no dreaming of her in the night, would ever make Brynhild love him back.

It was cruel. Perhaps too cruel. I saw the pain slip behind his eyes, nestle between his brows, and for a moment he was a child before me again, sobbing for the hopeless beautiful world that would one day end.

But he hadn't been a boy for many years. Now he was old enough to swallow it down and wound me in turn. He sank to his heels so that his face was near mine. Then sister, he said, he and I were one and the same. No better than the other. For his longing for Brynhild was no different to mine for Sigurd. Useless. Then he rose to his feet, looked down at me and whispered: how foolish we both had been.

I went to my mother's storehouse. The door always closed. Memories from childhood, when the door opened four times. Don't speak, she would say, and I would sit silent in the corner and breathe through my mouth lest I grow dizzy from the hearth smoke. A collection of things were spread out on her bench. Some I recognised: velveteen mushrooms and fennel and tumescent cloudberries, but they looked different, not like themselves, when they'd been sliced and pounded and crushed and turned inside out. She brewed medicines: salves and poultices and tonics to soothe fevers and sick stomachs and ward off infection, and those she gave to whoever needed them. But she concocted other things too, strange things with strange smells whose names I couldn't place. She never told me, and I didn't ask; if there was one thing my mother detested, it was a curious child.

I tried many times to do as she did. I gathered what I could: the pale slender bones from a chicken slaughtered for our supper and the elm trees' ribbed leaves and the green weed-like

sprouts. I mixed them with dirt and river water and snowmelt in the winter, but all they yielded was a foul slurry. Mud. There was no power in them; I didn't have that gift.

She didn't look up when I opened the door. Inside the smell hung low and brackish like fog, and on the bench I saw a bowl full to its brim with some dead creature's brownish blood.

Hadn't she told me to knock? Her dress was grey as goose down, her hair pulled back tight from her face, and in the dimness her eyes were black.

I didn't hesitate and in a great rush said that I knew what she'd done. All of it. To Sigurd. To me. What she'd conjured in this room. The lie she'd kept hidden.

Still, she didn't look at me, her hands still moving like pale spiders. The silence grew and grew, and I wondered how quickly I could sweep everything from the bench. Just one second more and I would do it, until finally she said, I was angry. Well. Perhaps that was to be expected. Though frankly, she'd thought I might be a little more grateful, given it had been me who had asked her that fall day to arrange the marriage. I'd never mentioned that I had quarrels about the cost.

The blood rushed in my ears and I laughed in disbelief. Was that all? Really? Had she nothing more to say?

She sighed. Did I want her to apologise? She wouldn't. She'd seen an opportunity and taken it. Done little more than any good mother would have. I myself was a mother now. Surely I would do the same.

I had not asked for this! I yelled. And now Brynhild knew, and what would Grimhild say to her? Ask if she wouldn't have done the same? I shook my head.

My mother clicked her tongue. A shame, she said, but Brynhild was now married to Gunnar, and she didn't think she would break those vows. She would be unhappy, yes, but she would not be special because of it. Unhappiness in marriage was the lot of many women - most, in fact - and what was more, she was honour bound. She'd made that foolish oath. Only had herself to blame. Yes. Her marriage would remain intact. And so would mine. And I couldn't deny the happiness the years had brought. Why, without her, I would not have my children, and would I wish them away, all because of this?

That happiness was tarnished now, I said. And it was true, every memory a falsehood, turned dull and grey.

I was still so young, she said. I thought that people were good and honest, that this was some kind of unique betrayal. But the truth was they all lied. All of them. And if I disagreed, well. Then I was only deluding myself.

But they didn't lie to their children! I cried. They didn't deceive them as she had done.

She laughed and set down her knife and finally turned to look at me. Didn't I understand? She'd only done what was right for her children. For me. For Gunnar. Everything she'd ever done, she'd done for us.

I shook my head and said, no. I'd never asked for this.

She came swiftly towards me then and put her cold hand up on my cheek. I flinched and my nostrils twitched at the smell of blood beneath her nails, and softly she said, I didn't need to.

I fled from her. Swept away from her darkness. I found a sword and carried it through the grass and over the hillock towards the river and the trees there. My body was burning, my skin a thing set alight. My veins were filled with poison; I needed to release it.

I began to hack at the trunk of a spruce, the blade biting the bark, its spiny body shuddering. Each time the edge stuck I wrenched it free and swung it again and again. And in the wake of my rage, the world grew silent in my ears, so I could no longer hear the thud of the sword or the birds twittering their night calls or the frogs crying down by the river, though they'd probably fallen quiet, all of them disturbed.

I don't know how long I raged. Until the light grew dim. Until the sword began to blunt. Until my shoulders cried out and something inside me finally broke.

I let the sword fall to the dirt; my body leached of anger. My insides scraped away. I sank to the ground before the tree and felt the cold damp of the soil seep through my skirts. And it was then, with no one to see me but the stars winking in in bluish sky, that I finally allowed myself to weep.

13

She will not leave her bed,
or perhaps she *can't*.
(We're still debating that one)
Brynhild.
Languishing in her bower and cursing Grimhild;
that cunning snake,
who stole Sigurd's mind,
taught men to be other than who they were,
and tricked her into dishonour.
Her oath now lies broken upon the floor.
We were intrigued, at first, by this dramatic turn,
but quickly lost interest,
picked our cuticles, tapped our feet,
and waited for them to come.
And finally they did, one by one.
First her husband; a pitiful creature,
his devotion so pathetic.
When he asks what ails her,
she asks in return, what he's done with the ring she'd given him?
He must have lost it, he says dumbly, stroking her arm.
We were there; we know the truth. Or rather, the lie.

Does he think her a fool? She knows it wasn't him, that it was Sigurd, who'd come that day.
He looks around hopelessly,
then sinks down and begs
then leaps up and holds her down.
If only she would listen!
She scratches his cheek.
He touches it, bewildered,
and hurries away.
Then Guttorm comes, sweet and baby-faced.
Our favourite (if we had to choose).
We know he loves her, and so must she.
How he looks at her like a fish, looking at the sea.
He holds her hand until she shoos him away.
Then finally comes Sigurd,
after all this time.
We'll admit, we almost shed a tear,
or two.
He reaches for her,
because until her wedding he could not remember her name,
and they gaze into silence,
as only lovers can do.
She pulls away, and tells him what she knows.
They'll run away, he says.
But she will not go;
she will not be dishonoured twice,
will not have two kings in one hall.
Please, he says,
and it is strange to see such a hero beg,
but she brings the axe down upon his head:
what's done is done.
She does not want him or anyone else.

That night she can't sleep.

In the morning she calls for her husband and says she doesn't want to live.
Sigurd has betrayed her, and betrayed Gunnar no less.
And so Gunnar must kill him
and kill too the son who would grow to avenge him.
Gunnar refuses. He demurs. He begs and pleads.
Speaks of oaths, of brotherhood,
but the Valkyrie bristles,
and whispers in his ear,
that if he doesn't, she will go. She will leave him in disgrace,
to live forevermore in Sigurd's shadow.
She has plucked his harpstring nerves,
found the spots most painful and prodded them to bruising,
and he finds himself ensnared, as they say,
in a catch-22.
Already we are placing wagers,
bets changing hands,
though some of us are quietly confident that the odds are in our favour,
because when he leaves, she tilts her head to the ceiling,
and smiles.

14

Later, I would remember those days that followed as thin and fragile. When I gathered them into my hands they cracked like eggshells.

It was my cousin who told me, pale-faced like a ghost and sidling up beside me to whisper: Brynhild would not leave her bed.

And that whisper sprouted wings and buzzed through the hall like a fly.

Perhaps she'd taken ill, someone suggested, and received a dozen doubtful looks; we'd all heard the noises, the tight angry pleading coming from her bower.

At night I could not sleep, my dreams all haunted. Dreams of Brynhild. Dreams of Sigurd. All day, I watched him, though for what I wasn't sure, and that uncertainty only made my anxiety grow. On the outside I was still, but inside everything was spinning; a thousand panicked thoughts: how could he know? How could he not? My body was cold and heavy with dread.

But still there was nothing. Not that day or the next or the one after that. I went down to the shore and stared out at the water, and suddenly began to laugh. I laughed so hard that a gull flew angrily away and then the laughter grew painful and I held onto my stomach until it was done. A wave slapped the sand and surged up the beach and I wiped the spray from my face and with it something dark that had been clinging there. I suddenly thought, who could say the love was not real? It existed in the world, and so it was, no matter how it came about. And with this sudden clarity I knew: there would be no surrender.

Walking back in the blue twilight, I found Gunnar sitting by a boat on the dock, his legs hung above the water.

How was Brynhild? I asked.

Not well, he said. His face was grey. She knew. Well. I knew the tale; there was no need to retell it.

I sat down beside him and looked out at the river and the black trees beyond. A lonely bird dove down from the sky to be swallowed by the darkness.

Only time healed the wounds of the heart, I said. With time, she would forgive him.

But my words were hollow; he knew it and so did I. And so we sat a little longer and looked out into the night and said nothing.

The next morning Sigurd came to me, stooped over my spindle, and said that he would speak with Brynhild.

Panic leapt inside me. Gunnar spoke with her every day, I said. Every hour, in fact, and still she wouldn't see reason. His words would surely do no better. Given their. Well, their history. Why, his meddling might even increase her anger, no?

He'd been party to that trick they'd played, Sigurd said sternly. If Gunnar had grovelled, then he should as well.

I said nothing and he cleared his throat and asked, didn't I agree?

My smile was stiff on my face like mud dried to clay. Of course, I said. If he thought it wise.

He was not with her long.

So? I asked. Had she accepted his apology?

No, he said. She hadn't. She was hurt. He sighed. She was angry.

I searched his face but found nothing; laid my hand on his arm and thought, good, because if she was hateful, she would not take him. He shouldn't blame himself, I said. He should blame my mother. But he couldn't know that. Couldn't know the whole awful lie. And I would not confess. I'd thought I could not live with it, with that black horrid thing, the worry, the fear, the shame of it, but I could. I would.

Because that first night and the one that followed and the one after that, I had tossed about in the dark while he slept and asked myself, despairing, how long a person could bear it, and the answer had come back to me, clear and true: as long as it took.

That night I saw the children to bed.

Would I tell them a story? Svanhild asked.

I was sitting beside Sigmund, his small head at my hip and the blanket pulled to his chin so that his pale face poked free like a little round moon. It was late, both children yawning

and the hearth fire eaten itself down to embers, but I said, of course; I would tell them the tale of the binding of Loki.

I don't know why I chose that tale. Or perhaps I do. I didn't care for Loki, who deserved his punishment. But Sigyn, the wife who would suffer for love; she I admired.

The story was hers. Let me tell it.

The gods would not forgive Loki for murdering their most beloved child: beautiful Baldur, son of Odin and Frigg. Loki tried to hide but you can't hide from the gods. They dragged him to a cave so dark like the mouth of the world, and there his punishment began. His sons were brought before him and one was transformed into a wolf, who slaughtered the other before Loki's eyes. Then Loki was bound to the rocks with his dead son's innards, and above him serpent was hung, whose poison would drip drip drip painfully onto his cheeks. This was to be his fate. It was his wife, Sigyn, who would save him. She was a goddess and he only a giant, but still she'd borne him those sons, one now a beast and the other dead. She would mourn them, she would, but first, she would stand by Loki with her arms high and a bowl to the snake's mouth to catch the venom that oozed from its tongue, and her arms would cry out and her heart would too, but she would not yield. She would stay in that dark damp place until the day the world itself split in two.

The story was done, the children asleep. I kissed their warm round foreheads and breathed their sticky scent. Sigmund stirred.

Why had Sigyn stayed with Loki? he asked with his sleepy tongue.

Because she loved him, I said, and his nose scrunched up and I smiled and whispered down into his conch-curled ear that one day he too might love someone that much.

But even as I said it, I wondered if he would. The world was cruel and all men died but only some won glory. And perhaps it was a better fate to die young than to face the weary ache, the wringing out that came with age. Either way, it didn't matter. I was no god and the Norns three had spun his fate the day he'd slid wailing into the world - or before that, even, when he was only a swelling inside me. The death of all children was decided before they lived.

In the hall I found my three brothers huddled and murmuring by the hearth, but the murmuring quickly stopped when I stepped into the light.

Where was Sigurd? I asked, for he was not by the fire, nor in our bed, but they all shook their heads and said they didn't know. Then their eyes slid sideways away from mine. Something strange hung in the air, but I was too tired to care.

When Sigurd came to bed, hours later, his skin was cool with night. I did not ask where he'd been, and when he said nothing I turned over and whispered into the dark what I'd told the children that night.

He made a noise in his throat and said, a good story.

Then we were silent, laid together side by side, and I could feel but not see the swell of his chest as he breathed. Outside some wayward bird cried and stirred up the night. And suddenly I said, I would do that for him. Did he know? What Sigyn had done for Loki. I would do it all.

But he didn't answer, the silence in the room hanging thick, and in the dark I couldn't tell if his eyes were open.

15

There was blood on my hands.

My wrists, my neck. Spattered on my lips and sliding down between them.

By the light of a pitch torch fallen to the dirt floor, the bed was all red. Black in shadow. Blood trickling and pooling and soaking into the wool. And the *smell*; the stink of metal and earth and things new and dead.

It was the thrust of the blade that had woken me: plunged down into Sigurd's chest, the flesh cleaved in two, the blade and hilt protruding from him like a tree from the earth and his beard wet with gore and his lips with the pink froth coughed up from his throat.

First, a strange dreamlike thought as my sleeping mind woke: that this blood, apart from its mass, looked no different to all the rest I had seen. No different to the cuts and scrapes, the ooze that seeped from between my legs, or the wounds of men and women, the limbs severed or crushed, the skulls split open like ripe fruit, or the animals slaughtered, the struggle before the blade bit and slid across the throat and the blood burst down and out like the spume of the sea against the rocks.

Then sound and light and sensation rushed violently in, and I rose to my knees and pressed my hands to the wound. But the blood would not stop; it pumped hot and slick between my fingers as his flailing heart pushed it free. He coughed once more and this time it dribbled weakly down his chin. Then his body was slack. His eyes looked up to the ceiling, then at me, then were suddenly empty, all the light in them gone. My hands fell into my lap and shook. The room was already quiet, but that quiet was suddenly overcome by an even greater hush.

Sigurd the hero was dead.

Who was responsible? I cast around me for some answer and found it there: a second body, still and broken on the floor. It was Guttorm. In his back was Sigurd's sword, thrown like a spear with his dying strength. My brother's neck twisted was to the side by the fall, his eyes wide and unseeing.

The world was spinning. My ears roared and choked all sound. Both things suddenly surged inside me: a rage that burst up through my body and scorched hot and deep, and beneath it a cold terrible sorrow that hooked its claws into the meat of my heart and dragged it down. I wanted to put my hand to his cheek, sweet boy that he'd been; I wanted to wrench the sword from his back and plunge it into his body again and again.

No time to wonder why he'd done it, because there was a movement seen from the corner of my eye, and I swiftly turned to find my children on the other side of the room. It was Svanhild I'd seen; the trembling of her body sitting up in her bed, her eyes wild and her mouth wide and gasping, the grey front of her dress and her long hair and her face all sprayed with blood. And beside her Sigmund, lying so still, stiller than sleep, because on his neck was a wound, a gaping red slit, curved and bright like a smile.

I flew across the room and pulled him into my arms and cradled his neck, for the wound was so deep, had gone down to the bone, his head heavy and flopping back. A long terrible sound came out from deep in my throat, and I rocked him and was filled with a pain so fierce that it stole the breath from my lungs, bit down with violent teeth through every muscle, every bone, because my poor sweet son would never wield a sword, set sail on a ship, lie with a woman, kill a man or avenge his father's death. And then I knew suddenly why he had been killed.

All this in only seconds.

Our hall was large but sound still moved through the walls, and so they came quickly: my brothers and Brynhild, my mother and father. They stood at the threshold, their torches lighting everything brighter, and took the whole sight of it in. Their faces paled at the slaughter, their eyes dark and wide in their white faces. What a sight I must have been, slick with gore like a corpse myself, the blood now drying, now blackening in the light.

Brynhild moaned and fell to her knees, her hands at her throat, then her mouth. Even twisted by grief, her face was still lovely.

When she moved towards Sigurd where he lay dead in the bed, a snarl ripped from my throat like a dog and she suddenly began to sob, her chest heaving beneath her dress and her tears catching the torchlight like jewels on her cheeks. I was disgusted by her grief.

I turned to my brothers where they stood and in a quiet voice asked them to tell me, right then, that Guttorm had acted alone, but their eyes shifted sideways in their pale faces and finally Hogni opened his mouth and said that all of it was Brynhild's doing.

Did they think me a fool? I snapped. How dare they lie, when Gunnar had blanched so sallow that he looked as though he might be sick – and it was not for the sight of blood, no, it was the guilt. They were cowards, sending our poor brother to do their dirty work.

Hogni interrupted and said, well, ***he*** would have done it, have no doubt, would have wielded the sword himself, if it weren't for their brotherly oaths - the ones they'd sworn years ago. He'd had more honour than to break those - but not Guttorm, who had been a child, and too young for such promises; there had been nothing to stop ***him*** from carrying out the deed.

And Gunnar, eyes sunken, stammered out quietly that I must understand. She'd told him she would leave him if Sigurd did not die. If Sigmund did not die - would have disgraced his name, brought dishonour down upon him. And he was to be king! What choice did he have? Then, quieter: he was to be king.

There was a thick blind redness in my eyes. I set my cold dead son down and rushed forward and slapped Gunnar's pale face, dragged my nails down his jaw. He cowered and yelped, a bloody handprint on his cheek, and then Hogni pulled me off and threw me to the ground. I crawled from there, back to my son, so sorry I'd left him, that I'd set him down in the filth of his own blood. Forgive me. I cradled him again. I would not let him go.

Then Gunnar, hand on cheek, turned to where Brynhild knelt and demanded to know why she was weeping. Was this not what she'd wanted? His voice was high, pleading. Had he not done what she'd asked? Why was she acting as if he'd wronged her?

And her head whipped quick towards him and he flinched, and she said, *wronged* her? He had wronged her from the moment he'd set foot outside her hall - no, before that, from the moment he'd decided he wanted her - that he *would* have her, because he would, he would not take no for an answer, he did not heed the signs, the flames, though they screamed that he was not worthy. He'd thought it better to trick her than admit defeat. And she'd married him not because she wanted to, but because she was oath-bound. He could not trap a wild animal and then blame it when it howled in its cage! Then she looked at me with her eyes blazing blue and said in a strangely calm voice that it was almost more than she could bear to see him dead. But still. It was altogether better than to see him with someone else.

Claw her eyes from their sockets, rip her tongue from her throat. But I couldn't. Sigmund was heavy, and there was something sinking down inside me, the anger there but no longer so hot, taken over now by something cold and leaden.

Evil bitch, my mother hissed, sunk down beside Guttorm's broken body, his head lolling in her lap. She deserved to die for all the destruction she'd wreaked.

Brynhild turned on her and snapped that it was *she* who'd caused this pain! She who had meddled! But if someone should pay for it all, then let it be her. Let her be the one to die.

Then from inside her dress she drew a knife. Quickly Gunnar seized her wrist, but with one breath she had pulled the hand from his grip. Another and she'd plunged the knife beneath her breast, into the soft space between her ribs, and we all heard the wet flesh sound as the blade pushed through muscle and scraped along bone. Her mouth opened but she did not scream, only let out a sharp exhalation of air. For a moment there was nothing, and then blood began to well around the blade and down towards the hilt, spilling quickly over her fingers. She slowly sagged forwards like a wilted flower.

Gunnar was shouting, begging, please someone, someone should help.

Hogni said quietly, let her die. She'd brought everyone nothing but misery.

And die she would, though I would not be there to see it.

I couldn't stay. I took Svanhild and fled from that room. No time to mourn. We went to the stables and I roused a mare snorting from sleep; hoisted Svanhild shaking high onto its back, bound Sigmund to my chest. Then I spurred the horse to fly through the night. I don't remember for how long we rode before I yanked the reins and the mare whinnied and skidded and we came to a stop.

There we stood at the forest's edge. The trees were quiet above us, their boughs stifling the moon's glow and their leaves disturbed by the breeze and whispering. And in the silence of the night, the moment of sudden startling peace, I knew what I must do.

I got down from the horse and went to the base of an ash. I dug into the soil, tore it loose, my nails catching and tearing on roots and rocks. I did not stop until my shoulders burned and my fingers throbbed with new blood and the hole before me was wide.

I trembled as I unbound Sigmund from my chest and lowered him into the ground. Pulled the dirt back down over his small still body until it was all covered over. That was all he would get: a tiny mound rising from the earth; a grave too shallow, so that in the days to come the animals would dig down and find him there. Left lonely in a forest, with only the trees to watch over him.

And it was then that I finally began to weep, the salt slipping between my lips and leaping from my chin to be swallowed by the dirt. I howled. I could not catch my breath. I would wake the world with my cries, flood the earth with my tears. I would let them know: the dragon slayer and his son were dead.

16

The wolf and his cub are dead.
We sob. We wail.
We tear at our hair,
claw at our eyes.
If only we were sculptors, we moan, and their bodies clay,
and we could mould all their broken, shredded, ruptured parts
together again.
But they are made of sinew and ivory,
and the blood that seeps now in great crimson puddles
(soaked up by packed earth,
soaked up by goose-down bedding,
soaked up by knotted hair)
was all they had.
They are like lakes bled dry,
and not even a torrential rain could restore them.
When she wakes we feel her heart quake;
the gods take it in their leviathan fists and shake her,
setting loose a flurry of shades.
(Emotions are multicoloured, you know)
The oily grey-green murk of her confusion;
the snap bang bright gold lightning flash of her shock;
the churning tidal slate blue of her grief,

the red of molten rock, of erratic embers, of desperate rage.
We should turn away, but we can't.
We stifle our sobs with hands over faces,
but can't help but peek between our fingers
at the battlefield in miniature.
No matter how terrible, we have always loved
the drama.
So we watch,
and we feel
the pull on the soft meat of our guts as she flails over the stag,
and cradles the wolf cub, sticky and still against her breast.
And as the others rush in,
(we do not care to name them)
we cheer her on as she spits venom and her voice runs ragged.
We yell in return: we demand retribution for this crime! We demand painful justice!
So when the once golden warrior
drives the blade into her soft flesh,
we really don't see it coming.
(Though later some of us will insist that they did)
And we will argue later over who the villain was
(because there is always one)
poring over the crime like amateur detectives.
And we will discuss whether she deserved it,
or whether *she* deserved it.
But perhaps it is not so easy.
Perhaps
neither of them did.

II

17

It took six days to arrive at King Half's hall.

We arrived as the sun's rim peeked over the horizon, the sky streaked sallow with pale yellow and grey. We'd ridden with little rest, stopping only to snatch at sleep, our winter coats bundled beneath our necks and curled together in the rotting leaf-mulch of late autumn. Hunger gnawed at our bellies and we ached in the smalls of our backs and our tailbones and hips from the lumpy ground and the jolt of the horse.

When we rode up over the grassy hill and into the village, they came out to receive us, unsure who we were. How frightening we must have looked, our hair matted, our clothes blood-rusted and muddy and our eyes dark pinpricks in our pale gaunt faces. A woman who saw us looked frightened and took a little amulet that hung from her neck and rubbed it fiercely between her fingers. All the townspeople stared and, with their pinched faces and twitching noses, looked to me like nervous shrews.

Perhaps I was delirious.

Hunger was known to make the mind see things that were not there. I'd once seen a man found who had been lost two weeks in the woods, and when they brought him into the village he had seen a small dog and thought it was a roasted chicken, and tried to tear the thing limb from limb to nibble on its leg. It was a wonder, really, that as we'd ridden through the grey dawn and blue dusk, that I hadn't seen land where there was none and driven our horse into a ditch.

Then Thora finally came out from the hall. I don't know why in that bleak dark night I had thought of her, of her fire-licked hair and pleasant laugh, of her polite invitation how many years ago? I suppose we had nowhere else to go.

When she came forward and took my filthy hands I thought I might weep, but no tears were squeezed out; already it seemed I'd sobbed myself dry.

I unburdened myself by the hearth, warmed my chilled fingers in its glow and felt the prickle as the hard blood in them softened. The flames quivered orange and blue and the wood popped and sighed. There was a strange desire in me to plunge my hands into them and feel a pain so fierce and new that it would dull the one already rubbing me raw.

Thora didn't blink when I spoke; there would be no gasping or wincing, and for that I was grateful. I did not want her pity. When I was finished she took my hand. There were callouses on her thumb and forefinger – from her needlework, I would learn, for her tapestries were beautiful as the world they mimicked: creatures of the forest, radiant women in golden gowns, men bloody in battle, woven so precisely that one could see the fear on their faces.

Her eyes were soft. She did not consult her father, nor her husband. A woman, yet there her word was law. Please, she said, I could stay as long as I liked.

She took me to the bathhouse behind the hall.

She would take care of Svanhild, she said and closed the door.

Before me stood a great tub, filled to its brim. Steam rose from the surface in tendrils so thick I was sure I could trap them with my fingers like ribbons of silk. I undressed and sank into the hot water, hissing through my teeth at its sting, which bit every cut and scrape and boiled my skin red. The dirt and blood from my body stained the pool brown. I scrubbed my hair and skin and wished that I could slough off layer after layer until I was fresh and pink and pure.

When I was done, I closed my eyes and sank my head under so that the water nipped my nose and lips and pushed my eyelids down. The stillness there. The silence. The first moment of calm. Then for a moment pain bloomed inside me so fiercely that I wanted to open my throat and let the water in. I didn't do it, of course. I pushed up and breathed deeply the waning steam and the cold air beyond it, then rose from the bath, my hair dripping down onto the clean swept floor. I looked down at my arms, my stomach, my legs, and saw that the grime and gore was all dissolved and gone. But I did not feel clean.

We stayed there for three years all told.

One family traded for another: King Half and Thora, her husband and children, another gaggle of aunts and uncles and cousins.

Thora's two sons, Arne and Erling, were mop-haired like lambs and had their father's wide mouth and their mother's milk skin. They were sweet and impish, shouting and giggling

and tumbling. It was painful to see them. How they breathed. How they grew. Sometimes from afar I would see one as my son, and my heart would lurch. I had shameful thoughts, of the gods and bargains. Of what was fair and what was not. Terrible thoughts. Each one rotten and I knew it.

I spent my days by Thora's side. I'd not sewn tapestries before. We wove at the loom and then stitched. Those first weeks I fumbled the needle and pricked my fingers and my blood stained the thread. Again and again. I was untalented, but Thora was patient.

In those early days my grief was a thing that rose and fell. Some mornings I woke to find the sadness had sunk down in my chest, and I would take to my work, my tongue between my teeth and my cheeks turned to the pale winter sun where it streamed through the smoke holes. Around me the women gossiped like those I'd left, sharp-tongued and their laughter twittering to the rafters. Other times sorrow rose up so awful inside me that I could not eat or sleep, would stay blanketed in my bed so that no one but I would know my suffering.

With time though that grief gave way to numbness; a weariness bone-deep. Half's hall was built right upon the sea, the village bleeding into the docks and then into the water, and I would go down to the shore to breathe the brine and sea spray, the gulls shrieking and wheeling overhead and the wind licking the ocean to waves. There, I thought of my family. Of what had become of them. For all I knew, each one could be dead, for death often came swift and unexpected. Would I grieve if they were? I took a pebble from the shore and flung it out far where it dropped with a heavy sound into the water. The horizon before me was long and blue and bleeding into the sea. It looked the same as it always had.

We women were at work in the hall, the doors flung open to welcome the shy warm breeze. And on the air the tang of the sea as the men hauled ashore the day's catch; each day better than the last, the nets full to burst with silver fish.

Svanhild came through the doors, her dress muddied at the hem. She was a different child now to the one I'd brought here. In those first months she'd eaten little, shrunk down, her cheeks stripped of their flesh, and in sleep she would whimper. She did not forget. She never would. But slowly, slowly she learned to carry the weight, and soon the child she was came clear again.

Where had she been? I asked. Her dress was sodden.

She snatched a wedge of flatbread from the table, leftover from lunch. It would surely be tough, but she pinched it between her teeth and chewed, then swallowed and said, they'd been crossing the stream; her and the other children. She'd slipped and fallen half in the water.

I frowned. Hadn't I told her to be careful? She was careless and those rocks were traps, slick with moss and longing to puncture flesh.

Svanhild nodded and tore at the bread so that crumbs showered the floor. Yes, she knew, she said. She wouldn't do it again. One of the boys had fallen and hit his head.

Was he okay? I asked.

No. She didn't think so. He wouldn't get up, even when they'd shaken him. She shrugged, then stuffed the piece in her mouth and in a muffled voice said, there had been lots of blood.

We flew to the stream. There the boy lay, curled on his side, the current lapping against his body as if he were a rock himself. I did not know him; he was only a nameless village boy. I could see where his head had met stone, the flesh and bone caved inwards, and the water having rinsed the blood from his scalp so that the wound glared white and pink within. His hair was dark and wet and stuck to his forehead. He could not have been older than five.

I retched into the grass.

He was too young. Hadn't Sigmund been too? I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and spat to clear the bile from my tongue. Svanhild stood at the stream's edge, looking down on the corpse with the cocked head of a bird, as if he were only an insect crushed accidentally beneath her shoe. Death no longer frightened her.

Each bitter winter lingered in that country, with its heavy snows and storms, until spring finally came, bringing watered-down sunshine and fragrant azaleas and hellborine.

Summer, autumn, winter again. Whatever petty turmoils raged in the domain of men, the world continued, oblivious to it all.

No one spoke of Sigurd's death. Two years had passed. News travelled slow, but not so slow. They knew, I was sure. They had whispered and gossiped, eyes sliding towards me, the woman he had married who had bathed in his blood. People far and wide would have shaken their heads and toasted his life, an extraordinary thing. Long may he live on in Valhalla! Then ale sloshing from horns, a tear or two shed, a song sung and so on and so on. Too soon I began to forget. I saw his face through fog. And where was his voice, his smell? Each night I closed my eyes and whispered his name into the dark as if I could summon him there. But it was useless, like grasping smoke, my hands falling through the air.

One morning I went to Thora in her room. She stood at her bedside, fastening an oval brooch to her chest.

I wanted to weave a tapestry, I said.

She smiled, as if she'd somehow known I would come to her that very morning to deliver those exact words. A tapestry of what?

A battle, I said. Sigurd's battle. With Fafnir.

I could see it clear in my mind: the patterns, the colours, the very wool I would use. This was my thought: I would pour every sadness I had left into its weaving and when it was done the sadness would be gone.

Thora saw that longing. She patted her cap down onto her hair and smoothed the front of her dress and when she was ready she turned and said, very well. She would help me.

And so each day I threw myself into the task. Plucking and pulling. The loom clanked and the shuttle slid sideways. Thora taught me to make the dyes and together we foraged, picking through the undergrowth like dogs and tugging plants from the earth, their roots fine as hair and moist with soil: woad and heather, knapweed and walnut. We stripped and sliced them, pounded and pulverised and boiled so that their colours bloomed. Umber, crimson, sage; I rolled the names over my tongue, slid them over my gums like berries, tasted their pleasing shapes. Each night I fell into my bed with stained fingers. It was difficult work. My fingers cramped while gripping the needle and my eyes were strained and my temples ached. But the ache nestled in my chest was soothed, the weight lifted so that I felt deliciously light. I gorged on that feeling, its sweetness. And I thought that perhaps the worst was done.

18

It was the tail end of the summer of our third year, the air sweet and mild, the sun lingering in the sky as if it could not bear to set. I was by the stream, picking the summer bedstraw with its delicate white flowers, pointed like stars, pulling them from the soil for the orange colour that hid within their roots. The water in the stream burbled. The late afternoon light kissed my cheeks.

A thrall came to me, running up the path, her hair so blonde it was almost white, and her forehead wide and shining in the sun. She was breathless, she told me, because she'd run quickly, as fast as she could, all the way from the hall. And when she finally caught her breath she said, the mistress had sent her to find me, then swallowed and lowered her eyes. My mother, Grimhild, and her sons had come.

And the world was suddenly silent; the flowers made no sound when they fell from my hands to the ground.

My heart thudded back down the path. Every beat a small violence. My family, miles from home. What could they want when I had nothing to offer? Everything gone. I was angry then.

And yet.

Still, their names conjured the barest candlelight flicker of yearning inside me; for some childish comfort, its familiarity, its warmth.

I quickly snuffed it. After all, I was no longer a child but a woman who had borne her own children and that comfort was long dead like a tree burned by fire to black and ash.

When I came to the hall there were some fifty men and their steeds clustered outside; my father's warriors, burly and weather-beaten, their swords strapped by their hips, and looking

rather bored, quite lost in their waiting, in their milling about and mumbling, because they were fast men of action, and to dawdle was to suffer. Around them the horses nickered and pawed forlornly at the sweet green grass that the men had trodden into the dirt with their muddy boots.

Thora stood by the doorway, so small and fine in that sea of meat. They were inside, she said gravely. I swallowed and she took my hand and gently squeezed, and that small act in its kindness was enough – enough that I breathed deeply once and then turned and pushed through those heavy doors to face what had come.

They were waiting at Half's table, the hearth burning and casting its glow upwards so that their faces flickered with fire. My mother sat straight-backed, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes rising up from them sharply. Had her hair begun to grey? There, at the temples; a silver shadow creeping down from the roots like the tide over the shore. My brothers sat on either side of her: Gunnar with his beard knotted down his chest and fiddling with a ring on his middle finger, and Hogni with his elbows on the benchtop, his hair all gone and his scalp now round and bare like an egg. How old were they now? They looked finally like men. Well, they'd certainly committed the savage acts that men did.

I waited and the silence hung like a thick thing between us. There was a crack from the fire as a log split in two. Outside a dog barked at something we could not see.

Then my mother finally spoke and said my name in a voice sweet as summer fruit. How the years had spun by, and look at me now. I looked different - a little thinner in the face, and my hair a little dull - but still much the same. Oh, how it warmed her heart to see my face. Really, it did, after all these terribly long years apart.

Please, I thought, but said nothing.

She looked pointedly around the room. And where was Svanhild? she asked. Surely I didn't mean to keep her squirrelled away? Surely she'd like to come out and greet her grandmother - her uncles, too?

I ignored her questions. Why had she come? I asked.

I thought she might frown, quick to anger as she was, but she only smiled. Very well, she said. Straight to the point. Not a moment to spare. But really, she was only tagging along. It was my brothers who'd had the idea.

What idea? I asked.

She blinked, and said, they'd come to offer me compensation.

Well now. That was a surprise.

Hogni tapped his fingers on the benchtop, and Gunnar cleared his throat and said that it was true. They, he and Hogni. Well. They regretted what had happened, how many years ago

now? Two? Three? He looked down at his hands. Long enough, anyhow. They'd come to make amends, to offer me whatever wealth I desired - and from their own coffers, no less.

I scoffed. *Their* coffers? Did they mean the ones stuffed with Sigurd's gold? My hands had begun to tremble and I folded them at my stomach. Was that the *wealth* they meant to offer me?

There was silence then, as Hogni glared and Gunnar's eyes shifted up and down, and then my mother's words cut through and she said flatly: my father was dead.

What? I asked.

He'd awoken one night with a terrible fever, his skin burning and sodden but shivering violently and his teeth chattering. She paused. She'd tried, but she could not cure him.

How odd my grief was then, if one could call it that; blunt but not painful. No, just a cold strange absence – for after all, he was my father; I should feel something, though we'd never been close. And when I asked how long ago, and my mother said two months, I thought then how my own father had coughed and spluttered himself into death, and at the moment he'd passed, I'd felt nothing. Nothing at all.

Then my mother went and stood behind Gunnar and put her hands down on his shoulders and said that now my eldest brother filled the empty throne. And it was not only Sigurd's wealth, they'd come to offer, she continued, though perhaps offer was not the right word. Return it to me, rather. But on top of that, so much more, all from my father's inheritance: more gold, the lands of Vinbjorg and Valbjorg, I knew how lovely they were in the summertime. And thralls, the most skilled - and some pretty ones too, if I liked, though if I didn't, then my brothers would happily keep them.

No, I said. Enough. Because I wanted none of it, none of what my brothers had decided they could spare. It was no apology, and no apology could be enough. I wanted them gone.

So I breathed through my nose and thanked them for their offer, but I had to refuse. Now, was that all they'd come to discuss? Well, they should not have wasted their time travelling such a long way, and if that was all, then I must now go, and when I returned, I truly hoped that they would be gone too.

Then I turned to escape that bleak, suffocating room, but I'd reached only the door when my mother called out in her hard clear voice: there was something else.

Yes, she said to my back. They had come on that miserable long journey through all of the paltry, backwater little villages of their own country to finally arrive here, in a foreign place that was, admittedly, quite lovely, to compensate me. But I was not the only one who had

suffered, not the only one for whom something was lost. She paused. Atli, she said finally. Brynhild's brother.

And with that there was a terrible clenching in my gut and a stiffness in my chest and my hand fell from the oak of the door.

Not a very happy man at the best of times, she continued. And now, he was furious, blaming Gunnar for his sister's death, which was stupid, really, given that she'd killed herself. But it didn't matter. He was their closest neighbour, an important ally. Never mind that he was being unreasonable. There could be no bad blood between them. She sighed. Such was the way of the world and the politics within it.

Then she paused, and I knew the words that would trickle from her mouth.

I was to be given to Atli, she said. In marriage.

I turned back, to the three of them there, such drab grey figures in their dark clothing in the dark light, looming like the fate-spinning Norns, my mother sitting and Gunnar sitting and Hogni so tall now, now rising, now coming towards me.

They couldn't be serious, I said and laughed. As if I would ever agree to such a match. Why, I'd straight away marry the first beggar they found in the street, or some old wrinkled toothless man, rather than him. But they said nothing and I swallowed. Had they not offered him whatever they'd cobbled together to give to me? They could give it all to him. Give him whatever pathetic penance they'd come there to give me. And then some.

They had, Hogni said. He would not take it. Did I really think they had offered me first? Or at all? No. It was Atli who'd asked. It seemed there was nothing else he wanted.

My blood turned cold. Hogni was coming closer now and I reached behind me and felt for the door. I wouldn't do it, I said. I wouldn't. Had they not learned? Had all that death not been enough?

My mother sighed. So dramatic. The marriage was a good one. I was a widower now, and not getting any younger. How would I find a suitor, holed up here in my misery? And Budli had now passed, just like my father - some infection of the foot or the ear or the lung. A bad one, whatever it was, and he was now very much dead and Atli was now king and I would be his queen. That was certainly more than I'd ever been in my marriage to Sigurd.

Did she really think I cared about such petty things? I asked. Sigurd had been greater than any king. He could have spat at Atli's feet and Atli would have thanked him for it.

My mother rose and her chair scraped back across the floor and she said sharply that this was bigger than me and my silly little wants, my silly little grudges. If I did not marry Atli then he would set upon their kingdom and fell their men, and the women and children would

be slaughtered in their beds, those innocents like lambs, and was that what I wanted? Was I so very selfish? I *would* marry Atli or I would never marry again.

And I looked at her full in her angry pinched face, because I was no child, she could not command me, I did not obey her, had not obeyed her for a long long time, and said very well, then I would not marry another man as long as I lived.

And then my hand touched wood, found the door, and I pushed, turned. Pushed again. Smothered a strange disbelieving laugh. It was useless. All of it. The door had been locked.

It was quick after that.

Hogni tugged my hands behind my back and when I squirmed his fingers bit the small bones in my wrists. Then my mother glided forward, a cup now in hand and inside some foul liquid, murky like pondwater when she held it close.

Please, I whispered.

But my mother's eyes were stone. Behind me Hogni breathed. And still in his seat, Gunnar looked down at his hands.

Then Hogni pinched my jaw and pulled my head back and my lips apart, and my mother poured the vile drink down my throat. Oh it was awful, the taste horrid, my throat squeezing and bucking and my tongue bloated and tears in a hot drizzle down my cheeks. I would drown, I thought. I would let myself drown.

But I was not yet ready to die. I swallowed instead.

Then I was heavy, a fog behind my eyes, filled up with clouds, thick in my skull. Then my legs sagging beneath me. Then my rage seeping slowly outwards like blood from a wound. Then dark coming down. Then nothing.

19

What do I remember?

The carriage jolting over stones and roots and down into ruts and potholes. The clop of hooves. The verdant blur. The caw of birds and the skittering, the crackle of critters disturbed and bursting out and disappearing. The splash and hiss of the serpent river and then the sting, the brine and the film of salt and the rocking back and forth beneath the spray. I must have eaten. Slept. I remember neither. If I had thoughts then they drifted idly by like flotsam on the sea.

Of course, I found out later that the journey from Half's hall was twenty-one days; a voyage along the river that cleaved the countryside and joined the sea like a great umbilical cord. Then the boat and the voyage northwards, hugging the jagged coast. My brother, the king, riding at the fore. And each day that slurry funnelled anew down my throat.

On the twenty-third day, I woke.

It was the smell that I noticed first: a scent in the air. Many scents, maybe. Impossible to name, but different somehow, different in the flavour of the sea on the breeze or the odour seeping in of sap bleeding from the wood that blackened in the hearth. My body was my own again and I could feel the weight of blankets on my chest, my legs, but I could not feel Svanhild, who often slept with me, could not feel her warmth curled snail-like against me. And I remembered then, the memories seeping, dripping through: my mother. The drink. Little more after that.

My eyes came open with panic and I sat upright, then winced and squinted because my head was pounding and my mouth was dry, my tongue a bloated thing inside.

Well well, look who had finally awoken.

He sat in the corner of the room, in its one dim shadow, as if from that seat he absorbed all of its light, all of its warmth, his eyes bright and hands folded beneath his chin.

My head might be a little sore, he said. Only the gods knew what concoction my mother had drugged me with, but it had knocked me out cold. Not a peep for three whole days.

And it was true, there was a beating in my skull and a lump in my throat, the room in my eyes soft at its edges. When I opened my mouth I was not sure that I would be able to speak, but I did, and I said his name: Atli. Why had he brought me there? Why was I there in that bed? And when I looked down I saw that my clothes had been changed, my dress stiff and new. My skin crawled beneath it.

Atli smiled. Had nobody told me? I was to be his wife.

A hand inside my head was rapping on a door and I said that I'd heard, but I wasn't sure I quite understood. My brothers had offered him Sigurd's riches - all of them, and then some. Surely all that wealth was worth far more than me?

He tutted, now now, I shouldn't reduce myself. Sigurd had gold aplenty, yes, but really *I* was his greatest treasure. Perhaps he hadn't seen it. In fact, he laughed, of course he hadn't, or we would not be here, would we? But if I was worthy of such a hero - and he could not deny, Sigurd *was* a hero - then I was *certainly* worthy of a king.

And Atli did look kingly, in his fine tunic, embroidered in reds and browns and his fingers thick with rings, and just the way he sat, one leg crossed over the other. Waiting. Expecting.

I breathed through my nose, afraid I might be sick. Where was my daughter? I asked.

He tapped his foot against the floor and looked at me, considering. She had remained in Denmark with King Half and his wife - what was her name? Inga? Tove? Well, it didn't matter now.

Something inside me was torn open then, a great wound that had ever so slowly stitched itself together and was suddenly reopened.

Atli sniffed. If we were being honest with one another - and he hoped we could be - he didn't care much for girls. The weaker sex, one might say. Really, if men could spring babies into being all on their own, the world would be a far better place. *But* the gods had willed women into existence, and so it was. Anyway. I should not be so disappointed. After all, soon I would have new children - sons - to care for, and what time would I have had for my daughter then?

Vomit rose in my throat in a vile little hiccup and I swallowed it back down. And my mother? I asked. My brothers?

He gestured loosely to the world beyond the room. They were there, he said. Somewhere. A laugh. My brothers had chosen wisely to bring me to him. Certainly they were no master tacticians, particularly Gunnar, but even *they* could count, and outnumbered they would have been. And now there we were. How funny that a marriage could prevent so much bloodshed.

I wouldn't marry him, I said.

He sighed; suddenly rose and swept across the floor towards me, and when I looked swiftly away he pinched my chin between his fingers and lifted it high.

I would, he said, or I would die. Then he smiled; released. I would be happy there, he said. So much wealth, I would not know what do with it all. Lands to lord over, peasant squabbles to judge, babies to kiss, and so on. After all, unlike Sigurd, *he* was a king.

A king and yet not half the man that Sigurd was.

The words had flown from my mouth before I could swallow them, and at once his eyes blackened and his fingers twitched. But he wouldn't bruise up his bride, he said, not this time, not so close to the wedding, no matter how much I might deserve it. A bride with a black eye would spoil all the fun.

Then he was gone and there was not a sound left in that cold dim room but my heart thundering loud in my chest.

They came with the dawn: two girls, their eyes downcast. I'd slept little, unsurprisingly. Had thought I might never sleep again, but somehow I had. My temples had not stopped their thumping but the pain was smaller, and I found myself hungering for something to eat.

The girls didn't speak. Not even a murmur. As if their tongues had been cut out, I thought, then was suddenly horrified and curious and kept my eyes on their lips but saw nothing. One was pretty, fine-boned and fair-haired, and I was certain that Atli would have taken her to bed. The other was not ugly, no, but a little lumpish and big-nosed, and there was a damp soft sadness about her eyes. Perhaps he'd taken her to bed too.

I let them dress me, steer my stiff limbs into the dress as if I were a corpse. Then another happier thrall came and tucked flowers into my hair, bluebells with their soft violet petals - Atli's favourite, she whispered, he'd asked for them specially, and I fought the urge then to rip them from my head and pluck each bulb from its stem until the stalks were ugly and bare.

The hall was larger than my father's, its ceilings higher and its torches more numerous. A great tapestry hung from the rear wall, and on the pinewood tables the legs were carved with little scurrying animals. I would later learn that when the foul infection that killed King Budli had sullied his liver and eventually his heart, and Atli had succeeded, that he'd declared the

hall too simple, not grand enough. It should be extended, he said, and the thralls had hammered for one whole year. You could see the joins, if you looked, where the wood was greyer; where the old ended and the new began.

The crowd was thick and murmuring, all its eyes following me as I walked, my thralls in tow, to the dais where Atli stood. His beard was oiled, his mouth smug inside it. I'd done all this before: the swords, the ribbon, the goat, the blood. The gothi spoke, but I could not hear anything. And when we turned to face the cheering crowd, Atli taking my hand and pinching, I saw my mother and brothers standing at the fore. They applauded with the rest.

I sat at my bench and the well-wishers came. They took my hands and brushed them with their wet lips and praised my beauty, the flowers in my hair such a lovely choice, offered me their prophecies, their blessings, and they knew, they said, because my hips were decent, that I would bear many sons, a whole army! The lady who made that joke patted my hand and chuckled, then shuffled back off into the crowd.

And I thought in sudden despair that this would be the rest of my life: this place, this pretending, if I did not do something about it. There was a knife on the table; I stared at the blade and it stared back. But when I reached for it, slowly, my hand shook and I drew it back. I was too weak to do such a thing, too frightened of the pain. And when I looked at a man nearby who was struggling to cut into his meat, I realised it would be too blunt to do the damage necessary anyway.

Then the food was brought, but I could not eat; in my mouth those rich stews and the meat peeling from the bone and the bread with its crust cracked open and steaming, were sawdust. If I ate I would be sick. The ale though I guzzled like a drowning fish.

I don't know how long I sat there before Gunnar appeared. He was drunk, drunker than me, his breath sour and his pupils wide like pebbles in his face.

Leave, I said, but he sat.

Forgive him, he said with his slurry tongue.

I laughed; looked away, down into the torchlight and the crowd. Why should I?

Our mother. She. If I. He shook his head. He had no choice.

How tired I was of hearing those words; over and over yet how little they meant. He was a king, I said. Tell me, who of us both had the greater choice?

A war, he said. Hiccupped. It would have ignited a war. All those innocents who would have perished. Hundreds, all dead. Was my life truly worth more than theirs?

How dare he proselytise, I said. Was it not because of him that we found ourselves there? Was it not because of him that my husband was now turned to ashes and my son rotted in the cold clotted earth?

He fumbled for my hand and gripped it tight, his clammy and hot, and looked hard into my face. He was sorry, he said. He was so–

But his words were cut short, because suddenly everyone was cheering, whistling, saying it was time, and I was swept by many hands out of my brother's grip. Away down the corridor to a room so suddenly dark that when I was pushed inside I could see nothing but bursts of brightness in my eyes. And when the brightness finally cleared, I saw the bed.

By then, I was quite drunk from all the ale. Numb with it. But my fear brought sudden feeling back into my body, like the blood returning to a limb that has been trapped beneath your body in sleep; everything coming painfully to life.

Atli slid into the room and closed the door behind him. Undress, he said.

I thought of fighting, but the thought was gone as quick as it came. Of course not. His weight was twice mine and I could not scream, and who would come, even if I did? Guests were well used to the sounds, the scuffling and whimpering of a bride in pain.

So I tried to draw it out. First the heavy gown, pulled slowly overhead, then unfastening the brooches to remove the shift. This even more slowly because my hands shook. Then I lay on my back and closed my eyes. Heard him undress. Felt his body come onto the bed. A minute, I thought. A minute more before it began. But no. He bore down on me suddenly and I gasped at the pain. I was split down the middle. His fingers pinched my arms. I let my body go slack and bit down hard as I could on my tongue to give myself a different pain to feel, but it was no use. I felt every second.

When he was done he rolled himself off me and soon his breath slowed and he was still. I shuffled away as far as I could and on that cold edge of the bed curled up into myself. My body was a big open wound. Again, I thought uselessly of dying. It seemed something in me already had. And then, quiet as I could in the silence and the dark, I wept.

I did not sleep that whole night. And when he finally rose with a grunt in the morning and went out through the door, I waited and listened until I was sure he was gone before I slid out of the rumpled, stinking bed and picked my dress off the floor. Tiptoed through the door. In the hall there were thralls stringing fish from the rafters to dry and stoking the hearth, and women around it, standing at their looms. They did not notice me when I slipped past.

Outside it had been raining; there were puddles on the ground, and the sky was so bright in its greyness that when I looked up I had to squint. I walked round the hall, to the side that faced east, away from the sea. There they were, the three of them, all saddling their horses for the journey home.

There were no places to hide, nothing but the long wall of the hall and its shadow, stretching behind me, and so I stood where I was and hoped it would be enough. And soon my brothers mounted and spurred their horses and the horses snorted and began to walk forward, their tails flicking the summer gnats that swarmed up from the lake nearby. Then only my mother remained. She got up onto her own horse, though perhaps not as easily as she once had when she was young, especially weighed down by all her long hair, the cloak that must be stifling in the thick wet air. She looked up suddenly as if she'd heard a sound, turned her head and saw me there. We stood like that a moment, her looking at me, and me looking back. Then she kicked the horse and it shook its head and moved off round the corner and was finally gone.

20

It was night and my nose was bleeding.

He had not hit me in the face. He only ever struck me in soft secret places - the stomach, the arms – where the bruises would be hidden. But I had been tilted back on my heels and lost my balance and stumbled face first into the door. A harsh little crunch and blood drip dripped onto the floor. I looked down at it.

The first time he struck me he had come to the room and started tugging at my skirts. I had pushed his hands, just a little, and he had slapped me so hard that my head seemed to spin around on my neck. Then I hadn't come quick enough to supper, he had not liked my tone of voice, I'd not worn the dress he wanted, or he'd remembered one such transgression from the days before and it had irked him so much that he had no choice but to punish me again.

That first morning of the sixth week, I'd woken and felt such a terrible weight on my chest, such a longing for my daughter, that for a moment I was sure I would die. But I hadn't died; I'd kept foolishly breathing. And so instead I'd begun to think of running away. Of fleeing into the woods. I could find a little cave, I thought, or a hollow in the ground and nestle down into the leaves and the dirt and be hidden. I could pick mushrooms from the earth to live on and drink from the streams until I could find a cart on the road or a boat that would take me far away.

But I was known. In the week after the wedding I'd been paraded through the streets of every village nearby, and the curious people had gathered and looked at me like a bird trapped in a cage. And the dogs, the hounds Atli had that could sniff and find exactly where a person hid from the smallest whiff of their scent trapped in a scrap of cloth. He'd trained them with rabbits, caught and released. And when the dogs found them they would bite down on the poor

creatures' necks until the bone was snapped in two. And then there were all the things that could befall a woman alone. There were bandits on the road, there were stories of women who'd ridden their horses in the dark only a short way and had been knocked down to the ground and bundled into the bushes where they were raped and torn open and left to bleed.

All this I would have risked, but there was one thought that finally stopped me: that if I went to my daughter, Atli would surely follow, and then we both would die. If I stayed, then it would only be me.

So I wove. In the hall, at first, with the other women, who each told me their names and praised my skill at the loom and my silk caps and fine dresses and what was it like, where I had come from, south of this place, which I thought was a silly question, and told them so, because it wasn't much different at all.

That was the first week. The next they let me be. Instead, they spoke of me in secret, said in exasperated voices that they didn't know why I of all people, so sullen and thin-faced, had been chosen to marry a hero like Sigurd, and then a king like Atli! It was an odd thing, a great mystery really, because some among them, or their daughters, or their daughters' daughters, would have been far better suited, would have smiled, would have laughed a little! Oh yes, they said, shaking their heads, they couldn't understand it.

They were particularly bad at whispering. Or perhaps they didn't care. Whichever it was, I had a loom installed in my room, where I could be alone and pluck and pull and tug myself to numbness. But it was not enough. So I found the places where a person could hide: in dank dripping storehouses that stank of fish and whey and squeaked with the scufflings of long-tailed rats. Or huddled half a mile inland on the banks of a small still pool of water frozen to ice, cradled by tree roots thick as a man.

I breathed in through my mouth and through my bodily pain and watched the blood on the floor and thought that later that day I would go out to a shallow little cave in the cliffside that I had found, where it was dry and quiet, and there I would pretend that I was nothing more than a bat hanging upside down, or a fox scuffling in the dust, or a spider tucked up inside my web in the dark. All alone in the world.

I woke one morning to find a girl by my bed, hovering at the foot. I yelped from the fright. She blinked and in a bored voice told me that she was to be my own special thrall. A handmaiden of sorts. I didn't ask about the others - the fair-haired one, the sad-eyed one. Had they told me their names? Perhaps I'd never asked. This one was called Thyra. She was pretty in an

unremarkable way, her face plain but pleasant, though her forehead was a little large and there was a dark mole on her cheek.

The other two had tiptoed around me like ghosts, which had suited me fine because I didn't want company, but Thyra made herself known. She asked what clothes I wanted washed, how my hair should be braided, and did I want the room swept that day or the next?

I warmed to her, though; solitude begets loneliness, and when I snapped at her she didn't blanch, only looked at me with something like contempt. For that I liked her.

I asked her one day where she had come from.

She plucked at a wayward stitch in the hem of a dress and said, a small village, at the foot of a great mountain, and there were hundreds of such villages and hundreds of mountains, so it was no great surprise that I had never heard its name.

How old was she? I asked.

Nine, she said. They had come in the night. Killed her father and brothers easily: a sword through the belly, an axe to the neck. Her mother's throat cut, her body tossed through the door into the mud. Then she looked at me hard as if daring me to ask what they had done to her, but I already knew; her wounds were not of the flesh. Anyway, she said, now she was here. All that in the past.

And then that day came when my nose was bleeding, Atli stormed off, and she knocked on the door and I told her to come in. She came in and found me with a rag up by my nose to soak up the blood and the splatter of it all down my front, and I could see the thought behind her eyes: that perhaps we were not so different after all.

She was not so sullen after that. And in the quiet cavern of my room, we began to talk.

It was no surprise that thralls knew more gossip, and certainly more useful gossip, than even the women of the hall. They were shadows, after all; neither seen nor heard. No one thought to lower their voice near a thrall. Would you whisper to hide your secrets from the furniture? So it was from Thyra that I learned the people of that place: the names of the noble women, those who whispered at their looms; who was harmless and who was not. Helga, whose husband had drowned in the sea three months before; Revna, with the hooked nose who laughed too loudly at Atli's wry remarks; and Liv, who smiled as I came and sneered as I went. But it was the men Thyra knew best. Atli's men. After they'd taken her to bed, they rolled onto their backs and sighed, and it would surprise you, Thyra said, to know how much those men liked to talk. Most of their secrets were mundane. Useless. Yet confessed with such seriousness that Thyra could have laughed. The man with the best secrets was Vingi; a broad man, square jaw, square shoulders, all of him square. A great warrior, I was told, and an even better lover.

But he didn't speak, Thyra said, as the other men did. When he was done he shrugged the thralls off and rolled over; they saw themselves out. Vingi who drank with Atli into the morning's red dawn. Vingi who sat at his right hand. Vingi whose pale eyes followed me, waiting. For what, I didn't know.

There was a harp in the corner of the room; a thing both hulking and delicate. A wedding gift, from some nameless chieftain hoping to curry favour. Even so, it was a beautiful instrument, carved from an elder tree, with its sleek curves and its sheep-gut strings so taut they trembled.

I found Thyra admiring it.

Had she seen one before? I asked.

Yes, she said, when she was a child. Her uncle's. He played it only at feasts, late into the night, and he played it well – so well that even the babies stopped their fussing and the dogs turned their sharp ears forward and listen.

I was surprised, because a harp was not a peasant's instrument – the wood too grand, the strings of sheep gut or horse hair a labour of love, the harp altogether a work of art, and what peasant had the time or money for such a thing? I had the startling thought then that she had never told me she was once a peasant.

Did she know how to play? I asked, and she nodded, and I said well, she must play me something then.

So she sank down to sit behind the harp and embraced it heft, its shoulder crooked by her chin. She plucked at the strings, bouncing them between her fingers. Such rough hands, dry and ragged-nailed and red from hours boiling and scrubbing the laundry and hauling sacks of oats and barley and sweeping the floors, but on that harp they were coarse things made lovely. I'd heard harp music before; pretty songs so delicate the wind might blow them away. Thyra's music was not delicate. She teased a song from the strings that ached, that wept, that went in through your ears and sank down into your chest and curled there so heavy you forgot to breathe. I closed my eyes, as if they might prevent my ears from hearing, and listened, so still, afraid that to move would break the song in two, would rupture it, whatever it was, that was ringing and crying out.

Then the final notes sang high and low into the room, one on top of the other, and the song sank down into quiet, the strings shuddering into silence. Thyra's hands fell down to her lap.

I opened my eyes. She would forget her other evening duties, I said. The tapers lit, the basin filled. All of it. I didn't need her to brush my hair. She would play for me instead.

And so each night in the hour that followed my return from supper, she played. That one radiant hour. She played until her fingers cramped and Atli's footsteps thudded by the door, and when he entered he looked at us with narrowed eyes, because women alone were always cause for suspicion; left too long to their own devices, doing who knew what, but certainly nothing good.

And perhaps he was right, because something in those songs was defiant. They soared inside my skull.

That month my bloods came early. Bright and angry. Six months now, or had I lost count? That female ailment was once a nuisance, with its stomach clenching and churning and the havoc it wreaked on the bowels and the mess, the smell, the time spent washing, spent being clean again. Now it was sickeningly sweet, a gift, a blessing, my body's resistance. I saw the red streak on the bed in the morning when I woke and smiled.

Until he found me, scrubbing at the stain. He went for the face this time, a quick jab to the left eye. It had already begun to swell. Thyra dabbed at the wound with a warm cloth.

I wasn't the first, she said after a while. Oh no. There had been another. What was her name? She could not remember - something ordinary, something unspeakably plain, but she wasn't, no. She was very pretty. But young. And dim. So pleased to be chosen. Thyra tilted back to better see the wound, sat forward again and daubed its tender edge.

Then she was quiet and still quiet, and I gestured impatiently and she sighed. They did not know what she'd done. None of them. She would not say, didn't say much at all of anything after that in fact. But when she returned from his room, the bruises had already begun to bloom.

I breathed through my nose. And what became of her? I asked.

Thyra drowned the rag in the steaming bowl and wrung the water from its neck. Two nights passed, she said, and he called for her again. Ah, she said, the water too hot, and wiped her hands down on her skirts. I must remember, she said, that no body was found. Perhaps she was sold on to another bidder, perhaps she fled, but. Well. They never saw her again.

Atli had visitors.

This was said by Vingi, standing above me. It was late afternoon, the sky grey and the light sickly and pale. I was crouched in my room, wringing water from the hem of my dress. A great storm had come in the night, the wind wailing and the rains pelting the roof like a flurry of arrows. Early that morning I had stepped outside, wrapped in my thickest winter coat. I'd wandered from the hall and into the trees behind, their bark dark and swollen with water and

the leaves still dripping. Then I'd stumbled over a snarl in the ground, a tree root sneaking out to catch my foot, and then into a puddle not yet guzzled up by the earth, and cursed.

I was to come with him, right then, Vingi said.

I gestured down at my skirts, at the mud-soiled hem and the splatter, and said that surely he would allow me a moment to change. What an embarrassment I would be to my husband, so filthy, wouldn't he agree?

And when finally I emerged from the room, his eyes, rather small in his long pinched face, looked me up and down, and his breath whistled through his nose and he remarked that he often saw me wandering from the hall. *Too* often, one might say. Where was it that I went?

Down to the shore, I said. And sometimes through the forest. Neither a lie.

And what was it there that demanded my presence so frequently?

Oh, nothing demanded it, I said, but I got such horrid pains – the womanly kind you see, and the walking soothed them.

And his face suddenly curdled and he cut quickly through my babble and said that nevertheless, he thought it would be wiser if I remained closer to home. It would not do for the queen to wander so far, would not please the King, and from now on I could just walk in great circles around the hall and that would no doubt produce the same effect.

I smiled thinly, wishing I could spit on his boots; I'd heard he took great pains each morning to polish the leather. Of course, I said. If he thought that would be best.

We came into the hall to find Atli by the hearth, and before him seated two huddled figures: a man and a girl, the man grey at the temples and face cracked with wrinkles like old wood, and the girl surely no older than ten. And both so dirty; they'd been caught in the rain. They were wet, the cold water on their clothes turning to steam by the fire, but the layers of dirt were older than that, sunk into the wrinkles in the clothes, matted into the hair. This was dust from one place and mud from another, all rolled into two people.

The man was Heimir, Atli said, his sister's husband.

I knew the name: the man who'd fostered Brynhild and married her sister, Bekkhild, who was lovely and golden-haired and long-limbed too, but older, and more partial to needlework than the sword. But it was said that not long after they'd married, she'd become quite mad. Had heard voices whispering to her through the walls that said terrible things. They frightened her. She tried to leap from a ledge one day to escape them but was pulled back. And after that she would not speak. Only sat where she was put and stared out into nothing.

And this was Aslaug, Atli said, then paused, and I could see him gathering something up, something sinister, savouring it, gorging on it, before he finally announced: the only child of Brynhild and Sigurd.

And I saw it then with a slow sinking down inside. I gathered the pieces: there were his eyes, his jaw, his hair sprouting from her head. And how strange it was to see not only Sigurd, but my own daughter, for they could have been sisters - *were* sisters, half siblings, after all - the same but not, because I saw Brynhild too, in the nose, the lips, the radiant eyes peering from the grimy face.

I tore my gaze from her, stopped it from wandering back.

Now, Atli said, Heimir, tell him, why did they look so. Well. Bedraggled? Why had they come here, of all places, unannounced and looking like a pair of beggars, and by foot no less, because they rode no horses. And why, tell him, and with this he threw his hand outwards as if to toss away the peel from a fruit, *why* had he brought his sister's child?

Heimir looked up from the hearth and at Atli with great slowness and blinked once and then again and because of that and the wrinkles like furrows in his face, I'd thought his voice would croak from his throat like old wood, but it was deep and clear when he spoke and said they had been travelling a long while. A long, long while.

Well, he could see that, Atli said. And he could certainly smell it. But why?

Heimir put a hand on the soft head of the girl, her knees tucked up and those bright eyes peering round, and said quietly, solemnly, as if in doing so the girl would not hear, that he believed Aslaug was in danger.

Atli was quiet; then he laughed. From who? he asked. Look at her! Small as a mouse, all nibble and no bite. What threat was she to anyone?

Heimir gave him a look black as thunder and said in a great rush, so then, had he forgotten already his own sister, murdered**,** and yes, don't tell him again that she had died by her own hand, he knew it to be true, but it was murder nonetheless, he would not be told otherwise, what choice did she have, they had driven her to it, and now that same, treacherous king sought to kill her daughter.

Atli smiled and said, oh come now, Heimir, how many years had passed? He himself had certainly lost count. If King Gunnar had wished to kill the girl child, then it was certain that she would be long dead by now. Incredibly dead, for he, Heimir, was growing long in the tooth, not as quick with a sword as he'd once been. They would have killed her quick smart, and him too.

No, Heimir said, they had been careful, had stayed nowhere for too long, not more than a month, had dressed shabbily as peasants, had forgone their baths, had told no one their names; and with all of this, he had kept her safe.

Atli sighed and said, then why come to him?

Heimir's eyes slid sideways towards me. Could I be trusted?

Of course, Atli said, waving his hand. I had no love for my brothers. A particular hatred, in fact. After all, they'd only killed my husband and son. Ha! Of anyone in the world, I perhaps owed them the least.

Heimir nodded slowly, then rubbed his beard with a dirty hand. Well, he said, Atli was right. He was growing old, it was true. He was not too proud to say it aloud. Sleeping down on the cold hard earth, night after night, was making his bones cry out as they never had before. He could feel the life leeching from them, slowly but surely, and one day, perhaps soon, he would die. He could not protect Aslaug forever. But Atli could. Could take the girl beneath his wing and hide her there until she grew.

Atli's face soured, his smile sucked away. He said in a low voice that perhaps it was time they returned home.

Heimir frowned and said, but this girl, she was his blood, his sister's own daughter.

And Atli hissed, but but but, was it his fault that his whore sister had spread her legs so wide? That she had birthed this child? No, this girl was not his to care for, no no, she was Heimir's burden to bear. And very soon he would have a brood of his own and his poor wife would not have the time to spare, not a second, to raise his sister's child. Then he stood and smoothed his hands down his lap and said that no, he was afraid there was not a thing he could do.

Heimir was silent; still hunched towards the fire, his elbows on his knees and at his feet the girl with a fist curled by her mouth, and before him Atli waiting, and between them the silence growing into something tight, until finally Heimir said with the weight of a curse that it seemed he was old and fool; a fool to seek help here, from Atli, who had no love for his sister, and who held beating in his chest something shrivelled and black. But one day he would suffer. He would perish. That evil he reaped would come back down upon him.

And at this Atli smiled and said well, if that was all they'd come for, then perhaps it was best they left now – the day still young and many hundreds of miles left for them to tread. The door lay behind them; they could see themselves out.

Then he beckoned and I stood but I was looking at the girl fidgeting with the clasp of her cloak, at the freckling on her cheeks and her body hunched over like a weeping spruce.

There was a hatred in me but it was swallowed by a strange swelling love and I could not bear it.

Please! I said.

Six white eyes turned on me.

Please, I said again. There was a storm out there, blackening the horizon. They could stay for the night, rest their weary legs. And we had too much food, always too much. They could eat their fill and set off in the morning.

Heimir looked at me fully, perhaps for the first time, considering; at Atli, again at me. Then, he nodded.

And I bobbed my knees in a silly little bow and went with Atli from the hall, back through the corridor. I could feel his anger, his body swollen with it, and I knew I would be punished for my disobedience, the words slapped back into my mouth. And so it would be, and so it was. But then, there, I did not care, for my heart was leaping, running, and I was warm all over.

Dawn came. Atli left early, riding from the village with Vingi to hunt. He would take what was left of his anger out on some fallow deer.

I tugged my hood over my head and set off into the cool air. The sky was unusually clear, the morning sun watery through the branches of the spruces and kissing the willow, the juniper, the myrtle and wild garlic. I stepped carefully over the tree roots.

Once, I had interrupted a fox, a twitching dying mouse dangling from its jaw. It froze, as if its stillness might conceal it from view. Its face was small and shrewd, its fur an orange blaze. I'd once seen three small pelts swinging in the wind, hung at the front of a villager's house. How sad, I had thought, to see their clever lithe bodies so limp and lifeless.

I found her perched on the trunk of a fallen tree, like some child of the forest. Aslaug.

I said her name and asked if she remembered me, and she looked down at me from perch and said yes, I was her uncle's wife. Her voice was high like a sparrow's, and she looked like one too, so small-limbed and dark-haired, her brownish cloak too big and bunched up around her.

My name was Gudrun, and I was her aunt, I said, surprised by the truth of it, but she only looked down at me, her head drawn to one shoulder.

Did Heimir know where she was? I asked and stepped slowly forwards, as if she were a creature that might startle. Out here all alone?

She sniffed and said no. She'd snuck away in the dawn while he slept. He snored so loud, she was lucky to have slept herself at all.

I was by the tree now and so I hauled myself up to sit beside her, struggling, for it was higher than it seemed and then I was up and looking out at the woodland quivering below, the twitching of the leaves and the grass with the wind and the bugs that crawled.

Beside me Aslaug picked at the bark of the tree and swung her legs. After a time I said that I'd known her father, once. Did she remember him?

She shrugged and said no, for she had never met him. She knew he was a hero. And that he was dead. But she did not know him. Only her mother, and only a short while. She squinted her eyes at me. Did I know her? Her mother?

I nodded and her face grew bright. What was she like?

I hesitated, because what could I say? That I had been in awe of her once and hated her too and that somehow both could be true? Instead, I smiled and said only the good: that she was powerful, beautiful, and Aslaug nodded, as if I'd confirmed a thing she had always thought. Then she rubbed her eyes and said that she thought she would like to go back.

We walked the path through the yellow morning to the hall, and when we rounded its corner, Heimir came from the doorway, to his knees in the dirt. He grabbed her tight and said that he'd been worried, frantic, to find her gone! She knew better than to wander, they were not welcome here, there were spies afoot, not a soul could be trusted, no one but him.

She was not so far, I said, and he looked up at me, hesitant, then seemed to decide upon something and thanked me once and a second time for the day just gone, for what I had said, but I shook my head; there was no need.

Where would they go now? I asked.

He sighed. He didn't know. To the east, inland. No place better than another. And every day he worried, and the worry was like a slow death, a sickness eating him inside and out.

I looked at the girl who looked up at the sky, into the sun's feeble beam, and my heart lifted because it was Svanhild, then Aslaug once again.

I knew then what I would do.

I called for Thyra and she dragged the harp from my room.

Was I sure? she asked, and I swallowed and said yes.

Here, I showed Heimir, if he pulled the strings back from the body then Aslaug, so small, could curl herself inside, become hidden within its belly. He could be a bard, a poet. No one need see her.

He plucked a string and it cried out, bent over and touched the wood, and said that he could not pay me, and I shook my head, no, the harp was a gift. Finally he nodded.

Perhaps he'd been wrong, he said softly, and to be wrong was not easy for an old man to admit. We both smiled then, but the smiles dwindled into something small and sad.

They should go now, I said, before the day sucked away the light.

And that was that.

Heimir heaved the harp onto his shoulder and looked about himself one last time, but they had come with so little, and now left with little more but some bread, some cheese, a single speckled greenish apple, the last from the tree. Before they stepped forward, Aslaug looked back at me, her hair wispy about her face, her hood fallen back, and waved goodbye.

I watched their backs until I could no longer see them. And when they were gone, I closed my eyes and felt the empty space their bodies had left behind: the heat, the smell, the silence of the world. Even the wind stopped and the trees in their golden fall cloaks all stood still. I stood that way for several minutes. Then I roused myself, shook the quiet free before it could settle, and went back inside.

21

The sickness began soon after; my own terrible disease, but this time far worse: no relief, even after the third month. Every smell made me gag. I retched until nothing more would come out. I called for the tinctures I'd once used, but none worked.

Lying down seemed to help a little, so I stayed in bed. Thyra dabbed my clammy forehead, offered me meagre sips of water as if I were a baby bird. She wrinkled her nose when she took the pot to empty, tossing its vile contents into the grass.

Then my belly began to grow, and it would not stop. At night I dreamed of the skin splitting open, of something black and sharp-toothed wriggling out. I wanted to weep but could not summon the strength. There were brews, I knew, that women spoke of, foul elixirs one could swallow that would strip the insides clean, send them out in a mess of blood.

No, I scolded myself. Was it the child's fault that it would be born? But when it stirred inside me, I felt nothing that resembled love. Only darkness spiralling down.

My pains began in the late hours of the morning. My body clenched and trembled. Outside it was winter, but inside that room it was unbearably hot. The midwife tapped my knee impatiently and said push! But the baby would not budge. I gripped the bedclothes so hard my knuckles went white and screamed so loud I was sure the entire village must have cowered.

Then day became night and the child was still not born. Something was wrong, I moaned.

The midwife spread my knees and peered into the hot darkness inside me, then leaned back and said in a flat voice that there were two.

Two what? I asked.

Two children, she said.

My eyes rolled back and I yelled, get them *out*, she must get them out right now!

She muttered something under her breath, then stuck her hands in, probed and pinched. I did not look, too afraid that I might see my insides clutched in her hands. Then there was a burst of pain as she turned something around, and then she said there, now push! And with one final scream they came, sliding from me slick and fast. The room filled with noise as two babies began to cry.

Sons, the midwife hummed with approval, and lowered them both to my damp chest. I wanted to hand them back. They were red squirming creatures, eyes scrunched shut, and to me they looked not like things made from my own body, but like some other animal's litter. Their hungry pink mouths were already searching and when one finally found a nipple I felt a sudden urge to cry. I swallowed it.

He named them Erp and Eitil. Strong names, he said. Powerful names, befitting of a strong powerful man like himself.

They squirmed when he sprinkled the water onto their foreheads. Twins, the crowd whispered. An omen, surely. A sign from the gods. A sign of what, though, nobody knew.

From the first day, they hated me. They cried all day. Horrible screeching wails. How could such small things make such a great awful sound? At first I scrambled to appease them, held them, rocked them, offered them my aching breasts, but they wanted none of it. I had the midwife brought and she looked them over quickly and said no, they were not sick. They were perfectly healthy, in fact. Only unhappy. Then she looked me up and down and made a little noise in her throat as if to say she'd thought so, and left.

Unhappy? I thought bitterly. What did they have to be unhappy about, when I was a thing unravelling, my hands always shaking. When I pulled on a dress, it hung from me like a sack, and I realised that I had forgotten to eat.

After the first month, I let them cry. I laid them in their bed and stood over them and watched as they screamed. Then one day their screaming was so loud that I carried them outside to a storehouse and set them down on a fat sack of barley and went out and shut the door. I could barely hear them. And suddenly all the sounds I'd not heard in weeks rushed to greet me: the birds chirping and the hiss of the wind through the trees and all the numerous sounds from the village. Just one hour, I thought. Then I would come get them. But that hour turned into two. Then three. And when finally I returned they had stopped their crying, but their eyes were black and stared at me with hatred. For once, I did not blame them.

After that, when I couldn't stand it, I would thrust them into Thyra's reluctant arms.

I would not be gone long, I said. But I was. Hours. Entire days. So relieved to be free of them. I lay alone with my eyes closed in the soft spring grass beneath the newly budding trees. I imagined their roots coiling around my limbs and pulling me down into the quiet dark earth. There I would disintegrate into the soil and no longer be weighed down by such heavy things as flesh and milk. Then I opened my eyes because I was suddenly ashamed. What kind of wretched mother was I that I could have such thoughts? I went and stood at the edge of the cliff and peered down into the bay far below. What would happen, I wondered, if I threw myself off? How long would it take my body to fall? The wind blew at my back and into the vast gaping space. It would be so easy, I thought, to die.

I did not jump. I hurried home, frightened and flushed with guilt.

In the room the children were already asleep. I looked down at them and remembered with a sharp pain how I'd once spent hours this way bent over Svanhild and Sigmund, every lash, freckle and fingernail a thing to marvel at. Did I feel it then, looking down at my sons? I did not. I felt only very alone. A stranger in my own body.

Despite it all, they grew.

Frey and Freyja were twins, the apples of the gods' eyes, born of Njord, that watery ruler of the sea. My sons were budding princes, sprouting like spring flowers. Or weeds. With each month that passed they were more and more their father's sons, with their dark eyes and pale skin, their tawny down of newborn hair growing in black. For nine long months they had grown inside me, been moulded by my flesh, but to look at them you would not believe it.

Too soon they began to crawl, then walk, and then I could not stop them. They rushed about with their arms outstretched, grabbing at everything: my hair, the beads at my throat, the sheepskin rugs from the bed. They clambered to the tops of tables, pushed and pulled, giggled when something clattered to the floor, shattered, cracked in two. They wanted to touch, to taste, to shove dirt and dust-laden things into their wide red mouths.

I searched for ways to tire them. Come, I beckoned, and bundled them into their fur coats so that their bodies were fat like seal pups. Then I took them up the mountain paths, stepping over mossy stones and beneath the low-hanging boughs of trees. And there I showed them all that I knew: the mountain avens, with their buttery centres and snow-white petals, hugging the rocks; clusters of stout mushrooms with their dusky heads and pale fluted underbellies, protruding from the forest floor. I hushed them and pointed to the thorny hedgehog, the darting hare, the pine marten clutching a grasshopper in its paws. I took them to the shore, the tide pools, where small mottled fish flitted and seaweed bloomed and rippled.

See, I said. See what the world offered when they stopped to look.

But they tore the flowers from the soil, squawked until the animals darted away, splashed the water until you could no longer see. They moaned that their feet ached, that the wind whipped too hard at their cheeks, that their bellies cried out for food, though they had only just eaten.

Then suddenly they were four years old. Then five. Time somehow leaping forward though I had thought, in misery, in the weariness that had sunk down into the marrow of my bones, that it would surely slow down. By then a great numbness had taken over me. I no longer cried.

As my sons grew it became no secret that they preferred their father. His love shone for them as mine did not. He told them stories and bounced them on his knee. But it was not enough. He had dreams, he said, of a long line of sons, a whole army in fact, each who could fight. And I would be the vessel. Another set of twins was ideal. Triplets even better. If he pushed himself into me three times in one night, then perhaps he could make it happen?

I waited until he fell asleep, then scooped out the gunk stuck up inside me.

Once, I had stood before the man I loved and he had held my belly and my heart had bloomed with unimaginable joy. A lifetime later, in that darkness, I prayed to whatever god was left to listen, please; I would do anything to not bear another child.

22

What joyous news! The birth of two sons.

A day to celebrate, to give thanks to gods great and small.

We shudder to imagine her fate had they born a cleft between their legs.

(Women have been killed for less)

But he is nonchalant,

perfectly smug.

He knew his seed was good

if the sons he's sired on slaves and whores

are anything to go by.

To bear a daughter could only be her error.

Already you can see they are their father's sons:

in their eyes, their noses, their brows.

To look at them you could believe he sired these children

all on his own.

But her face is not aglow

as a mother's should be.

Perhaps it was the difficult birth

that caused her harshness.

Or perhaps it was how nine months prior he rutted against her like an animal

without Sigurd's tenderness.

Skewered quite like

an animal on a spit,

her heart did not well up into her throat
but lay dead in her stomach.
She lay stiff and unyielding.
He may as well have been
fucking a corpse.
We watch them grow, scampering on unsteady legs.
They pinch and prod and screech and whine.
They run from her, giggling, but she does not find their games funny.
She does not find much of anything funny.
We don't remember the last time that we saw her laugh.
We do remember the day that she stood at the cliff's edge,
teetering,
and we would be lying if we said we were not interested to see
what path her body might take as it tumbled down:
her skin scraped by stone,
her bones splintered,
her skull cleaved open, smashed like ripe fruit.
But she dragged herself from the abyss's lure
and we released the breath we didn't know we were holding,
and some of us sighed because we were getting a little bored.
But we knew our ennui would not last,
because sometimes when you watched her sons
(just out of the corner of your eye)
their simpering smiles became fanged sneers
and you knew that they were waiting
to sink their teeth into someone.
Maybe, into her.

23

Vingi came to me as the sun dipped towards the earth, its light soft and pale as butter.

I was cleaning up the children for bed, wiping off all the dirt they'd played in that day, the food they'd smeared on their faces. They wriggled and one scratched me on the wrist with a sharp fingernail and smiled and I breathed once very slowly out through my nose.

Then Vingi shuffled into the room, smelling of steel and soot and tracking in mud on the soles of his boots; he'd been out that morning across the rain-soaked village to the blacksmith.

A guest waited in the hall, he said.

I dipped the cloth and squeezed. A guest? I asked. Had Atli not received them?

And Vingi said impatiently that Atli had not yet returned from his hunt, the one he'd ridden for that morning, bow slung across his back. Vingi was sour that he hadn't been invited.

A king's hall saw many visitors; so it was in Atli's and so it had been in my father's: jarls and chieftains and foreign noblemen all seeking aid or favour, and men who claimed to be old friends but were in fact pale nobodies and were ushered back out onto the street, and on the first day of the week the peasants who flooded in with their questions and disputes, asking when Atli might send a guard to defend a farm always being pillaged by bandits, and if he might not consider a reduction of their tithe, because the harvest that year, sadly, had not been so good, and they were going hungry, the little children especially were getting bony in the faces. But it was not the first day, so it could not be a peasant. I sighed. I hated noblemen the most. When a peasant looked at you he did so with a spark in his eyes of want and then of sadness, because he knew he could never have you, but when a nobleman looked, his eyes were

filled entirely with the arrogant thought that he could have you, and should, if that was what he wanted, because all noblemen thought themselves one small step below gods.

Thyra ushered the children away and I went into the hall. The air inside was sluggish with smoke. He sat with his back to me, whoever he was, a broad-shouldered man with his elbows on the bench. I cleared my throat and he was startled and quickly stood.

Lady, he said, his beard thick and orange like peat moss over his chin.

Oh, please, I said and forced a smile, he could call me by my name, and I told him what it was.

Thojdrek, he said, when I asked for his. A name I'd heard; the son of a king, a capable warrior, though perhaps not the fiercest – but clever, slow in temper, nimble-minded. I saw then the grandness of his clothes beneath the mud and tatter, the fine silver brocade, the fox fur lining.

I was sorry, I said, that my husband kept him waiting. The hunt, I'd heard, could make men forgetful of the time, but he waved his hand. He was in no hurry. A strange thing to say, given the grazes, the cut jagged and oozing on his forehead.

I gestured for him to sit and had a thrall fetch the ale. I waited for his gaze to creep downwards, to lick his lips. How many men had I politely fended off while screaming inside? But he only took a long drink, and then said so, I was King Gjuki's daughter.

This was not a surprise; my lineage was no secret, nor the alliance my hand had sealed. I nodded, yes.

Thojdrek smiled. He'd met my father, once, invited to eat at their hearth. He was only a boy, but he remembered it well: my father so loud, so big in his seat, had drunk so much that when morning came, he was found snoring in his horse's hay. He laughed; paused. How sad he was to hear of his passing.

I looked down at my lap. It was a long time ago, now.

Then the door creaked open with a shrieking gust and Atli entered, his cloak tugged from his shoulders and thrown to the floor for a thrall to catch.

Thojdrek, he said, what a surprise! How sorry he was to have arrived so late, but not so sorry, because it was worth the wait, he promised that; he'd snagged a boar, a great ugly thing - though weren't they all - and the fattest pig he had ever slain. Tonight, they would feast.

The thralls swiftly brought the supper, fragrant summer fruits, cheeses with thick rinds, and finally the meat, the flesh steaming, the fat quivering. Atli sank his ale and I poured another.

Thojdrek took up his cup and held it there. Did Atli remember when they had fought together in the war with Osantrix?

Atli smiled. Thojdrek knew he had not forgotten. How could he? How many men had they killed? Dozens? Hundreds. It was weeks, it seemed, before he could scrub the blood from under his nails. He tore the meat from the bone and sucked his fingers clean. No, he hadn't forgotten, but he didn't believe for a second that Thojdrek had journeyed all that way just to reminisce.

No, Thojdrek said; straightened. He had come to ask for help. Beg, if that was what it took. It was refuge he sought. His uncle, Erminrek - and he said the name as if he was expelling something vile - had exiled him from his own kingdom for refusing to bend the knee.

Why did he not just pay him he what he asked? Atli said.

Thojdrek sneered. All these years they'd ruled, he from his land and Erminrek from his, but Erminrek had grown weak-minded, suspicious, allowed greedy mouths to whisper in his ear, to stir discontent, to sow wild rumours, and now he demanded, he threatened, he plundered Thojdrek's kingdom, as if they were not equals! He took another drink.

Atli nodded. Well, if it was vengeance Thojdrek wanted, then he would gladly help. Offer his army – his very self. It had been years, so many years, since he'd whetted his sword. He was growing fat and slow in his idleness, and with this he patted his belly and laughed.

In time, Thojdrek said. In time they would fight. But for now, he must rest. Lick his wounds. If Atli would have him, and Atli said of course, because he was in Thojdrek's debt for the help he'd once given him. He would help, when the time came, and until it did he could stay.

Thojdrek bowed his head, and Atli stood and said they should both rest; it had been a long day. I would show him to his bed.

Then he swept out. I led Thojdrek from the hall. Outside the night was coming down blue and cold and the corridors were taper lit and flickering. His feet fell heavy behind me. There was a catch in his breath, as if he went to speak. Then nothing.

When we came to the room, I swung the door inward and he went inside, turned a slow circle and whistled.

I smiled politely. Was there anything else he needed?

After twelve terrible nights sleeping on stones and roots and the damp cold ground. No, he said, there was nothing else.

When he lowered himself to the bed, though, he winced and his hand went to his side.

Was he hurt?

He shook his head and said oh, no, it was only a scratch, but when I knelt down he sighed and slowly took up the hem of his shirt. His skin was shiny and split and smelling of

flesh, of meat exposed. I probed it gently, the ridges of scab, heard the catch of his breath in his throat and the hiss of another taken quick through the teeth.

Then I stood and said well, it wasn't too deep. It was the bruising that was hurting him most.

Then it wasn't so serious after all, he said in a tight voice.

Still, I said, I should dress the wound. Unless he wished to catch fever and die of infection.

He did not. So I gathered what I needed: honey and burdoch, ribwort and rosemary, ground down to the fragrant leaves, the woody stems. He took off his shirt and I bathed his skin, cleared the crust of clotted blood so the wound shone clean and pink. I could smell him now, my nostrils twitching, the dirt and sweat and brine and smoke. He was handsome, I realised – not obviously, no, but in the soft lines by his eyes and the mouth and the sturdiness of his body.

Outside the wind moaned and he asked, where did I learn all of this?

I didn't look up and said, my mother. She was a seer. A sorceress, really, who had known the things that sprouted from the hearth as well as he or I knew the colour of the sky.

I spoke of her, I realised, as though she were long dead. Perhaps she was.

She'd taught me well, Thojdrek said, and I shook my head and said oh, she hadn't taught me; I'd learned by watching.

I pulled the cloth from his stomach, grimy and red. He looked down at it; looked away.

He'd never much enjoyed the sight of blood, he said in a breathless voice, and I replied that that seemed an odd thing for a warrior to say.

Well, it was mostly his own blood that troubled him, he said. Swallowed. But still.

I wondered how many men would admit such a thing. The answer was few; so strong yet so weak with embarrassment, they would rather die.

And me? he asked.

I shook my head no. Blood did not frighten me. But perhaps that was a woman's virtue, for we lived half our lives bleeding, and so learned that without blood there would be no death, but there would also be no life.

I scraped the honey from its pot, said hold still and smeared it thick on his skin. He'd known my husband a long time, I ventured.

Thojdrek sucked air through his teeth and on the breath out said, yes, since before he was king. They'd fought together once and. Well, I'd heard. He had been only young, but was more skilled in strategy than men twice his age.

I said I'd heard the same said of him and he smiled and said, so I'd heard of him, then?

Only once or twice. I lowered my eyes. A long friendship, then. But I did not recall him at our wedding. Or had I forgotten?

A long allyship, he said. And no. He was invited, but sadly waylaid, called upon to tend some dispute further north, men on the brink of war. A pity, because he'd heard that it was quite the party, all sore heads the next morning.

But the truth of that rumour I didn't know, having been preoccupied – having woken that morning and wished that I hadn't.

And him? I asked. Was he married?

He shook his head.

I said, that surprised me; surely there was no shortage of women vying to share his bed. Then looked down at my sticky hands and thought, well well, because I hadn't been so bold in a long long while.

He cleared his throat. Perhaps he should have said that he *was* married. She died birthing their son, who came out shrivelled and blue, his lungs squeezed shut. Both of them in one day.

Oh, I said, my cheeks growing pink, my mouth opening, pretending to fuss with the jar, so sorry, forgive me, it was a foolish thing to say.

No, he said. It was years ago now. And perhaps for the best - not his wife, but the child, who had worried him, frightened him as he grew, because he didn't think he would have made the best father. The world tempted him away too often – even his wife said so. And what would a boy become without his father?

I wet the cloth and turned from the subject because things had grown too sad; it hung over us like smoke. So what had really happened? I asked and gestured to his stomach.

His face hardened. Erminrek had attacked at dawn. Had come down the hill, cloaked by darkness, laid in wait until the sun peeked its rim above the earth and then charged, and no one had known, all killed in their beds, all dead while they dreamed. And he was to blame. He should have known. Erminrek was always so quick to anger. He'd heard the rumours and set them aside.

But he couldn't blame himself, I said. Erminrek was his uncle. Of course he'd trusted him.

Thojdrek's eyes met mine and he said in a low voice to correct him if he was wrong, but he thought I knew as well as he that we could not always trust our families.

So. He knew. Well, that was no great surprise. Sigurd's death was legend and I the story's mourning wife. The poets would have lapped the tale up like wine; the drama, the treachery, the audience trembling in their boots.

Now it was him who was sorry, he said. That was not his place, but I shook my head and with a small sad smile said, as he had, it was a long time ago.

That might be, he said, but that didn't mean that the wound no longer ached.

The silence between us sparked. I didn't know what to do, so I rose to my knees, dabbed the scrapes on his jaw, his forehead, his breath warm and brushing my wrist.

And did he? I asked. Feel the pain of what he'd lost?

He half-laughed and said he didn't know how to explain what he felt.

I looked into his face and his eyes; clear as tidepools, nothing hidden in their depths. Everything he was, it seemed, lay in plain sight.

He forgot, I said softly, that I knew as well as he the pain of leaving home behind.

24

Dawn came and went and yet we spoke no more.

I reassured myself again that I hadn't dreamt it, though yes, it did have that quality of a dream, that strangeness. But my dreams for the last nine years were only ever grey bleak things, and I could still hear it, smell it – still feel the warmth and the hole inside me that something had begun to slowly trickle into.

Then another morning passed and another after that. How silly, I thought, pulling the thread tight in the sleeve of a coat. And he would be away soon anyway, gone to fight his war. And there he might die. Yes, he was already a dead man, I said to myself, a ghost. He might as well not be there at all.

So I went on as I always had.

It had been a wet start to the summer, the peasants all wringing their hands because the wet was not good for the barley, so soon before picking. It would split, and to make matters worse, a boy playing in a barn had been nipped by an angry rat and was now covered with a red rash and delirious with a fever, and had been sequestered in the very barn he had been bitten for fear the sickness might spread. The offending rat, it was said, had not been found.

These things I discovered, sitting at supper and chewing and listening to Atli and Thojdrek talk. Then they grew bored of such trivial things and began to speak of places I'd never been to and people I didn't know, so I excused myself and slipped heavy into my bed and that night dreamt of a strange great village I'd never seen in a place far away.

On the fourth morning we stood outside the hall's doors. The sky had cleared and the air was suddenly light with the day's coming warmth, the birds singing from their branches. I could have joined them.

Atli mounted his horse. He would be gone one month. Vingi too. Visiting some jarl whose named escaped me – some diplomatic matter, an uprising of thralls, of peasants. There was a secret usurper. I didn't care. I was so pleased they were going that if they didn't trot away soon I was afraid I might burst with delight.

Erp and Eitil stood and watched with sad scowls, because they had begged but were not allowed to go along; too young for such a journey, though I'd remarked aloud that to become great warriors, surely they must begin their training early. But Atli had only patted their heads and so now they sulked and pouted, and kicked at the dirt.

Then finally the entourage was moving off. We watched until they were round the bend, disappearing in a trail of dust.

I didn't wait to leave; there was no one to stop me. I set off walking. It was summer now and the ground was no longer mud but dirt. Soon I was sweating. I went to a beach I'd found the week before, where the forest grew right down to the shore. Ahead, the cliff face rose up from the water, the ocean pooling into the cove like a lake.

The sand was damp from the tide but I sat anyway, pulled off my shoes and freed my swollen feet, my toes wriggling in the sun. I breathed in until I felt my lungs swell up inside me and fill my whole chest. How lovely this place was, the breeze stroking my cheek and in the water a fish leapt up with a splash to catch an insect that clicked and whined.

Then a twig snapped like a neck underfoot, and when I looked I saw Thojdrek. He was too weak to hunt, his wounds too fresh, and so there he was, standing back from the shore, eyes half-shut against the glare and apologising, because he had not meant to frighten me.

He hadn't, and I said so.

He came down onto the sand, his boots sinking in. His face was scrunched and stiff.

He should not have walked such a long way, I scolded, but he waved the words away and sat with a groan. Then quickly, before I could speak, he said, well, it was obvious; no point in a lie. He'd followed me there. But he was so bored cooped inside that hall like a hen. In bed. By the hearth. There was nowhere else to go. And the day before, an old woman, eyes white with clouds and seeing past him, mistook him for her daughter and asked if he would rub her feet.

I looked at him, sleeves rolled high and arms bare and his nose already reddening in the sun. I should send him away, I thought. I could not trust this man. Thojdrek, friend of Atli. But the sight of him took the hollow in my chest and somehow made it smaller.

He took my silence for anger. Forgive him, he said, it was a foolish idea. He could see now that he was only disturbing me.

How many reasons did I have to banish him? I had too few fingers to count them. I decided then to ignore them all.

No, I said. He didn't disturb me. Please. Stay.

The days fell away in great handfuls, and he told me of his life.

Each day we met and walked. His wound was not healed, but he would not be cooped inside, would not allow himself to grow weak and slow sitting about, and so I chose the flattest paths, the ones not so potholed and littered with stones. We lapped up the sun and plucked plump summer berries from thorny bushes to eat. Then his body ached and so we rested on streambanks, sat in soft glades, watched the clouds waft in the sky and the twitching of life all around us, its quivering in the undergrowth, the trees, the water.

He was born to King Thetmar, son of King Thetmar, and another before that, proud as most kings were, winner of wars, ruler of vast kingdoms, and so on and so on. A great man, he said, but it was his mother he loved most. He whispered the name: Odila. Like music. He was her first and only child.

She was not the most beautiful, he said, but she was clever – more than clever, shrewder than any man he had ever known, and she was to his father like a beam to a ceiling; he would have crumbled without her counsel, though he would rather die than admit it. Had died. And so had she. Some illness that ate her from the inside out, licked her blood. Her skin pale but scorched by fever, coughing until Thojdrek was sure her ribs would crack. Her body whittled to nothing, and then the final breath. They burned her. He sobbed. He was six years old.

His father died soon after, thrown from his horse, his neck bent like a nail.

So unremarkable, Thojdrek said. Men hoped to die by the sword, but not his father. Felled by a skittish horse. He shook his head.

Then the kingdom was his, but he was young, too young, an orphan and a king by the age of seven, and at night a voice in him hissed that he too should die. And he tried, once; stuffed a weed into his mouth, sure that it was hemlock, but it was only that, a weed, and when he woke he knew: he had no choice but to live.

He'd captured a dwarf once, he said.

We sat on the streambank in the mild afternoon, the water green with muskgrass, and eating cheese I'd taken from the stores, salty and white, paring slices from the rind.

The dwarf's name was Alfrek. He'd come across him in the forest, pulling mushrooms from the dirt and muttering to himself, and perhaps that was why he did not hear Thojdrek creep up close. He bagged him like a squirrel, brought him back to the hall, but not before he

squealed and squirmed and fought. Thojdrek rolled over his arm to show the smooth silver line, the scar slashed between divots of bone, struck by a fingernail.

I sucked the pit from a cherry, down to its bitterness, and rolled it beneath my tongue. And how did I know this wasn't some story he'd spun?

He smiled and said well, had I seen his sword? *Naghlring*?

A little silly, I thought, how men named their weapons like pets, but yes, I'd seen it, golden-hilted in the scabbard.

Well, the dwarf had offered him that sword in return for his release.

And did he? I asked. Release him?

The wind blew in the lowing of cows from somewhere nearby, and he asked, is that what I would have done?

Of course, I said. It was bad luck to kill a dwarf.

He laughed and said I sounded like his wife.

Her name was Astrid. The marriage was arranged, though perhaps that went without saying. She was a jarl's daughter, one of ten – the fourth to be exact; an unfortunate lull squeezed between two brothers. And in that cramped spot she was mostly forgotten, until her sisters were married and gone and her brothers went to war, or died, and her father finally looked down at her and asked with a sigh, what were they to do?

He didn't love her at first, Thojdrek said, because though she was pretty, he was sixteen and girls were strange and sometimes lovely in their radiance, sometimes frightening, but marriage? No. What need had he for a wife? Heirs, they told him. And that was that. So he married her, and love her he did, to his surprise, for her sweetness and cleverness and for her love of the sea, how she would swim out from the shore to be surrounded by its vastness.

Four years passed with blood every month. Then the pregnancy took, but the birth did not. And quite suddenly, he was alone.

I told him my own stories too, of course, traded in tragedies. He'd heard the tale yes, from some poet's mouth, but I knew how those peddlers of stories loved to stamp women down, to twist them and leave them withered and pale. There was power in the telling and I would tell it right. And so I did. Sigurd, Sigmund, Svanhild. Weeping Brynhild. My mother and brothers and their awful treachery. And with every word said and listened to, I felt something seeping out of me – some bitterness slowly leaving my blood. That night, asleep in bed, my dreams were not grey and dark, but full of colours that were wonderful and bright.

We looked down at the rabbit.

He had just shot it with an arrow and now stood over its body, thankfully still; he had hit it true. Sometimes they were not dead, the poor things, but wounded and panting and one needed to be quick with a knife to end their suffering.

It was late afternoon, the light slanted and golden through the trees. We walked the bottom of the goat path that wound slowly uphill into the mountains above. He pulled the arrow free and put the small body into a sack with the others and wiped his hands down his trousers. Soon there'd be no rabbits at all in the forest, I said, impressed, plucking raspberries from a bush, swollen by the sun, and stuffing one into my mouth.

He laughed and said, he'd admit, he was not usually such a good shot. It was some kind of luck. No, really, he was serious. On his journey here he'd starved. There was no time to pack rations. Five days in and his empty stomach was crying out and keeping him awake at night. So he'd stalked the forest, loosed arrow after arrow, but the rabbits turned their tails and skittered away, as if they'd been warned. And then finally, one day, so close to giving up and eating the dirt from the ground, he'd found one, a scrawny thing, out there alone and snuffling by a bush. The arrow was nocked, the string pulled tight, when suddenly it turned, and – he swore this to be true – looked him right in the eye and did not run, did not even flinch, only looked at him there with its two black eyes, its pink nose twitching, as if it believed that it could not die, as if it knew something he didn't.

And so he couldn't do it. Couldn't shoot the creature, bold as it was; it didn't seem right. He slung the bow across his back, held the sack aloft. Perhaps for that one small mercy, the rabbits were thanking him now.

Time passed and Thojdrek's wounds healed. By the third week that frightful gash was only a pink seam, the bruise greyish, the body taken the blood back.

Slowly, he said, slowly he would try, but he did not go slowly. He ran ahead on the path and hauled wood to the hearth and rose early with his sword to spar with the still-waking sun. Down on the beach he clambered over rocks and dove from them like a boy, again and again, slipping into the spray.

That was how he'd escaped, he said when he returned to the shore, his hair oily dark like seal fur and the sand a crust on his legs. Cornered by his uncle's men, he'd run from them and dove into the sea, swam around the headland so he'd be hidden when dawn broke. When he came to a cove he was sodden and pulled himself painfully from the water, took a breath, then moved on foot, quick as he could, running low to a ramshackle village where he found a fisherman heading north.

He looked out to the horizon, the clouds wafting like smoke trails, and I felt a little blue sadness swelling inside me.

How long would he stay? I'd asked him once, and he'd said, a month, maybe less, as soon as he was healed. Then he'd visit the jarls of these lands, gather their pledges one by one, and return home to take what was his.

But that month had come and gone and still he not left. At night I thought of his leaving and my chest grew tight, because that day on the shore he'd peered out at the sea and his eyes were bright, and I'd known then that he would not stay. Had known it all along. I put a hand to my mouth, to keep everything inside.

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A month gone in the barest blink of an eye. We watched the horses trot forward, the men on them weary-eyed and sagging like wilted flowers. Atli dismounted, his feet thudding into the dirt, and my sons ran to him, squealing. Then he came forward, took my hand and gave it a dry-lipped kiss, looked over the heads until he found Thojdrek, and beckoned him inside.

They sat and Thojdrek asked what news he brought. I didn't need to stay there among the ravenous men, but I was curious and wary, so I shooed the thralls with a glare and lingered by the table, the good generous wife, to fill their cups.

Atli tore at his bread and said, mouth full, Jarl Gorm had agreed to join their campaign against Erminrek.

Thojdrek breathed in. And what did Jarl Gorm ask for in return?

Only his loyalty, should he regain his throne. Thojdrek would be in his debt.

Thojdrek nodded and chewed and Atli nodded and chewed too and swallowed and said that he saw Thojdrek was well rested, that his wounds seemed healed.

Well, Thojdrek said, he had only his wife to thank for that. Such skilled hands. Now the wound was only a scar.

Well, Atli said, he didn't know anything about such womanly magic – avoided it if he possibly could. He tapped his cup impatiently on the table and I went round to pour.

Then Vingi appeared, scuttling forward from the shadows and pinching in his hand the thin arm of a girl. She was not older than fifteen, her eyes wide and white like eggs in her skull. This thrall Atli had purchased, he said. What was he to do with her? Was she to join the others?

Atli scarcely glanced up from his plate. No, he said. She was to have her own room. One in the back, close by his.

Vingi's eyes grew wide, because thralls were treated low as dogs - in fact the dogs often better, but it was not difficult to guess what she might offer him; her body was hidden by her tunic, but on her chest ample flesh swelled beneath the fabric.

Vingi, obedient, wrenched the girl from the table, and in retreating, she turned and her eyes found mine. She did not look down.

Her name was Herkja, though whether that name was real or not, who could say? It was not unheard of for a master to rename his property something more pleasing, especially those thralls taken from the east, whose names were strange and difficult to pronounce. But she didn't look foreign; she looked not unlike myself. Dark hair. Pale skin.

He'd bought her in Jarl Gorm's village, where a slave trader's ship lay anchor. They were lined on the docks with their scabs like poor lambs for slaughter, their shoulders hunched and huddling together while wolfish men walked up and down, prodded muscle and fat, had them walk ten paces to reveal any limps. And it was clear what he'd seen in her: a small sweet mouth, a round pleasant face. No limbs missing or otherwise impaired. A woman, not ugly - pretty, even.

He'd offered a fine price, Atli said, and shrugged, as if she'd been thrust into his care. He couldn't refuse.

In most halls, thralls were like dogs; to be kicked when they disobeyed. Every one should be struck through with fear, for that was how best to make them move quickly. But this girl was different. When she was slow to come, when she fumbled the jug and spilled the ale in Atli's lap, he didn't slap her head from her shoulders, but let her mop up the mess. She didn't slink about the hall, eyes downcast, didn't flinch when her name was called. There seemed to be no fear in her.

One week and not a single night did he come to my bed. I knew where he was. But when she bent over the bench and the neck of her dress gaped, or she rolled her sleeves up to wash the supper plates and I searched her for bruises, I found none.

Perhaps she was clever. Perhaps she didn't tremble and cry, or lie still like a dead thing. Perhaps she feigned pleasure, writhed, moaned. I wouldn't have cared; let the girl save herself from a beating. But again and again I caught her looking at me from the corner of the room and my skin was licked with cold.

I came into the hall one day and said her name, and she rose from where she was crouched, sweeping ash from the floor.

So, I said, she was settling in, then?

She hesitated, because why should I care for her comfort? Then nodded and said softly, yes, that I and the king had been very kind to her.

A flame was difficult to stamp out, the longer one let it grow, but perhaps she was not so arrogant or defiant as I'd feared.

It was mild now, I said, but soon the air would grow chilly. My maid, Thyra, had been brought from the south, the cold a little shock. Not so for me. Where I had come from, the winter would turn your toes and fingers black if you didn't bundle them properly.

Herkja's smile was small, polite. She didn't laugh.

And where was it she came from? I asked. Her accent was not one I'd heard before, some of her words turning sour at the ends.

She blinked. Her home was Lesgoda, east of here. It was only small. I might not know it.

I didn't. But perhaps she might tell me of it sometime?

She nodded, and I let her go. Satisfied. The girl was a little stiff, but harmless. Let her watch me if it pleased her. Let her savour the favour she'd found herself. It surely wouldn't last long.

They would set sail in the spring.

Oh, I said, and swallowed the sharp little ache in my throat.

The summer had dwindled, slipped like water through my fingers. Too soon the leaves would turn and leap from their branches. Then winter would come.

We sat on the small beach, Thojdrek and I. The spring was months away, but soon time would swallow them up. I pushed my feet into the sand. He'd be happy, surely. to set sail at last? All that time waiting, his feet itching.

He rubbed his face with his hands. Truthfully? He did not want to fight Erminrek. Wished it did not have to be this way. He sighed. If they could come to some agreement, he would rather talk than fight. Rather talk than send so many men to die. But he knew such an idea was likely as waking tomorrow to find the seas run dry.

Then we were silent, looking at the mountains. Every word I thought died on my tongue, until one finally stuck and I asked, where would he go, if he could be anywhere but there?

He thought for a moment, then smiled and said he'd heard stories of a place named Sicilia. An island. Where it was, he didn't know. Perhaps that meant it was only a story. But

they said the ocean was clear and still, the sand pale like snow and the people with skin so bronze they glowed. He closed his eyes. He'd like to see such a place before he died.

My hand went out onto his forearm and it was warm, the heat of his flesh rising up through his shirt. It surprised me, because I had only ever touched him once, until now.

I looked into his face and he looked back into mine, and I said I knew, though I didn't, that he would live to see it.

The sun dipped its head and I trudged back from the beach. We were careful now; we came and went alone. All about me the late summer flowers were new and sweet-faced.

I heard her before I saw her; twigs and leaves rustling underfoot.

Herkja.

She stood in the copse, the trees bent towards her as if listening to a secret, a sack clutched in her fist and her fingers dirt-stained. If she was surprised to see me then I couldn't tell, her face blank, a little dumb-looking, but she was no fool, I was sure of that.

She quickly bowed her head.

What was she doing there? I asked, then bit my tongue, panic rising – had she seen us, heard us, how close had she come, had she followed me there?

She gestured to the ground where broad leaves sprouted white flowers. The wild garlic, she said. She'd been sent to gather some for supper.

A lie, but not a good one. That plant sprouted like a weed on our doorstep. Perhaps she was not so clever as I'd thought, but still, I wondered, what reason did she have?

Come, I said, treading forwards onto the path. The sun was beginning to set and soon the forest would crawl with the things of the night. It was time to go back.

They came in the night, pulling me from a dream, bleary-eyed, addled. Vingi pinched my arm and breathed something foul from his mouth. My feet were bare and cold; no time for shoes. The men all silent. Four whole men, sent just for me! A little excessive. All these thoughts and the strangest, calmest one: I was certain I would die that night.

Then into the hall, men and women gathered round. The tapers were lit and my body was thrust forward into their glow. I stumbled before Atli, stiff and grim in his chair up on the dais, and there to his left, standing beside him, was the girl, Herkja, hands folded at her front and her gaze lowered, so pious, so innocent, but she couldn't help but peek and then her mask slipped and something brightened in her eyes. The sight stole the calmness from me, the words

ripping from my mouth and growing louder: what was happening what dark hour was this what did he mean ripping me from my bed?

But Atli only looked at me, then behind me, and I heard the voices then, growing nearer – the shouts, the curses, coming up from the dark and into the light. Then Thojdrek was there, thrown into the room, still in his bedshirt. He looked at me; looked away. My stomach squeezed and I thought with horror that I might be sick.

Thojdrek opened his mouth but Atli swiftly cut through his breath and said, really? Would he really dare to speak?

Thojdrek opened his palms and said please, whatever this was, it was foolish. Just tell him what wrong he'd done. Tell him and he would set it right.

Atli's face turned suddenly red and he shouted loud enough to wake the villagers in their beds that Thojdrek knew, don't pretend, he *knew* that the pair of us had lain together, that we'd fucked in secret, right under his nose!

An excited murmuring from the crowd. One voice cried *whore*. Herkja nodded, and I could feel my blood surge, rise, my body shaking. I shouted, it was all a lie!

No, Atli snapped. There was a witness. We'd been spotted, just that afternoon, laid on the sand where we'd thought no one would see. But someone had. He looked at the girl, with her eyes downcast, and she nodded again and said that it was true; she'd seen it plain with her own two eyes.

Another word and I would wring her neck.

Then Thojdrek stepped forward and asked in his calm way, was this really what Atli believed? This girl, a stranger, a child, over his wife? Over his friend?

Atli took a breath and said well now, he'd admit, he had no doubt that his wife bore the greater blame. Women were temptresses, difficult to resist. They had their ways, but Thojdrek was not stupid, no, he was much smarter than that. He should have known.

But why would he come so far to seek Atli's favour, only to send it up in smoke? What sense did that make? Had Thojdrek ever lied to him before? He turned to the crowd with their wide shining eyes. Had anyone else seen? All of them who'd been there when Atli had not? Would anyone else there accuse them? No? Well, someone was lying, that was certain. But it wasn't them.

More murmuring. Some nodding, though not much. Atli blinked. Blinked again. What if, what if? The thought turned over behind his eyes: it was all a little rash, he'd been angry, so angry, he'd wanted us ripped from our beds, our heads lopped from our necks, but suppose he'd been wrong - no not wrong, never wrong, only misguided. Suppose he'd been taken for a

fool. At last he said, fine. Anyone else he would behead right then, but Thojdrek was not just anyone, and he was nothing if not fair. He turned to Vingi and said, fetch the boiling pot.

Fear plunged in my gut and Thojdrek's eyes grew wide and he said, surely Atli wasn't serious.

But he was, Atli said. We'd demanded his consideration, and here it was. There was only one way to be sure.

The pot was set before me with its blackened sides, its heat singing, belching steam.

I was to put my hands inside, beneath the water, Vingi said as if I didn't already know. They'd only burn if I was telling a lie.

But I didn't believe him. I saw it before it happened: there would be blisters, the skin peeled back to its inner layer, my hands great fleshy lumps. I would scream but not die – could I run, no, fight, with what weapon? My breath was rattling in my throat and finally I managed to say in a rush, please, no, it was the truth, I swore it, please, don't ask me to do this.

But Atli only looked down at me like a weed in the dirt.

I looked at Thojdrek, the fear stark in his eyes, then down at my palms, so pink and the lines fine and my fingers with their whorls. They would be burnt away. Only a second, I thought, a second in the water, quickly in, quickly out. The burns wouldn't be so bad. Well, yes, they would be bad. When I was a child I'd seen the blacksmith's apprentice pick up a glowing horseshoe with a glove and char his flesh right through to the bone, and the wound had festered and poisoned his blood. But his mother had tended his wounds and she knew nothing, while I knew the salves to put over the melt in the flesh, to heal the blisters, soothe the pain, though I would need someone to help, to make them in my stead, because my hands would be useless, would be red and raw and the skin sloughing off, oh no, oh no.

I plunged them in.

Everything inside me was wound tight enough to snap, my teeth gritted so tight that a thought flickered inside me, the fear that in my clenching I might split a molar in two. I waited for the sting, the screaming into pain, into agony, and for that agony to rise like a tide.

But the tide that never came.

The steam wisped from the pot and up into my nose and the water rippled where I'd disturbed it. But it did not bite.

A laugh rose giddy from my throat, spiralled high up to the ceiling. Everyone else was silent. Outside the wind rushed past, and in its whistling sounded as if it was laughing too.

My hands were shaking. I pulled them from the water and held them up trembling to the light. Behind them I saw Atli, and his face was white. There, I spat. Now he had his truth.

Everyone in the room looked at Herkja, how pale she'd become. Her mouth was agape, showing the black gap where one tooth had been lost. She took a step back and stammered, no, it was true, it was true what she'd seen.

Well, Atli said darkly, then she had nothing to fear.

She fought like a cat caught by its scruff, squirming, screeching, nails dragging sharp over Vingi's neck. He slapped her hard across the cheek, stunned her and dragged her with a bump off the dais and down over the floor.

When he drove her hands into the pot, the water hissed. Then there was a pause. Everyone blinked. The world didn't move, time shrinking down. Then everything leapt forward again. Sound returned. Herkja's screams ripped the air in two. Women covered their faces then peeked through their fingers and men winced but refused to look away. Atli screwed up his face at the dreadful noise and Thojdrek looked solemnly on. Seconds were drawn out like hours. Then at last she was released, and she flew back, still shrieking, her hands held up and quivering, though they were not hands anymore, but something else, bloated things, white-red and raw like lumps of meat.

There was bile in my mouth and I swallowed it down, but someone else hiccupped and released their supper in a foul splash onto the floor.

Atli sighed, as if the ordeal now bored him, and said, take her to the bog.

Herkja was still screeching, her eyes so wide, then they rolled back in her head and she dropped to the floor. The sudden silence was even louder. Vingi flung open the outer doors to reveal the moon hanging fat in the sky. Then he lifted her up and took her out into the night.

Later, I would hear him tell Atli that when he'd come to the bog she'd woken and begun to scream again, and her screaming had not ceased until she was submerged. Her hair bloomed like riverweed, the air choked out of her lungs and the lungs filled instead with murky water and peat. The breath bubbling its last and then finally gone.

He found me the next day. Not so far from the hall.

I sat in the shadow of an oak, its roots protruding from the earth like a giant's thick veins, and its fluted leaves made radiant by the sun so that they glowed the brightest green, their fine webbed skeletons made suddenly visible.

The night before I had stumbled to my room and curled upon the bed and within seconds it came: an ugly awful crying that would not stop. I held the pillow tight over my face to disguise the sound, and suddenly I couldn't breathe, and I thought of Herkja, who by then had been smothered by water, and began to cry harder. Because I could not hate her, not as I knew

I should, for she was little different to any woman I'd known; only wielding what desperate power she could grasp at.

I heard him coming. Crunching over twigs and leaves, skirting anthills and the puddles that pooled after rain and were cupped by moss in the divots in the earth.

He lowered himself down to the ground beside me and was quiet and listened, to the wrynecks above us hammering at the trees and the warblers twittering their sweet careless tunes - careless because for a bird every day was the same as the last.

He was leaving, I said, and he said yes, then fell silent. What more could he say? There were no words left.

I looked into his face, how sunken his eyes seemed, the purple beneath them. He was tired. So was I.

Where would he go? I asked, because he did not yet have a home to return to.

He said Jarl Gorm would have him. There were preparations to be made, all the boring logistics that went into a war. From there, they would march. It would be for the best.

The air had chilled. I pulled my shroud tighter about my shoulders. He bowed his head and took a breath to speak, but before he could I reached out and took his hand. His fingers were warm and slightly damp and softer than I'd thought they would be. All those weeks he'd nursed his wounds, his warriors hands had been allowed to heal.

Who knew, he said, one day we might meet again. He swallowed. He hoped we would.

My heart, my lungs, all of them were sore, stretched thin. There was not enough room inside me for the sadness swelling there. I hoped for that too, I said.

When he rose our hands came apart, and I watched his back until neither my eyes nor my ears grasped any part of him. And I stayed there, still, until the light dimmed and the small evening creatures began to emerge from their burrows.

I didn't weep for him; inside I was a desert, all dried out. But I did not need to. The sky grew swollen with angry clouds and for three days the rains battered the earth. They flooded the parched summer dirt, pulled from the ground in a slurry that flowed into the rivers, and the rivers themselves threatened to burst from their banks. The world wept for him in my stead.

26

We see her at the moment he dies.
He doesn't see the sword coming,
plunged into the gristly muscle of his back,
crunching down through the trapezius, the scapula,
into the sponge of his left lung,
interrupting its inhale.
Beneath the violet gloaming
he is toppled,
as she is mending holes in her sons' shirts.
At the precise moment his lung collapses
the bone needle slips and pricks her finger.
She hisses.
The blood beads, a tiny ruby on her index finger.
She lifts the wound to her lips to staunch the flow
just as the warrior who felled him wrenches the sword back through his body,
(the death blow in reverse)
and he stumbles to his knees, then falls to his chest,
his cheek caressed by mud churned by hundreds of feet.
There is something poetic about it,
or there would be
if the cut had made her stop and think of him,
had brought his name to her lips -

a ghost whispering from her throat.
They say you will know when a loved one dies -
that you can sense it
as if lightning has struck nearby,
or (less dramatic) as if an unwelcome wind has dragged its tendrils over you,
prickling your skin,
and for a moment you don't remember where you are.
You only know that something that was there before
is now missing.
But she doesn't feel anything.
Which is why, when Atli tells her, it does not sink heavily, slowly, into her heart
as it might have had she already known, marrow-deep.
No: it cracks across her shoulder blades like a whip,
thunders through her skull like a horse's stampede,
because as Thojdrek breathed his last,
she did not think of him.
Not even for one moment.
She waited the empty minutes until the blood at her fingertip clotted,
licked the last dew drop away
and carried on.

III

27

My hand was bleeding. A slip of the knife as I pared a slice from an apple, the skin parting. I watched dumbly as blood sprung up from the gash and slid slowly down my wrist.

Thyra leapt up from her chair and held a rag to the wound. But she said nothing. Only looked at me for a moment with a little sadness, a little anger.

After he left, Thojdrek did as he promised. Come spring they charged, laid siege to Erminrek's kingdom. A siege six months long. Hundreds of men dead. The animals all fleeing, all leaping away, and the grass trodden down into mud, because war made the land into something bleak.

I was busy. I could work my thoughts away, because a war was coming, there were sails to be woven and old ones to be cured of their frays and tears, shirtsleeves to be darned and tunics sewn, fish to be smoked and hung from the rafters, and milk churned until the soft fat clumped and drew together. And all through the war we were too busy wondering, worrying; there were women praying for their husbands, their sons, and at night in the dark I sent up to the sky a prayer of my own.

When the war was done and Atli came home, he feasted until dawn. Exhausting. All night spinning tales from the battlefield: the red-headed boy too small to fight, who had sobbed and begged and cried out for his mother before Atli swung the sword at his neck; the band of men they'd snuck up on and bound and recruited in a game, a fight to the death for freedom. To raise the men's spirits, Atli said. Of course, he'd still slaughtered the man who'd won. Not a single one of Erminrek's men would be allowed to go free. Mercy was for the weak. But that was his little secret; the men fought better if they still nursed some hope. He smiled and took a bite from his plate. And it seemed Erminrek was a creative man himself. It was said that in the

third week, when he'd captured Jarl Gorm's eldest son, he'd thrown him alive into a pit of snakes. Atli laughed, delighted.

Then he got up from his seat and held his cup high. A toast, he said, to Thojdrek. How Atli wished he might have lived to enjoy such a victory.

And with those last words, he looked at me.

I couldn't breathe, all the air sucked painfully from inside my sternum. But I would not let him see. I stayed very still and closed my eyes. And a hope I hadn't known I carried inside me was finally, brutally, snuffed.

I lay down in bed for nine whole days and would not get up. I stared at the ceiling and my body felt like a sack that had been ripped open, the things inside spilt out. I remembered how I'd thought before that I was alone in the world. Suddenly I was.

On the tenth day I rose and went out into the cold.

The crisp autumn had suddenly cracked open into winter, the snow creeping downwards from the mountain peaks and falling softly from the sky, piling in drifts at the doors and freezing the little lake down the hill in a thick white sheet.

The animals had been brought in out of the weather, and I sat by them while they shuffled about in their pens, the pigs plump and speckled with mud and the horses slowly blinking their great long-lashed eyes. A nervous ewe pawed at the dirt and bleated, and when I patted her back, I saw beneath her fleece the swell of her belly; in the springtime something would slither from her, hot and alive. The thought made me shudder.

In the woods, I yanked up wild parsley and its tiny white flowers, steeped them in water and watched them shrivel. I knew of a woman who'd once found herself afflicted with child, and her married lover had blanched and offered her a fistful of mushrooms to strip her womb clean. She was found the next day collapsed by the river very much dead, her skin yellowed and having shat out everything inside her. Fortunately for the lover, the problem was still resolved.

I downed my concoction and it was foul, my tongue recoiling to my throat, but there was pleasure in its foulness. The norns had snatched from me all they could grasp with their six greedy hands, but there, even coughing and ill with the taste, I took back something for myself.

At supper I watched my sons with their father; when a thrall set down a bowl and the spoon balanced on its rim fell onto the table, all three clicked their tongues, and I was filled with something bitter and went to my room.

Thyra was there with needle and thread, fixing something I'd ruined in haste. That afternoon I'd been sewing together a shirt and had fumbled a stitch, and in a fit of red anger had torn the fabric so that the seams popped open.

I lay down on the bed and watched her for a time. In the light of the torch behind her the soft fuzz on her cheeks was lit up so that there was a glowing rim of brightness around her face. How odd, I thought, that when I'd first known her she'd been little more than a girl, and now she was a woman, a little fatter around the waist, a little wrinkle between her brows.

Did she know Herkja? I asked suddenly. I dreamt of her often; horrible visions of her blistered hands, her wretched screams. Sometimes I watched. Sometimes I was her, and those were the worst, my hands burned and my head pushed down, darkness swilling over me, breath bursting like a fizz from my lips. I always woke before it was gone.

Thyra shook her head. She'd known her, yes, as she knew everyone in that place, but she did not *know* her. She was not so bold among the thralls. Kept to herself. And her pandering to Atli had made her no friends.

Oh, she picked buttercups, she added. Kept them by her bedside until they wilted. She frowned. She wanted something lovely, but they only looked wrong in their brightness, sad and dying in that cold grey place. Thyra had wanted to snip their small yellow heads off.

I didn't hate her, I said, as if she had asked. Not even the animals we ate suffered so. She hadn't deserved it.

Thyra stopped her sewing and came beside me and took my hand, and her eyes were sad but hard underneath and softly she said, we women seldom did.

28

I had not thought long of my brothers in what seemed to be years, until the day their names tipped from Atli's tongue. Evening, and rain brewed blue on the horizon and the air that seeped beneath the door smelt of damp. The children were gone to bed and we sat and ate our supper alone.

A banquet, he said, to honour my brothers.

The bread stuck in my throat in a lump and I sipped the ale and swallowed it down. If I'd had hackles like a dog they would have risen.

Well husband, I said, that was certainly a generous offer.

Atli speared a slice of meat, but began to cough before he could eat it. He'd been sick that winter, though the gods hadn't been so good as to make his sickness a fatal one. When he'd stopped spluttering he drank from his cup, swallowed and smiled. Well? He'd only thought it had been a long time since I'd seen them. And perhaps our sons would like to finally meet their uncles too.

His voice was so smooth, like a river at dawn. He had a talent for falsehoods, and no one could say he wasn't clever. Not even me.

Of course, he added, the meat limp on his knife, more importantly, they were our allies too. All that unrest in the north. There'd been rumours coming down of such dreadful things. The peasants had risen up against their jarls, refused to pay their tithes, and in the night beaten them to death. What if such trouble spread here? What if an army surged down thinking it could take what was theirs? He put the meat in his mouth. It was important that he and my brothers remind one another from time to time the oaths of fealty they'd sworn. One never knew when they might be needed.

Was that likely? I said.

It was more likely than ever before, he replied.

I looked at him, at the grease he'd spilled on his fine embroidered shirt but had not noticed, considering. What he said was true, all of it. But something wasn't right. Something was itching, but when I tried to look at it, to hold it in my mind, I was left with nothing.

Very well, I said, smiled and thanked him, and he set down his spoon and took up his ale and said, he would send Vingi by horse the very next day to deliver the invitation.

Then I suddenly rose from the table and said I was sorry, but I must go to bed, my stomach was sore, something I ate, and with that I hurried away with a belly full of lead.

In the room I found Thyra, stitching a shirtsleeve by candlelight. I shuttered the door, stood back against it and told her what Atli had said. She frowned. I commanded her to speak what she thought.

Her hands went still and she sighed and said only that Atli was a snake, and a snake might offer you poison and tell you it was honey.

And so I decided, I would not let them come.

It was unexpected, the urge to protect them, after all they'd done, but hatred is a burden for how it saps the soul and I'd been sickened by it. I was tired right down to my bones, and their names tugged at my mind, fossicked in its corners for the pleasures of childhood, for a love that had been fixed in my youth. If I wished to be rid of my brothers then that choice would be my own; Atli would not take it from me.

I took two silver rings from the clutter of trinkets on Atli's bedside, and with a knife's pointed blade scratched runes into their inside rings: a warning. Then I found Vingi outside, saddling his horse. Down in the bay the sea was angry, the waves slapping the shore, the wind stirred to a gale. If it had been any other man, I would have pitied him; sent to run errands as winter choked the land.

He looked down at my hand as if I'd offered him shit from the stable. What use did he have for such trinkets?

They were gifts, I assured him. A gesture of goodwill. I looked down and said quietly, I was sure he knew my brothers and I were not on the best of terms. But I'd agreed to this invitation, and I wanted them to know I would welcome them.

Vingi's eyes were so narrow they became slits in his face. But with a huff through his nose, he snatched the rings from my hand and stuffed them into his pocket. They would rattle around in there like teeth as his horse cantered southwards.

I didn't stay to watch him go.

I woke the next morning with a foul dry mouth. The room was so dim; I was like a blind creature huddled in a cave. I dressed and set out into the brisk day. Wandered down to the shore. My boots cut the hard sand and the headwind stripped my thoughts bare. A new day. My warning soon delivered. My brother's names would sink back down into the dark cellar of my mind.

I was coming back up, cresting the slope from the shore, when I heard the squawk of children; Erp and Eitil, by the wall of a house, and before them another boy who cowered into the mud. Erp pushed the boy and with a sad little cry, he fell onto his back.

Stop! I cried and ran towards them. The boy was tear-streaked and snot-nosed, and I did not know his name. What foolish argument was this?

My sons' faces were pinched and ugly, and they spat out shrilly that the boy wouldn't let them have the bird.

What bird? I asked. A bird I could not see.

And then the boy held his cupped hands out, and in them lay a tawny sparrow, its left wing bent, its chest heaving and beak cracked open in a gasp. He'd found it, he snivelled, beneath a tree. Its wing was broken, but he would fix it, would make it a splint, would feed it crumbs of bread until it was healed.

Foolish boy. The bird would die, for a bird that could not fly was no bird at all; that was the cruel way of the world, and he was old enough to know. The kind thing to do would be to break its neck. But beneath that thought was a tenderness for the boy, muddied and trembling, and all for a creature that would soon perish. He was Guttorm. He was Sigmund.

Of course, I said, and my sons' eyes pinched me with their rage. If he'd found it, then the bird was his.

The boy knew his luck and skittered away. My sons stood clenched fists; relented. I watched them go.

But the sight had sent a cold fear through me and that night I had Thyra draw me a bath, hot as she could. I soaked in the water until my skin was pink and raw and there was no more room left and the dread was gone.

It was nine days later and the late afternoon and I was bent low, picking ribwort from the dirt, when I saw the ship.

It glided through the slanted sun, prow slicing the water, foam churning at the hull. No sails were raised; only oars drove it forward. Not a trader's vessel, not a slave ship, no, not with

those fine fluted sides and the wood's lovely sheen. I put up a hand to shade my eyes, squinted and saw a dragon at the prow, carved to snarling.

My stomach fell like a stone from a great height; that ship was from my family's fleet.

I hurried down the slope and onto the sand, followed the boat as it steered towards the dock. The boat had been sighted; a crowd was muttering by the wharf. A stray foot nearly tripped me onto my face. An old woman huffed and uttered a sharp little curse when I pushed at her back.

And then I was through.

The ship slid into the harbour. The ropes for anchor were tossed ashore. There were a dozen men on board, but only three stood.

Vingi jumped from the boat down onto the deck, and behind him came my brothers.

How strange it was to see them there, like peering through time; older than our last meeting and the one before that. It was visible on their faces, the body gone awry, the wrinkles, the hair sprouting thinner and greyer from the scalp, the bulge under the shirt, and the wounds, the scars, because when Hogni lifted a hand to say hello, I saw the wiggle of a stump where half an index finger was gone.

My mask slipped; I quickly smothered my dread and smoothed it down and stepped forward to welcome them.

They bowed their heads and said thank you and then there was a pause that echoed into the past: Hogni's hands on my wrists and wrenching my jaw; Gunnar slurring and begging for forgiveness. I wanted to embrace them. I wanted to drive them through with swords.

I searched around in my mind and said politely that I hoped their journey was an easy one.

Hogni said it was, though there was one night with quite terrible waves, but it was done by the morning, the rest smooth sailing.

Even the gods has sought to warn them, I thought. They should have let the currents carry them home.

Silence again. Stiff, awkward. Because what was there to say after all those years?

And then from the boat rose two more figures, their bodies hunched and hoods pulled down low against the breeze. They swept them back. A woman and a boy, unsteady on their feet and sliding sideways after days at sea. She, short and curly-haired with one dimpled cheek, and the boy no more than fourteen, and lumpish in the way boys were before they grew, but with a pleasant face, a cleft in his chin.

Gunnar beamed and introduced them: his wife, Glaumvor and son, Snaevar.

The woman took my hands in hers, cold and blue from the sea, and said my name in a voice that was surprisingly low. How pleased she was to meet me at last! Though she would admit, Gunnar spoke of me so often she felt she knew me already. Another woman at last! After so many days surrounded by men.

Then she looked behind her and asked exasperated, where her son's manners were. She pushed the boy forward.

Aunt, he said in his pitchy adolescent voice and bowed his head. He looked at his mother, who nodded; looked at me, and said what she had clearly told him to say: that they were so honoured that I had asked them there.

The honour was all mine, I said. It wasn't every day I got to meet my nephew. And in any case, it had been my husband's idea.

Panic suddenly rose up in me at the thought and my mind frantically muttered that it wasn't too late! That they could still get back on their boat and sail away, because there was nothing here for them, nothing good, but Vingi stood behind me; I could hear his feet shifting in the dirt, his eyes beaming from his pinched face to burn the back of my neck.

Come, I said instead. I would take them to him.

He'd promised a feast and a feast he'd given them, Gunnar said to Atli, his teeth and gums all red with wine.

We'd been fortunate, Atli said. We weren't usually so blessed in the winter, but the gods had been kind in the spring. He smiled. They must have been rewarding him for something.

Hogni, cup dangling from his fingers, said to tell the truth, they'd been surprised to receive the invitation. How many years had it been since they'd last seen one another and not a word in between?

Too many, Atli said. Our families had been allied for many years, but yes it was true, they were yet to share the same sort of friendship their fathers had. They'd had their differences, he knew, but he could forgive if they could too. After all, he added and ruffled Erp's hair. They were joined now by blood.

Every word he spoke was followed in my mind by a black bitter doubt. I looked around; all the men were lounging swordless in their chairs. Not even a glare passed between them. Had I made a mistake? Nothing was impossible, I reasoned. Only unlikely. And remember, Atli had not summoned my brothers here from the goodness of his heart, but from a desire to protect his own behind. Yes, I thought. I took a sip of ale from my cup and felt it burn down

my throat. It did not make the feeling disappear, only dimmed it a little like putting a hand over my eyes to shield them from the sun. I would get drunk, I thought. Every night. And soon it would be over and they would be gone.

Glaumvor tilted forward in her seat and said to Atli, wouldn't he tell us about the war with Erminrek? They'd heard tales, but only from bards, and you never knew how much they said was true. She patted Snaevar on the back. Her son wanted to be a great warrior one day. Go on, she said, tell them.

The boy nodded reluctantly in his seat.

Atli smiled and said, well, it wasn't an easy war - though he supposed they all were, but this one particularly so, because the men weren't just stabbing one other and calling it a day, no, they were lopping off heads, and pulling out guts, and holding faces down in the mud until they drowned. His eyes shone, picturing it. Then he sighed happily and looked at Snaevar, a little pale in his seat and said, but that was the best kind of war for making men of boys. If they lived long enough, of course.

Glaumvor looked at Snaevar too, her gaze soft and fixed with love. She knew her son longed for honour and glory and all those things boy children dreamt of, she said. But how she wished she could keep him safe by her side forever. Surely I understood, she said to me. I must take my sons and squeeze them tight; soon they would be too big to hold!

I looked at my sons, bored and fidgeting in their seats, one picking the food from his teeth. My heart didn't budge.

Of course, I said. I savoured it every day.

And so the evening went, in strange stiff civility, until my brothers set down their cups and pushed back their plates and said they were exhausted – so difficult to get a good night's sleep when all night the ocean slapped you with its spray.

Then they rose from their chairs and were whisked away to sleep.

While they snored and dreamed that night, I lay awake. My blood was humming. My eyes were too wide for their sockets, stifled behind their lids, and so I stared into the dark, at the grey shades of night. There was an itch in me that nagged, that tugged. Into the silence I whispered, what was it I could not see?

Nothing; a great echoing nothing. Because of course no one was there to answer me.

29

I was awake before the sun, and when an hour later it bled over the frozen land, I got up from my bed and went out. The village was pale and hunched beneath the sky. Snow had fallen in the night so that the whole world, in secret, had become billowy and white. I breathed the chill air and it sheared up my nose with its knives of cold. For once I was grateful for its harshness; it stripped the clutter from my mind.

I had returned to my room to dress when there was a knock on the door.

It was open, I said, and in came Glaumvor, bright-eyed and snug in her grey coat and looking quite like a marmot.

She was sorry for the early hour, she said, and I told her not to worry, I'd risen with the sun that morning, then sat on the bed and gestured to the chair beside the loom. She sat.

No pause for breath; she quickly said that she'd hoped we might talk a little and get to know one another.

I smiled politely and said of course, but I was afraid that there was little to tell.

Oh, she said, well, she thought there was more than I let on.

She looked at me, as if willing me to speak, happy to wait, and so I admitted that I'd been surprised she'd come.

She laughed. Well, they'd tried to dissuade her - even Kostbera, Hogni's wife, had said that she should not go, that she'd be miserable on the ship, because she herself would have been miserable. But Kostbera's daughter was still suckling at the teat, and *her* son was nearly a man. And why should the men have all the fun? Why should she stay at home, weaving in the dark while they darted from place to place? She would be alone and bored. Well, that wasn't quite true. She wouldn't be alone, though some of the women in their hall were so dull it was

like mingling with planks of wood. And there would be a hole in her heart the whole time they were gone. She lowered her voice. But really, if she was honest, she'd hoped that by coming here she might learn something.

Learn something? I asked.

Of Brynhild, she said.

There was a hush over the room then, and inside I quivered, suddenly afraid that she might conjure a ghost.

Glaumvor said softly that she knew hers was a name I might wish to forget. But she couldn't. She'd heard stories, even before she'd known Gunnar. Songs, poems. Well, she was sure I'd heard them.

None. I'd heard none.

Then her father had offered Gunnar her hand, she continued, and she'd known something of his past and had thought one day he might tell her more, but he was a door squeezed shut. She sighed. She knew that he loved her; he did not need to keep that a secret. After all, she'd once loved someone too. Before him. But it was not only that. Some nights he cried out for Brynhild in his sleep and she bit her tongue and said nothing.

I said, gently that I wished I had something to offer her, but she couldn't ease his burden. No one could. Perhaps she'd never lost a person dear to her, but I knew it first hand; those memories reared their heads even now.

Her face withered. Yes, how silly of her, she said quickly. Of course there was no cure. But there was such loneliness in his suffering when there didn't need to be.

I took her hand and said that I didn't think Gunnar knew loneliness anymore.

She blinked, then said thank you. Then she wiped the rim of water from her eye and said oh, how embarrassing, she'd not meant to cry. She would take her sad weeping body and be out of my hair. Then she rose from the bed. When she reached the door I said her name and she turned.

She hadn't loved him, I said. Not the way he'd loved her. The best she could do was to love him more than she could.

Glaumvor nodded, and on her lips bloomed a small smile.

I'd not forgotten my brothers. Not forgotten my rings. I pulled my hair from my face so the wind would not tangle it and set out into the cold bitter day.

I found Gunnar down in the harbour, by the hull of a ship, his hand spread over the prow like he was stroking a horse.

Wasn't it beautiful? Gunnar asked. Atli had ferried a famous craftsman down from the north to build it.

Under threat, I thought, if I recalled correctly; his village and wife and all his sons razed to dust if he refused.

I must speak with him, I said urgently. But not there; who knew what errant ears might wander the dock.

I took him to an empty butcher's hut. On the bench a seal carcass was flayed wide open, its blubber thick and orange and glistening.

I shut the door. When I opened my mouth to speak, he interrupted. He knew I had something to say, he said, but would I let him speak first?

I made a gesture for him to get on with it then.

He was quiet, holding his breath; then he said quickly in a rush that our mother had died.

She'd found a lump, he said solemnly, growing in her breast. It swelled from a cherry to the size of an egg. The healer had offered to cut the breast off and the egg with it, and she had cursed him from the room. After that, there was nothing anyone could do. She'd sipped a tincture for the pain, and slept great long hours, and so she'd not suffered too greatly in the end.

I'd not even asked why she hadn't come. She'd never much liked boats. Was too old for such a journey. The truth was, I hadn't cared. There was an ache somewhere inside me, but when I searched, I could not find it; when I went to take it in my hands, it slipped away.

Why had he come? I asked.

He looked at me as if I were an old woman who'd forgotten herself. Because I'd summoned them, he said.

But I'd warned them.

He blinked. Warned them about what?

The rings, I said. Had Vingi not given him the rings?

He shook his head.

There was some explanation, I thought. Perhaps he'd lost them, so small, or perhaps he'd forgotten and they sat, still rattling around in his pocket.

The light in the hut through the smoke hole dimmed, a cloud snuffing the sun. I felt cold.

It was Atli, I said. He was. Well. He wanted to. I sighed. Something was not right. There was something awry. I didn't trust him.

Gunnar frowned; then laughed. If Atli wanted to kill them, would he not have done it already? The moment they arrived? Very easy, to ambush them then. They'd sat at his table without weapons, and still he hadn't. And what reason did he have to start a war?

There would be no war, I snapped. After all, who would rise up when they were dead? Snaevar, who I could see plain did not have the stomach for battle?

He paled a little, then muttered that he had only himself to blame. He and Hogni had made me suspicious, quick to distrust.

Put it this way, I said. Did he really believe that Atli had been itching for a family reunion?

Of course not, he scoffed. He was no fool. Atli had no love for them. But the war with Erminrek had reminded him that a king's power was a fickle fragile thing, that he could not neglect his allies. He'd given me his reasons, so where were mine?

But I didn't know. My cheeks burned. Perhaps like striking a flint, I'd conjured something from nothing.

Outside the wind whistled past the hut. Gunnar changed the subject and said that he had seen Svanhild.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. My heart had leapt into my throat, choking them down, and Gunnar saw this and said, twice. The first time in Denmark. The second time she came to them. A young woman. Lovely in every way and looking more like me than I might remember. And shrewd, outwitting every man at the feasting table. Himself included. Oh, she'd put him in his place once or twice, all at the ripe age of twelve.

I felt a relief I'd not expected, because not once had I imagined that she might be dead, had been sure there would be a pain in my breast, a terrible ache, that my body that had housed her would know if its fleshly extension was gone. That relief then became a joyous rush, then just as swift, a bitter anger, that he had been the one to see her. That it was not me. I coughed to cover my strong urge to cry.

The pale morning seeped beneath the door and cast itself blue over our faces. Gunnar leaned forward and touched my arm and said, there was nothing to fear anymore.

He was wrong. If I'd learned one lesson it was that there was always something to fear. But perhaps this one fear I'd nursed for ten long days, clutching it close like a bitter seed, had been just that; a fear, and nothing more.

Gunnar went to the door, cracked it open and let the chill creep inside, then turned back and said he'd heard that the great King Thojdrek had been our guest not long ago. What a shame it was to hear he'd died. A great loss. Though he'd gone the way every man wished.

And he would never truly die. Not with all the songs being sung - already, his body barely cold in the ground.

So many names, rising from the dust. It was true, I said. He'd stayed here many months.

And was he as great as they said he was?

Thojdrek had once said this: that those poets embellished every story, made it bigger until there was not a speck of truth to be found.

Those songs did not do him justice, I said.

I walked back from the hut beneath the bleak sky. Uncertain. And suddenly weary. How lovely it would have been, for just an hour, to lay down and shut my eyes. In the dark distant sky was a white streak of lightning, and from the blacksmith's hut came the squeal of metal, each stroke of the anvil ringing high as a bell.

I turned the corner and there were my sons: little lumps of grey, swaddled in their cloaks, crouched down to the white earth, the snow catching in their hair. Murmuring. Their hands pressed down onto something in the ice. When I crept up behind them, I saw what it was.

The boy's rescued bird. The wing still broken, and the rest of it broken too, its legs bent at a strange angle from its small trembling body. In their fists, the boys held sticks, broken in two so that the ends were sharp. They prodded the creature; a poke, a stab, then one, in excitement, poked a little too hard, and the bird, suddenly bleeding, gave a horrible squeak. Its taloned feet curled up, and it breathed very fast, then shuddered and stopped breathing at all.

In that second the world hushed. A veil of red drew down over my eyes.

What had they done?

They turned swiftly as if stung, but before fear blanched their small faces, I saw how their eyes shone. I would be sick, I thought, right there, in the snow, it was rising inside me. Go, I spat and they scurried away.

I sank down into the snow. Swayed a little, dizzy. Then was caught by a sudden panic, fumbled at the slush to cover the tiny stiffening corpse, the cold hurting my fingers, but I could not bear to look at it, oh please, I begged inside, do not make me look at it. And when the bird was covered over, I sat very still and felt the cold stinging up through my skirt to my knees, and in my head there rose an image: two men who would punish even a sneeze, kick a dog that sniffed at their boot, trip over a child and laugh when they cried. Kill a thing, but first make it suffer. I looked down at the mound of snow and my wet red hands. And the one thin thread, fine as hair, that tethered me to my sons, finally broke.

I trudged back through the slush. Numb inside and out. The walk was only short, but in the bleak cavern of my mind it was stretched out. When I finally pushed through the hall's tall doors, I found the inside empty except for Glaumvor. She was sitting by the hearth, a cup in hand and her feet shoeless, clad only in a pair of woollen socks and propped on a bench so close to the hearth's nibbling flame that I was suddenly frightened her toes might catch alight.

There was dancing in the village, she said to explain the quiet. A drunken group of revellers had whipped up a crowd, celebrating who knew what, tripping over themselves in the snow. And so the men had gone, though to drink more than to dance, she suspected. But not her, she shook her head. Neither one of them could entice her out into that awful bitter cold. Out there the very air would bite the nose from your face. Then she smiled and said, sit.

And I did, because I was shivering, I realised, my skirts all damp, the heat of the fire already prickling my skin back to life, and where else would I go? To my cold quiet empty room to be alone with all my spinning thoughts?

We spoke of boring things first: the harvest, which was good; the weather, which was not so good; the looms and the wool and the sheep that had been snatched by a wolf with eyes too big for its stomach, so that the poor creature had been dragged by its mangled throat, then left in surrender to slowly die. Then Glamvour's journey; how was it? I asked.

Not pleasant, she said, because yes, although she'd grown up by the sea, she detested it, all of it, the wet and the sand and the waves. She shuddered. So to be stuck on a boat, the sun and rain and wind beating down, and salt and more salt, an ocean's worth of salt, salt on her skin and the salt used to cure the dried fish, and then feeling sick and heaving that salt back up, and the men grunting and arguing and stinking of sweat and pissing over the side and her in a bucket. Humiliating. But it was her fault, really; she'd agreed to go – wanted to, even. She didn't know what had come over her. Love, she supposed.

By then a cup of dark wine had been brought to me and its sweetness sang down my throat and into my blood.

She'd said she was in love once, I said. Before Gunnar.

Glaumvor smiled vaguely, looked out into the dark beyond my head and said in a faraway voice, oh, yes. His name was Leif. A boy when she'd known him. It was a love between children, really, but weren't those so often the ones that became stuck in your teeth? They'd sat between the roots of an ash tree and sworn foolish little oaths - foolish because her father was a jarl and his only a farmer. And so it went as you would expect: her father offered her to another jarl, an old man with a nose snubbed like a pig's and shrivelled all over. How she'd thrashed and wept! And what did her wailing change? Nothing. She laughed bitterly, was

surprised by it and covered her mouth; then cleared her throat and said of course, she'd married the Jarl. But he died not a month later; one evening he was chewing his supper and his face went suddenly slack. He teetered, tilted, then toppled over the bench. And he did not wake up. She had even slapped him - only to be sure, of course. But still, nothing. So she'd hurried home to her father's hall, had taken a horse and galloped to the house by the ash tree where Leif had lived. But he was long gone, the house home only to spiders and dust. And she'd known it was her father who was to blame, though she'd never asked him; she didn't want to know. Wanted to imagine Leif out there somewhere in the wide wide world, grown grey and grumpy and whiskery and old.

And Gunnar? Well, he had come to her father, not for her, but for her sister, one of twelve eager men, all sweating and clambering and declaring their greatness, falling short only of flopping their appendages from their pants and showing them off. But not Gunnar. No, he had been the last suitor to arrive, was securing his horse in the stable when she'd hurried past and slipped in the muck onto her back, the wind blown hard from her lungs and the mud stinking and gone all through her skirts, and Gunnar so kind, helping her from the ground and picking the straw from her hair and laughing, not from cruelty, but so that she too would laugh instead of cry. And certainly, she had milked her widowhood for all it was worth, but one could not ignore fate when it knocked so insistently at the door.

My cup was empty, my head beginning to soften, to slowly spin. I said I did not know sometimes if I believed in fate. If it was true that our lives were decided when we were mere seeds in our mothers' wombs, then what had I, not yet born, done to deserve such providence?

It was the wine; it had loosened my tongue. Glaumvor turned her gaze from the fire onto me, and in its strength I was sure she could see through to my bones.

She knew, of course, she said quietly, what Gunnar had done. And never had she allowed him to believe it was right.

Oh, it didn't matter, I said. I'd forgiven them both. There was only so much grief a person could bear. The body filled up with poison and it must be relinquished, like bloodletting, or it would burst. I finished my drink, set the cup down and shook my head no, it was our mother I blamed most of all.

She had asked for me, Glaumvor said. In the end, when the fever took hold.

My chest grew tight. I did not want to know such things, not then, and so I looked into the white dancing fire and steered us away. Her son, I said. I saw a gentleness in him. He would grow into a good man.

Glaumvor smiled and said she hoped so, then her smile wilted and she said that sometimes she wished we didn't love our children so. How much easier it would be, for it was cruel how we held them so close only to let them go. As Snaevar grew she had often wondered, shamefully, if it would have been easier to be barren, her womb a cold empty desert. Tell her: was it better to have never loved or to have had it taken from you?

Neither, I said. Both would tear you to shreds.

30

They don their quilted vests, their iron lamellar,
grasp their axes, their swords, their timber shields.
Their iron helmets, scratched and dented, offer dull reflections
of dancing torchlight.
Once inside, though, they will sneak in darkness,
creep like mice, like the creatures of the night that we know lurk beneath our noses
but pretend we do not.
Some were unsure when their orders were delivered.
(To kill your queen's kin is not your everyday command)
Some muttered nervously.
Eyebrows were raised.
But at the end of the day, a command was a command.
So they approach the hall, snow crunching underfoot,
frost-breath misting in the air.
The incidental noises that their bodies emit
(the rumbling of bellies,
their breathing, getting faster now,
the muffled coughs and sneezes and clearing of throats)
get carried thankfully away by a southward breeze.
If we bent down we could taste their musk,
lick the sweat from their brows,
caress their labour-worn hands and feel them tremble with excitement or fear

(sometimes both).
Slowly, they open the hall's door,
to darkness.
They tip toe, tender-footed,
beneath extinguished lamps,
past animals drowsily tittering.
In the day to day, they are men,
with petty gripes and snot-nosed children and aches in the smalls of their backs.
But tonight they are gods of war,
brethren of Týr,
harbingers of justice, of death.
Their armour is impenetrable. Their swords will aim true.
They move as one.
They approach the first door.

31

Outside, the storm had finally come. The rain battered the snow, beat it into the earth beneath and turned both to mud. And with every thunder crack, the hall trembled.

I went to my room. Inside, the tapers quivered as if they too were cold. Thyra brought another blanket, draped it over the bed, and said quietly that I no longer had reason to fear.

A fierce quick wind howled past the wall. I unfastened my necklace and said, was that so?

She nodded, yes. Another thrall, bedded by Atli the night just gone, had whispered to the women as they prepared the supper how he loved to talk, that perhaps he enjoyed women most of all for their ears, and their sort in particular because they could not tell him no. Peeling carrots, she told how he had pulled himself from her and lain back and talked an hour of her life away, waxing on about my brothers' wealth, until his voice had dwindled and he'd mercifully begun to snore.

How boring, I thought, and said so too. Then Thyra left to go to her own bed, and I sat down and slid off my cap, loosened my hair and began to comb. I tried to think of something warm to push away the cold night, and so I thought of Glaumvor, of her bright shining love for my brother and their son, but there was something snagging, tugging. Not in my hair but in my mind. Something Thyra had said; something was wrong, something that flickered in the corner of my eye. I set down the comb. Paced. Worried the thought like a scab, like a tooth loose in the gum.

Then there was a great crack of thunder that shook the walls and sent a fine rain of dust sprinkling into my lap. All at once I knew, and what I knew was this: that Atli was a man driven

by cruelty and greed, and whatever he did not have he would someday want. And what he wanted then was a thing he'd already told.

The breath seized up in my body. The comb fell from my hand and onto the floor.

Quickly into the corridor, long and dark. I was running, but silent, barefoot, all the way to Hogni's room. I pressed my ear to the door, heard muffled noise of voices, angry and low. Then a crash, a shout. They'd been clever; they'd waited to lay their ambush in the dark – and on the second day, not the first. Too late. I ran again, not silent but thudding, to Gunnar, to Glaumvor. I did not knock but burst inside. Not fast enough. They had already come.

I'd come from the dark into the light. I blinked and the shadows in my eyes transformed into men; three of them, all dressed in their armour as if prepared for a fight, as if they had not crept through the dark, surprised the enemy while they slept. And surprise they had; my brother and his wife and son, still in their nightclothes, their faces still bleary and soft with sleep, but their eyes come alive, wide with fright. They had only just come; there was a sense in the room of fast movement just finished. I saw then that there was a mark on Glaumvor's cheek, red where the blood had rushed up beneath the skin. Beside her Snaevar was trembling from head to toe, and beside him Gunnar's lip had been cut on his tooth, the blood sliding slowly down his chin.

Then a fourth man I had not seen slid out from a shadow. It was Vingi and he was looking at me. And then the eyes of all four men turned to look.

I suddenly felt the thin press of the needle in my hand – the one I'd plucked from the mending pile and slid up my sleeve. I held it up high and the torchlight winked down its length and burst at the tip. Vingi looked at it; looked at the men. Then all four began to laugh.

And it was as they laughed that I took a deep breath and with a great yell, flung myself at the man closest and swung my arm down – down to stick the needle in his eye. The needle was long and slid in deep, the eye giving like butter, without a sound. The man shrieked and fell to his knees, and I thought with sudden disappointment that he would probably live, because the needle had been long, but still too short to pierce the brain. A knife would have been better. But I'd had no plan; I'd not thought what I would do once the needle was gone, and so that one strike was as far as I got before Vingi rushed up and with the butt of his sword struck a blow to my head. How strange, I thought, that it hurt only a little, though my eyes were all white, my blood beating in my ears. I could not hear. I could not see.

We were pushed from the room and into the hall. Murmur of voices suddenly gone quiet. Then my vision came clear. There was Atli in his chair up on the dais, and when he saw us he tutted, and said oh, but Vingi had done more damage to the faces of the women than the

men! Didn't he know, it was always better to punish a woman in the places hidden beneath her clothes? Even if her behaviour was bad, her face would still be pleasant to look at. Then he laughed. In his hand he fiddled with a saw-toothed knife.

My brothers were thrown together into the centre of the room. Their hands were bound, their faces swollen and shining. Someone would come, I thought. But my brothers' men were already dead. All huddled and sleeping in a barn, the doors had been barricaded, a bale of hay set alight. There was yelling; fists beat at the walls. Then a terrible painful screaming and the popping of flesh. The burning hair stank. The culprits covered their noses with their collars and waited quietly in the street until all inside were quiet and dead.

Not a second to spare; Atli commanded calmly that they tell him at once where they'd hidden Sigurd's gold. They were familiar with it, yes? The hoard won from the dragon Fafnir and stolen by them and squirrelled away.

There was a silence, thick and grim. Then Gunnar's voice cracked in two between bloody lips. He said in disbelief that they'd offered him that treasure once long ago and he had refused.

Well, it seemed his mind had changed, Atli said, as minds were wont to do. He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. Well? Would they not speak? Fine. He rose and came down from the dais and stood before them, considering. Then his fingers snatched at Glaumvor's jaw. Her eyes went wide and white with fear. What about her? he asked. What did she know? Was she the vessel for her husband's secrets? Were they hidden somewhere deep within her? Perhaps if he cracked her open, they might spill out.

Gunnar cried out and swayed on his feet and Atli's eyes slid to Snaevar. Perhaps his father had confided in him. He brought the knife to the boy's white throat and the boy's eyes swiftly closed. Atli laughed and said he doubted it. Look how the boy squirmed! He could see his heart beating quick in his neck. No, this boy was certainly no guardian of secrets, no warrior to be. A flower caught in a breeze quivered less.

He lowered the knife. Really? he asked. Not a peep from a single mouth? It was a lot of gold, yes, but a small price to pay for their lives, no? Then he sighed and said, fine. They would have it their way then.

He snapped his fingers and with a cry a thrall was dragged into the room. Thralls were always coming and going, their faces the same, all pale and wary, bought and sold, struck dead and replaced, and for a thrall there were so many terrible ways to die, but this one I knew: he was the pig keeper, thin like a spindle and with a terrible red rash of pimples over his chin. He always stunk of mud and shit, so that the other thralls pinched their noses and banished him to

sleep with the hogs. He was dirty, but kind; I knew this because I'd once watched as he let the pigs snuffle oats from his palm, whispering as he stroked their bristled backs like dogs.

The filthy shirt was peeled from his body, his stomach sunken in like a pit in the moon, a pale thin puff of hair on his bony chest. He was shaking. His mouth moved but not a single word came out. A stain slowly spread at the front of his pants, the stream trickling out and puddling on the floor.

It happened very fast. When Atli plunged the knife into the boy he shrieked, his eyes rolling white into his skull. A thick bloody sound like a wedge of meat thrown with a slap onto the floor. He gasped and bucked, then sagged like a sack of grain, head dangling on his neck, having fainted, or perhaps already dead.

To remove a man's heart was no quick feat. The flesh of the chest was drawn back like the flaps of a coat. It took two men to pull the ribs open with a snap. Blood pouring, all the while. Then the blade rasped wet as Atli sawed through gristle; a minute, two, the rest of the room all silent, then the heart pulled free like a seed plucked from the core of a plum, red and glistening. Atli tossed the organ into the hearth and the flames ate it up. There a splash and a foul stench as Snaevar vomited all over his bare feet. The hole in the boy's chest yawned wide and dark as a cave.

He did not make a habit of granting second chances, Atli said, wiping a bloody hand on the coat sleeve of one of his men. To be merciful was to be weak, but he offered them one now. They were family, after all. If they would only answer him then they could board their ship, be tucked safe in their beds faraway before the moon waxed again.

But men were foolish creatures more often than not; this I had learned, and my brothers were no exception. A man would surrender his heart before his honour.

Atli stood before them and they blinked their swollen eyes. He asked, were they ready to die?

And Hogni, teeth loose and broken in his skull, spat a bloody spittle in his tormentor's face.

It was quicker, this time, but not by much. Thralls, princes; all people scream. The heart fell to the floor with a wet sound of flesh, heavy thud like a rotted apple. Then Hogni's body toppled over and my brother lay dead.

Silence. A loud sob ripped out from Glaumvor's throat, then a sniffle. Beside her Snaevar was so white that it looked as if his body had already been bled out.

Atli shook his wrist. It was difficult work, he said. Then he looked at Gunnar and asked, was he ready?

Gunnar stood with his lips in a thin line and refused to speak.

As if he had in fact spoken, Atli smiled and said, oh, don't worry. His heart he would leave untouched.

He taunted us no longer.

We were dragged from the hall and into the crisp frozen night, the storm going but not gone, the rain still falling in a mizzle, the snow washed away.

Hands shoved my back and I fell to my knees in the slush. Before me the earth yawned: a hole, darker than the night and stirring inside. My eyes were playing tricks, and my ears, for there was a hissing inside like a waterfall's rush.

Then the men came forward, curious, to peek over the edge, and their torches lit up what lay within: adders, great snakes, thick as ropes with diamond backs and writhing in a great horrible mass.

Gunnar stood balanced at the lip. He stood there a long time. Then a hand punched out and pushed the small of his back, and he tipped, almost gracefully, forward, down through the air and into the black.

I see it all now.

See Gunnar land with a thump hard on his back, the breath knocked from his lungs, gasping loudly to suck it back in. The serpents suddenly slowing, their eyes all turning, one rising up to sniff at the air. Then the first bite; a whip-quick head. Then another, and another. A flurry of heads and teeth all darting in and out, as if to say *be gone*, but there was nowhere for Gunnar to go. And so they bit and hissed, nipped the ankle, the wrist, the leg and arm, the neck, the face, and Gunnar grunted and jerked but did not cry out.

An hour passed. Behind me feet began to stamp, shaking awake the cold blood inside as men remembered their beds and grew bored by the execution – not so dramatic as Hogni's was; it lacked without the screaming, the blood, the poison all hidden inside.

Even the very moment of death was unremarkable. Gunnar's chest began to flutter; his body choking up. Then at last he lay still.

Then the night was silent; not even the wind blew. The last few men shuffled away. On her knees in the mud, Glaumvor wept.

The spot on my head where I'd been struck suddenly began to throb. A dark was sliding over my eyes. I looked down at my hands and counted: Sigurd, Sigmund, Thojdrek, my brothers; all of them slipping through my fingers like sand I could not grasp.

32

I did not sleep, or perhaps I did. Floated through darkness. But when I woke I was no longer kneeling by that pit; I was laid down on my bed. It was day; a grey feeble light seeped through the thatching in the roof. My head was so sore, soft like a plum. When I touched the tender spot, the whole skull felt stuffed with wool. White sparks burst in my eyes. I would close them again and go back to sleep. But then the memory came; I felt in grow in me, rising up from somewhere inside: the blow to the head, the hearts ripped out, the writhing pit. My brothers both dead.

I sat up and the pain was so sharp that I thought I might faint. Then suddenly Thyra was there, a hot wet cloth in her hand. She held it to my head and said urgently that I must lie down, I had been hit, or did I not remember? Then there was fear in her eyes, because if I did not remember even that, then what else had I forgotten? Would she be the one doomed to tell me every other terrible thing?

But I was angry and my anger was growing. I pushed her hand away. Where was Glaumvor? I asked. Snaevar?

She lowered her eyes and I said firmly that if she knew, she should speak up now.

She shook her head and said I must not go. Who did I think I was? With what weapon? No, it was senseless. There would be no help for them now. I could only help myself.

But I said that I would storm from that room whether she helped me or not.

She looked at me as if expecting me to sway and fall back onto the bed, but I stared at her firmly until she lifted her eyes to the ceiling and sighed and said fine, she would show me. But we must be swift.

The room was not locked; there was no need. Glaumvor was tucked in a corner on the hard ground, her knees drawn to her chest, her wrists and ankles bound harshly with rope and in such a way that she could not get up.

I went to my knees on the floor before her and she lifted her head and her eyes grew wide, then wild, the breath coming through her nose fast like a horse. Something croaked from her throat, a moaning, and she began to strain at her bonds, her wrists already red, and I said quickly no, she must be quiet or we would be caught.

Thyra snuck from the room and back for a cup of water. I held it to Glaumvor's lips and she swallowed greedily, much too fast, coughing, choking, then swallowing again. Then finally her fast breathing slowed and the pulse in her neck settled, and she could finally speak and with her first words she said that I must kill him.

What had happened, I asked, after Gunnar had been tossed like an unhuman thing into the black pit? Because I did not remember; it was like peering through smoke, everything hidden. And where was Snaevar?

Dead, she said. An axe swung into his chest. Then she began to cry.

And after?

Atli, she said and sniffed. He. Her eyes slid towards the bed in the shadowed corner of the room. She buried her face into her knees and her shoulders shook.

I closed my eyes, could no longer bear to look, my body so filled with all the worst things, with a hatred so bitter that I could taste it, like bile. My brothers dead. Snaevar dead. And Glaumvor served something far worse, something stolen from her, ripped in two, all her joy gone, her body no longer her own but something strange and repulsive. She would want to peel off her skin and throw it away. She would wish herself dead too.

I would kill him, I said. But no, that would not be enough, because to die did not mean to suffer – to kill a wounded animal was to show it mercy – but *he* would suffer, the heart ripped from his chest again and again, and those others who had stood there with guilty eyes, they would all be punished, they would be brought to their knees.

Then Thyra darted forwards from the door, because someone was coming that way, we must go, and quick.

Glaumvor's blotchy face snapped up and she began to panic and said no, no please, I mustn't leave her, I must take her with me, I must cut the ropes. But I put a hand on her shoulder and said that I was sorry, but no, I needed time to make a plan. If she was gone then he would know there was something afoot. He would crack down with his sword and then how would we strike back?

Her lip trembled, a tear sliding down her nose. But she nodded.

I would come back for her, I promised.

Then Thyra was hissing from the doorway. I could hear voices nearby. I took one last look at Glaumvor, small and shaking, and knew that it was cruel to leave her, unforgiveable, even though it was necessary.

Then Thyra was tugging at my arm and we rushed from the room, and the last I saw of Glaumvor was her soft weeping face in the dark.

He came not long after. Clean now. All the blood washed off. He told me this, then added that blood was such a nasty thing; a woman would know. How it clung. His body, he'd scrubbed, but his clothes, well, there was no hope of removing those stains; he'd burned them all.

He looked at me and tutted. Such a shame, he said. He'd told Vingi to avoid the face. Any other part of the body and the unsightly wounds could be concealed, but they could not hide my cheek, and now it was quite ugly to look at it. He sighed. But never mind. It was nothing that would not heal, and no one could say that I had not deserved it. It was not right, what I'd done to that man. Doomed to live now with only one good eye. I must do better.

I wanted to spit at him, could feel the moisture gathering, the urge rising on my tongue, but my head was too sore and if I he struck me I was sure I would pass out.

And he did not need me to answer. He continued, pacing the room, saying someone had suggested that he might recompense me for my brothers' deaths. Silver, jewels, that sort of thing. But he thought the idea ridiculous, and that particular meddler with their foolish ideas had been swiftly dealt with. He had defeated my brothers, fair and square. They were cowards. They deserved to die.

I breathed in through my nose and curled my fingers into the bed and thought not yet, it was not time, and what could I do if my skull was caved in and I could no longer even twitch a finger? Nothing.

Then he came so close that I could smell the breakfast sour on his breath, his eyes growing dark, and he said that Vingi had told him about the runes I'd carved, the warning I'd sent. Tried to send. It seemed I'd forgotten where my loyalties lay: with him, my husband.

I said nothing. Looked straight ahead at the wall, the timber, at a damp patch, a stain, where the wood in the cold and wet had begun to rot.

He grew angry. Had I nothing to say? Was it not my brothers who had slaughtered my husband and son? I should be thanking him for what he'd done.

Again I didn't answer and he pinched my chin and demanded again that I thank him.

Very softly, I said no. Then, a little louder, that the only thanks I would give was when he lay cold and fleshless as bones in the ground.

In a rush he threw me to the floor, wrenched my body sideways so that I lay prone. My chin hit the ground and my teeth cracked together, and then his hand was at my neck and bearing down, pressing my face into the furs that lined the floor. He wrenched up my dress and I was panting, the fur was in my mouth and it was difficult to breathe. I was flailing, my hands were reaching, but it was too late. The pain was sharp and sudden. He pushed down on my head, onto the tender spot on the side, and my head grew light and I poured out of myself, above, away.

Then just as suddenly he was done, his body convulsing one final time, and his weight came off me and I sucked at the air. Inside I was throbbing, torn. I could not move. Was he gone? I wondered. Had it been minutes? Hours?

Then came his hot breath and his voice at my ear, and he said quietly, here was what I would do: I would run from that room, quick as I could, and order the thralls to prepare a feast so grand that the cellars ran dry. Slaughter the fattest hog and roast its body whole. And at that feast I would smile and pour each man a drink so that they might smile too and toast my brothers' deaths and the gold that was now his. Then he stood and a cold wind came from under the door and licked my skin, so tender I thought I might cry out from pain. Well get up, he said, I hadn't a moment to lose. Go tell the thralls and then ready his sons. They would sit by his side and learn what it meant to conquer one's enemies.

My throat was swollen; I could not speak, could not even whisper, so I nodded, yes, my cheek on the bed.

Then his footsteps trod heavy across the room, and at last he was gone.

I did as he commanded, for I had no plan, and my mind was a slurry, useless, my body an open sore.

I ordered the feast and the slaves were swift and buzzed about me like bees. They were smart and kept their eyes on the ground, did not to stare too long at my battered face, for fear they incur the same punishment.

When evening drew down, I went in search of my sons and found them in their room. When I appeared in the doorway they turned their bright eyes towards me and their excitement was quickly snuffed. It was not me they'd hoped to see.

They were crouched on the ground with their wooden toys; a whole army of them, wooden men with wooden swords. Eitil clutched one in his fist, and for a moment I saw not a toy but the tiny body of a bird, the head peeking out. I shuddered.

When I spoke the split in my lip reopened with a sting. I said without enthusiasm that their father was throwing a feast. They must put their toys away, it was time to dress.

In one small-fingered hand Erp held an apple and in the other a knife, peeling the reddish skin from the fruit, undressing it down to its dewy green-white flesh. He said that they knew; a victory feast. Their father had already told them that morning.

My pulse quickened. No, not a victory feast, I lied. Sometimes a feast could be a feast and nothing more.

They frowned and looked at one another with disbelieving eyes.

Fine, I thought. If they wanted the truth, then I would give it. I knelt down and said that I knew what their father told them, but there had been no victory. Only a loss. My brothers, their uncles, had done nothing wrong. And to kill a person without good reason was a grave thing indeed. Their deaths should be mourned, not celebrated.

Eitil smirked and lowered his eyes and said in a laughing voice that their uncle Gunnar was king only in name and not in temperament, and that Hogni had not been strong but had wept like a child and cried out when he'd died. This was what their father had told them.

They were only children, I snapped. They understood nothing of the world.

Erp's head tilted sideways and he said, well, they did know that my brothers had killed their aunt.

Suddenly everything was grating, the air too cold, too harsh, the light too bright, all stinging my skin, my eyes, every sound an attack. No, I said. She had taken the sword to her own flesh.

As if I hadn't spoken, Eitil held a wooden man up by his face and smiled and said that their father had promised he would drag the bodies through the village and toss them into the sea. Discard them like rubbish. Let them gather the muck and then be drowned. No grave to be visited. No fire to send them to the sky. Deep in that murk no god would find them.

And anyway, Erp said, they had deserved to die.

All at once it was Atli who stood there, his eyes black, and in them I saw my hands submerged and my brother's heart quivering and a foul pits of snakes and the floor pressed up against my nose, and then a great red nothing, immense, a crack in the world, an enormous raw wound, and when he raised his hand, I raised mine.

It was done before I knew it; my sons limp on the floor. They could have been sleeping, I thought, if their limbs were not bent at such strange angles, if their eyes were not open, if there had not been such bloody gashes in their scrawny boy necks, pooling on the floor, and more on my dress, soaking through to the shift, to the warm skin beneath.

I gasped and put a hand to my mouth, but the hand too was covered in blood that I spat away, and in the other I suddenly felt the thin weight of the knife, the little paring blade I'd plucked from Erp's startled hand. My fingers trembled and it fell with a dull disappointed sound to the floor.

I sat there a while, my whole body shaking. Then the shaking stopped.

Behind me the door opened with a creak and there entered the shuffle of a single pair of feet. I closed my eyes. But no sword fell upon my head.

It was Thyra.

She looked at me, all covered in blood, then down at my sons and then at me again. I looked at her and waited for to scream, to curse, to cry out for help.

She did not.

Swiftly she closed the door and sank to her knees and said in a rush that we must clean this. Now.

But my hands were limp and useless and bloody in my lap and she said my name once and then again, higher, she was beginning to panic.

And then suddenly I rose up, as if I'd been sunk beneath the water and finally broke the surface, my mind new and empty and clean, for all thoughts had been wiped clear but one: the blood, I said. We must gather the blood.

Outside a cloud passed overhead and the light that peeked through the thatching grew dim. Thyra was still and watching, muscles wound so tight she quivered, and in her eyes was something like fear.

Quickly! I said and she jumped up from the ground and wrung her hands and said no no no, this was madness, what did I mean gather the blood, we must hide this, all of it.

I looked at her until her fretting dwindled into silence. Would she help me? I asked calmly.

She glanced at the corpses; winced and looked back, to a sight just as terrible: the blood all over, and my hands still trembling. Perhaps she thought then of the other times, too many to count, when the blood was my own, my nose having gushed down my front, the hair pulled from my head in a clump, a ring having caught the flesh of my cheek, the wide cut weeping ugly and red.

Oh Gudrun, she said and put a hand to her mouth, bit down on a finger.

Then slowly, she nodded.

She hurried from the room and fetched a full bucket, a cloth, a clean shift dress gown cap. She stripped the clothes from my body; only my face and hands needed tending but she would clean me whole, and so I stood naked in the cold room and she began to wipe the filth from my skin, my body buffeted by her hands like a cornstalk by the wind, the water turning slowly dark.

The clean wool was itchy; it chafed my skin, the back of my neck, the shock still bright but something else beginning to peek through. I asked for the cup that she too had retrieved and she held it tightly a moment, hesitated, as if she might steal it away, as if it was not too late, but she knew that it was and so, slowly, she placed it into my hand.

If I were Freyja, with her chariot and her two felines, I would have flown into the hall like an eagle, ripped the doors from their hinges and the limbs from every man. But I was only a mortal woman, strong in some ways, yes, particularly in the mind, but not so strong in the muscular body as a man, and I could not allow my rage to be so wild; my anger must be precise and pointed as a knife.

I hurried to the storeroom where the ale was kept, ducking between shadows, past doorways that peeked into various rooms, hurrying fast, though I was no longer covered in blood and for me to be walking about was an ordinary thing. But there was no one anyway in the corridors and the bowels of the place but the thralls, who only looked at me and blinked and went back to their work.

In the near dark I poured the sweet drink into the cup, until the blood thinned and became the amber of hardened sap. Then I walked back through the corridor, careful not to spill, to the hall's wide door. Behind it I could hear the crowing of men, the laughter, the cheering, the thrum of a lyre, the stamping of boots.

My heart began to thud and its thudding went down my arm and made my hand start to shake. I willed it to slow down.

The thought came to me that very soon, in only minutes, I might die; that was the worst that could happen, and there would be pain, yes, a terrible burst of it, but after there would be none, and it would not be so bad. And with that thought a strange numb calm spread out from my chest to every part of me, filling my head.

I pushed the doors wide and went into the hall.

The torches were bright and all around me were men, the food yet to be served but their faces and eyes already shiny with drink. One man near me slipped in a puddle of spilled ale and stumbled so close to the hearth that the tail of his cloak caught alight. His friends stamped it dead, then looked at the charred hem and began to laugh. Another man held a little dog like a child and danced with it and the dog panted and looked around with wild frightened eyes.

And there was Atli, smug on his chair, looking down at them all and pleased by what he saw.

The cup was heavy in my hands; it was not so hard to smile.

When I came close to him, he took hold of my wrist and the jug wobbled and he asked in a low angry voice where I had been. The feast had begun nearly an hour ago and the men were now so thirsty their tongues had turned dry.

I said flatly that I was only dressing for the feast and fetching the drink - the good wine from the cellar, as he'd asked. There were many bottles down there, and many hands and a great deal of time was needed to get them all out, if indeed he wished for the cellars to be left empty.

He looked at me with a cold stare, then said well, what was I waiting for? Pour the drink.

I bent over him and tipped the liquid from my cup into his. My breath was stuck in my lungs as he brought the rim to his lips. He drank greedily, thirstily, every second a thick gulp as the drink slid down. I felt a pleasure spreading through me, something hot and wild. So good, he tilted the cup high to swallow every last drop, then set the vessel down with an empty sound onto the bench and licked his shining lips.

Now, he said, settling back into his chair, where were his sons? Hadn't he asked that they be there? Perhaps the blows to my head had made me forgetful. I should fetch them now.

Oh, I could not fetch them, I said.

He looked at me, anger sparking in his eyes, and said, what?

The pleasure inside me was radiant, and growing in its radiance; it was burning me from the inside, it was rising up and into my throat, into the very words that would come out.

I could not fetch them, I said again, because it was their blood he had just drank.

And I could see the wonderful moment in him, the thought spiralling, the second of stillness in which he did not yet understand, my words whirling inside him like a tricky wind that he could not grasp. Then his eyes grew wide and his mouth too and I drank up the sight, I guzzled it down and gorged on it there, let it swell until I thought I might be sick with it. He had thought me weak. He had been wrong.

He suddenly stood, the wood of his chair scraping with a terrible sound over the floor. His face was white. Tell him again, he said, and this time I should choose my words wisely.

I did not speak loudly, but the men had all fallen silent, the music snapped off at its end, and so they all heard me speak and say, of course, let me tell it again: I had killed his sons and put their blood in the drink that he had now gulped down.

Atli's mouth was open and I could see the pink meat of his tongue moving but not finding any words to say, and then finally he managed to spit something out: that I was a vile woman, a treacherous witch.

Across the hall someone stood and cried that I had slaughtered the kings' sons! Murderer! And a few others took it up like a chant, but the rest were still too pale and shocked; they did not know what to do. Hands went to hilts but hovered there, because I was only a woman, a waif, and a woman could do evil, it was true, but this?

In the end, it didn't matter. Atli did not need them.

He set upon me with a fury I'd not known. Between blows I blinked and saw the tendons swollen in his neck, the white spittle flying from his mouth. The room was all silent but for the thick sound of his fists hitting my flesh. I willed myself to faint, but I was awake through it all.

Another blow came and finally it was the last. My head hung loose from my neck as if it might topple off. I could taste blood in my mouth, and when I poked my tongue around there was a tooth that sighed and wiggled in the gum. I could see little, my eyes already beginning to swell, the bone so tender it felt caved in, but my ears had not suffered, and so I heard him clear when he bent over me and spoke. He said that he wanted nothing more than to kill me right there, but he would wait. A beating to death was not suffering enough, and he would make me suffer. My flesh would be stripped. My bones would be broken one by one. I would be set alight and blazing. I would suck the sea into my lungs. And every man and woman would watch and cast their judgement and each one would see that I was a monster.

33

We definitely did not see this coming.

But perhaps we should have.

She has slaughtered the lambs, the babes.

It happened so quickly;

we could not have stopped it.

Two twitches of the blade, the cleaving of skin,

and the princes were dead.

For a minute we are speechless

(a rare thing)

our cries stuck fast in our throats,

lodged bitter beneath our larynxes.

Then one of us croaks: monster!

And others among us take up the cry:

vile woman! Terrifying lady!

How did we not see her evil before?

Her fingers are claws, her teeth are fangs.

Burn her, butcher her, stone her to death!

But wait, one of us murmurs. What if we have it wrong?

What if we've misunderstood?

There are some animals, you know, who kill their own young.

Pigs have been known to savage their squirming pink babies,

and in the wet soupy air of Bharata, in damp rainforests and dry scrublands, sloth bears have devoured their children

without a second thought.

And what about those men who have sacrificed their young?

Jarl Hakon, who offered up his son to sway a battle in his favour,

or across far-flung seas,

Cronus, who feared a prophecy, and swallowed his boys.

It is also known that men will cast their unwanted daughters into the snow

to be bite-sized treats for wolves and bears.

Just because they did not hold the blade to their throats

does it make it any better?

And they were bad children, weren't they?

Troublesome. Something brewed within them -

something quite like their father.

But who but the gods gets to decide a flower's worth before it is in full bloom?

Not her.

She sits with their bodies slumped before her.

It is hard to see past her quivering form

so we peek over her shoulder at the ghastly sight.

One might think they were sleeping if their eyes weren't stuck wide open

and their necks weren't flayed open.

Never have we been so divided, as

we bicker amongst ourselves,

until one of us - the oldest, the wisest walnut - says

Perhaps.

And we still our tongues

and offer our ears.

Perhaps, they say, what we should be asking is not whether she is a mother or a monster.

Perhaps this is not the dilemma at hand

and there is no right or wrong.

Perhaps the only question and the only answer here is:

is it any wonder that she finally broke?

34

Wake again. This time in darkness. My head throbbed like a great open wound, my throat dry as sand. Every other sense rising up slowly. All quiet. Raw taste in my mouth. How much time had passed? If it was dark, then only hours, or perhaps days and been swallowed and that night was new. Or perhaps this was the in-between that followed death, not so painless as I'd hoped, though peaceful in its silence, but when I tried to move I felt the rub of rope at my wrists and ankles and realised I was bound. I remembered then how certain I'd been that soon I would die and suddenly laughed, then cried out; inside me somewhere, a rib was cracked.

I lay in the dark, and outside the world turned from black to grey, and I could see my body curled up and the small shape of the room. Then there were footsteps, soft outside the door, and my stomach sank down because it was morning and he had come for me. But when the door opened, the visitor bore a torch, and I squinted until the face came clear: Thyra. A mangled sound struggled from my throat.

She closed the door slowly, wary of its creaking, then rushed to me and began to yank at my restraints, her fingers digging beneath the knots. My ankles came free, then my wrists, the blood rushing back into the flesh and the bone sighing and the sigh coming out through my mouth.

I opened my mouth to speak but she cut through and said in an infuriated voice, questions? There was no time for questions. Tomorrow, I would die.

The rope dropped away and I rubbed the raw spots on my wrists.

There was a horse, she said. She'd snuck it out from the stable. It was tied to the birch tree behind the hall. I must take it, must kick its sides and ride away fast and never, ever look back.

She helped me to my feet and something, everything, in my body cried out and I fell against her, her hard thin body. She held my weight until I could stand on my own again, but still I held her arm and looked into her eyes.

What to say when no words could be enough? And so all I said was thank you, in as clear a voice as I could muster. Thank you.

We stood there for a breath, and then she lowered her eyes and said go, it was time, I must go.

And so I went, but I did not go to the horse. The horse could wait. Perhaps, if I never came, then it would somehow break free and canter out into the forest, to the lushness of the world, never again to be whipped, to be dug into with boots, never to be ridden out into battle and be driven through with a sword. Only to grow old and one day lay down in the grass and quietly happily die. It was a nice thought.

Instead, I went to his door.

He had posted no guards, but that was not so unexpected; I'd been trussed like a boar and left in the dark to slowly gnaw at my own mind. I pressed an ear to the wood, but all was silent inside; not even a snore. I knew well how grief and anger took so much from the body that the sleep that followed in its deepness was the one closest to death.

I pushed open the door. Slowly. Inside the air seemed to have been all drawn out, for I could barely breathe as I snuck inside. The room inside my eyes was dark, and then I could see: the bulk of the bed, the still lump of his body beneath the furs. I crept up close until I could hear the whistle whisper of his breath.

In my hand I held a knife, pinched quickly from the kitchen, but I saw then by the bed his sword leaning in its scabbard, and I looked at the knife and thought how small the blade looked, barely capable of inflicting the desired amount of pain, better for picking teeth than for killing a man.

But the sword.

I clutched the cold hilt, slid the scabbard down. Felt the dangerous weight of the thing. And I remembered then the first time I'd held one, how my wrist had turned over and my arm had sunk towards the ground, so surprised by its heft. And Sigurd had raised it from the dirt and with his hand held my wrist so that it would be strong, and I had suddenly realised that a sword was not an object, not a lifeless thing, but a thing imbued with power, and I'd trembled to feel it. I did not tremble now.

I raised the sword above my head and brought it down. Atli's body jerked as if I'd struck lightning into his chest. His mouth opened wide and from it came a strange strangled cry, a bewildered sound, and his fingers fumbled at the blade and sliced themselves open and let more blood out, and when his eyes turned on me they were wide and white. He tried to speak but only coughed out a reddish spittle, gurgled it back down.

In the thick wild heat of battle, a warrior slew a man and another and another, no time to stop, to look, but we were the only two in that room and time meant nothing, time slipped away. I leaned in close so he might see my face more clearly in the dark and so that when I spoke my words would come down and strike him in the face.

That he would be remembered for this; this defeat, and nothing else.

It did not take long for him to die.

And when the last breath had left his body, I heaved at the sword and wrenched it free, and the blood began to spill out more swiftly. I waited there a moment, suddenly afraid he might rise up, might not truly be dead, and slowly I reached out my hand and put it on his chest. His body was still very warm, but I felt the quiet inside him. He was gone.

I walked back through the corridor with legs of lead and a head filled up with fog and my thoughts a long thread unravelling from me. Where would I go? To that horse? And then where? To Svanhild, yes, of course, my sweet daughter, I would go, I would fly. But what would she say? And what would I say?

A slow cold was settling inside me.

I'd come to the hall. The door was wide open, and from inside came the snores of fifty sleeping men, the whisper of limbs shifting in the dark. They lay strewn about like leaves, like pigs in their sty, drunk until they could no longer stand, and now their bodies were slumped on benches and tables and rolled onto the floor, and in sleep their faces, with their open mouths and their eyes twitching behind the lids, were bare and helpless like children. Down through the smoke hole shone the silver light of the moon, and it pooled on the floor and the body of a woman.

Glaumvor.

She lay on her back, legs and arms flung out, her feet bare and her skirts tugged up around her hips. Little bruises and scratches up and down her flesh. A fingernail torn and leaving behind a bloody stump. And around her neck were the red shadows of the hands that had squeezed, and her eyes were wide open, the little vessels in them burst. Her body so small and the men so large. There was one, still, with his hand draped over her stomach. When I crouched down closer to look, I saw that it was Vingi.

I rushed out of the room because I was afraid I might scream, and in keeping the scream down my chest swelled with a sharp awful pain. Then that pain transformed into anger; there was a fire inside me, not one that was new but one that had always been there, had been slowly fed over time, had grown so large that my ribs might crack, they could not hold it in.

And I knew what I would do; I would finally set it free.

The thralls leapt awake when I entered, jumping out of their skins at the clapping of my hands and rising from their lumpish straw beds.

They were free, I said. All of them. They could take what they wished. Food, clothes. They could take Atli's own cloak if it pleased them. But they could not stay. They must go, go wherever they chose, but they must do so quietly and not wake the men who lay sleeping in the hall.

There was a great pause, an inhale as they looked at me with nervous eyes, darting over and away from the blood on my hands, the front of my dress, and then to one another, and I could see the thoughts, what trick was this, what lies were these words, but when I said nothing more, all as one they swiftly stood and scrambled about like ants, hands darting, sacks stuffed with whatever was close at hand, hurrying through the door, quick as they could.

And then there was only one other left in that room, and it was Thyra, and she was not hurrying, but still and standing with her hands empty. So I hadn't left, she said, frowning, then looked around the room and said, so, she was finally free? No longer my thrall.

And I softly said, that she had not been my thrall for a long long time, but a friend. How many years had passed? Too many. And I was not a good friend to her, no, not a friend at all. I should have cut her bonds long ago, and I was sorry, so sorry.

She looked at the black hole of the door beyond my head and said in a cavernous voice that she had not a single idea where she would go.

She would find a ship, I said, then a horse, and she would ride both to Denmark. She would not stop, she would search until she found the Jarl Hakon and his wife, Thora, and she would knock on their door and when they asked who she was, she would tell them I had sent her.

And me? Thyra asked. Where would I go?

I said it didn't matter, because I didn't know either. Then I laughed and she began to laugh too, and we laughed there together in the near-dark until the sound dwindled into silence.

That horse was still tied where she'd left it, I said. Now she must go.

She gathered to her what little she owned; a drab second dress, a whale-bone comb. The scarcity made me want to weep. She would take food from the storehouse if it had not been pillaged already, a blanket to warm herself in the cold night. She walked past me to the door, but before she disappeared, I heard her feet shuffle to a stop and the breath she took before she spoke. I closed my eyes and let the words wash over me as she said that I had been a friend to her too.

35

I took a torch to the hall. Set the tapestries alight. Each one lovely, each one woven by a woman's good tireless hands. I was sorry for that.

I shut the great doors, locked them from the outside. Dragged over a chair, a table, a candlestick that was light and useless, but I was delirious, I was seeing shapes in the dark, little faces that watched, and I could not tell if they eyes smiled or scowled. Smell of smoke, twitching at the nostrils. Then the fire's red glow seeping beneath the wood.

I heard when they woke. Heard the voices quickly grow in number, swell. Heard them first murmur, then rise into panic. Then the first desperate thump at the door.

I did not stay to hear them scream. So much death, I felt sick with it. I looked down at my hands, at the blood, dried into dust.

I flew down to the beach, stumbled through the new snow. Then over the hard sand and into the sea. So cold, the shock of it stole my breath, but I was stained, I was sullied by what I'd done. By what had been done to me. I scrubbed my hands in the water, ground them into the sand to slough off the skin, faster and faster, get it off, get it out of me.

Then the sudden realisation that I was in too deep; without knowing the tide had sucked me out into the sea. I could swim back to the shore. I was a good swimmer. But I was weary. I ached. My body was so heavy in my sodden dress. A wave broke on my shoulders and its water filled my mouth. Suddenly I was scared.

And after all that had been taken, it was strange that I thought then only of what had been given: Svanhild and Sigmund, curled up on my breast. Sigurd on the windswept beach.

Another wave and I sank down. I was dying, I thought.

Thora at her loom. Thyra astride the harp. Thojdrek laughing into the sun.

Beneath me everything was black. But above, shining down, was the white of the moon.

And at last I saw a girl with a mess of hair, fidgeting beneath the golden sky, waiting for a horse it was said would soon ride into town.

She could not see anything. Nothing but her whole life, stretched out empty before her. Yet to be lived.

A Monstrous Mother?: Revising the Story of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir

INTRODUCTION

Guðrún Gjúkadóttir has just watched her brothers take their final breaths; one with his heart ripped from his chest; the other tossed into a pit of snakes. It was Atli who killed them, the tyrant king, and also her husband, though she did not marry him willingly. Now she is stricken with a terrible grief, a grief that grows into an even greater rage.

She will have her revenge.

She beckons their two young sons, and puts her hands to their cheeks before she slits their throats. With two strokes of the knife, Atli's bloodline is cut clean from the earth. But she is not yet done. At the victory feast she serves her husband his supper, and he eats every bite. He is happy. He has won. But when he finally stands to raise a toast, Guðrún bends down by his ear and whispers: 'You've lost your boys. Their skulls, you know, you have used as ale-cups: I fixed your drink by blending in their blood. I took their hearts and roasted them on a spit. I gave them to you afterwards and you chewed ravenously.'[1]

This is the climax of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's story in the Old Norse *Völsunga saga* and *The Elder Edda*. While these events are not exactly replicated in my own retelling, *A Cup of Dark Wine*, this is the Guðrún of the original story. To the twenty-first century reader, she is a formidable and perhaps terrifying figure – a Norse Medea, the Greek princess who also murdered her own children. How, we ask, could a mother to commit such a terrifying act? In Guðrún's case, it is the culmination of a tragic life: her first husband, Sigurd, and son, Sigmund, murdered by her own brothers, then forced by those brothers to marry Atli.

We are certainly familiar with monstrous women: the hook-nosed witches, terrifying she-monsters, bad mothers and stepmothers who populate the world's myth, legend and

[1] Orchard, A (ed.), *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*, Penguin, London, 2011, p. 227.

folklore: the Greek Medea, Clytemnestra and Medusa, the Latin American La Llorona, the Judaic she-demon Lilith, and Grendel's mother in the Old English *Beowulf*. The monstrous mother archetype, and specifically the murderous mother, is particularly prominent in Western fairy tales: the wicked witch in 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' who poisons her young stepdaughter with an apple, the stepmother in 'The Juniper Tree' who cooks her stepson into a pie and feeds it to her husband, the witch in 'Hansel and Gretel' who lures the children into her candy-covered house in an attempt to eat them. These latter two examples echo Guðrún's story as they too involve both a maternal figure and the cultural taboo of cannibalism. Although the women in these stories are often not the mothers of the children they harm, Viv Maloney argues that this is 'an attempt to be more subtle in their denigration of mothers' by replacing them with other wicked maternal figures.[2] We see wicked mothers too in mythology: the aforementioned Medea who murders her children after being spurned by her husband, and La Llorona who drowns her children after her husband abandons her. Murderous mothers 'have long been objects of lewd fascination … used as widely accepted symbols of vile and utter despair', by cultures who 'rest upon the assumption of women's innate passivity and selflessness' and are 'unsettled by the assertion that this is not necessarily so'.[3]

Guðrún is another of these 'monstrous' historical women; however, she is different in that her actions seem to garner no real consequences or elicit any retribution, verbal or physical, from either the narrator, or her fellow characters. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea is insulted throughout the play, both by the characters she acts against, and the narrating chorus

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[2] Maloney, V, 'Challenging the Good/Bad Mother Myths: Fairy Tale Elements in Carmel Bird's "A Place for Everything" and Helen Cushing's "Lara and I"', LiNQ, vol. 28, no. 2, 2001, p. 10.

[3] Idelson-Shein, I, 'The Monstrous Mame: Mapping the Margins of Maternity in Early Modern Jewish Discourse', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2014, pp. 38-39;
Jeremiah, E, 'Murderous Mothers: Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in A O'Reilly (ed.), *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's* Of Woman Born, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004, p. 59.

('detestable beyond all other women, Hateful to heaven, to me, to all mankind';[4] O woman, heartless as a stone, As cold as iron').[5] What's more, they lament Medea's actions as representative of women's badness in general ('O womankind! O marriage bed, So laden with catastrophe, What evils have you brought to man?'), leaving the audience in no doubt of her wickedness.[6] In 'The Juniper Tree' the unnamed stepmother is punished by having a millstone dropped on her head, and in 'Hansel and Gretel', the cannibalistic witch is pushed into her own oven. By contrast, in *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda*, Guðrún is mostly portrayed with ambivalence. The characters against whom Guðrún seeks revenge name her as 'terrifying lady', 'harmful wife' and 'hard-hearted', and her deeds as 'wicked' and 'monstrous'.[7] Meanwhile, the story's omniscient narrator speaks of Guðrún with respect and even reverence: 'remarkable woman', 'wise woman', a 'strong woman [who] was mighty hearted'.[8] Even the description of Guðrún as 'formidable' seems to acknowledge that though her actions are grim, they are understood for their necessity: 'nor ever since has any corseleted bride avenged her brothers; she brought destruction on three mighty kings, shining woman, before she perished'.[9] As David Clark argues, 'one might construe Guðrún as a figure of awe, rather than of monstrosity – her deeds are recognised to be terrible, but the poetic attitude evoked is one of awe-struck admiration'.[10] The notion that a woman might be understood and even admired for committing violent vengeance – and specifically for killing her own children – presents an extreme departure from conventional Western feminine ideals. It prompts questions of how the Norse

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[4] Euripides, *Medea: A New Translation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2019, p. 86.
[5] Ibid, p. 83.
[6] Ibid, p. 84.
[7] Byock, J L (ed.), *The Saga of the Volsungs*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990, pp. 214, 223, 231; Orchard, p. 104.
[8] Orchard, pp. 223, 225, 226.
[9] Ibid, pp. 226, 215.
[10] Clark, D, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2005, p. 192.

defined appropriate and/or monstrous femininity, and in turn forces feminist revisionists like myself to consider how Guðrún should be represented today.

The narratorial reaction to Guðrún's behaviour in the sagas differs greatly from that of Medea and her familiars in other traditions. This is the subject of the first chapter of my thesis, as I delve into Old Norse perceptions of gender, monstrosity, and the link between the two. In her seminal 1993 study, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed coined the term that defines Western society's fears of women, identifying what is so unsettling about them that it threatens the patriarchal order. At its core, the monstrous feminine can be defined as 'what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrifying, abject'.[11] Abjection was explored by Julia Kristeva in her influential essay, *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. In this study, Kristeva develops and expands Sigmund Freud's concepts of the subject and object, defining abjection as occurring when an individual is confronted by or experiences the breakdown of its own corporeality, unable to distinguish between the Self and the Other. Abjection is that which disrupts 'boundaries and the flow between boundaries' and 'the place where meaning collapses', and has been frequently tied to the violent woman, something I will discuss in Chapter One.[12] According to Creed, 'all human societies have a concept of the monstrous-feminine', but as Debbie Felton argues, 'to a large extent monsters are culturally determined. Each culture has its own preoccupations and fears, its own definitions of 'normal', and so what is believed to be good or bad can vary greatly across time, places and cultures.[13] Bearing this in mind, depictions of 'bad' or 'monstrous'

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[11] Clark, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 192.
[12] Seal, L, *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, p. 18; Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', p. 213.
[13] Creed, B, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', in J. A. Weinstock (ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2020, p. 211; Felton, D, 'Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome', in A S

women (terms that I will use interchangeably in this thesis) throughout history deserve to be revisited.

In recent decades there has been an increasing interest in re-examining these women and the binary of good and evil that they are so easily slotted into. Feminist revisionism, which I will discuss in Chapter Two, is the act of revising literary works to reveal previously hidden or unrecognised assumptions about gender. More specifically, it is the uncovering and highlighting of the female perspective in traditional literature, a canon dominated by men and the male experience. As Liedeke Plate summarises: 'history is a story that is told in the interest of a particular group of people and … there is always another side to every story'.[15] Feminist revisionist authors like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Christa Wolf and Madeline Miller scrutinise damaging tropes of women in fairy tale, myth and legend, and reimagine individual women's stories to reframe conversations around and transform our perceptions of them. In this thesis, I follow in the footsteps of these authors, reimagining Guðrún's story through the lens of revisionist feminism. My own novel, *A Cup of Dark Wine,* seeks to fill a gap in the knowledge, by demonstrating how retellings of Old Norse women's stories can offer new perspectives on historical ideas of gender, femininity, and most crucially female monstrosity, and how Guðrún's story specifically, when placed within its unique Old Norse gender context, can specifically prompt interesting questions surrounding tensions between right and wrong. These questions are particularly important at a time when the popularity and breadth of feminist revision is flourishing – in particular, retellings of 'monstrous' historical women – we as writers must ask ourselves how, in light of their unique cultural context and our own attitudes today, we can best represent them.

Mittman & P J Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2012, p. 103.

[15] Plate, L, 'Remembering the Future: or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?', *Signs*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, p. 390.

Methodology

Writing *A Cup of Dark Wine* has been a balancing act, one that considers views of Guðrún as both monstrous and non-monstrous, and how I should represent these nuanced perspectives in my retelling of her story – whether there is one that takes prevalence, or whether I should represent them equally. Studying Old Norse literature, concepts of monstrous femininity, and feminist revisionism has not produced any definitive conclusions. I did not write this novel to determine whether Guðrún is monstrous or not, or whether we should adhere solely to Old Norse or twenty-first century attitudes; rather, it considers well-known ideas of the mutability of monstrosity over time and culture and applies this knowledge to the writing of historical 'monstrous' women. This thesis demonstrates that writing about 'monstrous' women is not a question of identifying one perspective that is 'right' and one that is 'wrong', but of accepting that all of them – and none of them – are. As Katharine Hodgkin observes, 'in historical fiction as in history we have to be alert to the possibility of other ways of being', and so we must allow the breadth of a woman's possible interpretations, both monstrous and non-monstrous, to be considered to retell their stories most effectively.[49]

By determining that Old Norse ideas of gender and motherhood differed from those of other early medieval European societies, it makes sense that their views of monstrous femininty may also have differed. Chapter One examines and responds to theories of two prominent scholars of Old Norse. First, in her essay 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe', Carol Clover proposes that the Old Norse gender system did not find its basis in a male/female binary, but rather on a more fluid spectrum of masculinity that depended largely on power and honour, and in which both men and women participated. As Clover

[49] Hodgkin, K, 'The Witch, the Puritan and the Prophet: Historical Novels and Seventeenth-Century History, in A Heilmann & M Llewellyn (eds.), *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p. 17.

summarises, what 'excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically but neither inevitably or exclusively, associated', and 'what prompts admiration is not maleness per se, but sovereignty of the sort enjoyed mostly and typically and ideally, but not solely, by men'.[50] While I acknowledge criticisms of Clover's theory, I ultimately support it through my examination of various sagas, including *Gísla saga (The Saga of Gísli the Outlaw)*, *Laxdæla saga (The Saga of the People of Laxárdalr), Grœnlendinga saga (The Saga of the Greenlanders)*, and *Njáls saga* (*The Story of Burnt Njáll)*, and propose in turn that Old Norse conceptions of monstrous femininity, like those of gender, would also have differed from those in other early medieval societies.

The second scholar is Jenny Jochens, whose chapter in *Medieval Mothering* identifies a lack of affective motherhood in the sagas and argues that it likely results from the Old Norse practices of infanticide and fosterage. This detachment was compounded by high infant mortality rates, and that boys in particular might die young in battle. This is not to say that there are no loving mothers in the sagas, but such instances are rare. As with ideas of monstrous femininity, if the Old Norse possessed different views on what constitutes 'appropriate' maternity, then they might also have differed on ideas about 'bad' motherhood.

Both Clover and Jochens's theories shine new light on Guðrún's murderous actions and the mild reaction they elicit within the text: if the Old Norse prized honour above all else and therefore supported acts of female autonomy made in its pursuit, as I argue in this thesis, and if their maternal relationships were more detached than ours are, then Guðrún's actions, while still presented as unfortunate and possibly shameful, were understood for their necessity,

[50] Clover, C, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Representations*, no. 44, 1993, p. 13.

affording her a more nuanced characterisation likely not offered to women in other early medieval European societies.

Considering Old Norse attitudes towards gender and motherhood, I consider how we should interpret and therefore write about Guðrún and historical 'monstrous' women like her in the twenty-first century. Do we honour the moral code that existed at the time Gudrun's story was recorded, or the one in which we are writing? Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock discusses the idea that monstrosity (and therefore monstrous-femininity) is not a fixed concept, but one whose definition changes across time, place and culture, and that it is therefore a 'socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires'.[51] As I have already mentioned, this thesis does not seek to find a definitive answer for how authors should write about women like Guðrún, but rather to demonstrate that we must consider the myriad of depictions of these women across time, however greatly they vary, in order to decide how best to write about them.

While the research conducted in Chapter One informed the construction of my novel, the writing of the novel then informed Chapter Two. This second chapter considers several issues faced by feminist revisionist authors retelling stories of 'bad' historical women, including navigating tensions between broad definitions of right and wrong in history and the present. First, I situate my novel within the feminist canon. While Rosalind Coward writes that it is 'just not possible to say that women-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism', I argue that it is precisely this quality that makes novels like my own 'feminist' revisions.[52] Through the process of redirection – turning the gaze from male to female – power is given to women whose stories may now be told by women and with women's experience

[51] Weinstock, J A (ed.), 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory', *The Monster Theory Reader*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2020, p. 25.
[52] Coward, R, '"This Novel Changes Lives": Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? A Response to Rebecca O'Rourke's Article 'Summer Reading'', *Feminist Review*, no. 5, 1980, p. 57

and the discourses surrounding it in mind. This is particularly important for accounts of 'bad' women whose narratives have traditionally been authored by men. As case studies, I look to three novels that retell stories of historical 'bad' women: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013), and Genevieve Gornichec's *The Witch's Heart* (2021) – all of which offer female insights overlooked by the dominant patriarchal narrative.

This leads to a discussion of what constitutes authenticity in the historical novel, and in feminist revisions, which attempt to investigate modern gender concepts in historical settings. Lucy Holland's *Sistersong* (2021), a retelling of the murder ballad 'The Twa Sisters' and set in Anglo-Saxon Britain, features the transmasculine character Keyne (or Constantine). While it is my opinion that Holland does not seamlessly weave discussions of gender into her historical novel, in telling this story, Holland succeeds in increasing trans visibility in historical fiction. This prompts a conversation about the difference between accuracy and authenticity: is authenticity subjective? Is accuracy or authenticity more important for writers of historical fiction? And what do these discussions mean for writers who retell stories of historical 'monstrous' women? Many critics of historical fiction believe that accuracy should be the basis for determining its quality, but with consideration of the mutability of 'badness' and 'monstrosity', no one person (other than perhaps the subject herself) can decide what constitutes the 'true' story of the 'bad' historical woman. As Katherine Cooper and Emma Short argue, 'any consideration of the 'real' historical female figure must acknowledge the contested nature of narratives surrounding her, as it is she who has been manipulated by male-authored and/or patriarchal accounts of history'.[53] This idea is compounded when the female figure stems from the corpus of myth and legend, because, while such stories may be rooted in some elements of reality or fact, they are ultimately works of symbolism and exaggeration

[53] Cooper, K & Short, E (eds.), 'Introduction: Histories and Heroines: The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction', *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012, p. 5.

intended to impart some message or provide entertainment. If fact is not myth's primary concern, who then decides which version of a myth is the truest one? The answer is that there is no one reality; rather, all of them are true, as 'they all contain the truth of those who tell them; that is what is interesting in the study of myths'.[54] By considering accuracy as it pertains to the feminist revision of stories of 'bad' historical women, I seek to highlight the layers of truth that exist around these figures, and how this might influence our writing of them.

Shifting focus, in Chapter Two I consider more closely the figure of the 'monstrous' woman, and how feminist revisionists represent their actions in their retellings. Christa Wolf's *Medea: Stimmen* (1996) retells the story of Medea, who, like Guðrún, murders her children. In Wolf's retelling, however, the children are not killed by Medea, but by a mob, which absolves her of guilt. While the aim in retelling stories of 'bad' historical women is often to reclaim and revise the male-authored stories that form their dominant narrative, I question whether Wolf's erasure of Medea's crimes prevents an opportunity for more nuanced discussion surrounding female violence and motherhood. In 'Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', Margaret Atwood addresses how feminist authors have previously shied away from writing 'bad' female characters, fearing how they may reflect upon women. She concludes that to write only 'good' women is just as damaging as it reinforces the angel/monster binary, whereby a woman who is not entirely good must be entirely bad. A variety of representations of women is key to transforming anti-feminist prejudices, as they allow women to be acceptably multi-faceted like men, and to be 'bad' without it reflecting on their gender. When it comes to retelling stories of 'bad' historical women, we must consider all depictions of their actions, and, in their variety, allow them to inform our writing so that we might transcend ideas of right and wrong. Instead of determining whether Guðrún and other historical women like her are good or bad, this thesis strives to

[54] van Zyl Smit, B, 'Medea the Feminist', *Acta Classica*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2002, p. 103.

demonstrate that the impossibility of determining this definition reflects both its inadequacy and a need to consider these women in their full complexity to retell their stories as best we can.

CHAPTER ONE

Guðrún as the Monstrous Feminine

Barbara Creed's concept of monstrous femininity and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, go hand in hand. The abject is characterised by its uncomfortable ambivalence: 'we are both repelled by [it] … yet attracted to it'.[55] It is an object or experience which 'activate[s] a gag reflex literally and/or metaphorically', and in its simplest terms, it is what 'disturbs identity, system [or] order', breaching 'borders, positions [or] rules'.[56] Considering these definitions, it is easy to see how a fear of the abject can easily be transferred onto particular persons, Othering them due to our fear of the unknown. Rinya Arya argues that we 'stigmatise [others] because their differences are not understood' – we deem them to be threatening, and 'in their otherness they are regarded as abject'.[57] Countless groups have been subjected to such Othering, but in this discussion I focus on how abjection works within patriarchal societies to separate the male patriarchal order from that which disrupts it.

Women have long been associated with this breach of order – this inability to be contained. As Margrit Shildrick argues, 'women's bodies … exemplify an indifference to limits evidenced by such everyday occurrences as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation and such supposedly characteristic disorders as hysteria, and, more commonly today, anorexia and bulimia';[58] all 'women are out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky; they are, in short', Shildrick summarises, 'monstrous'.[59] Women's ability to bear children in particular 'align[s]

[55] Arya, R, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, p. 5.
[56] Ibid; Kristeva, p. 4.
[57] Arya, p. 7.
[58] Shildrick, M, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, SAGE Publications, London, 2002, p. 39.
[59] Ibid, p. 39.

them with natural forces beyond male control', and exemplifies the uncomfortable horror and attraction of the abject: the pregnant body is 'deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet [it is] also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthralment with the mysteries within'.[60] The abjection of the mother is something I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

While 'feminine monstrosity' is often 'closely tied … to maternity', it is the violent woman who perhaps most confirms male fears of the uncontrollable woman.[61] She disturbs the patriarchal system in several ways: she disrupts the gender binary, behaving as a 'frightening antithesis to normal women', and by deviating so drastically from acceptable femininity that she 'threatens the stability of patriarchal and familial relations and expectations' and becomes 'monstrous'.[62] In Western society, women have been historically viewed as the 'fairer' sex, and traditional femininity is generally associated with submissive traits. The ideal woman is 'passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hardworking, patient, and straight-laced', and 'her happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule'.[63] This woman is also associated with acts of care and nurturance, while more dominant characteristics like assertiveness, control, aggression and, by extension, violence, belong to men. When this woman breaches her weaker, submissive role and transgresses into the male sphere, she 'traverses the male/female gender binary' and becomes abject or monstrous, '[a] hybrid creature who blurs the distinction between masculine and feminine.[64] If a woman can become masculine, then her gender is

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[60] Felton, p. 105; Ussher, J M, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*, Routledge, East Sussex, 2006, p. 1.
[61] Idelson-Shein, I, p. 38.
[62] Berrington, E & Honkatukia, P, 'An Evil Monster and a Poor Thing: Female Violence in the Media', *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, p. 53.
[63] Zipes, J, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2012, p. 69.
[64] O'Neill, M & Seal, L, 'Violent Female Avengers in Popular Culture', *Transgressive Imaginations: Crime, Deviance and Culture*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2012, p. 42; Dawson, L (ed.), 'Introduction: Female Fury and the Masculine Spirit of Vengeance', in F

ambivalent, and ambivalence characterises the abject: 'liminal beings are those that appear to be symbolically neither fully one thing nor another … Those that cannot be categorised … can also become monsters'.[65]

In 1988, Judith Butler developed her theory of 'gender performativity', suggesting that the traditional characteristics of gender – male and female, assignations of strength and weakness – are not inherent, but the result of repetition over time: 'gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of … a natural sort of being'.[66] In the simplest terms, gender is 'something one does rather than what one is'.[67] Butler proposes that for acceptable performances of gender to exist there must also be unacceptable behaviours – 'a domain of abject beings, a 'zone of uninhabitability' against which certain people define themselves and by virtue of which they ground their claims to symbolic legitimacy and power'.[68] When a person does not perform their gender in acceptable ways, society finds them to be abject, as 'gender [is] deemed monstrous when the binary categories by which it [is] perceived [break] down'.[69] Maggie O'Neill and Lizzie Seal, among other authors, have discussed the relationship between the traditional gender binary and the abject, claiming that 'in order to be rescued from abjection, violent women must be recuperated back into femininity.[70] Within modern Western patriarchal society, little room is allowed for gender flexibility, and it is for this reason that the

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McHardy (ed.), *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, p. 8.
[65] O'Neill & Seal, p. 19.
[66] Butler, J, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp. 43-44.
[67] Ussher, p. 3.
[68] Bildhauer, B & Mills, R (eds.), 'Introduction: Conceputalising the Monstrous', *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2003, pp. 19-20.
[69] Ibid, p. 12.
[70] O'Neill & Seal, p. 43.

acceptance of a broader definition of femininity, as well as the experiences of queer, non-binary, and transgender persons, represent a battle that continues to be fought.

Contemporary views of whether Guðrún is 'monstrous' are varied. While most scholars do not explicitly describe Guðrún's actions in killing her children as positive, many understand her behaviour within the context of her circumstances; her actions are unfortunate and possibly shameful, but ultimately necessary in a society where women may verbally goad men to vengeance but never perform such acts themselves. I will discuss the 'whetting' woman in greater detail later in this chapter, but she is defined by Jochens as one who, 'injured by an injustice for which revenge was beyond her capability, addressed a male relative(s), explained the crime's effect on him, reproached him for not having acted sooner, specified the requirements, and threatened dire consequences for noncompliance'.[71] Jana K. Schulman observes that, as she has no male relatives remaining to enact their physical duty, Guðrún must 'act to restore her own honour', and Caroline R. Batten describes how Guðrún's violence 'reflect[s] the inherent insufficiency of female verbal assertions of power'.[72] However, Kaaren Grimstad and Ray M. Wakefield describe Guðrún as a 'dragonish host' who exacts 'monstrous revenge' – a person 'who has been defined as monstrous … because of … her violations of the codes regulating hospitality between host and guest'.[73] In Old Norse society feasts were an important social institution, involving a 'contract of mutual respect and honour between guest and host; the sharing of food and drink in an atmosphere of conviviality and harmony', with

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[71] Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2016, p. 165.

[72] Schulman, J K, ''A Guest in the Hall': Women, Feasts, and Violence in Icelandic Epic', in S S Poor & J K Schulman (eds.), *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p. 226; Batten, C R, 'Strengði hon elfi: Female Reactions to Male Violence in Eddic Heroic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2019, p. 307.

[73] Grimstad, K & Wakefield, R M, 'Monstrous Mates: The Leading Ladies of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga Saga*', in S S Poor & J K Schulman (eds.), *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p 242.

the feast's location serving as a 'place of sanctuary for the duration of the festivities'.[74] Guðrún's violent actions, and how they disrupt rituals of feasting and consumption, are an extreme violation of social conventions and expectations. If the feast represents a peaceful place in a world where feudal violence is commonplace, then Guðrún's violence disrupts this neutral space. Guðrún serves the men with food and drink, as a hostess should, before revealing that 'their skulls, you know, you have used as ale-cups; I fixed your drink by blending their blood. I took their hearts and roasted them on a spit'.[75] Not only does Guðrún act violently at the feast, but she does so by infusing the usual respectful rituals between guest and host with a violence that is hidden – that makes the guest (the one eating) as culpable as the host (the one serving) – and is therefore all the more devastating; as she reminds Atli, 'you've finished it off alone, and you left no remnants, you chewed ravenously', a reminder that he too is a participant in this violation.[76]

Batten additionally argues that 'Guðrún transforms into a monster, driven to inhumanity by the magnitude of Atli's betrayal';[77] and Clark acknowledges that in reading particular poems from *Völsunga Saga*, it is possible to view Guðrún as 'part of the 'monstrous Other' trope', particularly in *Atlakviða* (The Lay of Atli or Atli's Song), which seems to depict Guðrún as unfeeling – what Clark describes as having 'inhuman self-control' – as 'the Huns' children grieved, all except Guðrún, who never grieved, for her bearish brothers, for her sweet little sons'.[78] The poem also seems to lend some sympathy even to Atli, who, when murdered by

[74] Schulman, p. 212.
[75] Orchard, p. 227.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Batten, p. 311.
[78] Clark, D, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 191; Orchard, p. 214.

Guðrún, is cast as defenceless 'in just the way her beloved Sigurd was';[79] 'unsuspecting' in the bed where she stabs him, 'he had no weapons'.[80]

These twenty-first century interpretations of Guðrún's character are expressed by experts in Old Norse culture, so their views do not necessarily reflect how a non-scholarly reader might interpret Guðrún, and whether that interpretation, lacking an understanding of Old Norse society and its particular attitudes towards honour and revenge, might lean more towards monstrosity.

I have addressed how twenty-first century scholars broadly view Guðrún, but how do other sagas and twenty-first century authors characterise her? The narrator's admiration for Guðrún in *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda* is reflected in *Gísla saga*. When the outlaw Gísli Þorkelsson discovers that his sister Þórdís wishes him dead, he laments:

> *Wife-veil-hearted wavering*
> *Warped to miss, my sister,*
> *Gjuki's daughter's great heart,*
> *Gudrun's soul, stern moody.*
> *Brooding wrath for brothers*
> *Bent her mood to vengeance:*
> *Heart's cause for her husband*
> *Held she not, but felled him.*
> I did not think I had deserved this from her, because I think I have shown more than once that her honour was as important to me as my own; sometimes I have put my life in danger for her sake, and now she has given me death's word.[81]

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[79] Clark, D, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 184.
[80] Orchard, p. 215.
[81] Johnston, G (trans.), *The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1963, p. 28.

Here, Gísli holds Guðrún up as an 'example of sisterly loyalty';[82] her behaviour is not condemned but exalted, since Gísli believes that Þórdís should be 'loyal to him rather than to her husband'.[83] In *The Sorrow Stone*, Kari Gíslason reimagines *Gísla saga,* retelling the story from Þórdís's perspective. The narrative follows Þórdís (called Disa in this novel) as she navigates the feuding between her two brothers, Gils and Kel (Gísli and Þorkell), her childhood lover, her eventual husband, and the other men who orbit her life and the lives of the women with whom she associates. After Disa's father tells his children Guðrún's story he declares, "Guðrún was a good woman … She did the right thing".[84] In this way, Gíslason honours the reverence for Guðrún that is demonstrated in the original saga. In *The Half-Drowned King*, Linnea Hartsuyker also ties Guðrún's actions to honour. In this novel, 'a woman may know honour … like the Swedish Guðrún, who killed her own sons since they were the sons of the man who betrayed her'.[85] Kate Heartfield's *Valkyrie* (2023) must also be noted as the most recent and comprehensive retelling of Guðrún's story. However, Heartfield omits the murder of Guðrún's sons from the plot entirely (in fact, Guðrún does not bear Atli any sons at all) which makes it impossible to use it as a point of comparison for interpretations of her 'monstrous' behaviour.

Both Hartsyuker and Gíslason's stories affirm the admiration for Guðrún that scholars like Clark claim is evoked in the original sagas, and all three retellings are notable as the only twenty-first century portrayals of Guðrún's character. As I will discuss in depth in Chapter Two, examining these contemporary images of Guðrún helps me to determine how my version of Guðrún might converse with theirs.

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[82] Clark, D, 'Revisiting 'Gisla saga': Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2007, p. 493.
[83] Ibid, p. 502.
[84] Gíslason, K, *The Sorrow Stone*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2022, p. 23.
[85] Hartsuyker, L, *The Half-Drowned King* [Ebook], Harper Collins, New York, 2018, p. 465.

Old Norse Ideas of Monstrous Femininity

Monsters abound in Old Norse mythology: werewolves and dragons, trolls and shapeshifters, revenants or *draugar* (the undead who walk amongst the living). But perhaps, as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir observes, 'the most interesting and thus probably the most 'successful' or unsettling monsters are the ones that share features with humans'.[86] The giantess, an Othered 'monstrous' female figure, presents a touchstone for examining monstrous femininity in Old Norse literature. Giantesses frequently inhabit both the *fornaldarsǫgur* and the *Íslendingasögur*, though in the former they are often sought out from far away by heroes who seek to conquer or partake in love affairs with them, while in the latter they are more likely to 'live at the border of society, which they try to invade', and 'appear in many forms, ranging from threatening creatures who are swiftly and brutally exterminated to benign figures providing various sorts of help'.[87] For some giantesses, only their immense height physically belies their difference, and so they can be viewed desirably as sexual partners – even existing as wives and concubines of the gods, as does Skaði, wife of the sea god Njörd, and also Thor's mother, Jörð. Many, however, are described as 'hideously ugly, distinguished by disfigured features and dark skin'.[88] Friðriksdóttir offers the giantess Geirríðr Gandvíkrekkja in *Gríms saga Loðinkinna (The Saga of Grim Shaggy-Cheek)* as an example: Geirríðr is 'long-faced and hard-looking, with a curved nose and sharp shoulders, swarthy and with gaunt cheeks, of foul appearance and bald on the forehead'.[89]

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[86] Friðriksdóttir, J K, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, p. 61.
[87] Kress, H, 'Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature', in S M Anderson & K Swenson (eds.), *The Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2001, pp. 81-92; Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 59.
[88] Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, pp. 62-63.
[89] Ibid, p. 62.

In general in the sagas – though particularly the *fornaldarsǫgur* – giantesses represent difference and otherness. In the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, Thor recounts the 'Berserk-women [he] battled on Hlésey', who 'smashed [his] ship' and 'threatened [him] with iron bars'.[90] Though it is not certain, John McKinnell argues that these berserkers are likely giantesses, as the island of Læsø, on which Thor's tale is set, is known in other sagas to be inhabited by giants.[91] Having heard Thor's plight, a disguised Óðinn reprimands him for his 'disgraceful deed … battling with women', to which Thor responds that they were 'hardly women'.[92] This argument demonstrates that giantesses were not viewed by the Old Norse solely as monsters or women, but as monstrous women. The giantess therefore presents a touchstone for examining monstrous femininity within Old Norse literature, as she often represents all that a woman should not be: 'immodest, sexually aggressive, physically active, defiant, and grotesque'.[93] In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama (The Saga of Sturlaug the Industrious),* the giantess Horn-Neb's desire for Sturlaug's companion Hrolf-Neb is blatant as she demands that he be brought to her 'so that [she] can see how big and strong he is … because [she has] heard a lot about his good looks'.[94] She is subsequently slaughtered by Sturlaug, who 'thrusts at her with [a] halberd, running her right through with it'.[95] In *Gríms Saga Loðinkinna*, Grim wakes to discover two giantesses beside his boat, 'tugging one at either end of it, and they seemed set on shaking it to pieces'.[96] Like Sturlaug, Grim murders the women, shooting one with arrows

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[90] Orchard, p. 73.
[91] For McKinnell's argument, see McKinnell, J, 'Fighting the Giantess: Pórr', *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, Boydell & Brewer, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 110-111.
[92] Orchard, p. 73.
[93] Ibid, p. 76.
[94] Tunstall, P (trans.), 'The Saga of Sturlaug the Industrious', *Way Back Machine*, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100908081937/http://www.oe.eclipse.co.uk/nom/Sturlaug.htm>, accessed 15 October, 2022.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Tunstall, P (trans.), 'The Saga of Grim Shaggy-Cheek', *Germanic Mythology*, 2005, <http://www.germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/GrimLodinskinnaTunstall.html>, accessed 15 October, 2022.

and hacking at the other with an axe. Such a gruesome end is typically the fate of the deviant giantess. Perhaps the most blatant example that the giantess defies traditional femininity, however, comes again in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, as the male heroic characters repeatedly misgender them. When Aki and Framar encounter giantesses while rowing along the coast, they ask, "Ought I to greet a man or a woman here?", as does Sturlaug, to which the giantess retorts: "Are you blind? This is a woman."[97]

As Friðriksdóttir notes, the giantess represents taboos and 'at the same time [also] provide[s] an outlet to explore these deviant behaviours and revel in their pleasure in an imaginary space'.[98] This is best evidenced in *Gríms Saga Loðinkinna*, when Grim encounters the aforementioned Geirríðr. Despite her appearance, when Geirríðr asks that Grim kiss her in exchange for her help, he does so, and 'she didn't seem as bad to touch as she was to look at'.[99] The giantess is often the subject of disgust at the same time as she is the subject of desire – an abject being, occupying a liminal space, just as the monstrous woman does. While the bodies of abject beings (like the giantess and the monstrous woman) are seen to be dangerous sources of horror, at the same time we are drawn to them, as they 'open up the possibility of exploring different and apparently deviant social or sexual practices … within a 'safe space''.[100] As Jane M. Ussher observes, 'we see this ambivalent relationship played out in mythological, literary and artistic representations of the feminine, where woman is positioned as powerful, impure and corrupt, source of moral and physical contamination; or as sacred, asexual and nourishing', and it is precisely this dual nature, the desire and disgust that both giantesses and deviant women evoke, that makes them monstrous.[101]

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[97] Tunstall (trans.), 'The Saga of Sturlaug the Industrious'.
[98] Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 77.
[99] Tunstall, P, 'The Saga of Grim Shaggy-Cheek'.
[100] Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 61-62.
[101] Ussher, p. 1.

Helga Kress argues that the treatment of giantesses 'reveals male fear of a female power that is bigger and stronger than the men themselves'.[102] The giantess is a wild figure, associated with nature, untamed by patriarchal order and 'the sagas show a great interest in bringing this wild woman into society, under its rules, order and control'.[103] Scholarly analyses of the giantess figure constitute the most frequent and in-depth explorations of monstrous femininity in Old Norse society that I have found, though of course they are perhaps not the best example; after all, giantesses truly *are* monstrous figures, and such defiant qualities are expected in them. Despite this, the giantess seems to metaphorically stand as a caricature that embodies Old Norse patriarchy's anxieties around women, and occupies a space in saga literature for the exploration of these fears/desires and their consequences. This prompts the questions: how did the Old Norse define 'appropriate' femininity, and what, therefore, characterised its 'monstrous' counterpart? To determine this, we must first discuss the Norse relationship to gender.

Old Norse Ideas of Gender

Our most informative resources detailing Old Norse society are the rich and comprehensive sagas. There are a number of saga genres, but in this exegesis I have focused on two: the *fornaldarsǫgur* (legendary sagas) and *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas or the *Sagas of Icelanders*). Though they were recorded in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the *fornaldarsǫgur* generally take place before the settlement of Iceland and prior to Christian conversion, and combine history with legend for the purpose of entertainment. The *Íslendingasögur* are (purportedly) true accounts composed between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries that follow Iceland's settlement and serve as historical records, recounting the multi-generational stories of everyday families. It is important here to briefly discuss their authorship.

[102] Kress, p. 84.
[103] Ibid, p. 85.

While the stories are set in earlier centuries – Guðrún's own story alludes to real historical events that occurred around the fifth century – the *fornaldarsǫgur* and *Íslendingasögur* themselves were not recorded until centuries later, following Scandinavia's Christianisation, and they were most likely written by educated, upper-class men.[104] As Alexandria Frauman summarises, 'what we are left with is a patchwork picture built largely from post-conversion medieval sources purporting to record poems and narratives preserved orally from earlier generations, but whose origins and authenticity as pagan materials are largely unclear'.[105] It is important, therefore, to read these sagas with these influences in mind, considering how perceptions of gender, religion and class in the twelfth- to fourteenth-centuries might have shaped how they were told.

In these stories we see a society in which men and women generally possessed 'distinct arenas of power: men took care of matters in the public sphere, while women were responsible for the domestic sphere';[106] men dominated in 'fishing, agriculture, herding, travel, trade, politics and law', and women in 'child care, cooking, serving, and tasks having to do with milk and wool'.[107] Women were mostly subordinate to men and their marriages were usually arranged. While in some of these tales, women exist as little more than 'domestic labourers, sexual objects, and political pawns', in others, women 'frequently manage to create and succeed in their own agendas rather than those thrust upon them by men', and the woman 'who plays life like a man' is 'commonly admired'.[108] These striking women, who I discuss below,

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[104] Frauman, A, 'Unstable Masculinities: Loki, *Ergi*, and Challenges to Heroic Identity in Old Norse Literature', PhD Thesis, Indiana University, Indiana, 2020, p. 2.
[105] Ibid, p. 3.
[106] Friðriksdóttir, J K, 'Gender', in A Jakobsson & S Jakobsson (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon, 2017, p. 230.
[107] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', pp. 2-3.
[108] Snook, J, 'Valkyries and Frithweavers: Women's Shifting Roles – from Warriors to Domestic Caretakers', *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2015, p. 110; Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', p. 117; Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', p. 7.

defy traditional gender roles, frequently seizing and wielding power, and they are often, if not revered, then respected for doing so. However, as Jennifer Snook argues, while some sagas 'suggest that the Old Norse imagination allowed extraordinary women to be warriors, resisters, and gender benders … other passages, however, reveal that the status of women was much less than ideal in many cases'.[109]

That women were subordinate to men is particularly evident in the arrangement of marriages. While some women willingly consented to their marital agreements (Guðrún herself is pleased to wed Sigurd) many others were forced into such unions. *Völsunga saga* alone is rife with examples: when Siggeir asks for Signy's hand in marriage, Signy 'does not wish to go away', but is ultimately betrothed, as her father insists that without their union 'we could neither have [Siggeir's] trust nor bind him in a friendly alliance';[110] Brynhild finds herself 'powerless to contend with [her father]', when he insists that she accept Gunnar's proposal;[111] and Guðrún is literally drugged into submission by her own mother and brothers, who 'order [her] to marry King Atli'.[112] Women are likewise traded in the *Íslendingasögur*: in *Laxdæla saga,* Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir is given in marriage to Thorvald by her father, and 'although she was rather against the idea, nothing was done';[113] and in *Njáls saga*, when Hoskuld betroths his daughter, Hallgerd, without consulting her 'because he had his mind set on marrying her off'.[114]

This is not to say that Old Norse women were not afforded a greater measure of power than women in other medieval European societies. Rigid rules regarding gender roles were more difficult to maintain in a society where men were often away for travel or trade, and

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[109] Snook, p. 125.
[110] Byock, p. 39.
[111] Ibid, p. 85.
[112] Ibid, p. 95.
[113] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'Laxdæla saga', *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 332.
[114] Cook, R (trans.), *Njáls saga*, Penguin, London, 2001, p. 56.

women had little choice but to assume greater control and power in their absence. In some circumstances, women were able to own property and vote in legislative assemblies. In *Laxdæla saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* (The Saga of Erik the Red), Aud Ketilsdóttir (or Aud the Deep-Minded) claims ownership of some land in Iceland where she decides she 'should make her home'.[115] She also owned slaves, including 'Hundi, who was of Scottish descent', and 'a fourth slave … named Vifil'.[116] Unn is also notable as an example of Norse women in positions of authority, as she captains her own ship filled with 'many … people of note' following the death of her son, Thorstein.[117] Daughters were entitled to some form of inheritance (a woman's dowry always belonged to her alone), and women were also able to initiate divorce from their husbands. In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir 'announced she was divorcing Þorvaldr' after he 'slapped her across the face', and 'when their estate was divided Guðrún received half of all the property'.[118] In *Njáls saga,* Unn seeks to divorce her husband Hrut because he cannot sexually pleasure her: 'he is not able to have marital intercourse with me in any such manner that I can enjoy'.[119] Some women, 'usually high-status widows [like Aud, even] took on leadership roles such as leading a household to settle in a new country and arranging marriages for their offspring'.[120] It is also worth noting that the saga authors do not only describe women's physical appearance, but their temperament: in *Njáls saga*, Hildigunn is described as 'a woman with a mind of her own and very beautiful', but also as being an 'unusually tough and harsh-tempered woman, but a fine woman when she had to be', and Hallgerd is described as 'a most beautiful woman', 'bountiful and high-spirited', but also as 'lavish and harsh-tempered'.[121]

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[115] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 279.
[116] Ibid, 280.
[117] Ibid, 278.
[118] Ibid, pp. 332-333.
[119] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'Njáls saga', The *Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 230.
[120] Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', p. 230.
[121] Cook, p. 430, 108, 114.

And in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir is noted as being 'the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland', but was 'no less clever than she was good-looking' – 'the shrewdest of women, highly articulate'.[122]

For modern writers of historical fiction, representations of gender in Old Norse society mirror those conveyed in the sagas. In Gíslason's *The Sorrow Stone*, Disa is not afraid to speak her mind, arguing against her father and brothers and attempting to control her own fate by threatening divorce and influencing male decisions, all from her traditional position as keeper of the house. Ultimately, however, she remains under the control of these men. When she is betrothed to Kolbjorn, a local boy, Disa protests, saying, 'I don't accept. Listen to me, Father. You've given me your advice. I refuse', but the decision is not hers to make:[123] 'This is not advice,' her father replies, 'You have accepted'.[124] Such an outcome might disappoint the reader who roots for Disa, but Gíslason, in writing historical fiction (not fantasy), is only sticking to the conventions and attitudes of the time and place in which he is writing. However, if Gíslason *had* allowed Disa's father to accept her refusal, this would not necessarily have diminished his novel as a work of historical fiction. Ideas of accuracy and authenticity and the tension between the two in historical fiction is something I discuss in detail in Chapter Two. Like Guðrún, Disa deviates from her traditional feminine role, though perhaps not so drastically: after Gils murders her husband, Grim (Þorgrímur), Disa is distraught, and goads her new husband and Grim's brother, Bork, to vengeance. Bork hires Eyjolf to pursue and kill Gils; when he finally succeeds, a remorseful Disa stabs Eyjolf in the leg before fleeing with her son, Sindri, and declaring herself divorced. In its plot, *The Sorrow Stone* does not deviate from the original *Gísla saga*; the attitudes towards gender and power that Gíslason includes reflect the attitudes held not by him as a modern author, but by the Old Norse themselves. In *A*

[122] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 327.
[123] Gíslason, p. 68.
[124] Ibid.

Cup of Dark Wine, I too have stuck to representing these attitudes from *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda* closely to give as accurate an impression as possible of the Old Norse gender/power dynamic.

In Hartsuyker's *The Half-Drowned King*, Ragnvald's sister Svanhild becomes involved with the son of the man who wishes to murder him. Unlike Disa or Guðrún, she does not break the bounds of traditional femininity in such a striking or violent way. Her greatest protest occurs when she flees Hrolf's farm rather than marry a man she does not want, though this very action – forced to flee rather than marry unwillingly – is reflective of the limits of female choice. Hartsuyker's Svanhild is no Guðrún, but, interestingly, she illustrates this very point in the text: when Svanhild asks why her mother does not kill her new and loathsome husband, who 'killed [her] husband and [her] son', Ascrida responds, 'I am no warrior. And no Guðrún either'.[125] She continues: 'you love the old song so much … Guðrún who survived as wife to her husband's killer and murdered her sons as they issued from her womb to avenge his death and her captivity. Life is not like that … Men can be uncompromising. They can kill or die. It isn't so simple for women'.[126] Svanhild reveres Guðrún, and this in itself indicates an admiration for and perhaps a determination to be a woman who defies traditional gender roles. Despite this, Ascrida reminds her daughter that Guðrún represents a fantastical ideal, a drastic path that women might *wish* that they could take in order to determine their own fates, but a path that is unfortunately inaccessible or simply unthinkable for most women. Both authors have represented the women in their stories as being unafraid to debate the decisions that men make on their behalf, but, nevertheless, these decisions are forced upon them. While they might be subject to greater privileges than other medieval women, they too remain subject to certain misogynist ideals and institutions.

[125] Hartsuyker, p. 56.
[126] Ibid.

As Pierre Brunel argues, there is a 'yawning gulf between saying this and making them the model for our modern feminists'.[127] The images of Viking women presented to us in popular fiction and television are frequently exaggerated and often romanticised. While there is no doubt that some women achieved unprecedented levels of power, women as a whole generally existed below men on the hierarchy. However, gender may not have been the only or even the most important factor with which the hierarchy was concerned.

Earlier, I discussed how societies both modern and historical frequently view a breakdown of the gender binary as a terrifying problem – as abject – but what if a society existed in which gender was represented less according to a binary, and more across a spectrum? The topic of gender in Old Norse society is one of considerable debate among scholars: some hold Viking women's unique privileges high as an indication of the society's progressiveness, and others point out the limits of these privileges. Carol Clover examines the grey area between these two perspectives, proposing that Old Norse society did not think so binarily in terms of man and woman, but instead possessed a fluid interpretation of and response to gender. According to Clover, the dual spheres of masculinity and femininity cannot be productively applied to the Old Norse; rather, all peoples existed on a masculine spectrum, where women are considered imperfect men. With this spectrum in mind, Clover asks, 'how useful is the category 'woman' in apprehending the status of women in early Scandinavia'?[128] Instead of discussing a society that demarcates between the two sexes, Clover suggests we should instead view Old Norse society as discriminating between the powerful and the powerless: 'what prompts admiration is not maleness per se, but sovereignty of the sort enjoyed mostly and typically and ideally, but not solely, by men', and 'what finally excites fear and loathing … is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of

[127] Brunel, P, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2015, p. 1032.
[128] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', p. 4.

volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitably or exclusively, associated'.[129] This idea, whereby masculine and feminine behaviour do not necessarily correspond with the male or female physical form correlates with Butler's theory of gender performativity. If we support 'the radical uncoupling of gender *from* sex' then 'gender becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one' and vice versa.[130]

Clover's one-gender theory is widely referenced by Old Norse scholars, but it has received its share of criticisms. Jeffrey Turco agrees with Clover that 'the effeminate man is an object of derision in the sagas', but disagrees with her proposition that 'the manly woman is accepted or even lauded'.[131] While the effeminate man is consistently an object of disdain, 'the latter is not nearly as clear-cut as Clover suggests'.[132] Indeed, one example exists in *Laxdæla saga*, when Þórðr successfully files to divorce his wife, Aud, for allegedly dressing in male clothing: 'Guðrún asked Þórðr, "whether the rumour is true, that your wife Aud is often dressed in breeches, with a codpiece and long leggings?".[133] When Þórðr then asks Guðrún 'what consequences it could have for a woman if she wore trousers like the men', Guðrún (who has invented the accusation), replies, "If women go about dressed as men, they invite the same treatment as do men who wear shirts cut so low that the nipples of their breasts can be seen – both are grounds for divorce".[134] Guðrún's mention of men is important, because while cross-dressing for both sexes could be a powerful social taboo, it was particularly shameful for men. According to Kirsten Wolf, 'although the secular law condemns female transvestites as much

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[129] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', p. 13.
[130] Evans, G L (ed.), 'Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders', in J C Hancock (ed.), *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, 2020, pp. 59-60.
[131] Turco, J, 'Gender, Violence, and the "Enigma" of Gísla saga', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philollogy*, vol. 115, no. 3, 2016, p. 290.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 333.
[134] Ibid, p. 334.

as male [ones], the Sagas of Icelanders reveal a hostile attitude to men wearing women's clothing and a correspondingly lenient attitude to women wearing men's clothing'.[135] The woman who mimics a man is of less concern than the man who mimics a woman: male cross-dressing was seen as 'immoral, because it threatened the male cultural horizon which equates male sexuality with power', while 'women dressing as men pose no real threat, for the act validates male dominance (the 'club' all want to join, at least from the male perspective)'.[136] Of course, this is still a grey area: women who acted like men were not as a rule accepted or encouraged by Old Norse society as Turco argues, and not all men who engaged with femininity were condemned.

Perhaps the prime example of accepted female cross-dressing is that of the Valkyrie, who embody Old Norse society's fluid gender system. The Valkyrie possesses both feminine and masculine characteristics; she is of the female sex, while her presence in battle – where she decides which fallen soldiers will ascend to Valhalla – lends her a distinctly masculine quality. Valkyries 'embod[ied] the martial virtues that are usually the preserve of men'.[137] In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (The First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani)*, the Valkyrie are described as descending from the sky as helmeted 'lightning-bolts', their 'byrnies … drenched in blood and beams blaz[ing] from their spears'.[138] The Valkyries' engagement with violence makes them semi-masculine figures. As Kathleen M. Self writes, 'the battleground is the pre-eminently masculine domain where true masculinity is displayed, tested, made, or lost', and so the Valkyries' 'presence on the battlefield is … masculinising'.[139] In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhild

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[135] Wolf, K, 'Transvestism in the Sagas of Icelanders', paper presented to the 10th International Saga Conference, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, 1998, p. 683.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Brunel, p. 1159.
[138] Larrington, C (trans.), *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 286.
[139] Self, K M, 'The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014, p. 153.

is a Valkyrie. The ambiguity of her gender is exemplified by her first meeting with Sigurd, in which he mistakes her for a man: 'Sigurd went into the rampart and saw a man lying there asleep, dressed in full armour', but once he 'removed the helmet from the man's head [he] saw that it was a woman'.[140] The armour Brynhild wears physically signifies her presence within the masculine realm, just as Sigurd's slicing her *out* of this armour so that it cannot be re-worn represents her transition away from it.[141] Similarly, Guðrún's attire physically marks her transgression into the masculine realm of physical aggression. In the *Edda*, Guðrún 'casts off' her necklaces, and she also 'cast off her cloak [and] took a naked sword' to aid her brothers in battle.[142] In *Völsunga saga*, she is even more bluntly described as being 'like the most valiant of men' as she 'put[s] on a mail coat'.[143] When Guðrún decides to aid her brothers in battle she is no longer behaving in a feminine/passive way, and so must remove these feminine signifiers – her jewellery – and take up armour and a sword. In the same way that Brynhild is mistaken for a man, in this moment Guðrún 'can be construed as a successful male impersonator' as she 'takes on the male role of active vengeance [and] the male paraphernalia of armour'.[144]

Likewise, there was some leeway in the realms of the gods. In *Þrymskviða (The Song of Thrym),* Thor's hammer is stolen by the giant Þrymr, who says that the only way he will return the hammer is if the goddess Freyja is sent to marry him. When Freyja refuses, the god Heimdall suggests that instead Thor disguise himself as Freyja: 'Let us put Thor in the bridal veil', he says, 'let him wear … women's clothes falling around his knees'.[145] Though Thor initially protests ("The gods will call me a cock-craver, if I let myself be put in a bridal veil"), Loki convinces him to disguise himself, even offering to dress as a woman too and be his

[140] Byock, p. 67.
[141] See Self, p. 152 for further discussion of this point.
[142] Orchard, pp. 221-222.
[143] Byock, p. 101.
[144] Clark, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 191.
[145] Orchard, p. 99.

maid.[146] Jón Karl Helgason views *Þrymskviða* as a tale that 'undermines phallocentric masculinity and social hierarchy'.[147] When Thor's hammer is stolen, so too is his maleness: 'the hammer empowers the male', as it is used to 'suppress women' and 'maintain the pyramidal structure of society, to protect social and sexual divisions'.[148] Without his weapon of masculinity to rely on, Loki convinces Thor to consider an alternative, 'more unrestrained sexuality', which he himself represents.[149] Loki is a liminal being; through his ability to shapeshift and become male or female, human (in appearance) or non-human, he is neither one thing nor another. In *The Prose Edda*, a thirteenth century collection of Norse myths, Loki changes himself into a mare and mates with the horse Svaðilfari, later giving birth to the colt that becomes Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse. Though both gods cross-dress in *Þrymskviða* for the purpose of a trick and not out of a desire to be feminine, Thor still agrees to go through with the plan and in the poem neither god is criticised for doing so.

These displays of gender fluidity contradict fixed notions of gender in Old Norse literature, both for masculine women and feminine men. Or perhaps the response (or lack thereof) by their fellow gods is less an acceptance of gender non-conformity, and more one of using this non-conformity as a means to an end for acquiring power. After all, if Thor had not dressed as a woman, he would not have reclaimed his hammer, and if Loki had not transformed into a horse, then the gods would have been forced to forfeit sources of their own power: the sun, moon, and the goddess Freyja. Not to mention that Odin sees no issue with riding the powerful colt born of this scandalous union.

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[146] Orchard, p. 99.
[147] Helgason, J K, '"þegi þú, þórr!": Gender, Class, and Discourse in þrymskviða', in S. M. Anderson & K. Swenson (eds.), *The Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2001, p. 166.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

In another criticism of Clover's one-gender model, Friðriksdóttir reproaches the study's narrow frame of data, since it focuses mainly on the *Íslendingasögur* and mostly ignores the *fornaldarsǫgur*. 'This,' she argues, 'is part of a broader propensity in Old Norse-Icelandic studies' to focus on the *Íslendingasögur*, which 'tend to be primarily preoccupied with these subjects', therefore leaving out an entire group of Old Norse women and their relationship to power and gender.[150] To 'develop an accurate and comprehensive picture of medieval Icelandic ideas about women', she writes 'it is therefore necessary to examine all of the extant sources'.[151]

Lena Norrman argues that instead of focusing on the male/female binary, 'a focus on the intermediary sphere of transgender would bring us a better understanding of the construction of gender' in Old Norse narratives.[152] Evans seconds this argument, arguing that the categories of male and female 'remain separate and cannot be collapsed into homogenity', as 'even if the feminine is simply seen as the 'not masculine' this still creates a binary – an opposition – resulting in a two-gender system'.[153] He argues that Clover completely ignores the relationship between biological sex and gender performance, as 'the sagas … clearly suggest a naturalised view of a fundamentally binary conception of sex, which can be seen to be of *significant* importance when evaluating the gender performance of a given character'.[154]

While there is certainly weight to these criticisms, merit can still be given to Clover for encouraging scholars to turn away from gender as the primary indication of power in Old Norse literature. What most determined one's power was honour. Old Norse society was a 'shame culture', whereby what motivated men – and women – was less 'courage, ambition, fealty, and

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[150] Friðriksdóttir, J K, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 7.
[151] Ibid, p. 8.
[152] Norrman, L, 'Woman or Warrior? The Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth', 11th International Saga Conference, University of Sydney, 2-7 July 2000, p. 379.
[153] Evans, G L, 'Modelling Saga Masculinities', in *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, pp. 3-4.
[154] Evans, 'Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders', p. 61.

largess' than a fear of the shame that would inevitably come if one did not act.[155] A person's incentives depended less upon a desire for positive outcomes, and more upon a fear of negative ones. According to Clover, gender in Old Norse literature was 'neither coextensive with biological sex … nor a closed system, but a system based to an extraordinary extent on winnable losable attributes', and honour, a person's greatest source of power, could be easily, painfully lost.[156] Honour was so important in Old Norse literature that 'many saga characters privilege [it] above all else, often at the expense of their material wealth, personal comfort, formal power, and, ultimately, in many cases, their life'.[157] As Lotte Motz puts it: 'given the choice between possible death and possible ridicule, a good man would without doubt choose the former'.[158] Readers would be hard-pressed to identify a saga that does not engage with the pursuit of honour, and in several stories the plot is dominated by characters who engage in a tireless cycle of vengeance: in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir convinces her husband and brothers to murder her former lover, and later goads her son to avenge his father's death, saying 'it grieves me to have such spineless sons';[159] and *Gísla saga* demonstrates revenge's endless and complicated cycle, as Þorgrímur kills Vésteinn, Gísli kills Þorgrímur in retaliation, and Þórdís (wife of Þorgrímur and sister to Gísli) goads her new husband into pursuing Gísli for vengeance, a decision which she ultimately regrets and so stabs the man who killed him. In Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's story, honour is crucial: Brynhild's honour is compromised as she is tricked into marrying the wrong man, for she 'swore an oath to marry that man who would ride through [her] wavering flames, and that oath [she] would hold to or else die';[160] Atli demands Guðrún's hand in marriage as compensation for his sister's death; and Guðrún murders her

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[155] Jones, G F, 'Heathen Shame Culture', *Honor in German Literature*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1959, pp. 13, 31.
[156] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', p. 13.
[157] Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', p. 228.
[158] Motz, L, 'Female Characters of Laxdæla Saga', *Monatshefte*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1963, p. 162.
[159] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 377.
[160] Byock, p. 88.

sons 'to bring upon her husband a dreadful revenge' for her brothers' deaths at Atli's hand.[161] Honour served as an invisible currency that could be earned or stolen, and a status that was never stable or final.

Bearing this in mind, Ian Felce writes that 'by acquiring and reacquiring distinction, the men of these sagas must repeatedly *achieve* manhood, which is fragile, in flux, and perpetually at risk of loss';[162] it is not an inborn quality, 'but something subjective and dynamic, determined fuzzily by collective social judgements'.[163] And certainly honour held as much importance for women as it did for men, though they tended to engage with the system differently. Though they were far less likely to physically participate in the revenge acts that restored honour, women were frequently peripherally involved in the process, goading men to action using harsh insults and bloody tokens. In the *Edda*, when Guðrún's daughter, Svanhild, is executed for false accusations of adultery, she 'incite[s] her sons to war by using grim words', and in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir goads her sons to avenge their father's death by 'spread[ing] out' the clothes he had been wearing when he was killed:[164] 'a shirt and breeches much stained with blood'.[165] These women frequently insult their men in an effort to spur them to action, like in *Laxdæla saga*, when Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir tells her sons 'you would have made your father better daughters, to be married off, than sons';[166] in *Grœnlendinga saga*, when Freydís calls Þorvaldr a 'coward';[167] and in *Njáls saga*, when Hildigunn implores Hoskuld to

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[161] Orchard, p. 226.
[162] Felce, I, 'Vengeance and Male Devotion in Laxdæla Saga and Njáls Saga', in L. Dawson & F. McHardy (eds.), *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 87.
[163] Cerbone, W, 'Real Men of the Viking Age', in A Albin, M C Erier, T O'Donnell, N L Paul & N Rowe (eds.), *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2019, p. 249.
[164] Orchard, p. 231; Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 388.
[165] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 388.
[166] Ibid, p. 377
[167] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'The Saga of the Greenlanders', *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 650.

‘avenge all the wounds [he] received on his body, or else be called a caitiff wretch before all men!’[168] Reading these whetting scenes, it is immediately clear that women in Old Norse literature exercised considerable influence, with reluctant men often seeking revenge only after women demand it. Clover writes that ‘women’s role, in blood feud, in ‘choosing the avenged’, involved them centrally in the family politics of honour and inheritance, [and in] theoretically male terrain’.[169] Though honour is most strongly tied to masculinity – maleness being ‘correlated with sovereignty and social approbation’ – both women and men engaged in its rituals in the sagas.[170]

Following the wrongful deaths of her brothers, Guðrún must demand revenge, but she has no male relatives left to goad into action: ‘Gunnar won’t come now, I can’t call for Hogni,’ she says of her brothers.[171] The only other men from whom Guðrún can demand vengeance are her husband – the perpetrator – and her own sons, who owe allegiance to their father. Grace F. von Swerigen observes that ‘in the absence of a male relative, the woman at hand assumed the burden’, and so Guðrún takes on the male role of active vengeance, ‘carry[ing] it out regardless of results, to face death with all the courage and equanimity of her warrior husband or brother’.[172] Her actions are a matter of honour. She cannot allow the dishonour that has been brought upon her to rest, simply because there is no man to correct the wrong. And if the root of the problem and the focus of Guðrún’s rage is her husband, Atli, then killing their children is a calculated move. In later years, Guðrún’s sons, defending their father’s honour and seeking revenge, could have killed *her*; as Jochens argues, ‘if vengeance for brothers necessitated killing a husband, the wife first had to sacrifice their children in order to make him understand

[168] Thorsson, ‘Njáls saga’, p. 255.
[169] Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, p. 4.
[170] Felce, p. 87
[171] Orchard, p. 203
[172] von Sweringen, G F, ‘Women in the Germanic Hero Sagas’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy*, vol. 8, no 4, 1909, p. 506.

that he himself could no longer hope that he would be avenged'.[173] For Guðrún, killing the children is a necessary move if she is to exact revenge for her brothers as required by the honour code.

Other examples exist of women using masculine physical aggression as Guðrún does. In *Laxdæla saga*, Aud (or Breeches-Aud) seeks vengeance against her husband, Þórðr, for divorcing her by wounding him in his bed: 'she drew her short-sword and struck him a great wound on his right arm which cut across both breasts'.[174] Though Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir's father, Osvif, 'offer[s] to ride after [Aud]' as she 'deserve[s] punishment', Þórðr 'told him not to think of doing so, as what Aud had done was only evening the score'.[175] In this instance, there seems to be no outrage at what Aud has done – or specifically, outrage that she is a woman who has performed a male act. Þórðr respects Aud's fair reciprocation and engagement with the honour system. In *Gísla saga*, another Aud defends her husband, Gísli when Eyjolf comes looking to kill him. When Eyjolf offers Aud silver to reveal her husband's location, she accepts the silver, but says, 'you must agree that I may do with it whatever I choose', to which Eyjolf agrees.[176] Aud 'put [the silver] in a large purse, then she stood up and struck Eyjolf on the nose, and blood spurted all over him'.[177] Because her husband cannot defend himself, Aud assumes her husband's role and exacts violence on Eyjolf. Though she has entered the male sphere, Aud humiliates Eyjolf further by pointing out that it is not a man who has wounded him, but a woman: 'and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you'.[178] The difference between how these two acts are gendered is notable. In the case of Breeches-Aud, a strong image is cast of her as 'manly', not only in her behaviour but in her physical

[173] Jochens, J M, *Old Norse Images of Women*, p. 140.
[174] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 335
[175] Ibid.
[176] Thorsson, 'Gísla saga', *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 548
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid, p. 548

appearance. When she travels to Þórðr's home, she dresses in breeches, and though Þórðr wakes when Aud enters his bedroom, he 'only turned over on his side when he saw some man [had] come in'.[179] In the case of *Gísla saga*, however, it is Aud's femaleness that is emphasised. She is not masquerading as a man through physical dress as Breeches-Aud does, or physically shedding her femininity like Guðrún, who tosses away her jewellery. Rather, Aud emphasises and uses her femaleness to further humiliate Eyjolf.

A final example of female violence is Freydís in *Eiríks saga rauða (Eirik the Red's saga)* and *Grœnlendinga saga*, who journeys to Vinland (an area of the North American continent) after striking a deal with two brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi. Wanting to have the upper hand on the expedition – and not wishing to share the spoils of their journey – Freydís one day beats herself and returns to her husband, claiming that she has been harmed by the brothers, and urging her husband through insults to take revenge. Her husband reluctantly agrees and invades the brothers' camp, slaughtering the men, until 'only the women were left, as no one would kill them'.[180] Shockingly, Freydís then asks someone to hand her an axe, 'and she then attacked the five women there and killed them all'.[181] Freydís has been called 'the most evil creature one can find in all the Old Icelandic literature', and in the saga, when her brother Leif discovers what she has done, he remarks that her 'descendants will not get on well with this world', indicating his disapproval.[182] Like Guðrún and Breeches-Aud, however, Freydís physically assumes a masculine persona: when she goes to speak to the brothers before her betrayal, she '[takes] her husband's cape' and wears it.[183] To Wolf, 'this is a clear signal that the action taken by … Freydís is one which is considered to belong to the male realm of

[179] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 335
[180] Thorsson, 'The Saga of the Greenlanders', p. 650
[181] Ibid.
[182] Wolf, K, 'Amazons in Vinland', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 95, no. 4, 1996, p. 4; Thorsson, 'The Saga of the Greenlanders', p. 650.
[183] Thorsson, 'The Saga of the Greenlanders', p. 649.

activity'.[184] The difference, however, between Freydís's acts and that of Guðrún and the two Auds, is that her violence is not contained within codes of honour and revenge; her act is not one of vengeance, but of greed. It is indicated that Freydís herself knows her acts were dishonourable, as she forbids her travelling companions from speaking of her deed, declaring, "I will have anyone who tells of these events killed".[185]

It is worth briefly mentioning here the relationship between Old Norse class and ideas of monstrous femininity. Old Norse society had three social classes: 'kings/chieftains, householders, and unfree thralls, or slaves', and it was 'land and birth (family background) [that] were the foundation for power and prestige and laid the ground rules for social hierarchy'.[186] In her analysis of the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) (which, like the *fornaldarsǫgur,* tell stories of legendary and semi-legendary figures) Friðriksdóttir found that noble women were constrained less by their gender than women in lower classes. These upper-class characters were given 'special status due to their elevated rank, enabling them to operate outside the traditional female spheres of reproduction, child-rearing and domestic responsibilities'.[187] Additionally, they are most often 'depicted in nonsexualised, positive, and admiring terms as elegant, wise, eloquent, persuasive figures'.[188] With this in mind, it could be argued that Guðrún is perhaps afforded greater neutrality because of her upper-class rank. However, Friðriksdóttir's analysis focuses dominantly on women wielding power that is 'primarily verbal and economic', breaking from the feminine sphere through politics, rather than through acts of physical violence like Guðrún. When it comes to the violent Old Norse woman, I would argue that more important than class in their reception were the circumstances

[184] Wolf, 'Amazons in Vinland', p. 5.
[185] Thorsson, 'The Saga of the Greenlanders', p. 650.
[186] Sigurðsson, J V, 'Class and Gender in Viking Society' in *Scandinavia in the Age of the Vikings*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2021, p. 90.
[187] Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 80.
[188] Ibid, p. 11.

surrounding their violent acts. William Layher argues that when women in the sagas 'step out of their normal roles and act as men would' they do so 'only as a last resort because their men failed to hold up their end of the social bargain', for 'if a man will not do a man's work, a woman will do it because the fear of shame for doing unwomanly things stings less than the loss of family honour already does'.[189] In Guðrún's case it is her husband who has betrayed her and her brothers who have been murdered; for Breeches-Aud, too, it is her husband who has betrayed her; and for Aud of *Gísla saga*, her husband is in hiding and cannot perform his duty. It is this criterion – action as a 'last resort' – that often seems to be vital in violent saga women being offered 'grudging respect and affirmation', rather than being seen as an aberration, as these revenge acts 'emulate the deeds that men traditionally do'.[190] If we consider masculinity to be 'the master signifier in the Norse gender system', then being a man in Old Norse literature can sometimes become more fraught than being a woman.[191] Masculinity was 'an imperilled playing field for men' as they had to continuously 'fulfill the expectations of male behaviour', while 'for women, the picture is more complex':[192] a woman could behave as a woman, as that was what she was, but if she delved into the masculine realm, she would likely be praised, as it was masculine honour that was prized above all else.

By deviating from ideas of gender as a binary, Clover's one-gender system disrupts traditional Western definitions of what constitutes the abject, and therefore what defines monstrous-femininity. Abjection is characterised by liminality: 'liminal beings are those that appear to be symbolically neither fully one thing nor another', both repulsive and strangely desirable or fascinating, and in resisting categorisation they 'call into question the order of

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[189] Layher, W, 'Caught Between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse', in S S Poor & J K Schulman (eds.), *Women and the Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic* Masculinity, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, pp. 188-189.
[190] Layher, p. 189.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid, p. 188.

daily life – they smash familiar distinctions between reductive categories and reveal these structures to be flawed and inadequate'.[193] The monstrous woman is abject because she blurs gender binary boundaries: neither entirely masculine nor feminine, but something in between. Clover's theory that Old Norse peoples may have existed on a scale of masculinity in which even women could be praised for deviating from femininity, signifies an incredible departure from traditional Western ideas of what constitutes the abject, and, therefore, of what characterises monstrous-femininity altogether.

I have incorporated this liminality into my novel by writing a Guðrún that contradicts herself, and therefore defies definitive categorisation: she exhibits the soft maternity often expected of women, and she balks against it; she is emotional and tender, yet cold and detached; she resists violence, yet commits murder. Guðrún is both good and bad. I have not attempted to redeem her as one, or condemn her as the other, something I will discuss further in Chapter Two. She resists binary categorisations, and therefore resists the labels – like 'monstrous feminine' – that these binaries perpetuate.

The Monstrous Mother and Old Norse Motherhood

According to Kristeva, one of our earliest experiences with abjection is our 'attempt to release the hold of [the] maternal entity'.[194] From the beginning of our lives we subconsciously associate the maternal with the abject as a source of contention and ambivalence; a mother is both 'desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject'.[195] The infant's relationship with the mother is one of push and pull, acceptance and rejection, as the child alternatively nurses at the maternal breast and detaches from it. Creed argues that 'the

[193] O'Neill & Seal, p. 19; Oswald D, 'Monstrous Gender: Geographies of Ambiguity', in A S Mittman & P J Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2012, pp 343-344.
[194] Kristeva, p. 13.
[195] Ibid, pp. 54, 158.

mother is gradually rejected because she comes to represent, to signify, the period of the semiotic which the paternal symbolic constructs as abject'.[196] In other words, the mother is cast off because she represents our more chaotic inner impulses, while the father represents structure and order. The mother's womb is associated with 'the primordial darkness that is a precondition of divine creation, which begins with the invocation of light'.[197] Light is associated with the masculine domain of 'order and reason, [while] darkness is construed as its devilish opposite, a feminine force associated with chaos'.[198] What perhaps best illustrates this distinction between ideas of feminine chaos and masculine order is Kristeva's theory of language or 'processes of signification', in which the mother is associated with the semiotic, and the father with the symbolic.[199] The semiotic, represents the 'babbles, cries and coos' of infants that are seen as 'meaningful parts of language but that do not signify anything in a referential sense';[200] the symbolic denotes the transition from the semiotic to the use of structured language, which allows the infant 'to build up subjectivity and mark out its difference', moving away from the chaos of the mother and towards paternal order.[201] The mother who kills her children completely destabilises rigid ideas of women as nurturers, presenting us with a disturbing contradiction, as it is 'the collocation of motherhood and murder, fertility and death', that makes the act of a mother killing her children so 'hard to fathom'.[202] As David Stuttard summarises, 'the killing of young children by their own mother

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[196] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, p. 38.
[197] Francus, M, *Monstrous Motherhood: 18th Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2012, p. 28.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Arya, p. 20.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Arya, p. 21.
[202] Segal, C, 'Euripides' *Medea*: Vengeance, Reversal and Closure', *Pallas*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1996, p. 25.

is an act of ultimate horror and shock: it is the brutal denial of everything that we take to be implied by the very conception, by the very words, of mother and motherhood'.[203]

It is not only Guðrún's filicide – the creation of the corpse – that might render her as abject, but the act that follows as she feeds her sons' bodies to her husband. If the corpse represents total abjection then the consumption of that corpse represents 'the symbolic order's limit point, a threshold that must not be crossed'.[204] It is one of Western society's most extreme and enduring cultural taboos, with a rich history of signifying Otherness; 'it is a taboo so great that it is deemed to be an inhuman act performed by those outside civilised society'.[205] According to Kristeva, 'the corpse … is death infecting life'.[206] To gaze upon a corpse – to witness death within life – is already profoundly disturbing; to *consume* this flesh – or, in Guðrún's case, to knowingly facilitate this consumption – blurs not only the perpetrator's humanity, but the boundaries between life and death, and is one of the most horrifying forms of the abject. The murderous mother 'offers a revolting reversal of the natural order'.[207] Mothers frequently exist as caregivers, and 'implicit in scenes of positive maternal nurturing … is the congruence of food and love'.[208] From a child's first days, it is the mother who usually serves at the sole source for the infant who nurses at their breast, and from then on the mother is supposed to continue to care for her family by feeding them. A mother who kills and cooks her children severs this loving relationship and 'nullifies the meaning of maternity'.[209]

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[203] Stuttard, D, *Looking at Medea: Essays and a Translation of Euripides' Tragedy*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2014, p. 16.
[204] Rice, R J, 'Cannibalism and the Act of Revenge in Tudor-Stuart Drama', *Studies in English Literature: 1500-1900*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2004, p. 298.
[205] Daniel, C, 'Hairy on the Inside: From Cannibals to Pedophiles', *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2003, p. 6.
[206] Kristeva, p. 4.
[207] Idelson-Shein, p. 40.
[208] Sceats, S, 'The Food of Love: Mothering, Feeding, Eating and Desire', *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 20.
[209] Warner, M, 'My Father He Ate Me …', *No Go the Bogeyman*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1998, p. 56.

If the mother is already an abject figure, then the mother who acts violently – whose behaviour is destructive instead of (or as well as) nurturing – is even more so. The same, however, cannot necessarily be said for fathers. Peggy McCracken argues that 'fathers also murder their children in classical and medieval fiction … but unlike examples of maternal infanticide, a father's murder may be explained as a sacrifice, not a vengeance: a father may kill his child in the service of some higher good or higher purpose', and this logic applies even to cannibalism.[210] Carolyn Daniel argues that 'stories that feature paternal cannibalism … seem to have significantly different emphasis to those where a mother-figure threatens to consume a child';[211] while cannibalism committed by mothers sees children killed without hope for an afterlife, paternal cannibalism often 'represent[s] an 'inverted birthing'' and resurrection.[212] One famous example is the myth of the Greek god Kronos, father of Zeus: 'afraid that one of his children will supplant him, [he] swallows them in succession, until finally, his wife Rhea … forces [him] to vomit [them] up'.[213] Not only are the children resurrected, but they become the Olympian gods, and through the father's cannibalism are reborn more powerful.

The different receptions of paternal and maternal filicide evident in many Western societies can be simplified into two streams of thought. The first is that paternal filicide is deemed less inappropriate because the father is traditionally seen to have the dominant claim over a child's life. Simone de Beauvoir observes that while it was 'still necessary to grant the mother a part in procreation … it was conceded only that she carried and nourished the living seed, created by the father alone'.[214] The father provided the child's roots, its life-force, while

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[210] McCracken, P, 'The Gender of Sacrifice', *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2003, p. 42.
[211] Daniel, p. 148.
[212] Ibid, p. 147.
[213] Garry, J & El-Shamy, H M, *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 230.
[214] de Beauvoir, S, *The Second Sex*, trans. H M Parshley, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1953, p. 17.

the mother merely served only as a living incubator. The second reason female filicide is deemed so threatening is that female violence, unlike its masculine counterpart, disrupts the established patriarchal order: 'violent women upset … the binary between 'masculine' and feminine'' and in doing so 'threaten the foundation of patriarchal ideology'.[215] The abject is defined in part as that which cannot be categorised, but the existence of the patriarchal system is dependent on the binary between male and female.[216] Within this binary, both men and women possess definitive characteristics and roles, and violence is the domain of men – so, if a woman is to act violently and behave as a man would, the binary breaks down and the foundation on which the patriarchal system rests is undermined.

The discourse 'surrounding so many cases of violent women, both past and present, seems to be less about justice or the act in question than about what it is to be a woman – motherly, feminine, wifely, ladylike, and so forth [as] nothing can bring up the discussion of proper womanly traits like a violent woman'.[217] When a woman acts violently, her actions are viewed through and judged according to the lens of her sex; while a man's bad behaviour seems more often to reflect on his individual circumstances, a woman's bad behaviour frequently reflects on her gender as a whole. When female violence becomes intrinsically tied to the female gender, patriarchal society can perpetuate generalisations that place women into a mad/bad binary, rather than seeking to understand their complex motivations as human beings.

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[215] Kramer, K, '"How Do You Like My Darkness Now?": Women, Violence, and the Good "Bad Girl" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*', *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film*, Julie A. Chappell and Mallory Young (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, USA, p. 17.
[216] Seal, p. 19.
[217] Neroni, H, 'Female Murderers: America's Recurring Nightmare', *Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*, State University of New York Press, Ithaca, 2005, p. 60.

While there are many mothers in both the *fornaldarsǫgur* and the *Íslendingasögur*, maternal relationships are rarely examined, and those that are described typically lack evidence of strong emotional bonds between mother and child. Instead, these relationships are often characterised by a scarcity or complete absence of emotion. In *Völsunga saga*, Signy sends her son to aid her twin brother, Sigmund in avenging their father's death, yet when Sigmund tells Signy that 'he thought himself no closer to having a companion', she immediately declares:[218] "Then take the boy and kill him. He need not live any longer"' – a command she repeats with another son.[219] In *Laxdæla saga*, Geirmund attempts to abandon his wife, Þuríður, and their infant daughter by sailing abroad, but on the night of his departure, Þuríður rows out to where Geirmund's ship lies anchored. Once aboard, she steals her husband's beloved sword, 'Leg-biter', replacing it with their daughter. When Geirmund wakes, he calls for Þuríður to return his sword and, 'take your daughter with you and whatever wealth you want', to which Þuríður responds:[220] "You will never have it, as you have treated me dishonourably in more ways than one".[221] In actuality, Þuríður's actions are not spiteful, but brave: in abandoning his wife and daughter 'without any means of support', Geirmund shirks his familial and legal responsibilities, and 'treat[s his wife] dishonourably'.[222] According to William Ian Miller, 'the general rule was that two-thirds of the cost of the children's maintenance was to be undertaken by the father, one-third by the mother', and so by sneaking their daughter aboard Geirmund's boat, Þuríður forces her fleeing husband to accept the legal responsibility that he owes his child.[223] Without an understanding of Old Norse kinship laws, however, it is understandable that Þuríður's seeming

[218] Byock, p. 42.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 325.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid, pp. 324-325.
[223] Miller, W I, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 149.

willingness to abandon her daughter might strike outsiders to Old Norse literature as cold-hearted.

Guðrún's own story also demonstrates an emotional lack between mother and child: though the murder of her sons certainly steals the spotlight, her relationships with her other children are also characterised by detachment. Though her brothers murder both her son and husband, Guðrún's grief focuses entirely on the latter. 'S[itting] over the dead Sigurd', Guðrún laments his death, 'tears stream[ing] through her tresses', and years later as she grieves her life's tragedies, she proclaims 'that was the sorest, when my Sigurd, robbed of victory, they slew in my bed'.[224] Her slain son, Sigmund, receives no such lamentations.

Jochens argues that there is a 'scarcity of affective motherhood in the Old Norse world', and that the potential reasons for this lack include the 'phenomena of infanticide [and] fostering'.[225] In pagan Old Norse society (prior to its Christian conversion and subsequent outlawing of infanticide), it was not guaranteed that a woman would be able to keep her newborn; this decision was the father's alone. Following birth, the baby was brought before the father, who would decide whether 'he accepted paternity', and, if he did, name the child and 'allow it to be returned to the mother'.[226] If he did not, however, the infant might be exposed – left outside to perish in the elements. By naming the child, the father 'eclipse[d] the exclusively female act of childbirth and [usurped] maternal space through his power of naming, which confirm[ed] children as the father's 'creations' and 'possessions''.[227] The likelihood of an infant's death, even after surviving birth, meant that women often remained disconnected from their offspring: 'the father's preponderant role in the newborn's fate, in particular the

[224] Orchard, pp. 179, 181, 233.
[225] Jochens, J, 'Old Norse Motherhood', in *Medieval Mothering*, J C Parsons & B Wheeler (eds.), Garland Publishing Inc., London, 1996, p. 201.
[226] Ibid, p. 204.
[227] Waugh, R, 'Language, Landscape, and Maternal Space: Child Exposure in Some Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2017, p. 236.

distinct possibility that he might order its exposure, may have inhibited women from emotional attachment to their children during pregnancy [and], furthermore, the experience of having had one infant killed may have rendered bonding with subsequent children more difficult'.[228]

Though it might be obvious, Jochens observes, 'it should be noted that the problem of infanticide is of particular concern to women' after 'nine months' pregnancy – involving, under the best circumstances, discomfort, nausea, and restricted movement, and culminating in a painful, prolonged, sometimes dangerous delivery, heightened the mother's interest in the baby over that of the father'.[229] Moreover, concerns over infanticide were particularly pertinent for mistresses, whose illegitimate offspring were even more likely to be exposed, and for both wives and mistresses alike, these condemned children were often female. Such is the case in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu (The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue)*, in which Þórsteinn tells his pregnant wife, Jófríðr, that 'if you have a girl, it must be left out to die, but if it is a boy, it will be brought up'.[230] Jófríðr births a daughter, and, unable to expose the child herself, sends her to the home of her sister-in-law, Þorgerðr, so that the child may be brought up in secret. In *Thorsteins tháttur uxafóts (The Tale of Thorstein's Bull's Leg)*, Þorkel orders that his sister Oddný's newborn be exposed when the child's father, Ivar the Radiant, refuses paternity. As in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, Oddný's newborn is saved, this time when the child is hidden in the forest and subsequently discovered by a couple who 'foster him lovingly'.[231] Of the many examples of infanticide that can be found in the *Íslendingasögur*, I have found only one in which it is a woman who orders a child's exposure: in *Vatnsdæla saga (The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal)*, Þorgrímur's wife orders that the child of her husband's mistress be killed,

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[228] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 206.
[229] Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998, p. 85.
[230] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue', *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 563.
[231] Hreinsson, V (ed.), 'The Tale of Thorstein Bull's Leg', *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, Reykjavík, 1997, p. 344.

demonstrating how illegitimacy increased a child's risk of exposure. When Þórsteinn, Þorgrímur's kinsman, discovers this news, he says that Þórsteinn 'has had his child left out to die on the instructions of his wife, and that is a wicked thing to do'. [232] While this instance of attempted infanticide represents an anomaly, as it is ordered by a woman, rather than a man, it is notable that Þorgrímur's wife does not seek to expose her own child, but another woman's. Female involvement in rituals of infanticide seem rare, given their near total absence from the sagas, and while *Vatnsdæla saga* does deviate from the notion that only men held sway over a child's life, it continues to reinforce the idea that their fate was frequently determined by powers outside a mother's control.

It is notable that in these examples, as in all others found in the *Íslendingasögur*, the condemned child is rescued, 'a fact which doubtlessly caused the story to be recorded', both for its remarkability, and perhaps to also reinforce Christian rhetoric that denounced infanticide.[233] As Jochens explains, 'it can be argued that Christianity became the most potent force in shaping western attitudes towards motherhood', and its impact on attitudes towards infanticide is particularly clear, as 'prohibition against this ancient custom came with Christianity'.[234] In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* the author notes that to commit infanticide 'was always considered a bad thing to do', and the rescued children often grow to be admired by the men who initially ordered their deaths.[235] Though it is undoubtedly true that infanticide was not viewed in a wholly positive light by the pagan Old Norse, it was certainly not condemned. Given that these sagas were not recorded until after Scandinavia's Christianisation, it is difficult to determine whether statements like those made by Þórsteinn accurately reflect pagan attitudes, or the likely Christian sympathies of the saga authors.

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[232] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal', *The Sagas of Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 247.
[233] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 204.
[234] Ibid, p. 203; *Old Norse Images of Women*, p. 83.
[235] Thorsson, 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue', p. 563.

Even if a woman's child was not exposed, there remained a risk that their time together would be cut short due to the Old Norse system of fosterage: the sending away of a child to be raised by another family, or, alternatively, the appointment of a woman to raise the child within the natal family's home. In most cases, the child lived apart from its parents 'between the ages of eight and sixteen, but occasionally infants as young as one year were sent away from home'.[236] Fostering was normally a process favoured by the upper-classes, who would send their children into the families of lower-class men who offered their services in return for renumeration and allyship. This is evident in *Reykdæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* (*The Saga of the People of Reykjadal and of Killer-Skúta)*, in which Hanef offers to foster Vemund's daughter as he believes 'he would get himself strong support in his dealings with other people'.[237] The system of fosterage also worked to broaden the child's social network, giving them new kinship bonds that often became 'as binding as blood relations'.[238] Fosterage is found repeatedly throughout the *Íslendingasögur*: in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir gratefully gives her son Þórðr to Snorri the Goði to foster in the aftermath of her husband's death; in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the couple Orm and Halldis foster Gudrid, daughter of Þórbjǫrn; and in *Fljótsdæla saga* (*The Saga of the People of Fljotsdal)*, following his friend's death, Bersi tells his widow, Droplaug, 'As you know, there was a great friendship between Þorvaldr and me … I want now to offer … to foster your son Helgi' – an offer which Droplaug says she cannot turn down, as 'she would not want to refuse such an honour for the boy'.[239] Fosterage is not so prominent in the world of the *fornaldarsogur*, though Guðrún's first husband, Sigurd, himself was fostered to Regin, who served as a mentor. As these examples represent only a handful of the instances of

[236] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 207.
[237] Hreinsson, V (ed.), '*The Saga of the People of Reykjadal and of Killer-Skúta'*, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, Reykjavík, 1997, p. 261.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Hreinsson, V (ed.), 'The Saga of the People of Fljotsdal', *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, Reykjavík, 1997, p. 392.

fosterage in the sagas, it can be concluded that the practice was very common. Because of this, 'one may wonder whether the constant option that a child be sent away for fostering prevented the development of what modern society considers normal mother-child bonding'.[240] Jochens even suggests 'that a foster mother was often emotionally closer to the child she was raising than the mother herself, even when both women were present on the farm'.[241] This close bonding between a foster-mother and her adopted child is evident in *Egil's saga* in the relationship between Skallagrim's son, Egil, and the servant woman, Þorgerðr Brák, who fosters Egil from childhood on his family's farm. One day, while playing a ball game, Skallagrim aggressively seizes his son, and Brák defends Egil, scolding Skallagrim: 'You're attacking your own son like a mad beast'.[242] Enraged, Skallagrim instead turns on Brák, chasing her before throwing 'a huge boulder after her which struck her between the shoulder blades', striking her dead.[243] Following Brák's murder, Egil is so enraged by his father's actions that in retaliation he kills one of Skallagrim's favourite men. Brák sought to defend Egil from his father, though he was not her child, and Egil in turn seeks vengeance for her death, though she is not his mother; both acts demonstrate the strong kinship bond that existed between them, despite their adopted relationship. Of the relationship between Egil and his biological mother, Bera, it can be noted that little is said.

In addition to infanticide and fosterage, these anxieties were increased by the risk that a child might die of natural causes, or that a son in particular might be slain, either in battle or while caught in the vicious cycle of revenge killing. As in all medieval societies, infant mortality rates were dramatically higher for the Old Norse than in Western countries today, and the loss of children is mentioned in several sagas, including *Egil's saga*, which notes that

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[240] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 207.
[241] Ibid, p. 208.
[242] Thorsson, Ö (ed.), 'Egil's saga', *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2000, p. 63.
[243] Ibid.

‘Skallagrim and Bera had many children, but the first ones all died’, and in *Fljótsdæla saga*, with Oddbjørg birthing four daughters, though ‘none of them survived childhood’.[244] If, as Jochens proposes, the fear of a child’s exposure caused mothers to remain emotionally detached from their children, then surely such logic applied also to the risk that a child might not reach adulthood before succumbing to illness or an accident. And even if a son in particular did survive infancy and childhood, the possibility remained that he would be swiftly killed in the pursuit of vengeance – either as the target of another man’s rage, or goaded to vengeance by his own female kin. In *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda*, Guðrún sends the sons borne of her third marriage, Sørli, Erp and Hamðir to avenge the death of their half-sister, Svanhild, when she is killed by another king. Though her sons warn her of their imminent deaths, claiming that she will need to ‘hold a funeral feast’ for them, she goads them anyway, scolding them for not being as ‘brave-hearted’ as her own brothers.[245] The likelihood that a son would die in battle and the anxiety this may have caused for mothers is exemplified in *Ljósvetninga saga (The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn)*, when Þorvardr’s wife tries to discourage her husband from sending their son into a vengeful battle, declaring ‘I won’t bear and raise another son if you give this one up to the sword’.[246]

Katherine Marie Olley additionally notes that while ‘children could be a source of security for their mothers and a route to power and influence … they could also be reminders of rape or a distasteful marriage while child-birth could threaten the mother’s very life’.[247] Of course, this does not mean that Old Norse mothers were incapable of forming loving bonds with their children. As Shannon Lewis-Simpson argues, ‘the few references to children in the

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[244] Thorsson, ‘Egil’s saga’, p. 51; Hreinsson, ‘The Saga of the People of Fljotsdal’, p. 380.
[245] Byock, p. 108; Orchard, p. 231.
[246] Hreinsson, V (ed.), ‘The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn’, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, Reykjavík, 1997, p. 239.
[247] Olley, K M, *Kinship in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, Boydell & Brewer, Cambridge, 2022, p. 114.

sources indicate that children *per se* had a low status, having a 'utilitarian function', either as a labour force or as a means of creating political alliances' but this does not mean that children were never 'loved, cared for, [or] deeply mourned by their parents when they died'.[248]

In the example from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, Jófríðr is unable to bring herself to expose her daughter, 'for I look upon the child with such love that I really have no heart to have it left out to die'.[249] In particular, there are more examples of mother-son bonds, like the love of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir for her son, Bolli: she 'was always pleased when he came to see her, talking of many things for a long time'.[250] The mother-daughter relationship is largely absent from the sagas, 'sometimes implied but infrequently depicted', and when it is present it is often ambivalent.[251] Perhaps, Olley suggests, this difference occurs because, 'unlike fathers for whom the son figured as a kind rival, mothers were unlikely to be threatened by their sons and … if a king had multiple wives … a mother and son would be natural allies against rival contenders to the throne'.[252] This being said, 'the son's value as an heir to his father and his potential position of power over his mother also made him a target of maternal aggression', as in Guðrún's case. That by killing her sons Guðrún severs Atli's bloodline is what renders her revenge as particularly horrifying, confirming the great patriarchal fear that 'the power to corrupt lineage is located in the maternal body'.[253] As Jochens argues, however, examples like that of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir 'represent a rare case in the Old Norse corpus of a devoted mother' in a body of writing that overall gives very little time to stories and experiences of motherhood.[254]

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[248] Lewis Simpson, S, *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, Brill, Boston, 2008, pp. 59, 61.
[249] Thorsson, 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue', p. 564.
[250] Thorsson, 'Laxdæla saga', p. 420.
[251] Olley, *Kinship in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, p. 127.
[252] Ibid, p. 117.
[253] McCracken, P, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1998, p. 134.
[254] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 202.

It is important to acknowledge that we cannot truly know the reasons for the lack of attention paid to maternal relationships in the sagas. This absence could 'reflect deficiency of mothers' feelings' within Old Norse culture, but it could also indicate an 'inability of women to articulate their emotions, or, equally plausible, the disinterest by male authors to include maternal expressions in their narratives'.[255] This disinterest might be benign, or it could reflect patriarchal anxieties about the mother, with the maternal body, despite its reproductive necessity, 'set up as paternity's foil' as a danger to its children.[256] Olley argues that, a woman's 'maternal function is characterised as inherently compromising' and so, when it is visible, it is often 'depicted as destabilising and dangerous, for her children and for others'.[257] The absence of the maternal therefore 'necessitates that the actual intrusion of the maternal body into a narrative be rendered violent and traumatic' and so 'when maternity makes its presence known [as in Guðrún's case] it is often with devastating effects'.[258] Paradoxically, we also cannot know for certain if in those rare cases where maternal bonds are emphasised, such emotions are authentic, or merely inclusions made by thirteenth century authors who wished to advance their own views of appropriate motherhood.

There are few examples of filicide – maternal or paternal – in the sagas. For Signy, who orders the deaths of her sons in *Völsunga saga*, there is no reaction – positive or negative – from her fellow characters, demonstrating that women involved in the deaths of their children were not unconditionally condemned. Signy's filicide is comparable to an example in *Jómsvíkinga* saga *(The Saga of the Jomsvikings)*, in which Earl Hákon sacrifices his young son, Erlingr, to the divine figure Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, to sway a battle in his favour. After Þorgerðr 'reject[s] all

[255] Jochens, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 203.
[256] Olley, *Kinship in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, p. 110.
[257] Ibid, p. 143.
[258] Ibid, p. 113.

the offers of great sacrifices which he made', he finally 'offered her his seven-year-old son called Erlingr, and she accepted him'.[260] Hákon expresses no remorse for killing his son, nor is he reprimanded by any other character, and the act is not referenced again. In both instances, Signy and Hákon are not the perpetrators of their sons' deaths, but instead order another to carry out the deed on their behalf. This aside, while paternal filicide is so often viewed differently to its maternal counterpart, in this instance both Signy and Hákon's actions seem to provoke the same lack of consequence; neither are reprimanded nor suffer any retributive justice, presenting a rare example in which mother and father are equalised, though it is unclear why. Both Signy *and* Guðrún use filicide to defend the honour of their natal families, yet Guðrún's case provokes a greater response from her fellow characters. After Atli discovers that his sons are murdered, he declares that Guðrún's 'monstrous deeds are unparalleled in the memories of men';[261] her vengeance is described as 'vile';[262] and in the *Edda* she is named 'terrifying lady'.[263] However, these negative reactions come only from the characters on whom vengeance is being exacted, and it is not explicitly stated what it is they are condemning her for: is it purely for her murderous actions, or more for the manner in which she has committed them? Is it because she physically enacts the killing herself, unlike Signy or Hákon? Is it because she violates the guest/host relationship by cooking the children, and makes Atli and his men complicit in the murder by tricking them into eating her sons' flesh?

The significance of cannibalism in the Old Norse context must also be considered. Olley argues that in Old Norse literature, 'the act of one person eating another can have many and varied meanings, dependent not just on the eater … but also on who is eaten, how, and

[260] Blake, N F (trans.), *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, London, 1962, p. 36.
[261] Byock, p. 104.
[262] Ibid, p. 107.
[263] Orchard, p. 214.

why'.[264] She divides the identity and purpose of the eaters into two categories: 'natural cannibalism', committed by 'giants who … do it for the mere sake of survival [as] an instinctive act which does not require any sort of knowledge: consequently they are uncivilised beasts'; and 'cultural cannibalism', committed by humans 'not because they need it for survival, but rather to become wiser, stronger, and the like' reinforcing 'their identity as civilised humans'.[265] If human cannibalism can be justified if it allows the eater to 'become wiser' then perhaps Guðrún's feeding of her sons to Atli can be viewed as 'cultural cannibalism' as it conveys a message (knowledge) – in this case, a warning: 'in forcing Atli to cannibalise his own lineage' Guðrún uses 'the horror of cannibalism to emphasise the perceived unnatural character of kin betrayal'.[266]

Even justified in this way, however, it cannot be said that maternal filicide, particularly in Guðrún's case, was entirely accepted or condemned by the Old Norse as is evidenced in the sagas. Guðrún's actions evince condemnation from other characters, but at the same time, she is praised in the saga, and exalted in others, as in *Gísla saga*, as a paragon of loyalty to one's natal family. Maternal filicide was not encouraged or celebrated in Old Norse literature; mothers were not so detached from their children that to murder them without reason was acceptable, nor were they so unemotional that to murder their children would be a task without its difficulties or regrets. However, Old Norse mothers were detached *enough* from their children that to murder them in pursuit of revenge was a viable option, if a final one, and it was acceptable if a woman sacrificed her children to vengeful ends and the preservation of honour. This idea is best reflected in *Völsunga saga* in the words spoken by Guðrún's own sons before she slits their throats: 'You may do with your children as you like … No one will hinder you,

[264] Olley, K M, 'Co-Presence and Consumption: Eating Kin(ship) In Old Norse, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol 120, no. 4, 2021, p. 491.
[265] Ibid, p. 24.
[266] Ibid, p. 499, 513.

but there will be shame for you in this act'.[267] To kill her children is Guðrún's right; no one can say that her actions are entirely wrong or unnecessary, but that does not mean that they are viewed as unconditionally positive, and to kill one's own children is still a shameful act. Returning to Clover's scale of masculinity, or rather, honour, the acceptance of Guðrún's actions – her ability to 'do with [her] children as [she] likes' – demonstrates that, if a choice between the two came about, Old Norse society privileged the masculine pursuit of honour over the maternal bond between mother and child.[268]

Though we cannot know for certain, it is likely that Old Norse women had a different perception than we do of motherhood and maternity, and that, often, it was aloof and unemotional. As Jochens concludes, 'the paucity of Old Norse evidence on motherhood, the frequency of callous attitudes … and the scarcity of acts of devotion … square with the conclusion reached by recent scholarship, that love and self-sacrifice (beyond the demands imposed by biology) are not universal and 'essential' features of maternal behaviour, rather, motherhood is a social construct varying with culture and time'.[269]

Interpreting Guðrún in the Twenty-First Century

To write my novel and tell Guðrún's story, I had to consider both Old Norse views of gender and monstrous femininty and those from today, where those views intersect, where they diverge, and which of these different ideas should be incorporated. In different eras, Guðrún can be both monstrous and revered: she is terrifyingly murderous and she is honourable; her boldness is masculine and her boldness is feminist. Today her bloody aggressions are more shocking, yet in an era of greater female empowerment, her assertiveness provokes approval and we sympathise with her oppression. For the Old Norse, Guðrún breaches the usual verbal

[267] Byock, p. 104.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Jochens, J, 'Old Norse Motherhood', p. 203.

limits of female engagement with physical revenge and violence, yet she rightly defends her family's honour when no man can. Guðrún occupies a liminal space, provoking admiration and sympathy, disgust and condemnation. Liminality characterises the abject – the monstrous – but as Rebecca Merkelbach asks, 'if a monster is lurking and there is no one to be threatened by it, is it a monster'?[270] Guðrún does not seem to perfectly fit the definition of monstrous, and that is because monstrosity itself does not have a fixed definition.

Weinstock discusses the inability to definitively define what is 'monstrous', and asks what such a definition depends upon: 'are monsters purely imaginary [?] … does monstrosity inhere in substantial deviation from established physical or behavioural norms [?] … are … human beings who engage in depraved acts monsters?'[271] The only murky definition he conjures echoes definitions of the abject: 'that which creates a sense of vertigo, that which calls into question ours (theirs, anyone's), epistemological world-view, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us … to acknowledge the failures of our system of categorisation'.[272] The reason that such definitions are difficult to determine is due to the constantly changing and evolving nature of monstrosity; the monsters of the twenty-first century are not the same as those of a century prior, nor will they be the same as those one hundred years from now. Even within the same time period, definitions of monstrosity differ culturally, so that one society's monsters will not be the same as another's. Michel Foucault emphasises monstrosity's subjective and transitory nature. In his lectures on abnormality in the nineteenth century, Foucault investigates 'the human monster', 'the individual to be corrected' and 'the masturbator' and examines how these conceptions of monstrosity are created by

[270] Merkelbach, R, 'The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Quaestio Insularis*, vol. 15, 2014, p. 23.
[271] Weinstock, p. 25.
[272] Ibid, p. 3.

defining irregularity against that which is regular.[273] He argues that definitions of monstrosity are ever-changing, emphasising the variability of what is considered 'normal' and 'abnormal' across time and culture, and demonstrates the instability of 'monstrosity' as a category. As Merkelbach argues, if an 'individual's status as monster is contingent on society's perception of said individual, this means that monstrosity is not as stable, fixed, or absolute a concept as scholarship has so far made it out to be'.[274]

The same can be said for perceptions of motherhood. While motherhood is determined in part by biological function, it is largely defined by social constructions of maternity that vary, like monstrosity, according to time and place. Shari L. Thurer argues that 'motherhood – the way we perform mothering – is culturally derived' as 'each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols'.[275] That word – 'perform' – returns us to Butler's theory of gender performativity, which can likewise be applied to motherhood. Just as a person's gender is representative of their actions and behaviour, so too is what we perceive to be 'good' or 'appropriate' mothering. Over time, these actions appear to represent a 'natural' order, but 'our particular idea of what constitutes a good mother is only that, an idea, not an eternal verity'.[276] 'The good mother', Thurer observes, 'is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology'.[277] Like monstrosity, we cannot ever truly define motherhood outside of its biological implications, and the performative form that motherhood takes in one culture might differ greatly from another. Old Norse women who may have remained more detached from their

[273] Foucault, M, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France: 1974-1975*, A I Davidson (ed.) and G Burchell (trans.), Picador, New York, 1975, pp. 107-108.
[274] Merkelbach, p. 23.
[275] Thurer, S L, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, Penguin, New York, 1994, p. xv.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.

children might be labelled 'bad' mothers in the twenty-first century as their standards do not match our own.

It is impossible for the twenty-first century reader to completely disengage from their modern morality; the majority of us do not exist in a world in which people acceptably and regularly commit murder to preserve honour. For Guðrún to kill her children, to us, is shameful, but this does not erase the cultural perception of her that existed centuries before. Hilary Mantel argues that 'a good novelist will have her characters operate within the ethical framework of their day – even if it shocks her readers', and we should not 'condescend to the people of the past, nor distort them into versions of ourselves'.[278] Readers look to historical fiction to show them worlds that differ from their own – that is the expectation – and sometimes these differences can be uncomfortable, challenging our own morals and beliefs. I do not have a definitive answer as to how we should perceive Guðrún or her actions, but that is because there *isn't* one – just as there is no conclusive definition of monstrosity or motherhood, and no one way that a woman should be. What I do know, however, is that history does not exist within a vacuum; contemporary writers who engage in the creative revision of tales of historical 'monstrous' women like Guðrún cannot rigidly adhere to one set of standards. We must consider the entire spectrum of perceptions that follow these women – both historical and contemporary – before we can truly decide how best to write about them.

[278] Mantel, H, 'The Iron Maiden', *The BBC Reith Lectures,* BBC Radio 4, London, 2017, 09:00-09:45, p. 5

CHAPTER TWO

Since ideas of monstrous femininity and motherhood change over time and place, authors of historical fiction who write about characters like Guðrún must reflect these changes in their work. Guðrún differs from other 'bad' women, since the society that produced her did not necessarily view her as such; rather it is later readers – in this case, Western readers in the twenty-first century – who are more likely to see Guðrún as bad. But if the Old Norse did not necessarily view Guðrún as 'monstrous' for murdering her children, does her story need feminist revision? To write *A Cup of Dark Wine*, I had to consider not only the historical context of Guðrún's story, but the potential morality of the twenty-first century reader – one that might differ on ideas of revenge, honour and 'appropriate' motherhood. As Mantel summarises, the real 'danger [writers of historical fiction] have to negotiate is not the dimpled coyness of the past – it is its obscenity', and the 'events and mentalities that, should you choose to describe them, would bring you to the borders of what your readers could bear'.[279] While I am aware of Old Norse social and cultural codes, the average reader today is not, and so to retell Guðrún's story completely unchanged could serve only to villainise her. As Esi Edugyan observes: 'if confronted … by the ghost of a Roman soldier, we would likely imbue him with our own notions of good and evil, rather than those of the old world to which he belonged'.[280] As I argue in Chapter One, Guðrún might represent a Western twenty-first century definition of the 'monstrous feminine', but her actions are deemed appropriate in her own era due to Old Norse codes of masculinity, honour and revenge, and their potentially different views of motherhood.

[279] Mantel, H, 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel On Dealing with History in Fiction', *The Guardian,* 2009, accessed 20 June 2022, < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker>
[280] Edugyan, E, *Out of the Sun,* Profile Books, London, 2022, p. 51.

As a writer of historical fiction, I must decide if one perspective matters more, and whether I should abide by the rules of the time in which Guðrún existed, or those that prevail now.

In the medieval world of the sagas, 'Guðrún's vengeance for her brothers [would] no doubt seem an unexampled heroic deed'.[281] The sagas demonstrate 'the horrific costs of maintaining and unyielding culture of honour', and therefore 'may, in many cases, seem merciless towards human life';[282] however, Old Norse society should not be viewed so simplistically as a culture that unconditionally condoned or 'valorise[d] indiscriminate violence', but one that possessed considerable anxiety around masculinity, and frequently praised any person, regardless of gender, who committed acts that reinforced its importance and protected its fragility.[283] Focusing specifically on Guðrún, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskji observes that

> to a modern man it might seem that Guðrún's vengeance is a piling up of monstrous crimes designed to horrify the hearers. But to interpret thus her vengeance would be, of course, to ignore the ethics of the society where this heroic legend and the lays based on it were popular.[284]

While it might seem strange to today's readers that Guðrún would avenge her brothers after they murdered her first husband and son, if we consider Old Norse codes of honour, then we have an explanation: for Old Norse women, if a choice came between her marital and natal families, the latter would prevail; 'since vengeance for a brother was duty, while vengeance

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[281] Clark, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 1.
[282] Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: Women of the Viking World*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2020, pp. 21.
[283] Ibid, p. 18; Cerbone, p. 254.
[284] Steblin-Kamenskij, M I, 'Valkyries and Heroes', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, vol. 97, 1982, p. 86.

upon a brother was contrary to duty, it was natural to take vengeance for brothers even if one had a grudge against them'.[285]

Of course, while many modern readers might disagree with Guðrún's actions, there are also instances in her story where they might offer her greater sympathy than the Old Norse. Western society today is generally more progressive when it comes to feminism and, more broadly, ideas of gender and how it is defined; though its readers might grimace at Guðrún's filicide, they might also be more likely than the Old Norse to sympathise with her plight as she is traded unwillingly into marriage and subjected to the choices and actions of the men who surround her. Additionally, Clover's theory of an Old Norse spectrum of masculinity aligns more with Western twenty-first century ideas of gender as fluid, rather than binary, though today that spectrum incorporates all genders, rather than maleness alone.

Michael Tanner discusses the conundrum readers face when confronted by ideas in fiction and art more broadly that contradict our moral code. While we are likely to 'overlook what we take to be factual mistakes', differences in opinion when it comes to questions of morality 'are quite another matter'.[286] Tanner disagrees with the notion that we should suspend our own morals when reading fiction: 'I judge characters by the moral standards I myself use in real life … and I don't change my mind if I learn that the author (and the society he was writing for) considered genocide … morally acceptable'.[287] I disagree with Tanner's assertion that one must rigidly stick to one's moral ideas even when new information (like historical context) comes to light, but I concede that it is often difficult not to do so. It is the duty of the historical novelist to 'impose order upon the chaos of the past, turning horror into narrative' and 'in doing so, one makes choices to change, manipulate or misrepresent, to a greater or

[285] Steblin-Kamenskij, p. 86.
[286] Tanner, M, 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality', in K. L. Walton & M. Tanner (eds.), *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 68, 1994, p. 27.
[287] Ibid, p. 37.

lesser extent'.[288] This tug of war between the author's allegiance to the past and present represents what Jerome de Groot refers to as the 'fundamental dissonance at the heart of historical fiction';[289] writers have 'a very active duty to history, but similarly, they have a political and moral duty to the present, through the choices they make in representing the past'.[290] When retelling Guðrún's story, I faced the conflict between these two duties. To erase Guðrún's actions would discredit the original saga and the Old Norse perspective, but to present her story unchanged to a twenty-first century audience could transform her into a caricature, a monstrous woman and mother.

The mutability of ideas of monstrous femininity and motherhood reflect the fact that notions of right and wrong are also highly changeable, and often varied even within the same time and place. This idea is embodied by the first-person plural chapters scattered within my novel. These 'we' chapters, whose voice echoes an omniscient Greek chorus, seek to represent the readers who judge Guðrún. Using these chapters, I have sought to make readers aware that they too are casting judgement upon her actions, and prompt deeper consideration of what that verdict might be and why. In adding this chorus to *A Cup of Dark Wine*, I attempt to navigate the morally grey space in the original saga and balance broad Old Norse and twenty-first century ideas of right and wrong as they pertain to Guðrún's story. The following discussion therefore addresses portrayals of historical women who might be considered monstrous to different degrees and for different reasons over time, and the considerations of the revisionist authors, like myself, who write about them.

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[288] de Groot, J, '''Who Would Want to Believe That, Except in the Service of the Bleakest Realism?': Historical Fiction and Ethics', *Integrity and Historical Research*, T Gibbons & E Sutherland (eds.), Routledge, New York, 2012, p. 22.
[289] Ibid, pp. 22-23.
[290] Ibid, p. 15.

A 'Feminist' Revision?: Stealing the Story Back

Roxane Gay argues that 'it is unlikely that there could ever be a consensus on what makes a novel a feminist novel', but that her definition would be

> … one that not only deals explicitly with the stories and thereby the lives of women; it is also a novel that illuminates some aspect of the female condition and/or offers some kind of imperative for change and/or makes a bold or unapologetic statement in the best interests of women.[294]

Feminist revisions like mine do just this. A form of feminist literary criticism, feminist revision soared into prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, 'with the rewritings of Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Sara Maitland, Michele Roberts, Emma Tennant, Jeanette Winterson, and Christa Wolf, to name just a few', but was pioneered by Adrienne Rich in her 1972 essay, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision'.[295] Though feminist revision was by no means an unknown concept at this time (as early as 1832, Mary Shelley had written the feminist verse drama *Prosperine*, based on Ovid's story of the abduction of Prosperine by Pluto and centring its female characters), Rich's essay defined feminist acts of revisionary reading and writing, creating a 'rallying cry for a broad variety of women rewriting the classics of Western literature'.[296] It decries male ignorance of the female perspective, as 'no male writer has written primarily or even largely for women', and calls for women to look to the past to reimagine it and create a better future for themselves.[297] As Rich argues, 're-vision – the act of looking

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[294] Gay, R, 'Theses on the Feminist Novel', *Dissent Magazine*, 2014, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/theses-on-the-feminist-novel>, accessed 20 October, 2022.
[295] Ibid, p. 393.
[296] Ibid, p. 391.
[297] Rich, A, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1972, p. 20.

back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.[298] It was in the 1970s, too, that French feminist critic Helene Cixous wrote her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', which similarly calls for women to 'write about women and bring women to writing', and coined the term *écriture féminine* (women's writing) to capture that call.[299] *Écriture féminine* is defined by its deviation from traditional male styles and subjects of writing. Cixous argues that writing has been historically governed by the phallus and its language, therefore excluding and othering women who lack the male appendage. By 'writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus', Cixous argues, women will be able to reclaim their sexuality and 'return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her' and in doing so invent their own language.[300] While Cixous's essay acts as a call to women to tell their stories now ('Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it'), it reinforces Rich's belief that we must 'liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her', so that 'the future [can] no longer be determined by the past'.[301]

A central aim of feminist revision is to interrogate the discourses that surround the female gender – discourses that, despite their origins in patriarchy, have been broadly viewed as natural. The women that we find historically in Western literature are not *real* women, but images created by men 'who exist only in relation to them'.[302] There is a deep irony in this, as Judith Fetterly identifies, as 'our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate … insist[ing] on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in

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[298] Rich, p. 18.
[299] Cixous, H, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', (trans. K Cohen and P Cohen), *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, p. 875.
[300] Ibid, pp. 881, 880.
[301] Ibid, pp. 876, 878, 875.
[302] Russ, J, To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1995, p. 81.

specifically male terms'.[303] When we dissect and seek to understand these images, we can create new ones that resist such narrow depictions of the female experience. As Rich argues, 'until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves', and once we do know them we can 'break [their] hold over us'.[304] The aim of feminist revision is not to create narratives that, however new, continue to constrict women by purporting to encompass the breadth of female experience. While it is all well and good to unite women against patriarchy, as Audre Lorde argues, criticising second-wave feminism for its lack of intersectionality, 'it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognise those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation'.[305] These revisions instead aim only to add to an ever-expanding corpus of feminist revisionist literature.

Rich broadly calls for the revision of stories of historical women in general, and while I examine a number of such works in Chapter Two, of particular relevance to my own novel is revisionist mythmaking, 'in which classical and biblical myths, folktales, and fairy tales are revised by female writers in order to reveal the previously hidden female presence within male-dominated mythologies'.[306] A decade after Rich, Alice Ostriker wrote 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', which encourages 'women writers [to] be … *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language' who steal back the words historically used for their oppression, and change their meaning so that they 'no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy' but as 'representations of what women find divine and demonic in

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[303] Fetterley, J, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Indiana University Press, London, 1978, p. xii.
[304] Rich, pp. 18, 19.
[305] Lorde, A, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference', *Sister Outsider*, United States of America, 1984, pp. 221, 222.
[306] Seamon, H, 'Revision', *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, E Kowaleski-Wallace (ed.), Taylor and Francis Group, New York, 1996, p. 492.

themselves'.[307] Myths, fairy tales and folklore are often dismissed as harmless due to their often fantastical, exaggerated nature, but these stories, which endure through generations, are repositories for a culture's most ancient and traditional beliefs, including those about gender. Rosalie H. Wax argues that 'myths simultaneously reflect and reinforce the deepest assumptions about how the world is and should be ordered and about the rewards and punishments that stem from appropriate and inappropriate behaviour'.[308] When told to children, these narratives reinforce ideas of appropriate gender – particularly the idea that a woman can only be an 'angel' or a 'monster' – and it is for this reason that their revision is so important. To retell these stories creates not only new consequences within the story itself, but in reality. As AnaLouise Keating contends, 'because mythic stories embody a culture's deep-seated, often unacknowledged (and therefore unquestioned) assumptions about human nature, revisionist mythmaking offers an important tool to effect transformation on multiple levels – ranging from our psychic lives to our social structures – and beyond'.[309]

In the years since Rich and Ostriker's essays were published, feminist revision through fiction has continued to flourish, with notable works including Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Maria Dhavana Headley's *The Mere Wife* (2018), Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021), Lauren Groff's *Matrix* (2021) and Lucy Holland's *Sistersong* (2021) to name only a few. This proliferation of retellings from the female perspective and their popularity can be seen largely as a triumph for feminists who believe in the elevation of excluded or diminished female voices; however, Plate cautions that the market's saturation with these stories changes their

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[307] Ostriker, A, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, pp. 69, 73.
[308] Wax, R H, 'The Process of Disenchantment: Magical and Disenchanted Moral Logic', *Magic, Fate and History: The Changing Ethos of the Vikings*, Coronado Press, 1969, p. 453.
[309] Keating, A, ''There is No Arcane Place for Return': Revisionist Mythmaking with a Difference', *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2012, p. 112.

purpose and impact, so that they sometimes exist less as forces for change and more as commodities that can be picked up and set down at will. Plate argues that 'the vogue for shopping for alternative pasts has direct consequences for the ways in which rewriting affects cultural memory', as revision becomes 'no longer a matter of revisiting the past in order to project new futures' but an act of 'scanning the assortment of possibilities, examining, touching, feeling, handling the goods on display … putting some of them in the trolley and others back on the shelf'.[310]

I acknowledge the merit of Plate's argument, particularly as the genre of feminist retellings is particularly saturated with one type of story – that is, tales of women from the Greek myths. This homogenising of fictional feminist revisions returns us to Lorde's criticisms of second-wave feminism for its lack of intersectionality, and gives credence to Plate's argument that in some cases such retellings have perhaps lost their initial purpose for change and exist more as easily marketable commodities. I believe that all feminist revisions, regardless of what corpus of myth they derive from, perform an important role in 'engag[ing] readers into contemplating differences'.[311] However, there is still a need for more diverse representations of women's stories – a need that is beginning to find an answer in novels like S. A. Chakraborty's *The City of Brass* (2017), Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and* Bone (2018), Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2019), Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022), and Sue Lynn Tan's *Daughter of the Moon Goddess* (2022).

Feminist author Rosalind Coward argues that 'over recent years we have been witness to a strange phenomenon, the emergence of what we may loosely call the feminist novel': novels written by and about women.[312] But, she continues, it is 'just not possible to say that women-

[310] Plate, p. 401; Bauman, Z, 'Liquid Modernity', Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 73.
[311] Plate, p. 408.
[312] Coward, p. 53.

centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism'.[313] After all, 'the Mills and Boon romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for and are all about women, yet nothing could be further from the aims of feminism', and so it would be 'misguided … to mark a book of interest to feminism [purely] because of the centrality it attributes to women's experience'.[314] While I agree with Coward's argument, when it comes to feminist revisionist mythmaking, this focus on the female perspective is often an important technique. Merve Altin writes that 'from the ancient times onwards, the female voice has been silenced and alienated. Man becomes the subject, speaking persona and woman becomes the complementary other'.[315] *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda*, like the majority of the sagas, are dominated by the tales and perspectives of men; women often appear only as 'victim or pawn of heroic society', with 'a great number of women remain[ing] nameless … only mentioned as wives, consorts, and female relatives'.[316] Guðrún is unique as, unlike these backgrounded women, she is afforded a greater stage. In the *Edda*, she is the subject of four poems: *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta (The First Song of Guðrún), Guðrúnarkviða in forna (The Ancient Song of Guðrún), Guðrúnarkviða in thridja (The Third Song of Guðrún)* and *Guðrúnarhvöt (Guðrún's Inciting)*. Each of these poems is dedicated to her character; however, only one of these (*Guðrúnarkviða in forna*) uses the first-person perspective, while the others, written in the third person, still impose a narrator's interjections and judgements onto her. In these third person poems, she is labelled a 'terrifying lady', 'harmful wife', and 'hard-hearted'.[317] However, as I noted in Chapter One, these examples represent the very few potentially negative descriptions of Guðrún present in

[313] Ibid, p. 57.
[314] Ibid, p. 57, 58.
[315] Altin, M, 'Aeaea is Revisited: Revisionist Mythmaking Strategies in Madeline Miller's *Circe*', *Ankara University: The Journal of the Faculty of Languages and History-Geography*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2020, p. 148
[316] Clark, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 182; Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender', p. 239.
[317] Orchard, pp. 214, 233, 231.

Old Norse literature, and they are coupled with more positive images of her as a 'remarkable', 'wise' and 'strong'.[318] Overall, in all of the literature in which she features, Guðrún is the subject of ambivalence. Additionally, in their short form these poems do not offer as detailed an account as longform fiction, and so the image of Guðrún that is produced is skeletal.

My choice to retell Guðrún's story – whole and linear and through her eyes, centring the female perspective – does not merely offer a woman's perspective, but achieves it through an act of redirection – or what Rachel DuPlessis labels 'displacement and delegitimation'.[319] The act of displacement is a 'shifting of attention to the other side of the story', achieved by centralizing Guðrún's perspective, while 'delegitimation … affects the whole known tale and represents a critique even unto sequences and priorities of narrative'.[320] By centering her perspective, the authority and viewpoint of the likely male narrators of the original sagas is transferred to Guðrún, and she is therefore given the power to tell her own story. These acts – displacement and delegitimation – are particularly important for writers seeking to reframe stories of 'monstrous' women, as they afford them the opportunity to construct their own reputations without the interference and opinions of men.

However, it is not only this redirection towards women's stories that defines feminist revisionism. Returning to Gay's proposition, it is in particular how they 'illuminate some aspect of the female condition and/or offer some kind of imperative for change and/or make a bold or unapologetic statement in the interests of women'.[321] In my own novel, I illuminate several of these aspects: how men dominate myth and legend, with women only their unimportant sidekicks ('His name would live on, a blazing fire that … could never be forgotten. And I only

[318] Orchard, pp. 223, 225, 226.
[319] Arnds, P, 'Translating a Greek Myth: Christa Wolf's *Medea* in a Contemporary Context', *Neophilologus*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2001, p. 418.
[320] Ibid.
[321]Gay, accessed 20 October, 2022.

his wife');[322] how these myths cast women in strange and twisted lights ('I knew how those peddlers of stories loved to stamp women down, to twist them and leave them withered and pale');[323] the violence often suffered by women at the hands of men ('there were stories of women who'd … been knocked down to the ground and bundled into the bushes where they were raped and torn open and left to bleed');[324] and the general male prejudice confronted by women throughout time ('he didn't care much for girls. The weaker sex, one might say. Really, if men could spring babies into being all on their own, the world would be a far better place').[325] Furthermore, I demonstrate how patriarchal structures affected Old Norse women specifically, and how they influenced Guðrún's actions: in particular, the heroic honour code, as Guðrún suffers the revenges waged by the men in her life; and the institution of arranged marriage – as Guðrún's mother Grimhild remarks: 'unhappiness in marriage was the lot of many women – most, in fact'.[326]

When revising the stories of monstrous women like Guðrún, this consideration of patriarchal structures can counter both historical and current discourses around female violence, which almost always 'seem to be less about justice or the act in question than about what it is to be a woman – motherly, feminine, wifely, ladylike, and so forth'[327] – something I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

In her novel *The Witch's Heart*, Genevieve Gornichec retells the story of Angrboða, the infamous giantess wife of the trickster god, Loki. Known as the 'mother of monsters', she births the wolf Fenrir, the serpent Jormungand, and Hel, the ruler of the dead – the former two

[322] *A Cup of Dark Wine*, p. 40.
[323] Ibid, p. 131.
[324] Ibid, p. 106.
[325] Ibid, p. 100.
[326] *A Cup of Dark Wine*, p. 73.
[327] Neroni, p. 60.

fated to fight against the gods at Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse. Aside from this vague maternal role, however, we know nothing of Angrboða*'s* past or present. In her novel, Gornichec confronts this absence and creates a new narrative, in which Angrboða is a (mostly) harmless witch who falls in love with the unreliable Loki, and whose love for her 'monstrous' children is fierce and deep. Surely few medieval readers who consumed the original sagas would question Angrboða*'s* one-dimensional, 'wicked' persona: in Sturluson's *Prose Edda* she is only mentioned to say that 'Loki had other children. With Angrboða [Sorrow Bringer], an ogress who lived in Giant Land', and that, after the birth of her strange children, 'all of the gods became aware that harm was on the way, first because of the mother's nature'.[328] And in the *Edda*, it is said only that 'Loki sired the wolf [Fenrir] on Strife-bidder'.[329] Every description of Angrboda is a negative one. In Gornichec's novel, however, the giantess's reputation is recast, imagining her as a mother who loves her children in spite of their difference, rather than a monster who only bore more like herself. And Gornichec not only redeems Angrboda as a caring mother, but expands and gives greater time to her almost non-existent story. These brief and sparse mentions of Angrboða offered Gornichec an almost blank slate, but retelling Guðrún's story is not so simple a task. I cannot so easily discredit some defamatory label and absolve her of guilt. Instead, I must drill beyond what has been written (or left unwritten) and use Guðrún's own perspective to reveal her motivations.

There are two novels that informed my approach to retelling the story of a woman who has done bad things. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) presents a fictionalized retelling of the real-life killings of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery by two household servants, Grace Marks and James McDermott. It follows their aftermath, as Grace recounts her earlier life and the events that led to the murders. In reality, the extent to which Grace participated in

[328] Sturluson, S, *The Prose Edda*, Penguin, London, 2005, p. 39.
[329] Orchard, p. 255.

the slayings is not entirely clear – whether she served as a scapegoat, perpetrator, or someone uneasily in between – and Atwood does not settle this ambiguity. But 'this particular story does not depend on what Grace did or didn't do, but rather on how she wants to be seen'.[330] While the act committed might remain the same, our knowledge of preceding events may change how we perceive Grace's culpability, and even cause us to question how suitable the binary of right or wrong, guilt or innocence, is. This is the same in Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013), a speculative biography that fictionalises the story of Agnes Magnúsdottir after she was sentenced to death for the murders of Nathan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson in nineteenth century Iceland. As with *Alias Grace*, Kent's novel does not so much dispute Agnes's culpability as invite readers to understand Agnes herself. In an interview with Felicity Wood, Kent says that what initially drew her to Agnes's story was a desire to 'see what circumstances could have placed Agnes in a position that perhaps left her with no choice but to commit such a terrible crime'.[331] Kent perfectly articulates my own reasons for choosing to retell Guðrún's story. After reading the two-dimensional woman in the original sagas, it is easy to remember only Guðrún's actions, and not the acts that preceded them. As in Atwood and Kent's novels, my retelling of Guðrún's story does not prove to readers that the original story was wrong, or that Guðrún was innocent. Rather, it breaks away from this good and evil binary by creating a Guðrún who is nuanced and multi-dimensional, and offers a new voice that allows us to bear witness to that complexity. Ostriker writes: 'a major theme in feminist theory … has been the demand that women writers be, in Claudine Hermann's phrase, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language'.[332] To retell Guðrún's story, I have stolen it away from the (most likely) male

[330] Getz, D, 'Why the Real Murder Case Behind *Alias Grace* Will Keep You Up at Night', *Bustle*, 2017, < https://www.bustle.com/p/whether-grace-is-guilty-not-in-alias-grace-isnt-even-the-biggest-mystery-of-the-story-3201078>, accessed 9 November, 2021.
[331] Wood, F, 'Hannah Kent: Iceland's Past', *The Bookseller*, issue 5583, 2013, p. 22
[332] Ostriker, p. 69

narrators who recorded it and replanted it firmly in territory that seeks to specifically consider the female condition, and this act of thievery – of taking back the story – is feminist.

Tackling Feminism in the Historical Novel

Readers might be surprised to find a quote in the *Edda* that foreshadows later feminist thought: when Atli taunts Guðrún after murdering her brothers, she proclaims that 'men's overbearing kills women's choice'.[333] These words are a far cry from a conscious, fully-fleshed stream of feminist thought – a kind that did not exist in the thirteenth century, when Guðrún's story was likely recorded. When characters view the world so differently, it can be difficult for writers to explore contemporary ideas like feminism in historical fiction.

In *Sistersong* (2021), Lucy Holland retells the seventeenth century folk ballad 'The Twa Sisters', drawing on the poem to tell the tale of three sisters in sixth-century Britain, living in anticipation of a Saxon invasion. Holland quickly reveals that one of these sisters, Keyne (or Constantine), is transmasculine, a realisation that sparks a number of confrontations with other characters regarding the 'proper' relationship to gender. Holland's intention to discuss gender in the Middle Ages through this particular lens is exciting in a literary community that is only recently becoming more open to and accepting of trans stories. However, there are moments in *Sistersong* that fail to realistically weave this discussion into this long-ago era. In particular, the reactions of some characters to Constantine's transmasculinity were too far removed from the consciousness of a religious, sixth-century community. After some initial backlash to Constantine's desire to dress in 'male' clothing, and participate in more traditionally masculine activities, many of the characters seem to accept Constantine's gender identity too easily. During the Beltane festivities, Constantine dances with a girl, Gwen, who flees from him when she discovers he is not biologically male. Later, however, Gwen apologises for running away,

[333] Orchard, p. 225.

and when Constantine confesses that he is a man, Gwen is immediately understanding, only saying 'Then I think you are very brave'.[334] When Constantine's sister, Sinne, eyes off the weapon he holds and says, 'I always knew you were different', Constantine replies, 'And how does that make *you* feel?'[335] Sinne's response, for a sixth-century woman, is unexpectedly accepting: 'I'm getting used to the idea'.[336] And later, after Constantine has aided his father, the King, in battle against the Saxons, the King names Constantine as his successor: 'All my life you have shunned me and stripped me of identity and voice,' Constantine says, to which the King replies, 'I am sorry … that I must be brought to the edge of ruin before I can see what matters'.[337]

For me, the quick acceptance of Constantine's transmasculinity in *Sistersong* does not work within the story as it does not reflect the likely views of sixth-century European peoples. However, this does not mean that Holland's novel does not represent a worthwhile example of historical fiction, as historical accuracy is not necessarily the only indicator of a historical novel's worth, particularly if such accuracy is not the author's sole purpose. In an interview with Penny Young, Holland notes that in writing *Sistersong* she hoped to offer greater visibility to transgender peoples and remind cisgender people 'that being transgender is not a modern concept, but is as old as humanity'.[338] If Holland's aim was to write a transgender character into history, offering a transgender perspective for the twenty-first century reader to consider (just as I have offered a female one) then she has succeeded. My opinion of Holland's novel also prompts a greater discussion of the difference between accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction. While accuracy reflects facts that are recognised as true, authenticity 'refers

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[334] Holland, L, *Sistersong* [Ebook], Macmillan, Camden, 2021, p. 374.
[335] Ibid, p. 396.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid, p. 485.
[338] Young, P, 'Just Three Questions with Lucy Holland, Author of *Sistersong*', *Penny Grace Young*, 2021, accessed 1 August 2022, < https://www.pennygraceyoung.com/post/just-three-questions-with-lucy-holland-author-of-sistersong>

to the experience of consuming an historical text and the audience's impression of whether it captures the past, even if this is at odds with available evidence'.[339] My criticisms of the quick acceptance of Constantine are valid, but only insofar as they reflect my view that they are inauthentic. As Laura Saxton argues, 'interpretations of authenticity in historical fiction are subjective', and so while 'one reader may interpret a text as capturing a sense of authenticity', other readers 'may not feel that a text captures their understanding of the past'.[340] My definition of authenticity as it pertains to *Sistersong* will likely differ from that of other readers, but each of these views are valid. Furthermore, accuracy does not seem to be as great a concern for readers of historical fiction as it once was.

Postmodern historians do not argue that the past existed; rather, they ask, 'how can we know the past today – and what can we know of it?'[341] In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale argues that 'classic' historical fiction (the historical fiction traditionally most concerned with accuracy) is constrained in three ways: the first is that 'persons, events, specific objects and so on' and the 'properties and actions attributed to them' must not 'contradict the 'official' historical record';[342] second, 'just as historical figures may not behave in ways that contradict the 'official' record, so the entire material culture' must not contradict it either;[343] and finally, 'the logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality'.[344] From this perspective, McHale continues,

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[339] Saxton, L, 'A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2020, p. 128.
[340] Ibid, p. 130-131.
[341] Hutcheon, L, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction,* Routledge, London, 1988, p. 92.
[342] McHale, B, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen Inc., London, 1987, p. 87.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Ibid, p. 88.

> … inventing apocryphal or fantastic or deliberately anachronistic versions of history is a betrayal of that record. This would be unassailably true, if only we could be sure that the historical record reliably captured the experience of human beings who really suffered and enacted history.[345]

Unlike the writer of 'classical' historical fiction, the postmodern historical fiction writer acknowledges that this is 'the last thing we can be sure of'.[346] The result, Lubomír Doležel argues, 'is the creation of a richer, more varied, often more exciting past' that reminds readers 'that the past of the world as he or she knows it is only one of many possible pasts … [a]nd the postmodern writer has the daring imagination to write them into existence'. [347]

And with the emergence of the postmodern historical fiction writer has come the rise of the postmodern historical fiction reader:

> No longer discouraged by the question of historical accuracy and attention to detail which fascinated more conservative critics and authors, contemporary readers are able to suspend their disbelief, and seem unconcerned as to whether the narratives they consume are factual or fictional.[348]

As the historical philosopher Frank Ankersmit best argues, 'the time has come that we should *think* about the past, rather than *investigate* it', and it is this that Holland and authors like her,

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[345] McHale, p. 96.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Doležel, L, 'Postmodern Historical Fiction' in Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010, p. 88.

[348] Cooper & Short, p. 5.

less concerned with accuracy and more concerned with investigating and challenging the 'dominant social narrative', seek to achieve.[349]

In another example, Madeline Miller explores contemporary issues in her novel *Circe* by weaving subtle moments of feminist thought throughout the story. 'As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep,' Circe comments;[350] and, 'It is a common saying that women are delicate creatures, flowers, eggs, anything that may be crushed in a moment's carelessness. If I had ever believed it, I no longer did'.[351] These comments are mere observations, allusions to a sense of injustice, without attempting to delve into unrealistic feminist discussion. They are clues, not designed to be debated between characters, but left to spark thought in the reader. In these revisions the characters need not be completely triumphant and do not need to include explicit and lengthy discussions of gender in order to count as feminist revisions. In *Circe*, feminism can be found in Circe's reasons for transforming Odysseus's men into pigs, rather than taking only a man's word for it; in *The Witch's Heart*, it is also to hear Angrboða's version of events; in my own creative work, it is to ponder *why* a woman might kill her children, rather than simply labelling her as monstrous for doing so; and in all of these, it is to bring to light the patriarchal structures that influence these women's lives. The 'feminism' in these feminist revisions is achieved not by articulating theory through the mouths of characters who could not have done so, but by bringing their perspectives and experiences to the reader's attention. Whether the version of events that a woman presents is agreed or disagreed with is less the point; it is the opportunity and the right to tell that version that truly matters.

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[349] Ankersmit, F, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', *History and Theory*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1989, p. 152; Young, < https://www.pennygraceyoung.com/post/just-three-questions-with-lucy-holland-author-of-sistersong>
[350] Miller, M, *Circe*, Bloomsbury, London, 2018, p. 181
[351] Miller, p. 274.

Staying True to the Source Material

Considering the changes I have made to the original saga in my retelling, I must ask how important it is for revisionist mythmakers to remain true to the original plot presented in their source material. The answer to this question might first depend on whether the character/s being scrutinized are drawn from myth or reality. In novels like *Alias Grace* and *Burial Rites* the authors revise tales of real historical women – but revisiting these stories entails significant ethical considerations: 'as the subjects of these novels are unable to give their consent, representing them is a fraught act' and 'can potentially harm the posthumous legacy of their vulnerable subjects, by playing a role in turning their interior lives and the punishment enacted on their bodies to cultural memory in vivid detail, reinforcing the very structures the novel seeks to disrupt'.[352] Retelling Guðrún's story is different because she exists only as a figure of myth; though her character might be rooted in the life of a real historical woman or even several women, her unique story, as recounted in the *Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, is mythical, rather than biographical. However, it could be argued that revisionist writers should not adhere any less strictly to myth than to reality. When revising tales of well-known characters, whose stories are ingrained in a culture's psyche, they are raised to the status of real-life figures, and the handling of their stories becomes almost as fraught.

For many critics of historical biofiction, there is 'an assumption that biographical and/or historical accuracy should be the basis for determining [its] quality'.[353] Irving Stone summarises this critique: 'allegedly [historical biofiction] mines biography without regard for verities, strains history through the author's personality, reshapes that history to fit novel form, oversimplifies, prevents the reader from separating fact from fiction, chooses only those subjects which allow for a lively sale, violates the privacy of people long dead, and makes

[352] van Luyn, A, '(In)famous Subjects: Representing Women's Criminality and Violence in Historical Biofictions', *New Writing*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2019, pp. 67-68.
[353] Lackey, M, *Biofiction: An Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2021, p. 81.

characters the victim of plot'.[354] These criticisms pose valid questions for those revising stories of real-life figures, but they also apply to mythical retellings, to figures like Guðrún, Medea, or Circe – figures ingrained so deeply in popular culture and cultural memory that they seem to have once lived. Though I believe we owe some allegiance to the original myths, I do not believe we owe them the same accuracy as we do flesh and blood characters like Grace Marks or Agnes Magnúsdottir – and it is impossible to know whether these legends, often passed down orally, or recorded numerous times by different authors, offer us the 'truth' in the first place.

As Jeanette King observes, 'since historians cannot use the actual past as a standard for historical accounts, but have to rely on someone's narrative … history can only ever be contested versions of the past'.[355] Each person who presents their own account inevitably infuses it with their own biases: 'what contemporary historical fiction now demonstrates more clearly than ever is an acute awareness of this fact that history, by its very nature, is always already fictional, and that it is always subject to bias'.[356] Bias in myth and historical narrative is one of the ultimate considerations for those writing feminist revisions; the very reason that we seek to tell the story from the female side is so that the prejudices that prevented her story from being fully told in the first place can be, finally, peeled away. Whenever we consider a woman's story, we must 'acknowledge the contested nature of narratives surrounding her, as it is she who has been manipulated by male-authored and/or patriarchal accounts of history'.[357]

After I made the decision to alter the cannibalism in Guðrún's story (deciding that Atli would only consume his sons' blood and not their hearts) I found myself contemplating a

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[354] Stone, I, in Lackey, M, *Biofiction: An Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2021, p. 79.
[355] King, J in Cooper, K and Short, E, 'Introduction: Histories and Heroines: The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction', *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction,* K Cooper and E Short (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012, p. 5
[356] Cooper & Short, p. 5.
[357] Ibid.

particular quote from Miller's *Circe*: 'Later, years later, I would hear a song made of our meeting … I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy'.[358] The boy who sings the song that Circe hears tells a different story of the meeting between Circe and Odysseus to the one that Miller's Circe herself recounts – a story that has been warped so that the female subject and her role becomes something different. When I considered Guðrún's story, I asked myself what changes might have been made by teller after teller to the original tale. Each teller adds their own layer of perception and language, and as these layers accumulate, a story can change over centuries. Who is to say, I thought, that Guðrún *didn't* only feed Atli their sons' blood? Could this simple fact not have been exaggerated over time so that this act became more gruesome, more shocking and therefore, more entertaining?

What I have written is a work of fiction. I do not claim that my version of Guðrún's story is the defining account of her (arguably fictional) life, because, though I have followed the original sagas relatively closely, those stories do not offer every detail, and I have filled those holes with my imagination. But since 'fantasy [is] a necessary tool in reconstructing and revising the historical record', it would be foolish to claim that any of these accounts – of real or mythical figures, all long dead – can exist separate from fantasy.[359] In these instances, where gaps must be bridged, revisionist mythmakers must ask the question: what if? 'These what-if questions signal an expansive vision of the past that is constituted as much by what might have happened as by what we can prove happened', and this fluidity is what is particularly unique about myth.[360] Myth, rooted in the imagination rather than reality, is ever-evolving, reflecting the person who chooses to retell it. It is for this reason that it is able to endure, because those

[358] Miller, p. 181
[359] Micir, M, 'The Impossible Miss Woolf: Kate Atkinson and the Feminist Modernist Historical Novel', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 4, p. 523.
[360] Ibid.

who choose to read and retell these stories may draw from them what they choose, and impose their own ideas upon them to give them new life, again and again.

When we consider the question of how important it is for revisionist mythmakers to remain true to the original plot presented in their source material, Marie Cardinal has an excellent response:

> Truth is not the least important here, Medea is a myth. Besides the truth about Medea cannot ever be known, even admitting that there may be one. Let's speak about reality rather than truth. For all the Medeas are true. They all contain the truth of those who tell them; that is what is interesting in the study of myths. Each interpretation is significant for a period, for an idea. These fables say more about the evolution of humanity than most historical documents.[361]

In Guðrún's case, they perhaps also say something about the evolution of monstrosity. My novel reflects yet another layer of perception – another society's views of feminine monstrosity and monstrous motherhood. Both *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda* present one version of Guðrún's story, while my novel presents another, and no one version is the 'truer' one. As Hodgkin argues, 'in historical fiction as in history we have to be alert to the possibility of other ways of being; the truth of historical fiction is to be measured imaginatively rather than literally'.[362] There is no truth in myth; the only truth it possesses is whatever meaning can be gleaned from each teller who tells it.

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[361] Cardinal M in van Zyl Smit, B, 'Medea the Feminist', *Acta Classica*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2002, pp. 101-122.
[362] Hodgkin, p. 26.

Sympathising with 'Bad' Women

The greatest challenge I encountered in revising Guðrún's story was striking a balance in representations of guilt and innocence. Readers are undoubtedly familiar with the 'bad' protagonist – the anti-hero: from the narcissistic Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) to investment banker and serial killer, Patrick Bateman, in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Their crimes are motivated by narcissistic boredom and sadistic urges respectively, but, despite their deplorable actions, readers remain drawn to these characters. In the case of the 'bad' woman, however, such intrigue is almost never enough. There are exceptions to this: Eva Khatchadourian in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), Amy Dunne in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), Villanelle in Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* (2014). Often, however, readers must sympathise with or pity the 'bad' woman, for whatever reason – their redemption or tolerance depends on the revelation of some sensitivity that harkens back to their inherently gentle femininity. While 'bad' women, like 'bad' men, might be 'transgressors of the law', they are also transgressors of 'the taboos of gender behaviour'.[363] Hilary Neroni agrees: 'in contrast to male violence and masculinity, female violence doesn't fit conveniently into our ideas of the feminine, and, because of this, it has a disruptive and traumatic impact'.[364] With such prejudices stacked against them, it can be difficult for writers to demonstrate that certain 'bad' women are deserving of more nuanced consideration.

For Gornichec, the challenge of redeeming Angrboða was perhaps not so enormous; the witch's reputation rested on no evidence beyond an inflammatory label, and so her history was ripe for revision; 'they will know you only as my wife and the mother of monsters', Loki

[363] Berrington & Honkatukia, p. 58
[364] Neroni, p. 59.

scolds Angrboða in a fit of rage, and he is correct.[365] That a woman can be demonised by so little perhaps represents an even greater injustice, but such a lack of evidence allowed Gornichec great freedom, with little to contradict whatever story she chose to tell. In *The Witch's Heart*, Angrboða is guilty of nothing greater than falling in love (foolishly, perhaps) with the unreliable Loki, to whom she bears three children, each more unusual than the last. Though she may literally be a 'mother of monsters' she herself is not a 'monstrous mother'.[366] Instead, she is closer to society's idealised maternal figure: devoted and fiercely protective of her 'babies'.[367] Gornichec's retelling leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that Angrboða was unfairly maligned, a victim of the gods' power and of her love for one of them.

It is easier to retell the tale of the maligned woman – the woman who bears no guilt – than of the woman who has truly transgressed. In her novel, *Medea. Stimmen* (1996), Christa Wolf offers one solution: erasure. Her text reimagines the story of the Greek Medea, who is betrayed by her husband, Jason (thief of the Golden Fleece), when he abandons her to wed another king's daughter, and so she vengefully murders their children before fleeing Corinth for Athens. In Wolf's retelling, however, it is not Medea who kills her children, but a violent mob. By erasing Medea's culpability, she absolves Medea of her guilt. Unlike Guðrún, whose filicide seems to have been broadly understood and even lauded by Old Norse society, Medea's monstrousness is enshrined in the words of Euripides' play. Jason attempts to wound her with insults: 'detestable beyond all other women, hateful to heaven, to me, to all mankind' and 'I loathe you, unclean wretch, child murderer'.[368] While Gudrun also receives her share of insults from her husband, Atli, these are countered by the narrator's redemptive descriptions of her as

[365] Gornichec, G, *The Witch's Heart* [Ebook], Penguin Random House, New York, 2021, p. 277.
[366] Ibid, p. 346.
[367] Ibid.
[368] Euripides, pp. 86, 90.

'remarkable', 'wise' and 'strong'.[369] The slurs in the aftermath of Medea's filicide are numerous and the judgment cast by her fellow characters, and by the narrating chorus itself is clear: Medea is a monster. Ancient Greek attitudes towards motherhood differed to those of the Old Norse. As discussed in Chapter One, motherhood was not upheld by the Old Norse as a defining aspect of femininity, nor were maternal bonds given particular attention or importance. In Ancient Greece, however, motherhood was revered, serving as 'the main role' for women and one to aspire to, as it was 'widely recognised that motherhood could bestow honour on Greek … women', for to 'have borne children and raised them well was considered a virtue, if not a necessity'.[370]

Euripides' myth indicates two motivations for Medea's actions: the first is revenge, and specifically the unbearable hurt she knows such a loss will bring her husband; 'her own pain at their loss is exactly what makes it possible for her to kill them because she knows the pain it will cause Jason and the knowledge it will bring him to'.[371] A similar motivation can be ascribed to Guðrún: though she perhaps did not love her children as Medea did hers, she still understands the devastation her actions will wreak. By forcing her husband to cannibalise his sons, Guðrún succeeds in her desire to 'bestow some profound dishonour' and 'bring a grievous shame upon [him]'.[372] In Old Norse-Icelandic literature, 'courage, ambition, fealty, and largess' were key components of honour, and avoiding shame was the 'basic motivation' that drove men's actions:[373] 'men avoided evil deeds mainly to escape public disgrace or

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[369] Orchard, pp. 223, 225, 226.
[370] Morillo, S R, 'Childhood and Motherhood in Ancient Greece: An Iconographic Look', M S Romero and R M C Lopez (eds.), *Motherhood and Infancies in the Mediterranean Antiquity*, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2018, p. 137; Petersen, L H & Salzman-Mitchell P (eds.), 'Introduction: The Public and Private Faces of Mothering and Motherhood in Classical Antiquity', *Mothering & Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2012, p. 4.
[371] Luschnig, C A E, 'Medea and her Children', *Granddaughter of the Sun: A Study of Euripides'* Medea', BRILL, Leiden, 2007, p. 96.
[372] Byock, p. 104.
[373] Jones, p. 13.

disapproval'.[374] The strong cultural importance of maintaining honour and avoiding shame is best summarised in *Beowulf* – an Old English poem that reflects a similar attitude towards honour as the Old Norse: 'for a noble man, death is better than a shameful life'.[375] By tricking her husband into simultaneously consuming his own children while destroying his lineage, Guðrún wreaks havoc, causing not only great sorrow for Atli, but incredible shame. It is the ultimate revenge.

Medea's second motivation is one of mercy; as the Corinthian mob threatens to descend upon them, she says: 'I'll kill my children now, at once, then flee this land, for if I linger, hands less kind will bring them far more crudely to their deaths'.[376] Medea believes that by killing the children she spares them from a worse fate, and so her actions are, in part, borne from love. Similarly, before Guðrún murders her sons, she says to them: 'I've long wanted to cure you of old age'.[377] These words may reflect Old Norse attitudes about death and a preference for one that is valiant and youthful than of old age, but they might also share the sentiment conveyed by Medea. Though Guðrún's words are not present in my own retelling, I have still included my interpretation of them: Guðrún laments the similarities between her sons and their father, both in appearance and temperament – a resemblance so great that one day, when she finds they have tortured and killed a small bird, she is overwhelmed, first with rage, then with revulsion. 'I looked down at the mound of snow and my wet red hands,' she says, 'and the one thin thread, fine as hair, that tethered me to my sons, finally broke'.[378] As P. E. Easterling writes, 'Men are their sons, and are brought up, as children, by them and among them'.[379] In this twisted way, perhaps, Guðrún's actions are also merciful: if her sons will grow to become

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[374] Jones, p. 13.
[375] Ibid.
[376] Euripides, p. 81.
[377] Orchard, p. 226.
[378] *A Cup of Dark Wine*, p. 230.
[379] Easterling, P E, 'Women in Tragic Space', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1987, p. 15.

as cruel as their father, then is it not better that their lives are cut short? Erasing Guðrún's actions completely, as Wolf does Medea's, presents an easy solution that absolves Guðrún, and removes an opportunity for a more nuanced discussion of violent women and mothers. By erasing Guðrún's actions completely, she would be reduced to a one-dimensional being, fitting far more easily into misogynist binaries of good and bad; it is her violent actions that invite a discussion of women as beings as complex as men.

The Guðrún presented in both *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda* lacks the rich emotional interior frequently found in the protagonists of contemporary novels. According to Sif Rikhardsdottir, 'the Icelandic sagas are notorious for their lack of emotional display' and 'the same can be said to apply to many medieval Icelandic genres' including the *fornaldarsogur*.[380] 'This does not imply', Rikhardsdottir continues, 'that the sagas are void of feelings – quite the opposite in fact, as they often describe dramatic events and the efforts of characters to come to terms with these events. Yet the objective narrative style in the sagas as a rule avoids emotive declarations or vivid … exhibitions of internal emotions'.[381] When Sigurd is slain Guðrún cannot bring herself to cry, though the women who comfort her offer their saddest tales in an effort to encourage her tears: 'each of them told their own great grief, the bitterest they'd had to bear … yet Guðrún was unable to weep'.[382] The narrator ostracizes Guðrún's performance of grief from that of others, stating that 'she didn't howl or beat her hands or keen like other women', and describes her 'harshness of heart'.[383] Guðrún does not perform her grief in the appropriate 'feminine' way. Does her 'hard-hearted[ness]' suggest to readers that her love for Sigurd was not so great?[384] Do her dry eyes signify a coldness, a lack of emotion to be

[380] Rikhardsdottir, S, 'Emotive Subjectivity Egils saga Skallagrímssonar', *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts*, S Rikhardsdottir and C Larrington (eds.), Boydell & Brewer, Cambridge, 2017, p. 57.
[381] Rikhardsdottir, p. 57.
[382] Orchard, p. 179.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Ibid.

disapproved of? The contemporary reader, however, might easily deduce from these passages that, upon discovering Sigurd's corpse, Guðrún enters a state of shock; in this light, Guðrún's devastation is not lacking, but is in fact so great that she *cannot* weep.

Thomas Mann's formula of 'myth plus psychology' is first articulated in his letters to the Hungarian anthropologist, Karl Kerenyi: 'myth … includes history, legend, and all literary traditions of the past … [while] psychology refers to the analysis of the reality of the psycho-social world'.[385] Myth is often vague and presents unrealistic scenarios and emotional reactions. Following her murder of their sons, Atli does not detain Guðrún, but continues to share a bed with her. 'You'll be burnt on a pyre, but first beaten with rocks', Atli tells her, yet the two continue to bicker, 'sending out hostile thoughts [and] hurling harsh words back and forth', as if Guðrún has done little more than scold their sons.[386] Instead of replicating these unrealistic scenes, I grounded my retelling in reality, considering how these characters might have truly behaved. By applying our modern psychological knowledge, we can 'revive myth by giving it vibrant immediacy', and allow 'the world of myth [to] intermingle with the modern world'.[387] Mann's formula influenced changes I made to Guðrún's original story, and particularly informed my reconstruction of two crucial elements of the tale's climax. In *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda*, Guðrún's murder of her sons is premeditated and executed with cold decisiveness. In my own retelling, her act occurs in a disassociated state, an emotional frenzy triggered by her sons taunting as their father would. In the original sagas, immediately after their murder, Guðrún presents her sons' corpses to their father, disguised as food and drink for him to consume. Again, in my own retelling I have altered the narrative, so that Guðrún does not offer Atli the boys' flesh to eat, but only their blood to drink. Perhaps in part

[385] Sasani, S and Sadeghi, Z, ''Myth plus Psychology' in *Death in Venice*', *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, p. 22.
[386] Orchard, p. 227.
[387] Sasani and Sadeghi, pp. 25, 31.

I made these changes to lessen the impact of Guðrún's crimes for modern readers, but I have grounded each deviation from the original tale in my own interpretation and imagining of Guðrún's physical and emotional reality.

In the first example of Guðrún's hot- rather than cold-blooded murder, I have considered what her mental state may realistically have been. Of course, it is not impossible that she may have made a calculated decision to execute her sons, but it is equally possible that her actions resulted from a downward mental spiral. I have found little scholarly work that considers mental illness in the Norse sagas, with the closest articles discussing only the 'berserker' figure: 'considered indomitable warriors, the paragons of the battlefield', they 'fought with abandon, consumed by a bloodlust that could blur the distinction between friend or foe'.[388] Michael Heath and Max Cooper examine the psychology of these seemingly unconquerable figures, debating the likelihood of possible roots in homicidal psychopathy, intermittent explosive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Today, mental illness is (mostly) recognised as a true and valid phenomenon, but in these ancient Norse texts there is little to no deep discussion of the characters' inner psychological worlds.

In retelling her story, I questioned what emotional consequences Guðrún's traumas may have had on her mental state; having seen her husband, son, and brothers slaughtered, having been subjected to emotional and physical abuse by her husband, and having borne, as a consequence of frequent rape, two unwanted sons, it is the shortest of leaps to wonder whether Guðrún could have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder or post-partum depression. The day she murdered her sons could very well have been the day that, after all she had endured, her mental state finally unravelled, with devastating consequences.

[388] Heath, M and M Cooper, 'Wearing the Wolf Skin: Psychiatry and the Phenomenon of the Berserker in Medieval Scandinavia', *History of Psychology*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2021, p. 309.

In the second example, Guðrún kills her two sons and prepares their corpses for her husband's consumption: she roasts their hearts 'on a spit', transforms their skulls into 'ale-cups' and blends Atli's drink with their blood.[389] When I wrote this scene, however, I encountered several logistical problems: where does Guðrún murder the children? To dismember and break down two human bodies would be a time-consuming and difficult task– does no one stumble across her as she commits the deed? How and where does she prepare the sons' hearts as food and does she do so alone? Does she dispose of the bodies afterwards and how? Despite these questions, I did not wish to entirely eliminate the cannibalisation of the children since it is such a pivotal moment in the story. Instead, I compromised by omitting Guðrún's removal of the hearts and skulls, but kept the consumption of blood. Guðrún is more easily able to gather her sons' blood and discreetly blend it with Atli's wine, and I felt that the act of his consuming their blood still symbolically fulfilled Guðrún's final wish to disgrace Atli, and therefore continued to honour the original saga.

Through these alterations I have struck a balance that achieves my aim to neither erase Guðrún's culturally appropriate actions, nor condemn her in the twenty-first century reader's eyes as monstrous. The reader is allowed to recoil at Guðrún's behaviour, but is also given the opportunity in the aftermath to reflect upon what brought Guðrún to commit such violence. The changes I have made do not alter the story entirely, as Wolf's do, but instead seek to honour the original plot while offering a modern perspective through a twenty-first century interpretation of events.

Let Bad Women be Bad: A Case for the Villainous Woman in Fiction

One question that myself and other scholars have pondered is *why* we should write about violent women at all, and whether such portrayals provide any benefits for an already

[389] Orchard, p. 227.

historically vilified gender. 'Is it not, today – well, somehow unfeminist – to depict a woman behaving badly?'[390] Margaret Atwood discusses the role and status of 'bad' women in literature: 'isn't bad behaviour supposed to be the monopoly of men? Isn't that what we are expected – in defiance of real life – to somehow believe?'[391] Certainly it is true that the 'bad' woman, and in particular, the violent one, has and continues to present certain challenges for feminist thinkers. O'Neill and Seal argue that violent women 'present quagmires for feminists, not least because … violence is frequently conceptualised as anti-feminist';[392] in particular, violent women become problematic as they tend to reinforce patriarchal fears of women, 'serv[ing[to uphold, rather than subvert, the dominant social order'.[393]

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar were among the first scholars to argue that the female angel/monster dichotomy perpetuated by Western patriarchy has influenced women's writing. 'The ideal woman,' they argue, 'that male authors dream of generating is always an angel', possessing 'virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability [and] politeness'.[394] In contrast, the monster, 'threaten[s] to replace her angelic sister [and] embodies intransigent female autonomy'.[395] Perhaps one of the most dominant of these misogynist fears is that of the 'crazy' woman: deemed irrational and unpredictable, 'women were and are still often associated with emotional and mental instability'.[396] As discussed in the previous section, having considered the likely psychological

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[390] Atwood, M, 'Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', *The Margaret Atwood Information Site*, 2004, <http://www.owtoad.com/home.html>, accessed 6 September, 2021.
[391] Ibid.
[392] O'Neill & Seal, p. 48.
[393] Ibid, p. 49.
[394] Gilbert, S M & S Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979, pp. 100, 105.
[395] Ibid, p. 112.
[396] Clark, 'Undermining and Engendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-Feminism in the 'Poetic Edda'', p. 190.

outcomes of Guðrún's traumatic experiences, I have woven throughout my novel the possibility of her suffering from post-partum depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder, but the flipside that I must also consider is how such a depiction of Guðrún as mentally unstable might reinforce this misogynist 'archetype of the psychotic/possessed woman who kills her child', and perpetuate the patriarchal notion that 'personality disorders, loss of self-control, hysteria: all are maladies deriving solely from the feminine genital apparatus'.[397]

The 'mad' woman is one of two categories into which violent women are typically separated: 'mad' or 'bad'. Women who are deemed 'mad' are generally 'characterised as morally 'pure'', having 'conformed to traditional gender roles and notions of femininity', and their 'crimes are considered irrational, uncontrollable acts, usually the direct result of mental illness'.[398] The second category – the 'bad' woman, who cannot be so easily be rehabilitated – is the woman Atwood refers to above. Like the 'crazy' woman, the presence of the 'bad' woman in literature creates fears such characters will only serve to perpetuate misogynist stereotypes: 'certainly it is no wonder that the bitch was ostracised from the pages of the fledgling feminist fiction of the early years of second-wave feminism', as feminists sought to offer only 'positive images' of women.[399] O'Neill and Seal argue that 'feminist discomfort with fictional portrayals of violent women arises from the concern that these representations often serve to uphold, rather than subvert, the dominant social order'.[400] But while a proliferation of bad female characters can be seen as detrimental to women, writing women

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[397] Porter, N T, 'From Alpha to Omega Women: Ancient Greek Origins and Contemporary Re-visions', *Violent Women in Contemporary Theatres*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2017, p. 89; Brulé, P, *Women on Ancient Greece*, trans. A Nevill, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003, p. 96.
[398] Meyer, C, Oberman, M, White, K & Rone, M, *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the Prom Mom*, New York University Press, New York, 2001, p. 94.
[399] Aguiar, S A, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2001, p. 2.
[400] O'Neill & Seal, p. 49.

who never deviate can present its own pitfalls, as these female characters fall into that other equally problematic archetype: the damsel in distress, the helpless woman who possesses no agency and relies on the decisions of men. If the only representations of women in literature and popular culture are those who never deviate from patriarchal standards, then this aids patriarchy's preference for a narrower standard of acceptable behaviour. Rather than promoting the important but often forgotten fact that women, like men, contain both good and bad traits, black and white representations perpetuate the 'Madonna vs. Medusa' binary. When women are judged, they are frequently cast binarily as good or bad, but the 'creation of a bad female character doesn't mean that women should lose the vote – if bad male characters meant that for men, all men would be disenfranchised immediately'.[401] Bad women thus create a conundrum for feminists: 'on the one hand the[ir] activeness and vitality … can be attractive to feminist[s]; on the other such portrayals may seem to undermine femininist aims'.[402]

In more recent years, there has been a newfound interest in telling stories of 'monstrous' women, or rather, women who do bad things. Of particular popularity are contemporary stories of 'nasty' or 'unlikeable' women or women going 'wild': recent novels like Emma Jane Unsworth's *Animals* (2014), Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen* (2015), Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019), Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020), or Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021). Our most well-known stories and the villainous women who inhabit them are being re-examined and retold: the film *Maleficent* (2014) offers a sympathetic backstory for the fairy who curses Sleeping Beauty; in his novel *Wicked* (1995), Gregory Maguire provides a tragic origin story for the Wicked Witch of the West; and Disney's *Villains* book series retells several well-known tales from the perspectives of their female antagonists.

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[401] Atwood, 'Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', <http://www.owtoad.com/home.html>
[402] O'Neill & Seal, p. 49.

The abject is frequently tied to bodily functions – to the 'wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus' that the body 'eject[s]', and the female body, which menstruates and lactates, is always closer to this abject state.[403] If the leaky female body is abject, then these stories, in which women are not sanitised but unruly, gross, desirous and loud, reclaim that abjection and 'force the reader to contemplate that which is uncomfortable to face … disorient[ing] the reader and encourag[ing] us to actively interact with the text in order to ascribe meaning to the place where it collapses'.[404]

Characters like Guðrún, Circe, and Angrboða have become a focus as authors seek to retell the stories of these historical 'bad' women, not always to exonerate, but to delve into their complex inner worlds and the good and bad inside them. Anbara Salam writes: ''unlikeable male character' is not a phrase I've come across often … but male interiority, in all its complexity, is culturally considered universally fascinating, deserving of an audience, even at its most mundane or scatological'.[405] The same cannot be said of women, whose acceptable flaws are so few, and 'anything outside of those tramlines is aberrant, repugnant', evoking a kind of 'moral squeamishness'.[406]

The obvious benefits of writing about these women have already been discussed: retelling stories of violent and misjudged women with a reframed story, a second chance in which they might break free from male-centric storytelling and be better judged according to more than just their gender. Sarah Appleton Aguiar applauds the rise in retellings of this kind:

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[403] Creed, 'The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis', p. 11.
[404] Pentony, S, 'How Kristeva's Theory of Abjection Works in Relation to the Fairy Tale and Post Colonial Novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*', *Deep South*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1996. https://www.otago.ac.nz/deepsouth/vol2no3/pentony.html#:~:text=Her%20use%20of%20the%20abject,whole%20new%20realm%20of%20possibilities.
[405] Salam, A, 'The Overdue Rise of the Unlikeable Female Protagonist', *Penguin*, 2020, accessed 21 June 2022, < https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/june/anbara-salam-belladonna-rise-of-unlikeable-female-protagonists.html>
[406] Ibid.

‘in the newly retold narratives that recount the story through the consciousness of the bitch figure, the feminist author strives to grant motivations for the behaviour of the bitch and to ‘correct’ the previous assumptions that her actions are inhuman and thus lacking cause’.[407] As discussed earlier, the driving motivation behind retelling these stories is often not to absolve a woman of guilt, but to analyse her motivations and dissect discourses surrounding her behaviour; to ‘invite an understanding of women’s crimes as products of complex power structures, draw attention to the subjective nature of constructions of the past, and give agency to voices silenced in the archives’.[408]

To analyse female violence and dissect the stories and attitudes surrounding a particular incident can ‘allow a critique of social and economic power structures that regulate women’s behaviour and enact punishment on their bodies while at the same time rendering women powerless’, and allow us to further identify and examine the limitations set by the patriarchy.[409] By analysing women who have carried out ‘unfeminine’ acts, the boundaries and definition of appropriate femininity and its ‘regulat[ion] according to certain discourses such as maternity, domesticity, sexuality, pathology, and respectability’ can be brought to light.[410] In Guðrún’s case, readers can clearly see her crime, but also just as clearly see how patriarchal structures – the institution of arranged marriage, the heroic code – influenced her actions.

I agree with Atwood that ‘bad female characters can … act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face’.[411] Feminists have abhorred the fairy tale princess for her one dimensionality, interesting only insofar as she relates to the men around her. As Atwood writes, ‘women have more depth to them than virtue.

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[407] Aguiar, p. 81-82.
[408] van Luyn, p. 67.
[409] Ibid, p. 70.
[410] O’Neill & Seal, pp. 42-43.
[411] Atwood, ‘Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature’, <http://www.owtoad.com/home.html>

They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many dimensionality be given literary expression?'[412] But if we wish to fight for women to be more than 'pretty faces', then it makes sense that this means we must accept what within them is ugly, what is darker and less perfect than we might prefer to pretend. While characters like Gornichec's Angrboða – a woman maligned – should certainly be redeemed, it is not necessarily these women who Atwood finds so important, but those like Guðrún, who exhibit moments of real badness. The solution is not to choose whether, as feminist writers (and all writers), we should cast women in literature as good or bad, but to step away from this binary entirely. Before female authors can write about women, they must first eliminate the archetypes that stand before them and 'examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her'.[413] We must create an array of women who reflect elements of both good and bad, and, most importantly, represent what it is to be not merely a woman, but human.

[412] Atwood, 'Spotty Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature', <http://www.owtoad.com/home.html>
[413] Gilbert & Gubar, p. 94.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is an attempt to write and think around monstrosity and what its mutability over time, place and culture means for feminist revisionist authors retelling stories of 'monstrous' historical women. Its findings are not definitive, but intended to open new discussions of how we consider the layers of perception and truth that surround these women, and what we choose to keep and discard as we retell their stories. By investigating Guðrún Gjukadottir of the Old Norse *Volsunga saga* and *The Elder Edda*, this thesis scrutinises the angel/monster binary that women have and continue to fall victim to, and how, as writers, we navigate this binary in representing the 'monstrous' woman in historical fiction, particularly when definitions of angel and monster are not fixed.

The villainous archetype of the murderous mother (or murderous stepmother) has existed throughout the history of Western literature, and particularly within the canon of its fairy tales, folklore and mythology. Guðrún differs to these women, as it is evident that Old Norse society likely possessed views of gender, and therefore of monstrous femininity, that differed from other early medieval European societies. Therefore, the response to Guðrún's filicide is generally not one of condemnation, but of respect – a respect demonstrated not only in the original text, but in the responses of both twenty-first century scholars and of the very few twenty-first century authors who have included her in their own revisions.

Both Clover and Jochens describe unique Old Norse relationships to gender and motherhood respectively. Clover emphasises the importance of power and honour over a person's sex, while Jochens argues that ideas of motherhood constituted a more detached relationship, reflecting the circumstances of medieval and Old Norse cultural life. I have considered these arguments as demonstrations of differences in Old Norse attitudes towards gender and motherhood, and beyond this to differences in perceptions of the abject, and

therefore of monstrous-femininity. This in turn, I argue, offers an explanation for the nature of the response to Guðrún's behaviour by Old Norse saga authors and poets.

So how does the twenty-first century writer incorporate Old Norse morality and its perceptions of monstrous-femininity into a novel written for twenty-first century readers? To tackle a modern concern like feminism in historical fiction can be difficult without engaging in anachronisms. However, both Miller's *Circe* and Gornichec's *The Witch's Heart* demonstrate that addressing feminist concerns within the historical novel can be as simple as offering a female perspective where there is none. *A Cup of Dark Wine* itself provides an example of this feminist act of redirection.

Holland's *Sistersong* provides a touchstone for a discussion of the difference between accuracy and authenticity, whereby authenticity reflects the idea that every person has a different and subjective interpretation of the past. Within historical fiction, the twenty-first century reader is less concerned with complete accuracy, than with an author's ability to capture what, in their mind, is an authentic version of the past. As Cooper and Short describe, 'what contemporary historical fiction now demonstrates more clearly than ever is an acute awareness of this fact that history, by its very nature, is always already fictional, and that it is always subject to bias'.[414] By considering ideas of authenticity, this thesis argues that perceptions of historical women are not singular and definitive but exist in layers of truth, lending credibility to multiple and varied interpretations of Guðrún over the centuries. Therefore, my own deviations from and additions to the original saga in *A Cup of Dark Wine* can be seen as reflecting one of many authentic interpretations of Guðrún's story.

Atwood argues that we must write about bad women and allow them to be bad, so that they becomes less an abjection, and something that is normal, in the same way that men are able to be good and/or bad. According to Sara Martin, 'women are trying to catch up but they

[414] Cooper & Short, p. 5.

– we – are trying to simultaneously expose woman's monstrous side and to make it endearing to the on-looker. That is, we are taking no risks, maybe for fear of questioning the 'respectable' image of woman built by feminism'.[415] However, in her novel *Medea: Stimmen,* Wolf erases Medea's filicide in an act that I believe assists patriarchal actors attempting to situate women within a good/bad binary. Rather than allowing Medea to commit her act and for readers to grapple with the gradation within her of good and bad, she is relegated back to a more one-dimensional realm, and the opportunity for more nuanced conversation surrounding violent women and mothers is extinguished. In *A Cup of Dark Wine* I have attempted to evoke sympathy for Guðrún and diminish the horror of her actions; in this sense, perhaps I have not depicted her 'badness' in the way Atwood champions. What stands, however, is that I have not shied away from including her 'bad' behaviour. In my depiction of Guðrún I have stepped away from the good/bad binary altogether, and allowed her to be, as all real life women are, a complex mixture of both.

In writing my novel, I have given Guðrún a voice – the most comprehensive, I would argue, that she has ever had. I have written her in the first-person, so that we might see through her eyes, and as a woman writing a woman, have redirected her story away from the likely male narrators who originally recorded it.

Still, I have honoured these first recordings – the ones found in *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda* – and therefore the Old Norse social and cultural context. I have not shied away from Guðrún's violence, as it could be argued that Wolf in her representation of Medea, and Heartfield in her own portrayal of Guðrún, have. By sticking closely to the events in the original sagas, I have not only created what I believe to be a historically authentic retelling of her story, but have created space for nuanced thought about female monstrosity and violent mothers.

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[415] Martin, S, 'The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 8, no. 2, 1999, p. 208.

This being said, while I am a scholar of the Old Norse, I am also a person living in the twenty-first century, and have imbued Guðrún's story with my modern perspectives on emotion. I have fleshed out with feeling the sparse writing style of the original sagas, which did not elevate a character's emotional interior and experience as today's authors do, including a consideration of issues less familiar to the Old Norse, like mental health.

I have created a Guðrún who does not ask to be condoned or condemned, who is entirely good or entirely bad. Like Kent and Atwood in their respective novels, *A Cup of Dark Wine*, is less about asking readers to reach a verdict, than it is about the events leading to it, the person at its core, and the creation of an awareness in the reader of how they create the judgements they cast. This idea is best embodied by the chorus chapters in my novel, which do not exist to direct attention away from Guðrún's voice, but rather to embody this tension.

In writing this novel, I have tried to create a Guðrún who cannot be so easily stuffed into a box. A Guðrún who embodies the liminal, the uncategorisable, the grey, rather than the black and white. A Guðrún who the reader can love and/or hate, agree and/or disagree with, and that that dissonance is okay.

Creed, writes that 'the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in an attempt to banish the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman'.[416] In the same way, the feminist revisionist novel, when retelling stories of monstrous women, attempts to redraw woman and the abject maternal body anew. It believes that the key to removing the femininity from 'monstrous femininity' (in the same way that there is no 'monstrous masculinity', only monstrousness) is to face it head on – to let bad women be bad, as Atwood suggests. Outside of the scope of this thesis, therefore, but a consideration for future feminist revisionists, is to ask whether the idea of redemption remains a useful one. I know of few feminist myth revisions

[416] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, p. 16.

(mine included) that do not attempt in some way to redeem their female characters, and so I ask: what would happen if we abandoned redemption altogether? What would result if we took the 'nasty' women narrative of authors like Moshfegh and Awad, and applied it to myth revisionism? What would Guðrún's story look like if it did not consider a twenty-first century morality at all? To dissolve the ties between monstrosity and femininity is a crucial step in breaking down masculine/feminine binaries altogether, and perhaps, paradoxically, the way to banish monstrous femininity is to write more women who are monstrous.

Future projects might also consider more deeply queerness in relation to Old Norse ideas of gender. For many in Western (and particularly Christian) society, the gender binary is appropriate simply because it reflects the ways in which gender has supposedly always been conducted. So what would happen if we turned to history, like Holland, and began to pick apart the truthfulness of this assumption? Though it is certainly not perfect – being based on a scale of masculinity for one thing – Clover's Old Norse one gender model might provide us with another framework for thinking about gender, as well as how we relate to the history of gender and our ideas of what is 'traditional' and/or 'natural' and what is merely, as Butler puts it, 'performative'.

It is also my hope that feminist revision might soon broaden more comprehensively into other non-Western cultures, where standards of what constitutes monstrous femininity may differ as they did for the Old Norse. Currently, the majority of feminist revisions available focus on Western historical stories, though there are some novels, like S. A. Chakraborty's *The City of Brass*, and Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Gods of Jade and Shadow*, that are reaching beyond these bounds. While I don't discount that Norse mythology falls beneath the Western umbrella, because its concepts of gender, and specifically of femininity and monstrous femininity, differ from its Western counterparts, it is my hope that *A Cup of Dark Wine* offers a step in the right

direction for examining more diverse ideas of femininity throughout time and culture, adding layers of complexity to our conception of 'woman'.

At its core, this thesis argues for this rejection of binaries. Feminity does not exist within such a dichotomy, nor does monstrosity; ideas of both concepts change over time and culture, and even within individuals. We must not pick only one perspective, but rather consider the range of interpretations of such women across time, in all their differences, in order to write about them most effectively. Therefore, this thesis does not present a definitive conclusion as to how authors should write about women like Guðrún, but instead demonstrates that there *is* no one way. There is no right or wrong version of femininity, of monstrous femininity, of monstrous motherhood, and there is no one version of Guðrún. There is only the Guðrún presented in *Völsunga saga* and the *Edda*. There is Gíslason's Guðrún, Hartsuyker's Guðrún, and Heartfield's Guðrún.

This one is mine.

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