

Three Poems for SixFold, Fall 2014

1. Complete History of Appalachian Coal Country

Dead tree on a dead hill, an evil land and old
beyond reckoning. Grown men once burrowed here,
white worms in black loam, harvesting stones to burn.
Coal is organic matter, subjected to pressure
and time. It lies in seams and sheets and beds beneath
the good earth; last breath of a dying forest,
frozen in stone. Ancient surface of the world, flooded,
rotted, crushed to peat and lignite. Left to ripen.
Overtopped by new growth and forgotten
for a hundred million years. Until we found a need.

Wake, coal. Spend some time as fire, and then as air.
Spend some time as water, too: Hydraulic Fractured,
into oil-rainbow creeks, slicked by poison and alive
with bluebottle flies feasting on blind-born crawdads
and belly-up channel-cats. The new extraction process
is a messy one but cheaper by a mile than chipping
inch by inch into the belly of the earth. And the land
must die, anyway, to make new coal. All we are and see
wants only time to make fine burning for our children's
children, lost (as they are like to be) in darkness and in cold.

2. The Big Man of Bastrop County

Someone fancy is dead today, I saw the funeral procession winding up a state road, snarling traffic with the spectacle of stranger-grief. Who were you, big man of Bastrop County? What unbroken chain of triumphs, what great deeds and fine friends, made you into a man who even dead can yet command an escort of five motorcycle cops, two fire-trucks, two paddy-wagons, and an ambulance? You've made a parking lot of mourning between Elgin and Alum Creek; a whole town came out, headlights at noon inching toward the grave.

Somewhere in Red Rock your thwarted twin has followed you in death, throat chocked shut with an apricot stone. This man you've never met (though he knows you), failed all your failures for you, and forfeited to you his joys. He drank your measure of misery at the banquet before birth, just as you drained his cup of joy. All unwillingly, and he blames you to the last, clawing the air in final frustrated rage; the phone drops from his hand. You've won again, Big Man. The roads are closed; the ambulance otherwise engaged.

3. Complete History of the Nordic Peoples

First dark, then cold, then lowing cows
that licked away the salt of not-thing to reveal
a human head. And that was Bori, the first man,
virgin-born to hot breath and the smell of cream.
Or so it's said.

And then there was an endless interval of elves
and warring giants and huldafolk, when
warriors wore the skins of wolves and bears as easily
as their own skins. And there were great men
in those days.

But they were few, and gave way to kings, who ruled
ragged bands of frightened folk, fighting in the snow
for scraps. Clumsy, numb-fingered, stumbling through
red slush, the scrum of screams and flashing axes. In this way,
the land was tamed.

Then they looked to the Sea and took the whale-road
in dragon-boats to harrow the islands and win riches,
gold and slaves and the man-God Christ, who hung like Odin
on a tree, but lived. They ate and drank of him and lost their taste
for any other blood.

The gods were burnt at Uppsala, upended statues' wooden eyes
turned to the heavens in resignation. In that diminished time,
the Dane-Law lost, famine in the Green-Land and everywhere
failure and herring and the plague. Then Martin Luther, Nazi gold,
and universal health.