

CALLING THE POEM

by
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Robin Helweg-Larsen is British-born but Bahamian-raised. After Jamaican primary school, then Stowe in England and some unsuccessful months at the University of Dundee, his education came from years of hitchhiking on five continents and working all over the place. His poetry has mostly been published in the UK (*Snakeskin*, *Ambit*, etc), but also in the US, Canada, Australia and India. He now lives with his wife Eliza in his hometown of Governor's Harbour on Eleuthera.

INVOCATION

O Odin,
Living outside me or within,
Share your mead of poetry you earned in night's delight,
Spare me from the mead you shitted out in flight and fright.
By Thought and Memory, I swear
A poem needs your care,
For poems... magic poems... are nothing,
and come from your nowhere...

A poem comes in flurries:
A phrase that catches, sticks,
A rhyme that matches
With some thought that dog-worries,
And a verse that clicks.

AWARENESS OF THE MOOD

The possibility before the poem, the mood,
Is premonition more than vision: loath
To admit, like the repressed and skewed
Response on seeing god-like demon, or young witch...
Not even genitals' light twitch,
But mere awareness of that energy, potential thrust,
That tightness in the chest,
A heart-tight feeling of both loss and lust.
Then don't ignore that feeling, for you're blessed:
A poem is lurking in your undergrowth.

SELF-BELIEF

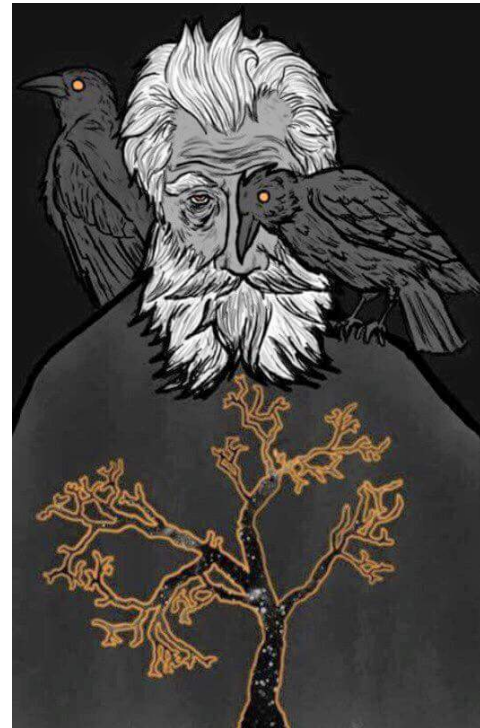
Can you handle the wild poem? Can you tame the thing, or kill?
The certainty, uncertainty, of writing as a skill,
The being told to "find your voice", the crawling like an ant
Across the skin of Literature, that giant, to implant
Some token of your individuality, some pin
To jab into the giant's vast and ant-infested skin,
To make your mark by scrawling words, tattoos, to claim a win...
You can't succeed alone against such odds!
But there are gods...

OF GODS

What are the gods? Are they true? Fake? Wild? Tame?
They are in you, and/or you are in them.
They are the joy that apes feel in the storm -
They are the hearth that keeps the caveman warm -
Societies the shaman's dreams create -
They are Fertility, Love, Hunting, War,
And tools, pots, crops that clutch the god-robe hem,
And Trickster's tales and lies, the Path, the Door...
Conflicting aspects flesh the human frame,
Demand obedience to some inner Law
To which no individual can conform.
Changing and arguing, they made Rome great
Before the MonoFossilizers came.

OF MUSES

When thoughts, fantastic dreams, bright images,
Invade you from inside without relief
- Thoughts that aren't yours, nor come from the outside -
Then, heedless of the real world's scimmages,
You can't ignore, forget, refute, refuse.
Forces not you, that ride you and bestride,
When viewed with self-delusion, self-belief,
Must therefore be some spirit, god, or muse.



OF SACRIFICE

You learn to call, to pray, and to invoke
The gods with incense, roasting meat and smoke,
The smell drawing the gods like flies.
They like being honored, they like gifts and sacrifice.
How do you gift a god of writing? Write!
Write when you have a thought, write day, write night.
How do you sacrifice? Accept this hardship:
You give up all activities
(Regardless of your duties, your proclivities,
Relationships) – for bardship,
Because you don't have time for them and writing.
Downgrade all love, work, striving, fighting -
For you must write.
You read, read, write, recite,
Write and rewrite,
Reread and rerecite.
(The modes you read impact the words you write,
Impact the thoughts you have, and how they're phrased.
Read novels, you'll have thoughts in prose: straight, trite;
Read verse, your thoughts will ramble, rhyme, be crazed.)
How bargain with the gods? Well, you can offer.
Can you demand? Well, no; you can't.
Do they play fair? Take care with what they proffer;
You're never sure if it's a loan or grant.
How long will favors last? While you're in favor;
A god or goddess owns you like a slaver.

And while for them you still produce,
Still honor them, you still have use.
So keep on writing until you collapse,
And they'll continue liking you. Perhaps.

THE TIGER

That wild white wind that whips the world away –
The darkness deep and dread in dazzling day –
The light and dark that fuse with furious force –
The leaping tiger that gives no recourse –
Acknowledge, fear, that lurking tiger's rage,
The terrifying sense of spring-taut powers,
Menacing, tail-tip twitching while it glowers,
Lethal both to ignore or to engage.
Acknowledge it, succumb: you've been rewarded.
And now produce – because the debt's recorded.

SACRIFICING YOURSELF

To bring that tiger you're desiring, fearing,
You place your own self in the clearing,
Tied to a tree, chained at the throat,
A monk who hopes, hopeless and lowly,
A tethered goat,
You bleat your prayers, and wait.
Your offer ("offer" is an offering,
An animal, coin, weapon, ring...
Even yourself, for you are an oblate...
"Offer" is "sacrifice", "sacrifice" is "make holy")
Your offer, your self-sacrifice, is still
"Take me, and pay me what you will."

Begging for the orgasmic lightning bolt
That gods blast blindly towards heath and holt,
You make yourself into a lightning rod
On some high tower to catch those blasts of god.

THE POEM COMES

Do you see the tigerish poem, or is it seeing you?
Sensing you, sizing up your form...
(You know that lovely feeling, warm,
When you're stared at by somebody you like...
How creepy though, if someone you dislike...)
Perhaps it will ring true,
Perhaps the lines
Will just ring hollow...
But having offered yourself up like some bonbon,
Prayed at the shrines
Of lares and penates, Mercury, Apollo,
Ganesh and Odin, Legbas Atibon,
Liminal gods of paths and gates,
And stories, lies, poetry and fates,
You have no right, nor no ability,
To choose between rough trade or some civility;
Stared at by god or demon, grand or scum,
You've whored yourself to gods. Take what may come.

INSPIRATION 1

When the god's in you, it's not like you're fucked,
Not top or bottom, neither back or front,
Nor Mary God-fucked with an untouched cunt,
Nor Zeus playing bull or swan, and all clothes rucked.
Nor is it there where your complete orgasm,
From curling toes to skull-top tingling hair,
Meets voodoo god who rides you as nightmare,
Meets "therapy" of ECG's dead spasm.

But winkled from your shell by muse or god
You're in that space where time unmoving seems
To Rip Van Winkle ordinary, not odd,
There where True Thomas by fay queen is smitten...
And when you wake from momentary dreams
Two hours have gone by, and the first draft's written.

INSPIRATION 2

The poem enters your head as a litter of kittens
Brought in by a cat from somewhere hidden,
Place of birth unknown.
A word, image, rhyme,
An idea, a tone,
They are brought one at a time
In no order, no preference, no ruling or schooling,
They just need to come in, like refugees at the border.
And they have no order,
They crawl over each other, blind and mewling,
And here comes another, and then here comes another.
So the thoughts enter your head like kittens. Give thanks to the
Mother.

MEMORABLENESS

That for an idea, for an idea's transmission.
But that isn't poetry. Poetry's mission
Is memory – every quick trick of the tongue
To give ear-to-mouth memory,
Words sung and strung
From an ear to an ear,
Bearing clear repetition,
Not just the idea,
But the idea's expression,
Silk wrapping the emery -
Rhythm and rhyme,
Form, pattern, compression,
Feet, movements, beat, time,
Iter-, reiter- and alliteration,
Sense, nonsense and assonance, insinuation,
Barbs and allusions,
Hooks, jokes and confusions,
Directions, inflections, creating connections...
So memory favors your chanting, reciting,
Enchanting beyond all mere reading and writing –
And magicking into the mind of forever.
You've taken control of poetic endeavor.



CRAFTING THE VERSE

We stand on two banks of the river that's flowing between us.
I'll bridge my new thoughts out to you with a verse.
First I form key ideas – they need clarity, cleanness –
The bridge forms an outline, takes shape in my head.

Now that bridge must be built,
Built regardless of canyons, or mud flats and silt.

The pillars are images placed first for more of the bridge to
traverse,
With my strongest words buttressing them so they're not washed
away.

Their positions are set by the distance and shores,
While the force of the water, the shape of the bed,
And the landscape and soil on my side and yours,
The allowance for possible earthquake or storm,
The demands of the load that the bridge will convey...
These determine the structure, materials, form:
For the best bridge will meet site demands
With both strength and matched style.
So the poet needs meter and rhyme, every trick he commands,
Or the verses won't carry their burden, will fail to beguile.

Though you see stone or steel in the bridge, for the most part it's air,
Rhythmic arches of unspoken airy allusion, illusion,
Outlined in hard words and designed to be elegant, spare.

So this poem's a book, that's reduced to an essay, reduced more
compactly

To two hundred lines, sacrificing precision
To memory's need for concision, elision.
Two hundred exactly?
No, not exactly. (Exactly!)

From the sweep, pattern, length,
To its delicate strength,
Whether old Roman aqueduct, young Golden Gate,
Whether flowing with water or people and freight,
Its clean shape was constrained by the structural needs and
efficiencies,
Driving its strength and position and duty.
All unstructured words in the river are wasted deficiencies.
Poems will last quite as long as an old Roman aqueduct,
Bridging the banks, bearing brightly in rhythms of beauty,
If all ostentation and ornamentation
Support the key functions in what you construct.
Raise your sights to the Space Elevator, that cable,
That modern-day Tower of Babel,
To not just bridge over
A strait or the Severn
But up! to bridge up! at the same time, to heaven.
Cloaked gods were invoked,
And the tiger broke cover,
Your poem connects river banks.
Now give thanks.

WHAT ABOUT FAILURE?

But what if the poem's not there?

Is just an idea?

A vague vapor?

What if there were only a few words, heard freshly?

Then write them down even (or rather, especially)

If you must get out of bed, find pen and paper.

By getting up and writing out

The poem letter by blind letter

You are showing by your doing

Your devotion to your gods.

Writing verse invokes the Muses,

Turns up fresh thoughts, more and better...

Not for certain, but just writing

Will of course increase the odds.

The hidden gods now bidden,

Gods willing, by gods you'll be ridden.

CODA

Odin

Send me your ravens

I'll feed them.

The images used to illustrate this poem are all representations of Odin.



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