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Odhroerir

**Nine Devotional Tales of Odin's
Journeys**

Laure Gunnlod Lynch

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Beloved Wanderer

Ravens soar swiftly through ashen skies
As worlds converge before my eyes,
Ravens soar swiftly through ashen skies
Bringing me to You,
Leading me to You.

Odin, my king, my hero, my love,
Guarding me, guiding me, from up above,
Dear One, High One, take my hand
And lead me to Your will,
Lead me to Your will.

Father of Gods and Father of men,
Your work to save Middlegarth never will end.
Beloved Wanderer, show me Your path,
And I will walk with You,
I will work with You.

Ancient One, mighty, You crafted the worlds,
From ash and from elm the first humans emerged.
Giver of life, press Your lips against mine,
And let me breathe Your breath,
I long to breathe Your breath.

For nine long nights You hung on the Tree,
You sacrificed Yourself for what You would be,
Master of runes, let me suffer for You,
And learn Your mysteries,
Learn Your mysteries.

You cast an eye into Mimir's Well
To see the unseen from Asgard to Hel,
Wise one, Farseeing, open my eyes,

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And let me see Your truth
Let me see Your truth.

Gunnlod You held for three nights in Your arms,
To win back the holy Mead precious to Gods,
Honey-tongued Bolverkr, speak to me now,
Inspire me with Your words,
I hunger for Your words.

Through wild nights of winter You hunt with the dead,
As mortals unknowing sleep in their beds,
Rider of Sleipnir, lord of the winds,
Let me ride with You,
Through stormy skies with You.

Chieftain of Asgard and victory's lord.
Your spear is mightier than any sword,
Wielder of Gungnir, penetrate me,
My heart hungers for You,
I yearn to bleed for You.

Father of wolves and master of seidhr,
I am Yours for eternity, far beyond death,
Celestial husband, embrace Your bride,
And bring me ecstasy,
Let me share Your ecstasy.

Ravens soar swiftly through ashen skies
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Introduction: The God of Paradoxes

He is the fury of storm winds and the fresh breeze of inspiration, giver of our first breath and collector of our last. With one hand He bestows creative genius, and with the other, madness. The ecstatic trances of the shaman and seer and the battle frenzy of the berserker are His gifts. He is the wayfarer and Wanderer who can show us the path, and the Trickster who can render us hopelessly lost and confused. He is the giver of life and death who dispenses victory and defeat at will. He is the granter of wishes and the lord of restless ghosts, the healer who can put illness to flight and the necromancer who can rouse the dead to answer His questions and do His bidding, the bringer of joy and the dread Hunter of the dark nights of winter. He is the chieftain of the Gods and the beggar at the feast, the welcome guest who most pray will never darken their doors. He is the charmer of His women and confounder of His men, the wooer of many and devoted friend of few. He keeps faith with those who keep faith with Him, yet is continually accused of betrayal by the faithless. The mysteries belong to Him, won by the sacrifice of His own blood, and yet He continually shares them if we but listen. He is the lover of war and mayhem, a God for hard-drinking macho types who like to hang out in biker bars and arm wrestle, as a friend of mine once put it, and yet He continually seeks wisdom and guidance from

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women. He is the far-seer, burdened with too much wisdom, who constantly strives against His own doom. Accused of utter selfishness, He works tirelessly for the preservation of the world.

He is arguably the most complex God ever to have dealings with humanity. The lore of the Northern Tradition¹ contains more than 235 different names, titles, and descriptive kennings for Him alone, and even now, in modern times, He is continually being given new heiti (by-names) by His worshippers. And if you think the opening paragraph above is a morass of contradictions, you're right. He is paradox personified.

He is Odin, and I've been in love with Him my entire life, though it's only in the past few years that I've been willing and able to admit it. For He is feared more often than He is loved, this God of inspiration, magic and death, and even those of us who love Him often find our way to Him through fear.

For me, the path that led to acceptance of Him was a dark and winding one, fraught with many stumbling blocks and false trails. Yet always while I hesitated and faltered, He waited. He waited for me in the dark corners of my room, in the howling of the winter winds outside my window at night, in the scraping of tree branches against the windowpanes. He was the face behind my dreams as well as all my nightmares, the voice that whispered to me as I read poetry, the One who knew all the secret places of my heart. I dreaded and adored Him in equal measure, this constant and invisible companion. And once in a while, I glimpsed His face—or some of His faces, for He has many. I caught a glimpse of Him in the gathering of clouds before a winter storm, in the wink of an old man, in the lopsided grin of a wolf. At the age of eight, I opened a book about the origins of Santa Claus and had a sudden vision of Him riding on his eight-legged steed at the head of His hunting party of the dead, flanked by His ravens and His wolves. And in that moment of seeing Him, I saw Him see me. It was the harbinger of all my hopes and fears.

That book actually mentioned his name: Odin. It was a name I would spend the next twenty-odd years avoiding for all I was worth.

But He didn't need me to speak that name; He had others. Other names and other guises, and as the years passed they crowded in upon me. Most of them had to do with death. I was a strange child, and at a very early age I realized that I would die someday and

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accepted it as one would accept an old friend. I feared the loss of others, but not my own demise. Death was for me a comfortable and familiar companion, like Him, the Father of the Slain. I was perplexed by the horror and fear with which adults reacted to what was a natural and inevitable part of life. Cemeteries were places of peace and rest. The carefully preserved dead body in the coffin was as empty as a wax statue; nothing resided there. The spirit had flown. Carrion birds and scavengers were simply cleaning up otherwise wasted remains, recycling the remnants of the dead back into the food chain where they could be used by the living. There was no horror in that. And if one had to die, did it not make sense that one would want to die well? Was it really such a tragedy to die young, or violently, if one died at one's best, or while defending one's own? For me, old age and infirmity, the nursing home and the sick bed, were far more terrible specters than death itself. My nightmares were of being confined to a bed that was really more of a cage, unable to feed or clothe or even clean myself. I saw this happen to a couple of my mother's elderly relatives, and finally at the age of twelve I saw it happen to my father, at the end of a long and losing battle against cancer. I prayed for his death, prayed to the One I knew was always with me and always listening. I was not ashamed when my prayers were answered. After my father had been cremated, my mother and I went to Central Park in New York and scattered his ashes to the winds. If I had read it by that time, I might have thought of the words spoken to Ibn Fadlan after he had witnessed the funeral of a chieftain of the Rus, Scandinavian traders in 10th century Russia: "His Lord, for love of him, has sent the wind to bring him away in an hour." ² I did not know it then, but cremation was and remains the interment method of choice for those dedicated to Odin. Not for His own, the slow decay beneath the earth to provide food for worms. There was no horror in this, either; there was glorious release.

Speaking of horror, my child's imagination was drawn to it from an early age as well, although it seldom actually scared me. If the dead were simply dead, walking corpses and the reawakened spirits of the restless dead thrilled me. They were ambassadors from another world, proof of my thesis that death was only another transition and not the end of anything. I filled my head with Poe, Stephen King, and Anne Rice, not to mention countless horror movies

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good, bad, and indifferent. The shadow of what lurks beyond the grave became my daily fare, harkening back to my earlier fascination with the undead hunters of the winter nights. And in the red eyes of the Hound of the Baskervilles and the reflection of the werewolf and the vampire, He continued to stalk me. In all my avoidance of Him, I never strayed far from His side, nor would I. He knew it, and smugly, He waited.

The turning point began shortly after my father's death, although it would take years to reach its completion. I began having dreams about my father, and a sense during waking hours that he was trying to reach out to me, and these experiences sparked in me an interest in something that had previously been absent from my life: religion. My father had been a lapsed Catholic, so I gave his religion a try, feeling that he would want me to. I went to Sunday morning Mass for almost six months before admitting that there was nothing for me there, in that church of a God who I instinctively knew was not my own. Nor was there any sense of community or fellowship for me in the rows of strangers seated around me. As much as I admired the beauty of the ceremony and the symbolism of Communion, this was not my faith. My mother was Jewish, and my grandmother had already tried in vain to draw me into her religion. I gave it another shot. But a summer spent at a Hassidic Jewish day camp did nothing to endear my mother's God to me, either. It seemed only men were fit to serve Him, to offer up prayers, while women walked a step behind and made sure to keep their bodies fully covered. I know that isn't true of every sect of Judaism, but my early exposure to the God of the desert left me with the distinct impression that this God did not like or value women much at all, and that was something my female self could not accept. Whoever my God was, He must be sought elsewhere.

Paganism was beginning to gain popularity at the time, and books on Wicca and other paths were popping up in bookstores and at the library. I snatched them up as quickly as they appeared. Wicca seemed closer to what I was looking for, but was still not quite right. I read Greek mythology, and was powerfully attracted by the myths of Hades, lord of the underworld, and His bride Persephone, but sensed that this was still not quite where I belonged. I gravitated towards magic and ancient cultures and anything having to do with the dead,

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so for a while I thought my home might be found in Egyptian paganism. The pairing of Isis, Goddess of life and communication, with Osiris, God of the dead, entranced me. The twin figures of Anubis and Wepwawet (canine Gods who, I realize now, mirrored for me Odin's two wolves, Geri and Freki) seemed to offer comfort and strength. Best of all were hieroglyphs, an alphabet that was also a magical symbol system. It was not the symbol system that belonged to Him, the one who continually beckoned to me, yet it had enough similarities to keep me occupied for a while. In all these other Gods of death and consciousness and inspiration, I caught glimpses of Him; He lurked behind all their many different faces, as much as I refused to see Him there. But finally, these other Gods managed to get the message through to me that They were not my own, that They were only standing in for the one to whom I belonged. The one who waited still.

Meanwhile, He continued to beckon to me everywhere; I would have had to be blind, deaf and as insensitive as a rock not to see it, not to feel it. Crows followed me wherever I went, and looking back I realize some of them were easily large enough to have been ravens; I wasn't able to tell the difference back then. References to Odin popped up in the oddest contexts all around me. In a class on epics, a college professor tried to persuade me to do my thesis paper on the *Poetic Edda*. (I balked, considered Beowulf as an alternative briefly, and instead ended up doing it on the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.) Another professor asked me one day, rather pointedly and apropos of nothing, whether I'd ever heard of Asatru. When I said I hadn't, he explained to me that it was the indigenous religion of the Scandinavians, and then, fixing me with an intense blue-eyed stare, added: "Remember that word: Asatru." In retrospect, I realize both professors reminded me a great deal of Odin. At my wedding to the man from whom I'm now (at the time of this writing) legally separated, *Ride of the Valkyries* blared out unexpectedly in place of the wedding march I had selected. This kind of thing went on and on for years. Odin beckoned to me as Tolkein's Gandalf, and from behind a thousand other masks. He beckoned to me from every shadow and every glimmer of starlight. He whispered to me with every gust of wind, and stalked and wooed me in my dreams. Finally,

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I succumbed. And who could blame me? Who was I to resist Him, this seducer of Goddesses and giantesses?

The beginning of the end came while I was browsing in a bookstore one day and was inexplicably drawn to pick up a paperback copy of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, a novel I knew nothing about (there wasn't much descriptive information on the back of the cover, either) by an author I'd never heard of. I took it home and devoured it, and as I read about Mr. Wednesday (Gaiman's American version of Odin), everything in my being cried out in overwhelming joy and recognition. (I've since learned that a great many Odin's folk agree that Gaiman's portrayal of Odin in the novel is amazingly spot-on; it should definitely be read by everyone at all interested in the Old Man.) That book blasted away what little was left of my resistance; by the time I finished it, I was putty in His hands. As soon as I set it aside, I threw myself into the reading of the Eddas and sagas and whatever else I could get my hands on about the ancient and modern practice of Heathenism, as well as an intense study of the runes that I expect to be a lifetime process. I hungered for these things as if I had never tasted food my entire life, thirsted for any knowledge that pertained to Him as if it were cool water and I'd spent my entire life up until that point wandering in the desert. Because in a very real sense I had, just as He Himself restlessly wanders the worlds. But at long last I had come home. Home to Him.

In December of 2002, at His insistence, I made a permanent lifelong (and beyond) commitment to Him: I took sacred marriage vows, and He accepted me as His wife. I will add here that this was not a thing done lightly on my part, nor should vows of such spiritual magnitude be entered into lightly by anyone. Agreeing to become His wife was the most powerful spiritual experience of my life, and I feel that everything that had happened to me previously was leading up to it and preparing me for it. It literally transformed my entire existence, tearing apart the life I had lived up until that point and creating a new one in its wake much as Odin and His brothers created the earth, sky and seas from the slain body of Ymir. (And yes, this comparison does convey an accurate idea of the degree of sacrifice involved.) As a result of this, Odin has become my partner in every aspect of my life. There is no waking moment in which I am not aware of His presence, no thought that passes through my mind that He does not react and

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respond to, no area of my life that He does not touch or that does not interest Him keenly. He shares my every thought, mood, care, whim, and dream, and even more astonishingly allows me to share His. By day, I am enfolded in His unshakable love and tenderness (for although He is in many ways a dark and terrible God, one thing that surprises those lucky enough to discover it is how incredibly sweet He can be), and at night I rest in His embrace. I am not speaking metaphorically here, either; there are times when His presence is so real and solid to me that I wonder that even mundane folk in my vicinity cannot hear and see Him! I realize that these statements may be scoffed at by many, and to be honest I don't care. Those who have experienced His presence and His love in their own lives (or the presence and love of another deity) will recognize the truth of what I say. As for the others, I can only hope that at some point they will be lucky enough to experience a relationship of this kind with whatever form or personage they best relate to the divine. At any rate, they are not likely to have even read this far!

Speaking of which, this little book you hold in your hands now is the result of an oath I made to Odin at Yule in 2004. It is my gift to Him, but it is also by extension a gift for those who love Him. When I began working on it, it was my intention to write a series of devotional meditations, exercises, and activities that might help the seeker to get to know this many-sided God better, as well as help those already involved with Him on some level to deepen their relationships. I will probably still get that book written eventually, but this book evolved into something entirely different. As I tried to commit to paper some of the ways in which I have worked with Odin, stories began to come to me instead—some of them in His words, some in the words and voices of others. As they came to me, I wrote them down—for not only have stories always been my dearest love, after Him, but there are often truths revealed in what masquerades as fiction that cannot be presented or learned in any other way. The peoples of the north always recognized this fact, and it accounts for the importance of the skald in all of the ancient Heathen cultures, as well as the importance of the Mead of Poetry in Heathen lore. Like the runes, stories and their telling are an integral part of who Odin is, one of His favorite ways of sharing the wisdom He has worked so hard to gain. What better format for a devotional book to Him than a

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collection of tales written for—and occasionally by and/or with—Him?

Writing these stories has been a meditation in itself for me, and I hope it will be likewise for those who read them. I want to insert one disclaimer here: although I am a student of the lore, I am far from being an expert in it. While there are certainly bits of lore to be found here, this is not intended to be a faithful retelling of the Eddas—or even parts of them—and there is much in these pages that well-read Heathens will perceive as inconsistent with what they have learned. I can only repeat that these are the stories that were given to me to tell—and in many respects this book was as much a gift to me as it is to Odin and as I hope it will be to its readers.

Before we move on to the tales themselves, I thought a few notes on the writing of them and various insights that occurred to me in the process might be of interest. (If not, feel free to skip this part!)

Mother of Gods: This little story is the result of a vision I had late one night, of a beautiful white-haired woman dressed all in white tucking her three newborn babies into their cradle. When I realized who the woman was and who the babies were, the rest of the story came in a flash. This experience also marked my introduction to Bestla and the forging of a relationship with Her. Odin's mother is a formidable lady—gracious and queenly, yet iron-willed and with a piss-and-vinegar personality that tolerates no nonsense whatsoever. When She looks at you, you can sense the deep, calm, solid sense of knowing that is Hers, a trait shared by many of the great Jotun seeresses. I feel greatly privileged to know Her, as I have the impression that She does not involve Herself much with humans—not even humans who belong to Her son. She has considerable magical skill, especially in scrying and working with plant spirits, and taught these skills to Her son in His childhood, long before His other explorations in search of wisdom began. This early exposure to His mother's witchcraft later contributed to accusations that He was tainted by “womanly ways,”³ but Odin is the ultimate pragmatist, and uses whatever power or wisdom He can get His hands on, without regard for what the less knowledgeable may think.

This story also features appearances by Odin's two brothers, who are known variously as Hoenir and Lodhur or Villi and Ve, and who are often perceived as apostases of Him—aspects that have

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become fully developed enough to act independently. I respectfully disagree with those who espouse this theory; in my own experience, they are completely distinct beings. I have seen a connection made between Lodhur and Loki by some, which raises the question of whether Loki is Odin's "blood-brother" by oath or by parentage. From what I've been able to glean, the idea that They are blood-brothers (by means of a blood-sharing ritual) is a relatively modern claim made for the first time in the Victorian era, and in all of the original source material They are simply referred to as brothers. This introduces a problem in that Odin's parents are named in the lore as Borr and Bestla, and Loki's as Farbauti and Laufey. And yet, it would hardly be the first time that Gods and other beings in the lore appeared under more than one name, Odin being the most famous example. It is not my purpose here to untangle this debate; I will only note that in my own experience, Odin refers to Loki simply as "My brother." His references to Loki in these stories are no exception.

Mimir's Gift: This story speaks for itself, I think. It came with the insight that Dagaz is the rune that most clearly represents Odin's sacrifice to the Well and the split consciousness He gained from it. Meditation on this rune can be helpful for those who wish to delve deeper into these mysteries.

Blood, Sex, Honey: My emphasis in these stories on the giantess Gunnlod and Her relationship with Odin may seem peculiar to some Heathens, especially since She is not specifically named in the lore as a wife of Odin, nor even as a Goddess. Yet there is plenty of evidence to support my feeling that She is both.

1. The *Havamal*⁴ version of the winning of the Mead describes what looks suspiciously like a wedding feast, and there is mention of a "ring oath" (most likely, marriage vows) sworn by Odin. (The references to "Baugi" in Snorri become interesting when one realizes that in Old Norse, *baugr* means "ring.")
2. She is the only female being, besides Frigga, to whom a heiti of Odin's directly refers. As Odin is given the kennings *Angan Friggjar* ("Delight of Frigg") and *Fadbyggvir Friggjar* ("Dweller in Frigg's Embrace"), so He is also referred to as *Farmr arma Gunnladr* ("Burden of Gunnlod's arms") and

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Gunnlod's Embracer. No other Goddess or female wight (not even Jord) is given this pride of place. She is also (along with Jord and Rind, other wives of Odin) referred to as "Frigga's rival" by Snorri in the *Skalskaparmal*.⁵

3. Although Gunnlod Herself is not numbered among the Goddesses by Snorri, Her son by Odin, Bragi—God of poetry—is numbered among the Gods. This fact alone strongly argues that Her relationship with Odin (especially since marriage was almost certainly involved) would have elevated Her status to that of Goddess. (There is some dispute among Heathens as to whether Bragi was actually born an immortal, or whether He began as a mortal poet who attained the status of a God through the brilliance of His verse. I have not addressed the mystery of His birth in the current story, but will probably do so at some point in the future.)
4. In the passages of the *Havamal* that mention Her, Odin Himself describes Gunnlod in complimentary and even tender terms, as a passionate, brooding and "good" woman⁶ without whose love He would never have escaped the fortress of the giants. To my knowledge, the lore does not record His lavishing such praise on any other female figure.

And yet, despite all of this, both lore accounts of the story end with His seeming abandonment of Her. Again and again, I've seen this pointed to as evidence that Odin is an oath-breaker, but that has always seemed wrong to me, and inconsistent with my own experience of Him. So I asked Gunnlod for Her own version of the story, and *Blood, Sex, Honey* is the result.

I believe that Gunnlod not only gifted Odin with the Mead of Poetry and inspiration, but also was the source of a magico-sexual initiation similar to the one Freyja is credited with having given Him. There is some support for this idea in the writings of at least two scholars (James Chisholm and Eric Wodening)⁷ who regard Her as an anima of Odin's, a female reflection of His soul. Also, I find it interesting that in the *Havamal*, Gunnlod offers Odin a drink of the holy mead "from her golden chair." This mention of a golden chair is often ignored, but to me it is a curious echo of the "high seats" in which seeresses traditionally sit.

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In my own experience with Gunnlod, She has an intoxicating, effervescent, fiery energy backed by the immovable rock-solid strength and solidity common to the other Jotun God-brides. She is a powerful witch (if She were not, would Suttung have put something so precious as the Mead of Poetry in Her keeping?), skilled in seeing and soulcraft as well as the magics of word-weaving and song (enchantment) that bear a striking resemblance to Odin's galdr. I also see curious parallels between her and Saga, the Goddess who *Grimnismal*⁸ tells us drinks with Odin every day from golden cups, presumably while They are swapping stories. I believe it's possible that Saga is the path where Gunnlod and Frigga meet; She offers a tantalizing glimpse of the part of the story of Odin and Gunnlod that did not survive in the lore. Storytelling, the writing of poetry and/or fiction, and mead-making—activities highly prized in Heathen society past and present—all require a certain amount of inspiration, and can be undertaken as devotional acts by those who wish to know Gunnlod better.

An additional note: During the writing of this introduction, and long after the writing of the original tale, I came across an article⁹ suggesting that the original form of the name Suttung was Surt-ungr, meaning "son of Surt." This would mean Suttung and his daughter Gunnlod were fire giants, the race prophesied to rise against and defeat the Gods at the time of Ragnarok. I also find it curious that the region inhabited by the kin of Surt, Sokkdolum, or Sunken Dales, bears more than a passing resemblance to the name the *Grimnismal* gives to Saga's hall, Sokkvabek or Sunken Benches. This information validates the story as it was given to me, and validation is always nice! My own UPG¹⁰ tells me Suttung's palace is in southern Jotunheim at the end of a deep valley, and that it guards a mountain pass leading into Muspelheim, the realm of Surt and Asgard's greatest foes. If this is true, it should be plain to see why Odin would seek the hand of Suttung's daughter, and why He would have to be a great deal less wise that we know Him to be to have willfully abandoned Her!

I sense that I've only scratched the surface of this story and of Gunnlod's mysteries, which I hope will continue to be revealed to me in the future. But in the meantime, here at least is a telling of the mead story that does not cast Odin as the arch-villain so many like to make Him out to be.

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Self to Self: Odin's account of His ordeal on the Tree, as He shared it with me. Typing this out was painful, and re-reading it during the editing process even more so.

Recently, I've seen it suggested in several places that Odin's connection with the runes is overstated, and that we don't owe Him any great debt of gratitude for the use of them because, after all, He did not "create" them. The word "rune" means mystery, and that is what each one of the ancient symbols known to us as the northern runes are—mysteries. Certainly, Odin did not "create" these mysteries, any more than a mother creates a soul when she gives birth to a child. No, what Odin did, through His ordeal on Yggdrasil, was to birth these mysteries into the realms of consciousness, molding them within the crucible of His soul and by means of the fires of His ordeal into shapes and tangible forms which could be grasped and understood. He did this much as a mother gives the child in her womb flesh and form even though its spirit came to her from elsewhere. The runes passed through Odin in order to reach the realms of manifest reality, where we can now all access them, Gods and mortals alike. As shaman of the Gods, Odin traveled into the realms of the unconscious and the unmanifest, grasped the secrets of manifestation, and brought them forth into consciousness. He managed to achieve this only through considerable ordeal and pain, again much like the pain of giving birth—and the moment in which He actually birthed the mysteries was His moment of greatest agony; the *Havamal* tells us that He screamed as He took them up. I do not think it can be ignored, either, that the process took nine nights of ordeal on the Tree, not unlike the nine months it takes a woman to give birth. Also, like a child, the runes themselves are sentient, living beings.

I am of course not suggesting here that Odin is really a Goddess in reverse drag—far from it, in my experience He is overwhelmingly masculine. Yet He has a deep connection with women's mysteries, and His ordeal on the Tree is yet another example of this. I also believe that the winning of the runes was the last in His series of three great initiations, and that He needed the unique double vision and deep wisdom provided by His taste from the Well of Mimir, and the inspiration and regenerative powers of the Mead, in order to prepare Him to succeed in this final ordeal.

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There are indeed many Gods who can teach the runes to mankind, yet it should be borne in mind that They can only do so because Odin brought these mysteries into conscious awareness, where they became accessible to all—the Gods, man, and the other races of beings. Before His ordeal, the Norns showed no signs of being willing to relinquish or share their secrets. Today, however, the runes are no longer privileged secrets but can be studied by all who have the patience, discipline, and talent, and this is as Odin fully intended. This is one of His gifts to us, an extension of the basic gift of consciousness He bestowed on the first humans, Ask and Embla.

Last Journey: I wanted to include a story about Odin in His role of psycho-pomp, but nothing was coming to me until late one night when I had a vision of a raft making its way slowly across the water, steered by the Old Man Himself. I scribbled down the first few lines of the story, and the rest of it flowed—if you’ll pardon the expression—from there. This is not one of the “downloaded” stories in this collection; it is largely my own creation. And yet, I am confident that it portrays the experience of being “taken home” to Valhalla by Him accurately, and I hope it will be a comfort to those who may need it.

A Drink for an Old Man: This tale-within-a-tale came about because I wanted to include something about the relationship between Odin and His men. However, I expect that a lot of people will take exception to its portrayal of Frigga (most of which is drawn from the infamous Saxo Grammaticus¹¹ as well as my own UPG). If the story offends you, I can only assure you that it is—as Grim says before he relates it to Jake Coulter—only a story. I have a friendly and productive relationship with Frigga, and meant Her no disrespect by writing it.

He Sees You When You’re Sleeping: This was actually the first story written in this collection, preceding my Yule oath by about two years. It’s semi-autobiographical—not an essay, but a somewhat fictionalized account of events that actually occurred when I was eight.

They Speak to Me: The story of the death of Balder, as told to me by Odin. When He began it, I expected a lighthearted ramble on His experiences with plant spirits. I could not have been more wrong. I am still deeply in awe of the fact that He shared this with me.

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Chooser: I wanted to include a Valkyrie story, and started writing a very different one that I may finish at some later date. But that story got set aside temporarily when I was walking home from work one day and *Chooser* came to me almost full-blown. I only had to rush home and write it down. It isn't your traditional Valkyrie story, but it *is* a realistic one. Yes, this is what it's like.

And now that I've rambled for more than long enough, on with the stories. Join me by the fire, while winter winds rage outside and the Hunt ravages the landscape. We will pass a horn of mead and hopefully I will entertain you for a few hours, as skalds entertained their communities in days of yore. Even more importantly than that, hopefully I will manage to share with you some small part of the immense love, awe, and adoration I have for this most complex and contradictory of deities, this God who has claimed me so utterly, body and soul. He is a God feared by many (and not without good reason) and truly loved and known by few, and yet I've found it to be true that to a very great extent people see what they expect to see in Him, and experience what they expect to experience. In all His interactions with Gods, giants, and mortals alike, Odin gives as good as He gets; that much is attested in the lore as well as in UPG. Approach Him with dread and prejudice in your heart, and you will very likely see why He is called in the *Voluspa* "Terror of the Gods."¹² Approach Him with love, or at the very least respect and openness, and you will receive the very best He has to offer you, personally. It is my hope that these stories will help you do that.

Laure Gunnlod Wodandis Lynch
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¹ Various mythological source texts on which Heathens base our religious practices, primarily the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*.

² *Risala*: Ibn Faldlan's Account of the Rus

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³ An accusation leveled against Him by Loki in *Lokasenna* (“The Flyting of Loki”), a section of the *Poetic Edda*.

⁴ A section of the *Poetic Edda*, roughly translated as “Sayings of the High One.”

⁵ A section of the *Prose Edda*, translated as “The Language of Poetry.”

⁶ Description gleaned from various translations of the *Poetic Edda*

⁷ This theory is mentioned in Eric Wodening’s booklet *The Threefold Initiation of Woden*, as well as in James Chisholm’s translation of the *Poetic Edda*.

⁸ “The Lay of Grimnir,” yet another section of the *Poetic Edda*.

⁹ *An Investigation of Poetic Fragments Preserved in the Elder Edda following the Research of Dr. Viktor A. Rydberg (1828-1895)* by William P. Reaves

(<http://aetaustralia.org/articles/arwrodingunnlod.htm>)

¹⁰ UPG stands for Unverified Personal Gnosis; in other words, the perceptions and experiences of worshippers that are not necessarily attested in the lore.

¹¹ *Gesta Danorum*, or *History of the Danes*

¹² “The Prophecy of the Seeress” in the *Poetic Edda*.

A Drink for an Old Man

Jake had finally kicked out the last few stragglers and was painstakingly wiping down the bar one last time when the bell above the door jangled and the door creaked open an inch or two. He looked up, squinting as he wiped sweat from his brow with his sleeve. “I thought I locked that damn thing,” he muttered aloud, and then shrugged. It was late, he was tired, and the gods above only knew he had enough on his mind. He had probably forgotten to throw the bolt, and then the wind—which was howling so fiercely outside it made the windows rattle—had pushed the door open. Wouldn’t be the first time. Shrugging, he put down his rag and started towards the door to shut it again.

But before he could reach it, it slammed open, thudding against the wall. A gust of wind swept inside with a whoosh, extinguishing the candle flames that lit the bar and the circular tables and almost knocking him backwards. The bar was plunged into darkness, alleviated only slightly by the dim light from the streetlamps that found its way in through the door. Jake sighed heavily. “I don’t fucking need this tonight,” he announced to no one in particular, and started towards the door a second time.

He had almost reached it when it slammed shut, just as abruptly as it had blown open.

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Jake shuddered; the wind could not possibly have been responsible this time. Complete blackness engulfed him now; he literally could not have seen his fingers wiggle if he had been holding them an inch in front of his face. The curtained windows admitted no light from the street, and he had already turned out the electric lights in the bar, preferring to work by candlelight as he finished cleaning up and prepared to go home. Not that he was especially looking forward to going home; he had been putting it off for an hour already. But there were things he had to do there, things that would only get harder than they already were if he waited. And now he had to deal with this bullshit first. He cursed, digging in his jeans pocket for his cigarette lighter, pulling it out, and flicking it on.

He was not alone in the bar.

A mere foot from him, illuminated by the dancing circle of light from the lighter's flame, stood an old man. A rather ragged, decrepit-looking old man, wearing a tattered cloak so dark blue it was almost black and a wide-brimmed floppy hat that tilted down too far over his face, hiding one of his eyes. Beneath the shadows cast by the hat, Jake made out a scraggly white beard and gaunt, sharp features. The visible eye was amazingly blue, the blue of crystal-clear waters or the sky on a cloudless fall day, and its gaze stabbed into Jake like the piercing gaze of an eagle. As Jake stared, grasping the lighter in numb shock, the lips beneath the ragged moustache twisted in amusement, and suddenly the man threw his head back and began to laugh, a deep, booming belly-laugh that seemed to turn Jake's bones to jelly. Startled, he fumbled with the lighter, and the hot metal seared his finger as the bar was swallowed up by darkness again.

"Shit!" he said aloud, sucking on his burned finger as his other hand searched the floor for the fallen lighter. Obviously, he told himself, the old guy was just some drifter who had wandered in when the wind had blown open the door. He was stupid to have let himself get so bent out of shape over it.

"Allow me," a deep baritone voice said, slicing into his thoughts. The lighter flicked on again, this time captured in the old man's hand. Jake blinked; how had he gotten hold of it so quickly? The flame danced and glimmered in the single blue eye. The old man looked far too amused for Jake's comfort.

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“L-look, buddy,” Jake stammered, trying to reassert some degree of control over the situation before things got too far out of hand, “we’re closed here. I was just getting ready to go home. So if you’ll just give me back my lighter, we can both be on our way, and—”

But the old man had turned away from him and was using the lighter to re-ignite the glass-enclosed candles that lined the bar, one after the other. When he had finished, he turned back towards Jake with an accomplished air and a little smile. “There, that’s better. It’s so much easier to talk if we can see each other, isn’t it?” Without waiting for an answer, he seated himself at the bar.

Jake sighed heavily and walked over. “I told you, we’re closed,” he said between gritted teeth, reaching out to grab the old man’s shoulder. Then he stopped. He had expected to feel frail bone with a thin covering of flesh. What he actually felt was solid, sinewy muscle over bone that felt more like rock. He had intended to pull the old man around to face him, and to escort him out of the bar if necessary. What actually happened was that at the first touch of Jake’s hand, that blue eye glanced up at him and he found himself suddenly unable to move, unable to even will himself to move. Every cell in his body felt as if it was filled with ice. Fire danced in unimaginable depths of blue, holding him as paralyzed as a rat transfixed by the gaze of a serpent. He shivered, feeling a single drop of sweat ooze from his forehead and slide slowly down his cheek.

The old man smiled again. There was something downright disturbing about that smile; it was not in itself an unpleasant smile, but it held the promise of infinite unpleasantness, should Jake continue on his present course. “Surely,” the old man said, and his voice was mellow and rich and complex, like old whiskey liberally laced with honey, “surely you have time to serve one more drink before you go. A drink for an old man who has come a long way.”

Jake’s mouth felt bone-dry; he could really use a drink himself, he realized, especially considering what waited for him at home. “Sure, why not?” he managed, and instantly found himself able to move again. Hastily, he removed his hand from the old man’s shoulder. “Sorry about that.”

The old man nodded graciously. “You are forgiven. I realize that to your eyes I appear to be no more than a homeless tramp. It is

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an impression I cultivate intentionally; it allows me to go places I might not otherwise be able to go, see things I might not otherwise have an opportunity to see. But make no mistake about it: appearances can be misleading. In my own case, especially.”

Jake laughed nervously. “So I see.” He hesitated. “You got a name?”

The old man chuckled. “Oh, I have many. You, however, may call me Grim.”

“Grim, huh? That’s a strange name, isn’t it?” There was something disturbingly familiar about it, too, although for the life of him Jake couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

“Oh, indeed.” The amusement in the old man’s eyes deepened. “Although I have many that you would find even stranger, and more disturbing. For now, Grim will do.”

Jake swallowed hard. “All right then, Grim.” He started to offer his hand, wondered if that was appropriate and almost withdrew it, then offered it again. “I’m—”

“You are Jake Coulter,” Grim interrupted him smoothly. He took the proffered hand and shook it, and although he did not squeeze it hard or any of that macho foolishness, Jake felt the effortless strength there, like an iron fist concealed in velvet. “I know you,” the old man added by way of explanation, as if Jake should have realized that by now.

“B-but,” Jake found himself stammering again. “I’m sure I’ve never met you before in my life. How do *you* know *me*?” Then he saw the look in the old man’s eyes, and shook his head. “Never mind; I don’t think I wanna know.”

The old man chuckled again, a dry sound like old leaves rustling in the wind. “Very wise. Now, about that drink?”

“Oh! Right.” Jake hurried around the bar, went to grab a glass from a shelf, and then paused. “What’re you having?”

The old man’s lips pursed as he considered his options, his eye glimmering as if he were a kid offered free run of a candy store. “Whiskey, neat,” he said at last. “The simpler the better, this evening. But make it your best whiskey, mind you. And make it a double.” He winked.

Jake fought to keep his hands from shaking as he selected a bottle from his stock, filled two shot glasses, and offered one to Grim.

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He was about to take a swig of his own drink when, to his surprise, the old man raised his glass in a toast. "Greetings, Jake Coulter," he said, his deep voice swelling as if to fill a grand hall rather than Jake's tiny hole-in-the-wall bar. "The Lord of Men greets you. Never will you be rewarded so well for the gift of a single drink." He winked again, his blue eye sparkling, then lifted the glass to his lips and drained its contents in a single gulp.

Jake suppressed a smirk; the Lord of Men, was it? And yet, as much as he wanted to scoff, something about the toast had seemed natural and fitting. To hide his shudder, he lifted the bottle. "More?" he offered.

"Most assuredly," the old man replied. Jake filled his glass again, and then, after a glance at the clock, topped off his own. It was already a quarter past three, about an hour later than his usual closing time for a Saturday night, but on Saturdays it was his habit to go to an all-night movie theatre and catch a show after closing. Tina wouldn't be expecting him home before five or six at the earliest. He smiled to himself, a smile that was more of a grimace. Tonight, she was going to be surprised. One more drink, and then he really needed to get out of here. He'd spent a week planning this, and another week delaying and trying to talk himself out of it. There was no point in putting it off any longer.

"You really do not want to go home right now," the old man said suddenly, cutting into his thoughts. There was a gentleness in his tone Jake hadn't heard before, and yet he almost jumped at the sound of his voice. He realized, guiltily, that he had been glancing at the clock again.

He laughed nervously, raking his fingers through his short dark hair. "Actually, yeah, I do; I'm running late tonight, and the old lady's waiting for me." He took a long swallow of his drink to strengthen his resolve. "So drink up, old man, cuz she won't keep forever, you know what I mean?"

Grim was staring at him, his visible eye burning like blue flame, the other hidden in darkness. "Nothing waits for you there, Jake Coulter," he said, his voice more stern this time. "Nothing except death."

Jake felt as if his entire body had been plunged into ice water; he could barely breathe. He gulped from his drink again, and then

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closed his eyes, pressing his thumbs into the eyeballs until he saw red sparks. “Yeah, well,” he managed at last. “Only hers.”

“I am afraid not, son. Make no mistake about it, whether or not you die physically as a result of your plans for the night, something in you will die when you take her life. You will lose a part of your spirit. Is she worth that?”

Jake raised his head and looked at him, his vision blurring. He saw the ragged old man sitting there, a vagabond shrouded in a blue-black cloak, and yet when he squinted his eyes just so, he caught a glimpse of a very different vision. The man who sat opposite him was not particularly old nor the least bit ragged, but tall, straight and majestic, with the lithe grace of a predator and the bearing of a king. Gold gleamed on his arms and at his brow, and the flaps of dark fabric around the shoulders of his cloak became two great black ravens, perched on either shoulder. The same brilliant blue eye gleamed at him from the shadows surrounding his face. Jake blinked to clear his vision, and stared at the decrepit old man before him. His throat felt parched again. “Who *are* you?” he asked hoarsely.

The old man smiled. “One who knows. One who has been where you are now.”

Jake laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, that isn’t even possible. How could someone like you—” He stopped in mid-sentence, unsure whether he was addressing the vagabond wanderer or the enthroned king. Did it matter? Rationally, he knew women cheated on their husbands (and vice versa) every day; that was life. But rationality had little to do with what he felt right now, the humiliation and hurt and utter degradation he had felt ever since he’d found out what she was doing behind his back. In his own private emotional world, he was the only man ever to have suffered this, and she was the only woman ever to have committed such a betrayal. Suddenly, he struck the bar hard with his open palm, ignoring the tingling pain that raced up his arm to his elbow as a result; it was better than the other pain, the pain that had been driving him for weeks as he’d laid his plans. “I loved her, damn it. Worse, I trusted her. How could she do this to me? How could I have been such a fool?”

“Even the wisest are made foolish by love,” the old man replied, something almost wistful in his voice. Then he smiled bitterly, and his voice hardened. “And women often speak fairest

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when their hearts are falsest. Of course, men are no better.” He shifted in his seat. “Let me tell you a story, from the days of my own youth.” He glanced at his empty glass. “But first, refill my drink, if you would.”

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