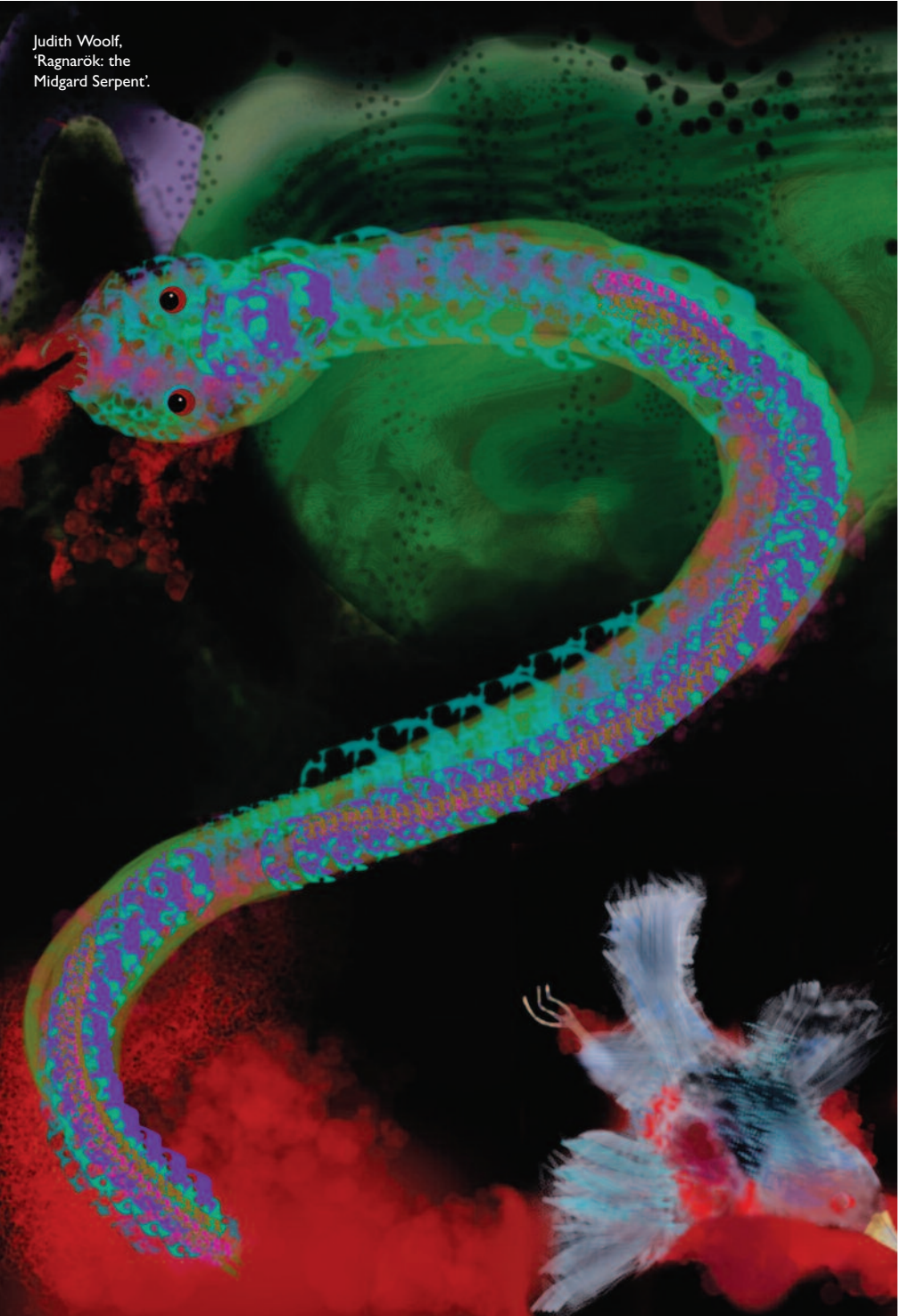


Judith Woolf,  
'Ragnarök: the  
Midgard Serpent'.



# The Skald and the Spaewife

Judith Woolf

*The action is set in early 14th-century Iceland, though the actors wear modern dress.*

## **Characters in order of appearance:**

**Scholar:** *an elderly professor.*

**Young Skald:** *an apprentice poet.*

**Spaewife:** *an old peasant woman.*

**Scene:** *The Scholar's study: a small table piled with leather-bound books, an upright wooden chair for the Scholar and a three-legged stool for the Young Skald. A driftwood fire, downstage centre, can be 'lit' using a hidden torch. Scholar, wearing a shabby old academic gown, is discovered sitting at his desk writing. Young Skald, dressed in jeans and casual hooded top, enters and 'knocks' (with suitable sound effect) at the invisible study door.*

**SCHOLAR:** *(without looking up)* Interruptions, interruptions . . . Come in. *(Young Skald walks toward the desk. Scholar goes on writing.)* I said, come in, if you're coming.

**YOUNG SKALD:** I already have, sir.

**SCHOLAR:** *(peering up at him in surprise)* Ha. Do I know you, boy? Are you one of my students?

**YOUNG SKALD:** I should like to be, sir.

**SCHOLAR:** *(surprised)* You would, eh? You look more like a country lad than a scholar.

**YOUNG SKALD:** My father was in the book trade, sir.

**SCHOLAR:** A scribe?

**YOUNG SKALD:** Not a scribe, sir; no. He couldn't write his own name. He was a sheep farmer up at Gothafell.<sup>1</sup> He used to say that our stillborn lambs made the finest vellum in Iceland. We supplied all the parchment for the monks at Thykkvabær. They used a lot of it. A mucky, smelly job it was too, scraping the fat and the wool off the soggy, wet skins and dressing them with urine and lime solution. I used to wear my knuckles raw rubbing them down with pumice stone after they'd been stretched and dried. They say our mountain, Gothafell, used to breathe fire in the old days, like a dragon. We could find all the pumice we needed up there, but it took days to get the skins really smooth and thin with it. My father used to reckon that however much work the monks put into making a fine book, we put in at least double. *And they got to do their part indoors in the warm and dry. That's why he packed me off to them at ten years old to learn reading and writing and rhetoric. He wanted me to be a priest.*

**SCHOLAR:** But you didn't, is that it? So what are you doing here, young What's-your-name? (*Peers at Young Skald's hooded top.*) Young Gap. Uncouth sort of name, Gap. Why ever did they call you that?

**YOUNG SKALD:** Not Gap, sir: Gylfi. Gylfi, Apprentice Poet.

**SCHOLAR:** A poet, eh. You've come to the wrong place, then. I know what all you young scribblers are writing nowadays. Newfangled verse in limp rhyming couplets, full of Frenchified tales about King Arthur and his pack of snivelling knights. I don't know what Iceland is coming to. The year of our lord 1325 and poetry is as good as dead. No one remembers the old days when it was a hard, professional job, putting together a clever string of kennings with a gold arm-ring from the king if you succeeded and your head chopped off next morning if you didn't. I don't suppose you even know what a kenning is, young Gap.

**YOUNG SKALD:** As a matter of fact, I do, sir. There was a hymn some old canon had written which the monks used to make us sing on Good Fridays.<sup>2</sup> That had kennings in it. Calling God 'the high ruler of the storm tent'; that sort of thing. It means telling the truth in a twisty way so it takes you by surprise. For instance, if I said that you were the greatest scholar of Norse mythology since the death of Snorri Sturluson, I would simply be stating a fact, but if I were to call you the all-wise dragon who guards the gold-hoard of the story-mountain, that would be a kenning. Sir:

**SCHOLAR:** And if I were to say that you are an impudent young whelp who deserves to be sent away with a flea in his ear; what would that be?

**YOUNG SKALD:** That would be a threat. But if you were to say, 'Gylfi Gothafell, I can see you have the makings of a true skald and you have walked over sixty miles on a bad road to find me, so I will teach you what you want to know,' that would be a promise.

**SCHOLAR:** So, what *do* you want to know, and how will you pay me if I agree to teach you?

**YOUNG SKALD:** I want to know the old stories of the gods of the Vikings. And I'll pay you the way a good student always pays his master.

**SCHOLAR:** And how is that?

**YOUNG SKALD:** I'll take the knowledge you give me and make it my own. Poetry isn't just about kennings and verse forms and musty old books. It's about unleashing the power of words and making old things new again.



Words can fly, and words can cry, and words can melt like snow.  
Words can hit the mark like an arrow from a bow.  
They can soar like a hawk sailing on the wind,  
flourish like a weapon in a bold fighter's hand.

Words can change, and words can range, and words can cast a spell.  
Words can quench your thirst just like water from a well.  
They can soar like a hawk sailing on the wind,  
flourish like a weapon in a bold fighter's hand.<sup>3</sup>

**SCHOLAR:** (*grumbling*) Oh, very well. I suppose you show a glimmer of promise. But you'll have to prove that you're worth teaching, mind. First, though, could you put your head round the kitchen door and ask my housekeeper to come and light the fire. I should warn you, she's a bit of an ogress. No, wait, I can hear her coming. Sometimes I almost get the feeling she knows how to read my mind.

*Spaewife enters, wearing a large grubby apron over her black dress, and starts tending the fire.*

**SPAEWIFE:** The fires that get lit in this house, anyone would think that driftwood grew on trees. Anyone would think it just walked in off the shore on its own two feet, like Ask and Embla in the old story, who started as logs of wood washed up by the sea and got turned into the first man and woman. Anyone would think I didn't have enough to do, what with all the rough and the cooking and water to draw and floors to scrub. (*To the audience*) All right, so it's a torch and some coloured paper: Have you lot never heard of Brechtian alienation? Drat these ashes. They get everywhere. (*She takes a dustpan and brush and starts to sweep up invisible ash.*)

**SCHOLAR:** All right, we'll start with the text I'm working on at the moment. It's a poem about the time of the old gods that the priest at Oddi lent me to copy for the cathedral library here at Skálholt. Let's hear you read and construe the first few verses.

**YOUNG SKALD:** I'll do my best, sir. What's the poem called?

**SCHOLAR:** *The Seeress's Prophecy.*

**SPAEWIFE:** Whit in the name is a seeress?

**SCHOLAR:** (*automatically slipping into teaching mode*) It means a pythoness or sibyl. A shamaness. A transmitter of vatic utterances from the spirit world.

**YOUNG SKALD:** I'm afraid you've lost me too, sir.

**SCHOLAR:** (*irritably*) A female with the power to see into the distant past and foretell the future.

**SPAEWIFE:** Oh aye, you mean a spaewife. Like my great-granny that had the Sight.

**SCHOLAR:** (*irritably*) Have you no work to do? (*Spaewife gets a duster out of her apron pocket.*) Well, get on with it, boy. We don't have all day.

**YOUNG SKALD:** From all hallowed beings I ask for a hearing,  
greater and lesser, the children of Heimdall.  
Father of dead men, you wish me to utter  
tales I recall from the dawning of time.

Fostered by giants, I remember my rearing,  
born into life before world was well started.  
I remember nine kingdoms and nine giant maidens,  
the roots of the axle-tree under the earth.

Perhaps I'm being stupid, but it all seems a bit obscure. Who was Heimdall?

**SPAEWIFE:** *(to herself)* Obscure, he says. It'll be darker yet before it's done.

**SCHOLAR:** *(looking it up in one of his books)* According to Simek, 'De Vries concluded that Heimdall ought to be listed among the gods of the second mythical function, that of strength, whereby Thor would represent the warrior and Heimdall the guardsman. Dumézil however thinks of Heimdall as the god of origin, like the Roman Janus and the Indian Dyauh of the *Mahabharata*, not as the father of the gods, but as the god of the beginning of long life (symbolised by his nine births). In this case Snorri's information that Heimdall is Odin's son is inaccurate. Schröder, on the other hand, understands Heimdall to be a god of fire who would correspond to the Indian god Agni.'

**YOUNG SKALD:** So, to sum up, sir?

**SCHOLAR:** Nobody knows. Get on with the next verse.

**SPAEWIFE:** *(to herself)* All those words to tell what nobody knows. There's book-learning for you.

**YOUNG SKALD:** Back in the fore-time of Ymir's dwelling  
there was neither sea-sand nor cold sea-water,  
earth was absent and sky was vacant,  
an empty chasm where no grass grew.

Then came the Æsir and reared high temples;  
forges they founded and tools they fashioned.  
In a green meadow they played at chequers  
with golden pieces and their hearts were glad.

Who were the Æsir? Or is that another really silly question?

**SCHOLAR:** They were the gods of Asgard, the ones you've come here to learn about. You can skip the next bit. It's just a long list of dwarfs' names.

**YOUNG SKALD:** How many dwarfs, sir?

**SCHOLAR:** About sixty, if I remember rightly.

**YOUNG SKALD:** That sounds like too many, somehow. Seven would have been plenty. (*Leafs ahead through the text.*) And there's an awful lot of this poem too. It seems to be dozens of stories all jumbled together: Look, here's a bit about Baldr – I'm sure I've heard his name somewhere. Who was he?

**SCHOLAR:** He was the second son of Odin, father of the gods, and the wisest and most beautiful of all the Æsir. According to Snorri Sturluson, he was so radiant to look at that light shone from him and so fair that the ox-eye daisy used to be called Baldr's eyelashes because its petals were so white.

**YOUNG SKALD:** It says here he became a blood-stained sacrifice, killed with a dart made from mistletoe. Can a god die?

**SPAEWIFE:** (*to herself*) Oh, they can die, all right. They can be bumped off just like anyone else.

**SCHOLAR:** Snorri gives quite a full account of it in his *Prose Edda*. Yes, here we are. 'The beginning of this tale is that Baldr was troubled by bad dreams in which it seemed that his life was in danger. So the Æsir met in council and agreed that Baldr should be made safe from every sort of harm. So fire and water and stone and cold iron and every kind of metal, and the earth and the trees and the birds and the beasts, and poisons and diseases and even the snakes swore a solemn, binding oath to Frigg his mother that they would never hurt him. After that, it became a sport among the Æsir to shoot or strike at Baldr and see the weapons miss their target. But Loki was secretly displeased to see Baldr unharmed, so he changed his shape into that of a woman ...'

**YOUNG SKALD:** Loki? Who was he?

**SCHOLAR:** Simek tells us that 'There has been no interpretation of Loki as yet which manages to include all the aspects of his character as shown in the various tales. Loki is not simply the demonic being, the destructive person, whom Bugge saw as a reflection of the Christian Lucifer. Comparing him with Hermes of Greek mythology or even with the Celtic god Briciu, weakens his position and makes him the malicious, foolish, loquacious servant of the gods. It is an oversimplification to see Loki as a pure alter ego of Odin, as a personification of Odin's dark side, merely because of his closeness to Odin, whose blood-brother he is said to be. De Vries is somewhat fairer to his multi-faceted character when he sees him as the "trickster" of archaic religions, who undertook the double function of culture-hero and deceiver.'

**SPAEWIFE:** (*to herself*) Aye, that's Loki, for you. No one could ever pin him down. Well, not so as he couldn't get loose again in the end and come and get them for it.

**SCHOLAR:** According to Snorri's more straightforward account, 'Loki was handsome and pleasing to look at, but evil in his nature and capricious in his deeds. He had a greater share of cunning than any of the gods and had subtle tricks for all occasions.'

**SPAEWIFE:** (*to herself*) You can say that again. Handsome as a fox and tricky as a two-tongued snake.

**SCHOLAR:** Anyway, to return to Snorri's account, 'Loki changed his shape into that of a woman and went to speak with Frigg, Baldr's mother. And when he told her how the gods were all shooting at Baldr, she laughed and said, "Wood and edged weapons can never hurt my son. The only thing, living or dead, not bound by oath to spare him is the green mistletoe, and that seemed too young to do him any harm."

**SPAEWIFE:** Here, I know how this tale works out. Loki goes back and he gets a twig of mistletoe and puts a real sharp point on it and then he finds Baldr's brother, the blind one, and asks him why he isn't joining in the game. Just you aim where I tell you, he says, and you'll not need eyes. And the brother shoots Baldr right in the heart and he falls down dead.

**YOUNG SKALD:** Where did you learn that story, great-grandmother?

**SPAEWIFE:** Learn, is it? You don't need books to get learnt, no matter what some folks think. It was my own great-granny that told it me.

**SCHOLAR:** (*to Young Skald*) Very interesting, the way these surviving traces of pre-Christian narrative surface in the oral tradition. Well, as I was saying, Snorri then gives an extensive account of Baldr's funeral, which yields some valuable anthropological clues about the role played by ships in Viking funerary rites, and also relates a characteristic myth (with evident fertility cult implications) about a descent into the underworld and an attempt to restore the dead god to the world of the living.

**SPAEWIFE:** It was the youngest one, the bairn. It always is in a tale. His mother asks the lot of them who will ride the road to Hel and it's only the bairn that's willing. Not his big brother with the thunderbolts that thought himself so strong.

**SCHOLAR:** Thor.

**SPAEWIFE:** Aye, Thor. Him. You don't catch him going. It's the bairn that borrows his father's great horse and rides east and north into the mountains for nine long nights and a day until he comes to Hel bridge.

**SCHOLAR:** (*fussily*) By Hel, of course, we should understand not the Christian place of eternal punishment but rather the realm of the dead of Norse mythology which shares a name with its presiding deity.

**SPAEWIFE:** Aye, Hel, who queens it over the dead. But we haven't got to her yet. The horse comes to the bridge and there's a lassie, just, to guard it, and that one horse's hooves make more din than a whole troop of dead men that rode over it just the day before. Besides, the bairn doesn't have the colour of a dead man. So she asks him what he wants in that uncanny place. But the lad is bound to find his brother, so he just puts his horse into a jump and clears the wall and comes into the house of the dead and finds him sitting at the table with a golden cup and a golden plate. And if he was white before, now he's ashen, and his bonny wife sitting pale beside him that loved him so much that she had them burn her on the boat with his corpse rather than leave him. And no doubt there's some book that can tell what happened next.

**SCHOLAR:** Hmm, yes, well, in Snorri's version of the story, 'Hermóthr asked Hel to let his brother ride home with him to Asgard and told her how bitterly the Æsir were weeping for his loss. But Hel said she must have proof of how dearly he was loved before she would let him go and she uttered these words: "Only if everything in the world, alive or dead, sheds tears for Baldr shall he return to the Æsir. If not, I shall keep him here for ever!"

*(Young Skald starts scribbling something down.)*

**SCHOLAR:** You're not paying attention, boy.

**YOUNG SKALD:** It's a good subject for a song.



For Baldr the beautiful, for Baldr the young,  
for Baldr the mortal your tears must run down.  
United in sorrow the whole earth shall mourn.  
Let creation weep for Baldr or he'll not return.

The storm wind shall sigh for him, the clouds melt in rain.  
The stones on the mountainside shall grieve for him slain.  
All people, all creatures must let their tears fall.  
Lament now for Baldr to weep him from Hel.

Let eagle and raven cry, the wolf howl in the wood,  
the oar blade shed salt tears, the sword blade weep blood.  
The dead and the living together must mourn.  
Let creation weep for Baldr or he'll not return.<sup>4</sup>

**SCHOLAR:** As I said before, you're not completely devoid of talent – though, needless to say, that is not how the story ends. In a neat doubling motif, Snorri parallels the animate and inanimate forces willing to weep for Baldr with those which earlier swore the oath to protect him, and then identifies the one discordant element, in this case a troll-wife



sitting in a cave, whose refusal takes the form of a riddling mock-acceptance of the otherwise universal observance of ritual mourning.

**SPAEWIFE:** I will weep dust, I will weep sand, I will weep ash.  
I will weep dry tears for Baldr;  
let Hel keep what she has.

**SCHOLAR:** Snorri surmises that this naysayer was in fact Loki, 'who had brought so much evil on the Æsir'.

**SPAEWIFE:** No him. No our Loki. Don't you believe it. Na, Loki was in Asgard, so he was, weeping crocodile tears for poor dead Baldr.

**YOUNG SKALD:** So who was the troll-wife, then?

**SPAEWIFE:** She was a wife right enough, aye. She was Loki's wife, that had borne him three fine bairns and got little but grief for it.

**YOUNG SKALD:** (*keenly curious*) How did you come to know that, great-grandmother?

**SPAEWIFE:** I know what I know. Get on with your books – I'm busy. (*Starts fussing round fire.*)

**SCHOLAR:** It is clear from the source material that she was not, strictly speaking, Loki's wife. Snorri tells us that, in addition to his two legitimate sons by Sigyn, Loki fathered three monstrous offspring on an ogress called Angrboda: the Midgard serpent, the Fenriswolf and Hel, the goddess of death. The Æsir rightly perceived these newborn infants as potential threats to the safety of Asgard and dealt with them accordingly: throwing the serpent into the sea, where it grew so large that it eventually girdled the earth; banishing Hel to rule over the nine realms of the dead; and chaining Fenriswolf with an unbreakable band, a task which could only be accomplished after the god Tyr agreed to place his right hand in the monster's mouth as a pledge of the Æsir's good faith.

**YOUNG SKALD:** What happened to it?

**SCHOLAR:** It was bitten off, of course. Simek appositely points out, in this connection, that 'the loss of the hand used for swearing oaths is documented in many cultures as a punishment for perjury.'

**YOUNG SKALD:** But did Loki get away with his crimes?

**SCHOLAR:** He did not, despite shape-changing into a salmon and hiding himself in a waterfall. The Æsir eventually trapped him in a net of his own devising and contrived a fitting punishment for him, succinctly described by Snorri. 'They took Loki's two sons, Vali and Narfi, and turned Vali into a wolf which tore his brother apart. Then the Æsir took the entrails and tied Loki to three great stones, and these bonds turned to iron, holding him fast. Then the giantess Skadi hung up a venomous snake above him, and though his wife Sigyn sits by his side with a bowl to catch the poison –'

**SPAEWIFE:** (*with spiteful pleasure*) Aye, so she does. Like it says in yon poem,  
...there sits Sigyn,  
and of her husband she has little joy.

**SCHOLAR:** (*ignoring her*) 'every so often she has to empty the bowl, and then the poison drips onto Loki's face and his convulsions cause earthquakes. He will lie like that till Ragnarök.'

**YOUNG SKALD:** Ragnarök! (*Puts on Odin's eye-patch and raises his hood.*)

**SCHOLAR:** The end of the world. The doom of the gods.

**YOUNG SKALD:** (*In Odin's voice*)

I see it now. I see the promised end.  
The world in chaos, brother killing brother.  
Three years of deadly winter when the wolf devours the moon.  
I see Surt the fire giant riding against the gods  
with his sword of molten lava which will set the world aflame.  
I see Loki the outcast returning for vengeance,  
bringing Hel's host in a ship built from dead men's nails.  
I see Thor, son of Odin, defeat the Midgard serpent  
and fall dead from the venom of its dying spittle.  
I see Fenriswolf unleashed attacking great Odin  
despite his keen spear and coat of golden mail.  
The wolf will swallow Odin. The wolf will cause his death.  
I see the jaws gape and everything turns black.

**SCHOLAR:** But even that is not the end. Indeed, there could be said to be no end, since narratives of this kind present time as essentially cyclical in nature. Snorri tells us that after Ragnarök 'the earth will rise again from the sea, so green and fertile that corn will spring up without being sown. Vidar and Vali will be alive, harmed neither by sea nor fire, and the sons of Thor will join them, bringing their father's all-powerful hammer. Then Baldr will return at last from Hel, with blind Höthir, the brother who killed him, and they will all sit down together and talk of days gone by, of the Midgard serpent and Fenriswolf and of mysteries unknown to men. And they will find the golden chequers still lying in the grass, where the Æsir left them at the dawn of time'. However, in *The Seeress's Prophecy*, the speaker significantly reverses the order of events, making Baldr's return a consequence of the finding of the golden chequers:

They will find in the grass the marvellous chequers  
that once they had owned when time was young.  
Then cornfields will flourish that never were sown,  
all ills will be mended, Baldr will return.

**SPAEWIFE:** Aye, but that's no the way it ends.

**SCHOLAR:** Since, as I have already pointed out, time is here being perceived as cyclical rather than sequential, it necessarily follows ...

**SPAEWIFE:** (*interrupting*) Yon spæwif in the rhyme, that's no the way she ends it.

**SCHOLAR:** (*startled*) Eh? What? I don't see how you could possibly know that, but oddly enough you're right. The poem ends with a rather cryptic verse in which Níthhögg, the dragon of death, hovers over a battlefield and carries away the corpses of the slain, signalling the end of the shamaness's trance.

Then comes the death-dragon flying darkly,  
shining serpent from moonless mountains.  
Over the plain his wings are heavy,  
laden with corpses. Now she sinks down.

**SPAEWIFE:** And is there no more said about Baldr in all those fine books of yours?

**SCHOLAR:** Not in this particular manuscript, no. But, as a matter of fact, there is one other poem that touches on the subject. Ah yes, here we are. 'In the enigmatic text known as *Baldr's Dreams*, we see the Æsir sitting in council, perturbed by the ominous nightmares that foreshadow Baldr's death. This time it is Odin who undertakes the ride to Hel, where, undeterred by an encounter with a sinister hound with a bloody breast, he locates the grave of a dead seeress, whose ghost he raises to answer his questions.'

Straight by the doors of Hel he rode  
to find the grave of the wise witch.  
Stark she rose at his words of power,  
grudgingly answered in corpse's speech.

Simek says...

**ODIN:** Be silent now, old man. Your part is done.  
Be deaf and blind to what is still to come.

**SCHOLAR:** (*drowsily*) Simek says the Norse word for seeress actually means wand-bearer ... (*rests his head on his arms and sleeps. Spæwif rises, taking off her apron and picking up her magic staff from beside the fire.*)

**SPAEWIFE:** What unknown man has brought this burden  
to make me travel a hard road?  
Snow has blanched me, rain has soaked me,  
dew has drenched me. I've been long dead.

**ODIN:** A wayfaring man, son of a warrior,  
I come for news of the nether world.  
why do the mail-coats deck the benches?  
For whom is the dais bright with gold?

**SPAEWIFE:** Here is the mead that is brewed for Baldr:  
It shines in the cup, and a shield hangs over  
dark as the doom that awaits the Æsir:  
Reluctant I've spoken. I'll speak no more.

**ODIN:** Spaewife, I charge you, do not be silent.  
I crave your answers till all is known.  
Who is doomed to be Baldr's slayer  
and steal the life-blood from Odin's son?

**SPAEWIFE:** He'll die at the hands of his own brother:  
A lofty branch will be Baldr's killer;  
brought to the Æsir by blind Höthr:  
Reluctant I've spoken. I'll speak no more.

**ODIN:** Spaewife, I charge you, do not be silent.  
I crave your answers till all is known.  
What will the waves, the daughters of Aegir,  
hear Odin whisper to his dead son?

**SPAEWIFE:** You are no traveller, but half-blind Odin  
who pledged an eye to win secret wisdom.

**ODIN:** And you are no spaewife or wise woman,  
but the spawner of Hel and her monstrous brethren.

**SPAEWIFE:** Ride homeward, Odin, and brag your triumph.  
No one again will seek my counsel  
till Loki is loosed from iron bands,  
and Ragnarök arrives with ruin.

*Spaewife extinguishes the fire and Spaewife and Odin turn to stone by freezing with their backs to the audience. Scholar wakes and looks round in bewilderment.*

**Scholar:** What's become of the boy? Did I dream there was a boy here? The fire's gone out.  
It's cold.

.....

## Judith Woolf

### Notes

*The Skald and the Spaewife* was commissioned by the Jorvik Viking Festival and first performed in the Kerrigan Room, York Theatre Royal, on 24 February 2001.

The Scholar's learned quotations are taken from Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, tr: Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993).

1. Goðafell means 'mountain of the gods' in Old Norse.
2. The Good Friday hymn sung by the monks at Thykkvabær was *Harmsól* (Sun of Sorrow), a Christian skaldic poem rich in kennings, composed in their Augustinian monastery during the second half of the 12th century by Gamli kanóki, whose name may mean Canon Gamli or simply the old canon.
3. The Young Skald's first song, 'Words can fly...', is set to the Icelandic folk tune 'Vikivaki'.
4. His second song, 'For Baldr the beautiful...', is set to the klezmer tune 'Papir iz dokh vays' (Paper is White).