

Rahul Gupta

Volund's Revenge

One lost liberty
by loosened bonds
that snidely snipped
were snaring trammels:
caught by the cutting
of cords away,
release of bondage
laid it upon him.

Feeblest fibres,
fastest shackles:
restraints strongest
by their stripping off;
a cunning craftsman
was crippled and maimed:
harsh hamstringing
hobbled Volund.

There stands a smithy
on Staith-by-the-Sea,
a nest where Volund
is narrowly caged:
ebbtide apart
an island-prison
when the firth is drowned
as the flood rises.

Limping lamely
he lights the hearth,
blasts on bellows
till the banked charcoal,
redhot with rage,
is a roaring furnace;
hefts the handles
of hammer and tongs.

Bloomeries brood.
At the broiling foundry,
in sultry smother
from sumps under,

he quickens the lodes
in quarried veinstone,
he smelts his ores
for the smithy's womb.

The molten metals,
milked through runners,
course into crucibles
to be cast as ingots
in the molding matrix;
he mounts the anvil,
fettles the firepit,
he fans the coals.

Sweat-besmirched swart
he swings his hammer
— through smoke-swelter
of smouldering fumes,
shoot showering sparks
from the shocks of the sledge —
beats billets and pigs
to bars of iron.

Struck slabs are steeped
with a steaming hiss,
sluiced slag-drossy
in the slake-bucket;
heated, hammered,
hardened and quenched:
stubborn the steel;
stark and bitter.

'I waddle webfootedly
for my wiles,' he laughed,
'since Nidud's numbing
knee-handiwork!'
But the queen's counsels
are cold always:
'Far from tame yet,
what you found in the woods.'

Sly, sleeplessly,
he slaves at the anvil
in blinding billows,
in blistering heat,
yet the heat and hunger

in the heart of the smith
burn more fiercely
than the blazing furnace.

Night nor by day
he never ceases:
hobbled but unhalting,
at it hammer and tongs;
the empty island
echoes clanging
yet what beats in his brain
bangs still louder.

Stooped and stumping
in stilts he ploys
the tricks of his trade;
trains craftsmanship
to transmute ugly
matter to beauty,
earth, air, and fire
into artefact:

Redgolden rings.
Razor-tempered,
hardened and honed
hoards of weaponry:
blades blood-eddied
with braided swirls
and waves welded
in the weave of steel

acid-etched with venom;
anger-whetted;
his feud is forged
into folded metal;
bent on broodings
he beats the anvil:
he would wreak a wonder
wrought in vengeance.

Man-manacled Elf,
his mind's on the wife
he tried to tame;
trapped and pining,
he kept hidden
the cloak she yearned for;

now her wedding-band
is worn by another.

Devising visions
of revenge perfected,
his wrongs righted
in a richer design,
he would mend the broken
to better than new
by a great breaking
of againmaking.

His mind's modelling
a masterpiece,
Elf-artfulness
for all his rancours:
he keenly tinkers
clever contraptions;
and in the deafening dungeon
he dreams of swans.

Shapes shirts of mail,
shining hauberks
skilfully linked
like scales of fishes;
cloisonnés clinch
in clustered lattice
jewels joining
gemstones and glass.

Now with plucking pincers
he plies his skills,
gouging gimlets,
grating drillbits,
and bone-buffers;
blades for flaying;
the scabbed scalpel;
the scraping saw;

anneals and sinters
enamels fusing
millefiori
and mother-of-pearl;
tooth of walrus,
tusk of narwhal,
with elk-antler

and aurochs' horn.

Filigrees enfold
fine-traceried
embedded panels
of bright-chequered
foil-lustrous facets;
in fretworked cells
gleam glazed spangles
and glowing amber.

He assembles scenes
of sword-dancers;
warriors grappling
with wolves and bears;
narrates an array
of heroic legendry,
to people with pictures
plates on helmets.

He twists patterns
of twining serpents
set seething fast
in silver wire:
their lashing coils
are locked forever
in gold with garnets
for glaring eyes;

and toils over
intaglios,
carving cameos
in costly stone;
shaved out of shell,
shimmering inlays
lodge in sockets
with a lacquered sheen;

dazzling brooches
for a daughter's breast:
ivoried orbs
with ogling crystals;
and (round the rims
romping wolfcubs)
paired fine goblets
for fond parents.

Today he dawdles
in the dunes of the shore
on stumping crutches;
he studies the gulls
as they escape to the sky,
skirling, soaring.
He is beachcombing
for birds' pinions.