A Lay of St. Boniface

By Patricia Masson

Winter at its midmost. · In his weakness the Sun,
a doddering dotard, · had dared to creep forth,
rising late from his bed, · to limp a short space
up the hill of heaven. · Soon, his heart quailing
he must tire, totter down, · turn again to his rest.
A passion of pity · overpowered me at the sight
of the god so disgraced, · whose glory in summer
had lightened the land, · lifted up our spirits
with brightness and beauty, · the bounty accorded him
by the Lord of life, · light-bestower,
bringer of blessing. · in that blissful season
all green things that grow, · grass in the meadows,
herbs of the wilderness, · worts of the gardens,
all that flowers and bears fruit · in farm-field or woodland
had leapt into life; · by that Lord's power
all beasts had bred, · the bull at his urging
got calves on the kine, · cocks trod their hens;
men mastered maidens. · But for me sufficed not
such cheerful worship, · chosen and dedicated
for a service more sacred · when the season should change.

The moment was come now. · The might that had cherished us,
the Lord, the Life-Giver, · beleaguered by darkness,
ailed now in anguish. · From of old it was spoken,
how at Yule of the year · he must yield him to Death,
that quells even gods, · and quicken the springtime
no more in the middle-earth, · save if men in devotion
restore again life · to the Lord who bestowed it,
to the giver of all good · yielding again his own:
For the life of he herds · a horse or a bull,
of our bread and or beer · for the barley and the wheat
our fields had brought forth, · and our folk moreover
must seek among their sons · the sacrifice proper
for the life of man. · On me the choice fell.
This was wherefore I walked · in worship and glory
to the place appointed, · set apart and hallowed
for the keeping of that custom, · as the counsel of dread
that our forefathers followed · we fulfilled in our turn.
Behind me I heard · a high-pitched outcry,
A woman in her weakness · wailing a lament.
Mourn me not, Mother, · for each man must die
and better in this battle · where the bliss of the summer,

prosperity for our people, · is the prize to be won,
than stretched in the straw, · stricken with age,
a dastard death · that is deemed by warriors.

High above men's houses, · on the holy mountain
was that sacred spot · the Spirit of all life
deigned to indwell. · None could doubt who saw it
that holiness haunted · that hallow of the god,
eldest of oak-trees, · of all in our land
the greatest in girth, · the ground he overshadowed
broader than a mead-hall, · branches far-spreading
the timbers of its roof. · Towering he uplifted
his head in the heavens, · hearing and conversing
in whispers with the winds · in words that men knew not,
runes of the High Ones; · roots in the deep earth
fixed and fastened · firmly and securely,
moveless in the mould, · where mortals honored him;
and betwixt these twain · a twilight country,
a life-haunted labyrinth · of leaves and branches
bewildering the sight. · So seemed he in his prime,
noble and awful. · Now, the oppressors
Death and the Dark, · are driving him hard,
strongly as he strives. · Striped by the frost-giants
of his green garment, · his ground-shadowing limbs
bare as old bones, · when the blizzards mock him
how wildly he wails, · weeping the dire loss
of his vigour and fruitfulness: · Not in vain have you called
on your servants for succour: · Your suffering endure
but a little while, Lord, · and your lack shall be made good.
As we approached the place, · plainly we could see him
high on his hill-top, · the holy one standing
gaunt as a gallows · before the gloomy heavens
as we climbed ever closer. · Then a clamour broke out
as terror overtook us: · The Tree's self was moving,
coming toward us. · With a cry like a man groaning
it faltered, it fell: · Into four parts shattered
it lay, what was left of it, · low on the earth's face,
riven and in ruin, · irrevocably felled,
and the heavens above the hill · were horribly empty
where its form had filled them, · save for the figure of a man
who stood by the stump, · still and unafraid,
and held in his hand · the haft of a felling-axe
that had struck that stroke: · The stranger who called himself
Winfrith the Well-Doer, · who wilfully had departed
into exile from hi Englamd, · for some oath that impelled him

to dwell in danger · in a distant land.
So he came to our country, · where he called upon our people
to attend to strange tales, · teaching a new doctrine,
to the few who would follow him. · Folk for the most part
heard him not nor heeded, · holding that his babble
was witless and wandering. · When he warned that at this season
he would dare such a deed, · no danger had we feared,
but reckoned that he raved, · bereft of his senses.

Now we stood stone-still, · and in stark horror
gazed into that gap · where our god had been steadfast
since middle-earth's making, · till a man had struck him
one blow with his blade, · and broken the power
we had feared and fostered. · At first for a little while
horror kept us hushed. · Then I heard a voice arise,
a mourning moan, · as of one mad with terror:
"Winter has won, · and the world is doomed,
We can send no sacrifice. · Summer cannot return,
No drawing-out of days, · but the drear twilight
shall linger and lengthen, · the light and the comfort
fade still and falter · until they fail at the end.
Never growth, never green, · never grain for the reapers,
but dearth and darknes, · and death unescapable
with no god to be our guardian." · Grim answered another:
"And all the work of this wizard, · this wanton destroyer:
Shall the foeman go free, · fleering and gloating over
his harvest of harm? · Have at him! Kill him!
Though all vows are now vain, · let one victim and the last
blacken with poured blood · the bole that he has severed
and be the first to feel · the fate that he has called down!"
Not a man of us moved. · Mighty as was our anger,
no weapon was drawn, · for the world as we had known it
was shattered in the shock, · all sureness was gone,
nor were men of one mind. · Many there were who reasoned,
the Life-Lord being lost to us, · his laws were unmade
that would call on us to kill · the causer of our ruin.
Let him wend where he would. · What worth to us now,
when the deed was done, · were the death of the destroyer?

Boldly Boniface · braved our anger,
flinched not nor fled, · but faced our hatred
with will unwavering. · Watching from his standpoint
he beheld and heard us · hanging back irresolute
without strength to strike him. · Striding towards us
he clearly declared · his claim to victory.

"Look now where it lies, · brought low and abolished,
the wood that you worshipped! · To ward you from harm
you prayed and implored it, · paying it in men's blood
the fee of your fears, · that had not force in itself.
to stave off from its stem · the steel of an axe-blade.
False and unfounded · was the fear that tempted you
to such devilish deeds, · death of the innocent,
neighbours and kinsmen · needlessly slaughtered.
Be free now from fear! · Have faith and believe
That Life's true Lord · is a loving father,
granting ungrudgingly · the gifts of the harvest
from his unfailing fullness. · He enforces no price,
having need of nothing, · who is nature's source,
and holds in his hards · both the heavens and the earth.

Some welcomed his words: · women for the most part,
mothers and maidens · whose menfolk in past years
had been given to the god. · Their grief-wounded hearts
sickened of sacrifice, · sought not nor cared for
a proof of his promises. · The prudent, and the desperate,
looked now for leadership, · to the lord of our people,
cunning in counsel, · for the course we would follow
was his duty to deem · in doubtful matters.
He wielded his word-hoard: · "As to whether this deed
was ill-done or well done, · I am unable to tell,
nor what fate shll befall us · who must fail to render
what men have deemed to be due · since the days of our forefathers.
When a carle is killed · the custom has been ever
that the heirs that live after him · are in honour boud
to further the feud, · for father and brother
taking violent vengeace · as virtue demands.
If the tales speak true · the tree that lies slaughtered
was the guise of a god; · the grievance aginst his slayer,
the feud for his felling · falls then to his own kind.
Mortals in such matters · meddle at their peril!
And what if the words · of this Widsith be true,
And the Lord that he looks to, · who laid him the task
Of wreaking his wrath · on a rival for our worship
is the wielder of the worlds? · What woes shall they suffer
who by force offend · against his faithful servant?
It were wise to wait, · watching the outcome,
and see if the spirit-world · send their own vengeance,
bring ruin on the ravager; · or raise to life again,
unharmed and whole, · the holy oak-tree
in proof of their power; · or by portent or sign

grant us some guidance · to what were good for us to do.
Or if Boniface abide, · blessed with fair fortune,
And the seeds that must be sown · with no sacrifice offered
as in the years of yore, · still yield us a harvest,
we may tell by such tokens · that truth is in his claim
that his god is the greater, · and it were good for our people
to listen to his lore · and learn the new customs.
Hold we our hnds then · from hasty actions
that may bing us to bale, · let us bide our time.
Leave Weird to her work, · for her will is more powerful
than any mind of man · or might of the gods."
Duly did we therefore · what he deemed to be best,
and the canniest course. · Some carped at this judgment
that harmed not the hated one; · yeet they harkened my voice.
For I, who of all men · was most angered at heart,
spoke for his sparing. · It was to spill my own blood,
a life that was laid down · loyally and freely,
this company had come there, · not in cold despair
and mirthless mockery, · to mingle the carcase
of a faithless foe · beside a fallen tree-trunk.

We left him aloft there, · lone on the summit,
as we wandered away; · and I walked down the hindmost,
on feet that felt · as if fixed on backwards
as we traced out in terror · a track forfended
where my weird had not willed · I should walk again ever.
Coming among cottages, · I cowered away furtively
to shelter in some shippon, · shrank from men's dwellings
lest harm should haunt · the house roof that covered me,
or folk at fireside, · afrighted at sight of me,
drive me from their doors, · who was a dead man by right.
Yet there came to me kinsfolk; · [they] kindly and welcoming
led me back to lodge with them, · to the life I had thought ended
when my doom was dealt to me, · that duty now lost.
So I moved among men, · and made as if to live again,
in the white-pale winter-gloom · that wanly spread over
days that should not have dawned for me · and I dared not believe in them.
It seemed, even so, · that the sun's hours grew more,
Or at least were no less, · though lowering cloud-banks
concealed his setting · and made secret his rising.