

**John Dryden Translation Competition for 2013-2014 Second Prize Winner**

**Extract from 'Skjelettet og Anatomiboka' by Hans Herbjørnsrud,  
translated by Lucy Moffatt**

**Published with the courtesy of Gyldendal Norsk Forlag**

**THE SKELETON AND THE ANATOMY BOOK**

When I came from Sagaheim Folkehøyskole, a college in South Trondelag, to take over the family farm here in Heddal in the winter of 1976, I had a skeleton and an anatomy book among my possessions.

Now, as chance would have it, one storm-blasted February day right before my departure from the school, I had been given the task of separating out the items that were worth keeping in the stock room of the old school building. This house, where Sagaheim had been based since the school was founded in 1898, was shortly due to be demolished and we teachers were taking advantage of a Saturday when all the students had travelled back home to strip the rooms of any items that might be worth conserving and take them over to the brand new school building. The things we left behind would be buried by timber and splintered panelling beneath a haze of swarming dust when the bulldozer smashed up the vast old pile with its ornate Swiss-style bay windows and balconies. The demolition was due to take place a couple of months after we had moved out of the school – at the same time as our decrepit old family retainer, John Deere, would be hobbling bow-legged around the fields at home on the farm from dawn till dusk, day after day, ploughing, harrowing, sowing and rolling his way through the spring work, issuing bronchial snorts of diesel from his exhaust pipe.

My job, then, was to select and reject items in the stock room – which was not so much a room as a shed made of unplanned planks cobbled together between two cross-beams under the rafters in the vast loft. The rafters were like the ribs in a huge thorax; the loft breathed in with each heave and groan of the gusting wind, drawing the frozen air into its lungs on that fierce-snorting February day, making the draughty shed as cold and clammy as an atishoo. The electric heater was less than a little effective so I was

wandering about in thick outdoor clothing and breathing out speech bubbles scribbled full of foggy talk and other woolly chat as I clumped about on the loose floor planks in my hobnailed boots.

The work was going well enough, because the items were numbered and named with those labels people use for jam-jars, and the collection was classified by subject: Physics, Chemistry, Geography, Biology and Geology. One glass cabinet contained an adder, dead-drunk in alcohol, a stuffed corncrake and a spritely, life-like stoat, together with other preserved animals and birds that I can no longer recall. But I do remember that on one of the shelves lay the cranium of a wolverine and the skeleton of a large fish, whose mummified head – fairly well-preserved – was still attached, and stared with a gaze as glowing and dented as beaten copper. The naked spine of the fish shot out thread-fine bones, like a lilliputian birch tree with a birch-bark-pale trunk and white-frosted twigs that had just been felled to the ground. A beaver for which there had been no space on the shelves sat atop the cabinet, gnawing upon an aspen branch imperturbably. But the stoat's whiskers quivered vigilantly and I could see its eyes shimmer glassily with crystallised fright as I tramped back and forth across the wobbling planks of the floor, which cracked beneath my boots, making the same sound as the warning splash the beaver atop the cabinet might rap out with his tail on the surface of the water in his river pool. Some of the planks squeaked their rusty nails as they jerked beneath the tramping of my boots and the rasping sound of these nails was, for me, so unbelievably like the cry of the corncrake that on at least one occasion I couldn't help but spin around to stare at the bird.

Much of the Physics and Chemistry collection was from the early 1900s, and not much of it remained once I had sieved and sifted the glasses of various powdery substances. The scales were weighed and found wanting. Decilitre beakers, litre jugs and meter-sticks failed to measure up and were rejected. The same went for the thermometer, which was stuck in the wrong season.

From the rack of frayed old wall-charts used for Natural History and Bible Studies, I chose two life-like depictions the school had acquired in 1906, according to the labels. One plate showed Cain beating Abel to death with the jawbone of an ass before the sacrificial altar, while the other showed Joseph standing up to his hips in water and

stretching his hands up beseechingly towards his brothers' heads, which circled the lip of the well high above him like eleven black stars against the bright sky. I also took with me an anatomical chart of a human skeleton, and another of a skinless male body, which showed how the tendons and ligaments bound the flesh fast to the skeleton, swathing the body in strips that reminded me at once of a winding sheet and a newborn's swaddling clothes.

Only a few of the maps tallied with the political territories of 1976, and I offered them all up to the bulldozers. But I preserved the stuffed mammals and birds, and prolonged their lives by caging them into a display case in the crafts room of the new building. The food-loving beaver also lost his freedom now, and was imprisoned in the showcase, where he continued to gnaw and gnaw upon his ever-lasting aspen branch. In a thousand years' time the beaver would surely still not have got beyond stripping the branch of its bark, leaving it shining, bone-white.

In a mahogany display case as tall as a man at the very back of the shed stood a skeleton I had seen a few times before. And when, on that day, I hobnailed close by the case, I thought I could hear the dry rattle of the bones. It was said that a medical student who had worked as a substitute teacher at the school in the autumn and early winter of 1918 had supposedly brought the skeleton with him from the University of Oslo. But after he died of Spanish influenza in December of that year, the skeleton remained at the school for some reason or another. On the label was written: "Skeleton of a 38-year-old farmer from Numedal, slain in August 1835.

Belonged to Sjur Loftsgard, who died in the epidemic before Christmas 1918."

Yes, so Sjur was the name of the medical student and he had probably left behind him information that could flesh out the skeletal story yielded by the meagre details on the label. Apparently, Sjur came not only from the same village but also from the same farm as the Numedal farmer. Yes – indeed the skeleton was supposedly that of his grandfather, or so it was rumoured. Perhaps that's why he became so eagle-eyed and ruffle-feathered whenever the skeleton came up in conversation, they said. I was also told that Sjur was the oldest son, and had planned to take over the family farm and settle down as the district doctor in his home village once he had qualified as a physician. During the last days of his life, he took himself and his bony body to bed, blurted out

the school's former caretaker, casting down his gaze while his glass eye stared frozenly at me. His grandfather was called Sjur too, you understand, he said – though I was unable to grasp what it was I understood.

So yes, then, the old caretaker understood quite a lot, but two former pupils from the village would be able to tell me even more. Both were 79 years old and had once been taught Norwegian, History and Anatomy by the student. The pair had worked together in the woods as lumberjacks since their college days and that life of toil with bow-saw and axe in metre-deep snowdrifts and sun-dizzied July days had twisted their bodies crooked and scored its striations upon them. I met the old men at the old people's home in the village. One of them was sitting in a wheelchair and when he tried to remember his days at Sagaheim in 1918, his liver-spotted brow wrinkled abruptly like a newly ridged potato field with many furrows, making his nose resemble a primitive plough with two broad ploughshares and a long spike pointing towards the eyebrows. Its job was done, for the plough stood athwart the ridges at the outer edge of the field.

The two old men said that the man who had once upholstered the skeleton and draped it in skin and beard and hair had been the victim of a fratricide in one of the upper villages of Numedal, in Uvdal. Sjur had told them all about it. On the crown, you could see the cleft, narrow as the slot in a piggy-bank, left by the axe's blade. A five-kroner coin I tried with could just about be forced into the opening, and tinkled down into the empty cranium.

Two brothers each owned a splendid farm in the same neighbourhood, I heard, and one fine day when they were out beating the bounds between their dairy pastures up in the hills, they fell to arguing about a marker stone. The words flew thick and fast, and soon cutting words gave way to axe-blows. The fight became tight-lipped and short-lived once the axes' jaws began to speak their sharp language. The manslayerer sank the body in a tarn but when he returned to the village alone and unable to account for his brother, people became suspicious. His arm twitched and shook as he drew his fingers through his mop of hair, they noticed, and with every word he stuttered, the sinews in his neck writhed as they did when he guzzled ale from the cask to quench his thirst. Nonetheless, his words fell as oddly mild as rain in January: "I'm not my brother's keeper," he is supposed to have said, before shutting himself up in the guest room on

the first floor of the farmhouse. They could hear him in there, a-wolfing and a-bearing in all manner of rough and unrecognisable voices.

At length, a search party was formed, and streamed far and wide across the uplands where the brothers had walked up along the boundary. For three days on end, the local farming folk combed the bushes and thickets, wedging their way into a bear's abandoned winter den, wading through the brook on the mountain dairy farm and dragging iron hooks fastened to long lines through pools and tarns; but it was as if the earth had opened up and swallowed the missing man. Their dredging pulled up nothing but water-lily roots, slick as eels. They hallooed and listened. The echo mocked their cries. When they stopped to eat, all they could hear was the deafening stillness of the dairy pastures.

When they came back to the dairy farm at twilight, the white cowbell chimes glittered in the air around them like whitefish darting in a river's current. And then the evening poured across the uplands and muddied the day. The sky above the dairy shed became filled with twinkling shards of glass. Out in the meadows, the darkness gasped for breath beneath the juniper and the crooked birch. Only once they had stepped into the cramped summer farmhouse did they gradually become calm. The paraffin lamps shone. They ate and drank. The plump timber of the beams closed its fingers about them, so that they sat shoulder to shoulder as if hidden within the hollow of two clasped palms. The flame shuddered on its wick. They spoke little. And then sleep blew them all out.

When the search ended its third day, the search party had at least found a grimacing skull, a backbone, a silver belt-buckle, a fine brooch and several smaller bony remnants besides, all belonging to the daughter of a well-to-do farmer who, as the whole village knew, had been lured away from home one Saturday night and enticed into the mountain realm by the troll in Gråbergnuten ever such a long time before. It looked to the search party as if the troll had swallowed the girl – skin and hair and all – and then thrown up the bones and spat them out again, it was said. What they took at first to be an indigestible skein of her waist-long brown hair proved, on closer inspection, to be owl pellets.

On the sixth day after the brothers had gone up along the boundary, the carcass of the murder victim floated up to the surface of the water out in the middle of a tarn. It lay

there and swelled up to a vast size in the baking sun beneath a blue-black thundercloud of raucously cawing ravens. The dairy maid who discovered the dead body thought at first that it was an ox-calf puffed up with bloat.

Four men carried the waterlogged carcass back to the village on a litter in the late August evening. And it was said that the corpse glowed and cast a greenish sheen around it like the will o' the wisp that hovers over a hoard of silver buried in the marshes, or the gleam of phosphorus that flickers around spoiled fish in the darkness of the cellar. He lit himself home in the black night, it was said. The bearers made not a single false step as they descended the rocky path through the dairy pastures, such was the strength of the body's radiance, even though it still had clothes upon it. The green glow of northern lights glimmered upon the faces of the two men furthest to the rear. The bearers went bare-headed, as was the custom. Their throats tightened and constricted when they were obliged to squeeze out some necessary word or another. The dead man had been well liked by all. The night sky was pierced with long, sharp needles that scratched at their gaze if they lifted their heads.

When the bearers passed by the church, the bells began to thunder in the night with a heavy clanging, as if the heavens were splitting asunder a mountain of iron and copper with blazing thunderbolts. Alongside the farm road the meadowsweets stood on tiptoe and shone with consumptive pallor in the dead man's glow. The cattle-shed lowed, the stable neighed and the sheepfold down in the enclosed pasture bleated when the bearers entered the farmyard. The gleam cast by the dead man flickered in the breeze and glowed so eerily that they dared not set the litter down inside for fear of starting a fire, and instead left it standing out in the middle of the farmyard overnight. And then they found that the shimmering light attracted the moths, and that bats flitted about the litter like tiny little fluttering sorcery books that had been thrown up into the air – one sorcery book after another – from the thick darkness beyond the light, I heard.

When the brother refused to confess to the killing, the parish constable sent the corpse for autopsy to the University of Christiania, for he hoped that an anatomical examination of the body could settle the matter. After the investigation, the skeleton was apparently kept in the medical faculty's collection and displayed during anatomy lectures until, finally, the previously mentioned student, Sjur, took the ruins of his

grandfather with him to Sagaheim in 1918 – more than 80 years after the killing. The old men mentioned that Sjur also took an ancient anatomy textbook with him from the faculty. The book was muzzled tight with criss-crossed string tied in double knots and two bows that put one in mind of the transparent wings of a dragon-fly.

The two former college students told me that Henrik Wergeland, Norway's foremost poet through the generations, had been there when the body of the farmer from Numedal had been opened up and examined at the end of August 1835. And that may well be true, for in 1834, after failing to obtain even the smallest and humblest of the country's parishes, Wergeland hurled himself, with all his unruly energy, into the study of medicine instead. We have several concrete accounts of his participation in autopsies during his two years of medical studies. The dissection of the axed man from Numedal must have left him particularly shaken, I understood.

The two 79-year-olds at the old people's home mentioned that Wergeland had written a poem called *Cain and Abel*, and that this poem supposedly dealt, among others, with how the body of the Numedal farmer was ripped open in the anatomy theatre at the university. Sjur had read the first half of the poem aloud to his pupils during the last class they had had with him, they told me, and several days later he died. But it seems he didn't dare read us the end, said one of them. No, I reckon he didn't dare do that, said the other. The latter half of this poem is prophetic and stares far off into the future, said the first man. Yes, that's what Sjur told us before he began reading, said the other. Perhaps the poem sees us as we sit here now, said the first. No, I'd say it looks even further ahead, said the other. Yes, Sjur told us that it was a far-sighted poem that gazed over our heads and stared straight across the millennia, said the first one. And he said that the poem was deadly dangerous, pure and simple, said the other. Yes, Sjur had read everything that was written on the papers of course, said the first man. And that's why things turned out for him the way they had to, said the other. Wergeland was incomparable, said the first. Is, said the other; he is incomparable. And will be, said the first; he will remain incomparable.

An air of high days and holidays came over the two old men whenever they mentioned Wergeland's poem. I remember them so clearly still, I believe. Their hands came alive and their stiff, crooked fingers began to pluck at the air. The words rang out. As they sat

before me, battered by life, and testified to an odd experience from their youth, they looked all at once so wide-eyed and childlike that the wrinkles were smoothed from their faces and their cheeks grew soft and yellow-white as the skin on day-old cream, I seem to recall.

Sjur had spent a whole lesson dealing with what the poem was about and how it had come into being. He started the next lesson by untying the string and opening up the old anatomy book. From right at the back, between the binding and the printed pages, many loose sheets of paper came spilling out. Sjur took them out and held up the first page to the students. They could see that the sheet was teeming with letters and characters ordered in a pattern, like iron filings held by a magnet on the back of the paper.

Here is the poem I told you about, said Sjur. It was written in Wergeland's own hand in the winter of 1836. The poem does not appear in his collected works. It has never been published. I am the only person who has read it. You will be the first people to hear it. But I will stop midway through the poem. I dare not read more than seven of these fourteen pages. This poem has seen too much. The last seven pages stare lidlessly into a future that none of us is strong enough to behold. The poem would dazzle and blind us. It is that merciless. Wergeland did not wish *Cain and Abel* to be read by anyone. He himself was scared to death of his own poem. Indeed, it made him quite sick and confined him to his bed. The poem knocked him out, drained his sap and sucked out his marrow. For two whole summer months, the vigorous Wergeland was prostrated, laid out in a seemingly deathlike state, barely perceiving the world around him. His eyes were two lumps of burnt-out coal in a snowman's face. That is how perilous the second half of the poem was to the man who wrote it. That is how perilous it will also be for us. *Cain and Abel* is an outsider in our age. We cannot tolerate it. The world is still too young and inexperienced for this poem. It belongs far off in the roadless and remote millennia that our thoughts cannot reach, you understand.

While Sjur the student read out the first half of *Cain and Abel* to the college students, the skeleton stood placed beside him, in front of the blackboard, I heard. Sjur's pitchblack mop of hair and dark suit blended in with the blackboard so that his narrow face, chalk-white as a white eel, stood out unexpectedly and summoned all gazes to itself. The skeleton that stood beside him could easily have been one that somebody had

drawn in chalk upon the blackboard, said one of the old men. The stand held the skeleton suspended slightly above the floor so that it was pretty much of a height with the student, and it had been so strange to see these two standing there, shoulder to shoulder, staring out over the flock of students, said the other 79-yearold. Gripping, but scary all the same, said the first. I thought they looked like each other, said the second. Yes, and no wonder, said the first. Sjur's dark-brown eyes had been at the same height as the black eye sockets of the skeleton, and the students' gaze flickered from one head to the other.

That would prove to be Sjur's last lesson at Sagaheim. He coughed and sneezed constantly and was already doomed to die of the Spanish influenza that would send him to his grave just days later. The handkerchief he often resorted to was speckled red with nose blood. His forehead was dewed with sweat, his eyes crackled and after every coughing fit, the fever burst out and wafted, red-streaked, over his waxen cheeks. His face was striped red as those white flowers there, said one of the old men, pointing at the pelargonium that hung blooming above the window frame, thin blood streaks running over its chalk-white petals. But although Sjur stood there like that, forced to cough up his soul from time to time, he still managed to read out half of Wergeland's poem in the crow-hoarse voice his sickness had now given him.

When the student had read the poem, he folded up the papers, stuck them back in the anatomy book, bound the string around it and tied up the bows. Then he cleared his throat so as to speak more distinctly, thanked the students for their company and walked rapidly out of the classroom. They never saw him again.

The skeleton was left standing there beside the teacher's desk after he had gone, chalk-white against the blackboard. The students sat there for a while, and tried to regain their composure while the poem fell like a sinker into their very depths. The skeleton stood there at the front like a second teacher, commanding their respect with its stern gaze. The students could look death in the eye if they wanted, but they cast down their gaze and stared at their desks, and for a long while it was quiet as the grave. It was so still that all I could hear was my own breathing, said one of the old men. Eventually, the class monitor got up, went to the front, picked the skeleton up carefully with both hands and carried it up to the room in the dormitory where Sjur lodged. The others remained

seated at their desks, silent and reflective. Something had happened, but they didn't know what, said the old man in the wheelchair. Then the headmaster rang the school-bell out in the yard. It sounded like the empty, slow tolling of a funeral bell and the students flapped up at once like a startled flock of birds and flew to the door, I was informed.

Of course, we only got to hear half of the poem of *Cain and Abel*, said the old men, and that part deals first and foremost with the fratricide, and the autopsy of the murder victim from Numedal. Sjur interrupted his reading at the point where Wergeland is sitting and looking at the skeleton during an anatomy lecture, at the same time as he is writing the poem. And that was certainly the thing that had the most powerful effect on us: that we were left alone with the skeleton that Wergeland depicts in his poem. After all, he himself was involved in cutting and slicing up the body, and after it had lain for a few days in a tank of dissolving solution Wergeland had scoured and scraped each bone clean of the scraps of flesh. With his scraping, he freed the skeleton from its rotted flesh just as a sculptor hacks a life-like form from a stone-dead block of marble. And in the poem, Wergeland likens the skeleton again and again to a sculpture, and the bones to various ornamental objects made of marble. The autopsy and cleansing of the skeleton is, in fact, described in the sharpest of detail in the poem, and the words we had just heard still billowed like a breath-light veil about the skeleton as it stood in front of the blackboard. The skeleton was clad in Wergeland's words. We sat there statue-stiff, staring, we felt, at the marble sculpture of a human being.

As in most of Wergeland's poems, the images follow hot on one another's heels, said the old men. When Sjur read the poem for them, it was as if he were leafing through a book about an artist in which the printed text filled barely a third of the pages. The illustrations burst their banks, flooding over the written words, said one of them. One image gave a running start to and served as a launchpad for the next and the next and the next, said the other. Yes, the poem seemed to bound from one image to another, like when you jump from one stepping stone to the next over a dismal swamp following muddy explanations, said the first. The words seemed always to be on the verge, on the go, on the run towards ever-new, headlong visions, said the other.

“*Cain and Abel* must be among the most magnificent of Wergeland’s poems, because I remember the reading as if I’d heard it yesterday,” said the old man in the wheelchair. “Never before can a ribbed skeleton have been honoured in fairer fashion. In the poem, Wergeland calls the skeleton a marble-white shadow of our body, and he says that this shadow brother inside us will shine like alabaster even after thousands upon thousands upon thousands of years, I well remember. And he thinks, too, that the rib-cage resembles two harps standing upright side by side. And that the cranium is the colour of a pale yellow quartz that he calls jasper. And that the hip bones are reminiscent of butterfly wings spread out for flight. And that the bones of the spine look like petrified lily buds.”

“Yes, I remember that as well,” burst in the other 79-year-old. “And I remember, too, that at the point where Sjur stopped reading, Wergeland is imagining the back-bone as a white eel – like the ones that live in wells. The poet sees this bone-white eel, as if in a vision, swimming in the pitch dark, deep within the human body. The eel has been washed shining white by the blackness and gleams in the darkness, I remember the poem saying. Yes, although I don’t recall it word for word, of course, you understand. But I see the image so clearly before me even today. The backbone slithers like a freshwater eel at the bottom of a well – that’s more or less what it said in the poem. The eel turns, accommodatingly, and mirrors our every movement, I remember it said. And if I close my eyes, I can see this well-eel snaking deep down into the darkness inside me. Yes, I can see it so clearly. To compare our back-bone to a white well-eel is stranger than peculiar. And yet it may well be because the comparison is so astonishing that I remember this eel so clearly after all these years. Or because I was young and impressionable. Or because it was the mortally ill Sjur who read the poem out in the last class we had with him. In the summers afterwards, whenever I was doggy-paddling and diving in the river pools, I often found myself imagining that my back-bone was just such a white eel, snaking its way forward both inside my body and down in the sudden depths of the river. And I think I also remember that the poem spoke of a white flame that flickered and shone in the darkness deep down inside us.”

“Yes, I remember that too,” said the other old man. “Sjur stopped reading just when the poem mentioned this white flame that flares inside us – all, absolutely all of the time, even though nobody can see it.”

“Only death can make the flame visible.”

“That thing you just said, though – there was nothing about that in the poem,” said the other.

“No, apparently there wasn’t.”

“But the terrible thing is that one day this well-eel will become pitch black.”

“And stiff,” said the first man. “Rod-stiff and stone-dead.”

“Yes, apparently that’s in the second half of the poem.”

“That’s how eerie they’ll become, these creatures,” said the first man.

“Yes, and their back-bone will grow out into an eel-black tail. And that tail is longer than the legs. So when these creatures walk forward, the tail digs up the earth behind them like a ploughshare. And after walking long enough like that, it’s not long before they fall down on all fours. Then it becomes much easier for them to make their way – when the tail’s standing straight up in the air, I mean. Because it’s as hard and inflexible as an iron bar. And so it’s an advantage to go on all fours. That way the tail doesn’t plough up the earth.”

“Sjur mentioned something about that, of course. That was why he didn’t dare read the rest to us,” said the other man.

“No, and there’s nothing the least bit odd about that,” said the first.

“I’m glad I’ll soon be 80 and that I leave no children or grandchildren behind me,” said the other.

“You’ve got a point there,” said the first.

I sat before the two old men and listened. They spoke as if the poem had been given into their sole keeping, and they had made it their own. And I can’t deny that the more I heard, the more the skeleton in the stock room came to mean to me. After my visits to the old people’s home, I would usually slip up to the loft, open the door of the mahogany cabinet, and, often as not, simply stand there motionless, sunk in all manner of thoughts as I gazed at the skeleton. I would often take a keen-eyed storm lantern up with me and, switching off the naked light-bulb in the ceiling, I would let the lantern’s light fill out the hollow spaces between the bones. The light plugged the eye sockets full

of glitter, tricked the empty rib-cage out with heart and lungs, shrugged the shoulders wider and modelled a muscular male body, which, as a finishing touch, I dressed in a shining suit. And all at once, large as life in the cabinet before me, there stood a Numedal farmer from the 1800s, clad in traditional garb of grey-white wool. His smooth complexion had a sheen exactly akin to that of real skin. But on the unvarnished wood of the cabinet wall behind the farmer, I could see his sparse shadow sketched out like a sarcastic caricature of the sturdy man I had created.

“You’re terribly hung up on that Numedal guy, aren’t you,” said a student to me after a literature class about Wergeland and the fratricide in Uvdal. Unable to control myself, I had taken the skeleton with me and showed it to them.

“So didn’t you find it interesting?” I asked.

“Yes of course. When you’re so obsessed with something, you can make anything exciting.”

“So even poetry can be exciting, then, you think?”

“Yes, but more to the point, you yourself can, too.”

“You mean...?” I asked.

“Yes, I mean exactly that,” said the student.

It is clear, of course, that I had become somewhat more enthusiastic about the skeleton than was reasonable. I could spend longer than the longest time musing in front of the mahogany cabinet. Gradually, the skeleton became more to me than just a bunch of brittle bones. All the stories that the student had left behind him had breathed so much life into the lifeless that I felt exactly as though I could hear the hollow bone-shafts’ piping prayer for mercy, and the whisper of blood in what was more like a meccano-builder’s metallic representation of a human than an artist’s rapid sketch of a man. The skeleton had long begun to draw life from my own life and the bony creature had, at the same time, begun to animate me. We both gave and took, symbiotic. My imagination plumped him up with flesh, made him juicy with blood, dripped his eye sockets full of mercurial restlessness, let his auditory canals hammer the words I spoke upon the anvil of his ear, stuffed that empty skull full of my dreams, rigged him out in home-woven

woollen clothes and endowed him with a murky fate from which my life could suck new life.

The more keenly I was gripped by the skeleton, the more wildly eager I became to lay my hands on the poem Wergeland had written after the autopsy. Sjur had said in his last class that *Cain and Abel* had never been published. The same autumn that he died of Spanish influenza, the publication of Wergeland's collected works got under way. The task of editing the vast production that the 37-year-old poet had left behind him would last through the whole of the inter-war period – longer than the time during which Wergeland himself had been active as an author – and when it was finally completed in 1940, the publication consisted of twenty-three broadbacked volumes.

I helped myself to all the tomes and, not content with merely checking the table of contents in each, sounded them out, page by page, to check that *Cain and Abel* was not hidden under another title, or encapsulated in a larger poem. I winged quickly through the prose, but would often settle down in the poetry in search of booty I had snapped up, as it were, in my flight through the text, and I was just as eager when I launched myself at the twenty-third volume as I had been when I came tumbling into the first.

I found nothing. Neither in the foreword, nor in the collected texts nor in the usually long-winded footnotes did I clap eyes on *Cain and Abel*. Not a glimpse, not a glimmer, not a single reference to the poem did I see in any of those thousands upon thousands of pages that it had taken at least 22 years for the two foremost authorities on Wergeland in the period between the wars to collect and edit. When I couldn't find the poem in the beautifully produced eight-volume collected edition that came out in the 1950s either, I was able to conclude that the researchers who lived off and for Wergeland could not possibly have any knowledge of the poem, bits and pieces of which the old men in the old people's home had so zealously preserved for nearly 60 years. When those two left this world, *Cain and Abel* – which the old men themselves described as an immortal poem – would die along with them, just as many mediaeval ballads must certainly have foundered and sunk to the bottom of the same ocean of collective consciousness from which they sprung before the collectors of the 1800s set out and rescued the songs that had managed to keep themselves afloat.

“It was so powerful to hear Sjur in that last lesson of his,” said the old man in the wheelchair. “So overpowering. And so painful. It was as if he filled us up both with himself and with what he was reading aloud. In a way, I have every single word of what he said and what he read inside me. In flesh and bone, I mean. The words are sort of spread out over my whole body. It’s as if I can feel them in me. Like lead shot, they sit here and there in my carcass and ache, but I can’t work them out. If you know what I mean.”

“Artur was grazed by a charge of shot when he was 44, you understand, and he was incapacitated for nearly half a year,” said the other old man.

“But it’s Wergeland’s words I’m talking about, not that stray bullet 36 years ago,” said the one in the wheelchair. “It’s as if some words sit in my chest and others in my shoulders or my calves. Yes, that’s how it feels, and I notice them when there’s a change in the weather. There are only a few words sitting up in my head. And those are the words I remember. But my body has taken good care of them all. One fine day, you’ll see, everything I heard of that poem will work its way out of me.”

“Have you found anything in the books you told us about last time, by the way?” asked the other one.

“Not yet. But I’m not going to give up. Ever.”

“The poem hasn’t ever been published then, I reckon.”

“No, it seems not,” I said.

“But we carry it inside us, don’t we,” said the one in the wheelchair.

“Yes, as long as we last,” said the other.

So, no, I found nothing, not a jot, about *Cain and Abel*. What I did find, though, was Wergeland; and one day, when I had got lost right in the heart of that teeming wealth of imagery and was standing there in perplexity, I found myself at last, immediately after being retrieved and set on the right path by a wise and generous poem called *My Self*.

I had already entered a state of fine, hazy intoxication by that point. Wergeland had gripped me. My thoughts flowed out in dreams and branched out into visions in which I heard the heavenward flight of distant violins, and rapture soon became my customary state of being. There were days when I dangled with joy and swayed in my own breeze.

But I was still missing something. I had read every single one of the twenty-three volumes of Wergeland's collected works, but still I did not know the most important one – the one that the old men claimed to be his best poem and which must, by extension, be the very pinnacle of Norwegian poetry. And since I had now found myself at last, I simply couldn't settle into my obsession with bliss until *Cain and Abel* had also been found. If I didn't find the poem, it would be gone when the old men went.

That could not be allowed to happen. I thought forwards and I thought backwards, but when I came up short in both directions, I found I had got no further. At the beginning of January 1976, as a last resort, I sent a hand-written letter to a wellknown literary researcher who was, at that time, considered to be the leading authority in the field of Wergeland's oeuvre. I ought perhaps to mention his name here, but I have been advised against it by the members of my family who were my first readers and by my publishers, out of consideration for the researcher's children and grandchildren. However, I can allow myself to write that he was probably the same age as the two old men, so around 80, and that he disappeared in the summer of 1976, some months after I had left the school and taken over the family farm here in Heddal.

The day after the letter had been sent, I received a telephone call in the middle of a lesson, "urgent – a matter of life and death," as the caller had apparently put it. The school secretary burst into my classroom without knocking and said I must hurry to the telephone right away. The receiver was lying on her desk and howling, she said; and she rushed ahead of me along the corridor, casting wild-eyed glances back over her shoulder to check that I was managing to keep pace. "The caller claims to be a professor and he's shut up in a burning house. His life's at stake. Hurry now!" she whispered breathlessly as she opened the door to the office, at the same time laying a hand on my back as if to hurl me into the room.

I picked up the receiver. The caller was the researcher I had written to. I grasped his name and I grasped the fact that he was standing with my letter rustling in his hand, but that is, in fact, pretty much all that I am absolutely certain that I grasped of the telephone... not conversation, but rather monologue that now followed.

The pitch of his voice lay somewhere between the crow of a cock and the squeal of a pig. He had just cracked a bottle of red wine open against his forehead in sheer joy and

excitement at my letter, I was given to understand. A jagged hole in his brow was spewing sludgy cerebral matter, and blood mingled with blood-red wine and splinters of glass was flowing down his face, dimming his sight and soaking his clothes. Yes, at first, that was how I had to grasp it. But afterwards, I sensed that the bottlebreaker might also be someone else. Perhaps the researcher was talking about that time Wergeland had smashed a wine bottle against his forehead in exasperation at being prevented from speaking at a meeting. No, it wasn't easy to grasp just who it was who had used his forehead as a bottle opener. In any event, wine and blood and brain goo were streaming over the face and clothes of some person or another, in either the present or the past – that much I could gather. The hole in the head could just as well mean that he wasn't talking about Wergeland. I was told, moreover, that my letter had made him so screamingly happy that he had hoisted an inner flag and leapt six meters off the ramp leading up to a barn, spraining both his ankles. But since there are certainly very few barns with ramps near Kampen Church in the second-best district of Oslo's east end where the researcher lived, it dawned on me little by little that it must have been another person, perhaps Wergeland, who had in his time dared make this bold leap. The researcher concluded the telephone monologue with a squeal of joy which he stretched out so thin that it finally snapped – and with that, the connection was broken.

Bewildered, I put down the receiver. I hadn't been able to get a single word in edgewise amid the howls.

“It's not his house that's burning down, but the professor himself who is ablaze,” I said to the secretary. “He's tried to put out the fire by smashing a bottle of red wine against his forehead.”

That was how it began, the pursuit. For yes, that is just how I perceived the researcher, as a veritable pursuer. He was hunting for a quarry that, in his euphoric periods, he believed me to have captured. Soon he had made himself believe that I had in my safekeeping the original handwritten manuscript of *Cain and Abel*, and soon he imagined that I was the bearer of secret Wergelandian traditions. My heart, it was my heart he was after. I know that now. He was a heart thief. Even after I had moved to the family farm in Heddal the hunt continued, eventually at such a breakneck pace that I detest even thinking about what happened. Yes, I detest it. Until I learnt to defend

myself, not a day went by without an urgent call or an express letter. But nowadays he doesn't concern me at all. My heart sits now where it sat then and beats calmly. He's gone for good. I have learned to forget myself calm and untroubled. Nothing calms me so much as calm. That's why I keep myself completely calm. Besides, it's such a long time now that he's been gone. Thirty years is a lot of years. Apparently, he had a cottage up in the hill here. That's how I've forgotten it. Apparently, the cottage lay not far from the edge of one of my plots of forest. In any event, I did my bit when he vanished. I seem to recall that I was in the search party looking for him. But of course there isn't anything to remember. He wasn't found. His disappearance was a relief to me. That's how I've forgotten it. That it was a relief.

But I suppose it was bad enough while it was happening.