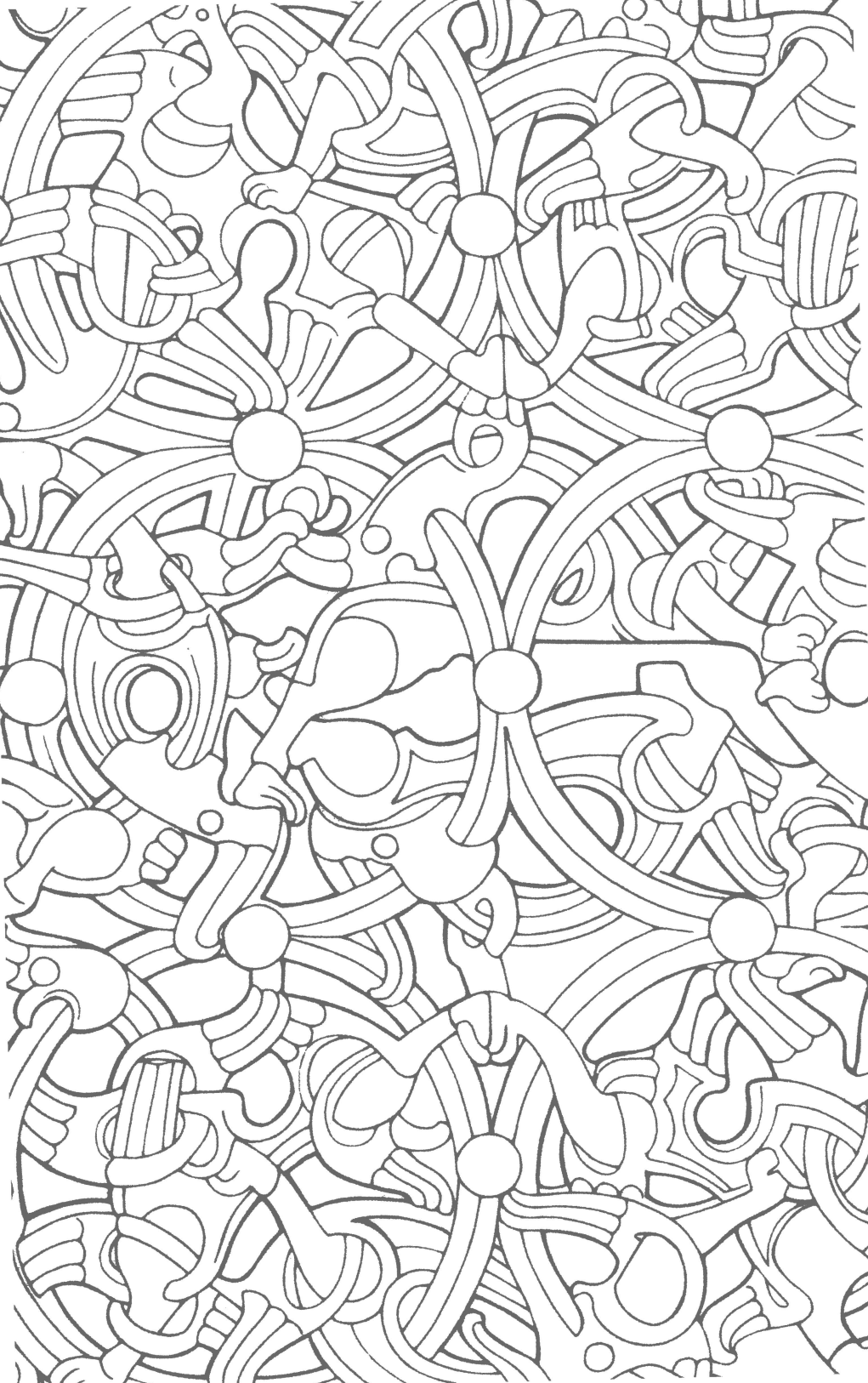
NORSE MYTHOLOGY



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American Gods
Stardust
Neverwhere
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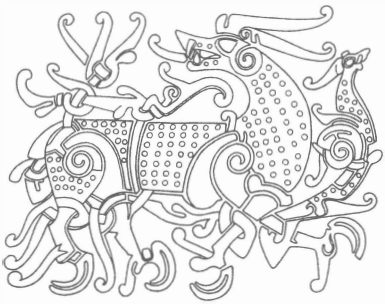

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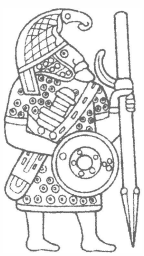

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

AN INTRODUCTION

It's as hard to have a favorite sequence of myths as it is to have a favorite style of cooking (some nights you might want Thai food, some nights sushi, other nights you crave the plain home cooking you grew up on). But if I had to declare a favorite, it would probably be for the Norse myths.

My first encounter with Asgard and its inhabitants was as a small boy, no more than seven, reading the adventures of the Mighty Thor as depicted by American comics artist Jack Kirby, in stories plotted by Kirby and Stan Lee and dialogued by Stan Lee's brother, Larry Lieber. Kirby's Thor was powerful and good-looking, his Asgard a towering science fictional city of imposing buildings and dangerous edifices, his Odin wise and noble, his Loki a sardonic horn-helmeted creature of pure mischief. I loved Kirby's blond hammer-wielding Thor, and I wanted to learn more about him.

I borrowed a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen* by Roger Lancelyn Green and read and reread it with delight

and puzzlement: Asgard, in this telling, was no longer a Kirbyesque Future City but was a Viking hall and collection of buildings out on the frozen wastes; Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise, and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable, and dangerous; Thor was just as strong as the Mighty Thor in the comics, his hammer as powerful, but he was . . . well, honestly, not the brightest of the gods; and Loki was not evil, although he was certainly not a force for good. Loki was . . . complicated.

In addition, I learned, the Norse gods came with their own doomsday: Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods, the end of it all. The gods were going to battle the frost giants, and they were all going to die.

Had Ragnarok happened yet? Was it still to happen? I did not know then. I am not certain now.

It was the fact that the world and the story ends, and the way that it ends and is reborn, that made the gods and the frost giants and the rest of them tragic heroes, tragic villains. Ragnarok made the Norse world linger for me, seem strangely present and current, while other, better-documented systems of belief felt as if they were part of the past, old things.

The Norse myths are the myths of a chilly place, with long, long winter nights and endless summer days, myths of a people who did not entirely trust or even like their gods, although they respected and feared them. As best we can tell, the gods of Asgard came from Germany,

spread into Scandinavia, and then out into the parts of the world dominated by the Vikings—into Orkney and Scotland, Ireland and the north of England—where the invaders left places named for Thor or Odin. In English, the gods have left their names in our days of the week. You can find Tyr the one-handed (Odin's son), Odin, Thor, and Frigg, the queen of the gods, in, respectively, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

We can see the traces of older myths and older religions in the war and the stories of the truce between the gods of the Vanir and the Aesir. The Vanir appear to have been nature gods, brothers and sisters, less warlike, but perhaps no less dangerous than the Aesir.

It's very likely, or at least a workable hypothesis, that there were tribes of people who worshipped the Vanir and other tribes who worshipped the Aesir, and that the Aesir-worshippers invaded the lands of the Vanir-worshippers, and that they made compromises and accommodations. Gods of the Vanir, like the sister and brother Freya and Frey, live in Asgard with the Aesir. History and religion and myth combine, and we wonder and we imagine and we guess, like detectives reconstructing the details of a long-forgotten crime.

There are so many Norse stories we do not have, so much we do not know. All we have are some myths that have come to us in the form of folktales, in retellings, in poems, in prose. They were written down when Christianity had already displaced the worship of the Norse

gods, and some of the stories we have came to us because people were concerned that if the stories were not preserved, some of the kennings—the usages of poets that referred to events in specific myths—would become meaningless; Freya's tears, for example, was a poetic way of saying "gold." In some of the tales the Norse gods are described as men or as kings or heroes of old, so that the stories could be told in a Christian world. Some stories and poems tell of other stories, or imply other stories, that we simply do not have.

It is, perhaps, as if the only tales of the gods and demigods of Greece and Rome that had survived were of the deeds of Theseus and Hercules.

We have lost so much.

There are many Norse goddesses. We know their names and some of their attributes and powers, but the tales, myths, and rituals have not come down to us. I wish I could retell the tales of Eir, because she was the doctor of the gods, of Lofn, the comforter, who was a Norse goddess of marriages, or of Sjofn, a goddess of love. Not to mention Vor, goddess of wisdom. I can imagine stories, but I cannot tell their tales. They are lost, or buried, or forgotten.

I've tried my best to retell these myths and stories as accurately as I can, and as interestingly as I can.

Sometimes details in the stories contradict each other. But I hope that they paint a picture of a world and a time. As I retold these myths, I tried to imagine myself a long

time ago, in the lands where these stories were first told, during the long winter nights perhaps, under the glow of the northern lights, or sitting outside in the small hours, awake in the unending daylight of midsummer, with an audience of people who wanted to know what else Thor did, and what the rainbow was, and how to live their lives, and where bad poetry comes from.

I was surprised, when I finished the stories and read them as a sequence, to find that they felt like a journey, from the ice and the fire that the universe begins in to the fire and the ice that end the world. Along the way we meet people we would know if we met them, people like Loki and Thor and Odin, and people we want to know so much more about (my favorite of these is Angrboda, Loki's wife among the giants, who gives birth to his monstrous children and who is there in ghost form after Balder is slain).

I did not dare go back to the tellers of Norse myth whose work I had loved, to people like Roger Lancelyn Green and Kevin Crossley-Holland, and reread their stories. I spent my time instead with many different translations of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, and with the verses of the *Poetic Edda*, words from nine hundred years ago and before, picking and choosing what tales I wanted to retell and how I wanted to tell them, blending versions of myths from the prose and from the poems. (Thor's visit to Hymir, for example, the way I tell it here, is a hybrid: it begins in the *Poetic Edda*, then adds details of Thor's fishing adventure from Snorri's version.)

My battered copy of *A Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, by

Rudolf Simek, translated by Angela Hall, was always invaluable, continually consulted, eye-opening, and informative.

Huge thanks go to my old friend Alisa Kwitney for her editorial assistance. She was a fabulous sounding board, always opinionated and forthright, helpful, sensible, and smart. She got this book written, mostly by wanting to read the next story, and she helped me make the time to write it in. I'm incredibly grateful to her. Thank you to Stephanie Monteith, whose eagle eyes and Norse knowledge caught several things I might have missed. Thanks also to Amy Cherry at Norton, who suggested that I might want to retell some myths at a lunch on my birthday eight years ago, and who has been, all things considered, the most patient editor in the world.

All mistakes, conclusions jumped to, and odd opinions in this volume are mine and mine alone, and I would not wish anyone else blamed for them. I hope I've retold these stories honestly, but there was still joy and creation in the telling.

That's the joy of myths. The fun comes in telling them yourself—something I warmly encourage you to do, you person reading this. Read the stories in this book, then make them your own, and on some dark and icy winter's evening, or on a summer night when the sun will not set, tell your friends what happened when Thor's hammer was stolen, or how Odin obtained the mead of poetry for the gods . . .

Neil Gaiman

Lisson Grove, London,

May 2016

NORSE MYTHOLOGY

THE PLAYERS