

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

5 *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*

PROLOGUE

*(Spoken by the Announcer of the Ballad)*

Mari Lwyd, Horse of Frost, Star-horse, and White Horse of the Sea, is carried to us.

The Dead return.

Those Exiles carry her, they who seem holy and have put on corruption, they who seem corrupt and have put on holiness.

They strain against the door.

They strain towards the fire which fosters and warms the Living.

The Living, who have cast them out, from their own fear, from their own fear of themselves, into the outer loneliness of death, rejected them, and cast them out for ever:

The Living cringe and warm themselves at the fire, shrinking from that loneliness, that singleness of heart.

The Living are defended by the rich warmth of the flames which keeps that loneliness out.

Terrified, they hear the Dead tapping at the panes; then they rise up, armed with the warmth of firelight, and the condition of scorn.

It is New Year's Night.

Midnight is burning like a taper. In an hour, in less than an hour, it will be blown out.

It is the moment of conscience.

The living moment.

The dead moment.

Listen.

*(Pitchblack Darkness — A Long Table laid with a White Cloth — A Door on Stage Right — A Broad Window next to it — The Two Loads of a Pendulum — When light comes it is so contrived as to throw their shadows to the extreme ends of the room — Between these ends stylistic figures whose movements exaggerate human movements — A Skull may be suggested at one shadow-limit of the Pendulum, and a Fillet at the other.)*

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.

Hark at the hands of the clock.

Now dead men rise in the frost of the stars

And fists on the coffins knock.  
They dropped in their graves without one sound; 5  
Then they were steady and stiff.  
But now they tear through the frost of the ground  
As heretic, drunkard and thief.

Why should you fear though they might pass  
Ripping the stitch of grief, 10  
The white sheet under the frosted glass,  
Crisp and still as a leaf?  
Or look through sockets that once were eyes  
At the table and white cloth spread?  
The terrible, picklock Charities 15  
Raised the erected dead.

Under your walls they gnaw like mice:  
Virtue is unmasked.  
The hands of the clock betray your vice.  
They give what none has asked. 20  
For they have burrowed beneath the graves  
And found what the good gave most:  
Refuse cast by the righteous waves  
In fossil, wraith and ghost.

Chalice and Wafer. Wine and Bread. 25  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Good men gone are evil become  
And the men that you nailed down 30  
Clamped in darkness, clamour for rum,  
And ravish on beds of down  
The vision your light denied them, laid  
Above the neglected door;  
And the chattering speech of skull and spade 35  
Beckons the banished Poor.

Locked-out lepers with haloes come.  
Put out the clock: the clock is dumb.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 40

The breath of a numb thing, loud and faint:  
Something found and lost.  
The minute drops in the minute-glass;  
Conscience counts the cost.  
What mounted, murderous thing goes past 45  
The room of Pentecost?  
Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 50  
What shudders free from the shroud so white  
Stretched by the hands of the clock?  
What is the sweat that springs in the hair?  
Why do the knee-joints knock?  
Bones of the night, in the naked air, 55  
Knock, and you hear that knock.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

A knock of the sands on the glass of the grave,  
A knock on the sands of the shore, 60  
A knock of the horse's head of the wave,  
A beggar's knock on the door.  
A knock of a moth on the pane of light,  
In the beat of the blood a knock.  
Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. 65  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The sands in the glass, the shrinking sands,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 70

[*Light*]

*Figures:*

Fasten the yard-gate, bolt the door,  
And let the great fat drip.  
The roar that we love is the frying-pan's roar  
On the flames, like a floating ship.  
The old Nick will keep the flies from our sheep, 75  
The tic, the flea and the louse.  
Open the flagons. Uncork the deep  
Beer of this bolted house.

[*They stoop to the fire*]

*One Figure:*

Unseen fingers are aching now  
(Hark at the pendulum's chain!) 80  
Out of the night they have pulled the Plough,  
Pulled the Dead Man's Wain.  
Bones of the dead are clattering, clinking,  
Pulling the Plough from the shore.  
Dead men's fingers are feeling, knocking, 85  
Knocking now on the door.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

*Another Figure:*

Crammed with food the table creaks.  
The dogs grow fat on the crumbs. 90  
God bless our board that springs no leaks,  
And here no ruffian comes,  
No beggars itching with jackdaws' eyes,  
No fox on the trail of food,  
No man with the plague from Hangman's Rise, 95  
No jay from Dead Man's Wood.

Chalice and wafer that blessed the dead,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 100

*Third Figure:*

Bones of the dead should come on their knees  
Under a pilgrim's cloak,  
But out in the dark what devils are these  
That have smelt our kitchen-smoke?  
Listen. Listen. Who comes near? 105  
What man with a price on his head?  
What load of dice, what leak in the beer  
Has pulled your steps from the dead?

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 110

'Starving we come from Gruffydd Bryn  
And a great meal we have lost.  
We might have stayed by the fire of the inn  
Sheltered from the frost.  
And there a sweet girl stood and spread 115  
The table with good things,  
Felinfoel beer with a mountain's head,  
And a pheasant with hungry wings.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 120

'There were jumping sausages, roasting pies,  
And long loaves in the bin,  
And a stump of Caerphilly to rest our eyes,  
And a barrel rolling in.  
But dry as the grave from Gruffydd Bryn 125  
We are come without one rest;  
And now you must let our Mari in:  
She must inspire your feast.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 130

'For She knows all from the birth of the Flood  
To this moment where we stand  
In a terrible frost that binds the blood  
In a cramp that claws the hand.  
Give us rhyme for rhyme through the wood of the door 135

Then open the door if you fail.  
Our wit is come from the seawave's roar,  
The stars, and the stinging hail.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 140

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones  
That hunger out in the air.  
Jealous they break through their burial-stones,  
Their white hands joined in a prayer.  
They rip the seams of their proper white clothes 145  
And with red throats parched for gin,  
With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths  
They hammer the door of an inn.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost. 150

'O pity us, brothers, through snow and rain  
We are come from Harlech's waves.  
Tall spears were laid on the mountain.  
We hid in the warriors' caves.  
We were afraid when the sun went down, 155  
When the stars flashed we were afraid;  
But the small lights showed us Machynlleth town,  
And bent on our knees we prayed.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 160

Though you come from the grim wave's monklike hood  
And Harlech's bitter coast,  
White horses need white horses' food:  
We cannot feed a ghost.  
Cast your Lwyd to the white spray's crest 165  
That pounds and rides the air.  
Why should we break our lucky feast  
For the braying of a mare?

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:

A horse's head in the frost. 170

'In the black of En-gedi's cave we hid;  
We hid in the Fall of the Bride.  
And the stars flew back from the lifted lid;  
We saw those horsemen ride.  
We hid all night in the cowl of the wave; 175  
Chariots and kings we saw  
In Goliath darkness, bright and brave  
Felled by an ass's jaw.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 180

'O white is the starlight, white on the gate  
And white on the bar of the door.  
Our breath is white in the frost, our fate  
Falls in the dull wave's roar.  
O rhyme with us now through the keyhole's slit 185  
And open the door if you fail.  
The sea-frost, brothers, has spurred our wit,  
Ay, and the killing hail.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 190

What thirst consumed by the leaping flames,  
What thirst has brought you back  
From the starry writing of holy names  
The spittle of Hell turns black.  
Austere star-energies, naked, white, 195  
Roused you, but still you play  
With a bottle drowned in a drunkard's night,  
Brought by the wicked spray.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost. 200

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Hark, they are going; the footsteps shrink, 205  
And the sea renews her cry.  
The big stars stare and the small stars wink;  
The Plough goes glittering by.  
It was a trick of the turning tide  
That brought those voices near. 210  
Dead men pummelled the panes outside:  
We caught the breath of the year.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

*(Voice)*

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. 215  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Out in the night the nightmares ride;  
And the nightmares' hooves draw near.  
Dead men pummel the panes outside,  
And the living quake with fear. 220  
Quietness stretches the pendulum's chain  
To the limit where terrors start,  
Where the dead and the living find again  
They beat with the selfsame heart.

In the coffin-glass and the window-pane 225  
You beat with the selfsame heart.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

*(Very faint)*

'We bring from white Hebron  
And Ezekiel's Valley, 230  
From the dead sea of Harlech  
And mountain-girt Dolgelley,  
All that singing way  
From Cader to Kidwelly,

A stiff, a star-struck thing 235  
Blown by the stinging spray  
And the stinging light of the stars,  
Our white, stiff thing,  
Death and breath of the frost,  
That has known the room of glass, 240  
Dropped by the Milky Way  
To the needle and thread of the pass.'

Hark, they are coming back, those fellows  
Giving the stars another name,  
Blowing them up with a pair of bellows 245  
From a jumping, thumping, murderous flame;  
Men of the night with a legion of wrongs,  
Fists in the dark that shudder with shame,  
Hated lechers with holy songs,  
Bastard bodies that bear no name. 250

*(Loud and near)*

'We bring from Cader Idris  
And those ancient valleys,  
Mari of your sorrows,  
Queen of the starry fillies.'

You'll not play skittles with us, 255  
White Spirit. Spray of malice;  
Froth from an old barrel:  
Tell us if that be holy.

'Hers the white art that rouses  
Light in the darkest palace, 260  
Though black as a mole's burrow:  
Truly we come to bless.'

You come from drunkards' houses  
And bent, picklock alleys.  
You come to thieve or borrow: 265  
Your starved loins poke and press.

'Great light you shall gather,  
For Mari here is holy;

She saw dark thorns harrow  
Your God crowned with the holly.' 270

Have you watched snowflakes wither?  
They fasten, then fade slowly,  
Hither and thither blowing:  
Your words are falling still.

'Deeper sadness knowing 275  
Than death's great melancholy,  
We journeyed from Calgarw,  
From that skull-shaped hill.'

A white horse frozen blind,  
Hurled from a seawave's hollow, 280  
Fostered by spray and wind,  
Profane and priestlike thing!

'She has those precious secrets  
Known to the minstrel solely,  
Experienced in the marrow, 285  
Quick to tame beasts unruly.'

She should have been a whistle  
For that tames our collie;  
He darts on like an arrow,  
Then he creeps up slowly. 290

'O, if she were a whistle  
She would not call your collie,  
But through this keyhole narrow  
Try, your wits to rally.'

Go back to Cader Idris, 295  
To your Dry Bones Valley.  
Death shall pounce to-morrow,  
And break upon your folly.

'Clustered thick are the stars,  
And the fire-irons lying still; 300  
Dust in the iron bars;

Frost on the window-sill.  
The fire warms many hands,  
But there where the shadows press  
A single point of light 305  
Can bring great loneliness.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'In the black of the churchyard yew we lay  
And the long roots taught us much. 310  
We groped for the sober light of day,  
Light that we dared not touch.  
The sleet of the stars fell cold and thin  
Till we turned, and it touched our crown;  
Then we yearned for the heat in the marrow of sin, 315  
For the fire of a drinkers' town.'

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost.

'But brightest brimstone light on him  
And burn his rafters black 320  
That will not give when his fears are dim  
The treasure found in the sack.  
In the mouth of the sack, in the stifled breath,  
In the sweat of the hands, in the noose,  
In the black of the sack, in the night of death 325  
Shines what you dare not lose.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Under the womb of teeming night  
Our Mari tries your faith; 330  
And She has Charity's crown of light:  
Spectre she knows and wraith;  
How sweet-tongued children are wickedly born  
By a swivelling devil's thrust  
Mounting the night with a murderous horn, 335  
Riding the starry gust.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Under the edge of the spray of the stars,  
In the hollow dark of a wave, 340  
We heard the fire-irons stirring the bars,  
Laying the ash of the grave.  
We saw your faith in the pin of the tongs  
Laying your fears at rest;  
You buried our bones with your drinking-songs 345  
And murdered what you love best.'

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'But the pin goes in to the inmost dark  
Where the dead and living meet, 350  
And the clock is stopped by the shock of the spark  
Or the stealthy patter of sleet.  
Where disdain has cast to its utmost pitch  
The strands of the finished thread,  
The clock goes out, and the ashes twitch, 355  
Roused by the breaking of bread.'

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 360

Go back, with your drowned and drunken eyes  
And your crooked mouths so small  
And your Mari foaled of the starry skies:  
Go back to the seawave's fall.  
If we lift and slide the bolt in the door 365  
What can our warm beer buy?  
What can you give for the food we store  
But a slice of starving sky?

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:

A horse's head in the frost. 370

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O who has woven the skein of the hair,  
And who has knotted the ropes of the fist,  
And who has hollowed the bones of the eyes? 375

One of you answer: the hands have kissed.  
I see in your eyes white terror,  
I see in your locked hands hate.  
Press, we are one step nearer  
The live coals in the grate.' 380

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Hark, they are going; the footsteps shrink,  
And the sea renews her cry. 385

The big stars stare and the small stars wink;  
The Plough goes glittering by.  
It was a trick of the turning tide  
That brought those voices near. 390  
Dead men pummelled the panes outside:  
We caught the breath of the year.

*(Voice)*

Dread and quiet, evil and good:  
Frost in the night has mixed their blood.

Thieving and giving, good and evil: 395  
The beggar's a saint, and the saint a devil.

Mari Lwyd, Lwyd Mari:  
A sacred thing through the night they carry.

Betrayed are the living, betrayed the dead:  
All are confused by a horse's head. 400

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.  
Lazarus comes in a shroud so white  
Out of the hands of the clock.  
While baskets are gathered of loaves of light, 405  
Rape is picking the lock.  
Hungering fingers, bones of the night,  
Knock, knock, knock.

*Figures:*

Bones of the dead with their crooked eyes  
And their crooked mouths so small, 410  
Night-nags foaled of the starry skies,  
Threatening our feast, they call.  
We face the terrible masquerade  
Of robbers dressed like the dead.  
The cold star-energies make us afraid, 415  
Afraid of that picklock tread.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

A starlit crucifix hits their knees  
And a chain of bloodstained beads 420  
Drops to the fork where the fingers seize  
Their good and evil deeds.  
Those blasphemous hands can change our mind  
Or mood with a craftsman's skill;  
Under their blessing they blast and blind, 425  
Maim, ravish, and kill.

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock. 430

Resurrection's wings and corruption's moth  
Beat on the window-pane.  
The tombs are ripped like a table-cloth,

And madmen teach the sane.  
A voice redresses those ancient wrongs 435  
With a wrong more deep than all.  
Holy Charity's bastard songs  
Burst from a seawave's fall.

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost. 440

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Hell curse this house for a badger's holt  
If we find no man devout.  
God singe this doorway, hinge and bolt, 445  
If you keep our evil out.  
Long-limbed we hung in the taunting trees  
And cried in our great thirst:  
Give us a drink, light breaks our knees.  
Give, or the house is cursed.' 450

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Snatch off that mask from a drinker's mouth  
All lit by phosphorus up.  
Men of the night, I know your drouth; 455  
Your mouths would blister the cup.  
When the big stars stare and the small stars wink  
You cry it's the break of day.  
Out of our sight; you are blind with drink:  
Ride your Mari away. 460

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'Pity our penitent fingers now  
Telling the beads of a chain.  
Out of the night we have pulled the Plough, 465  
Pulled the Dead Man's Wain.

Out of the torment of huge night  
Where the cruel stars are hung,  
We have come with blessing to heal your sight  
If first you will cool our tongue.' 470

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back, with your drowned and drunken eyes  
And your crooked mouths so small  
And your Mari foaled of the starry skies: 475  
Go back to the seawave's fall.

If we lift and slide the bolt in the door  
What can our warm beer buy?  
What can you give for the food we store  
But a slice of starving sky? 480

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost.

'Surely, surely you'll open the door  
Now that you know our sins;  
For all grows good that was foul before 485  
Where the spark of heaven begins.

Where the spark that cleaves to the chimney's groove  
Is blown to the freezing weather  
It is men's good that breaks their love,  
Their evil draws them together.' 490

Chalice and Wafer, Wine and Bread.  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

'Know you are one with Cain the farm  
And Dai of Dowlais pit;  
You have thieved with Benjamin's robber's arm; 495  
With Delilah you lay by night.

You cheated death with Barabbas the Cross  
When the dice of Hell came down.  
You prayed with Jo in the prisoners' fosse  
And ran about Rahab's town.' 500

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O, had we never drunk a drop  
You might receive us then,  
Men of the snow-deep mountain-top 505  
And soot-faced mining men.  
Do you not hear like an anvil ring  
The smith of the rock of coal  
Who fell on his steel like that great king  
And sundered body and soul?' 510

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

'O crouch and cringe by the bounding flame  
And close your eyelids fast.  
Out of the breath of the year we came. 515  
The breath of the year has passed.  
The wits of a skull are far too great  
Being out of the hands of the clock.  
When Mari Lwyd knocks on the door,  
In charity answer that knock.' 520

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones  
That hunger out in the air.  
Jealous they break through their burial-stones, 525  
Their white hands joined in a prayer.  
They rip the seams of their proper white clothes  
And with red throats parched for gin,  
With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths  
They hammer the door of an inn. 530

'O a ham-bone high on a ceiling-hook  
And a goose with a golden skin,  
And the roaring flames of the food you cook:  
For God's sake let us in!  
To see the white beer rise in the glass 535

And the brown jump out of the jug  
Would lift those stiffened loons in the grass  
Like lambs to the darling dug.'

Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:  
A horse's head in the frost. 540

Go back to your Hell, there are clean souls here,  
Go back to your barns of muck.  
Go back to your Hell, and leave our beer,  
And your Mari bring you luck.  
We'll feel you with stones, we'll strip you clean 545  
In the stars, if you're not gone.  
But Jesus! why are you all unseen  
On whom our lamplight shone?

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,  
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands. 550

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

*(Voice)*

Eyes on the cloth. Eyes on the plate.  
Rigor mortis straightens the figure.  
Striking the clock when the hands are straight, 555  
You have seen a god in the eyes of the beggar.

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

*(Faint)*

'O white is the frost on the breath-bleared panes  
And the starlike fire within, 560  
And our Mari is white in her starry reins  
Starved through flesh and skin.  
It is a skull we carry  
In the ribbons of a bride.  
Bones of the Nightfrost parry 565  
Bones of the Fire inside.'

*(Loud and near)*

‘None can look out and bear that sight,  
None can bear that shock.  
The Mari’s shadow is too bright,  
Her brilliance is too black. 570  
None can bear that terror  
When the pendulum swings back  
Of the stiff and stuffed and stifled thing  
Gleaming in the sack.’

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. 575  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

END

1941

*(From Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, and other poems. London, 1941)*