

Bill Holm Poems from Chain Letter of the Soul

By [Bill Holm](#)
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New Religion

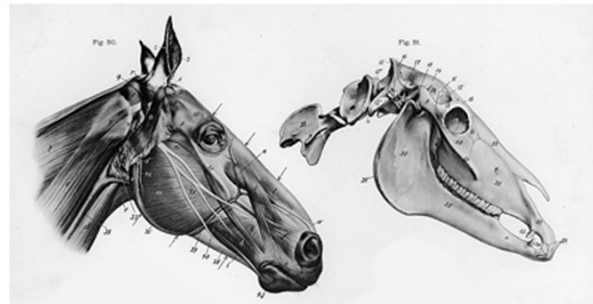
This morning no sound but the loud
breathing of the sea. Suppose that under
all that salt water lived the god
that humans have spent ten thousand years
trawling the heavens for.
We caught the wrong metaphor.
Real space is wet and underneath,
the church of shark and whale and cod.
The noise of those vast lungs
exhaling: the plain chanting of monkfish choirs.
Heaven's not up but down, and hell
is to evaporate in air. Salvation,
to drown and breathe
forever with the sea.



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Horses

Go stand by the fence.
Keep quiet. The horses will come –
thirty, forty of them,
however many live and dine there.
They will put their long, narrow noses
one or two at a time
over the fence to nuzzle you,
maybe nibble on your shirt
or suck your finger.
They are watching you
with full attention.
You look curious to them:
docile and harmless.
They want to touch you, pet you,
see what skin feels like.
Don't disappoint them.



Tunnel

Entering a tunnel the first time
you operate on pure faith
that there's another side.
Maybe the sign was just fooling...
Maybe it's a trap. Maybe
that light is only a trick after which
the road falls a thousand feet
straight down into the sea.
Notice even rational humans,
like you, for instance, always breathe
a little easier after the road
continues through the mountain
uneventful, down the cliffside
toward what looks from here
like civilization, and maybe it is.

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The Wisdom in a Rondo

In a rondo the same tune
sings again, again, again,
with something else between.
Why shouldn't your music
resemble your life? The same tune
come back in the same key?
You keep falling in love with the same
woman by different names, you take
the same job you never liked in the first place.
You buy the same house over and over,
on different streets, in different states.
The same toast, the same coffee.
Lead with the same foot in the same
dance, scratch the same itch with
the same finger. All in E major
or whatever key you start
until the last page when the double bar
signals you won't be hearing
that tune anymore. Unless
by chance the universe
loves repetition even more
than you and keeps the rondo circling,
searching for a new place to sing.



Editor's Note:

Last year, while the tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico's deep waters was still spewing, I heard Garrison Keillor on National Public Radio read "New Religion" by poet Bill Holm, and it spoke to me about our soul connection to our oceans. I fell in love with Holm's poems.

These four poems are excerpts from *The Chain Letter of the Soul* by Bill Holm, published in 2009 by Milkweed Editions, <http://www.milweed.org>, (800) 520 -6455. This work is protected by copyright and all rights are reserved. Milkweed Editions has given us permission to reprint these poems.



Anatomie d'un phonographe à disques

Bill Holm, who died in 2009, was born in southwestern Minnesota and spent his childhood there, growing up on the prairie. When he was ten years old (in 1953) he began gathering his poems. In his adult life, he lived in various places as you will learn when you read his works. These places included Minnesota; Seattle, Washington; and Iceland, the home of some of his ancestors. He was the author of more than a dozen books of poetry and prose which include *Boxelder Bug Variations*, *Playing the Black Piano*, *Coming Home Crazy*, *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*, and *The Windows of Brimnes: An American in Iceland*. *The Chain Letter of the Soul* provides a good sample of his poems. He won many awards, including the 2008 McKnight Foundation's Distinguished Artist Award.



The popularity of these songs attests to the singers' belief in their efficacy, although songs like *Kanteletar* tune "Irresistible" suggest that additional rituals may have accompanied the singing: "nature will bring you all right, blood will draw you to my side. Your own blood will take over—warm, it will make advances." In their 2006 CD, *Miero* [Outcast], Värttinä's song "Lumotar" [The Enchantress] they weave a similar incantation to stir a man's passion. It invokes the image of the cauldron with its opening, "I'm going to cook a man's mind, warm it up with fire." It is no surprise, perhaps, that the cooking fire and its pot have traditionally become the site of witchcraft with its repetitive stirring motions and the alchemy of cooking. The sympathetic magic of the fire representing passion is simple but profound. Or as Mari Kaasinen's lyrics put it, "Burn, mind of man! Let me set fire to your heart, so that you choose my body, and worship me forever." New lyrics, yet completely in keeping with the traditional mode.

Assuming the charm has worked, the next step, of course, is marriage; in Karelia that's a complicated procedure lasting days, as we see with the wedding of Louhi's daughter in Runo 21 of *The Kalevala*. The song I began with is a wedding tune from the traditional ritual, "Kylä vuotti uutta kuuta" [the village waited for the new moon]. It is a welcoming song for the new bride, sung to her traditionally by her groom's sister as the bridal party arrives at the newlyweds' home. The song uses hunting motifs to describe the marriage, referring to the bride as the "sorsa" or wild duck caught by an eagle. This somewhat predatory ambience is a motif repeated in many of the songs of *The Kanteletar*, particularly in the stories like "Palakainen," a murder ballad. There are many happier motifs in the songs, too, like those celebrating the moment when the bride leaves home full of hope, praising the beauty of the new bride and those instructing the groom on how to treat his new partner, including one (1:134) that warns the groom to "advise your maiden in bed, teach her behind the door" and by using gentle means unless she fails to live up to your standards, then "fetch a lash from the thicket." Ever conscious of gossip (another lurking danger), the song also counsels that you use these stronger means behind your own door so that the sounds do not carry to the village folk, and that you don't leave visible signs of your impatience because "the village ploughmen would see...the village magpies would slang." This advice is echoed in Runo 24 of *The Kalevala* but it is paired with a runo with instructions for the bride, too.

While the wedding may be a happy event for the whole village, there is little time to enjoy life once the long ritual is complete. If we follow the narrative of *The Kanteletar* songs, the giddy anticipation of marriage leads to the harsh reality of married life. For the wife there should be no more longing, but there are many dangers that must be dealt with in daily life. Many of the women's songs in *The Kanteletar* deal with protective lullabies or the complaints of daughters-in-law in close quarters with their new family. But sometimes laments are not enough—it is time for the curses. Curses can be a method of healing, as Värttinä's "Viikon Vaivanen" shows:

Flee from me, Disease. You came to us with the wind. Now I'll banish you to the bottom of the sea. If you don't obey, I'll cast you out to the home of Ukko Karhu and to the pen of Akka Karhu. They will chew up your bones.

The personification of the illness allows the singer to address it as she would an unwelcome guest, with threats and punishments, invoking the power of the gods. The traditional Karelian tune provides a mesmerizing rhythmic tune to capture the disease and cast it out.

