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Poems

Ian Adam

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Abstract
THE WITCH: CENTRAL ALBERTA, PING-PONG
‘all along the coast of Denmark,’ she said, 'you could see the flames at night from the boats, a row of candles on the shore.'

the pyre towers to tree level on the flat land, there have been celebrations with beer and barbecuing steaks and hamburgers and corn, for three midsummer hours, Danish families and friends, adults, swaggering teenagers, and children circling round the field, fascinated by the stuffed figure in a dress, life-size, at the top of heaped branches, bound on a pole, with face wax-like, indifferent.

‘it is an ancient ceremony, going back long before Danes were Christians, when we gave our faith to the disappearing sun, keeping its light when darkness fell, with sacrifice. we are a pagan people still.’

the Lutheran pastor speaks in Danish, then torches light the heap as below the horizon the sun-God dips to rest.

flames gather, surge upward, a hot breath moves outward, spectators draw back, on top the solitary figure, woman-sacrifice, seems to glow.

older couples dance, men bound in tight dark suits, women with bonnets and ballooning dresses,
all lace-fringed,  
they move to the rhythms of Europe,  
shadows dark partners to their steps.

but there are no boats here,  
only a conflagration  
a wax face melting,  
the spaces of land stretching away  
the dancers moving, and the young  
watching rituals that are not theirs,  
talking in English, hearing no screams.

St Haus festivities: a Protestant tradition, c. 15th century, when witches were hunted and burnt. It is John the Baptist, being St Haus, that gave the day its name. The ritual of bonfires and the burning of a 'witch', was the foreswearing of all evil. The story being, that when burned, a witch would fly to Bloksbjerg (an actual place in Germany), implying a long way off, there, on this particular night, they would meet with the devil. Nowadays children collect clothes and broomsticks to make a human sized 'witch' which is placed at the top of the fire. Although 'St Haus' is often connected with midsummer, it is actually June 23, not the June 21, and it is on June 23 that Danes stand around the fires in the evening, sing midsummer songs and listen to a 'bonfire speech'.

danish people were concentrated to the north-west of town.  
many had come not directly from Denmark, however,  
but via the north-central United States,  
which they had not found accommodating.  
evertheless, with a truly Canadian sense of concessions to everyone,  
they titled their district USONA,  
the 'United States of North America,'  
reflecting an aspiration not unexpressed elsewhere,  
and established,  
in competition with the 'First English Lutheran Church'  
and 'Our Saviour's Evangelical Lutheran Church'  
a third, the 'Danish Lutheran Church,'  
with services in their own language.  
father's friend was one of the few  
who had come directly from Europe,  
he had served in the Danish army,  
he brought to our heritage  
amazing skills in table tennis,  
and trained us in a manner which has served us well.