

BENNY ANDERSEN

SVANTE'S SONGS

A song story

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

This book is an attempt to give a description of and introduction to the virtually unknown, possible deceased lyrical poet Svante Svendsen. My knowledge of Svante dates back to my youth, since we met on an academic course in 1946, when both of us began to specialise in languages for our school-leaving exam, which we passed in June 1948. After that, our ways parted for a number of years, as he began to study medicine, while I travelled around playing the piano at hotels and restaurants in the provinces, in Norway and in Sweden. It was not until, at the end of 1959, I settled in Copenhagen, Vanløse, that we met once more. Svante had long since abandoned his medical studies (he gave up when he had to dissect corpses) and was earning a living partly as a copywriter for a daily newspaper and partly by writing occasional articles for a local newspaper (a doctor's column). During the ten or so years that preceded his disappearance – and possible death – in 1971, we met from time to time and became friends, despite the fact – or maybe because of it – that our views on a number of things were quite different.

When I tracked down and saw Svante once again – in 1960 or 1961 – it seemed to me he had completely changed, from the slight, smiling, obliging and somewhat superficial student I had known in 1946-48. Now he was partially bald, considerably overweight and seldom smiled. *When* he actually did, you had to be on your toes, for it was all over in a split-second and you only just managed to notice that one of his front teeth was missing.

Apart from that, though, he was sullen and contrary and misanthropic – nothing found favour in his eyes – and I at once thought to myself: hello goodbye, this is the parting of the ways! I had almost paid him a visit to see if he still had any contact with some of our ex-course comrades. But when shortly after-

wards I had one foot in the door, he suddenly asked me to wait a while, went over to his bookshelves and, from behind the books, took out a strange, well-worn kidskin bag that turned out to be some sort of brood pouch or mother hen for his poems. From it he extracted a sheet of yellow, folded draft paper and began to read 'Little song for Nina', which introduces this volume. I had not at all expected anything of the kind from him, and when he later told me something of his infatuation for Nina, I started to have warm feelings for him that have not left me since then.

The fact that in the following years he occasionally let me 'see if there was anything in the bag', as he used to put it, was not due to his feeling as a poet that he bore any affinity with me. He treated my poems with a mild indulgence, something that ought almost to be considered as praise among friends, considering the coolness with which he otherwise treated lyrical poets that had 'been led up the garden path of modernity'.

On one occasion, I showed him a poem that I felt was highly successful. It was, by the way, also later included in the collection 'The Inner Bowler Hat' and has also been published in a number of anthologies and textbooks. He skimmed through it and nodded slightly: 'It's very nice.' But I contained my fury of disappointment, until he added: 'But you must make sure you do a final version.'

I then grabbed hold of the poem and made for the door, determined never to show my face there again. Once out of the door, I realised however that I had not been visiting him but vice versa, so I had slammed my own front door. Having cooled down a bit, I shuffled back in to Svante, who asked with great concern: 'Terribly sorry, did I say something wrong?'

I was immediately touched, but after that I only showed him my poems when they had *definitively* been printed.

No, what induced him to confide his literary production to me was his respect for me as a *musician*. For some reason or other, he was convinced that I was the only person who could write music to his poems, so they would sound exactly right. I was less convinced, but I tried out a couple of them, and he was

touchingly enthusiastic about the results – utterly unmusical as he was – and strongly urged me to continue. Most of the melodies, however, I did not compose until after his disappearance or possible death in 1971.

As a result of these and other circumstances, I shall include my own private person in the description of him, although the main emphasis will, of course, be on him.

The melodies for the poems are printed in a small supplement at the back of the book. Svante Svendsen, according to his own statement, was born in Malmö in 1926. On the few occasions when he was surrounded by more than one or two persons, he used to present himself as ‘Svante Svendsen, born Svensson, got lost from my Scanian parents on a Malmö ferry in August 1935, since when I have had to get by with the help of others.’

Unfortunately, I have never managed to find out who and from where his parents actually were. He apparently had no connection whatever with his family.

Farum, 28 June 1972
Benny Andersen

LITTLE SONG FOR NINA

My life is but a can of beer,
Deposit paid am I,
except when you are oh so near,
you envoy from on high.

My navel's flab, my belly's girth,
whose growth I daily fear,
you swear are things of greatest worth –
to me you're always dear!

But how can ever I extol
your figure without flaw?
I drink your body of its soul
in hipflask swigs galore.

You are my life, my daily bread,
You are my dearest dear.
I'm but a bloke who's overfed,
who's standing far too near.

I know that this is of the past.
Another's your sweet dear.
But you have taught me love at last,
to me you're always near.

When I had read the song, I expressed my quite unreserved admiration.

Svante shook his head.

‘It’s not all that good. “To me you’re always near” – pinched from Johannes V. And you could put your finger on a couple of other things. But that’s partly deliberate. In an age that cultivates perfection, it can sometimes feel necessary to make something that’s imperfect.’

He folded the sheet of paper and replaced it in the kidskin bag, and promised to send me a copy.

He was living in a rented room in Holte. Plank bed, writing desk, two chairs and a waste-paper basket. Bookshelf and built-in cupboard, central heating and view of the garden. Above the writing desk a framed reproduction of Van Gogh’s old boots. I never found out if this was Svante’s own picture or if it belonged to the old lady that owned the house.

‘Who is this Nina, then?’ I asked.

‘She is my destiny,’ he said, looking down into the kidskin bag.

‘She’s driving me mad. Or something like that. Have you got a moment to spare?’

I sat down on the plank bed and unbuttoned my coat once again. He went over to the waste-paper basket, rummaged around its contents and fished up two bottles of porter, handing one of them to me. When he had drunk half of his, he started to tell me his story.

His description of her was strange. Whenever he said something positive about her, it was immediately followed by a negative assessment of the same characteristic; and whenever he came up with something negative, he immediately interpreted it as something positive.

She was fantastically beautiful. But that, on the other hand, was not a quality in itself. She was small and short-legged and had a slight squint. But he happened to like small, short-

legged girls, and if they had a slight squint into the bargain, he found them irresistible. She was mad about men and faithless – he had often cried and drunk himself to sleep. But, on the other hand – if that sort of girl didn't exist, life would hardly be worth living. Do you know what I console myself with when she has been unfaithful to me? I think: well, she's been unfaithful to others with me as well.

And so he continued. Finally, I tried to prise some facts out of him. Well, she was a laboratory technician, or had been. At the Serum Institute. Probably. But she had also stood as a painter's model. Or lain. An excellent painter, by the way. Just didn't get anywhere with his painting. Repeated himself. But in a talented way. She had also been a courier for a year or so. Each time she came home from a trip, she gave him the clap. It was quite trying. Especially when the doctor asked him to name the person who had infected him. Nina naturally insisted that it was him who had infected her, although he had never been unfaithful to her. She made such jealous scenes and demanded to know who he had screwed while she had been working her tail off on Mallorca and Sicily. Even though he didn't think all that much of jealousy, he even so took it as a sign that he was not completely indifferent to her. While she took that as an excuse to take revenge on him by immediately being unfaithful to him. Once when he went for treatment for gonorrhoea, her painter friend was sitting in the waiting room too. Svante said that that gave him a certain degree of satisfaction. Until he began to think about the other two men who were also sitting there.

All in all, she was wonderful. And he could impossibly do without her. Wonderful and without shame. Or rather: emancipated. He wasn't all that keen about emancipation. Interpreted it as superficiality. But if anyone was going to be allowed to be emancipated, it was her. She was so by nature. She was a whole, a perfect being. He hated perfectionism, but loved the perfect when it appeared in a form such as hers. Only it made him so nervous. And depressed. His state called for a considerable number of bottles of porter. Hence his size.

He opened the kidskin bag and took the poem out again. Glanced at it, handed it over to me. Would I try and write a tune for it? After all, I was a musician. I could just give him a copy of it next time we saw each other. He had another couple of poems, would quite like to hear them sung. He couldn't sing himself, so for precisely that reason. You have to supplement yourself with what you're not and what you cannot if you want to survive.

I said I was prepared to give it a try. He looked down into the kidskin bag, shook it a bit, stuck his hand down and fished out another piece of paper.

'Take this along with you,' he said, but don't read it till you get home.

I couldn't wait to read it till I got home to Vanløse. In the train, I unfolded it. It did not as yet have any title, but I soon discovered it was a drinking song.

SVANTE'S DRINKING SONG

Night is so cold.
Life is so short.
Friends move out further
off than they ought.
My tongue's all mouldy, my soul's lost its pep.
And each time I move it's a backward step
You must just keep your spirits primed.
I am drunk and I'm feeling fine.

Cobbles for bread.
Traffic like shears.
Zips and not buttons.
Music that sears.
Stars that are sooty and grins that don't fit
and porter and belches and aquavit.
You must just keep your spirits primed.
I am drunk and I'm feeling fine.

Tiredness and tears.
Shouts like coarse rope.
Hands quite rejected.
Hope without hope.
Toothache. Insomnia. Gastric distress.
But life's worth a hangover still, I guess.
You must just keep your spirits primed.
I am drunk and I'm feeling fine.

A month after my first visit to Svante, I got to see Nina. I paid him an unannounced visit one evening before I was to play, had half a bottle of aquavit with me, assuming he had a couple of bottles of beer about the place, which was a correct assumption on my part.

When Svante opened the door and caught sight of me, his look was somewhat shyer than usual, his gaze almost wandered. I thought I had come at a bad time and was about to leave, but he said in a low voice: 'Come on in. It's perhaps a good thing you came.' From this rather low-key welcome I guessed that he had a visitor, which turned out to be the case.

On the plank bed, her legs tucked up under her, sat a young woman about twenty-five years of age. Her hair was long and fair, gathered at the neck by a clasp or something similar. Her dress was of dark velvet or velour, and she was wearing a long necklace of unpolished pieces of amber. She was not fantastically beautiful, but quite attractive. An expert optician would perhaps have been able to ascertain that she had a slight squint. I couldn't. When a moment later she swung her legs forward, I could soon see that she was not particularly long-legged, not that I for that reason would have called her small and short-legged. She smiled in an extremely friendly way at me and tilted her head slightly as she stretched out her hand, but that did not have to mean that she was mad about men and faithless. Despite the fact that she did not correspond all that well to Svante's description, I was immediately convinced that she must be Nina. And when Svante presented us to each other, it turned out that once more my intuition had been on target. It looked like being one of my good evenings.

Naturally, I handed over the bottle to her, which she immediately passed on to Svante with a shy smile.

To stay with my intuition for a while – I sensed at once that I had landed in a space full of tension. Perhaps I had inadvertently interrupted a major row. I discreetly looked for

scratches, small cuts, black eyes, overturned chairs, broken vases and the like, but the outer world was apparently untouched – only the Van Gogh reproduction hung a little crookedly, but it always did that. Any eventual row must have been of a verbal nature.

Svante fished out a couple of bottles of porter and of beer from the waste-paper basket (as he put it: it's got to be emptied from time to time, anyway). And with the aid of our united bottles I managed to carry out my unchosen role as lightning conductor so well that the mood threatened on several occasions to become a bit silly. I can't remember much of what we talked about – it wasn't about literature at any rate. On that point, both Svante and I resemble most of the poets I know. When two or three poets are together, they talk about brands of wine, eroticism and money. Occasionally about politics. But extremely rarely – and only if they are in a depressive period – about literature.

Every night I used to play at the restaurant Chez Ankerfeldt on Falkonéallé, from ten to half past four – and it had suddenly now become twenty minutes to ten, so I had to take a cab from Holte. Nina wanted to come along, as she lived in Frederiksberg.

I noticed that Nina kissed and embraced Svante when we left. I also saw that Svante returned her kiss rather hesitatingly and unwillingly.

She ended up dropping in at the restaurant – a flying visit that lasted three hours. Since guests were thin on the ground to start off with, I had plenty of occasion to chat with her.

It emerged from what she said that he had been on the point of throwing her out when I arrived. That had happened before, and each time it was she who had to come crawling and beg him to take her back again.

She talked about him with great warmth and admiration, but by no means uncritically. She condemned his unfounded jealousy and self-pity, and she aired a theory based on the idea that for some reason or other he absolutely *wanted* to be un-

happily in love with her, had actually chosen to go sit there as the injured party and write melancholy songs about it.

Later that evening she asked me if Svante had told me about her? I said he had. She replied that I wasn't to believe everything he had said about her – he was an expert in laying it on thick. She had only been unfaithful to him on a single occasion, and that was the last time he threw her out and she had been quite desperate. But on that score they were quits. She knew at any rate that he had consoled himself with someone called Eve.

At that point, I noticed that she had begun to squint a bit. She drank up and said: well, it can't be all that interesting to hear about all our complications.

I inwardly agree with her on that – the story was not so different from the confidences I was obliged to listen to every evening at the piano. Moreover, some more guests had now arrived, so it suited me fine that she was leaving.

As she said goodbye, I thought she looked – if not exactly fantastically beautiful, well exceptionally so. And as she walked between the tables, I could see that she was more short-legged than I had at first assumed.

I never really got the relationship between the two of them completely sorted out. Which of them was more candid towards the other – and towards me? I don't doubt that they loved each other in their odd way, but which one loved the other most? Which one loved himself or herself most?

But perhaps these are the wrong questions. The older and more so-called 'mature' I become, the more uncertain I become as well, the less I understand human beings. Or rather: the more I gradually come to realise how little I understand human beings. Over the years, one's misunderstandings and wrong judgments of other people start to form quite a landmark in one's mental landscape.

As Svante once said:

'What actually takes place between two people that are very

fond of each other, only those two people know. And they know precious little about it, too.'

I'm one of those people who can't dawdle. It must be wonderful to be able to stroll along and give yourself plenty of time to take in and digest all the many different impressions you meet along the way. Several times I have tried to walk slowly, but after a few metres I get this kind of panicky feeling in me and begin to rush off. It's worst in towns. It's impossible for me to walk at a restrained pace along a pavement. Sooner or later there's an old lady in front of me walking even more slowly than I am. With the best will in the world I can't avoid overtaking her, so I can go back once more to what I consider a slow tempo. But soon after that I'm on the heels of a mother with two small children, one of them in a pram. The mother is lovely to look at, the kids are enchanting, but despite this I can't stand them and their almost demonstrative slowness. To dawdle is not the same as to move at a speed of ten centimetres a day like an alpine glacier! Svante is one of the slowest walking beings I have encountered – rather like a black slug. He has brilliantly characterised his speed problem in the line 'And each time I move it's a backward step.' Despite this, he liked going for a walk with me, which is something I don't understand. He didn't only walk slowly, he would stop up, yes, even go back to look more closely at something that had caught his eye in a shop window a quarter of an hour earlier and that he now felt he wanted to buy. There was always an abundant distance between us; conversation under such circumstances was impossible. I recall with a shudder the long monologues I have conducted when striding at a brisk pace without imagining that Svante had fallen behind. With agile snaps of the fingers I would underline witty punch lines and possibly split my sides laughing at a particularly brilliant joke, only to straighten up and see myself surrounded by surprised, worried or uncertainly smiling fellow citizens – but no Svante. He was standing a hundred metres down the street looking at a shop window.

It seldom cost me any greater exertion to tear myself away

from my interested audience and run over to Svante to ask him what the meaning was.

‘Just look at that coffee maker there,’ he could come out with, ‘it’s just the sort of thing I need.’

‘Well, then, let’s go in and buy it!’ I’d say.

He would straighten up and furrow his already furrowed brow.

‘No, it’s just not on,’ he’d murmur.

‘Why ever not,’ I’d say eagerly, ‘you would like that coffee maker and we go in and buy it, all right?’ If you haven’t got enough money on you, I can lay out.’

‘It’s not that,’ he’d say, looking suddenly lost and ashen in the face. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

I sometimes wondered if he perhaps had had a past as a shoplifter and therefore didn’t dare enter shops any more.

One day, however, I got the following song from him. It is not one of his strongest, but it provides a partial explanation of his purchasing problems, here presented in a department store scale.

SVANTE IN THE DEPARTMENT STORE

Often in shops of a quite normal size
Terror and panic I cannot disguise.
But when a department store's doors I pass through
my self-discipline is put under the screw.

Here there's too much, it's all here by default,
from fine grand pianos to coarsest sea salt.
I came here for something I had to procure,
but what it was I'm completely unsure.

Soon all the goods start to swim past my eyes.
Both my ears roar. And my tongue changes size.
I point at things blindly before all goes black.
Pay up and frantically hurry off back.

Off to a pub where two beers and three snaps
save me from what would be instant collapse.
Then home to unpack what's now in my string bag
though gooseflesh is all I can call my swag.

Never a thing I can put to some use.
Strange home utensils distinctly abstruse.
What shall I do with shoes too small by far,
a fine silver rattle and small-chequered bra?

Among the absurd things I now catalogue:
one warm dog's blanket, but minus the dog.
A garden hose, but no flower bed in sight.
I wonder if this will go on all night –

Help! Give me strength! I am tempted anew
to the store's bargain sale's hullabaloo;
I waver and quaver and buy like a fool
a kennel, a topee – a whole swimming pool...

This is my evidence poignant and clear:
Wonderful bargains have all cost me dear.
So bind me, watch over me, dull me with wine,
and save me from sales and a total decline!

Nina had more than hinted to me that a female comfoter by the name of Eve had attended to Svante. I never properly asked Nina just how much she knew about the relationship. Possibly, she had only seen the following song on one occasion and noticed the name Eve. It is even conceivable that Svante sent her the song to make her jealous, to get her to come back to him. Svante claimed to me that the poem was completely imaginary, with a touch of real events that, by the way, only had to do with Nina:

‘If I really had been together with someone called Eve, I would of course have given her a different name in the poem. If you use live models in a short story, you don’t give such persons their private names, do you? Read the text in reverse. It says “The garden of Eden” at the end because I wanted to describe a brief moment in an earthly paradise. And that makes it only natural to call the girl Eve and her legs Eve-like. It’s as simple as that.’

I’m still in doubt as to whether things are that simple in this case. For when it comes to it, Svante has in at least two songs used Nina’s real name, in the ‘Little Song to Nina’ and (see later) in ‘Svante’s Happy Day’. If the above poetic name theory was to hold water, these two poems would have to deal with someone else than Nina. Who? Eve perhaps?

SVANTE IN PARADISE

Whitethorn in view.
Kids play on cue.
Wall washed in sun.
Summer's begun.

Peace chirping high.
Clouds drifting by.
Glass of iced port.
Paper's been bought.

Apples in bowl.
Prawns by the shoal.
Lilac's scent-kegs.
Lithe Eve-like legs.

Languishing smiles.
Topless textiles.
No traffic storm.
Music that's warm.

Cuckoos say cluck.
Bottles say glug.
Leaves thick and groomed.
Prawns all consumed.

All this fresh air.
Heart debonair.
Bottle – all gone.
Eve says: Come on!...

I'm here in the Garden of Eden
But my belly's been overfeedin'.

It was difficult to trace the original Swede in Svante. His suburban Copenhagen was without any accent. From time to time he might come out with 'the devil take me' or 'seventy-five', but I took this almost as just being a bit coquettish. His drinking habits were also Danish – mainly beer-oriented.

But he kept Swedish newspapers, read Swedish books (in Swedish) and avidly followed everything that occurred in Sweden. Supported the Swedish football team. And when he criticised how things were in Denmark, it was always based on Swedish views and models. He was fairly peeved about being a citizen in a NATO country and the idea of Denmark entering the Common Market went even more against the grain.

'You can enter the Common Market if you like,' he declared, 'I'm staying outside.'

He did not clarify in any way how he would set about it.

He did not refrain at all from criticising Swedish society, but if the rest of us modified in any way our respect for our sister country, he would become mortally offended and exclaim: 'No one can criticise Swedish conditions as acutely and talentedly as the Swedes themselves. Put your own house in order first!'

I once asked him why on earth he didn't go to Sweden and live there. He went over to his bookshelf, took out a couple of volumes of Moberg's 'The Emigrants' and brought out his kid-skin bag.

'The tragedy is this – I can't stand the sea. When as a boy I came over on the Malmö ferry, I was so sea-sick that it has struck terror in me for life.

He then fished 'Longing for Sweden' up out of his bag and handed it over to me.

But, considering the fact that there both hovercraft and planes exist, and that the Elsinore-Helsingborg crossing lasts a maximum of twenty minutes, I have a sneaky suspicion that there was something else that deterred him even more. Namely,

the fear of being disappointed at meeting the Promised Land. The risk of losing his dream and thereby his transposed standing place.

Besides, I have a vague feeling that certain passages in the song are ironically intended.

LONGING FOR SWEDEN

I stand here and gaze at the Swedish coast
and long for its mountains and skerries.
My heart is jumpy, it flutters almost,
wants to be on the first of the ferries
 to banish all that pains me
 let birchtree groves sustain me
 where smiling girls endear...
 but I am stuck right here
 if not I'll end up sea-sick.

It feels just like seeing the far promised land
all flowing with milk and with money,
where life the ragings of time can withstand
and where Bellman's songs are like honey
 where lingon sprigs assorted
 in birchtree groves are sported
 but I am stuck right here
 a quayside overseer
 if not I'll end up sea-sick.

I stand in a country neurotic and small
where people are smiling and crazy.
The Swedes do a great deal we can't do at all,
they're so neutral and not 'cos they're lazy
 and their sound limbs displaying
 in birchtree groves are playing
 they're brimful of ideas
 while I just fade out here
 if not I'll end up sea-sick.

My ashes shall sail back to Sweden's land
be scattered in every direction
so I'll be transported from strand to strand
and maybe at last find perfection
 where roots can thrive and flourish
 in birchtree groves that nourish
 but till that day is near
 I guess I'm stuck right here
 if not I'll end up sea-sick.

AT THE HOT-DOG STAND

One cold, blustery October day, Svante and I passed a hot-dog stand in Frederiksberg. I was seized by an irresistible urge to eat a sausage and on the spot requested a frankfurter.

Svante placed himself next to me. He was going through one of his silent, brooding times, or, to put it more plainly: he had a hangover. Hardly had the hot, fragrant sausage been handed over to me that a place became vacant on the leeward side of the hot-dog establishment and I hurried over to it. But Svante continued to stand on the windward side gazing thoughtfully in front of him. The hot-dog man asked him:

‘What would you like – usual, knackwurst or frankfurter?’

Svante became a little less distant and replied:

‘No hot dog for me, thanks.’

The hot-dog man raised his eyebrows and asked:

‘What can I do for you then – I’m afraid all we’ve got is sausages and bread – a couple of rolls, perhaps?’

‘No thank you, I don’t want anything at all – especially not sausages.’

The hot-dog man turned out to be a bit of a sly dog. He looked inquiringly at Svante and continued politely:

‘You’ve just come here to tell me you don’t want a hot dog?’

Svante nodded: ‘Yes, I think it’s the best thing to draw your attention to that – so there won’t be any misunderstandings.’

‘Very thoughtful of you,’ the hot-dog man said, ‘so you’re not very keen on sausages?’

‘Oh yes, I used to like them a lot – but that’s over now.’

‘I see. Might I ask: If you were to eat a sausage now, what type would you have preferred?’

‘Probably a knackwurst. Possibly a frankfurter.’

‘So it’s those two types in particular you don’t want to

have?’

‘Yes, I’m glad you’ve understood.’

‘That’s what we’re here for. But the sausage you don’t want to have, would it have been with mustard or ketchup or both?’

‘Both. With or without both. According to how you look at it.’

‘I fully respect your attitude. I ought, perhaps, draw your attention to the fact that we also have crisp-fried onions and raw chopped onions as extras.’

‘Good thing you mentioned that. In that case, I think I would replace the ketchup by raw chopped onions, so that the sausage I don’t want to have would be a knackwurst with mustard and raw chopped onions – in the first instance. Perhaps – but I can’t say so definitely – perhaps I would not want to have two knackwursts.

‘One or two rolls?’

‘I would make do with just the one roll.’

‘Am I then right in thinking that you would actually like to have the other roll?’

‘I’m sorry if I’ve expressed myself unclearly. The first roll is what I would have ordered if I had wanted to order it. But since I don’t want to order it, it naturally ceases to be valid. The second roll, on the other hand, I would not have ordered even if I had wanted to order the first one, so that never enters the discussion.’

‘Now I understand,’ the hot-dog man nodded gravely.

‘But you must excuse my having taken up so much of your time,’ Svante said, seeing that I had now eaten my hot dog. ‘I will come back tomorrow.’

‘You are welcome at any time.’

And since that day, Svante would come every evening and start by declining to order his knackwurst with mustard and raw chopped onions and only one roll. On a few occasions, the hot-dog man succeeded in getting him to do without crisp-fried onions instead of the raw ones, but there Svante drew the line. De-

spite all this, a long-lasting friendship sprang up between the two of them, one that lasted until Svante got a taste for sausages again and thus became a quite ordinary customer.

Well, the end of the affair is my responsibility. I felt that the event deserved to be further developed in a poem. So I also suggested to Svante to make a song about it, but no such song ever materialised. This perhaps says something about Svante's working methods and explains his scant production: he refused to gain inspiration from just anything.

THE SEASONS, first version

Flowers bloom in meadows or vases.
Beating of mats all surpasses.
Paths are regravelled
and poems unravelled
for now it is springtime in Denmark.

Washing can flap while its drying.
Young kids get spots that are trying.
Girls must take teasing
and football's unceasing
for now it is summer in Denmark.

Days now seem shorter and gloomy.
Schoolkids unruly and rheumy.
Clothes get outdated
tears flow unabated
for now it is autumn in Denmark.

Deaths. New divorces. Long novels.
Plans in cold storage and snuffles.
Noses start dripping
and schnozzles start dipping
for now it is winter in Denmark.

Svante wrote 'The Seasons' in the summer of 1963. I was immediately fascinated by such expressions as 'Beating of mats all surpasses'. We don't hear anything about *who* is *beating* those mats. If Svante hadn't chosen a gerund for the subject, we would immediately have seen all those spring-cleaning housewives at work in our mind's eye. But Svante concentrates on the fact that beating took place, and that this time it was mats at the receiving end. Throughout the poem he deliberately avoids saying who is doing things. Washing can admittedly *flap*, but why? Because of the wind, not of its own free will. Young kids admittedly *get* something, but what? Annoying spots, but not of their own free will.

Nor does it say that agile lads are eagerly playing football out on the meadow, but only states that an awful lot of playing took place: *Football's unceasing*, which leads you to identify with the poor ball that's being booted around without being able to defend itself. Schoolkids are not inactive, but this is no proof that any action is seen as positive.

In this way, the poem comes to express on the one hand a sympathy and solidarity with all those who are small and overlooked in society, those who are trodden underfoot, kicked, waved around with, etc. But on the other hand the poem also expresses a sense of impotence; it is apparently impossible to revolt against the status quo, those efficient wielders of power who treat us as they see fit.

At one point only, however, it would seem as if a brief light is lit in the dark. For what are the schoolkids? Unruly! There is as yet no open sign of revolt, but the belief in authority has started to crumble a little, and it is as if the author places his hope in the will of the new generation to question ossified authority and outdated forms of government. So far, though, it would only seem to be a single, fluttering hope, after which the poet sinks back once more into despondency and resignation.

This attempt at an interpretation is, of course, off my own

bat. When I put it forward to Svante, he looked very surprised, scratched the back of his head and exclaimed: 'I believed all along it had to do with the seasons!'

I later tried a different interpretation. I was going to make sure I flushed him out, one way or another!

It is of course correct, as Svante claimed, that the poem deals with the seasons. But, in my opinion, it deals just as much with Svante's view of, and attitude towards, the passing of the seasons, i.e. the seasons of life – in other words, his philosophy of life.

The first verse celebrates the spring of life, early youth. All possibilities are open, like the blossoming flowers. One is brimful of energy, eager to open all windows and sort through everything that is old, ready to put one's house in order, beat one's own mat. Welcome, future! The world belongs to us who have a sense of what is beautiful in life and art.

The second verse refers to a more mature age. One has had children, the wife has plenty to keep her busy – just think of all the washing that needs to be done. In one's happiness and pride concerning the children, a touch of concern creeps in: the smallest one has got a rash – could it be childhood spots or fruit specks – or maybe sun rash? It's a pity that the lad can't resist teasing the girls, that they're no good at playing football for example (Neither Svante nor I could foresee at that point in time that a decade or so later there would be a world championship in woman's football!). But, all in all: as long as one doesn't have all larger worries than these, one should be content.

In the third verse, this satisfaction is threatened. One never quite achieved what one had hoped for. The future did not end up belonging to one, since it had become present in the meantime. The kids had grown up, and one fails to understand present-day schoolkids and methods of upbringing. Are young people just to be allowed to do whatever they like? Shouldn't there be just a hint of guidelines? And modern changes so fast now that one feels oneself hopelessly antiquated from one day

to the next. And it *could* be that one is no longer able to keep up, maybe out of sheer indolence one has missed the opportunity to get out of one's rut? One's marriage is a bit wobbly, perhaps. At times, one is on the point of abandoning the whole thing.

In the fourth and last verse, old age and decay have made their entrance. Soon all one hears about is accidents and death. Perhaps that is all one is interested in? So that was what one got out of life. What was the point of all that exertion, all those worries and all that hope? All one can hope for now is that the whole thing will soon be over with. For the rest of one's mortal span, all one can do is take care of one's most annoying infirmities and seek solace in drink, and in novels that deal with people even worse off than oneself.

All in all, the poem expresses a deeply pessimistic view of life. We begin full of the joys of life, full of expectation, and end up indignant, doddering and full of cold. As the preacher says: we are born over an open grave.

When – not without some pride – I presented this interpretation to Svante, he livened up considerably, placed a hand on my shoulder and said with considerable warmth: 'You have no idea what a great service you have done me! How glad I am that a pair of professional eyes have looked at that poem, for I have known all along that there was something wrong with it. It had something to do with the ending – it lacked something or other. You don't feel quite satisfied – do you know what I mean? Well, of course you do. Now I can see what's wrong. Formerly, I couldn't see how simple the problem was. That's how it often is with the simple things – you can't see them because you lack the imagination to conceive of something that was *that* simple again. Aren't I right?'

I nodded, more out of courtesy and curiosity than any actual comprehension. Svante soon whipped out his kidskin bag and took out his copy (or original) of the poem. He then grabbed some scissors and began to cut the poem into pieces.

'What are young doing?' I asked.

‘Completing it,’ he explained, placing the pieces on the writing desk, ‘just look – I have cut off the first verse, because it of course has to come last. That calls for a porter.’ He dived into the waste-paper basket for a couple of bottles. I faintly protested: ‘Yes, but that ruins my whole interpretation!’ Svante opened the bottles and passed me one.

‘So what – you can always make another one. Cheers!’

We toasted each other, and Svante added – without any personal barb, as far as I could judge:

‘In that way, the fourth line of the first verse: ‘and poems unravelled’ will become the penultimate line of the entire poem. It will be much weightier because of that. Thanks for your help, old friend!’

Since then, I have refrained from interpreting either Svante’s or any other poet’s creations.

So here is ‘The Seasons’ in the edition fully revised and approved by Svante.

THE SEASONS (in the final version)

Washing can flap while its drying.
Young kids get spots that are trying.
Girls must take teasing
and football's unceasing
for now it is summer in Denmark.

Days now seem shorter and gloomy.
Schoolkids unruly and rheumy.
Clothes get outdated
tears flow unabated
for now it is autumn in Denmark.

Deaths. New divorces. Long novels.
Plans in cold storage and snuffles.
Noses start dripping
and schnozzles start dipping
for now it is winter in Denmark.

Flowers bloom in meadows or vases.
Beating of mats all surpasses.
Paths are regravelled
and poems unravelled
for now it is springtime in Denmark.

In the spring of 1963, I spent a weekend with Svante at a summer cottage in Asserbo that I had been allowed to borrow by an acquaintance. The weather was delightful, the birds sprightly – nature and beer close at hand. We went for walks in the woods and along the shore and got quite a colour in the space of just a couple of May days. In the evenings we went down to the pub and were given excellent service, as we were virtually the only customers. The idea of our stay was, among other things, to cheer Svante up a bit. There was trouble again between him and Nina and, as usual, I couldn't work out if she had run away from him or he had thrown her out. He was way down the dumps at any rate and he been on some self-destructive drinking bouts. Things just couldn't go one like that.

I was in one of my good periods. I had saved up a little money, given gambling a rest for a while and wanted to try to live off my writing, translating and doing things for the radio, etc. – and it looked as if it was going to work, even though I had a family to keep. (We also happened to live very cheaply in Vanløse.)

I took it for granted that with my excess of *joie de vivre* I was the right person to put Svante straight and get him back up on the rails again. But I was soon to realise that the opposite is often the case: that the person who is doing fine by his very presence and intolerable good humour causes the depressed person to find his own situation even blacker than before – and a joint fit of weeping had perhaps have been more in keeping.

I could feel the discrepancy when, like an eager guide, I went around pointing out the joys of life to my one-man conducted party:

'On our right, the great tit, and a bit further back the woodpecker. Oh, just look at that little squirrel – how lucky we are to get a glimpse of him. Note, too, how spring is bursting out everywhere. This creeper, by the way, is a honeysuckle. It will flower soon, but in the meantime we will have to enjoy the flow-

ers already out – here it looks as if we have a little cluster of violets. The local residents are said to be very proud of their spring, so we must make sure we don't offend them by suggesting that spring can be nice elsewhere too. Here a deer has definitely passed by. And what's that – a genuine honey-bee, no less – that augurs well. And now it's time to have a quick look at the beach – this way'... All of this while Svante lagged ten metres behind and stared fixedly at the ground.

When we were down at the pub on Sunday evening eating veal fricassee, I was rather tired and irritable.

'Why don't you pull your bloody self together and write a song about the spring!' I exclaimed. 'I know it's not very modern to write about nature and things like that, but you've never had any desire to be modern either. Force yourself to think about the spring. I hereby order a song about the spring from you. All I'll decide on is the title. It is to be called *Svante's Spring Song*. And the fee payable is three special Easter brew beers, the last four the grocer had. The fourth one I intend to drink myself. So get weaving.'

Svante gave one of his mini-smiles, the first of the whole weekend so far. And when I promised him one of the Easter brews as an advance fee, he accepted.

When we were sitting in the train the next morning on our way home, he fished the following up out of his kidskin bag:

SVANTE'S SPRING SONG

My hair's falling out
my knee-cap's all loose
my kidney stones rattle refrains.
My heart is askew
my gut's in a noose
my leg has these strange shooting pains –
 for each step I take there's this sting...
 and yet it is spring.

My gait's like a bear's
my youth dead and gone
my mind set has turned black as tar.
My love has moved in
with him she's keen on
I see her now most from afar –
 I also lost out on the swing...
 and yet it is spring.

Our future will choke
in sulphur and smoke
we'll leave what we took or we gave.
My shovel and spade
I'll one day invoke
and hurry off down in my grave –
 this year could see my final fling...
 and yet it is spring!

It is without any enthusiasm that I present the next song which, to put it mildly, treats our language grossly. Some will perhaps reproach me for having included it in the selection, because it reveals a less flattering side of Svante's talent.

I would nevertheless defend the song by saying that it does not necessarily mock the Danish language as such, but the language when it sounds worst, when it is used in a coarse way.

But it is not a heartfelt favourite, and therefore I have not written a melody for it. If anyone wants to sing it, it is possible to use the old melody for Lembcke's song about the mother tongue.

THE MUDDY TONGUE

Our muddy tongue is frightful, it has so foul a sound.
With what shall I compare it, in song can praise be found?
A whore well past forty, red-nosed and hair all dyed,
but she is so game and she still holds back the tide.

She places on our lips every word that's choked and wry
from all love's hoarsest groaning, to festive drunken cry;
to hearts weighed down by sorrow, or filled with wild unrest,
she grants us all the timely belch that calms our savage breast.

And if in east and west we have searched from first to last
the wisdom of new ages, the wit of times long past,
she tempts and she entices, by her will we must bide.
She is a whore past forty that still holds back the tide.

The foreigners that seek to learn her language with great toil,
they get the feeling it is just like porridge on the boil;
And every time they struggle to say what strikes their ears,
she laughs out loud so heartlessly and all she says is: Cheers!

And all of the poets she gave words' mighty power
they tyrannise her language, but from an ivory tower.
Each song known by the people and listened to with zest,
is mostly German, English or Spanish at its best.

Each feeble joke that causes a grin to reach our lips,
a gross of them at least she has right at her finger-tips.
each word straight from the belly that back to it can home
has been for many centuries our own tongue's basic tone.

And words all change in passing before they disappear
Our dialects forgotten, like snows of yesteryear;
and tongue after tongue all like shooting stars have died;
but she is so game and she still holds back the tide.

It is indeed seldom that an exuberant *joie de vivre* characterises Svante's songs, although glimpses of black humour do at times break through the darkness of his outlook and cause one to make allowances for obvious signs of self-pity. By the way, I feel that self-pity in minor doses can benefit one's disposition. One must be allowed to lick one's wounds. But when self-pity becomes self-contempt – as it does in the following song – there is danger ahead.

When Svante gave me the song (in spring 1968) there was nothing special to be noticed about him, except perhaps that he was a bit more strained and talkative than usual. He told me episodes from his youth I had not heard previously. I shall relate one of them here. Admittedly, it does not shed any explanatory light on Svante's later life or his production, but I am fond of it because it provides a strange and touching impression of Svante when quite young. As a boy and until he began his adult 'A' level course he lived with a couple of elderly people who treated him with loving kindness – and he used to call them mum and dad. They died long ago.

On one occasion, he was bed-ridden with inflammation of the throat and had a high temperature. The old couple were sitting out on the terrace eating their breakfast in the sun. They had just been in to see how he was, when an elderly neighbour phoned to say that Svante was over at her place, almost unconscious and unable to speak a word. Horrified, they hurried over.

It later transpired that in a delirium he had got out of bed, had first tried to crawl out the window to get to the old couple out on the terrace, had given up and gone out through the front door, crossed the one neighbour's lawns, gone behind the next neighbour's house and walked straight out onto the road, dressed only in his underwear.

The reason for his having described this wide arc instead of having gone directly out to them on the terrace was that in his delirious state he believed he had lost one of his legs – and then

it can be pretty difficult to walk in a straight line. Once out on the road, he thought: 'Who around here can stand seeing a man in his underwear?' and decided in favour of the elderly woman neighbour, whom he knew well. She was sitting talking on the phone when she saw Svante come in through the garden gate with a gait that was extremely odd. She broke off her conversation at once and hurried out to him: 'What on earth's wrong, Svante?' Svante was going to reply 'I've lost one of my legs,' but at that point he happened to look down at his legs and discovered that they were both there, and so he thought it was a rather stupid thing to say and did not answer, just allowed himself to be taken into the house. Before she got him to lie down, he murmured: 'Phone my dad.'

Five minutes later, his head had cleared – it had helped to get out of that sun-heated room and be cooled down a bit.

It was late before I left that evening, and Svante made me promise not to read the song before the following morning. And this time, for some reason or other, I kept my word.

I didn't get up until around ten the next day, but as soon as I had read the text, I realised that this time it was not simply one of his usual depressions. I immediately took a taxi out to his place, but he had already left. On his writing desk lay a piece of paper with the address of a mental sanatorium somewhere on Zealand. He stayed there for the following three months.

SVANTE'S BLACK SONG

I'm so tired of myself and all my stoppings.
And my body causes me dismay.
What use is it my liver's size keeps dropping
When my belly just balloons away.
I'm prone to self-hating
Need a touch of overrating.

I'm fed up with my name, my thoughts are fleeting.
And my prayers the Lord will all ignore.
What use to me's a heart that goes on beating
When there's no one it is beating for.
I'm prone to self-hating
Need a touch of overrating.

I regret all my past, my birth's distasteful.
I should not have seen the light of day.
And Nature's been a damned sight over-wasteful
when I wasn't strained off straight away.
I hate my self-hating
Need a touch of overrating.

I'm so tired of my voice and my handwriting
and my brain is leaden, tired and worn.
It would be oh so nice and so inviting
to forget oneself and be reborn –
be freed from self-hating
with a touch of overrating.

I rang to the sanatorium and was told that Svante was not interested in talking to anyone or receiving visits. But I was welcome to write to him.

I wrote a couple of long, cheerful letters to him and received in answer a couple of postcards, where he merely wrote that he was feeling better, had lost some weight and would soon be coming home. I then had a busy period of TV work and travelling and that, combined with a feeling that he perhaps wanted to be left alone, caused our correspondence to die a natural death.

One day in June 1968 – when I was living in Kompagnistræde – Nina came up to me with a small, tired voice, large, mournful eyes and a song that Svante had sent to her, *Letter from you*, in which he described how much he longed to get a letter from her. When I asked her if she hadn't written to him, she replied that she had got three unanswered letters returned by post. That it was now all over between them. She did not want to be humiliated any further. She did not understand him, and she now wished to live her own life.

'Isn't it a rather unfortunate moment to decide something like that,' I asked cautiously, 'maybe everything will look a bit different when he is fit again and comes home.'

'Svante will never come back to me,' she said, in an unexpectedly sharp tone of voice and got up to leave. She stopped for a moment in the door and looked at me for a moment in a strangely inquiring way. Then she smiled sweetly:

'You don't understand a thing.'

And left.

She was right. I never managed to make out her relationship to Svante. And generally speaking, my assessment of what takes place inside other people's minds has repeatedly proved itself to be catastrophically deficient – and I say this without any coquetry whatsoever. The only characters I understand are

the imaginary ones that appear in my short stories. Or so I delude myself into believing.

Here is the song *Letter from you*.

LETTER FROM YOU

I've an appetite that's vanished
And all solid flesh has now sunk
I can't even get plastered, get really drunk
till a letter comes from you.

To the spot I seem to be rooted
I just sit alone in a nook
I don't even feel like opening a book
till a letter comes from you.

I shun all small conversation
reject each word that would console
I won't even give my old mother a call
till a letter comes from you.

Vitamin C's not on the agenda
I just lie here and pine away
I won't even come to rue the day
till a letter comes from you.

I believe my days are all numbered
my pulse'll soon give up the ghost
I don't even dare to hope to host
a letter that comes from you.

So now you know what the end is
how much you must answer for
should you not, at once, just guarantee
that a letter comes to me.

As I knew that Svante's foster parents were dead, I asked him in a letter if the old mother mentioned in the song was his real mother, and if she was still alive.

He answered somewhat curtly that the expression should naturally be understood metaphorically, just as when you talk about your sick old aunt. In my letter I also expressed some slight amazement that he returned Nina's letters unopened and asked him if he thought she was possibly trying to pull my leg? To my surprise he answered that it was true enough. He knew perfectly well from previous letters what was in them – half-implicit or explicit reproaches. They were not the sort of letters he was longing for.

I feel the urge here – before we move on to the sad and mysterious conclusion of the Svante saga – to include a song that is quite unique in Svante's production, as it expressing a state of pure happiness. Here we meet something so rare as a completely relaxed and cheerful Svante. The song dates from the summer of 1967, one year before his stay at the sanatorium. Nina and Svante were on holiday together in a small summer cottage on one of the South Funen islands.

SVANTE'S HAPPY DAY

See how the day's begun!
Warm is the round red sun.
Nina is showering at ease.
And I'm eating bread and cheese.
Life's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Flowers start to flower once more.
Spiders run down the door.
Birds fly in flocks through the air
when there are birds to spare.
Joy's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Green is the grass and wet.
None of the bees need fret.
Suck in the air till it's spent.
Oh, get that bindweed scent!
Bliss's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

In wafts a shower-time song.
She's really going strong.
Outside the sky is quite blue.
I can approve that too –
Joy's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Now Nina comes right in,
naked, with moist warm skin,
kisses me fondly, still bare
goes off to do her hair.
Life's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

After his stay at the sanatorium, Svante and I didn't see much of each other. I moved to Farum at the end of 1968 and he moved to Amager. He did not visit me and I did not impose on him. Nina got married, not to the painter but to a graphic artist and squatter. After a couple of years they got divorced and I think she now lives in a commune in North Zealand.

In 1970 my daughter got married and moved from Farum to Frederiksberg. This affected me more than I had expected. I had some minor depressions, which suited me fine in a way as it gave me material, partly food for thought and partly for literary work and thus job satisfaction. In that sense, an author is more favoured by fortune than most other people: as soon as he notices a depression approaching – no matter how small – he noticeably livens up and, with a melody on his lips (in a minor key) he hurries off to the bookshop and buys plenty of paper.

But it also caused me to a greater extent to recall the old depressionist, Svante, and one day when I was in a sufficiently dark mood I went out to Kastrup to visit him. (February 1971.)

The little old lady who opened the door turned out to be Mrs Jensen, who smiled nervously at me before showing me up to his room.

'He's not doing all that well,' she whispered, 'but we do what we can for him. I make sure that he gets something proper to eat and do the cleaning when he lets me. He's very stubborn, you know, but apart from that he's a fine person. Don't talk too much about wanting to help him or things like that – that just makes him sullen. Just take him as he is.'

It was an attic room with sloping walls and could probably have been quite cosy. There was a mahogany table with drawers, a wicker chair, a small pile of books, an iron bedstead and eight bottles of porter, four of which were unopened. The wall-paper was light blue with narrow red stripes. On the floor a Persian carpet, well worn but possibly genuine.

On the bed lay Svante fully dressed, shrunk to about half

his usual size. His cheeks, once so bulging, were now flabby and wrinkled. He sat up and stretched out his hand in a friendly way. I found it difficult to disguise my dismay at seeing him in such a state. He smiled and an almost mischievous look came into his eyes:

‘I know I’m only a shadow of my former self. But I prefer that to being the shadow of others.’

He also explained that he neither felt ill nor tired, just lazy. Did as little as possible. Had managed after his stay at the sanatorium to get by on a disablement pension. Read a book once in a while, but only books he had read before. Never went out. Felt best when lying staring up at the ceiling with a bottle of porter close by. In a way, he seemed more balanced and almost jovial. I remembered Mrs Jensen’s remark about not talking about helping him. Even so, I had a strong feeling that things couldn’t go on like this.

‘It was a good thing you came, by the way,’ he said after having shoved a bottle of porter in my hand, and he hauled out the kidskin bag from under the bed, opened it and handed me the following song.

WORST HUNGER PANGS

Put venison, smoked salmon on the table,
add caviar and lobster to the spoils!
When roast beef fat starts curling best it's able,
Then all my mental juices seethe and boil.
My palate's greed's a stay-by
and my appetite's uncouth
my fork's a catapult with vibrant twangs
that fires off all the dainties
into my mouth
but nothing can allay my
 worst hunger pangs.

We're wallowing in wine and girls who're frisky.
A tape recorder plays a cheerful tune.
We dance so close that pulse and mood get risky.
Our bodies squeeze so tight we almost swoon.
I'm partying and lay my
giddy head in some lap
while everyone around just shouts and bangs.
my soul can feel a twitching
my flesh too perhaps
but nothing can allay my
 worst hunger pangs.

I drink and dance and whore just like a nutter.
Behaving like a rocket that has blown,
so from my pores great sparks begin to sputter
I'm exiled from my every shaking bone.
I had a short-lived heyday,
all my flesh has turned to flab,
so cups are always brimful in my hands.
Just she who isn't present
or my death perhaps
just one might but allay my
 worst hunger, my best hunger pangs.

I decided to be tough with him.

‘Svante,’ I said, ‘Just listen here: the world is out of joint. Just think of the pollution problem. Over-population in the developing countries. Anti-personnel bombs and napalm in Vietnam. The drugs issue. Banks are being built instead of houses. Don’t the squatters mean anything to you? Race discrimination, The Common Market, the women’s libbers – I could just go on. We’re living in 1971, and you’re still sitting there writing about your small, private petit bourgeois provincial ego, about unhappy love – can’t you see these are luxury problems?’

He shrugged his shoulders: ‘Good heavens, it’s the only luxury I allow myself, apart from porter.’

‘Yes, but can’t you see that the writer’s role today can’t be the same as...’

‘I’m not a bloody writer,’ he interrupted.

‘You bloody well write!’

‘I’m at liberty to write a bit for myself.’

‘If you only write for yourself it’s a form of masturbation!’

‘I’ve heard that masturbation doesn’t damage your health, quite the reverse.’

I refused to give up that easily:

‘Besides which, it’s not true that you only write for yourself. You’ve shown your work to me, among other people.’

‘That was to have music set to it – I can’t do that myself.’

‘Don’t just sit there and claim that you wouldn’t like to get them published!’

He looked at me with an overbearing smile that exasperated me.

‘Good heavens,’ he said calmly, ‘why should I put my private petit bourgeois outpourings on display, who would be interested in my luxury problems? Drink up your porter.’

I quickly drank it and got up. Once in a while I can get a bit hot-tempered.

‘I’ll bloody well make sure the songs get published!’ I said

and left.

That promise I am now in the process of keeping.
I haven't seen Svante since.

Just under a week later – at the beginning of March 1971 – I went out to Kastrup again, firmly resolved not to lose my temper this time. But I still had an excellent depression, so if anyone could haul him out of his inner exile, it ought to be me. He probably realised that, for when I arrived he was gone.

'Mr Svendsen left just the day after you were here,' Mrs Jensen said, inviting me into her living room. 'He wouldn't say where he was going, just that he wouldn't be coming back. But, I said, isn't there a message I can give if anyone asks after you?'

She paused and turned her face away, looked out at the bare apple trees in the garden. A plane flew noisily over us at quite a low altitude. I started, but she seemed not to notice the noise. I waited a bit before saying anything. Finally, she dried her eyes and said with a somewhat firmer voice:

'He was such a fine man, never hurt a fly, he was hardest on himself. We don't quite understand why he left – he always said he liked it here.'

'Please excuse my curiosity,' I put in, 'but did he leave any message?'

'Oh yes, that's right...', she said and got up, went over to a bureau and took Svante's old kidskin bag out of a drawer. She gave it to me with both hands.

'Mr Svendsen asked me to give you this when you came. I don't really know what it is.'

The bag turned out to contain the song that concludes this book. The title is mine, as are most of the other ones.

I never heard from him again and do not know where he is in the world – or even if he is alive. The song can possibly be interpreted as a final farewell to those left behind before setting

off into the unknown. But I refuse to believe that Svante has taken his own life. My theory is that he eventually got over his sea-sickness, or rather his fear of meeting the real content of his dreams – and that, in other words, he went off to Sweden.

Svante belong to a type of poet that is personality-oriented and strongly individualistic, a type that today is more and more giving way to authors that are society-oriented and have a collective attitude.

A relic of the past, one could say. Possibly, but even in these times of upheaval we need to cherish our relics of the past, to measure ourselves against them, to react to them, maybe let ourselves be inspired by them in order to find a path in all this confusion, to decide where we are going to focus our exertions. From that point of view, Svante is still worth reading. And maybe worth singing. I miss him at any rate.

SVANTE'S SWAN-SONG

Hours end before they have started.
Nothing stays always new.
Live to the full when I've departed.
May songs and may love ever follow you.

Days wasted I leave behind me.
Who knows what soon is due.
You who are left, though you won't find me,
May songs and may love ever follow you.

No escort with me has started.
No bitterness clouds my view.
Live to the full when I've departed.
May songs and may love ever follow you –
 live to the full when I've departed,
 may songs and may love ever follow you.