

The Wanderer

Always the one alone longs for mercy,
 the Maker's mildness, though, troubled in mind,
 across the ocean-ways he has long been forced
 to stir with his hands the frost-cold sea,
 and walk in exile's paths. *Wyrd* is fully fixed!¹ 5

Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of troubles,
 of cruel slaughters and the fall of dear kinsmen:²
 "Often alone, every first light of dawn,
 I have had to speak my sorrows. There is no one living
 to whom I would dare to reveal clearly 10
 my deepest thoughts. I know it is true
 that it is in the lordly nature of a nobleman
 to closely bind his spirit's coffer,
 hold his treasure-hoard, whatever he may think.
 The weary mind cannot withstand *wyrd*, 15
 the troubled heart can offer no help,
 and so those eager for fame often bind fast
 in their breast-coffers a sorrowing soul,
 just as I have had to take my own heart —
 often wretched, cut off from my homeland, 20
 far from dear kinsmen — and bind it in fetters,
 ever since long ago I hid my gold-giving friend
 in the darkness of earth, and went wretched,
 winter-sad, over the binding waves,
 sought, hall-sick, a treasure-giver, 25
 wherever I might find, far or near,
 someone in a meadhall who knew of my people,
 or who'd want to comfort me, friendless,

¹ *Wyrd* is the Old English word for Fate, a powerful but not quite personified force. It is related to the verb *weorthan*, meaning roughly 'to occur'; it may be useful to think of *wyrd* as 'what happens', usually in a negative sense. In a poem so preoccupied with puzzling over the nature and meaning of fate, it seemed appropriate to leave the word untranslated.

² The Exeter Book manuscript in which the poem survives does not have quotation marks, or clear indications of where one speech begins and ends in this poem; we are not sure whether lines 1-5 are spoken by the same character that speaks the following lines, or whether they are the narrator's opinion on the general situation of the Wanderer.

accustom me to joy. He who has come to know
 how cruel a companion is sorrow 30
 to one who has few dear protectors, will understand this:
 the path of exile claims him, not patterned gold,
 a frost-bound spirit, not the solace of earth.
 He remembers hall-holders and treasure-taking,
 how in his youth his gold-giving lord 35
 accustomed him to the feast—that joy all fades.

And so he who has long been forced to forego
 his dear lord's beloved words of counsel will understand:
 when sorrow and sleep both together
 often bind up the wretched exile, 40
 it seems in his mind that he clasps and kisses
 his lord of men, and on his knee lays
 hands and head, as he sometimes long ago
 in earlier days enjoyed the gift-throne.¹
 But when the friendless man awakens again 45
 and sees before him the fallow waves,
 seabirds bathing, spreading their feathers,
 frost falling and snow, mingled with hail,
 then the heart's wounds are that much heavier,
 pain after pleasure. Sorrow is renewed 50
 when the mind flies out to the memory of kinsmen;²
 he greets them with great joy, greedily surveys
 hall-companions — they always swim away;
 the floating spirits bring too few
 well-known voices. Cares are renewed 55
 for one who must send, over and over,
 a weary heart across the binding of the waves.³

And so I cannot imagine for all this world
 why my spirit should not grow dark
 when I think through all this life of men, 60
 how they suddenly gave up the hall-floor,
 mighty warrior tribes. Thus this middle-earth
 droops and decays one day at a time;

¹ The description seems to be some sort of ceremony of loyalty, charged with intense regret and longing.

² Or “when the memory of kinsmen flies through the mind.”

³ The grammar and reference of this intense, almost hallucinatory scene is not entirely clear; the translation reflects one commonly-proposed reading.

and so a man cannot become wise, before he has weathered
 his share of winters in this world. A wise man must be patient, 65
 neither too hot-hearted nor too hasty with words,
 nor too weak in war nor too unwise in thoughts,
 neither fearful nor fawning, nor too greedy for wealth,
 never eager for boasting before he truly understands;
 a man must wait, when he makes a boast, 70
 until the brave spirit understands truly
 whither the thoughts of his heart will turn.

The wise man must realize how ghostly it will be
 when all the wealth of this world stands waste,
 as now here and there throughout this middle-earth 75
 walls stand blasted by wind,
 beaten by frost, the buildings crumbling.
 The wine halls topple, their rulers lie
 deprived of all joys; the proud old troops
 all fell by the wall. War carried off some, 80
 sent them on the way, one a bird carried off
 over the high seas, one the gray wolf
 shared with death—and one a sad-faced man
 hid in an earthen grave. The ancient
 ruler of men thus wrecked this enclosure, 85
 until the old works of giants stood empty,
 without the sounds of their former citizens.¹

He who deeply considers, with wise thoughts,
 this foundation and this dark life,
 old in spirit, often remembers 90
 so many ancient slaughters, and says these words:
 ‘Where have the horses gone? where are the riders? where is the giver of gold?
 Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of the hall?
 O the bright cup! O the brave warrior!
 O the glory of princes! How the time passed away, 95
 slipped into nightfall as if it had never been!’
 There still stands in the path of the dear warriors
 a wall wondrously high, with serpentine stains.
 A torrent of spears took away the warriors,
 bloodthirsty weapons, *wyrd* the mighty, 100

¹ Ruined buildings are called ‘the work of giants’ (*enta geweorc*) in several places in OE literature.

and the storms batter the stone walls,
 frost falling binds up the earth,
 the chaos of winter, when blackness comes,
 night's shadow looms, sends down from the north
 harsh hailstones in hatred of men. 105

All is toilsome in the earthly kingdom,
 the working of *wyrd* changes the world under heaven.
 Here wealth is fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
 here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting,
 all the security of this earth will stand empty." 110

So said the wise one in his mind, sitting apart in meditation.
 He is good who keeps his word,¹ and the man who never too quickly
 shows the anger in his breast, unless he already knows the remedy,
 how a nobleman can bravely bring it about. It will be well for one who seeks mercy,
 consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability stands. 115

source: the Exeter Book
 translation: R. M. Liuzza

¹ Or 'keeps faith'. These last lines offer an answer to the Wanderer's unresolved melancholia – the wisdom of self-control and the hope of Christian salvation.