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! Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of troubles, of cruel slaughters and the fall of dear kinsmen: “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 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, 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, 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, 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
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
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,
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
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
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
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,
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,
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,
ever eager for boasting before he truly understands;
a man must wait, when he makes a boast,
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
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,
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,
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
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,
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,

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.

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.”

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.

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.