

The Seafarer

This tale is true, and mine. It tells
How the sea took me, swept me back
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,
In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells 5
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow
As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast
In icy bands, bound with frost,
With frozen chains, and hardship groaned 10
Around my heart. Hunger tore
At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered
On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
How wretched I was, drifting through winter
On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow, 15
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
The only sound was the roaring sea,
The freezing waves. The song of the swan
Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl, 20
The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
The mewling of gulls instead of mead.
Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
By ice-feathered terns and the eagles screams;
No kinsman could offer comfort there, 25
To a soul left drowning in desolation.

And who could believe, knowing but
The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
I put myself back on the paths of the sea, 30
Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;
Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,
The coldest seeds. And how my heart
Would begin to beat, knowing once more
The salt waves tossing and the towering sea! 35

The time for journeys would come and my soul
Called me eagerly out, sent me over
The horizon, seeking foreigners' homes.

But there isn't a man on earth so proud,
So born in greatness, so bold with his youth, 40
Grown so grave, or so graced by God,
That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,
Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.
No harps ring in his heart, no rewards,
No passion for women, no worldly pleasures, 45
Nothing, only the oceans heave;
But longing wraps itself around him.
Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,
And all these admonish that willing mind 50
Leaping to journeys, always set
In thoughts traveling on a quickening tide.
So summer's sentinel, the cuckoo, sings
In his murmuring voice, and our hearts mourn
As he urges. Who could understand, 55
In ignorant ease, what we others suffer
As the path of exile stretch endlessly on?

And yet my heart wanders away,
My soul roams with the sea, the wales'
Home, wandering to the wildest corners 60
Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
To the open ocean, breaking oaths
On the curve of a wave.

Thus the joys of God 65
Are feverent with life, where life itself
Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth
Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.
No man has ever faced the dawn
Certain which of Fate's three threats 70

Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
 Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
 The praise the living pour on the dead
 Flowers from reputation: plant
 An earthly life of profit reaped 75
 Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery
 Flung in the devil's face, and death
 Can only bring you earthly praise
 And a song to celebrate a place
 With the angels, life eternally blessed 80
 In the hosts of Heaven.

The days are gone
 When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
 Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
 No givers of gold, as once there were, 85
 When wonderful things were worked among them
 And they lived in lordly magnificence.
 Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.
 The weakest survives and the world continues,
 Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished. 90
 The world's honor ages and shrinks,
 Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
 Blanch as time advances, their beards
 Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.
 The sons of princes, sown in the dust. 95
 The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
 Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
 Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
 Opens his palms and pours down gold
 On his kinsman's grave, strewing his coffin 100
 With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing
 Golden shakes the wrath of God
 For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
 Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.

We all fear God. He turns the earth, 105
 He set it swinging firmly in space,
 Gave life to the world and light to the sky.
 Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.
 He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven
 To carry him courage and strength and belief. 110
 A man must conquer pride, not kill it,
 Be firm with his fellows, chaste for himself,
 Treat all the world as the world deserves,
 With love or with hate but never with harm,
 Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell, 115
 Or set the flames of a funeral pyre
 Under his lord. Fate is stronger
 And God mightier than any man's mind.
 Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,
 Consider the ways of coming there, 120
 Then strive for sure permission for us
 To rise to that eternal joy,
 That life born in the love of God
 And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy
 Grace of Him who honored us, 125
 Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

..... Translation by : Burton Raffel