

The Seafarer

source: the Exeter Book

translation: R.M. Liuzza

I sing a true song of myself,
tell of my journeys, how in days of toil
I've often suffered troubled times,
hard heartache, come to know
5 in the keel of a ship many of care's dwellings,
terrible tossing of the waves, where the anxious
night-watch often held me at the ship's stem
when it knocks against the cliffs. Pinched with cold
were my feet, bound by frost
10 in cold fetters, while cares seethed
hot around my heart, hunger tore from within
my sea-weary mind. That man does not know,
he whose lot is fairest on land,
how I, poor wretch, dwelt all winter
15 in the ice-cold sea in the paths of exile,
deprived of dear kinsmen,
hung with icicles of frost while hail flew in showers.
I heard nothing there but the noise of the sea,
the ice-cold waves; the wild swan's song
20 sometimes served as my music, the gannet's call
and the curlew's cry for the laughter of men,
the seagull's singing for mead-drink.
Storms beat the stone cliffs where the tern answered them,
icy-feathered; often the eagle screamed,
25 dewy-feathered – no sheltering family
could bring consolation to my abandoned soul.
And so¹ he who has tasted life's joy in towns,
and few sad journeys, scarcely believes,
proud and puffed up with wine, what I, weary,
30 have often had to endure in my seafaring.

¹ The repeated connecting word *forthon* is notoriously difficult in this poem – it points forwards and/or backwards, meaning either 'therefore' or 'thus'. In a poem whose logic progression is by no means clear or easy to follow this is a significant source of ambiguity. I have chosen to render it with the vague 'and so', hoping to preserve some of the interpretive difficulty found in the original.

The night-shadow darkened; snow came from the north,
frost bound the ground, hail fell on earth,
coldest of grains. And so² they compel me now,
my heart-thoughts, to try for myself
35 the high seas, the flow of salt streams;
my heart's desire urges my spirit
time and again to travel, so that I might seek
far from here a foreign land.
And so no man on earth is so proud in spirit,
40 nor so good in gifts or keen in youth,
nor so bold in deeds, nor so loyal to his lord,
that he never has sorrow at his seafaring,
when he sees what the Lord has in store for him.
He has no thought of the harp or the taking of rings,
45 nor the pleasures of women or worldly joy,
nor anything else but the tumbling waves —
he always has longing who hastens to sea.
The groves take blossom, fair grow the cities,
the fields brighten, the world rushes on;
50 all these urge the eager-hearted
spirit to travel, when he has a mind
to journey far over the flood-ways.
Even the cuckoo urges with its sad voice,
summer's guardian announces sorrow
55 bitter in the breast-board. He does not know,
the man blessed with ease, what those endure
who walk most widely in the paths of exile.
And so now my thought flies out from my breast,
my spirit across the sea-flood
60 flies out widely over the whale's home,
to the corners of the earth, and comes back to me
greedy and hungry; the lone flier cries out,
incites my heart ceaselessly to the whale's path

² The disjunction between what has come before and what come after this line is so great that it has been proposed that a second speaker is introduced here (there are no quotation marks in Old English that might clarify this ambiguity). Though this 'two-speaker' theory is no longer widely accepted, it reflects the difficulty many critics have reconciling the conflicting attitudes presented in the poem – sea voyage as terrible suffering, sea voyage as longed-for escape (as in the first chapter of Melville's *Moby-Dick*), sea-voyage as metaphor for spiritual pilgrimage, or even for life itself.

over the open sea – and so hotter to me
65 are the joys of the Lord than this dead life,
loaned, on land.³ I will never believe
that earthly goods will endure forever.
Always, inevitably, one of three things
hangs in the balance before its due time:
70 illness or age or attack by the sword
wrests life away from one doomed to die.
And so for every man the praise of posterity,
those coming after, is the best eulogy —
that before he must be on his way, he act
75 bravely on earth against the enemies' malice,
do bold deeds to beat the devil,
so the sons of men might salute him afterwards,
and his praise thereafter live with the angels
forever and ever, in the joy of eternal life,
80 delight among heaven's host. The days are lost,
and all the pomp of this earthly kingdom;
there are not neither kings nor emperors
nor gold-givers like there once were,
when they did the greatest glorious deeds
85 and lived in most lordly fame.
Fallen is all this noble host, their happiness fled,
the weaker ones remain and rule the world,
get what they can with toil. Joy is laid low,
the earth's nobility grows old and withers,
90 just like every man throughout middle-earth.
Old age overtakes him, his face grows pale,
the graybeard grieves; he knows his old friends,
offspring of princes, have been given to the earth.
When life fails him, his fleshly cloak will neither
95 taste sweetness nor touch soreness,
nor move a hand nor think with his mind.
Though a brother may wish to strew his brother's
grave with gold, lay him among the dead

³ At this point the sea-voyage is revealed to be a journey of spiritual discovery, as in the Hiberno-Latin *Voyage of St Brendan*. The hermit-monks of Ireland had a particular penchant for taking to small boats and trusting in God for their safety. Some reached Iceland, some are rumored to have reached the Americas; many others, no doubt, found rest at the bottom of the sea.

with many treasures to take with him,
100 that gold will be useless before the terror of God
for the soul that is full of sin,
the gold he has hidden while he lived here on earth.
Great is the terror of God, the earth trembles before it;
He established the sturdy foundations,
105 the earth's solid surface and the high heavens.
Foolish is he who fears not the Lord; death will find him unprepared.
Blessed is he who lives humbly; that mercy comes to him from heaven,
the Maker establishes that mind in him, for he believes in His might.
A man must steer a strong mind and keep it stable,
110 steadfast in its promises, pure in its ways;
every man must hold in moderation
his love for a friend and his hatred for a foe,
though he may wish him full of fire...
...or his friend consumed
115 on a funeral pyre.⁴ Fate is greater,
the Maker mightier than any man's thoughts.
Let us consider where we should have our home,⁵
and then think how we might come there,
and let us also strive to reach that place
120 of eternal blessedness,
where life is found in the love of the Lord,
hope in heaven. Thanks be to the Holy one
that he has so honored us, Ruler of glory,
eternal Lord, throughout all time. Amen.

⁴ Something is missing from the manuscript here; the translation is conjectural and makes as little sense as the original.

⁵ The tone of these last lines, different in many respects from the rest of the poem, seem to place the poem finally in a homiletic setting – the exhortation of a preacher rather than the confession of a weathered Ancient Mariner.