

# The Wanderer

*Translation from Michael J. Alexander  
from The Earliest English Poems*

Who liveth alone longeth for mercy,  
Maker's mercy. Though he must traverse  
tracts of sea, sick at heart,  
- trouble with oars ice-cold waters,  
the ways of exile - Wierd<sup>1</sup> is set fast.

Thus spoke such a 'grasshopper', old griefs in his mind,  
cold slaughters, the death of dear kinsmen:

"Alone am I driven each day before daybreak  
to give my cares utterance.  
None are there now among the living  
to whom I dare declare me throughly,  
tell my heart's thought. Too truly I know  
it is in a man no mean virtue  
that he keep close his heart's chest,  
hold his thought-hoard, think as he may.

No weary mind may stand against Wierd  
nor may a wrecked will work new hope;  
wherefore, most often, those eager for fame  
bind the dark mood fast in their breasts.

So must I also curb my mind,  
cut off from country, from kind far distant,  
by cares overworn, bind it in fetters;  
this since, long ago, the ground's shroud  
enwrapped my gold-friend. Wretched I went thence,

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<sup>1</sup> Wyrð, destiny.

winter-wearied, over the waves' bound;  
dreary I sought hall of a gold-giver,  
where far or near I might find  
him who in meadhall might take heed of me,  
furnish comfort to a man friendless,  
win me with cheer.

He knows who makes trial  
how harsh and bitter is care for companion  
to him who hath few friends to shield him.  
Track ever taketh him, never the torqued gold,  
not earthly glory, but cold heart's cave.  
He minds him of hall-men, of treasure-giving,  
how in his youth his gold-friend  
gave him to feast. Fallen all this joy.

He knows this who is forced to forgo his lord's,  
his friend's counsels, to lack them for long:  
oft sorrow and sleep, banded together,  
come to bind the lone outcast;  
he thinks in his heart then that he his lord  
claspeth and kisseth, and on knee layeth  
hand and head, as he had at otherwhiles  
in days now gone, when he enjoyed the gift-stool.

Awakeneth after this friendless man,  
seeth before him fallow waves,  
seabirds bathing, broading out feathers,  
snow and hail swirl, hoar-frost falling.  
Then all the heavier his heart's wounds,  
sore for his loved lord. Sorrow freshens.

Remembered kinsmen press through his mind;  
he singeth out gladly, scanneth eagerly

men from the same hearth. They swim away.  
Sailors' ghosts bring not many  
known songs there. Care grows fresh  
in him who shall send forth too often  
over locked waves his weary spirit.

Therefore I may not think, throughout this world,  
why cloud cometh not on my mind  
when I think over all the life of earls,  
how at a stroke they have given up hall,  
mood-proud thanes. So this middle earth<sup>2</sup>  
each of all days ageth and falleth."

Wherefore no man grows wise without he have  
his share of winters. A wise man holds out;  
he is not too hot-hearted, nor too hasty in speech,  
nor too weak a warrior, not wanting in fore-thought,  
nor too greedy of goods, nor too glad, nor too mild,  
nor ever too eager to boast, ere he knows all.

A man should forbear boastmaking  
until his fierce mind fully knows  
which way his spleen shall expend itself.

A wise man may grasp how ghastly it shall be  
when all this world's wealth standeth waste,  
even as now, in many places, over the earth  
walls stand, wind-beaten,  
hung with hoar-frost; ruined habitations.  
The wine-halls crumble; their wielders lie  
bereft of bliss, the band all fallen  
proud by the wall. War took off some,

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<sup>2</sup> *Middangeard*. This earth: the place  
between Heaven and Hell.

carried them on their course hence; one a bird bore  
over the high sea; one the hoar wolf  
dealt to death; one his drear-checked  
earl stretched in an earthen trench.

The Maker of men hath so marred this dwelling  
that human laughter is not heard about it  
and idle stand these old giant-works.

A man who on these walls wisely looked  
who sounded deeply this dark life  
would think back to the blood spilt here,  
weigh it in his wit. His word would be this:

Where is that horse now? Where are those men? Where is the hoard-sharer?  
Where is the house of the feast? Where is the hall's uproar?

Alas, bright cup! Alas, burnished fighter!  
Alas, proud prince! How that time has passed,  
dark under night's helm, as though it never had been!  
There stands in the stead of staunch thanes  
a towering wall wrought with worm-shapes;  
the earls are off-taken by the ash-spear's point,  
- that thirsty weapon. Their Wierd is glorious.

Storms break on the stone hillside,  
the ground bound by driving sleet,  
winter's wrath. Then wanness cometh,  
night's shade spreadeth, sendeth from north  
the rough hail to harry mankind.

In the earth-realm all is crossed;  
Wierd's will changeth the world.  
Wealth is lent us, friends are lent us,  
man is lent, kin is lent;  
all this earth's frame shall stand empty."

So spoke the sage in his heart; he sat apart in thought.  
Good is he who keeps faith: nor should care too fast  
be out of a man's breast before he first know the cure:  
a warrior fights on bravely. Well is it for him who seeks forgiveness,  
the Heavenly Father's solace, in whom all our fastness stands.