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

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

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,

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,

The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,

The mewing of gulls instead of mead.

Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed

By icy-feathered terns and the eagle's screams;

No kinsman could offer comfort there,

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.

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!

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 to greatness, so bold with his youth,

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,

Nothing, only the ocean's 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

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,

In ignorant ease, what we others suffer

As the paths of exile stretch endlessly on?

And yet my heart wanders away,

My soul roams with the sea, the whales'

Home, wandering to the widest corners

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

Are fervent 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

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

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

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,

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.

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.

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

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,

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.

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,

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,

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,

Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.