

A n o n y m o u s
translated from the Anglo-Saxon by Bill Christophersen

The Seafarer

The tale I tell is the truth; the song
I sing, my own.

Stooped over, belayed
to the stern oar, struggling with sorrow's tide,
I've borne breast-drought and bitterness;
steered keel through calamity's haunts,
the combers unfurling; coaxed bow
through night-narrows, numb, squinting
always at the cliffs I crept along.
My feet froze. Frost plied
its icy manacles. Miseries whittled
and hewed my heart. Hunger unmoored
my mind.

The man who's made his home
on dry land isn't likely to guess
how, hope-lorn, hagridden, bone-weary,
I've bided winters, weathered my lot
cut off from kin and caped with froth,
spellbound by the sound of waves
pounding the bergs. The blare of cormorants
was my harp, my hearth-song. No human laugh,
but the curlew's call, the cry of the gannet.
North wind's wassail. The nattering gulls.
The blast battering the palisades.
Then tern would keen and eagle scream
from frost-blenched throat. No friend hard by
to hoist a sinking heart.



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None kens such caterwauling skreeghs
who sups in the burghs—no banished wretch
but a well-fed belly big with wine!
My burden bent me toward brine and thickest
night, where the North ungirds itself
in snow and hail, harrows the earth
with its cold seed.

Solemn thoughts
swell my heart, of the hurtling waves
whose surge I must withstand anew.
Mind-craving maddens; amazes; bids
soul strike out, seek the way
to a land that beckons beyond the flood.

No man on earth so might-proud,
well-endowed, well arrayed,
strong of arm and staunchly backed
by lord but harbors a heart-churning fear
of the course the Lord has foreordained.
Forget harps, the having of rings;
women don't win him, nor the world's delights.
He longs instead for louring waves.
Sea-stricken. Sleep broken. Ballast awry.

Blossom and leaf, the light-drenched mead,
brisk trafficking in town and fair—
these but spur the seafarer
to cut the cord; to court fate,
inscribe his wake on water's slate.
The cuckoo coos in clenched voice:
summer comes; cares will ripen—
bosom's harvest. The blithe heart
gapes at the wilderness that woos
the plowman who plows the ocean-plain.
Soul, sprung loose from its skeletal roost,



stalks those briny steppes. The mind
delves, paces the planet's girth;
returns bone-dry and ravenous.

Eldritch, the cuckoo's call entralls.
I'll gallivant in the whale's wake
that furrows the deep. Dearer by far
are the Lord's favors than this fell life
dealt us on land.

I do not know
as man's weal survives, world without end.
These three as lief would stem his tide:
ague, old age and edge of sword —
each one will let out breath from bladder.
So much for earldoms, earls, thanes:
You'd better have made your mark with untarnished
deeds; have died deserving renown
for what you've wrought and rendered, what
you've ventured in this vale of hate,
how far prevailed in the Devil's despite:
That those to be should bless your name
and angels declaim your epitaph
as the ages lapse. Leave such an estate
and scarcely can self be said to expire.

Empire ends. The emperor's hand
falters. Kingdoms come apart.
No earl bestows torqued gold anymore
like the open-handed lairds of old,
whose stout acts, storied graces
and burnished glories have gone by the board.
Those lords had pluck; would parry and thrust.
Today's pretenders bend or unbend
as best it suits. No brave man thrives
(quality won't out, but peters out,
putrefies the wan world over).



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Age beards him, saps the blood from his face,
bleaches his hair. He broke his loaf
with warriors once. Not a one but molders
in the ground, a ghost. That grieves his heart.
Once vigor is spent, spirit wizens.
Nothing tempts or tickles him now.
He can't lift thumb or lighten thought;
tastes naught; can't walk; awake the night.
A man may bury his brother, strew
his grave with gold, but gold put up
won't ward away the wrath the Lord
God levels at a sin-laden soul.

