

"It's not true," I said. "A few minutes from now I'm going to carry you back to Hrothgar, safe and sound. So much for poetry."

"I'll kill myself," he whispered. He shook violently now.

"Up to you," I answered reasonably, "but you'll admit it may seem at least a trifle cowardly to some."

His fists closed and his teeth clenched; then he relaxed and lay flat.

I waited for him to find an answer. Minutes passed. It came to me that he had quit. He had glimpsed a glorious ideal, had struggled toward it and seized it and come to understand it, and was disappointed. One could sympathize.

He was asleep.

I picked him up gently and carried him home. I laid him at the door of Hrothgar's meadhall, still asleep, killed the two guards so I wouldn't be misunderstood, and left.

He lives on, bitter, feebly challenging my midnight raids from time to time (three times this summer), crazy with shame that he alone is always spared, and furiously jealous of the dead. I laugh when I see him. He throws himself at me, or he cunningly sneaks up behind, sometimes in disguise—a goat, a dog, a sickly old woman—and I roll on the floor with laughter. So much for heroism. So much for the harvest-virgin. So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons.



Balance is everything, riding out time like a helmless sheep-boat, keel to hellward, mast upreared to prick out heaven's eye. He he! (Sigh.) My enemies define themselves (as the dragon said) on me. As for myself, I could finish them off in a single night, pull down the great carved beams and crush them in the meadhall, along with their mice, their tankards and potatoes—yet I hold back. I am hardly blind to the absurdity. Form is function. What will we call the Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?

(Do a little dance, beast. Shrug it off. This looks like a nice place—oooh, my!—flat rock, moonlight, views of distances! Sing!

*Pity poor Hrothgar,  
Grendel's foe!  
Pity poor Grendel,  
O, O, O!*

Winter soon.

(whispering, whispering. Grendel, has it occurred to you my dear that you are crazy?)

(He clasps hands delicately over his head, points the toes of one foot—*aaie!* horrible nails!!—takes a step, does a turn:

*Grendel is crazy,  
O, O, O!  
Thinks old Hrothgar  
Makes it snow!*

Balance is everything, tiding out rhyme . . .

*Pity poor Grengar,  
Hrothdel's foe!  
Down goes the whirlpool:  
Eek! No, no!*

It will be winter soon.

Midway through the twelfth year of my idiotic war.

Twelve is, I hope, a holy number. Number of escapes from traps.

[*He searches the moonlit world for signs, shading his eyes against the dimness, standing on one shaggy foot, just slightly bloodstained, one toe missing from an old encounter with an ax. Three dead trees on the moor below, burned up alive by lightning, are ominous portents. (Oh man, us portents!) Also trees. On a frostbitten hill in the distance, men on horses. "Over here!" he screams. Waves his arms. They hesitate, feign deafness, ride away north. Shoddy, he observes. The whole chilly universe, shoddy.]*

*Enough of that! A night for tearing heads off, bathing in blood! Except, alas, he has killed his quota for the season. Care, take care of the gold-egg-laying goose! There is no limit to desire but desire's needs. (Grendel's law.)*

The scent of the dragon. Heavy all around me, almost visible before me, like my breath.

I will count my numberless blessings one by one.

- i. My teeth are sound.
- i. The roof of my cave is sound.
- i. I have not committed the ultimate act of nihilism: I have not killed the queen.
- i. Yet.

*(He lies on the cliff-edge, scratching his belly, and thoughtfully watches his thoughtfully watching the queen.)*

Not easy to define. Mathematically, perhaps a torus, loosely cylindrical, with swellings and constrictions at in-

tervals, knobbed—that is to say, a surface generated, more or less, by the revolutions of a conic about an axis lying in its plane, and the solid thus enclosed. It is difficult, of course, to be precise. For one thing, the problem of determining how much is queen and how much queenly radiation.

*The monster laughs.*

Time-Space cross-section: *Wealthew.*

Cut A:

It was the second year of my raiding. The army of the Scyldings was weakened, decimated. No more the rumble of Hrothgar's horsemen, riding at midnight, chain-mail jangling in the whistling wind, cloaks flying out like wimpling wings, to rescue petty tribute-givers. (O *listen* to me, hills!) He couldn't protect his own hall, much less theirs. I cut down my visits, conserving the game, and watched them. Nature lover. For weeks, all day and far into the night, he met with his counselors, talking, praying, moaning. I became aware, listening to them, that I was not their only threat. Far to the east of Hrothgar's hall there was a new hall a-building, its young king gaining fame. As Hrothgar had done, this younger king was systematically burning and plundering nearby halls, extending the circle of his tribute power. He was striking now at the outer rim of Hrothgar's sphere; it was only a matter of time before he struck Hrothgar. The counselors talked and drank and

wept, sometimes Hrothgar's allies among them. The Shaper sang songs. The men stood with their braceleted arms around one another's shoulders—men who not long before had been the bitterest of enemies—and I watched it all, wringing my fingers, smiling rage. The leaves turned red. The purple blooms of thistles became black behind the people's houses, and migrant birds moved through.

Then, from all corners of Hrothgar's sphere of influence and from towns beyond—the vassals' vassals—an army began to form. They came walking or riding, oxen dragging their wagonloads of shields, spears, tents, clothes, food. Every night when I went down to look there were more of them. Cartwheels tall as a man, with rough, square spokes. Big-hoofed gray horses spackled like wolves, that rolled their eyes and whinnied at my footfall, leagued with men as if strapped to their business by harness I could not see. Horns cracked out in the darkening stillness; grindstones screeched. The crisp air reeked with the aftersmell of their cooking.

They made camp in a sloping pasture rimmed by enormous oak trees and pines and nut trees, a stream moving down through the center, over steps of rock. Where the forest began, there was a lake. Every night there were new groups of campfires to push away the frost, and soon there was hardly a place to stand, there were so many men and animals. The grass, the withering leaves were full of whis-

pering, but the campground was hushed, muffled by their presence, as if blighted. I watched from my hiding place. They talked in mumbles or not at all. Message carriers moved from fire to fire, talking softly with the leaders. Their rich furs shone like birds' wings in the firelight. Heavily guarded, the younger soldiers pushed through the crowd and, all night long, washed clothes and cooking ware in the stream until the water was thick with dirt and grease and no longer made a sound as it dropped toward the lake. When they slept, guards and dogs watched over them in herds. Before dawn, men rose to exercise the horses, polish weapons, or move out with bows in search of deer.

Then one night when I went down to spy, they were gone, vanished like starlings from a tree. I followed their trail—footprints, hoofprints, and wagon ruts cutting a wide dirty swath toward the east. When I came in sight of them, I slowed down, laughing and hugging myself; it was going to be a massacre. They marched all night, then scattered into the forest like wolves and slept all day without fires. I snatched an ox and devoured it, leaving no trace. At dusk, they formed again. At midnight the armies arrived at the antlered hall.

Hrothgar called out to him, glorious protector of the Scyldings, hoarfrost bearded: "Hygmod, lord of the Helmings, greet your guests!" Unferth stood beside him, his

huge arms folded on his byrnie. He stood with his head bowed, eyes mere slits, clamped mouth hidden where his mustache overlapped his beard. Bitterness went out from him like darkness made visible: Unferth the hero (known far and wide in these Scanian lands), isolated in that huge crowd like a poisonous snake aware of what it was. King Hrothgar called again.

The young king came out, well armed, leading a bear and six retainers. He looked around him, blond and pale, arms ringed with gold, a vague smile hiding his shock. The army of the Scyldings and all their allies stretched off in the darkness as far as the eye could see—down the slopes of the hill, down the stone-paved roadways, away into the trees.

Hrothgar made a speech, lifting his ashspear and shaking it. The young man waited like stone, his gloved right hand grasping the chain that led the bear. He had no chance, and he knew it. Everyone knew it but the bear beside him, standing upright, considering the crowd. I smiled. I could smell the blood that would drench the ground before morning came. There was a light breeze, a scent of winter in it. It stirred the fur on the men's clothes and rattled the leaves around me. The bear dropped down on all fours and grunted. The king jerked the chain. Then an old man came out of the meadhall, went to the young king, just clear of the bear, and spoke to him.

Hrothgar and all his allies were silent, waiting. The young king and the old man talked. The retainers at the mead-hall door joined in, their voices low. I waited. Hrothgar's whole army was silent. Then the young king moved toward Hrothgar. A rumble went through the crowd, then fell away like a wave retreating, drawing pebbles out from shore. At last, very slowly, the young king drew out his sword, with his left hand—a sign of truce—and dropped it, as if casually, in front of Hrothgar's horse.

"We will give you gifts," the young king said, "splendid tribute in sign of our great respect for the honorable Scyldings." His voice and smile were gracious. His eyes, slanting downward like the eyes of a fish, were expressionless as dried-up wells.

Unferth laughed, all alone in the silence. The sound rolled away to the darkness to die among trees.

Hrothgar, white-haired, white-bearded as the ice-god, shook his head. "There is no gift your people can give the Scyldings," he said. "You think you can buy a little time with gold, and then some night when we're sitting at our mead, you and all your brave allies will come down on us—crash!—as we tonight have come down on you, and no gift we can offer then will turn away your fury." The old man smiled, his eyes wicked. "Do you take us for children that play in the yards with pets? What could we give you

that you couldn't take by force, and at that time take from us tenfold?"

Unferth smiled, looking at the bear. The young king showed nothing, accepting the joke and the argument as if he'd been expecting them. He gave the chain another jerk and the bear moved closer to him. When he'd waited long enough, he looked back up at Hrothgar.

"We can give you such piles of treasure," he said, "that I have nothing left to pay an army with. Then you'll be safe."

Hrothgar laughed. "You're crafty, lord of the Helmings. A king shrewd with words can mount a great army on promises. The treasure you'd take by destroying my house could make all your swordsmen rich. Come, come! No more talk! It's a chilly night, and we have cows to milk in the morning. Take up your weapons. We'll give you ground. We haven't come to kill you like foxes in a hole."

But the young king waited on. He was still smiling, though his eyes had no life in them. He had something in reserve, some ingenious product of his counselor's wits that would overwhelm their scheme. He said, speaking more quietly than before, "I will show you a treasure that will change your mind, great Hrothgar." He turned to an attendant and made a sign. The attendant went into the meadhall.

After a long time he returned. He was carrying nothing.

Behind him, men opened the meadhall door wide. Light burst over the hillside and glinted on the weapons and eyes of the Scyldings. The bear stirred, restless, irritable, like the young king's anger removed to the end of a chain. Old Hrothgar waited.

Then at last, moving slowly, as if walking in a dream, a woman in a robe of threaded silver came gliding from the hall. Her smooth long hair was as red as fire and soft as the ruddy sheen on dragon's gold. Her face was gentle, mysteriously calm. The night became more still.

"I offer you my sister," the young king said. "Let her name from now on be Wealtheow, or holy servant of common good."

I leered in the rattling darkness of my tree. The name was ridiculous. "Pompous, pompous ass!" I hissed. But she was beautiful and she surrendered herself with the dignity of a sacrificial virgin. My chest was full of pain, my eyes smarted, and I was afraid—O monstrous trick against reason—I was afraid I was about to sob. I wanted to smash things, bring down the night with my howl of rage. But I kept still. She was beautiful, as innocent as dawn on winter hills. She tore me apart as once the Shaper's song had done. As if for my benefit, as if in vicious scorn of me, children came from the meadhall and ran down to her, weeping, to snatch at her hands and dress.

"Stop it!" I whispered. "Stupid!"

She did not look at them, merely touched their heads. "Be still," she said—hardly more than a whisper, but it carried across the crowd. They were still, as if her voice were magic. I clenched my teeth, tears streaming from my eyes. She was like a child, her sweet face paler than the moon. She looked up at Hrothgar's beard, not his eyes, afraid of him. "My lord," she said.

O woe! O wretched violation of sense!

I could see myself leaping from my high tree and running on all fours through the crowd to her, howling, whimpering, throwing myself down, drooling and groveling at her small, fur-booted feet. "Mercy!" I would howl. "Aargh! Burble!" I clamped my palms over my eyes and struggled not to laugh.

No need to say more. The old king accepted the younger king's gift, along with some other things—swords and cups, some girls and young men, her servants. For several days both sides made speeches, long-winded, tediously poetic, all lies, and then, with much soft weeping and sniffing, the Scyldings loaded up Wealtheow and the lesser beauties, made a few last touching observations, and went home.

A bad winter. I couldn't lay a hand on them, prevented as if by a charm. I huddled in my cave, grinding my teeth, beating my forehead with my fists and cursing nature.

Sometimes I went up to the frozen cliffwall and looked down, down, at where the lights lay blue, like the threads running out from a star, patterning the snow. My fists struck out at the cliff's ice-crusting rock. It was no satisfaction. In the cave again, I listened to my mother move back and forth, a pale shape driven by restlessness and rage at the restlessness and rage she felt in me and could not cure. She would gladly have given her life to end my suffering—horrible, humpbacked, carp-toothed creature, eyes on fire with useless, mindless love. Who could miss the grim parallel? So the lady below would give, had given, her life for those she loved. So would any simpering, eyelash-batting female in her court, given the proper setup, the minimal conditions. The smell of the dragon lay around me like sulphurous smoke. At times I would wake up in panic, unable to breathe.

At times I went down.

She carried the mealbowl from table to table, smiling quietly, as if the people she served, her husband's people, were her own. The old king watched with thoughtful eyes, moved as he'd have been by the Shaper's music, except that it was different: not visions of glorious things that might be or sly revisions of the bloody past but present beauty that made time's flow seem illusory, some lower law that now had been suspended. Meaning as quality. When drunken men argued, pitting theory against theory,

bludgeoning each other's absurdities, she came between them, wordless, uncondemning, pouring out mead like a mother's love, and they were softened, reminded of their humanness, exactly as they might have been softened by the cry of a child in danger, or an old man's suffering, or spring. The Shaper sang things that had never crossed his mind before: comfort, beauty, a wisdom softer, more permanent, than Hrothgar's. The old king watched, remote from the queen, though she shared his bed, and he mused.

One night she paused in front of Unferth. He sat hunched, bitterly smiling, as always, his muscles taut as old nautical ropes in a hurricane. He was ugly as a spider.

"My lord?" she said. She often called the thanes "my lord." Servant of even the lowliest among them.

"No thank you," he said. He shot a glance at her, then looked down, smiled fiercely. She waited, expressionless except for perhaps the barest trace of puzzlement. He said, "I've had enough."

Down the table a man made bold by mead said, "Men have been known to kill their brothers when they've too much mead. Har, har."

A few men laughed.

Unferth stiffened. The queen's face paled. Once again Unferth glanced up at the queen, then away. His fists closed tight, resting on the table in front of him, inches from his knife. No one moved. The hall became still. She

stood strange-eyed, as if looking out from another world and time. Who can say what she understood? I knew, for one, that the brother-killer had put on the Shaper's idea of the hero like a merry mask, had seen it torn away, and was now reduced to what he was: a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions, stubbornly living on, ashamed and meaningless, because killing himself would be, like his life, unheroic. It was a paradox nothing could resolve but a murderous snicker. The moment stretched, a snag in time's stream, and still no one moved, no one spoke. As if defiantly, Unferth, murderer of brothers, again raised his eyes to the queen's, and this time didn't look down. Scorn? Shame?

The queen smiled. Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, "That's past." And it was. The demon was exorcised. I saw his hands unclench, relax, and—torn between tears and a bellow of scorn—I crept back to my cave.

It was not, understand, that she had secret wells of joy that overflowed to them all. She lay beside the sleeping king—I watched wherever she went, a crafty guardian, wealthy in wiles—and her eyes were open, the lashes bright with tears. She was more child, those moments, than woman. Thinking of home, remembering paths in the land of the Helmings where she'd played before she'd lain aside her happiness for theirs. She held the naked, bony

king as if he were the child, and nothing between him and the darkness but her white arm. Sometimes she'd slip from the bed while he slept and would cross to the door and go out alone into the night. Alone and never alone. Instantly, guards were all around her, gem-woman priceless among the Scylding treasures. She would stand in the cold wind looking east, one hand clutching her robe to her throat, the silent guards encircling her like trees. Child though she was, she would show no sign of her sorrow in front of them. At last some guard would speak to her, would mention the cold, and Wealtheow would smile and nod her thanks and go back in.

Once that winter her brother came, with his bear and a great troop of followers, to visit. Their talk and laughter rumbled up to the cliffwall. The double band drank, the Shaper sang, and then they drank again. I listened from a distance for as long as I could stand it, clenching my mind on the words of the dragon, then, helpless as always, I went down. The wind howled, piling up snow in drifts and blinding the night with ice-white dust. I walked bent over against the cold, protecting my eyes with my arms. Trees, posts, cowsheds loomed into my vision, then vanished, swallowed in white. When I came near Hart, I could smell the guards of the hall all around me, but I couldn't see them—nor, of course, could they see me. I went straight to the wall, plunging through drifts to my



knees, and pressed up against it for its warmth. It trembled and shook from the noise inside. I bent down to the crack I'd used before and watched.

She was brighter than the hearthfire, talking again with her family and friends, observing the antics of the bear. It was the king, old Hrothgar, who carried the meadbowl from table to table tonight. He walked, dignified, from group to group, smiling and filling the drinking cups, and you'd have sworn from his look that never until tonight had the old man been absolutely happy. He would glance at his queen from time to time as he moved among his people and hers, the Danes and Helmings, and with each glance his smile would grow warmer for a moment, and a thoughtful look would come over his eyes. Then it would pass—some gesture or word from a guest or one of his Scylding thanes—and he would be hearty, merry: not false, exactly, but less than what he was at the moment of the glance. As for the queen, she seemed not to know he was there. She sat beside her brother, her hand on his arm, the other hand on the arm of a shriveled old woman, precious relative. The bear sat with his feet stuck out, playing with his penis and surveying the hall with a crotchety look, as if dimly aware that there was something about him that humans could not approve. The Helming guests all talked at once, eagerly, constantly, as if squeezing all their past into an evening. I couldn't hear what

they said. The hall was a roar—voices, the clink of cups, the shuffle of feet. Sometimes Wealtheow would tip back her head, letting her copper-red hair fall free, and laugh; sometimes she listened, head cocked, now smiling, now soberly pursing her lips, only offering a nod. Hrothgar went back to his high, carved chair, relinquishing the bowl to the noblest of his thanes, and sat like an old man listening inside his mind to the voices of his childhood. Once, for a long moment, the queen looked at him while listening to her brother, her eyes as thoughtful as Hrothgar's. Then she laughed and talked again, and the king conversed with the man on his left; it was as if their minds had not met.

Later that night they passed a harp—not the old Shaper's instrument, no one touched that—and the queen's brother sang. He was no artist, with either his fingers or his throat, but all the hall was silent, listening. He sang, childlike except for the winter in his gray eyes, of a hero who'd killed a girl's old father out of love of the girl, and how the girl after that had both loved and hated the hero and finally had killed him. Wealtheow smiled, full of sorrow, as she listened. The bear irritably watched the dogs. Then others sang. Old Hrothgar watched and listened, brooding on dangers. (The queen's brother had straw-yellow hair and eyes as gray as slate. Sometimes when he stole a glance at Hrothgar, his face was a knife.)

Toward morning, they all went to bed. Half buried in snow, the deadly cold coming up through my feet, I kept watch. The queen put her hand on Hrothgar's bare shoulder as he slept and looked at him thoughtfully, exactly as Hrothgar had looked at her and at his people. She moved a strand of hair from his face. After a long, long time she closed her eyes, but even now I wasn't sure she was asleep.

And so in my cave, coughing from the smoke and clenching feet on fire with chilblains, I ground my teeth on my own absurdity. Whatever their excuse might be, I had none, I knew: I had seen the dragon. Ashes to ashes. And yet I was teased—tortured by the red of her hair and the set of her chin and the white of her shoulders—teased toward disbelief in the dragon's truths. A glorious moment was coming, my chest insisted, and even the fact that I myself would have no part in it—a member of the race God cursed, according to the Shaper's tale—was trifling. In my mind I watched her freckled hand move on the old man's arm as once I'd listened to the sigh of the Shaper's harp. Ah, woe, woe! How many times must a creature be dragged down the same ridiculous road? The Shaper's lies, the hero's self-delusion, now this: the idea of a queen! My mother, breathing hard, scraping through her hair with her crooked nails, watched me and sometimes moaned.

And so, the next night—it was dark as pitch—I burst the meadhall door, killed men, and stormed directly to the door behind which lay the sleeping queen. Glorious Unferth slept beside it. He rose to fight me. I slapped him aside like a troublesome colt. The queen's brother rose, unleashed the bear. I accepted its hug in my own and broke its back. I slammed into the bedroom. She sat up screaming, and I laughed. I snatched her foot, and now her unqueenly shrieks were deafening, exactly like the squeals of a pig. No one would defend her, not even suicidal Unferth at the door, screaming his rage—self-hatred. Old Hrothgar shook and made lunatic noises and drooled. I could have jerked her from the bed and stove in her golden-haired head against the wall. They watched in horror, Helmings on one side, Scyldings on the other (balance is anything), and I caught the other foot and pulled her naked legs apart as if to split her. "Gods, gods!" she screamed. I waited to see if the gods would come, but not a sign of them. I laughed. She called to her brother, then Unferth. They hung back. I decided to kill her. I firmly committed myself to killing her, slowly, horribly. I would begin by holding her over the fire and cooking the ugly hole between her legs. I laughed harder at that. They were all screaming now, hooting and yawling to their dead-stick gods. I would kill her, yes! I would squeeze out her feces between my fists. So much for meaning as

quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality. Grendel the truth-teacher, phantasm-tester! It was what I would be from this day forward—my commitment, my character as long as I lived—and nothing alive or dead could change my mind!

I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live. It would be, for me, mere pointless pleasure, an illusion of order for this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. (End quote.)

I let go her feet. The people stared, unbelieving. I had wrecked another theory. I left the hall.

But I'd cured myself. That much, at least, I could say for my behavior. I concentrated on the memory of the ugliness between her legs (bright tears of blood) and laughed as I ran through the heavy snow. The night was still. I could hear their crying in the meadhall. "Ah, Grendel, you sly old devil!" I whispered to the trees. The words rang false. (The east was gray.) I hung balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said—unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains—that she was beautiful.

I resolved, absolutely and finally, to kill myself, for love of the Baby Grendel that used to be. But the next instant, for no particular reason, I changed my mind.

Balance is everything, sliding down slime. . . .

Cut B.



After the murder of Halga the Good,  
dear younger brother of bold king Hrothgar  
(helm of the Scyldings, sword-hilt handler,  
bribe-gold bender who by his wife had  
now two sons) came Hrothulf out of  
orphan's woe to Hart.

*(O hear me,  
rocks and trees, loud waterfalls! You imagine I tell you  
these things just to hear myself speak? A little respect  
there, brothers and sisters!*

*(Thus poor Grendel,  
anger's child,*

red eyes hidden in the dark of verbs,  
brachiating with a hoot from rhyme to rhyme.)

SCENE: *The Arrival of Hrothulf at Hart.*

"Hrothulf! Come to Aunt Wealthew!  
You poor, poor dear boy!"  
"It is very kind of you, madam, to take me in."  
"Nonsense, dearest! You're Hrothgar's flesh and blood!"  
"So I'm told." A mumble. Trace of smile.  
The old king frowns in his carved chair.  
The boy has the manners, he broods, of a half-tamed wolf.  
Fourteen years old and already a God-damned pretender?  
Age, old chain of victories, where is your comfort?  
He clears his throat.  
No no; I jump to conclusions.  
The boy has been through a bad time,  
naturally. Father-funeral and all the rest.  
And gifted, of course, with a proud heart,  
like all his line. (Oft Scyld Shefing . . .)  
(The hawk in the rafters hands down no opinion.)  
The Shaper sings—the harp soughing out through the long  
room  
like summer wind—"By deeds worth praise  
a man can, in any kingdom, prosper!"  
So.

The boy sits solemn and hears the harp  
behind closed eyes. The October hills in his calm mind  
run wolves.

*Theorum*: Any action (*A*) of the human heart  
must trigger an equal and opposite reaction (*A*<sup>1</sup>).  
Such is the golden opinion of the Shaper.  
And so—I watch in glee—they take in Hrothulf;  
quiet as the moon, sweet scorpion,  
he sits between their two and cleans his knife.

SCENE: *Hrothulf in the Yard.*

*Hrothulf speaks:*

In ratty furs the peasants hoe their fields,  
fat with stupidity, if not with flesh. Their foodsmells  
foul the doorways, dungeon dark, where cow-eyed girls  
give tit to the next generation's mindless hoe. Old men  
with ringworm in their beards limp dusty lanes  
to gather like bony dogs at the god-lined square  
where the king's justice is dispensed; to nod like crows  
at slips of the tongue by which a horse is lost, or delicate  
mistakes  
of venue through which murderers run free. "Long live  
the king!" they squeak, "to whom we owe all joy!"  
Obese with imagined freedom if not with fat, great lords  
of lords look down with cowdog eyes and smile.

"All's well," they sigh. "Long live the king! All's well!"  
 Law rules the land. Men's violence is chained  
 to good (i.e., to the king): legitimate force  
 that chops the bread-thief's neck and wipes its ax.—Death  
 by book.

Think, sweating beast! Look up and think!  
 Whence came these furs on the backs of your kind  
 protectors?  
 Why does the bread-thief die and the murdering thane  
 escape by a sleight by the costliest of advocates?  
 Think! Squeeze up your wrinkled face  
 and seize the hangnail tip of a searing thought:  
*Violence hacked this shack-filled hole in the woods where  
 you  
 play freedom games. Violence no more legitimate than  
 than a wolf's. And now by violence they lock  
 us in—you and me, old man: subdue our vile  
 unkingly violence. Come into the shade.  
 I would have a word with you and your wart-hog son.*

SCENE: *Hrothulf in the Woods.*

The nut tree, wide above my head,  
 stretching its cool black limbs to take  
 the sun, sends darkness down my chest.  
 Its dappled, highcrowned roadways make

safe homes for birds; quick squirrels run  
 the veins of its treasure-giving hand;  
 but the ground below is dead.

Strange providence! Shall I call the tree  
 tyrannical, since where it stands  
 nothing survives but itself and its high-  
 borne guests? Condemn it because it sends  
 down stifling darkness, sucks the life  
 from grass, and whitens the sapling leaf  
 for trifling, fluttering friends?

The law of the world is a winter law,  
 and casual. I too can be grim:  
 snatch my daylight by violent will  
 and be glorified for the deed, like him;  
 drain my soil of Considerations,  
 grip my desires like underground stones,  
 let old things sicken and fail.

She touches my hair and smiles, kind,  
 trusting the rhetoric of love: Give  
 and get. But the thought flits through my mind,  
 There have got to be stabler things than love.  
 The blurred tree towering overhead  
 consumes the sun; the ground is dead;  
 I gasp for rain and wind.

SCENE: *The Queen Beside Hrothulf's Bed.*

*Wealtheow speaks:*

So sad so young? And even in sleep?  
Worse times are yet to come, my love.  
The babes you comfort when they weep  
Will soon by birthright have

All these gold rings! Ah, then, then  
Your almost-brother love will cool;  
The cousin smile must grind out lean  
Where younger cousins rule.

When I was a child I truly loved:  
Unthinking love as calm and deep  
As the North Sea. But I have lived,  
And now I do not sleep.

In short, I watched the idea of violence growing in him, and apprehension in all of them, and I enjoyed myself (old hellroads-runner, earth-rim-roamer), sucking glee from spite,—O sucking to the pits! He hardly spoke when he first came, skinny, pimply, beardless except for the babyhair on his upper lip and chin. At the end of a year he never spoke at all, unless he was forced to it or found himself alone with the foul old old peasant he met in the

woods sometimes, his counselor. Hrothulf had hair as black as coal and hazel eyes that never blinked. He stood, always, with his head slung forward and his lips in a pout, like a man straining to remember something. The old man—he was nicknamed Red Horse—had a perpetually startled look, round, red eyes and mouth, white hair that flared around his high, empty dome like the beams of the sun: the look of a man who has suddenly remembered something. I followed the two down shaded paths, skull-lined, since I had used them often (but our travelers did not see the skulls)—Hrothulf stumbling over roots and stones, the old man swinging along on one stiff leg. He spit when he talked, his eyes bugged. He stunk.

“To step out of the region of legality requires an extraordinary push of circumstance,” the old man yelled. He was deaf and shouted as if everyone else were too. “The incitement to violence depends upon total transvaluation of the ordinary values. By a single stroke, the most criminal acts must be converted to heroic and meritorious deeds. If the Revolution comes to grief, it will be because you and those you lead have become alarmed at your own brutality.”

Hrothulf fell down. The old man went on swinging along the path, oblivious, waving his fists. Hrothulf looked around him in slight surprise, understood that he had fallen, and got up. He almost fell again as he ran to catch his adviser. “Make no mistake, my beloved prince,” the old

man was yelling. "The total ruin of institutions and morals is an act of creation. A *religious* act. Murder and mayhem are the life and soul of revolution. I imagine you won't laugh when I tell you that. There are plenty of fools who would."

"Oh no, sir," said Hrothulf.

"The very soul! What does a kingdom pretend to do? Save the values of the community—regulate compromise—improve the quality of the commonwealth! In other words, protect the power of the people in power and keep the others down. By common agreement of course, so the fiction goes. And they do pretty well. We'll give them that."

Hrothulf nodded. "We have to give them that."

"Rewards to people who fit the System best, you know. King's immediate thanes, the thanes' top servants, and so on till you come to the people who don't fit at all. No problem. Drive them to the darkest corners of the kingdom, starve them, throw them in jail or put them out to war."

"That's how it works."

"But satisfy the greed of the majority, and the rest will do you no harm. That's it. You've still got your fiction of consent. If the lowest of the workers start grumbling, claim that the power of the state stands above society, regulating it, moderating it, keeping it within the bounds of order—an impersonal and higher authority of justice. And what if the workers are beyond your reconciliation? Cry 'Law!'

Cry 'Common good' and put on the pressure—arrest and execute a few."

"A stinking fraud," Hrothulf said, and bit his lip. There were tears in his eyes. The old serf laughed.

"Exactly, my boy! What is the state in a time of domestic or foreign crisis? What is the state when the chips are down? The answer is obvious and clear! Oh yes! If a few men quit work, the police move in. If the borders are threatened, the army rolls out. Public force is the life and soul of every state: not merely army and police but prisons, judges, tax collectors, every conceivable trick of coercive repression. The state is an organization of violence, a monopoly in what it is pleased to call *legitimate* violence. Revolution, my dear prince, is not the substitution of immoral for moral, or of illegitimate for legitimate violence; it is simply the pitting of power against power, where the issue is freedom for the winners and enslavement of the rest."

Hrothulf stopped. "That's not at all what I intend," he said. "There can be more freedom or less freedom in different states."

The old man stopped too, several steps ahead of him on the forest path, and looked back, polite by an effort. "Well, that may be," he said. He shrugged.

Hrothulf, though clumsy, was no fool. He said angrily (unaware of the irony that he, a prince, had a right to

anger, and the old man, a peasant, did not), "Nobody i.. his right mind would praise violence for its own sake, regardless of its ends!"

The old man shrugged and put on a childish smile. "But I'm a simple man, you see," he said, "and that's exactly what I do. All systems are evil. All governments are evil. Not just a trifle evil. *Monstrously* evil." Though he still smiled, he was shaking, only half controlling it. "If you want me to help you destroy a government, I'm here to serve. But as for Universal Justice—" He laughed.

Hrothulf puckered his lips, stared thoughtfully past him.

Hrothgar's nephew was kind, for all that, to the cousins he half intended to displace. He was a moody, lonely young man, after all, afraid of strangers, awkward even with the adults he knew well, and the cousins were plump blond children of three and four. There was one other cousin, Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter by a woman who'd died. Whenever Freawaru spoke to him, Hrothulf blushed.

He sat between the two boys at the table and helped them with their food, smiling when they talked but rarely answering. The queen would glance at the three now and then. So would others, sometimes. They all knew what was coming, though nobody believed it. Who can look into the wet-mouthed smiles of children and see a meadhall burn-

ing, or listen past their musical prattle to the midnight roar of fire?

—Except, of course, old Hrothgar. Violence and shame have lined the old man's face with mysterious calm. I can hardly look at him without a welling of confused, unpleasant emotion. He sits tall and still in his carved chair, stiff arms resting on the chair-sides, his clear eyes trained on the meadhall door where I'll arrive, if I come. When someone speaks to him, he answers politely and gently, his mind far away—on murdered thanes, abandoned hopes. He's a giant. He had in his youth the strength of seven men. Not now. He has nothing left but the power of his mind—and no pleasure there: a case of knives. The civilization he meant to build has transmogrified to a forest thick with traps. Hrothulf, he knows, is a danger to his sons; but he cannot abandon the child of his dead younger brother. Hygmod, his brother-in-law, is biding his time while Hrothgar lives, because of Wealtheow; but Hygmod, he knows, is no friend. And then there is a man named Ingeld, ruler of the Heathobards, as famous for slaughter as was Hrothgar in his day. The old man intends to deal out Freawaru to him; he has no assurance it will work. And then too there's his treasure-hoard. Another trap. A man plunders to build up wealth to pay his men and bring peace to the kingdom, but the hoard he builds for his safety becomes the lure of every marauder that happens



to hear of it. Hrothgar, keen of mind, is out of schemes. No fault of his. There are no schemes left. And so he waits like a man chained in a cave, staring at the entrance or, sometimes, gazing with sad, absent-minded eyes at Wealtheow, chained beside him. Who is one more trap, the worst. She's young, could have served a more vigorous man. And beautiful: need not have withered her nights and wasted her body on a bony, shivering wretch. She knows all this, which increases his pain and guilt. She understands the fear for his people that makes a coward of him, so that, that night when I attacked her, he would not lift a finger to preserve her. And his fear is one he cannot even be sure is generous; perhaps mere desire that his name and fame live on. She understands too his bitterness at growing old. She even understands—more terrible, no doubt, than all the rest—old Hrothgar's knowledge that peace must be searched through ordeal upon ordeal, with no final prospect but failure. Lesson on lesson they've suffered through, recognizing, more profoundly each time, their indignity, shame, triviality. It will continue.

How, if I know all this, you may ask, could I hound him—shatter him again and again, drive him deeper and deeper into woe? I have no answer, except perhaps this: why should I *not*? Has he made any move to deserve my kindness? If I give him a truce, will the king invite me in for a kiss on the forehead, a cup of mead? Ha! This

nobility of his, this dignity: are they not *my* work? What was he before? Nothing! A swollen-headed raider, full of boasts and stupid jokes and mead. No more noble than Red Horse, Hrothulf's friend. No one would have balked at my persecuting him then! I made him what he is. Have I not a right to test my own creation? Enough! Who says I have to defend myself? I'm a machine, like you. Like all of you. Blood-lust and rage are my character. Why does the lion not wisely settle down and be a horse? In any case, I too am learning, ordeal by ordeal, my indignity. It's all I have, my only weapon for smashing through these stiff coffin-walls of the world. So I dance in the moonlight, make foul jokes, or labor to shake the foundations of night with my heaped-up howls of rage. Something is bound to come of all this. I cannot believe such monstrous energy of grief can lead to nothing!

I have thought up a horrible dream to impute to Hrothgar.

*Hrothgar speaks:*

I have dreamt it again: standing suddenly still  
 In a thicket, among wet trees, stunned, minutely  
 Shuddering, hearing a wooden echo escape.  
 A mossy floor, almost colorless, disappears

In depths of rain among the tree shapes.  
I am straining, tasting that echo a second longer.

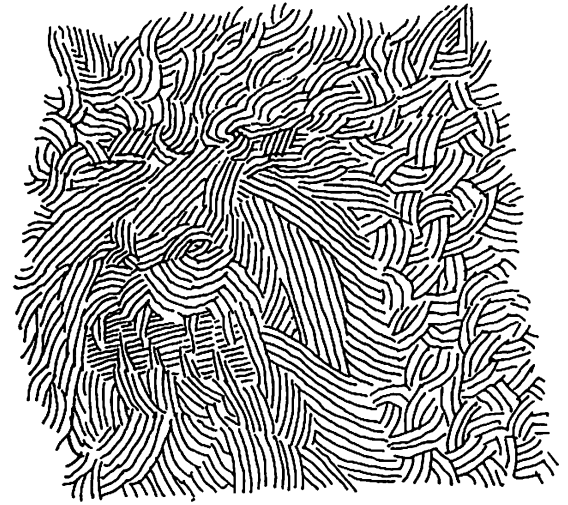
If I can hold it . . . familiar if I can hold it . . .  
A black tree with a double trunk—two trees  
Grown into one—throws up its blurred branches.

The two trunks in their infinitesimal dance of growth  
Have turned completely about one another, their join  
A slowly twisted scar . . . that I recognize. . . .

A quick arc flashes sidewise in the air,  
A heavy blade in flight. A wooden stroke:  
Iron sinks in the gasping core.

I will dream it again.

9



December, approaching the year's darkest night, and the  
only way out of the dream is down and through it.

The trees are dead.

The days are an arrow in a dead man's chest.

Snowlight blinds me, heatless fire; pale, apocalyptic.

The creeks are frozen; the deer show their ribs.

I find dead wolves—a paw, a scraggly tail sticking up  
through snow.

The trees are dead, and only the deepest religion can break  
through time and believe they'll revive. Against the  
snow, black cuts on a white, white hand.

In the town, children go down on their backs in the

drifted snow and move their arms and, when they rise, leave behind them impressions, mysterious and ominous, of winged creatures. I come upon them as I move through sleeping streets to the meadhall, and though I know what they are, I pause and study them, picking at my lip.

I do not pretend to understand these feelings. I record them, check them off one by one for the dead ears of night.

Something is coming, strange as spring.

I am afraid.

Standing on an open hill, I imagine muffled footsteps overhead.

I watch one of Hrothgar's bowmen pursue a hart. The man, furred from his toes to his ears, walks through the moon-and-snowlit woods, silent as an owl, huge bow on his shoulder, his eyes on the dark tracks. He moves up a thickly wooded hill, and at the crest of it, standing as if waiting for him, he finds the hart. The antlers reach out, motionless, as still as the treelimits overhead or the stars above the trees. They're like wings, filled with otherworldly light. Neither the hart nor the hunter moves. Time is inside them, transferred from chamber to chamber like sand in an hourglass; it can no more get outside than sand in

the lower chamber can rise to the upper without a hand to turn stiff nature on its head. They face each other, unmoving as numbers on a stick. And then, incredibly, through the pale, strange light the man's hand moves—click click click click—toward the bow, and grasps it, and draws it down, away from the shoulder and around in front (click click) and transfers the bow to the slowly moving second hand, and the first hand goes back up and (click) over the shoulder and returns with an arrow, threads the bow. Suddenly time is a rush for the hart: his head flicks, he jerks, his front legs buckling, and he's dead. He lies as still as the snow hurtling outward around him to the hushed world's rim.

The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it.

Near Hrothgar's hall stand the images of the Scyldings' gods, grotesque faces carved out of wood or hacked from stone and set up in a circle, eyes staring inward, gazing thoughtfully at nothing. The priests approach them, carrying torches, their shaggy white heads bent, obsequious. "Great spirit," the chief of the priests wails, "ghostly Destroyer, defend the people of Scyld and kill their enemy, the terrible world-rim-walker!" I smile, arms folded on my chest, and wait, but nobody comes to kill me. They

sing, an antique language as ragged and strange as their beards, a language closer to mine than to their own. They march in a circle, from god to god—maybe uncertain which one is the Great Destroyer. "Is it you?" their meek old faces ask, lifting the torch to each monster-shape in turn. "Not I," whispers the head with four eyes. "Not I," whispers sly old dagger-tooth. "Not I," says the wolf-god, the bull-god, the horse-god, the happily smiling god with the nose like a pig's. They stab a calf and burn it, the corpse still jerking. The old peasant, friend of Prince Hrothulf, whispers crossly: "In the old days they used to kill virgins. Religion is sick."

Which is true. There is no conviction in the old priests' songs; there is only showmanship. No one in the kingdom is convinced that the gods have life in them. The weak observe the rituals—take their hats off, put them on again, raise their arms, lower their arms, moan, intone, press their palms together—but no one harbors unreasonable expectations. The strong—old Hrothgar, Unferth—ignore the images. The will to power resides among the stalactites of the heart. (Her-kapf.)

Once, years ago, for no particular reason, I wrecked the place; broke up the wooden gods like kindling and toppled the gods of stone. When they came out in the morning and saw what I'd done, no one was especially bothered except the priests. They lamented and tore their

hair, the priests, as fraught and rhetorical as they were when they prayed, and after a few days their outcries made people uneasy. On the chance that there might be something to it all, whatever a reasonable man might think, the people tipped the stone gods up again, with levers and ropes, and began to carve new gods of wood to replace those I'd ruined. It was dull work, you could see by their faces, but it was, for some reason, necessary. When the ring was complete, I considered wrecking it again, but the gods were inoffensive, dull. I decided the hell with it.

I have eaten several priests. They sit on the stomach like duck eggs.

Midnight. I sit in the center of the ring of gods, musing on them, pursuing some thought that I cannot make come clear. They wait, as quiet as upright bones in the softly falling snow. So Hrothgar waits, lying on his back with his eyes open. Wealtheow lies on her back beside him, her eyes open, her hand resting lightly in his. Hrothulf's breathing changes. He is having bad dreams. Unferth sleeps fitfully, guarding the meadhall; and the Shaper, in his big house, tosses and turns. He has a fever. He mumbles a few inchoate phrases to someone who is not there. All the gods have hats of snow and snow-crested noses. In the town

below me there are no lights left. Overhead, the stars are blanked out by clouds.

But someone is awake. I hear him coming toward me in the snow, vaguely alarming, approaching like an arrow in a slowed-down universe, and a shudder runs through me. Then I see him, and I laugh at my fear. An old priest, palsied, walking with a cane of ash. He thinks it has magic in it. "Who's there?" he pipes, coming to the edge of the ring. He has a black robe, and his beard, as white as the snow all around us, hangs almost to his knees. "Who's there?" he says again, and pokes himself through between two gods, feeling ahead of himself with the cane. "Is there somebody here?" he whimpers.

"It is I," I say. "The Destroyer."

A violent shock goes through him. He shakes all over, practically falls down. "My lord!" he whimpers. He goes down on his knees. "O blessed, blessed lord!" A look of doubt crosses his face, but he resists it. "I heard someone down here," he says. "I thought it was—" The doubt comes again, mixed with fear this time. He squints, cocks his head, struggling to penetrate his blindness by force of will. "I am Ork," he says uncertainly, "eldest and wisest of the priests." I smile, say nothing. I intend to paint the images with the old man's steaming blood. "I know all mysteries," the priest says. "I am the only man still living who has thought them all out."

"We are pleased with you, Ork," I say, voice very solemn. Then, suddenly impish—at times I cannot resist these things: "Tell us what you know of the King of the Gods."

"The King?" he says.

"The King." I do not giggle.

He rolls his blind eyes, figuring the odds, snatching through his mind for doctrines.

"Speak to us concerning His unspeakable beauty and danger," I say, and wait.

The snow falls softly on the images. The old priest, kneeling, has one knee on his beard and is unable to lift his head. He shakes all over, as if the palsy is something outside him, an element like wind.

"The King of Gods," he whispers, and searches his wits.

At last he folds his arthritic white hands, raises them before him like a nightmare flower, and speaks. "The King of the Gods is the ultimate limitation," he keens, "and His existence is the ultimate irrationality." A tic goes down one cheek; jerks the corner of his mouth. "For no reason can be given for just that limitation which it stands in His nature to impose. The King of the Gods is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality."

He tips his head, waiting for some response from me that will tell him how he's doing. I say nothing. The old

man clears his throat, and his face takes on an expression still more holy. The tic comes again.

"The King of the Gods is the actual entity in virtue of which the entire multiplicity of eternal objects obtains its graded relevance to each stage of concrecence. Apart from Him, there can be no relevant novelty."

I notice, with surprise, that the priest's blind eyes are brimming with tears. They seep down his cheeks into his beard. I raise my fingers to my mouth, baffled.

"The Chief God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of novel intensities. He is the *lure for our feeling*." Ork is now weeping profusely, so moved that his throat constricts. I observe in wonder. His knotted hands shake and sway.

"He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purposes of all creatures. He is an infinite patience, a tender care that nothing in the universe be vain."

He begins to moan, shaking violently, and it occurs to me that perhaps he is merely cold. But instead of hugging himself, as I expect him to, he stretches out his arms toward the sky, huge-knuckled fingers gnarled and twisted as if to frighten me. "O the ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil, such as hatred, or suffering, or death! The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetual perishing, and being actual involves elimination. The nature of evil may be epitomized, therefore, in two

simple but horrible and holy propositions: 'Things fade' and 'Alternatives exclude.' Such is His mystery: that beauty requires contrast, and that discord is fundamental to the creation of new intensities of feeling. Ultimate wisdom, I have come to perceive, lies in the perception that the solemnity and grandeur of the universe rise through the slow process of unification in which the diversities of existence are utilized, and nothing, *nothing* is lost." The old man falls forward, arms thrown out in front of him, and weeps with gratitude. I have trouble deciding what to do.

Before I can make up my mind about him, I become aware that there are others moving toward the place, drawn by the old man's keening. So quietly that even old Ork cannot hear me, I tiptoe out of the ring and hide behind a fat stone image of a god with a skull in his lap and a blacksmith's apron. Three of his fellow priests arrive. They gather around him, bend over to look at him. The snow falls on them softly.

FIRST PRIEST: Ork, what are you doing here? It is written that the old shall keep to the comfort of their beds!

SECOND PRIEST: It's a bad habit, beloved friend, this wandering about at night when monsters prowl.

THIRD PRIEST: Senility. I've been telling you the old fool's gone senile.

ORK: Brothers, I've talked with the Great Destroyer!

THIRD PRIEST: Bosh.

FIRST PRIEST: Blasphemy! It is written: "Ye shall not see my face."

SECOND PRIEST: Think what shape you'll be in for your morning devotions!

ORK: He stood as near to me as you are.

FIRST PRIEST: "Worship is the work of priests. What the gods do is the business of the gods." You know the text.

THIRD PRIEST: He's a blamed fool. If a man hankers for visions, he should do it in public, where it does us some good.

SECOND PRIEST: It doesn't look right, beloved friend, wandering around in the middle of the night. A man should try to be more regular.

ORK: Nevertheless, I saw him. My life of study and devotion has been rewarded! I told him my opinion of the King of the Gods, and he didn't deny it. I believe I'm approximately right.

FIRST PRIEST: The theory's ridiculous. Idle speculation. For it is written—

SECOND PRIEST: Please do come in with us, beloved friend. I hate being up after midnight. It ruins me the whole next day. It makes me put my clothes on wrong, and scramble the service, and eat incorrectly—

THIRD PRIEST: Lunatic priests are bad business. They give people the willies. One man like him can turn us all to paupers.

As I listen, shaking my head at the strangeness of the priestly conversation, another priest comes running up, younger than the others, pulling his outer robe on as he comes. They turn their heads, looking at the younger priest in annoyance. It occurs to me that perhaps he has been drinking. "What's this?" he cries. "Precious gods, what's this?" He throws his hands out, delighted by all he sees. Ork tells him what he has seen, and he listens in rapture. Before Ork has finished, the younger priest drops to his knees and throws his hands up, shaggy lips smiling, wild.

FOURTH PRIEST: Blessed! O blessed! (On his knees he goes over to Ork, seizes the old man's head between his hands, and kisses him.) I feared for you, dear blessed Ork—I feared your bloodless rationalism. But now I see, I see! The will of the gods! The rhythm is re-established! Merely rational thought—forgive me for preaching, but I must, I must!—merely rational thought leaves the mind incurably crippled in a closed and ossified system, it can only extrapolate from the past. But now at last, sweet fantasy has found root in your blessed soul! The absurd, the inspiring, the uncanny, the awesome, the terrifying, the ecstatic—none of these had a place, for you, before. But I should have seen it coming. O I *kick* myself for not seeing it coming! A vision of the Destroyer! Of course, of course!

Before we know it, you'll be kissing girls! Can't you grasp it, brothers? Both blood and sperm are explosive, irregular, feeling-pitched, messy—and inexplicably fascinating! They transcend! They leap the gap! O blessed Ork! I believe your vision proves there is hope for us all!

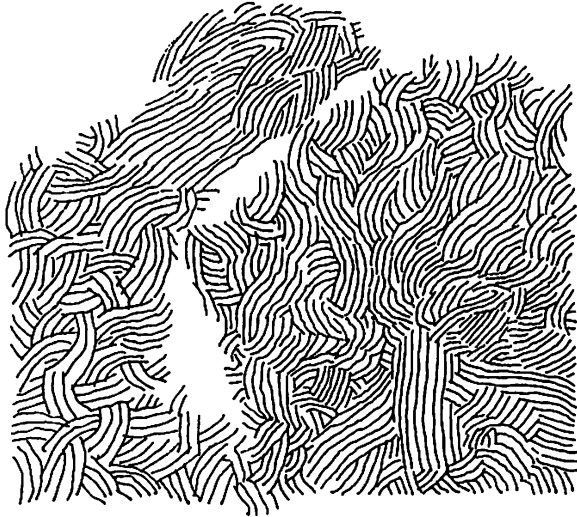
So he raves, overflowing with mead-bowl joy, and the older three priests look down at him as they would at a wounded snake. Ork ignores him, sniffing privately. I back away. Even a monster's blood-lust can be stifled by such talk. They remain inside the image ring, snow falling softly on their hair and beards, and except for their forms, their prattle, the town is dead.

Hrothgar is asleep now, resting up for tomorrow's ordeal of waiting. Wealtheow breathes evenly, beside him. Hrothulf and the king's two children are asleep. In the main hall, row on row in their wall-hung beds, the guardians snore, except Unferth. Puffy-eyed, he gets up, and in a kind of stupor goes to the meadhall door to piss. A dog barks—not at me: I have put my spell on them. Unferth hardly hears. He looks out over the snowy rooftops of the town to the snowy moor, the snowy woods, unaware of my presence behind the wall. The snow falls softly through the trees, closing up the foxes' dens, burying

the tracks of sleeping deer. A wolf, asleep with his head on his paws, awakens at the sound of my footsteps and opens his eyes but does not lift his head. He watches me pass, his gray eyes hostile, then sleeps again, his cave half hidden by snow.

I do not usually raid in the winter, when the world is a corpse. I would be wiser to be curled up, asleep like a bear, in my cave. My heart moves slowly, like freezing water, and I cannot clearly recall the smell of blood. And yet I am restless. I would fall, if I could, through time and space to the dragon. I cannot. I walk slowly, wiping the snow from my face with the back of my arm. There is no sound on earth but the whispering snowfall. I recall something. A void boundless as a nether sky. I hang by the twisted roots of an oak, looking down into immensity. Vastly far away I see the sun, black but shining, and slowly revolving around it there are spiders. I pause in my tracks, puzzled—though not stirred—by what I see. But then I am in the woods again, and the snow is falling, and everything alive is fast asleep. It is just some dream. I move on, uneasy; waiting.





Tedium is the worst pain.

The dull victim, staring, vague-eyed, at seasons that never were meant to be observed.

The sun walks mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan.

*"The gods made this world for our joy!"* the young priest squeals. The people listen to him dutifully, heads bowed. It does not impress them, one way or the other, that he's crazy.

The scent of the dragon is a staleness on the earth.

The Shaper is sick.

I watch a great horned goat ascend the rocks toward my mere. I have half a mind to admire his bottomless stupidity. "Hey, goat!" I yell down. "There's nothing here. Go back." He lifts his head, considers me, then lowers it again to keep an eye on crevasses and seams, icy scree, slick rocky ledges—doggedly continuing. I tip up a boulder and let it fall thundering toward him. His ears flap up in alarm, he stiffens, looks around him in haste, and jumps. The boulder bounds past him. He watches it fall, then turns his head, looks up at me disapprovingly. Then, lowering his head again, he continues. It is the business of goats to climb. He means to climb. "Ah, goat, goat!" I say as if deeply disappointed in him. "Use your reason! There's nothing here!" He keeps on coming. I am suddenly annoyed, no longer amused by his stupidity. The mere belongs to me and the firesnakes. What if everybody should decide the place is public? "Go back down, goat!" I yell at him. He keeps on climbing, mindless, mechanical, because it is the business of goats to climb. "Not here," I yell. "If climbing's your duty to the gods, go climb the meadhall." He keeps on climbing. I run back from the edge to a dead tree, throw myself against it and break it off and drag it back to the cliffwall. "You've had fair warning," I yell at him. I'm enraged now. The words come

echoing back to me. I lay the tree sideways, wait for the goat to be in better range, then shove. It drops with a crash and rolls crookedly toward him. He darts left, reverses himself and bounds to the right, and a limb catches him. He bleats, falling, flopping over with a jerk too quick for the eye, and bleats again, scrambling, sliding toward the ledge-side. The tree, slowly rolling, drops out of sight. His sharp front hooves dig in and he jerks onto his feet, but before his balance is sure my stone hits him and falls again. I leap down to make certain he goes over this time. He finds his feet the same instant that my second stone hits. It splits his skull, and blood sprays out past his dangling brains, yet he doesn't fall. He threatens me, blind. It's not easy to kill a mountain goat. He thinks with his spine. A death tremor shakes his flanks, but he picks toward me, jerking his great twisted horns at air. I back off, upward toward the mere the goat will never reach. I smile, threatened by an animal already dead, still climbing. I snatch up a stone and hurl it. It smashes his mouth, spraying out teeth, and penetrates to the jugular. He drops to his knees, gets up again. The air is sweet with the scent of his blood. Death shakes his body the way high wind shakes trees. He climbs toward me. I snatch up a stone.

At dusk I watch men go about their business in the towns of the Scyldings. Boys and dogs drive the horses and oxen

to the river and break through the ice to let them drink. Back at the barns, men carry in hay on wooden forks, dump grain in the mangers, and carry out manure. A wheelwright and his helper squat in their dark room hammering spokes into a hub. I listen to the grunt, the blow of the hammer, the grunt, the blow, like the sound of a leaky heart. Smells of cooking. Gray wood-smoke rises slowly toward a lead-gray sky. On the rocky cliffs looking out to sea, Hrothgar's watchmen, each man posted several stone's-throws away from the next, sit huddled in furs, on their horses' backs, or stand in the shelter of an outcropping ledge, rubbing their hands together, stamping their feet. No one will strike at the kingdom from the sea: icebergs drift a mile out, grinding against one another from time to time, letting out a low moan like the sigh of some huge sea-beast. The guards watch anyway, obedient to orders the king has forgotten to cancel.

People eat, leaning over their food together, seldom talking. The lamp at the center of the table lights their eyes. Dogs beside the men's legs wait, looking up from time to time, and the girl who brings the food from the stove stands looking at the wall as she waits for the plates to empty. An old man, finished before the rest, goes out to bring in wood. I spy on an old woman telling lies to children. (Her face is dark with some disease, and the veins on the backs of her hands are ropes. She is too old

to sweep or cook.) She tells of a giant across the sea who has the strength of thirty thanes. "Someday he will come here," she tells the children. Their eyes widen. A bald old man looks up from his earthenware plate and laughs. A gray dog pushes against his leg. He kicks it.

The sun stays longer each day now, climbing mechanical as a goat off the leaden horizon. Children slide down the hills on shaped boards, sending their happy cries through drifted stillness. As twilight deepens, their mothers call them in. A few feign deafness. A shadow looms over them (mine) and they're gone forever.

So it goes.

Darkness. At the house of the Shaper, people come and go, solemn faced, treading softly, their heads bowed and their hands folded for fear of sending dreadful apparitions through his dreams. His attendant, the boy who came here with him—a grown man now—sits by the old man's bed and plays pale runs on the old man's harp. The old man turns his blind head, rising from confusion to listen. He asks about a certain woman who does not come. No answer.

But the king comes, with the queen on his arm, young Hrothulf walking four steps behind them, holding the hands of their children. The king sits beside the Shaper's

bed as he sits in the hall, motionless, his patient eyes staring. Hrothulf and the children wait out in the entry room. The queen puts her fingertips gently on the old man's forehead.

The Shaper whispers for the lamp. The attendant pretends to bring it, though it stands already on the table beside his bed. "That's better," the queen says dutifully, and the king says, as if he couldn't see well before, "You look healthier today." The Shaper says nothing. Crouched in the bushes beside the path, peeking in like a whiskered old voyeur, wet-lipped, red-eyed, my chest filled with some meaningless anguish, I watch the old man working up the nerve to let his heart stop. "Where are all his fine phrases now?" I whisper to the night. I chuckle. The night, as usual, doesn't comment.

He sits motionless, propped up in bed, deathwhite hands folded on top of the covers: his eyes, once webbed with visions, are shut. The young man, the attendant sitting with the harp, does not play. The king and queen wait, dutiful, probably counting the time off in their heads, and the herbalist—humpbacked, robed in black (a tic screws taut one whole side of his face)—the herbalist, no longer useful to the onetime king of poets, paces back and forth slowly, rubbing his hands. He waits for the soft, dry throat-rattle that will free him to go pace elsewhere.

The Shaper speaks. They bend closer. "I see a time," he says, "when the Danes once again—" His voice trails off; puzzlement crosses his forehead, and one hand reaches up feebly as if to smooth it away but forgets before it can find the forehead, and falls back to the covers. He lifts his head a little, listening for footsteps. There are none. The head drops back weakly. His visitors wait on. They do not seem to realize that he is dead.

In another house, at a large, carved table, a middle-aged woman with hair just slightly less red than the queen's (she has close-together eyes and eyebrows plucked neat as the lines of a knife wound) sits by lamplight listening, as he did, for footsteps. Her nobleman husband lies sleeping in a nearby room, his head on his arm, as if listening to his heartbeat. She is a lady I have watched with the greatest admiration. Soul of fidelity, decorum. The Shaper would tip his whitened head, blind eyes staring at the floor whenever the lady spoke, and from time to time, when he sang of heroes, of ship-backs broken, there was no mistaking that he sang the song for her. Nothing came of it. She would leave the hall on her husband's arm: the Shaper would bow politely as she passed.

She hears them coming. I duck back into the gloom to watch and wait. The messenger the Shaper's attendant has sent goes up to the door and has hardly knocked once when the door opens inward and the lady appears,

staring through him. "He's dead," says the messenger. The lady nods. When the messenger is gone, the lady comes out onto the steps and stands with her arms locked, expressionless. She looks up the hill toward the meadhall.

"So all of us must sooner or later pass," I am tempted to whisper. "Alas! Woe!" I resist.

Only the wind is alive, pressing her robe to her fat, loose hips and bosom. The woman is as still as the dead man in his bed. I am tempted to snatch her. How her squeals would dance on the icicle-walls of the night! But I back away. I look in on the Shaper one more time. The old women are arranging him, putting gold coins on his eyelids to preserve him from seeing where he goes. At last, unsatisfied as ever, I slink back home.

In my cave the tedium is worse, of course. My mother no longer shows any sign of sanity, hurrying back and forth, wall to wall, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four, dark forehead furrowed like a new-plowed field, her eyes glittering and crazy as a captured eagle's. Each time I come in she gets between me and the door, as if to lock me up with her forever. I endure it, for the time. When I sleep, she presses close to me, half buries me under her thistly fur and fat. "Dool-dool," she moans. She drools and weeps. "Warovvish," she whimpers, and

tears at herself. Hanks of fur come away in her claws. I see gray hide. I study her, cool and objective in my corner, and because now the Shaper is dead, strange thoughts come over me. I think of the pastness of the past: how the moment I am alive in, prisoned in, moves like a slowly tumbling form through darkness, the underground river. Not only ancient history—the mythical age of the brothers' feud—but my own history one second ago, has vanished utterly, dropped out of existence. King Scyld's great deeds do not exist "back there" in Time. "Back there in Time" is an allusion of language. They do not exist at all. My wickedness five years ago, or six, or twelve, has no existence except as now, mumbling, mumbling, sacrificing the slain world to the omnipotence of words, I strain my memory to regain it. I snatch by my wits a time when I was very small and my mama held me softly in her arms. Ah, ah, how I loved you, Mama—dead these many years! I snatch a time when I crouched outside the meadhall hearing the first strange hymns of the Shaper. Beauty! Holiness! How my heart rocked! He is dead. I should have captured him, teased him, tormented him, made a fool of him. I should have cracked his skull mid-song and sent his blood spraying out wet through the meadhall like a shocking change of key. One evil deed missed is a loss for all eternity.

I decide, naturally, to attend his funeral. She tries to prevent me. I lift her by the armpits as though she were a child and, gently, I set her aside. Her face trembles, torn, I think, between terror and self-pity. It crosses my mind that she knows something, but she doesn't, I know. The future is as dark, as unreal, as the past. Coolly, objectively, I watch the trembling; it's as if all the muscles are locked to the charge of an eel. Then I push her away. The face shatters, she whoops. I run to the pool and dive, and even now I can hear her. I will forget, tomorrow, so her pain is a matter of indifference.

And so to the funeral.

The Shaper's assistant, cradling the old man's polished harp, sings of Hoc and Hildeburh and Hnaef and Hengest, how Finn's thanes fought with his wife's dear kinsmen and killed King Hnaef, and a terrible thing ensued. When Finn had few men and his enemies had no king, they made a truce, and the terms were these: that Finn would be lord of the lordless Danes, because a king without men is a worthless thing, and thanes without a lord are exiles. Both sides made vows, swore the duty of peace, and so winter came, in its time, to the country of the Jutes.

The people listen silent and solemn to the old Shaper's song on the young man's lips, and the pyre where the old man lies stands waiting for fire. The dead arms are

crossed, the features are stiff and blue, as if frozen. Ice glints on the sides of the pyre. The world is white.

*Young Hengest still  
through slaughter-dark winter stayed with Finn,  
heart sorrowing. He thought of home,  
though he could not drive on the dark sea  
his ring-prowed ship; for the sea-air rolled,  
dusky with wind, and the waves were locked  
in ice. Then another season came,  
another year, as the years do yet,  
bright shining weather awaiting its time.  
The winter was gone, earth's breast was fair,  
and the exiled Hengest was eager to go,  
unwilling guest from the dwelling.—Yet as  
ice-chains locked the land, so Hengest's heart  
was locked: revenge called harder to him than home.  
He cried in his mind for quarrel, and quarrel came.  
Then Finn lay down in blood, bold king  
with all his company, and the queen was taken;  
and, loaded with rings King Finn could not refuse,  
the Danes sailed home. Men's double vows  
soon wash away. Spring rain drips down through rafters.*

So he sings, looking down, recalling and repeating the words, hands light on the harp. The king listens, dry-eyed, his mind far, far away. Prince Hrothulf stands with the

children of Hrothgar and Wealtheow, his features revealing no more secrets than does snow. Men light the pyre. Unferth stares at the flames with eyes like stones. I too watch the fire, as well as I can. Colorless it seems. A more intense place in the brightness of snow and ice. It flames high at once, as if hungry for the coarse, lean meat. The priests walk slowly around the pyre, saying antique prayers, and the crowd, all in black, ignoring the black priests, keens. I watch the burning head burst, bare of visions, dark blood dripping from the corner of the mouth and ear.

End of an epoch, I could tell the king.

We're on our own again. Abandoned.

I awaken with a start and imagine I hear the goat still picking at the cliffwall, climbing to the mere. Something groans, far out at sea.

My mother makes sounds. I strain my wits toward them, clench my mind. *Beware the fish.*

I get up and walk, filled with restless expectation, though I know there is nothing to expect.

I am not the only monster on these moors.

I met an old woman as wild as the wind

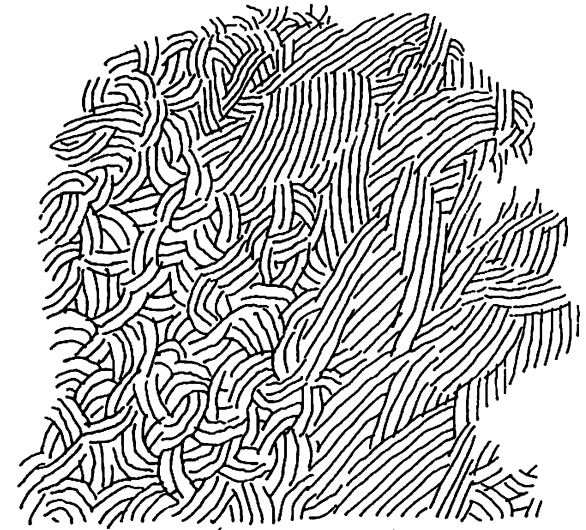
Striding in white out of midnight's den.

Her cloak was in rags, and her flesh it was lean,

And her eyes, her murdered eyes . . .

Scent of the dragon.  
 I should sleep, drop war till spring as I normally do.  
 When I sleep I wake up in terror, with hands on my throat.  
 A stupid business.  
*Nihil ex nihilo*, I always say.

## II



I am mad with joy.—At least I think it's joy. Strangers have come, and it's a whole new game. I kiss the ice on the frozen creeks, I press my ear to it, honoring the water that rattles below, for by water they came: the icebergs parted as if gently pushed back by enormous hands, and the ship sailed through, sea-eager, foamy-necked, white sails riding the swan-road, flying like a bird! O happy Grendel! Fifteen glorious heroes, proud in their battle dress, fat as cows!

I could feel them coming as I lay in the dark of my cave. I stirred, baffled by the strange sensation, squinting into dark corners to learn the cause. It drew me as the

mind of the dragon did once. *It's coming!* I said. More clearly than ever I heard the muffled footsteps on the dome of the world, and even when I realized that the footsteps were nothing but the sound of my own heart, I knew more surely than before that something was coming. I got up, moved past stone icicles to the pool and the sunken door. My mother made no move to prevent me. At the pool, firesnakes shot away from me in all directions, bristling, hissing, mysteriously wrought up. They had sensed it too. That beat—steady, inhumanly steady; inexorable. And so, an hour before dawn, I crouched in shadows at the rocky sea-wall, foot of the giants' work. Low tide. Lead-gray water sucked quietly, stubborn and deliberate, at icy gray boulders. Gray wind teased leafless trees. There was no sound but the ice-cold surge, the cry of a gannet, invisible in grayness above me. A whale passed, long dark shadow two miles out. The sky grew light at my back. Then I saw the sail.

I was not the only one who saw them coming. A lone Danish coastguard stood bundled in furs, his horse beside him, and he shaded his eyes against the glint of the icebergs beyond the sail and watched the strangers come swiftly in toward land. The wooden keel struck sand and cut a gouge toward the boulders on the shore—a forty-foot cut, half the length of the ship—and then, quick as wolves—but mechanical, terrible—the strangers leaped

down, and with stiff, ice-crusting ropes as gray as the sea, the sky, the stones, they moored their craft. Their chain-mail rattled as they worked—never speaking, walking dead men—lashing the helm-bar, lowering the sail, unloading ash-spear shafts and battle-axes. The coastguard mounted, snatched up his spear, and rode loudly down to meet them. His horse's hooves shot sparks. I laughed. If they were here for war, the coastguard was a goner.

"What are ye, bearers of armor, dressed in mail-coats, that have thus come riding your tall ship over the sea-road, winter-cold ocean, here to Daneland?" Thus spake the coastguard. Wind took his words and sent them tumbling.

I bent double, soundlessly laughing till I thought I'd split. They were like trees, these strangers. Their leader was big as a mountain, moving with his forest toward the guard. Nevertheless, the Dane shook his spear the way attackers do when they're telling a man what they're going to do with his testicles. "Attaboy!" I whisper. I shadow box. "If they come at you, bite 'em in the leg!"

He scolded and fumed and demanded their lineage; they listened with folded arms. The wind blew colder. At last the coastguard's voice gave out—he bent over the pommel, coughing into his fist—and the leader answered. His voice, though powerful, was mild. Voice of a dead thing, calm as dry sticks and ice when the wind blows



over them. He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or so it seemed for an instant, from a dream I had almost forgotten. The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snake's. He had no more beard than a fish. He smiled as he spoke, but it was as if the gentle voice, the childlike yet faintly ironic smile were holding something back, some magician-power that could blast stone cliffs to ashes as lightning blasts trees.

"We're Geats," he said, "the hearth-companions of King Hygilac. You've heard of my father. A famous old man named Ecgtheow." His mind, as he spoke, seemed far away, as if, though polite, he were indifferent to all this—an outsider not only among the Danes but everywhere. He said: "We've come as friends for a visit with your lord King Hrothgar, protector of the people." He tipped his head, pausing. You'd have thought he had centuries. At last with a little shrug, he said, "Be so kind as to give us some advice, old man. We've come on a fairly important errand." The hint of irony in the smile grew darker, and he looked now not at the coastguard but at the coastguard's horse. "A certain thing can't very well be kept hidden, I think. You'll know if it's true, as we heard back home, that I don't know what kind of enemy stalks your hall at night—kills men, so they say, and for some reason scorns your warriors. If it's so—" He paused, his eyebrows

cocked, and glanced at the coastguard and smiled. "I've come to give Hrothgar advice."

You could see pretty well what advice he'd give. His chest was as wide as an oven. His arms were like beams. "Come ahead," I whispered. "Make your play. Do your worst." But I was less sure of myself than I pretended. Staring at his grotesquely muscled shoulders—stooped, naked despite the cold, sleek as the belly of a shark and as rippled with power as the shoulders of a horse—I found my mind wandering. If I let myself, I could drop into a trance just looking at those shoulders. He was dangerous. And yet I was excited, suddenly alive. He talked on. I found myself not listening, merely looking at his mouth, which moved—or so it seemed to me—independent of the words, as if the body of the stranger were a ruse, a disguise for something infinitely more terrible. Then the coastguard turned his horse and led them up to where the stone-paved road began, gray as the sea, between snow-banks. "I'll have men guard your ship," he said. He pointed out the meadhall, high on its hill above the town. Then he turned back. The sea-pale eyes of the stranger were focused on nothing. He and his company went on, their weapons clinking, chain-mail jangling, solemn and ominous as drums. They moved like one creature, huge strange machine. Sunlight gleamed on their helmets and cheekguards and flashed off their spearpoints, blinding.

I did not follow. I stayed in the ruin, prowling where long-dead giants prowled, my heart aching to know what the strangers were doing now, up at the meadhall. But it was daylight; I'd be a fool to go up and see.

I couldn't tell, back in my cave, whether I was afraid of them or not. My head ached from staying too long in the sunlight, and my hands had no grip. It was as if they were asleep. I was unnaturally conscious, for some reason, of the sounds in the cave: the roar of the underground river hundreds of feet below our rooms, rearing out walls, driving deeper and deeper; the centuries-old drip-drip of seepage building stalagmites, an inch in a hundred years; the spatter of the spring three rooms away—the room of the pictures half buried in stone—where the spring breaks through the roof. Half awake, half asleep, I felt as if I were myself the cave, my thoughts coursing downward through my own strange hollows . . . or some impulse older and darker than thought, as old as the mindless mechanics of a bear, the twilight meditations of a wolf, a tree . . .

Who knows what all this means? Neither awake nor asleep, my chest filled with an excitement like joy, I tried to think whether or not I was afraid of the strangers, and the thought made no sense. It was unreal—insubstantial as spiderweb-strands blowing lightly across a window that looks out on trees. I have sometimes watched men do

mysterious things. A man with a wife and seven children, a carpenter with a fair reputation as wise, not maddened by passions, not given to foolishness—regular of habit, dignified in bearing, a dedicated craftsman (no edge un-beveled, no ragged peg, no gouge or split)—once crept from his house at the edge of the town while his family slept, and fled down snowy paths through woods to the house of a hunter away in search of game. The hunter's wife admitted him, and he slept with her until the second rooster crowed; then he fled back home. Who knows why? Tedium is the worst pain. The mind lays out the world in blocks, and the hushed blood waits for revenge. All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal—a harmless, sensible, smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world—two snake-pits. The watchful mind lies, cunning and swift, about the dark blood's lust, lies and lies and lies until, weary of talk, the watchman sleeps. Then sudden and swift the enemy strikes from nowhere, the cavernous heart. Violence is truth, as the crazy old peasant told Hrothulf. But the old fool only half grasped what he said. He had never conversed with a dragon. And the stranger?

Afraid or not, I would go to the meadhall, I knew. I toyed, of course, with the ridiculous theory that I'd stay where I was safe, like a sensible beast. "Am I not free?—as free as a bird?" I whispered, leering, maniacal. I have

seen—I embody—the vision of the dragon: absolute, final waste. I saw long ago the whole universe as not-my-mother, and I glimpsed my place in it, a hole. *Yet I exist*, I knew. *Then I alone exist*, I said. *It's me or it*. What glee, that glorious recognition! (The cave my cave is a jealous cave.) For even my mama loves me not for myself, my holy specialness (he he ho ha), but for my son-ness, my possessedness, my displacement of air as visible proof of her power. I have set her aside—gently, picking her up by the armpits as I would a child—and so have proved that she has no power but the little I give her by momentary whim. So I might set aside Hrothgar's whole kingdom and all his thanes if I did not, for sweet desire's sake, set limits to desire. If I murdered the last of the Scyldings, what would I live for? I'd have to move.

So now, for once unsure of victory, I might set limits to desire: go to sleep, put off further raids till the Geats go home. For the world is divided, experience teaches, into two parts: things to be murdered, and things that would hinder the murder of things: and the Geats might reasonably be defined either way. So I whispered, wading through drifts waist-high, inexorably on my way to Hrothgar's meadhall. Darkness lay over the world like a coffin lid. I hurried. It would be a shame to miss the boasting. I came to the hall, bent down at my chink, peered in. The wind was shrill, full of patterns.

It was a scene to warm the cockles of your heart. The Danes were not pleased, to say the least, that the Geats had come to save them. Honor is very big with them; they'd rather be eaten alive than be bailed out by strangers. The priests weren't happy either. They'd been saying for years that the ghostly Destroyer would take care of things in time. Now here were these foreigner upstarts unmasking religion! My old friend Ork sat shaking his head in dismay, saying nothing, brooding, no doubt, on the dark metaphysical implications. Things fade; alternatives exclude. Whichever of us might exclude the other, when the time came for me and the stranger to meet, the eyes of the people would be drawn to the instance, they would fail to rise to the holy idea of process. Theology does not thrive in the world of action and reaction, change: it grows on calm, like the scum on a stagnant pool. And it flourishes, it prospers, on decline. Only in a world where everything is patently being lost can a priest stir men's hearts as a poet would by maintaining that nothing is in vain. For old times' sake, for the old priest's honor, I would have to kill the stranger. And for the honor of Hrothgar's thanes.

The Danes sat sulking, watching the strangers eat, wishing some one of them would give them an excuse to use their daggers. I covered my mouth to keep from cackling. The king presided, solemn and irritable. He knew that his

thanes couldn't handle me alone, and he was too old and tired to be much impressed—however useful it might be to his kingdom—by their fathead ideas of honor. *Get through the meal, that's the thing*, he was thinking. *Keep them from wasting their much touted skills on one another.* The queen wasn't present. Situation much too touchy.

Then up spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son, top man in Hrothgar's hall. He had a nose like a black, deformed potato, eyes like a couple of fangs. He leaned forward over the table and pointed the dagger he'd been eating with. "Say, friend," he said to the beardless leader of the Geats, "are you the same man that went swimming that time with young Breca—risked your lives in the middle of the winter for nothing—for a crazy meadboast?"

The stranger stopped eating, smiled.

"We heard about that," Unferth said. "Nobody could stop you—kings, priests, councilors—nobody. Splash! *Uh, uh, uh!*" Unferth made swimming motions, eyes rolled up, mouth gasping. The thanes around him laughed. "The sea boiled with waves, fierce winter swells. Seven nights you swam, so people say." He made his face credulous, and the Danes laughed again. "And at last Breca beat you, much stronger than you were. He proved his boast against you—for what it may be worth." The Danish thanes laughed. Even Hrothgar smiled. Unferth grew serious, and

now only the stranger went on smiling, he alone and the huge Geats next to him, patient as timberwolves. Unferth pointed with his dagger, giving friendly advice. "I predict it will go even worse for you tonight. You may have had successes—I haven't heard. But wait up for Grendel for one night's space and all your glorious successes will be done with."

The Danes applauded. The stranger smiled on, his downward-slanting eyes like empty pits. I could see his mind working, stone-cold, grinding like a millwheel. When the hall was still, he spoke, soft-voiced, his weird gaze focused nowhere. "Ah, friend Unferth, drunk with mead you've said a good deal about Breca. The truth is, nevertheless, that I beat him. I'm stronger in the ocean than any other man alive. Like foolish boys we agreed on the match and boasted, yes . . . we were both very young . . . swore we'd risk our lives in the sea, and did so. We took swords with us, swimming one-handed, to fight off whales."

Unferth laughed, and the others followed, as was right. It was preposterous.

The stranger said, "Breca couldn't swim away from me, for all his strength—a man with arms like yours, friend Unferth—and as for myself, I chose not to swim away from him. Thus we swam for five nights, and then a storm came up, icy wind from the north, black sky, raging waves,

and we were separated. The turmoil stirred up the sea-monsters. One of them attacked me, dragged me down to the bottom where the weight of the sea would have crushed any other man. But it was granted to me that I might kill him with my sword, which same I did. Then others attacked. They pressed me hard. I killed them, nine old water nickers, robbed them of the feast they expected at the bottom of the sea. In the morning, sword-ripped, they lay belly-up near shore. They'd trouble no more passing sailors after that. Light came from the east and, behold, I saw headlands, and I swam to them. Fate often enough will spare a man if his courage holds."

Now the Danes weren't laughing. The stranger said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for what came next. Nobody was. Solemn, humorless despite the slightly ironic smile, he suddenly cut deep—yet with the same mildness, the same almost inhuman indifference except for the pale flash of fire in his eyes. "Neither Breca nor you ever fought such battles," he said. "I don't boast much of that. Nevertheless, I don't recall hearing any glorious deeds of yours, except that you murdered your brothers. You'll prowl the stalagmites of hell for that, friend Unferth—clever though you are."

The hall was numb. The stranger was no player of games.

And yet he was shrewd, you had to grant. Whether or not they believed his wild tale of superhuman strength, no thane in the hall would attack him again and risk the slash of that mild, coolly murderous tongue.

Old King Hrothgar, for one, was pleased. The madman's single-mindedness would be useful in a monster fight. He spoke: "Where's the queen? We're all friends in this hall! Let her come to us and pass the bowl!"

She must have been listening behind her door. She came out, radiant, and crossed swiftly to the great golden bowl on the table by the hearth. As if she'd brought light and warmth with her, men began talking, joking, laughing, both Danes and Geats together. When she'd served all the Danes and the lesser Geats, she stood, red hair flowing, her neck and arms adorned in gold, by the leader of the strangers. "I thank God," she said, "that my wish has been granted, that at last I have found a man whose courage I can trust."

The stranger smiled, glanced at Unferth. Hrothgar's top man had recovered a little, though his neck was still dark red.

"We'll see," the stranger said.

And again I found something peculiar happening to my mind. His mouth did not seem to move with his words,

and the harder I stared at his gleaming shoulders, the more uncertain I was of their shape. The room was full of a heavy, unpleasant scent I couldn't place. I labor to remember something: twisted roots, an abyss . . . I lose it. The queer little spasm of terror passes. Except for his curious beardlessness, there is nothing frightening about the stranger. I've broken the backs of bulls no weaker than he is.

Hrothgar made speeches, his hand on the queen's. Unferth sat perfectly still, no longer blushing. He was struggling to make himself hope for the stranger's success, no doubt. *Heroism is more than noble language, dignity. Inner heroism, that's the trick! Glorious carbuncle of the soul! Except in the life of the hero the whole world's meaningless.* He took a deep breath. He would try to be a better person, yes. He forced a smile, but it twisted, out of his control. Tears! He got up suddenly and, without a word, walked out.

Hrothgar told the hall that the stranger was like a son to him. The queen's smile was distant, and the nephew, Hrothulf, picked at the table with a dirty fingernail. "You already have more sons than you need," the queen laughed lightly. Hrothgar laughed too, though he didn't seem to get it. He was tipsy. The stranger went on sitting with the same unlighted smile. The old king chatted of his plans for Freawaru, how he would marry her off to his enemy, the king of the Heathobards. The stranger

smiled on, but closed his eyes. He knew a doomed house when he saw it, I had a feeling; but for one reason or another he kept his peace. I grew more and more afraid of him and at the same time—who can explain it?—more and more eager for the hour of our meeting.

The queen rose, at last, and retired. The fire in the hearth had now died down. The priests filed out to the god-ring to do their devotions. Nobody followed. I could hear them in the distance: "O ghostly Destroyer . . ." The cold ring of gods stared inward with large, dead eyes.

It is the business of rams to be rams and of goats to be goats, the business of shapers to sing and of kings to rule. The stranger waits on, as patient as a grave-mound. I too wait, whispering, whispering, mad like him. Time grows, obeying its mechanics, like all of us. So the young Shaper observes, singing to the few who remain, fingertips troubling a dead man's harp.

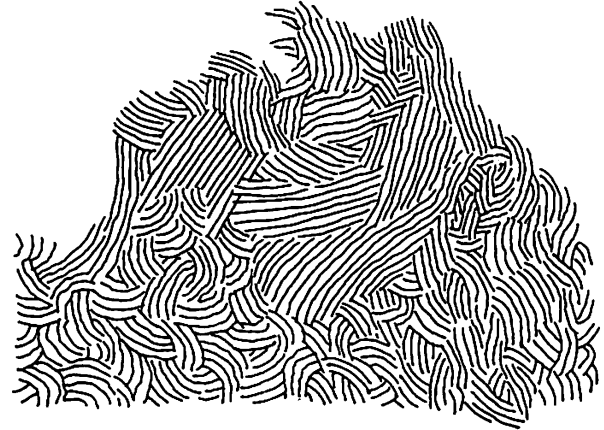
*Frost shall freeze, and fire melt wood;  
the earth shall give fruit, and ice shall bridge  
dark water, make roofs, mysteriously lock  
earth's flourishings; but the fetters of frost  
shall also fall, fair weather return,  
and the reaching sun restore the restless sea. . . .*

We wait.

The king retires, and his people leave.

The Geats build up the fire, prepare to sleep.  
 And now, silence.  
 Darkness.  
 It is time.

## 12



I touch the door with my fingertips and it bursts, for all its fire-forged bands—it jumps away like a terrified deer—and I plunge into the silent, hearth-lit hall with a laugh that I wouldn't much care to wake up to myself. I trample the planks that a moment before protected the hall like a hand raised in horror to a terrified mouth (sheer poetry, ah!) and the broken hinges rattle like swords down the timbered walls. The Geats are stones, and whether it's because they're numb with terror or stiff from too much mead, I cannot tell. I am swollen with excitement, bloodlust and joy and a strange fear that mingle in my chest like the twisting rage of a bone-

fire. I step onto the brightly shining floor and angrily advance on them. They're all asleep, the whole company! I can hardly believe my luck, and my wild heart laughs, but I let out no sound. Swiftly, softly, I will move from bed to bed and destroy them all, swallow every last man. I am blazing, half-crazy with joy. For pure, mad prank, I snatch a cloth from the nearest table and tie it around my neck to make a napkin. I delay no longer. I seize up a sleeping man, tear at him hungrily, bite through his bone-locks and suck hot, slippery blood. He goes down in huge morsels, head, chest, hips, legs, even the hands and feet. My face and arms are wet, matted. The napkin is sopping. The dark floor steams. I move on at once and I reach for another one (whispering, whispering, chewing the universe down to words), and I seize a wrist. A shock goes through me. Mistake!

It's a trick! His eyes are open, were open all the time, cold-bloodedly watching to see how I work. The eyes nail me now as his hand nails down my arm. I jump back without thinking (whispering wildly: *jump back without thinking*). Now he's out of his bed, his hand still closed like a dragon's jaws on mine. Nowhere on middle-earth, I realize, have I encountered a grip like his. My whole arm's on fire, incredible, searing pain—it's as if his crushing fingers are charged like fangs with poison. I scream, facing him, grotesquely shaking hands

—dear long-lost brother, kinsman-thane—and the timbered hall screams back at me. I feel the bones go, ground from their sockets, and I scream again. I am suddenly awake. The long pale dream, my history, falls away. The meadhall is alive, great cavernous belly, gold-adorned, bloodstained, howling back at me, lit by the flickering fire in the stranger's eyes. He has wings. Is it possible? And yet it's true: out of his shoulders come terrible fiery wings. I jerk my head, trying to drive out illusion. The world is what it is and always was. That's our hope, our chance. Yet even in times of catastrophe we people it with tricks. Grendel, Grendel, hold fast to what is true!

Suddenly, darkness. My sanity has won. He's only a man; I can escape him. I plan. I feel the plan moving inside me like thaw-time waters rising between cliffs. When I'm ready, I give a ferocious kick—but something's wrong: I am spinning—*Wa!*—falling through bottomless space—*Wa!*—snatching at the huge twisted roots of an oak . . . a blinding flash of fire . . . no, darkness. I concentrate. I have fallen! Slipped on blood. He viciously twists my arm behind my back. By accident, it comes to me, I have given him a greater advantage. I could laugh. *Woe, woe!*

And now something worse. He's whispering—spilling words like showers of sleet, his mouth three inches from



my ear. I will not listen. I continue whispering. As long as I whisper myself I need not hear. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick . . .

*A meaningless swirl in the stream of time, a temporary gathering of bits, a few random specks, a cloud . . . Complexities: green dust, purple dust, gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust . . .*

*The world is my bone-cave, I shall not want . . . (He laughs as he whispers. I roll my eyes back. Flames slip out at the corners of his mouth.) As you see it it is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare-history, time-as-coffin; but where the water was rigid there will be fish, and men will survive on their flesh till spring. It's coming, my brother. Believe it or not. Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you.*

I do not listen. I am sick at heart. I have been betrayed before by talk like that. "Mama!" I bawl. Shapes vague as lurking seaweed surround us. My vision clears. The stranger's companions encircle us, useless swords. I could laugh if it weren't for the pain that makes me howl. And yet I address him, whispering, whimpering, whining.

"If you win, it's by mindless chance. Make no mistake. First you tricked me, and then I slipped. Accident."

He answers with a twist that hurls me forward screaming. The thanes make way. I fall against a table and smash it, and wall timbers crack. And still he whispers.

*Grendel, Grendel! You make the world by whispers, second by second. Are you blind to that? Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is not the point. Feel the wall: is it not hard? He smashes me against it, breaks open my forehead. Hard, yes! Observe the hardness, write it down in careful runes. Now sing of walls! Sing!*

I howl.

*Sing!*

"I'm singing!"

*Sing words! Sing raving hymns!*

"You're crazy. Ow!"

*Sing!*

"I sing of walls," I howl. "Hooray for the hardness of walls!"

*Terrible*, he whispers. *Terrible*. He laughs and lets out fire.

"You're crazy," I say. "If you think I created that wall that cracked my head, you're a fucking lunatic."

*Sing walls*, he hisses.

I have no choice.

"The wall will fall to the wind as the windy hill  
will fall, and all things thought in former times:  
Nothing made remains, nor man remembers.  
And these towns shall be called the shining towns!"

*Better*, he whispers. *That's better*. He laughs again, and the nasty laugh admits I'm slyer than he guessed.

He's crazy. I understand him all right, make no mistake. Understand his lunatic theory of matter and mind, the chilly intellect, the hot imagination, blocks and builder, reality as stress. Nevertheless, it was by accident that he got my arm behind me. He penetrated no mysteries. He was lucky. If I'd known he was awake, if I'd known there was blood on the floor when I gave him that kick . . .

The room goes suddenly white, as if struck by lightning. I stare down, amazed. He has torn off my arm at the shoulder! Blood pours down where the limb was. I cry, I bawl like a baby. He stretches his blinding white wings and breathes out fire. I run for the door and through it. I move like wind. I stumble and fall, get up again. I'll die! I howl. The night is aflame with winged men. *No, no! Think!* I come suddenly awake once more from the nightmare. Darkness. I really will die! Every rock, every tree, every crystal of snow cries out cold-blooded objectness. Cold, sharp outlines, everything around me: distinct, detached as dead men. I understand. "Mama!" I bellow.

"Mama, Mama! I'm dying!" But her love is history. His whispering follows me into the woods, though I've outrun him. "It was an accident," I bellow back. I will cling to what is true. "Blind, mindless, mechanical. Mere logic of chance." I am weak from loss of blood. No one follows me now. I stumble again and with my one weak arm I cling to the huge twisted roots of an oak. I look down past stars to a terrifying darkness. I seem to recognize the place, but it's impossible. "Accident," I whisper. I will fall. I seem to desire the fall, and though I fight it with all my will I know in advance that I can't win. Standing baffled, quaking with fear, three feet from the edge of a nightmare cliff, I find myself, incredibly, moving toward it. I look down, down, into bottomless blackness, feeling the dark power moving in me like an ocean current, some monster inside me, deep sea wonder, dread night monarch astir in his cave, moving me slowly to my voluntary tumble into death.

Again sight clears. I am slick with blood. I discover I no longer feel pain. Animals gather around me, enemies of old, to watch me die. I give them what I hope will appear a sheepish smile. My heart booms terror. Will the last of my life slide out if I let out breath? They watch with mindless, indifferent eyes, as calm and midnight black as the chasm below me.

*Is it joy I feel?*

GREDEL

They watch on, evil, incredibly stupid, enjoying my destruction.

"Poor Grendel's had an accident," I whisper. "*So may you all.*"

