

PART II

by the name of Beowulf. They beg, my lord,  
an audience with you, exchange of words  
and formal greeting. Most gracious Hrothgar,  
do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.  
From their arms and appointment, they appear well born  
and worthy of respect, especially the one  
who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed."

Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:  
"I used to know him when he was a young boy.  
His father before him was called Ecgtheow.  
Hrethel the Geat gave Ecgtheow

*Hrothgar recognizes  
Beowulf's name and  
approves his arrival*

his daughter in marriage. This man is their son,  
here to follow up an old friendship.  
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once  
with a gift-cargo across to Geatland  
returned with marvellous tales about him:  
a thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty  
in the grip of each hand. Now Holy God  
has, in His goodness, guided him here  
to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.  
This is my hope; and for his heroism  
I will recompense him with a rich treasure.  
Go immediately, bid him and the Geats  
he has in attendance to assemble and enter.  
Say, moreover, when you speak to them,  
they are welcome to Denmark."

At the door of the hall,  
Wulfgar duly delivered the message:  
"My lord, the conquering King of the Danes,  
bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;  
also that he welcomes you here to Heorot  
and salutes your arrival from across the sea.

You are free now to move forward  
to meet Hrothgar, in helmets and armour,  
but shields must stay here and spears be stacked  
until the outcome of the audience is clear."

The hero arose, surrounded closely  
by his powerful thanes. A party remained  
under orders to keep watch on the arms;  
the rest proceeded, led by their prince  
under Heorot's roof. And standing on the hearth  
in webbed links that the smith had woven,  
the fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail-shirt,  
resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:  
"Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac's kinsman,  
one of his hall-troop. When I was younger,  
I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,  
hard to ignore, reached me at home:  
sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer  
in this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,  
empty and useless once the evening light  
hides itself under heaven's dome.  
So every elder and experienced councilman  
among my people supported my resolve  
to come here to you, King Hrothgar,  
because all knew of my awesome strength.  
They had seen me bolstered in the blood of enemies  
when I battled and bound five beasts,  
raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea  
slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes  
and avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it  
upon themselves, I devastated them).  
Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,  
settle the outcome in single combat.

*Beowulf  
Hrothgar  
announce  
arrival*

*He declares  
fight combat*

And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,  
dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people  
and their ring of defence, my one request  
is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far,  
the privilege of purifying Heorot,  
with my own men to help me, and nobody else.  
I have heard moreover that the monster scorns  
in his reckless way to use weapons;  
therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame  
and gladden his heart, I hereby renounce  
sword and the shelter of the broad shield,  
the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand  
is how it will be, a life-and-death  
fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells  
must deem it a just judgement by God.  
If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;  
he will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,  
swoop without fear on that flower of manhood  
as on others before. Then my face won't be there  
to be covered in death: he will carry me away  
as he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;  
he will run gloating with my raw corpse  
and feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,  
fouling his moor-nest. No need then  
to lament for long or lay out my body:  
if the battle takes me, send back  
this breast-webbing that Weland fashioned  
and Hirethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.  
Fate goes ever as fate must."

Hrothgar, the helmet of Shieldings, spoke:  
"Beowulf, my friend, you have travelled here  
to favour us with help and to fight for us.

460 There was a feud one time, begun by your father.  
With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf,  
who was a Wulfing; so war was looming  
and his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.  
He came away then over rolling waves  
to the South-Danes here, the sons of honour.  
I was then in the first flush of kingship,  
establishing my sway over all the rich strongholds  
of this heroic land. Heorogar,  
my older brother and the better man,  
also a son of Halfdane's, had died.  
470 Finally I healed the feud by paying:  
I shipped a treasure-trove to the Wulfings  
and Egtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance.

"'Tt bothers me to have to burden anyone  
with all the grief Grendel has caused  
and the havoc he has wreaked upon us in Heorot,  
our humiliations. My household-guard  
are on the wane, fate sweeps them away  
into Grendel's clutches—  
but God can easily  
halt these raids and harrowing attacks!

480 "Time and again, when the goblets passed  
and seasoned fighters got flushed with beer  
they would pledge themselves to protect Heorot  
and wait for Grendel with whetted swords.  
But when dawn broke and day crept in  
over each empty, blood-spattered bench,  
the floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted  
would be slick with slaughter. And so they died,  
faithful retainers, and my following dwindled.

*Hrothgar recalls a  
friendship and tells  
of Grendel's raids*

"Now take your place at the table, relish  
the triumph of heroes to your heart's content."

Then a bench was cleared in that banquet hall  
so the Geats could have room to be together  
and the party sat, proud in their bearing,  
strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by  
with a decorated pitcher, pouring bright  
helpings of mead. And the minstrel sang,  
filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice,  
gladdening that great rally of Geats and Danes.

*A feast in Heorot*

520

among the Heathoreams, then made his way  
to where he belonged in Bronding country,  
home again, sure of his ground  
in strongroom and bawn. So Breca made good  
his boast upon you and was proved right.  
No matter, therefore, how you may have fared  
in every bout and battle until now,  
this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever  
outlasted an entire night against Grendel."

From where he crouched at the king's feet,  
Unferth, a son of Ecglaf's, spoke

*Unferth strikes a  
discordant note*

530

Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:

*Beowulf answers  
Unferth*

contrary words. Beowulf's coming,  
his sea-braving, made him sick with envy:  
he could not brook or abide the fact  
that anyone else alive under heaven  
might enjoy greater regard than he did:

"Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca  
in a swimming match on the open sea,  
risking the water just to prove that you could win?  
It was sheer vanity made you venture out  
on the main deep. And no matter who tried,  
friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,  
neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed you.  
You waded in, embracing water,  
taking its measure, mastering currents,  
riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,  
winter went wild in the waves, but you vied  
for seven nights; and then he outswam you,  
came ashore the stronger contender.  
He was cast up safe and sound one morning

*Unferth's version  
a swimming contest*

540

Each of us swam holding a sword,  
a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection  
against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never  
move out farther or faster from me  
than I could manage to move from him.  
Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on  
for five nights, until the long flow  
and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,  
night falling and winds from the north  
drove us apart. The deep boiled up  
and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.  
My armour helped me to hold out;  
my hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,

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I was the strongest swimmer of all.  
We'd been children together and we grew up  
daring ourselves to outdo each other,  
boasting and urging each other to risk  
our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.  
Each of us swam holding a sword,  
a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection  
against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never  
move out farther or faster from me  
than I could manage to move from him.  
Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on  
for five nights, until the long flow  
and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,  
night falling and winds from the north  
drove us apart. The deep boiled up  
and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.  
My armour helped me to hold out;  
my hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,

a fine, close-fitting filigree of gold, kept me safe when some ocean creature pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast and swathed in its grip, I was granted one final chance: my sword plunged and the ordeal was over. Through my own hands, the fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

"Time and again, foul things attacked me, lurking and stalking, but I lashed out, gave as good as I got with my sword. My flesh was not for feasting on, there would be no monsters gnawing and gloating over their banquet at the bottom of the sea. Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping the sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated like the ocean's leavings. From now on sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids were over for good. Light came from the east, bright guarantee of God, and the waves went quiet; I could see headlands and buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked.

However it occurred, my sword had killed nine sea-monsters. Such night-dangers and hard ordeals I have never heard of nor of a man more desolate in surging waves. But worn out as I was, I survived, came through with my life. The ocean lifted and laid me ashore, I landed safe on the coast of Finland.

Now I cannot recall  
any fight you entered, Unferth,

that bears comparison. I don't boast when I say that neither you nor Breca were ever much celebrated for swordsmanship or for facing danger on the field of battle. You killed your own kith and kin, so for all your cleverness and quick tongue, you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell.

The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly as keen or courageous as you claim to be Grendel would never have got away with such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king, havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere. But he knows he need never be in dread of your blade making a mizzle of his blood or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter—from the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear. He knows he can trample down you Danes to his heart's content, humiliate and murder without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different. I will show him how Geats shape to kill in the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to may go bravely to mead, when morning light, scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south and brings another daybreak to the world."

Then the grey-haired treasure-giver was glad; far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf, on the warrior's steadfastness and his word. So the laughter started, the din got louder and the crowd was happy. Wealththeow came in, Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies. Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted

Unferth rebuked.  
Beowulf reaffirms his  
determination to  
defeat Grendel

Wealththeow,  
Hrothgar's queen,  
graces the banquet

590

Beowulf tells of his  
ordeal in the sea

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610

the men in hall, then handed the cup  
first to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,  
urging him to drink deep and enjoy it  
because he was dear to them. And he drank it down  
like the warlord he was, with festive cheer.  
So the Helming woman went on her rounds,  
queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,  
offering the goblet to all ranks,  
treating the household and the assembled troop  
until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.  
With measured words she welcomed the Geat  
and thanked God for granting her wish  
that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive  
to ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,  
a daunting man, dangerous in action  
and eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow;  
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:

*Beowulf's firm  
host*

"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.  
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,  
I meant to perform to the uttermost  
what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,  
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,  
prove myself with a proud deed  
or meet my death here in the mead-hall."

This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat  
pleased the lady well and she went to sit  
by Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.

Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,  
proud talk and the people happy,  
loud and excited; until soon enough

*Hrothgar laud  
Hornel in Beowulf  
keeping*

Halfdane's heir had to be away  
to his night's rest. He realized  
that the demon was going to descend on the hall,  
that he had plotted all day, from dawn-light  
until darkness gathered again over the world  
and stealthy night-shapes came stealing forth  
under the cloud-murk. The company stood  
as the two leaders took leave of each other:  
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,  
named him hall-warden and announced as follows:  
"Never, since my hand could hold a shield  
have I entrusted or given control  
of the Danes' hall to anyone but you.  
Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.  
Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,  
beware of the enemy. There's nothing you wish for  
that won't be yours if you win through alive."

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.  
The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,  
left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,  
his queen and bedmate. The King of Glory  
(as people learned) had posted a lookout  
who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,  
special protection to the Danish prince.  
And the Geat placed complete trust  
in his strength of limb and the Lord's favour.  
He began to remove his iron breast-mail,  
took off the helmet and handed his attendant  
the patterned sword, a smith's masterpiece,  
ordering him to keep the equipment guarded.  
And before he bedded down, Beowulf,  
that prince of goodness, proudly asserted:

*Beowulf recounts  
the use of weapons*

"When it comes to fighting, I count myself as dangerous any day as Grendel. So it won't be a cutting edge I'll wield to mow him down, easily as I might. He has no idea of the arts of war, of shield or sword-play, although he does possess a wild strength. No weapons, therefore, for either this night: unarmed he shall face me if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord in His wisdom grant the glory of victory to whichever side He sees fit."

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster under his head and his whole company of sea-rovers at rest beside him. None of them expected he would ever see his homeland again or get back to his native place and the people who reared him. They knew too well the way it was before, how often the Danes had fallen prey to death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats. Through the strength of one they all prevailed; they would crush their enemy and come through in triumph and gladness. The truth is clear, Almighty God rules over mankind and always has.

Then out of the night came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift; the hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts, all except one; it was widely understood that as long as God disallowed it, the fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.

One man, however, was in fighting mood, awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

710 In off the moors, down through the mist bands God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping. The bane of the race of men roamed forth, hunting for a prey in the high hall. Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it until it shone above him, a sheer keep of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time he had scouted the grounds of Hirothgar's dwelling— although never in his life, before or since, did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.

720 Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door turned on its hinge when his hands touched it. Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open the mouth of the building, maddening for blood, pacing the length of the patterned floor with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light, flame more than light, flared from his eyes.

730 He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping, a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors quartered together. And his glee was demonic, picturing the mayhem: before morning he would rip life from limb and devour them, feed on their flesh; but his fate that night was due to change, his days of ravening had come to an end.

Mighty and canny,  
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching  
for the first move the monster would make.  
Nor did the creature keep him waiting

but struck suddenly and started in; he grabbed and mauled a man on his bench, bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body utterly lifeless, eaten up hand and foot. Venturing closer, his talon was raised to attack Beowulf where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in with open claw when the alert hero's comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly. The captain of evil discovered himself in a handgrip harder than anything he had ever encountered in any man on the face of the earth. Every bone in his body quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape. He was desperate to flee to his den and hide with the devil's litter, for in all his days he had never been clamped or cornered like this. Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled his bedtime speech, sprang to his feet and got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting, the monster back-tracking, the man overpowering. The dread of the land was desperate to escape, to take a roundabout road and flee to his lair in the fens. The latching power in his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip the terror-monger had taken to Heorot. And now the timbers trembled and sang, a hall-session that harrowed every Dane inside the stockade: stumbling in fury, the two contenders crashed through the building. The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow survived the onslaught and kept standing:

*Beowulf's fight with Grendel*

780 it was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame braced with the best of blacksmith's work inside and out. The story goes that as the pair struggled, mead-benches were smashed and sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all. Before then, no Shielding elder would believe there was any power or person upon earth capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall unless the burning embrace of a fire engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary wait arose, and bewildering fear came over the Danes. Everyone felt it who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall, a God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe, the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-seif, keening his wound. He was overwhelmed, manacled tight by the man who of all men was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

790 But the earl-troop's leader was not inclined to allow his caller to depart alive: he did not consider that life of much account to anyone anywhere. Time and again, Beowulf's warriors worked to defend their lord's life, laying about them as best they could with their ancestral blades. Stalwart in action, they kept striking out on every side, seeking to cut straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle there was something they could not have known at the time, that no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art could ever damage their demon opponent.

*Beowulf's thence  
Afrail him*

He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge of every weapon. But his going away out of this world and the days of his life would be agony to him, and his alien spirit would travel far into fiends' keeping.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men with pain and affliction in former times and had given offence also to God found that his bodily powers failed him. Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived, he was hateful to the other. The monster's whole body was in pain, a tremendous wound appeared on his shoulder. Sinew split and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted the glory of winning; Grendel was driven under the fen-banks, fatally hurt, to his desolate lair. His days were numbered, the end of his life was coming over him, he knew it for certain; and one bloody clash had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes. The man who had lately landed among them, proud and sure, had purged the hall, kept it from harm; he was happy with his nightwork and the courage he had shown. The Geat captain had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes: he had healed and relieved a huge distress, unremitting humiliations, the hard fate they'd been forced to undergo, no small affliction. Clear proof of this could be seen in the hand the hero displayed high up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's

Grendel is defeated  
Beowulf fulfills  
his boast!

840

shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior gathered, as I've heard, around the gift-hall, clan-chiefs flocking from far and near down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly at the monster's footprints. His fatal departure was regretted by no-one who witnessed his trail, the ignominious marks of his flight where he'd skulked away, exhausted in spirit and beaten in battle; bloodying the path, hauling his doom to the demons' mere. The bloodshot water wallowed and surged, there were loathsome upthrows and overturnings of waves and gore and wound-slurry.

With his death upon him, he had dived deep into his marsh-den, drowned out his life and his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

850

Then away they rode, the old retainers with many a young man following after, a troop on horseback, in high spirits on their bay steeds. Beowulf's doings were praised over and over again.

Nowhere, they said, north or south between the two seas or under the tall sky on the broad earth was there anyone better to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom.

Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord, the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.

860

At times the war-band broke into a gallop, letting their chestnut horses race



wherever they found the going good  
on those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane  
of the king's household, a carrier of tales,  
a traditional singer deeply schooled  
in the lore of the past, linked a new theme  
to a strict metre. The man started  
to recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's  
triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,  
entwining his words.

He told what he'd heard  
repeated in songs about Sigemund's exploits,  
all of those many feats and marvels,  
the struggles and wanderings of Wael's son,  
things unknown to anyone  
except to Fitela, feuds and foul doings  
confided by uncle to nephew when he felt  
the urge to speak of them: always they had been  
partners in the fight, friends in need.  
They killed giants, their conquering swords  
had brought them down.

*After his death*  
Sigemund's glory grew and grew  
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,  
the guardian of the hoard. Under grey stone  
he had dared to enter all by himself  
to face the worst without Fitela.  
But it came to pass that his sword plunged  
right through those radiant scales  
and drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.  
His daring had given him total possession  
of the treasure hoard, his to dispose of  
however he liked. He loaded a boat:

*Hrothgar's minstrel  
sings about Beowulf*

Wael's son weighted her hold  
with dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted.

900

*The tale of  
Sigemund, the  
dragon-slayer,  
appropriate for  
Beowulf, who has  
defeated Grendel*

910

Sigemund's name was known everywhere.  
He was utterly valiant and venturesome,  
a fence round his fighters and flourished therefore  
after King Heremod's prowess declined  
and his campaigns slowed down. The king was betrayed,  
ambushed in Juland, overpowered  
and done away with. The waves of his grief  
had beaten him down, made him a burden,  
a source of anxiety to his own nobles:  
that expedition was often condemned  
in those earlier times by experienced men,  
men who relied on his lordship for redress,  
who presumed that the part of a prince was to thrive  
on his father's throne and defend the nation,  
the Shielding land where they lived and belonged,  
its holdings and strongholds. Such was Beowulf  
in the affection of his friends and of everyone alive.  
But evil entered into Heremod.

Meanwhile, the Danes kept racing their mounts  
down sandy lanes. The light of day  
broke and kept brightening. Bands of retainers  
galloped in excitement to the gabled hall  
to see the marvel; and the king himself,  
guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person,  
walked in majesty from the women's quarters  
with a numerous train, attended by his queen  
and her crowd of maidens, across to the mead-hall.

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,

*King Heremod  
reimbursed and  
reconciled with  
Beowulf*

standing on the steps, under the steep eaves, gazing at the roofwork and Grendel's talon: "First and foremost, let the Almighty Father be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd can work. His wonders always and everywhere. Not long since, it seemed I would never be granted the slightest solace or relief from any of my burdens: the best of houses glittered and reeked and ran with blood. This one worry outweighed all others—a constant distress to counsellors entrusted with defending the people's forts from assault by monsters and demons. But now a man, with the Lord's assistance, has accomplished something none of us could manage before now for all our efforts. Whoever she was who brought forth this flower of manhood, if she is still alive, that woman can say that in her labour the Lord of Ages bestowed a grace on her. So now, Beowulf, I adopt you in my heart as a dear son. Nourish and maintain this new connection, you noblest of men; there'll be nothing you'll want for, no worldly goods that won't be yours. I have often honoured smaller achievements, recognized warriors not nearly as worthy, lavished rewards on the less deserving. But you have made yourself immortal by your glorious action. May the God of Ages continue to keep and requite you well."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

King Hrothgar gives thanks for the relief of Heorot and adopts Beowulf "in his heart"

960

"We have gone through with a glorious endeavour and been much favoured in this fight we dared against the unknown. Nevertheless, if you could have seen the monster himself where he lay beaten, I would have been better pleased. My plan was to pounce, pin him down in a tight grip and grapple him to death—have him panting for life, powerless and clasped in my bare hands, his body in thrall. But I couldn't stop him from slipping my hold. The Lord allowed it, my lock on him wasn't strong enough, he struggled fiercely and broke and ran. Yet he bought his freedom at a high price, for he left his hand and arm and shoulder to show he had been here, a cold comfort for having come among us. And now he won't be long for this world. He has done his worst but the wound will end him. He is hasped and hooped and hurpling with pain, limping and looped in it. Like a man outlawed for wickedness, he must await the mighty judgement of God in majesty."

970

There was less tampering and big talk then from Unferth the boaster, less of his blather as the hail-thanes eyed the awful proof of the hero's prowess, the splayed hand up under the eaves. Every nail, claw-scale and spur, every spike and welt on the hand of that heathen brute was like barbed steel. Everybody said there was no honed iron hard enough to pierce him through, no time-proof blade

980

that could cut his brutal, blood-caked claw.

Then the order was given for all hands  
to help to refurbish Heorot immediately:  
men and women thronging the wine-hall,  
getting it ready. Gold thread shone  
in the wall-hangings, woven scenes  
that attracted and held the eye's attention.  
But iron-braced as the inside of it had been,  
that bright room lay in ruins now.

The very doors had been dragged from their hinges.  
Only the roof remained unscathed  
by the time the guilt-fouled fiend turned tail  
in despair of his life. But death is not easily  
escaped from by anyone:  
all of us with souls, earth-dwellers  
and children of men, must make our way  
to a destination already ordained  
where the body, after the banqueting,  
sleeps on its deathbed.

Then the due time arrived  
for Halldane's son to proceed to the hall.  
The king himself would sit down to feast.  
No group ever gathered in greater numbers  
or better order around their ring-giver.  
The benches filled with famous men  
who fell to with relish: round upon round  
of mead was passed; those powerful kinsmen,  
Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits  
in the raftered hall. Inside Heorot  
there was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation  
was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.

*The damaged hall  
repaired*

1020

Then Halldane's son presented Beowulf  
with a gold standard as a victory gift,

an embroidered banner; also breast-mail  
and a helmet; and a sword carried high,  
that was both precious object and token of honour.  
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;

it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts  
in front of the hall-troops. There haven't been many  
moments, I am sure, when men exchanged  
four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.

An embossed ridge, a band lapped with wire  
arched over the helmet: head-protection  
to keep the keen-ground cutting edge  
from damaging it when danger threatened  
and the man was battling behind his shield.

Next the king ordered eight horses  
with gold bridles to be brought through the yard  
into the hall. The harness of one  
included a saddle of sumptuous design,  
the battle-seat where the son of Halldane  
rode when he wished to join the sword-play;  
wherever the killing and carnage were the worst,  
he would be to the fore, fighting hard.  
Then the Danish prince, descendant of Ing,  
handed over both the arms and the horses,  
urging Beowulf to use them well.  
And so their leader, the lord and guard  
of coffer and strongroom, with customary grace  
bestowed upon Beowulf both sets of gifts.  
A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.

The chieftain went on to reward the others:  
each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf

*Victory gifts  
presented to Beowulf*

*A victory/feast*

1040

1050

*The other Geats are  
rewarded*

and risked the voyage received a bounty,  
 some treasured possession. And compensation,  
 a price in gold, was settled for the Geat  
 Grendel had cruelly killed earlier—  
 as he would have killed more, had not mindful God  
 and one man's daring prevented that doom.  
 Past and present, God's will prevails.  
 Hence, understanding is always best  
 and a prudent mind. Whoever remains  
 for long here in this earthly life  
 will enjoy and endure more than enough.

They sang then and played to please the hero,  
 words and music for their warrior prince,  
 harp tunes and tales of adventure:  
 there were high times on the hall benches  
 and the king's poet performed his part  
 with the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding  
 the tale of the fierce attack in Friesland  
 where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death.

Hildeburh  
 had little cause  
 to credit the Jutes:  
 son and brother,  
 she lost them both  
 on the battlefeld.  
 She, bereft  
 and blameless, they  
 foredoomed, cut down  
 and spear-gored. She,  
 the woman in shock,  
 waylaid by grief,

Hoc's daughter —  
 how could she not  
 lament her fate  
 when morning came  
 and the light broke  
 on her murdered dears?  
 And so farewell  
 delight on earth,  
 war carried away  
 Finn's troop of thanes,  
 all but a few.

How then could Finn  
 hold the line  
 or fight on  
 to the end with Hengest,  
 how save  
 the rump of his force  
 from that enemy chief?  
 So a truce was offered

as follows: first  
 separate quarters  
 to be cleared for the Danes,  
 hall and throne  
 to be shared with the Frisians.

Then, second:  
 every day  
 at the dole-out of gifts  
 Finn, son of Focwald,  
 should honour the Danes,  
 bestow with an even  
 hand to Hengest  
 and Hengest's men  
 the wrought-gold rings,

1080

Another performance  
 by the minstrel

Hildeburh, a Danish  
 princess married to  
 the Frisian King  
 Finn, loses her son  
 (unnamed here) and  
 her brother Hnaef in  
 a fight at Finn's hall

1090

The Danish attack is  
 bloody but  
 indecisive. Hnaef is  
 killed. Hengest takes  
 charge and makes a  
 truce with Finn and  
 the Frisians.

bounty to match  
the measure he gave  
his own Frisians —  
to keep morale  
in the beer-hall high.  
Both sides then  
sealed their agreement.  
With oaths to Hengest  
Finn swore  
openly, solemnly,  
that the battle survivors  
would be guaranteed  
honour and status.  
No infringement  
by word or deed,  
no provocation  
would be permitted.  
Their own ring-giver  
after all  
was dead and gone,  
they were leaderless,  
in forced allegiance  
to his murderer.  
So if any Frisian  
stirred up bad blood  
with insinuations  
or taunts about this,  
the blade of the sword  
would arbitrate it.  
A funeral pyre  
was then prepared,  
effulgent gold  
brought out from the hoard.

The Danish  
survivors to be  
quartered and given  
partly of treatment  
with the Frisians  
and their allies: the  
Julcs

The bodies of the  
slain burnt on the  
pyre

1110 The pride and prince  
of the Shieldings lay  
awaiting the flame.  
Everywhere  
there were blood-plastered  
coats of mail.  
The pyre was heaped  
with boar-shaped helmets  
forged in gold.  
of well-born Danes —  
with the gashed corpses  
many had fallen.  
Then Hildeburh  
ordered her own  
son's body  
be burnt with Hnaef's,  
the flesh on his bones  
to sputter and blaze  
beside his uncle's.  
The woman wailed  
and sang keens,  
the warrior went up.  
Carcass flame  
swirled and fumed,  
they stood round the burial  
mound and howled  
as heads melted,  
crusted gashes  
spattered and ran  
bloody matter.  
The glutton element  
flamed and consumed  
the dead of both sides.

*Their great days were gone.*

Warriors scattered  
to homes and forts  
fewer now, feeling  
Hengest stayed,  
lived out that whole  
winter with Finn,  
homesick and helpless.  
No ring-whorled prow  
could up then  
and away on the sea.  
Wind and water  
raged with storms,  
wave and shingle  
were shackled in ice  
until another year  
appeared in the yard  
as it does to this day,  
the seasons constant,  
the wonder of light  
coming over us.  
Then winter was gone,  
earth's lap grew lovely,  
longing woke  
in the cooped-up exile  
for a voyage home —  
but more for vengeance,  
some way of bringing  
things to a head:  
his sword arm hankered

*to greet the Jutes.*

*So he did not balk*

*once Hutilafing*

*placed on his lap*

*Dazzle-the-Duel,  
the best sword of all,*

*whose edges Jutes*

*knew only too well.*

*Thus blood was spilled,*

*the gallant Finn*

*slain in his home*

*after Guthlaf and Oslof*

*back from their voyage*

*made old accusation:*

*the brutal ambush,*

*the fate they had suffered.*

*all blamed on Finn.*

1150

*The wildness in them*

*had to brim over.*

*The hall ran red*

*with blood of enemies.*

*Finn was cut down,*

*the queen brought away*

*and everything*

*the Shieldings could find*

*inside Finn's walls —*

*the Frisian king's*

*gold collars and gemstones —*

*swept off to the ship.*

*Over sea-lanes then*

*back to Daneland*

*the warrior troop*

*bore that lady home.*

*The Danes, homesick  
and resentful, spend  
a winter in exile*

*Danish warriors  
spur themselves to  
rescue the fraud Finn  
is killed, his  
stronghold looted,  
his widow,  
Hildrith, carried  
back to Denmark*

*Spring comes*

The poem was over,  
the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur  
started on the benches, stewards did the rounds  
with wine in splendid jugs, and Wealththeow came to sit  
in her gold crown between two good men,  
uncle and nephew, each one of whom  
still trusted the other, and the forthright Unferth,  
admired by all for his mind and courage  
although under a cloud for killing his brothers,  
reclined near the king.

The queen spoke:

"Enjoy this drink, my ~~most-generous~~ lord;  
raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats  
duly and gently, discourse with them,  
be open-handed, happy and fond.  
Relish their company, but recollect as well  
all of the boons that have been bestowed on you.  
The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed  
and now the word is that you want to adopt  
this warrior as a son. So, while you may,  
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath  
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,  
before your decease. I am certain of Hirothulf.  
He is noble and will use the young ones well.  
He will not let you down. Should you die before him,  
he will treat our children truly and fairly.  
He will honour, I am sure, our two sons,  
repay them in kind when he recollects  
all the good things we gave him once,  
the favour and respect he found in his childhood."

She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,  
Hrethric and Hirothmund, with other nobles' sons,

1190

all the youth together, and that good man,  
Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers.

The cup was carried to him, kind words  
spoken in welcome and a wealth of wrought gold  
graciously bestowed: two arm bangles,  
a mail-shirt and rings, and the most resplendent  
torque of gold I ever heard tell of  
anywhere on earth or under heaven.

*Calls Beowulf,  
reclining a bangle  
Beowulf will possess  
it in due course for  
King Hrothgar, and  
will be wearing it*

1200

There was no hoard like it since Hama snatched  
the Brosings' neck-chain and bore it away  
with its gems and settings to his shining fort,  
away from Eormeric's wiles and hatred,  
and thereby ensured his eternal reward.  
Hygelac the Geat, grandson of Swerting,  
wore this neck-ring on his last raid;  
at bay under his banner, he defended the booty,  
treasure he had won. Fate swept him away  
because of his proud need to provoke  
a feud with the Frisians. He fell beneath his shield,  
in the same gem-crust, kingly gear  
he had worn when he crossed the frothing wave-vat.  
So the dead king fell into Frankish hands.  
They took his breast-mail, also his neck-torque,  
and punier warriors plundered the slain  
when the carnage ended; Geat corpses  
covered the field.

Applause filled the hall.

Then Wealththeow pronounced in the presence of the  
company:

"Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,  
wear it for luck and wear also this mail

from our people's armoury: may you prosper in them!  
Be acclaimed for strength, for kindly guidance  
to these two boys, and your bounty will be sure.  
You have won renown: you are known to all men  
far and near, now and forever.  
Your sway is wide as the wind's home,  
as the sea around cliffs. And so, my prince,  
I wish you a lifetime's luck and blessings  
to enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons  
with tender care, be strong and kind.  
Here each comrade is true to the other,  
loyal to lord, loving in spirit.  
The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:  
having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid."

She moved then to her place. Men were drinking wine  
at that rare feast; how could they know fate,  
the grim shape of things to come,  
the threat looming over many thanes  
as night approached and King Hirothgar prepared  
to retire to his quarters? Retainers in great numbers  
were posted on guard as so often in the past.  
Benches were pushed back, bedding gear and bolsters  
spread across the floor, and one man  
lay down to his rest, already marked for death.  
At their heads they placed their polished timber  
battle-shields; and on the bench above them,  
each man's kit was kept to hand:  
a towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt  
and great-shafted spear. It was their habit  
always and everywhere to be ready for action,  
at home or in the camp, in whatever case  
and at whatever time the need arose

*Bedtime in Heorot*

1250

to rally round their lord. They were a right people.

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly  
for his night's ease, as had happened to them often,  
ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall,  
committing evil until the end came,  
death after his crimes. Then it became clear,  
obvious to everyone once the fight was over,  
that an avenger lurked and was still alive,  
grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,  
monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.  
She had been forced down into fearful waters,  
the cold depths, after Cain had killed  
his father's son, felled his own

1260

brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw,  
marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,  
shunned company and joy. And from Cain there sprang  
misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,  
the banished and accursed, due to come to grips  
with that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle.  
The monster wrenched and wrestled with him  
but Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,  
the wondrous gifts God had showered on him:  
He relied for help on the Lord of All,

1270

on His care and favour. So he overcame the foe,  
brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed,  
outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind  
made for his death-den. But now his mother  
had sallied forth on a savage journey,  
grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,  
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure

1280



a great reversal, once Grendel's mother  
attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less  
only by as much as an amazon warrior's  
strength is less than an armed man's  
when the hefted sword, its hammered edge  
and gleaming blade slathered in blood,  
razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet.  
Then in the hall, hard-honed swords  
were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield  
lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets  
or woven mail when they woke in terror.

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,  
in mortal terror: the moment she was found.  
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers  
in a tight hold, then headed for the fen.  
To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved  
of the friends he trusted between the two seas.  
She had done away with a great warrior,  
ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.  
Earlier, after the award of the treasure,  
the Geat had been given another lodging.  
There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their  
trophy,  
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow  
to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,  
both parties having to pay  
with the lives of friends. And the old lord,  
he grey-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary  
when he heard the news: his highest-placed adviser,  
his dearest companion, was dead and gone.

1310 Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber:  
the winner of fights, the arch-warrior,  
came first-footing in with his fellow troops  
to where the king in his wisdom waited,  
still wondering whether Almighty God  
would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes.  
So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance  
and the wooden floor-boards banged and rang  
as he advanced, hurrying to address  
the prince of the Ingwines, asking if he'd rested  
since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.

1320 Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings' helmet, spoke:  
"Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.  
Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.  
He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother  
and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor,  
my right-hand man when the ranks clashed  
and our boar-crests had to take a battering  
in the line of action. Aeschere was everything  
the world admires in a wise man and a friend.  
Then this roaming killer came in a fury  
and slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,  
glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,  
I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud  
because of last night, when you killed Grendel,  
wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat  
since for too long he had terrorized us  
with his depredations. He died in battle,  
paid with his life; and now this powerful  
other one arrives, this force for evil  
driven to avenge her kinsman's death.  
Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,

Beowulf's  
summons

Hrothgar laments  
the death of his  
counselor. He  
knows Grendel's  
mother must avenge  
her son

in the anguish every thane endures at the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.

"I have heard it said by my people in hall, counsellors who live in the upland country, that they have seen two such creatures prowling the moots, huge marauders from some other world. One of these things, as far as anyone ever can discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale bigger than any man, an unnatural birth called Grendel by country people in former days. They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags and treacherous keshes, where cold streams pour down the mountain and disappear under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch above a mere; the overhanging bank is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface. At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns. And the mere bottom has never been sounded by the sons of men. On its bank, the heather-stepper halts: the hart in flight from pursuing hounds will turn to face them with firm-set horns and die in the wood rather than dive beneath its surface. That is no good place.

When wind blows up and stormy weather makes clouds scud and the skies weep, out of its depths a dirty surge is pitched towards the heavens. Now help depends again on you and on you alone.

The gap of danger where the demon waits is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare. I will compensate you for settling the feud as I did the last time with lavish wealth, coffers of coiled gold, if you come back."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. For every one of us, living in this world means waiting for our end. Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark. So arise, my lord, and let us immediately set forth on the trail of this troll-dam. I guarantee you: she will not get away. nor to dens under ground nor upland groves nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to. Endure your troubles to-day. Bear up and be the man I expect you to be."

With that the old lord sprang to his feet and praised God for Beowulf's pledge. Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse with the plaited mane. The wise king mounted the royal saddle and rode out in style with a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths were marked all over with the monster's tracks,

The country people's tales about the monsters

1380

Beowulf halts  
Hrothgar's courage  
He proclaims the  
heroic code that  
guides their lives

The haunted mere

1400

The expedition to the mere

her trail on the ground wherever she had gone  
across the dark moors, dragging away  
the body of that thane, Hirothgar's best  
counsellor and overseer of the country.  
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed  
up fells and screees, along narrow footpaths  
and ways where they were forced into single file,  
ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.  
He went in front with a few men,  
good judges of the lie of the land,  
and suddenly discovered the dismal wood,  
mountain trees growing out at an angle  
above grey stones: the bloodshot water  
surged underneath. It was a sore blow  
to all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,  
a hurt to each and every one  
of that noble company when they came upon  
Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

Everybody gazed as the hot gore  
kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn  
repeated its notes: the whole party  
sat down to watch. The water was infested  
with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons  
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,  
serpents and wild things such as those that often  
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road  
and doom the voyage. Down they plunged,  
lashing in anger at the loud call  
of the battle-bugle. An arrow from the bow  
of the Geat chief got one of them  
as he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft  
stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water

got less and less. It was his last swim.  
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,  
prodded by barbed boar-spears,  
cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,  
a strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch  
men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf got ready,  
donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;  
his mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail  
would soon meet with the menace underwater.  
It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:  
no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,  
no vicious armlock choke his life out.

To guard his head he had a glittering helmet  
that was due to be muddied on the mere bottom  
and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold,  
princely headgear hooped and hasped  
by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders  
in days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;  
since then it had resisted every sword.

And another item lent by Unferth  
at that moment of need was of no small importance:  
the brehon handed him a hilted weapon,  
a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.  
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns  
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed  
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,  
anyone who had fought and faced the worst  
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time  
it had been called to perform heroic feats.

When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,  
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,

could hardly have remembered the ranting speech he had made in his cups. He was not man enough to face the turmoil of a fight under water and the risk to his life. So there he lost fame and repute. It was different for the other rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:  
"Wisest of kings, now that I have come to the point of action, I ask you to recall what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall and suffer death while serving your cause, would act like a father to me afterwards. If this combat kills me, take care of my young company, my comrades in arms. And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar, to send Hygelac the treasures I received. Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold, let Hrethel's son take note of it and see that I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence and enjoyed the good of his generosity. And Unferth is to have what I inherited: to that far-famed man I bequeath my own sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonderblade. With Hirunting I shall gain glory or die."

After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly: without more ado, he dived into the heaving depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day before he could see the solid bottom.

Quickly the one who haunted those waters, who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds for a hundred seasons, sensed a human observing her outlandish lair from above. So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that, remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail saved him on the outside. Her savage talons failed to rip the web of his warshirt.

Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer carried the ring-mailed prince to her court so that for all his courage he could never use the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole and yet the water did not work against him because the hall-roofing held off the force of the current; then he saw firelight, a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell, the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength, then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm: the decorated blade came down ringing and singing on her head. But he soon found his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade refused to bite. It spared her and failed the man in his need. It had gone through many hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armour and helmets of the doomed, but here at last the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.

1500

Beowulf takes his  
leave

1510

1520