

The Wanderer
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The Wanderer

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Hyperlinks to [annotations](#) are added in-line in the text, in bolded brackets. See also my notes on [The Wanderer](#).

Text

Often the lone-dweller waits [**1**] for favor, mercy of the Measurer, [**2**] though he unhappy across the seaways long time must stir with his hands the rime-cold sea, tread exile-tracks. Fate is established!**5**

So the earth-stepper spoke, mindful of hardships, of fierce slaughter, the fall of kin: Oft must I, alone, the hour before dawn lament my care. Among the living none now remains to whom I dare**10** my inmost thought clearly reveal. I know it for truth: it is in a warrior noble strength to bind fast his spirit, guard his wealth-chamber, think what he will. Weary mind never withstands fate,**15** nor does troubled thought bring help. Therefore, glory-seekers [**3**] oft bind fast in breast-chamber a dreary mind. So must I my heart-- often wretched with cares, deprived of homeland,**20** far from kin--fasten with fetters, since long ago earth covered my lord in darkness, and I, wretched, thence, mad and desolate as winter, over the wave's binding sought, hall-dreary, [**4**]**25** a giver of treasure, where far or near I might find one who in mead-hall might accept my affection, or on me, friendless, might wish consolation, offer

me joy. He knows who tries it how cruel is sorrow,**30** a bitter companion, to the one who has few concealers of secrets, beloved friends. [**5**] The exile-track claims him, not twisted gold, his soul-chamber frozen, not fold's [**6**] renown. He remembers hall-warriors and treasure-taking, [**7**]**35** how among youth [**8**] his gold-friend received him at the feast. Joy has all perished! So he knows, who must of his lord-friend, of loved one, lore-sayings long time forgo.

When sorrow and sleep at once together**40** a wretched lone-dweller often bind, it seems in his mind that he his man-lord clasps and kisses, and on knee lays hands and head, as when sometimes before in yore-days he received gifts from the gift-throne. [**9**]**45** When the friendless man awakens again, he sees before him fallow waves, sea-birds bathing, wings spreading, rime and snow falling mingled with hail. Then are the heart's wounds ever more heavy,**50** sore after sweet--sorrow is renewed-- when memory of kin turns through the mind; he greets with glee-staves, eagerly surveys companions of men. Again they swim away! Spirits of seafarers bring but seldom**55** known speech and song. Care is renewed to the one who frequently sends over the wave's binding, weary, his thought.

Therefore, I know not, throughout this world, why thought in my mind does not grow dark**60** when the life of men I fully think through, how they suddenly abandoned the hall, headstrong retainers. This Middle-Earth [**10**] each of all days so fails and falls that a man gains no wisdom before he is dealt**65** his winters in the world. [**11**] The wise man is patient, not too hot-hearted, nor too quick tongued, nor a warrior too weak, nor too foolhardy, neither frightened nor fain, nor yet too wealth-greedy, nor ever of boasts too eager, before he knows enough.**70** A warrior should wait when he speaks a vow, until, bold in mind, he clearly knows whither mind's thought after will turn. [**12**] A wise man perceives how ghastly [**13**] it will be when all this world's weal desolate stands,**75** as now here and there across this Middle-Earth blown on by

wind walls stand covered with rime, the buildings storm-shaken. The wine-halls molder, the wielder lies down deprived of rejoicing, warband all fallen,**80** proud by the wall. Some war took utterly, carried on forth-way; one a bird bore off over the high holm [[14](#)]; one the hoar wolf dealt over to death, one a warrior, drear-faced, hid in an earth-cave.**85** Thus the Shaper of men destroyed this earth-yard, until, lacking the cries, the revels of men, old giants' work stood worthless.

When he with wise mind this wall-stone and this dark life deeply thinks through,**90** the wise one in mind oft remembers afar many a carnage, and this word he speaks: Where is the horse? Where the young warrior? Where now the gift-giver? Where are the feast-seats? Where all the hall-joys? Alas for the bright cup! Alas byrned warrior!**95** Alas the lord's glory! How this time hastens, grows dark under night-helm, as it were not! Stands now behind the dear warband a wondrous high wall, varied with snake-shapes, warriors fortaken by might of the ash-spears,**100** corpse-hungry weapons--famous that fate-- and this stone-cliff storms dash on; snowstorm, attacking, binds all the ground, tumult of winter, when the dark one comes, night-shadow blackens, sends from the north**105** rough hailstorm in anger toward men. All is the earth-realm laden with hardship, fate of creation [[15](#)] turns [[16](#)] world under heaven. Here goldhoard passes, [[17](#)] here friendship passes, here mankind passes, here kinsman passes:**110** all does this earth-frame turn worthless! [[18](#)] So said the one wise in mind, at secret conclaves sat him apart. Good, he who keeps faith, nor too quickly his grief from his breast makes known, except he, noble, knows how beforehand to do cure with courage. [[19](#)] Well will it be**115** to him who seeks favor, refuge and comfort, [[20](#)] from the Father in heaven, where all fastness stands.

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Annotations

[[1](#)] **waits**. The usual translation for *gebideð* here is 'experiences.'

The poem, I think, justifies my translation.

[2] **Measurer.** OE *metod* 'fate,' one of the several words used to refer to God in his various aspects; the actual meaning of the words, of course, frequently shifted somewhat with the coming of Christianity.

[3] **glory-seekers.** OE *domgeorne* 'ones eager for renown.'

[4] **hall-dreary.** OE *seledreorig*. The translation is literal.

[5] **concealers . . . friends.** I have here expanded the OE *leofre geholena* 'beloved _____.' The second word is not altogether clear.

[6] **fold's.** OE *folde* 'earth,' retained in dialectal usage. Cf. Gerard Manley Hopkins' phrase "fold, fallow, and plough" ("Pied Beauty").

[7] **treasure-taking.** OE *sincþege*, perhaps more clearly, but less euphoneously, rendered 'treasure-receiving'; this refers to the giving of treasure (especially arm-rings and weapons) by a lord to his retainers.

[8] **youth.** OE *geoguð* may refer to the age of a person or to the troop of young warriors, as opposed to the *duguð* 'seasoned warband, nobles.'

[9] **gifts . . . gift-throne.** OE *giefstolas breac*, whose literal rendering, 'enjoyed gift-thrones,' is vague.

[10] **Middle-Earth.** OE *middangeard* 'earth, the place between heaven and hell,' made familiar by J. R. R. Tolkien's use of the term in his fiction.

[11] **that man . . . world.** A more literal translation would be "before he owns [or "has"] his portion [*dæ*l 'deal'] of winters in the world"-- i.e., before he grows old.

[12] **nor ever . . . turn.** Cf. Deuteronomy 23.21-23: "When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not be slack to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin in you. But if you refrain from vowing, it shall be no sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what has passed your lips. . . ." The speaker in *The Wanderer* repeatedly argues for such prudence.

[13] **ghastly.** OE *gastlic* is etymon of both NE *ghostly* and NE *ghastly*. It carried both significances in OE.

[14] **holm.** 'Ocean, sea.'

[15] **fate of creation.** OE *wyrda gesceaft* 'the beginning/origin of fates/events.'

[16] **turns.** OE *onwendeð* 'changes.'

[17] **passes.** OE *bið . . . læne* 'is fleeting/transitory.'

[18] **turns worthless.** OE *idel weorpeð* 'becomes idle, empty, worthless.'

[19] **except he . . . with courage.** A conflation of two clauses in the OE: "nempe he ær þa bote cunne, / eorl mid elne gefremman," which may be rendered roughly, "unless he earlier knows the remedy, earl [how] to act courageously."

[20] **refuge and comfort.** OE *frofor* can have either of these overlapping senses; I have used both to fill out the half-line. The

OE of lines 115b-17, literally rendered, reads thus: "Well will it be [or "it is"] to him who favor seeks, refuge from [OE *to*] (the) father in (the) heavens, where for us all that stability [OE *fæstnung*] stands."