OVERSEA

being the first book of

BEOWULF
OVERSEA is a translation of lines 1 through 1887, following Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edition (1950). The second section, HOMELANDS, completes that text up to line 3182.
HEY now hear

what spears of Danes
in days of years gone
by did, what deeds made
their power their glory —

their kings & princes:

SCYLD SCEFING,
wretched foundling,
grew under open skies & in him glory thrived & all who threatened his meadhall ran in terror & all neighboring nations brought him gold following whaleroads.

BEOWULF,
this good king’s son
grew glorious in the heart of all Scandinavia, born to keep his fathers’ rule & answer his people’s need & his gifts brought trust,

men to stand by him in war, in old age —
the tribe thrives with each man’s rewarded deed.
Scyld’s hour came,
his strength went unto his God’s keeping

His beloved men carried out his last request,
they bore their king to the shores of the land he long ruled,

to the sea’s surge & harbor where
a ringprowed, kingly vessel tossed,
icecrusted, keen to set off.

They laid his glorious, beloved frame amidship,
against the mast & covered it with treasure, trappings

from the realm’s farthest reaches,
weapons of war, armor, sword & byrne
set upon his breast.

The seas have never possessed a better geared keel than that.
The riches his people bestowed matched those cast off with him

as a child
in his beginnings
alone upon waves.

They flew a flag woven with golden threads high above his head
& then let the waters bear him unto Ocean’s arms away from their

grief & sad hearts. No counselor
nor warrior can say for sure where
that cargo will arrive.
& THEN

Beowulf
of the Scyldings

succeeded his departed
father & lord to rule that
country many years

well known, well loved

& his son, grim, gray

HEALFDENE
lifelong light
of the Scyldings

bore two sons & two daughters
by all counts:

HEOROGAR & HROTHGAR
& good Helga

& Yrse (was it?)

... Onela the Swede’s
queenconsort?)
Luck in battle brought Hrothgar friends, kinsmen ready to serve him, young blood flocked to join his band, swell his ranks.

Then it came to him to command to be built a great lodge & men undertook this work erecting a meadhall larger than any they had ever seen or heard of under whose beams all gifts God gave him (all but the landshare & lifebreath He provides for men) would be dealt out to young & old alike.

& tribe upon tribe arrived from all throughout Midgarth to girt, to decorate this meetingplace & despite its size their work went quickly.

That greatest hall stood ready for Hrothgar’s lips & hands to shape its name, fulfill its promise:

He called it Heorot & there bestowed rings & riches upon his warriors as they feasted under towering, cliffhigh gablehorns.
One day not long off

fire
will burn those walls
flames

will temper hatred’s blade,
cleave
son & fatherinlaw —
but this has yet to be.

The dark rang.
The new hall’s
noise fell
upon tortured ears. In

the dark dwelt
a beast who ached as he heard

loud sweet

harp notes

cast song’s sharp shape, craft

unfold the airs
& fill the ears

with all origins —
Where water rings the world’s bright fields
sun & moon lend their glory’s light
as lamps for men on land
& tree leaf &
limb deck out earth’s every fold
as breath quickens
each creaturekind.

Hrothgar’s men
enjoyed happy lives
at Heorot & then

the Hellfiend’s raids began . . .

That grim ghostbeast called Grendel
dwelled on doomed ground in demonrealms &
made swamp & moor his stronghold. He stalked
those borderlands one of the banished kin of
outcast Cain, Abel’s killer, Almighty God
condemned to live beyond mankind.

Cain’s crime fathered an evil brood:

ents & orcs & elves
& giants who
long ago
waged war on God
& won themselves
His reward.
NIGHT came. He went
to check out those Danes
boozing at home in their
big house & pay them a call.

He found
them snoozing like fat, well
fed babies safe from boogies.

BANG! like a flash
that hard hearted, grim, greedy,
sick thing snatched 30 sleeping
Danes &
jiggetyjig ran home again,
fists full of blood candy.

& then

dawn’s      first
light       lit
what        Grendel
did         hid
none        of it

& then

last        night’s
cups        brimmed
with        morning
wept        tears
An old, renowned king’s grief.
An evil ghost’s ugly footprint.

Too much pain too soon, too long.
Murder’s fearless pattern set

in less than a night.

Feud Sin
certain sign clear token
Sin Feud
out of season no let up

Men sought digs
outside the hall,
got as far from
hate’s haunt
as they could.

One took them all on.
That greatest of houses
stood idle.

12 bitter winters
taught the Scyldings’
king each sorrow
under the sun.

Tongues wagged, lips
clicked: Grendel’s
attacks, Hrothgar’s
pain common knowledge.

No truce, no ransom,
no glory possible for men,
seasoned or green,
at the hands of that
horrible beast.
Death’s dark shadow
hovered over moors,
plot thickened mist
& never ending night.

Hell's runes
hid all trails.

Singlehanded
Hell’s fiend held Heorot,
made its cold hearth his home.
Night’s dark. Scylding’s grief.
That beast knelt before no Lord’s
throne.
His deeds went unrewarded.
Men of rank met, asked:

“What runes, what sacrifice
will answer our people’s need?”

Priests & chiefs prayed:

“Troll Killer, our god &
single aid, deliver us!”

Hell dwelled in their hearts, heathen rites
darkened their minds. They knew nothing of

God Almighty, Heaven’s Helm, Judge of Deeds.
Pagans deaf to Glory’s praises know no solace,

shove their souls
into terrorrealms
unto fires’ arms,

remain unborn.

Death’s day brings
joy to men
if they seek peace,

the Father’s arms.
NIGHT & day
care’s tides
rose & fell,
drowned Healfdene’s
son. No runes
stilled storm’s
rage. Damned
wrack, grim doom,
nightfear.

Too much pain too soon, too long.

Hygelac’s thane,
noble, mighty, brave Geat, his
manhood, then ripe, got wind of
Grendel’s rampage & decked out
a ship fit to fare waves, said
“I’ll track swans’ path to seek
that good king in need of men.”

Friends & counselors
unable to turn him from
his journey
urged him on,
drew his sorts, checked omens
for the brave, beloved prince.
He picked a company from the best men he could find.

15 sought seawood,  
led to land’s edge  
by seawise warrior,  

set keel to breakers,  

left  
    shore’s ledge,  
leapt  
    churned sand.  

Sea surge bore forth  
    bright cargo:  

weapons, trappings,  
hearts keen to man  
    timberbound,  
wavelpapped,  
    windwhipped,  
    foamthroated bird.  

Ship floated. Sail filled.  
A day & a day prow plowed  
& crew saw bright cliffs,  
steep hills, wide beaches.  

Sea crossed. Land at last.  
Boat moored. Byrnes shook.  

Weder men thanked God for an easy voyage over waves.
Glint of shieldbosses
across gangplanks
caught in coastguard’s eye
on seawall at seawatch
flashed upon his mind,
pricked his brain.

“Who goes there? Why? What are they up to?”

Hrothgar’s thane rode his horse down to the beach.

Spear’s great wood quaked in his hand.

He drew his quick breath, steadied himself & said:
“Who are you in your armor & your mail, brought by tall keel along the sea’s road upon wide waves? For years at land’s end I’ve watched the shore for enemy armies come by ship to invade & raid us Danes & never seen shielded men arrive so openly.

Yet I’ve had no warning, no news of you, no orders from my kinsmen to let you pass.

& I’ve seen no greater earl on earth than one of you appears to be,

no mere hallman
glamorized by dazzling armor, strengthened by weapons alone,

unless his looks weave lies,

he has no equal.

But now before you take another step on Danish soil I must be told where you sailed from & why. For all I know you foreigners & seafarers may be spies, so answer my simple question, haste is best:

Where have you come from?”
“WE are Geats!”

Crew’s captain & chief
unlocked his wordhoard,
his answer rolled from
his tongue:

“Ecgtheow,

my father,
all folk knew well,
the flower of his kinship
survived many winters
before it faded
ripened by many years

leaving his memory
to thrive in the minds
of all wisemen
throughout wide earth.”
We come with warm hearts to seek Healfdene’s son.
Show us goodwill, give us godspeed on our guest errand
unto your illustrious Danish lord.
Our journey’s rime will soon be no secret, I think.

You know — if rumors we’ve heard hold true —
that some scourge among Scyldings
shapes its hate’s deeds by dead of night,
twisting its terror’s strange, violent designs
from living men’s humiliation & dead men’s blood.

I bring buried in the wide ground of my heart
seeds of an answer for brave, old Hrothgar: how
he might overcome this fiend, untwist the tight net
its evil weaves & cast good fortune’s change,
stilling care’s swelling tides —

if it is any longer possible —

for otherwise forever after suffering & sorrow
shall be every day’s necessity at good Heorot,
best of halls, for as long as it endures upon
its lofty heights.”
Coastguard on horseback

cleared his throat,
unfaltering officer spoke:

“As any clever
shieldbearer in his right mind would, I’ve
weighed your words & deeds & now think you
a troop loyal to Scyldings’ lord. Bear forth
your weapons in battledress, I’ll be your guide
& leave my men to guard your freshtarred boat
from enemies, keeping its curved wood keel
safe on sand until it’s ready to bear
its beloved band

whom fate allows to weather
war’s storm whole

back across sea’s streams
to Wederland.”

They set off, their widehulled boat at rest,
rope & anchor held it fast.

Gold swine emblems
gleamed above cheekguards —
inlaid, firehard
tusk & snout,
twisted tail.

Bristled boar:

warhearts’ blazon, lifebreaths’ protector.
Together men marched. Their quick pace brought them in sight of
gilt, glint,
splendor,
timbered hall,
mighty king’s seat,
house
most prime
under heaven
in earthdwellers’ minds
whose fires’ light lit
many lands.

Coastguard pointed out the direct route to that bright lodge, lighthearted men’s home,
turned his horse & said:

“It is time now for me to get back. May the allruling Father’s mercy keep you & your mission sound. I go to the sea to resume my watch against our enemies.”
STONE

paved

street

straight

track

byrnes’

shine

bright

hard

hand

linked

rings

war

gear

songs

horror

armor
warriors entered the hall.
Set their wide, hardbossed shield
together against the wall,
sat down on a bench.

Warbyrnes clanked.
Graytipped
ashwood spears gathered.
Seamen
ironclad, fighters
Weapondecked.

A king’s thane
asked them their bloodlines:

“Where do you come from with plated shields,
gray mailshirts, grim warhelmets & that
heap of spears? I am Hrothgar’s messenger
& officer. I’ve never seen a braver looking
foreign troop — you must seek Hrothgar
out of wide hearts, not out of wreck or exile.”

Answer’s words came
loudly from under
the bold, lordly
Weder leader’s helmet:

“We share Hygelac’s board.”
BEOWULF

my name
"I would like to tell
your renowned king
Healfdene’s son,
my errand myself
should his majesty
grant us audience."

Wulfgar,
Vendel’s chief,
whose
heart’s
prowess & wisdom
many
knew,
paused & replied:

“I will ask as you request
Scyldings’ lord, Dane’s friend
& ringgiver, our glorious king,
about your journey
& will all speed return with
the good man’s answer.”
Quickly
  the war hero
trained
  in protocol
went to
  where old, gray Hrothgar,
the Danish lord,
sat with his retinue.
Face to face he addressed
his protector:

“Here are Geatmen
come from afar
over wide ocean.
Beowulf, warrior
chief, wishes to
have words with you.

Gracious Hrothgar,
do not refuse them.
Their array commands
an earl’s esteem —
indeed, their leader
is a strong man.”
WORDS welled in Hrothgar, Scyldings' helm:

“I knew him when he was a boy, his father’s name was Ecgtheow to whom the Geat Hrethel gave his only daughter as a wife — now his son comes to us, a trusted friend. Our seafarers who took Geats’ gifts of thanks say his hand’s grip has the fire of 30 men’s battlestrength. It is my hope & joy that Holy God in His mercy sends him to us Danes to unwind Grendel’s evil gyre. I will reward his heart’s might with goods & treasures. Quick now, call them in, the entire kinband & give them words of welcome from all Danish peoples.”

Wulfgar went to the hall door, called to them outside:

“My glorious lord, the Dane’s king, tells me to tell you he knows your heritage. Stronghearted men from across sea’s swells, here you are welcome. You may see Hrothgar in your array, under war’s grim masks but leave your shield boards & wooden slaughtershafts to await your words’ outcome.”
The powerful leader rose, splendid ranks around him.

& ordered some of his band to stay & guard their gear.

He led the rest into Heorot. The warhard warrior stood

under its rafters
at its hearth

his
shirt

smith
crafted
links

brilliant
net

byrne
glitter
shone

his
words

a dark echo from
under his helmet:
“Hail Hrothgar,
I am Hygelac’s kin & thane
my acts of youth were
    glory’s deeds
Grendel’s outrage
    was no secret
in Geats’ lands.
Seafarers told our warriors
this best of houses
stood idle, useless
when heaven hid
day’s light.
They urged me to
    seek
wise
Hrothgar.
They know me, have seen me come
from battle drenched in
    fiend’s blood
dead ents
    (5 prisoners)

watched me slay krakens
    on waves at night
my life in danger
the acts of
those creatures I crushed
    sealed their own fate

Weders’ revenge

& now I have a score to settle with Grendel

    troll
beast.”
“Having come this far I beg you, Scyldings’ protector, warriors’ shelter & people’s friend, do not deny me this one favor:

Let me & my strong band clean up Heorot by ourselves.

I’ve discovered that this reckless beast uses no weapons, so to Hygelac my lord’s delight I’ll take this fiend on barehanded,

fight him tooth & nail for life & let God’s doom name the loser death hauls off.

If Grendel gets the upper hand no doubt he’ll make a meal of us Geats,

he’s tasted manhood’s flower in this hall many times before.

   If I die dig me no grave
   for I’ll be that monster’s supper, slaughter salted, gore sauced.

   Alone on his moors
   he’ll pick his teeth with my bones.

   No you won’t have to build my barrow.

   If battle claims me
   send Hygelac my byrne, this good mailshirt made by Weland that Hrethel left.

   What will be will be.”
WORDS welled in Hrothgar, Scyldings’ helm:

“Indebted, in mercy, Beowulf, my friend, you come to us. Alone, your father struck a great feud with the Wylfings when his strong hand slew Heathlaf.

His own kin, the Weders, dare not harbor him for fear of war. So he sought us honored Scyldings just as my reign of the Danes began.

Young as I was, I ruled a wide land & a hoard of fine warriors. Heregar, my older brother, Healfdene’s son, my better, had not been dead long when I settled the Wylfings’ feud by sending them antique treasures in payment for spilt blood & Ecgtheow pledged allegiance to me in return.”
“My heart grieves
when I speak of the damage
Grendel’s hate, plots & lightning raids have done,
when I think how my halltroops, my fighting men thin out, swept by fate into Grendel’s evil gyre, & how easily God could end these mad deeds.

Often in the hall beer filled warriors boast in cups that they will wait out the night, pit their sharp swordgedges against Grendel’s attack.

But when morning stains the meadhall’s gore & wet blood gleams on bench & plank daylight finds few left alive, death hauls away the loved & trusted.

Now sit. Eat. Unbind your thoughts. Then tell us the tales of glory your hearts bring to mind.”

Room was made on a bench in the beerhall for all the Geats. They went & sat there glowing with strength. A cupbearer came with an ornate alebeaker in his hands to pour them bright, sweet drink.
Now & then
   Heorot rang
       with songs

the poet’s
       clear voice
   & heroes’ joys

swelled into noise,
       shouts & cries of

no minor company,
       Danes & Weders.
UNFERTH, Ecglaf’s son, who sat at
the Scylding lord’s feet broke the hush he caused
when he stood to utter baited words, battlerunes:

(This fuss over a seafarer’s journey annoyed him: he granted no man in Midgarth greater praise for deeds done under heaven than he received.)

“Are you the Beowulf who swam a race on open seas with Breca, tested tides out of pride & because of a rash boast risked your life in deep water, who no man, friend or foe, could turn from this adventure’s danger?”
“You swam,
   sea’s foam wreathed your arms,
your hands
   thrashed their way along sea’s roads as
Ocean’s fork
   tossed you into sea’s boiling floods &
winter’s waves crashed upon sea’s streams. Water
held your body
   7 nights
   when Breca’s greater strength
gained him the lead.
   At dawn he climbed
from sea to shore onto Heathoraemas’ land
then made his way home to Brondings’ fair, peaceful
capitol,
   to the cities & wealth he rules,
to the people who loved him.
   Beanstan’s son fulfilled his boast.

   No matter how well you’ve weathered
battle’s storm or withstood war’s
grim rage
   I don’t give you a fighting
chance of surviving one night in or near
Grendel’s grip.”
Beowulf, Ecgtheow’s son, quietly replied:

“Unferth, my friend,  
your beer speaks for you  

The truth  
in all your talk  
about Breca’s adventure  

is that no man’s strength matched my own.  

Let me  
make it clear:  

when we were boys we made a pact to pitch  
our youth upon Ocean’s prong & challenged  

his swift seas’ rough waves, not each other.  

Breca never  
gained a stroke on me  
nor tried to.  

For 5 nights bitter cold rolling waves  
dashed us about under black skies headlong  
into deadly grim northern gales. We swam  
with hard, naked swords in our hands until  
the flood separated us.  

Its waves grew fiercer  
rousing sea fishes’ anger.  

The knit of my hard  
handlinked sark slung to my body, covered  
my breast with a guilded byrne’s protection.  

Then a scavenger  
dragged me under, a fiend’s tight grip plunged  
me to Ocean’s floor but my sword point, granted  
a direct hit, pierced the monster, my hand  
guided that great seabeast into battle’s storm.”
“NOT once but many times
my good sword saw fit to slash
not one but many
bloated whale bellies
whose juices ran
stirred by thoughts of
sitting down to
a deep sea board
laid with me.
Morning found them
hacked by blades
washed by waves
ashore asleep
with death never to trouble
ocean goers again.”
“Light came over the East,

God’s bright beacon.

Sea swells stilled.

I saw headlands,

windswept hills.

Often fate leaves
a strong man unscathed:
such was my lot,
my hilt notched up
9 monsters’
death

No man I know of

fought harder or

found himself

in worse straits

by night in sea streams.

Under sky’s arc
I escaped hatred’s grip
alive,
flood & tide brought me
to Finns’ land
exhausted.”
“Unferth, if there are tales like that about
your craft in battle or
your sword’s terror
they go untold. Forgive me if I boast but
the deeds you & Breca have done
have yet to match my own
though murder patterns

your bright blade with
your brother’s blood —
your cleverness will feed Hell’s fires.

Grendel’s evil gyre could have never spun
so much humiliation or
so much horror
in your king’s Heorot if your heart & mind were
as hard in battle
as you claim.

But now the beast knows
there’s no feud or swordstorm to fear from
your people, the glorious Danes.

He eats you Scyldings alive,
no mercy stems his appetite, his lust your death.

But soon I’ll show him
what this Geat can do in battle & by dawn tomorrow

all who wish to
may walk to this meadhall
free from fear by morning light

when sun’s bright byrne
shines in the South.”
Glad words heard
by brave, gray-haired, bright
Danes’ chief & folkshepherd:
needed aid found,

Beowulf’s promise.

Warriors’ laughter,
melodies sound,
cheers of joy.

Wealhtheow, Hrothgar’s queen, gold clad lady & good wife,
greeted the men & passed the cup in proper fashion, first
to the Danes’ beloved guardian, bidding him drink this beer
in joy. The victorious king drank & ate with lust. Then
the Helming’s lady made her rounds with the treasured cup
to young & old alike in hall’s every part & when the ring
decked, rich hearted queen came to Beowulf she greeted
the Geats’ leader & wisely thanked her God that her wish was
fulfilled: here was a hero to trust to free her house
from evil. The fierce fighter took the mead cup from
Wealhtheow. Raising it, Beowulf, Ecgtheow’s son, his blood
hot with the thought of forthcoming battle, spoke:

“I said when I set out to sea
seated in my boat with my company
that I would answer your people’s
prayers at once or cringe
crushed in the fiend’s grip.
& so I will — or meet my days’
end in this mead hall.”
The Geat’s promise pleased the good folkqueen,
the gold clad wife went & sat by her lord.
Once more the hall hears
brave speech,
troops’ joy,
victory’s noise
Healfdene’s son soon rose to go to his rest.
From sunrise to sunset, in day’s light
his high hall was safe, the raids on it just
plans hatched in the monster’s brain. But when
dark blacked out things
a shadeshape would
come & glide like a
shadow under skies.
All stood.
King & hero saluted each other.
Hrothgar wished Beowulf luck & with these words
turned his hall over to him:
“Never since my hand could lift a shield have I
entrusted this Danes’ lodge to any man but you.
Guard & keep this best of homes in glory’s name,
make it the scene of courage in wrath’s wake,
survive this work & your wants won’t lack fulfillment.”
HROTHGAR & his men left the hall.  
The Scyldings’ chief & protector  
sought his queen  
Wealhtheow —  
her arms in his bed.  

The glorious king, as all heard,  
had appointed a hallguard  
to meet Grendel —  

his entwatch was a favor,  
a service rendered unto Danes’ lord.  

The Geats’ leader placed his trust  
in his own great strength & God’s grace.
He took off his iron byrne, 
lifted the helmet from his head 
& handed them to his servant 
along with his engraved blade, 
best of swords, telling the boy 
to take care of this gear.

Before he climbed up to his bed 
the Geat, Beowulf said:

“I believe in my battlecraft 
as much as Grendel believes in his 
therefore my sword’s blow will not 
make his waking sleep although it could.

Despite his evil reputation, he knows 
nothing of the shattered shield 
so tonight I set aside my sword 
If he dares to fight weaponless

let him come & let wise God, Holy Lord, 
grant glory to him who deserves it.”

He laid down. 
His cheek pressed the pillow.
Throughout the hall
bold seamen sunk into uneasy sleep
All hope of homecoming faded

(the good earth that fed them, their peaceful city, their friends, kin)
into dreams.
None could count the number of Danes slaughtered under this lodge’s gablehorns.

Yet the lord twisted victory,
threads of His mercy’s aid, into the Weders’ battleweb:

one man’s craft would overcome the fiend’s might.
Truth made manifest:
mighty God’s
wide mind wields
all mankind.

The shadow came,
stalked, pierced
night’s dark.

God’s
will alone would allow
the ghostbeast’s void
to swallow these warriors.

Sleep broke all but
one man’s
watch, anger flared in him with rage —

his enemy’s arrival,
their battle’s outcome
marked time.
GRENDEL came from his moors hid by hillfog, God’s curse embedded in his hide, to set an evil snare for one certain man in that high hill.

Under clouded skies he stalked within clear sight of that gold plated structure, that winehouse of men.

This wasn’t the first visit he’d paid Hrothgar but never before in all his days or since had he had such hard luck: those warriors were waiting there.
Joyless, up to the lodge

the raider came.

His fist no sooner hit the doors than
the firehard bolt laid across them
snapped in two,
they dropped open
like a broken jaw.

The chaosfiend
walked in,
stomped across the polished floor.

His heart’s hate flashed in his eyes
like the ugly blaze of a burning barn.

His heart leapt to see the scene before him:

a heap of warriors, juicy arms, trunks & legs.
His mouth watered at the thought of them
ripped from limb to limb,

limp & lifeless.

(This was to be the last night fate laid men upon his plate.)

The eyes of Hygelac’s kin watched the wicked raider
execute his quick attack:

without delay,

snatching his first chance,

a sleeping warrior,

he tore him in two,

chomped muscle, sucked veins’
gushing blood,

gulped down his morsel, the dead man,

chunk by chunk,

hands, feet & all.
& then

footstepandclawfiendreachmanbedquicktrick
beastarmpainclampnewnotknownheartrunflesho
feargetawaygonowrunrun

never before had
sinherd feared anything so.

(“or cringed crushed . . .
or my days’ end . . .”)

Beowulf stood up straight,
beast in his grip,
his knuckles popped.
Ent bent on escape
runwideflatopenswampholessafebadfingerman
squeezeletgowantnotcomesadgobadhallrunrun

Rattle,
roar in lordly hall,
every Dane’s blood,
warrior, earl or servant, froze.

Both beast
& man, both guards
thrashed furious, frantic.
Building boomed.
It was a miracle
the winehall withstood
their battle,

didn’t crash
to the ground
a heap of rubble

Inside & out
smithcrafted ironbands
held its walls fast.

Gilt meadbenches
ripped from floor, tipped,
tossed by flight, yet

wise Scyldings knew no man could wreck
good, bone adorned, antler decked Heorot
— only flames’ fathom & fires’ scorch
could unlink the skill that built it

A new sound: scream screech howl
split the ears of Danes outside.
Yelps heard, terror gripped them.
Hell’s slave, God’s enemy chanted
horrorsong

nogoodnokillno
gonopainopain
armburnpainono

Beast in the hold of man matchless
in strength & might on Midgarth, in
earth’s corners in that day & age.
NOTHING could make earlshelter, Beowulf, let go—
he reckoned deathbringer’s quick brought none good.

Swords, heirlooms, old blades hacked at monsterhide. 
Men joined the fight to protect their lord & chief.

But none knew the wicked life they sought to stem
was safe from all earthly weapons’ glorious powers.

The beast had cast a spell to stay
even the best of iron edge’s cuts.

Yet in that day & age
that ghost from another world
would start upon his
wretched journey back into
distant demonrealms.

He whose heart feuded with God
& plotted men’s murder
found that the body that once
did his bidding no longer obeyed.

His hand stuck
fast in the grip of Hygelac’s kin.
Man & monster, mutual enemies
for as long as they each drew breath.
raw wound gaping sinews severed
snapped muscles bare bones blood
visible agony

Hellbeast’s shoulder

Beowulf granted battle’s glory.

Grendel fled for moors & hills,

his joyless lair —
struck to the quick,
his life’s lease up
his days number nil.

Blood
storm realized all Danes’
wished: Hrothgar’s hall

cleansed by him who came from afar,
delivered from chaos by a strong,
wise heart.

They rejoiced for
that night’s work,
its glory & valor.

Geats’ leader made good his boast,
cured that sorrow, no small grief,
Danes suffered without any choice.

Beowulf hung the hand, arm & shoulder,

Grendel ’s total grasp under roof’s sweep, visible token
inside gablehorn’s curve.
MORNING,
   many warriors
       surrounded the giftlodge.
Chieftains
   fared wide highways
       far & near to see
a wonder:
   the wicked beast’s footprints.
All who
   stood where Grendel trod
       felt no grief
for life
   lost along that track
       to Kraken Lake,

no glorytrail:
   a path of blood
that traced defeat’s flight led
straight to Monster Mere where
blood & water boiled — putrid
waves surged, hot gore poured
upon whirlpools, ripples of
slaughter.
   Death’s doom swarmed
to hide that heathen soul,
home to rest in swamp’s peace.

There Hell received its own.
men boys glossy steeds

glad journey

back from the lake
talk

of Beowulf’s glory:

“No hand that holds a shield

north or south of here

has greater right to rule

this stretch of land

beneath wide open skies

between two seas

than his, this royal

worthy warrior’s —

with no offence meant to great

Hrothgar, a good king!”

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Now & then &

when the road opened out

into a flat, clear, familiar course

horses, riders leapt ahead, raced
each other: battlebrave on bays.

& now & then

a man

in whom men's deeds echoed,

shifting

his mind's hoard
to stir words that
welld into
tales, twicetold shapes

bound by

his skull's full armor,

sang a song of Beowulf & told what

little he knew of Sigemund's tale:
“None know the whole story,
all the ins & outs about
that son of Wael’s battles,
brave deeds, broad travel, bloodshed & feuds.

Well, none but his mother’s
brother Fitela, like hand
to hilt in battle they fought
thick as thieves as they were, together they slew

more ents than you can count
& when Sigemund died his fame
spread overnight & far & wide
folk talked about the worm he killed all alone,

without his uncle Fitela
he crawled into a ghastly
lair beneath gray rock
where it guarded a hoard big beyond all telling.

By sheer chance with one
blow his noble iron sword
cut clean through the worm’s
gem crusted hide & rotten flesh & struck rock

pinning the stinking carcass
against its own cave wall
like a spitted ox to roast
in the flames of its own roar & murdered breath

leaving that monster of a
warrior, Wael’s son, to
take his pick of the hoard.
He loaded down his boat, packed his ship’s hold

with gold & jewels & black dragon fat sputtered.”
“The brave adventures of that warrior’s warrior brought him glory, fame & fortune. As far as exiles go, Sigemund’s the best known. But let’s not forget Heremod, his tale may fade but not his fights & deeds, they still deserve a song:

He fell into the hands of Jutes & died a quick death — a mercy maybe, an end to his long restless wanderings. He’d been cast out by his people because when he was their king they feared for their lives, his willful rule failed to fulfill his wisemen’s hopes, his people’s need: they wanted an end to suffering, a king like his father was, a strong protector of the Scyldings’ hoard, citadel & homelands.

Sin ate out his heart.
He was no man’s joy — no Beowulf!”

Dustclouds, horseraces —
sun hurried unto noon.

Stouthearted servants went to that high hall & gawked at the strange thing hung up there.

The good king & renowned ringward himself came from his bed followed by his lords,

his queen & her ladies. Together that company strode up the footpath up to their meadhall.
HROTHGAR

climbed the porch steps,
stood between the posts,
looked up to the steep
gilt roof
    at the ghost’s
hand & said:

“Let us stop now
to thank the Almighty,
the Shepherd of Glory,
    for we are beholden:

    wonder upon wonder
    the power of God’s
    eternal hand.

Less than a year ago
    I thought I’d never
live to see an end
to the blood spilt
in this best of halls:

    the gore & hate
of Grendel’s hand
    washed away.”
“My wisemen lost all hope.

None could cut the gnarled roots of grief that clutched my people’s earth or break the hold of phantoms’ glamour.

Now by God’s aid a man succeeds where all our well laid plans failed.

God bless the woman, alive or dead whose womb bore this son for mankind!

Now & forever more
I shall love you, Beowulf, like a son & keep the peace such a kinship makes

& all you want of this world that is in my power to give shall be yours.

Many lesser men than you have received my honored gifts for weaker deeds than yours.

May what you have done here seal your fame for eternity. May the Almighty continue to grant you the success he gives you now.”

Tears in the old man’s eyes.
Beowulf, Ecgtheow’s son, replied in turn:

“With all goodwill
we undertook a dark work,
dared to cross
an enigma's path.

How I wish
you'd been there, Hrothgar, to see
the fiend fall
in full array.

I'd meant to
wrap my arms around him, bind him
to death’s bed
with a bear’s,

a beewolf’s hug
but his body slipped my grip:
God’s will, he
jerked free.

His last burst
of strength broke my hold
yet he left in
his tracks

the price of his life:
hand, arm & shoulder —
too narrow an escape
from battle’s grasp.

Nothing can heal his wound, he hasn’t long to live.
Sin weighs him down, evil binds him, crime stains him.
He awaits the Bright Lord’s great judgment, his doom.”
That noble earl’s craft left
Unferth, Ecglaf’s son, speechless.
His yelping tongue stopped when
all those warriors stared upon
each finger of that rafterhung
hand, each nail on that heathen
paw a steel spur, a deadly talon.
They agreed, no man’s bladeiron,
however good, could touch that fist
of awls, wreck those bloody spikes.
FIT FIFTEEN

A COMMAND:

quick hands
deck out Hart

men, women
ready the
winehall, guestlodge

gold threads,
webs on
walls, sights to see

That monster marked by his own evil left
that bright but broken building’s hinges
sprung but the insides still standing,
held by ironbands. Only the roof remains
all in one piece when he turned to flee,
his life fading fast.

Those who take a stab at cheating death
leap in the dark, try as they may,

the soul of every living being,
each earthdwelling man’s child,
must seek its need’s necessity.

Its place prepared,
it its body comes to rest
fast asleep in its grave,

its feast unfinished.
In due time, the hour right, Healfdene’s son arrived. The king himself wished to join in his hall’s feasting.

No greater nor nobler company ever before swelled the ranks of subjects gathered around their treasuregiver.

Men sat down on benches. Their glory, their wealth, their joy overflowed. Hrothgar & Hrothulf, great hearted kin, downed the many expected cups of mead in their hall.

Friends filled high Heorot. Treachery’s runes had yet to score Scyldings’ hearts with dark stratagems.

Healfdene’s son presented Beowulf with gifts, victories’ rewards:

a gold standard, his battleblazon,

a helmet, a byrne, a sword all saw held high, carried up to the warrior.

Beowulf drank his cup dry, thanked the Lord for his hallgifts, accepting them before the assembly shameless & unembarrassed.

No show of friendship had ever been so glorious:

4 gold treasures.

No man before had so honored another upon the alebench.
A wire wound ridge
across the helmet’s crown

kept the skull inside safe
from blows of any sword

hammered & ground
to join the shield in

an enemy’s hand.

Hrothgar, warriors’ shield, ordered
8 gold bridled steeds to be brought
through the yard into the hall: one

a workhorse saddled with a battleseat
marked by a craft that made it treasure,
which Healfdene’s son, the high king,

rode on, out to the frontranks’ swordplay.
There among the slaughtered & fallen
his renowned strength never failed him.

Ingwines’ prince bestowed both horses & weapons
upon Beowulf for his good use.  

Heroes’ hoardward
& famous chief rewarded him with steeds & treasure
for weathering battle’s storm.

Let no just man
who seeks to speak the truth fault these gifts.
& EARL’S
lord gave
each man on meadbench
who crossed the sea with Beowulf
gifts, heirlooms, promised
them gold, bloodmoney for
the man they lost to Grendel.
A small price to pay, his victims
would have been unnumbered if
wise God & one man’s heart had not
stood in the way. The Lord still
holds mankind’s fate in
His hand: a fact the mind
that plans ahead should heed.
These days a man must endure
both good & bad as long as he
lives in & makes use of
this world.

song & sound from
strung wood strum

harp’s joy words
& music linked in

a tale turned to
bind entwine all

hearts at Heorot
& Hrothgar, Healfdene’s chief
The poet went in & out of the benchrows & told about Finn’s men, how the Danes’ heroes & Hnaef the Scylding fell in a sudden attack on Frisian fields:

“With good reason Hildeburh put no trust in Jutes after, guiltless herself, she lost loved ones, sons & brothers, to shield woods’ clash, rushed by fate, wounded by spears. O sad woman.

With good reason Hoc’s daughter wept when morning came to light destiny’s designs. She saw below bright skies her murdered, slaughtered kin where once she had known the world’s greatest joys.

That fight claimed all but a few of Finn’s men. There was not a chance left of finishing that battle with Hengest upon those grounds or even of rescuing slaughter’s survivors by force, so a truce was drawn, offered & accepted.”
“Half the lodge
would be cleared
to be their hall & highseat.

Half the rule
would be theirs
to be shared with the Jutes.

The gilded favors of Finn, Folcwada’s son,
rich gifts, rings & treasures,
would be as much the Danes’
as the Frisians’ when
cheer honored their beerhall.

A treaty both sides
promised to keep
without fail. Without hesitation
Finn pledged an oath to Hengest:
Slaughter’s survivors would be treated
as his wisemen advised, that is,
with honor.

No man would break that peace by
word or deed or with malice mention
that priceless act, that is, out of necessity,
they’d sworn allegiance to
their own ringgiver’s slayer, in other words,

the memory of that feud that a Frisian’s
careless, hasty words might stir up could
be settled by the sword’s edge alone.”
“Pyre readied.
Hoargold brought.
Warriors in
funnelgear, best
Scyldingmen
& no lack of
bloodstained mailshirts or guilded swine, ironhard boar, or bodies injured, destroyed by battlewounds on that firepile.

Hildeburh ordered her sons’ flesh, blood & bones committed to Hnaef’s funeral pyre’s flames laid arm to arm, shoulder by shoulder.

Dirges, chants, keening
O sad woman.

Warriors lifted up,
slaughter’s fires licked the skies, roared before his barrow.

Skulls popped, gashes burst, sword bites spat blood:

fire’s greed
glutted by men battle snatched from both sides,
shaken free of life.”
“& THEN

the friendless warriors went back
to Frisia to find the homes & uplandtowns
they’d left.

But Hengest stayed behind,
shared that hard winter with Finn,

homesick, yet
storms, winds churned, swelled the seas
his slender keel would have to cross.

Ice locked
waves in winter’s grasp
until the new year came
brining man

soft weathers, as always,
even now, each season
takes its turn.”
“When earth shook winter
from her bright lap

revenge sprang up
in the exile’s heart.

Where sea & homethoughts
dwelt plans to provoke

an incident grew: an iron
sword in the stranger’s heart.

So when Hunlafing laid
a bright blade (that best

of swords, that edge all Jutes
knew well) upon his lap

Hengest did what any man
in this world would . . .

Finn died in his own home
killed by swordblows

when Gudlaf & Oslaf talked
of the attack & sorrow their men

met at their seajourney’s end,
blaming Finn for most of it.

A restless heart can’t be pent
up in a man’s breast for long.

That hall ran red with enemy blood.”
“King Finn slain amidst his bodyguard, his queen seized, his house sacked, everything worth taking carried off by Scyldings, loaded in their ship to cross the sea & his wife

brought back to Danes, returned to her people.”

song sung sing er’s saga

ended: joy rose bench rows’ noise boys brought wine in wonderous cups Weahltheow

wore a golden crown & went to where two good men, nephew & uncle (brother’s son, father’s brother) sat,

each still true to the other, the peace between them firm.
Unferth, spokesman, sat there too
at the feet of Scyldings’ lord
together with a company that put
their trust in Hrothgar’s great
heart’s courage even though his own
kin knew no mercy at his sword’s edge.

The Scyldings’ lady spoke:

“Empty this full cup my noble lord, my treasuregiver. Joy be with you goldfriend of men & address these Geats with the kind words they deserve, now let them know your thanks for gifts that come to you from near & far. I’ve been told you’ve asked this warrior to be a son to you. Bright Heorot, hall of ringgifts, is cleansed so now make use of the gifts you have to give & when fate’s shaft strikes leave your kin your kingdom & peoples. Hrothulf, I know, will still honor these youths when you must depart this life, leave this earth. Rest assured, Scyldings’ friend, that he’ll bestow favors upon our sons when he remembers what glory & delight we once brought his childhood."

Then turned
& walked along the bench to where
her sons sat with heroes’ sons in the company

of youth & there between the brothers

sat Beowulf,
Geat & good man.
FIT EIGHTEEN

FULL cup

friendly words

woundgold

goodwill

(Beowulf’s)

2 armbands (ornamented)
robe & rings
torc (earth’s greatest)

There’s no better heroes’ hoard under clear skies,
none since Hama took the Brosings’ gemset collar & fled for

a bright city from

Eormenric’s

hate & craft

& entered

eternity

a wise man.
That neckring the Great Hygelac, Swerting’s nephew, wore at his last stand when by his blazon he defended that treasure, guarded slaughter’s spoils & his pride courted disaster: a feud with the Frisians. That prince brought that jewel across high seas’ waves & ended up slain under his shield. His body fell into Franks’ hands along with his byrne & that ring. Warriors worse than he, however, escaped death to plunder those battle left hacked down. The field lay thick with dead Geats.

Noise: hall echoes.

Wealhtheow raised her hand before the company & spoke:

“Beloved Beowulf accept this torc, this robe, our people’s treasures. May they bring you good luck & make you thrive.

By your might prove yourself, teach these boys with mercy & I will remember to reward you. Far & near men will sing your praises forever wherever seas skirt winds’ cliffhomes.

May you flourish for as long as you live. I wish you wealth, riches, & treasure, noble warrior.

Joy is yours, may your deeds make you my sons’ friend. Here, these gentle hearts, true to each other, swear allegiance, united by loyalty & ready to serve.

Those who drink here do as I bid.”
She took her seat. Then men resumed their best of feasts & drank their wine. None of them knew the fate grim destiny set in store for a man laughing there.

Evening came. Hrothgar retired to his chamber, the king took to his bed.

Countless warriors remained in the hall just as they used to, benchplanks stripped, spread with blankets, pillows & one of those beerdrinkers, eager but doomed, laid down on the hall floor.

Shields, boss & bright wood, above their heads & there for all to see, high helmets, ringed byrnes, great wood shafts ready for battle always ready, at home or in field, those excellent folk stood by to answer, at any hour, their lord’s battlecry.
THEY slept

That night’s rest cost
one man the raw, flat rate
common when Grendel held
that goldhall, before death
repaid him for his sinraids.

They all knew

something
outlived the Hellbeast,
survived the battlenight:

Grendel’s mother
lumbered from her lair,
blood clouded her eyes.
The shebeast hurried to Heorot

where her son, shoot
of Cain’s seed, bud of
murdered brother’s blood,
shadowblossom of
browmark & swordedge

escaped
the Geat’s grip
but not God’s hand
& came home to her
icy stream
along death’s road.
Grendel’s mother
burst in upon Danes,
dead to the world,
sprawled all over their hall floor
as scrambled in sleep as the luck
they woke to.

Shocked hands
grabbed at swords,
shields
over benches, above heads,
forgot
byrnes, helmets

Horror returned
struck not by woman
not warrior

The monster’s mother
fumbled through lodgetangles,
smashed
a thane, snatched her son’s
gory arm
in her frightened fist.
No blood crusted blades
hacked boar crests off helmets.

The confused shebeast fled,
ran for her swamps,
ripped limb in one hand,
the man asleep in the other,

killed by the creature’s hug,
was brave Aeschere, Hrothgar’s love.

When the gifts had been given
& the feast finished, the wine drunk,

Beowulf & his men went to spend
the night in digs of their own

beyond the uproar in Heorot
where both sides suffered

equal losses, equal gains:
pain’s return, sorrow renewed.

The news of that thane,
dear to the gray king’s heart,

brought the man grief.
he commanded his messenger:

“Bring me Beowulf!

When will God end our Hell?”
At crack of dawn

floor boards thundered.

Battlelucky Beowulf

& his men came up to,

into Heorot & crossed the hall

up to wise Hrothgar:

“My lord,

your night’s sleep

was sweet, I trust.

Has there

been any trouble here?”

Words caught

in Hrothgar’s throat,

Scyldings’ helm answered:
“FORGET all peace!
Grief returns to Danes.

Aeschere’s dead.
What we shared:

secrets stomping feet
battles arms swinging

slashed boar emblems blood
heads split wide open noise
gone!

A bitch’s bare hands crushed
that model man. Somewhere now
a beast’s lips suck the bloody
stump of Yrmenlaf’s brother

in revenge for that hard grip
of yours, the life torn from
that mother’s son, that monster
who raided this hall & claimed
the lives of some of my best

warriors. I’m told two things
can be seen to prowl the nearby
borderlands, a male & female,
who dwell in swamps on”
“dark land

riddled with
wolfhills, windy

cliffs, risky
swamtrails where

upland streams

glimpsed
through cragfog

flow on
underground.

Not far,
a few miles from here,

a firmly rooted wood’s
frost crusted branches

hand
shadows upon a lake

where each night sees
strange wonders:

firewaters,

flare above
unplumbed fathoms.”
“Though the stag that stalks the heath
escapes the hounds through that wood,
he’d turn his antlers to the pack
to end their chase & bear their jaws
before he’d jump that bank.

Terror
keeps that spot.

Black water spouts
lift off the lake
& lap the clouds

Wind surges into
deadly storms until
all air grows dark.

The skies wail.”
“Once again
I look to you
for help,

Beowulf.

You don’t yet know
the terror
that lies upon
that land.

Track down
her lair,

return to
Heorot alive,

dare to
take on this feud

& rewards shall be yours:

gifts, goldbraids, old
treasures, my thanks.”
BEOWULF,  

Ecgtheow’s son  
weighed his words & said:  

“Wise Hrothgar, do not grieve.  

One day we will all die  
so then let him who can  

make his mark in this world  
while he may:  

fame, the dead warrior’s  
most prized possession.  

Arise now, guardian of your kingdom.  
Quickly, let us go  
track down that woman.  

I promise you  
she will not lose us to  
earth’s bowels, mountain’s woods  
or ocean’s depths,  
wherever she may go!  

Despite all that has happened,  
be patient Hrothgar,  
but then I expect no less of you.”
The old king leapt up:

“Thank God for this man’s words!”

Hrothgar’s horse saddled, braided mane
steer bridled, wise, aged
ruler arrayed, a large foot
troop readied.

The parade of linden shields marched in her tracks over
the clear cut ground trail
she hauled the corpse of

Hrothgar’s dear housethane,
that best of youths, along

through woods onto moors.
That noble army pressed ahead

across steep rock slopes
on narrow paths singlefile,

on unknown roads, under precipice & bluff, past many kraken haunts.

Hrothgar took a few of his wisemen & rode ahead to size up the lay of the land when suddenly they came upon a clump of mountain trees leaning out over a gray rock. A murky wood. Bloody water thick with gore stirred below them.
Pain wreaked
the hearts of
all Danes &
Scylding lords,
the grief of
many a thane
& all earls,
when they found
Aeschere’s head
upon that cliff.
Those folk looked
down upon a
bloodwelled flood,
hot gore.
Time & again
the horn sung
an alarm, a
warsong.
The foot troops
all sat by that
water where
they saw hoards
of seadrakes,
krakens, explorers
of the deep,
stretched out
on slopes —
worms, wild beasts
who prowled
the sailroad
at midmorning.
When those bitter creatures heard
that good horn’s ring
they plunged enraged. A hard
arrow flew from
the chief Geat’s bow, hit its
mark, slowed one’s stroke
until death’s wake overtook
& swallowed him.

The water boiled with
boar spears & sword barbs,
a fierce attack.

Men dragged the strange wave
roamer’s dead hulk ashore &
gazed in wonder upon fathoms’
ghostly guest.
Beowulf put on his gear, hero’s armor.

He had no fear. His byrne, broad, handknit, craftmarked, would explore those depths.

No grip of hate or war could crush the bones, break the chest & grasp the life locked inside.

& eddies made by the silver helmet that guarded his head would stir mud from the lake’s bottom.

The weaponsmith who shaped it bound it with bands & engraved it with swine images no battleblade could bite.

& he had a sword called Hrunting lent him in his hour of need by Hrothgar’s spokesman, Unferth.

Peerless, ancient treasure, not least of this hero’s panoply.

Its steel edge, hard with bloodshed, gleamed with a design: poison twigs entwined. It failed no man in battle or adventure or wherever armies gathered.
Not a word of what
Ecglaf’s son had said
when he was drunk
tempered the loan of
his sword to
the better warrior

He knew he
would never have
risked his life in
the surf.

He knew he
would have let
fame & glory go
then & there.

Not so
for the better man
once he
gearèd himself for war.
BEOWULF,

Ecglaf’s son, turned to Hrothgar & said:

“Wise king, I’m ready to go now but before I leave recall that bond we share.

Famous son of Healfdene & goldfriend of men,

should I lose my life in your name will you be

my father when this world is no more mine?

If battle claims me will your hand guard my young men,

my closest friends?

& dear Hrothgar, the treasures you gave me, will you send them

to the Geats’ lord, Hygelac, so that when he looks upon

that gold, Hrethel’s son will see & know I found

a good & wise ringgiver & enjoyed his gifts while I could.”
“I leave the sword
my fathers’ fathers left me
to Unferth, man of wide renown,

its ripple & waves
its hard, cold edge
shall be his.

Hrunting will earn me
my fame or death will take me.”

With those words
without their replies,
the Wedergeats’ leader
bravely departed.

Surge, surf, billows
waves swallowed the warrior.

The good part of a day passed
before he caught sight of level lakefloor.

At once that terrible mother of floods,
those deep regions’ guardian for a hundred seasons,
sensed a man from above
entering her underwater otherworld.

She grabbed the warrior,
his sound body, his lithe limbs,
wrapped in knitrings, mail links,
safe from her horrible fingers’ terrible grasp.
Swarms of
salamander seabeast snake
tusks tried
to break his sark as
lake shewolf
drug Beowulf
to the bottom
into her lair
helpless
hard as he tried
to swing his sword.

The warrior found himself inside
some enemy hall, safe from her waters,
out of her floods’ sudden pull,
under a high ceiling, on dry land.

He saw a blink of firelight, bright
flash, its gleam lit the black cave.

The good man made out
the shape of
that lakewife,
fathoms’ hulk
& swung his warsword
with all his might
wide unchecked.
The hard edge’s coiled pattern hacked
her head, screamed its greedy warcry.

But the stranger’s bright blade
had no bite, struck no quick.
His precious treasure failed him.

All those split helmets & doomed men’s slashed mail faded with its reputation for the last & the first time.

Hygelac’s kin never battleshy, drew his breath. Glory burned in his brain.

The angry warrior threw down his sword — engraved waves, wound wires, its hard steel edge lay on the ground. He put all trust in his own fists’ mighty force.

A man only does that when he means to win the kind of fame which outlasts the battle for without it his life adds up to nothing.

Rage blinded him. Without a second thought the Wargeats’ leader caught Grendel’s mother by the shoulder & knocked her to the floor. As she fell she pulled him down, crushing him. His head spun. She pinned him & reached for her broad, burnished knife but no point or edge, no mothers’ revenge could pierce the mesh that knit his breast’s protection. Without its hard but supple shell, without God’s mercy, the victory He held in the balance, Ecgtheow’s son would have lost his life beneath broad earth.

Once Beowulf was back on his feet God’s justice, the fight’s outcome, was clear.
& THEN he saw on her weapon heap
a sword charmed with luck,
a blade forged by ents,
an edge as sharp as wyverns’ teeth.

The dream of all warriors gleamed
before him, the best of weapons,
too big for any man to carry into
battle’s clash: good, well made,
giants’ work.

Scyldings’ champion
graped the chained hilt & drew
the patterned blade with hot but
grim heart. Without fear
for his life & with all his angry
might he struck a swordblow
that cracked her neck, shattered
its rings of bone & sliced clean
through her doomed heart.

She slumped to the ground.

Sword’s gore: warrior’s joy.
Bright flash,
light burst forth

like sky’s candle
as if that cavern
were clear heaven
at noon.

He stared around him at the room.
Hygelac’s thane followed the wall
holding up his weapon firmly by
its hilt — cautious but brave:

Grendel’s final payment
for all those raids he made on Danes,
the men he slew sleeping by Hrothgar’s hearth,
those he ate & those he carried off.

The revenge of the 30 or so dead warriors
filled Beowulf’s heart when he came upon
Grendel collapsed upon his bed, battle
worn, glazed & lifeless.

His corpse burst wide open when Beowulf
hacked off its ugly head.

Above whirlpools
of gore streams
of blood stained

the waters Hrothgar & his wisemen
had kept watch over the whole day.
Old, gray heads nodded:

“We’ve seen the last of him,
he’ll not be back in all his glory
bringing our king a victory.

That seawolf’s got him for sure!”

Day’s ninth hour came.

Bold Scyldings broke camp, abandoned the slopes.

Good Hrothgar, men’s goldfriend, turned homeward,

leaving his guests, that hero’s crew, alone there.

Sick at heart they stared
out over the lake’s murky waters,
hoping against all hope to see them part

& bear forth their friend & lord himself.

Then war’s icicle dripped with ripe
hot gore, the iron edge’s age
melted like chilblain ice in a blink

God’s hand bends all things to its design:

summer’s flux swarms winter’s grasp
to season the hour & frost’s crown turns
to floe’s thaw & floods again.

Cold blood: dissolved blade.
Of all the treasures
    he saw in that trove
Wedergeats’ leader
    took no more than

Grendel’s head & that hilt

    set gems gleamed from,
whose blade engraved with braided waves
    hot gore burned up
& melted down with poisons from that
dead ghostbeast’s body.

Return begun: he swam safe & sound
alive to see his slaughtered enemies,
& dove up through those waters whose

surge & waves now cleansed of
the morethanhuman who dwelt in them
when that ghostbeast lost his life:
his days: God’s loan.

    With hard strokes
seafarers’ captain came to land
    with laketreasures,
bearing the weight of their joy.

His crew ran to the shore to meet him,
thanking God to have their lord back alive
& well & quickly unbuckled his helmet & byrne.

    Peace upon the face of the waters
beneath clouds
    pools of blood, slaughter’s ripples.
They set forth with gladhearts
& retraced their own footsteps,
returning by way of old paths,
well marked straight tracks.

They came down off the lakeslopes
like a parade of kings,
carrying Grendel’s head atop a spear.

No one of them could manage it alone.
4 strong men struggled with that burden.

14 Geats, men of war
now came in sight of gold Heorot.
A proud lord amid
his band crossed the meadhall’s meadows.
An earl’s thane, a man
worth all his renown entered the hall.

Grendel’s head
hauled by its hair across the floor:

men drinking dropped their cups,
earls & their queen gazed in terror
upon this wonder.
BEOWULF,

Ecgtheow’s son,
greeted the Scyldings’ leader,
Healfdene’s son & said:

“Gladly we bring you
gifts from the lake,
victory’s tokens,

spoils
of a close escape,

a hard fight almost lost
if God’s shield hadn’t
been there from the start.

Hrunting, a good blade indeed,
but there no more than useless steel,
failed me
when Men’s Guardian revealed
an old sword

more than mansize
hung upon the wall & gave me time
to take it down. His mercy appears
when we need it most!

Two well placed strokes
at just the right times
brought down mother then son.”
“& then

the broad battlesword’s wavewoven blade
burned away in the blood that burst out,

the hottest gore any war ever shed.

Despite my enemies I’ve brought that hilt back:

vengeance was mine, fit payment for
their raids, the Danes left slaughtered
in their wake.

Sleep, dear Hrothgar,
free from worries
about your warriors,
men both seasoned & green.

Sleep, Scyldings’ prince,
free from fear,
your earls now lie
safe beside your hearth.”

& then

the old man’s hand received that gold hilt,
thus the craft of ancient giants passed
unto the grayhaired lord, Denmark’s greatest king.
A man who shared his wealth from sea to sea
now owned the treasure of God’s enemies,
murderer & mother whose savage hearts
had long since ceased their beat.
Hrothgar gazed at the hilt, 
that remnant of older days 
engraved with their history:

CHAOSE#FLOOD#OCEAN#GUSH
GIANT#ONES#GONE#SURGE

They wore their web of fate 
when they strayed from God 
& drowned in His angry seas.

Runes on bright gold foils 
named the man who had 
that sword made, ordered its 

hilt adorned with gleam 
& twist of leaf & snake.

A hush fell. Hrothgar spoke:

“Let him who’s upheld truth & justice, 
whose past now floods his memory, 
who’s grown old guarding his homelands 
say: This man was born to greatness!

Your fame, my friend will travel 
all far roads & reach each nation. 
Your heart rules your cool, wise hand. 
I honor the promise, the bond we made.

Long life, Beowulf! Your nation’s 
comfort, your warriors’ guardian 
. . . unlike Heremod.”
“Ecgwela’s son grew up to be no joy to the Danes, instead he brought good Scyldings death, slaughter & destruction. Often rage would overtake him & he would attack his friends, the men who shared his board & battles until he shunned them completely & shut himself off from their company.

This price God set above all men refused the Danes his treasures’ honor. In return, his joyless life brought him Hell’s eternal misery.

Let this be a lesson: Man’s heart must be open.

Listen well to what I tell you; my wisdom comes from winters’ ripeness.

It is a wonder the way God’s strange design grants some men wisdom, other land & rank & how at times He allows a man his heart’s desire, giving him happy homelands here on earth, a kingdom that stretches beyond his eyes, a strongly manned fortress: all his to rule.

One day such a man will wake, look out his door & say: ‘All this knows no end, I am a rich man, age & sickness can’t touch me. Nothing casts a shadow on my long & happy life. No hate threatens what is mine. The whole world goes my way, does my bidding.’”
“ALL goes well, 
too well, 
pride takes root, 
fLOURishes.

The soul’s watchman 
sleeps, too sound a 
sleep, caught up in 
days’ cares.

The soulslayer 
draws near unnoticed, 
draws his bow, lets 
go. An arrow 
bites 
the unguarded man’s 
heart. A shaft 
poisoned with longing 
pierces his soul.

That prince’s days grow dark. His mind boils:

‘I’m a selfmade man, 
what’s mine is mine alone.
Why should I share what little there’s left? 
I’m tired of my warriors, 
that pack of thieves, 
let’em cheat some fool who’s got enough to share.’
“Thus he loses all of God’s design & death turns his body to dust in the wind. Another inherits what was his & without second thought, with open heart bestows treasure where treasure is due.

Guard against this evil, dear Beowulf, best of men, do what is right & take its eternal reward. Let no pride invade your mind, renowned champion. Right now & for awhile your strength is at its height but soon enough you will be stripped of that glory by sickness or swordedge,

by fire’s grasp, by blade’s bite, by flood’s surge, by spear’s flight or oldage or your eyes’ clear light will dim & fade & death overwhelm you.

Likewise, I ruled armored Danes a hundred seasons under these skies, guarded them in war with swordedge & spear from so many of Midgarth’s tribes that I too thought no enemy beneath wide heaven could touch me. & look how luck slipped through my hands, how horror swallowed happiness when Grendel made his way to my house & cast my mind into misery with his unending raids. Praise God Eternal Creator, I live to see this head wet with gore, dripping like a warblade, & an old feud’s end!”
“Now take your seat.
Eat, drink to
your heart’s content.

Your manifest glory
is our manifest joy.”

Black night hooded
that hall of warriors.

They rose.
The old, gray Scylding longed
for his bed.

The Geat, mighty chieftain,
was glad for the chance of
a good night’s rest.

& in those days they had
retainers in their halls
whose job it was to see
to all the needs of thanes
& traveling warriors &

one of these led Beowulf,

exhausted by his long journey
a long, hard adventure,

to bed.
The bighearted man rested beneath a curved & gilded gablehorns,
inside the towering building its guest slept
until the black raven heralded by heaven’s joy
& bright sunlight buried away all shadows.

His warriors hurried, eager to get home.
The man whose heart had brought them to that hall longed for the journey back,
to set out quickly for his ship, anchored faraway.

Beowulf sent Ecglaf’s son his sword, steel Hrunting,
& thanked him for its loan saying he thought it a good
& powerful battlefriend. The brave warrior found that blade’s edge blameless.

By then his men were all ready & in their armor.

The noble leader whom the Danes esteemed went to Hrothgar’s highthrone.
The brave men saluted one another.
BEOWULF,  

Ecgtheow’s son said:

“We seafarers have come a long ways & are eager to get back to Hygelac.

We have been treated well here, what more could we wish for?

Lord of men, if there is ever anything on earth that I can do to win whatever love your heart hasn’t already shown me, tell me & I’ll come at once.

If I get word across flood’s vast stretch that neighboring nations close in on you, a threat you know well, then I’ll bring a thousand thanes & heroes to your rescue. I know that Hygelac, however young, will back me with word & deed, let me prove how much I honor you with spearshaft & might. When you need men most my aid will arrive.

& if Hrethric, that prince’s son, wants to come visit Geats’ court let him come, he’ll find friends there.

A good man should visit foreign lands.”
& Hrothgar replied:

“It is God in you that speaks!

I've never heard a wiser, older man utter truer words. Your hands may be strong but your heart is clear & ripe.

If spear, battle, sickness, or steel

should carry off Hrethel’s son, your lord & folkshepherd,

then Seageats would never find

a better man than you to sit upon their throne & guard
their hoard if you were still alive & willing to rule

your kinsmen’s kingdom.

The more I know you, Beowulf, the better I love you.

Your heart & mind please me.

All you’ve done here brings about a lasting peace between
Geats & Danes. The old inroads & fighting shall cease.

As long as I rule this wide land

our peoples shall exchange treasure,

our men greet each other with gifts:

across gannetwaters prow’s curve will come with love’s token.

Your race honors its treaties & feuds,
lives up to the old codes
with blameless lives.”
Healfdene’s son, heroes’ shield,
gave Beowulf 12 more treasures
in that great hall
        & wished him godspeed,
a safe voyage home to his people.

The Scyldings’ lord & noble king
kissed that best warrior, held
his face in his hands.

Tears in the old, gray man’s eyes.

He wished without hope & knew
he would never see Beowulf again.

Grief flooded his heart,
his heartstrings held back a
dark longing
        that burned in his blood
for this dear man.
Beowulf left Heorot.

Gold treasures gleamed all about the proud warrior as he walked across grassy earth.

As they hurried along his men spoke over & over about Hrothgar’s gifts.

He was a peerless, flawless king unto the end of his days when old age robbed him of his strength’s joy & brought him the ruin it brings many.

The seagoing craft rode at anchor, waited for its lord & master, its captain & crew.