

# The Wanderer



**T**his lonely traveler longs for grace,  
For the mercy of God; grief hangs on  
His heart and follows the frost-cold foam  
He cuts in the sea, sailing endlessly,  
5 Aimlessly, in exile. Fate has opened  
A single port: memory. He sees  
His kinsmen slaughtered again, and cries:  
    "I've drunk too many lonely dawns,  
    Grey with mourning. Once there were men  
10 To whom my heart could hurry, hot  
    With open longing. They're long since dead.  
My heart has closed on itself, quietly  
Learning that silence is noble and sorrow  
Nothing that speech can cure. Sadness  
15 Has never driven sadness off;  
Fate blows hardest on a bleeding heart.  
So those who thirst for glory smother  
Secret weakness and longing, neither  
Weep nor sigh nor listen to the sickness  
20 In their souls. So I, lost and homeless,  
Forced to flee the darkness that fell  
On the earth and my lord.

## GUIDE FOR READING

5-7 What has happened to the wanderer's kinsmen? How might his memory be like a port? How has fate limited him to a "single port"?

Leaving everything,  
Weary with winter I wandered out  
On the frozen waves, hoping to find  
25 A place, a people, a lord to replace  
My lost ones. No one knew me, now,  
No one offered comfort, allowed  
Me feasting or joy. How cruel a journey  
I've travelled, sharing my bread with sorrow  
30 Alone, an exile in every land,  
Could only be told by telling my footsteps.  
For who can hear: "friendless and poor,"  
And know what I've known since the long cheerful nights  
When, young and yearning, with my lord I yet feasted  
35 Most welcome of all. That warmth is dead.  
He only knows who needs his lord  
As I do, eager for long-missing aid;  
He only knows who never sleeps  
Without the deepest dreams of longing.  
40 Sometimes it seems I see my lord,  
Kiss and embrace him, bend my hands  
And head to his knee, kneeling as though  
He still sat enthroned, ruling his thanes.  
And I open my eyes, embracing the air,  
45 And see the brown sea-billows heave,  
See the sea-birds bathe, spreading  
Their white-feathered wings, watch the frost  
And the hail and the snow. And heavy in heart  
I long for my lord, alone and unloved.  
50 Sometimes it seems I see my kin  
And greet them gladly, give them welcome,  
The best of friends. They fade away,  
Swimming soundlessly out of sight,  
Leaving nothing.

How loathsome become  
55 The frozen waves to a weary heart.

In this brief world I cannot wonder  
That my mind is set on melancholy,  
Because I never forget the fate  
Of men, robbed of their riches, suddenly  
60 Looted by death—the doom of earth,  
Sent to us all by every rising  
Sun. Wisdom is slow, and comes

31 **telling:** counting.

43 **thanes:** followers of a lord.

45 What are the "brown sea-billows"?

60 **looted:** robbed by force. What was taken from the men who were "looted by death"?

But late. He who has it is patient;  
 He cannot be hasty to hate or speak,  
 65 He must be bold and yet not blind,  
 Nor ever too craven, complacent, or covetous,  
 Nor ready to gloat before he wins glory.  
 The man's a fool who flings his boasts  
 Hotly to the heavens, heeding his spleen  
 70 And not the better boldness of knowledge.  
 What knowing man knows not the ghostly,  
 Waste-like end of worldly wealth:  
 See, already the wreckage is there,  
 The wind-swept walls stand far and wide,  
 75 The storm-beaten blocks besmeared with frost,  
 The mead-halls crumbled, the monarchs thrown down  
 And stripped of their pleasures. The proudest of warriors  
 Now lie by the wall: some of them war  
 Destroyed; some the monstrous sea-bird  
 80 Bore over the ocean; to some the old wolf  
 Dealt out death; and for some dejected  
 Followers fashioned an earth-cave coffin.  
 Thus the Maker of men lays waste  
 This earth, crushing our callow mirth.  
 85 And the work of old giants stands withered and still."

He who these ruins rightly sees,  
 And deeply considers this dark twisted life,  
 Who sagely remembers the endless slaughters  
 Of a bloody past, is bound to proclaim:  
 90 "Where is the war-steed? Where is the warrior? Where is  
     his war-lord?  
 Where now the feasting-places? Where now the mead-hall  
     pleasures?  
 Alas, bright cup! Alas, brave knight!  
 Alas, you glorious princes! All gone,  
 Lost in the night, as you never had lived.  
 95 And all that survives you a serpentine wall,  
 Wondrously high, worked in strange ways.  
 Mighty spears have slain these men,  
 Greedy weapons have framed their fate.  
 These rocky slopes are beaten by storms,  
 100 This earth pinned down by driving snow,  
 By the horror of winter, smothering warmth  
 In the shadows of night. And the north angrily

66 **craven** (krä'vən): cowardly;  
**complacent** (kəm-plā'sənt): self-  
 satisfied; **covetous** (kūv'Y-təs):  
 greedy.

69 **spleen**: bad temper. (The spleen  
 is a body organ that was formerly  
 thought to be the seat of strong  
 emotions.)

77-82 In what different ways have  
 the warriors met their fate?

84 **callow mirth**: childish joy.

95 **serpentine**: winding or  
 twisting, like a snake.

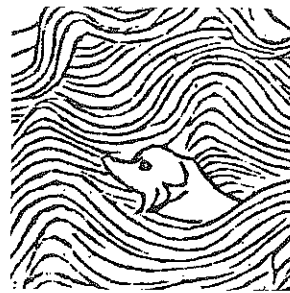
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Hurls its hailstorms at our helpless heads.  
Everything earthly is evilly born,  
105 Firmly clutched by a fickle Fate.  
Fortune vanishes, friendship vanishes,  
Man is fleeting, woman is fleeting,  
And all this earth rolls into emptiness.”

So says the sage in his heart, sitting alone with  
His thought.

110 It's good to guard your faith, nor let your grief come forth  
Until it cannot call for help, nor help but heed  
The path you've placed before it. It's good to find your  
grace  
In God, the heavenly rock where rests our every hope.

*Translated by Burton Raffel*



### Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What happened to cause the poem's title **character** to become a wanderer?
2. What emotion does this poem chiefly evoke in you? Share your reaction with classmates.
3. How would you describe the wanderer's present life and his feelings about it?

THINK  
ABOUT

- the experiences he describes in lines 8–22
- the life he led before he became a wanderer
- his remarks in lines 90–108

4. Do you agree with the attitude toward grief expressed in lines 12–16? Why or why not?