

Beowulf

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PREFACE

I was in my third year of university when the professor of my History of the English Language class stood up at the front of the lecture hall and recited the opening of English's first epic poem. The hair on the back of my neck stood up –

*Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelings ellen fremedon.*

Not because of the language, although Old English does beat out a rhythm that makes one's hands itch for a pair of oars. Not because of the story – although, having read Seamus Heaney's translation the year before, I was aware of the power of this story of a hero's journey to do battle with something that changes them forever. It was because the class was taught by Professor Jennifer Bryan, and it was the first time I'd heard Old English spoken by a woman.

There were, of course, women already working with Old English and Old Norse: Marijane Osborn in America, Heather O'Donoghue in the United Kingdom, and others. But to a young woman still in university – even a good university, even one that often paid particular attention to under-represented voices – the idea that *Beowulf* was a story I could tell was a new horizon beckoning.

I realised later that *Beowulf* tends to attract translators who do not have their papers in order. Edwin Morgan was Scottish; Kevin Crossley-Holland discovered Anglo-Saxon literature after failing his first exams at Oxford; Heaney famously put a *bawn*, a symbol of Anglo-Irish oppression, into his rendering. My translation comes from writing as a woman – usually destined to pour mead and wait for the family feud to erupt – and as an

American. We have, all of us, snuck up to this poem while the gatekeepers were otherwise occupied. None of us came to this by birthright.

And in doing this we follow our source material entirely. Scyld Scefing was a foundling who rose to become a legendary king. Beowulf was never meant to rule: he fell into it by outliving everyone else in line for the throne. The world of the poem is populated by people meant for other things, and who wanted something different. They went looking, and found lives marked out by a beating poetic line. But they, the characters, and we, the translators, also brought things with us in our boats: a way of thinking about a building with sentry towers, a name of a Norse god, a sympathy for the women left to ferry pitchers.

My translation does some things with *Beowulf* that differ dramatically from the source text, most particularly in my approach to the structure: I have split the poem up into a collection-length series of poems that tell the story. By doing so, my translation makes space for the many voices within *Beowulf* that are often drowned out by a single narrator describing a single hero. This story is about Beowulf, yes; but it is also about the narrator of the poem, and about Modthryth and Hildeburh, about Grendel's mother, forever nameless. I have not given her a name, but I have given her and others more of a presence and, occasionally, a voice in the poem. Some people will say the shifts in focus and form I have made mean that this is not a translation. But my approach, like every approach to *Beowulf*, is still real; each is just as accurate as another, because translation happens in the space between, in what is passed over and what is held up to the light. Professor Bryan may have been telling a slightly different slant, but I listened, and now, over ten years later, I am telling my story of *Beowulf*.

I can't tell you what you will find in this poem. I can tell you what I've seen: boats splitting water, an arm underneath an ashen shield, something stirring in the night. All of it is true. But what you will hear — what *Beowulf* will show you, will lean to whisper in your ear — is something belonging only to you. Listen. You haven't heard this one before.

*For my parents, Jeffrey and Susan,
for my sisters, Dara and Ellen,
and for my husband Luke:
for everything.*

Beowulf

Prologue

HWÆT

Stop me
if you've heard this one before: the lands up north,
hoar-bent, frost-locked, need deeper plows
to dig them. Here is one.

SCYLD SCEFING

This is a story about coming and going. This is a story about the sea. SCYLD came in with the first morning tide, lightly carried in spite of the treasures in his boat — mailcoats, gold, gifts the color of water at dawn — rich omens, indeed, for a baby still too weak to close a fist. At that age, all palms lie open — an orphan's, a foundling's or a king's.

In time, his hand hardened into one we knelt to as king — all of us; from the ocean he came in on to the farther sea. I was gathering kelp when we found him, my back unbent by age, holding his squalling face in the hollow of my neck as we carried him to the hall, that first grey morning. I was repaid for that deed — a small one, but one he was grateful for, if this lifetime of gifts

is any indication. We were lordless, in need, and he was a gifted child — he took to his role of foster-lord, of king-in-training, easily. Eager to have what was his, deeds came quickly — he knew his way with a sword in his hand, a seabird catching that first smell of salt. As his shoulders widened to carry them, more and more retainers came — he marked his age

in men, not years; a loadbearer in a burdensome age. Some he won over with gold, tracts of land gift-wrapped in rainfall that followed the line of his eye. Some lay still, carried off the field, the first and last tithing for a king. I saw lifetimes of conquering and harvest, things I will not see

again. We have diminished, we are fallen – my one true deed,

performed again, taking him back to the grey death
he came from. He died in his sleep, of old age –
his grip on the pommel finally slipping, back to the sea,
back to a wooden boat – I carved the nails – and the gifts
we shroud him with. Gifts for a king, more than kingly,
gold he couldn't at his strongest height have carried –

And let them go, past the sightline of mist, let the sea carry
his gold, his body, and his boat – wherever it may, indeed,
to whatever shining demons, whatever black-hooded kings
may care to take my people's tithing for an age
we had no right to. Finally, my strength and my will gives –
let the tide pull him out of my hands, if the sea,

if the sea's unseen coast must have him, must carry
him off. This was a gift, this is the weakness of an undeeded
man, this is an age dying. This was a good king.

SUCCESSION

The crown passes: from Scyld to BEOW, famous among men;
and to his son HEALFDANE, who ruled as long as he lived,
grey-haired and fierce under the Scylding's shield.
He woke four children to the world: HEOROGAR,
HROTHGAR, and HALGA THE GOOD; YRSE, the last,
sent off early to ONELA, to brighten that foreigner's bed.

*The lineage runs like knots of a spine, like the swollen knuckles
of an aged woman by the fire.*

Here is the story beginning.

Here are the words you want.