from Beowulf
Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney


Beowulf carries Grendel’s head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon’s hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats’ land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon’s lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf the price of this last victory will be great.

THE FINAL BATTLE

Then he addressed each dear companion

275 one final time, those fighters in their helmets, resolute and high-born: "I would rather not use a weapon if I knew another way to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast as I did against Grendel in days gone by.

280 But I shall be meeting molten venom in the fire he breathes, so I go forth in mail-shirt and shield. I won’t shift a foot when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall between the two of us will turn out as fate,

285 overseer of men, decides. I am resolved. I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe. "Men at arms, remain here on the barrow, safe in your armour, to see which one of us is better in the end at bearing wounds

290 in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours, nor is it up to any man except me to measure his strength against the monster or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
by my courage, or else mortal combat,
doom of battle, will bear your lord away."

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.
The fabled warrior in his warshirt and helmet trusted in his own strength entirely and went under the crag. No coward path.

Hard by the rock-face that hale2 veteran, a good man who had gone repeatedly into combat and danger and come through, saw a stone arch and a gushing stream that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm against the dragon in those flaming depths. Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats unburdened his breast and broke out in a storm of anger. Under grey stone his voice challenged and resounded clearly. Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized a human voice, the time was over for peace and parleying. Pouring forth in a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster burst from the rock. There was a rumble under ground. Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
writhed and convulsed and **vehemently**
turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,
an heirloom inherited by ancient right,
was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
each antagonist struck terror in the other.
Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
by his tall shield, sure of his ground,
while the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
and racing towards its fate. Yet his shield defended
the renowned leader's life and limb
for a shorter time than he meant it to:
that final day was the first time
when Beowulf fought and fate denied him
glory in battle. So the king of the Geats
raised his hand and struck hard
at the enamelled scales, but scarcely cut through:
the blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
had need of at that moment. The mound-keeper
went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
when he felt the stroke, battle-fire
bellowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled:
**infallible** before that day,
failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
to have to give ground like that and go
unwillingly to inhabit another home
in a place beyond; so every man must yield
the leasehold of his days.

It was not long
until the fierce contenders clashed again.
The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up
and got a new wind; he who had once ruled
was **furled** in fire and had to face the worst.
No help or backing was to be had then
from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
broke ranks and ran for their lives
to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
the claims of kinship cannot be denied.
His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's, a well-regarded Shylfing warrior related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet, he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him, how well he lived among the Waegmundings, the freehold he inherited from his father before him. He could not hold back: one hand brandished the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword—...

Sad at heart, addressing his companions, Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words: "I remember that time when mead was flowing, how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall, promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price, make good the gift of the war-gear, those swords and helmets, as and when his need required it. He picked us out from the army deliberately, honoured us and judged us fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—and all because he considered us the best of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face by himself alone—the shepherd of our land, a man unequaled in the quest for glory and a name for daring—now the day has come when this lord we serve needs sound men to give him their support. Let us go to him, help our leader through the hot flame and dread of the fire. As God is my witness, I would rather my body were robed in the same burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body than go back home bearing arms. That is unthinkable, unless we have first slain the foe and defended the life of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know the things he has done for us deserve better. Should he alone be left exposed to fall in battle? We must bond together, shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword.”
Together Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster’s treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon’s cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

9

...Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back, excited by the treasure; anxiety weighed on his brave heart, he was hoping he would find the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him helpless, earlier, on the open ground. So he came to the place, carrying the treasure, and found his lord bleeding profusely, his life at an end; again he began to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance broke out from the king’s breast-cage. The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

410 “To the everlasting Lord of All, to the King of Glory, I give thanks that I behold this treasure here in front of me, that I have been thus allowed to leave my people so well endowed on the day I die.

415 Now that I have bartered my last breath to own this fortune, it is up to you to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer. Order my troop to construct a barrow on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled. It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness and be a reminder among my people—so that in coming times crews under sail will call it Beowulf’s Barrow, as they steer ships across the wide and shrouded waters.”

425 Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped the collar of gold from his neck and gave it to the young thane, telling him to use it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well.

“You are the last of us, the only one left of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow them."
That was the warrior’s last word.

He had no more to confide. The furious heat
of the pyre would **assail** him. His soul fled from his breast
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

*Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow the Geats cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon’s treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.*

10

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
chieftains’ sons, champions in battle,
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They **exulted** his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.