

# from *Beowulf*

Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney

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*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

### 7

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,<sup>o</sup>  
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,  
295 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.  
300 Hard by the rock-face that hale<sup>o</sup> 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  
305 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  
310 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.<sup>o</sup> Pouring forth  
315 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**  
320 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  
325 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  
330 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  
335 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:  
340 when he felt the stroke, battle-fire  
billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled<sup>o</sup>  
of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,  
**infallible** before that day,  
failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.  
345 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  
350 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  
355 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.

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His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,  
a well-regarded Shyfling 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,  
365 how well he lived among the Waegmundings,  
the freehold<sup>o</sup> 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,  
370 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,  
375 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  
380 of his arms-bearing thanes.<sup>o</sup> 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  
385 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  
390 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  
395 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.*

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400 ...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,  
405 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.  
420 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  
430 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  
435 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,  
440 mourning his loss as a man and a king.  
They **extolled** 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  
445 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,  
450 kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.