

Three Songs From a Play

by Evelyn Hooven (September 2016)



(The play, Seafarer, was suggested by the Anglo-Saxon poems “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer.” This work is not a translation; it is, rather, an attempt to imitate—although in modern English—the sound and mood and tone of Anglo-Saxon poetry.)

Choral Ode to the Sea

We're finished with you

Beguiler, old cheat—

Rubbish is all you'll get from us.

Streets are swept smooth and chimneys cleared,

Old beggars sit clothed by the hearth,

The city's a scoured wall against you,

Lapidary, closed.

Sky rain will split buds to revelation,
Shoots spring green from our earth—
Not for wanderers,
Never for tide-beaten farers
Who go forth and come back dead
Will our trees be felled into coffins.
No more the manless hutch and quiet
Riven by the taking waves.
No storm-terror, fog-terror, no sea sleep for landsmen.
Beggars are fed by the hearth.
We've lifted the lame from the edge of steps,
Driven boney whores from the coast.
We have finished with you, beguiler, old cheat!
We've turned our backs on the sea.

Seafarer's Song

I was, you know, young when I went to sea.
I went. Just to look.
To be no apprentice to trades
Nor fighter against armies,

But to seek, amid waves

And strangers, what I had never seen.

I went. Knew chill and shadow.

No hearth. No woman.

Hail fell on earth, coldest of grains;

Icy-feathered visits from terns;

The yelling salute of eagles. . . .

Storms beat the keel-wood,

I fought and remained afloat—

In a real storm, it was all terror.

Who knows what will come from a stirred deep?

Beasts sharp with hunger, sundered rocks,

Clawing weeds, your enemy's ghost?

Final thunder din.

Dense silence.

Terror is gone.

The helmsman's idle.

In a gentle boat.

Dark. Not even a point of star.

What is there but longing?

No moon I can see

Pulls my mind across the gull-path.

I hearken to water from wells,

Kiss of the tongue; I cannot see

My outstretched hand.

Far away, they lift the harp,

My friends, the lovely ones.

They pull, fingers on strings,

Music from wood.

I fall asleep to the harp not there,

Waken to keel-wood

Spray wet and clean;

Waterweed, starfish, sea anemone. . .

For landsmen the hearth fires

Are drowsy with rising.

Sun comes through and time to steer.

I see you touching the earth,

One another; loving, planting;

Textures of garments, firewood, flesh;

The young laughing as they take it hard;

Change of seasons. . . .

Very long I lived an exile,
The toiling hierarchies of thrifty villages
Were not for me. . . .

The Wanderer's Song

How should a man
Let his loved ones go,
Whether they're dead or living?
For so long, I found no way.
I saw them last in sunlight,
Bodies unfighting, burning armour,
Bright cup waiting for a mouth not thirsty,
Hand for lifting, fallen down.

I have seen such things. . . .

My lord was tall and great-hearted;
When a battle was won he heaped gifts upon us,

We'd put them away or give them to our wives,
Not payment the cause of all that joy. . . .
Songs rose from the meadhall, struck the air.

Tossing on waves, unable to sleep,
I would see them—friends,
Taking meat and bread
With a man who'd never betray you—
Not for your wife, land, gold
Or envy of skill.

We've fought and lived through it,
We've hungered and are fed,
The enemy's driven far. . . .

I'd open my eyes to dusky waves,
The only gleam, eyes of fishes, shark-teeth.

The friends, nothing but dreams.

My mind held them perfect as I wasted,

I wasted as the seagull throve.

Memories have taken all the toll they can.

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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