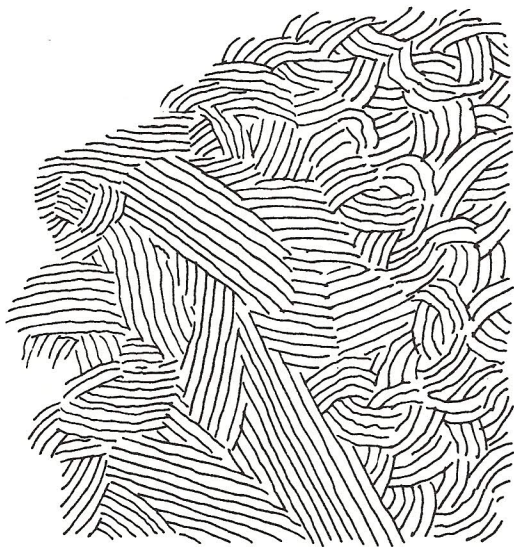




Balance is everything, riding out time like a helmless sheep-boat, keel to hellward, mast upreared to prick out heaven's eye. He he! (Sigh.) My enemies define themselves (as the dragon said) on me. As for myself, I could finish them off in a single night, pull down the great carved beams and crush them in the meadhall, along with their mice, their tankards and potatoes—yet I hold back. I am hardly blind to the absurdity. Form is function. What will we call the Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?

(Do a little dance, beast. Shrug it off. This looks like a nice place—oooh, my!—flat rock, moonlight, views of distances! Sing!

*Pity poor Hrothgar,
Grendel's foe!
Pity poor Grendel,
O, O, O!*

Winter soon.

(whispering, whispering. Grendel, has it occurred to you my dear that you are crazy?)

(He clasps hands delicately over his head, points the toes of one foot—*aaie!* horrible nails!!—takes a step, does a turn:

*Grendel is crazy,
O, O, O!
Thinks old Hrothgar
Makes it snow!*

Balance is everything, tiding out rhyme . . .

*Pity poor Grengar,
Hrothdel's foe!
Down goes the whirlpool:
Eek! No, no!*

It will be winter soon.

Midway through the twelfth year of my idiotic war.

Twelve is, I hope, a holy number. Number of escapes from traps.

[He searches the moonlit world for signs, shading his eyes against the dimness, standing on one shaggy foot, just slightly bloodstained, one toe missing from an old encounter with an ax. Three dead trees on the moor below, burned up alive by lightning, are ominous portents. (Oh man, us portents!) Also trees. On a frostbitten hill in the distance, men on horses. "Over here!" he screams. Waves his arms. They hesitate, feign deafness, ride away north. Shoddy, he observes. The whole chilly universe, shoddy.]

Enough of that! A night for tearing heads off, bathing in blood! Except, alas, he has killed his quota for the season. Care, take care of the gold-egg-laying goose! There is no limit to desire but desire's needs. (Grendel's law.)

The scent of the dragon. Heavy all around me, almost visible before me, like my breath.

I will count my numberless blessings one by one.

- i. My teeth are sound.
- i. The roof of my cave is sound.
- i. I have not committed the ultimate act of nihilism: I have not killed the queen.
- i. Yet.

(He lies on the cliff-edge, scratching his belly, and thoughtfully watches his thoughtfully watching the queen.)

Not easy to define. Mathematically, perhaps a torus, loosely cylindrical, with swellings and constrictions at in-

tervals, knobbed—that is to say, a surface generated, more or less, by the revolutions of a conic about an axis lying in its plane, and the solid thus enclosed. It is difficult, of course, to be precise. For one thing, the problem of determining how much is queen and how much queenly radiation.

The monster laughs.

Time-Space cross-section: *Wealthcow.*

Cut A:

It was the second year of my raiding. The army of the Scyldings was weakened, decimated. No more the rumble of Hrothgar's horsemen, riding at midnight, chain-mail jangling in the whistling wind, cloaks flying out like wimpling wings, to rescue petty tribute-givers. (O *listen* to me, hills!) He couldn't protect his own hall, much less theirs. I cut down my visits, conserving the game, and watched them. Nature lover. For weeks, all day and far into the night, he met with his counselors, talking, praying, moaning. I became aware, listening to them, that I was not their only threat. Far to the east of Hrothgar's hall there was a new hall a-building, its young king gaining fame. As Hrothgar had done, this younger king was systematically burning and plundering nearby halls, extending the circle of his tribute power. He was striking now at the outer rim of Hrothgar's sphere; it was only a matter of time before he struck Hrothgar. The counselors talked and drank and

wept, sometimes Hrothgar's allies among them. The Shaper sang songs. The men stood with their braceleted arms around one another's shoulders—men who not long before had been the bitterest of enemies—and I watched it all, wringing my fingers, smiling rage. The leaves turned red. The purple blooms of thistles became black behind the people's houses, and migrant birds moved through.

Then, from all corners of Hrothgar's sphere of influence and from towns beyond—the vassals' vassals—an army began to form. They came walking or riding, oxen dragging their wagonloads of shields, spears, tents, clothes, food. Every night when I went down to look there were more of them. Cartwheels tall as a man, with rough, square spokes. Big-hoofed gray horses spackled like wolves, that rolled their eyes and whinnied at my footfall, leagued with men as if strapped to their business by harness I could not see. Horns cracked out in the darkening stillness; grindstones screeched. The crisp air reeked with the after-smell of their cooking.

They made camp in a sloping pasture rimmed by enormous oak trees and pines and nut trees, a stream moving down through the center, over steps of rock. Where the forest began, there was a lake. Every night there were new groups of campfires to push away the frost, and soon there was hardly a place to stand, there were so many men and animals. The grass, the withering leaves were full of whis-

pering, but the campground was hushed, muffled by their presence, as if blighted. I watched from my hiding place. They talked in mumbles or not at all. Message carriers moved from fire to fire, talking softly with the leaders. Their rich furs shone like birds' wings in the firelight. Heavily guarded, the younger soldiers pushed through the crowd and, all night long, washed clothes and cooking ware in the stream until the water was thick with dirt and grease and no longer made a sound as it dropped toward the lake. When they slept, guards and dogs watched over them in herds. Before dawn, men rose to exercise the horses, polish weapons, or move out with bows in search of deer.

Then one night when I went down to spy, they were gone, vanished like starlings from a tree. I followed their trail—footprints, hoofprints, and wagon ruts cutting a wide dirty swath toward the east. When I came in sight of them, I slowed down, laughing and hugging myself; it was going to be a massacre. They marched all night, then scattered into the forest like wolves and slept all day without fires. I snatched an ox and devoured it, leaving no trace. At dusk, they formed again. At midnight the armies arrived at the antlered hall.

Hrothgar called out to him, glorious protector of the Scyldings, hoarfrost bearded: "Hygmod, lord of the Helmings, greet your guests!" Unferth stood beside him, his

huge arms folded on his byrnie. He stood with his head bowed, eyes mere slits, clamped mouth hidden where his mustache overlapped his beard. Bitterness went out from him like darkness made visible: Unferth the hero (known far and wide in these Scanian lands), isolated in that huge crowd like a poisonous snake aware of what it was. King Hrothgar called again.

The young king came out, well armed, leading a bear and six retainers. He looked around him, blond and pale, arms ringed with gold, a vague smile hiding his shock. The army of the Scyldings and all their allies stretched off in the darkness as far as the eye could see—down the slopes of the hill, down the stone-paved roadways, away into the trees.

Hrothgar made a speech, lifting his ashsphear and shaking it. The young man waited like stone, his gloved right hand grasping the chain that led the bear. He had no chance, and he knew it. Everyone knew it but the bear beside him, standing upright, considering the crowd. I smiled. I could smell the blood that would drench the ground before morning came. There was a light breeze, a scent of winter in it. It stirred the fur on the men's clothes and rattled the leaves around me. The bear dropped down on all fours and grunted. The king jerked the chain. Then an old man came out of the meadhall, went to the young king, just clear of the bear, and spoke to him.

Hrothgar and all his allies were silent, waiting. The young king and the old man talked. The retainers at the mead-hall door joined in, their voices low. I waited. Hrothgar's whole army was silent. Then the young king moved toward Hrothgar. A rumble went through the crowd, then fell away like a wave retreating, drawing pebbles out from shore. At last, very slowly, the young king drew out his sword, with his left hand—a sign of truce—and dropped it, as if casually, in front of Hrothgar's horse.

"We will give you gifts," the young king said, "splendid tribute in sign of our great respect for the honorable Scyldings." His voice and smile were gracious. His eyes, slanting downward like the eyes of a fish, were expressionless as dried-up wells.

Unferth laughed, all alone in the silence. The sound rolled away to the darkness to die among trees.

Hrothgar, white-haired, white-bearded as the ice-god, shook his head. "There is no gift your people can give the Scyldings," he said. "You think you can buy a little time with gold, and then some night when we're sitting at our mead, you and all your brave allies will come down on us—crash!—as we tonight have come down on you, and no gift we can offer then will turn away your fury." The old man smiled, his eyes wicked. "Do you take us for children that play in the yards with pets? What could we give you

that you couldn't take by force, and at that time take from us tenfold?"

Unferth smiled, looking at the bear. The young king showed nothing, accepting the joke and the argument as if he'd been expecting them. He gave the chain another jerk and the bear moved closer to him. When he'd waited long enough, he looked back up at Hrothgar.

"We can give you such piles of treasure," he said, "that I have nothing left to pay an army with. Then you'll be safe."

Hrothgar laughed. "You're crafty, lord of the Helmings. A king shrewd with words can mount a great army on promises. The treasure you'd take by destroying my house could make all your swordsmen rich. Come, come! No more talk! It's a chilly night, and we have cows to milk in the morning. Take up your weapons. We'll give you ground. We haven't come to kill you like foxes in a hole."

But the young king waited on. He was still smiling, though his eyes had no life in them. He had something in reserve, some ingenious product of his counselor's wits that would overwhelm their scheme. He said, speaking more quietly than before, "I will show you a treasure that will change your mind, great Hrothgar." He turned to an attendant and made a sign. The attendant went into the meadhall.

After a long time he returned. He was carrying nothing.

Behind him, men opened the meadhall door wide. Light burst over the hillside and glinted on the weapons and eyes of the Scyldings. The bear stirred, restless, irritable, like the young king's anger removed to the end of a chain. Old Hrothgar waited.

Then at last, moving slowly, as if walking in a dream, a woman in a robe of threaded silver came gliding from the hall. Her smooth long hair was as red as fire and soft as the ruddy sheen on dragon's gold. Her face was gentle, mysteriously calm. The night became more still.

"I offer you my sister," the young king said. "Let her name from now on be Wealtheow, or holy servant of common good."

I leered in the rattling darkness of my tree. The name was ridiculous. "Pompous, pompous ass!" I hissed. But she was beautiful and she surrendered herself with the dignity of a sacrificial virgin. My chest was full of pain, my eyes smarted, and I was afraid—O monstrous trick against reason—I was afraid I was about to sob. I wanted to smash things, bring down the night with my howl of rage. But I kept still. She was beautiful, as innocent as dawn on winter hills. She tore me apart as once the Shaper's song had done. As if for my benefit, as if in vicious scorn of me, children came from the meadhall and ran down to her, weeping, to snatch at her hands and dress.

"Stop it!" I whispered. "Stupid!"

She did not look at them, merely touched their heads. "Be still," she said—hardly more than a whisper, but it carried across the crowd. They were still, as if her voice were magic. I clenched my teeth, tears streaming from my eyes. She was like a child, her sweet face paler than the moon. She looked up at Hrothgar's beard, not his eyes, afraid of him. "My lord," she said.

O woe! O wretched violation of sense!

I could see myself leaping from my high tree and running on all fours through the crowd to her, howling, whimpering, throwing myself down, drooling and groveling at her small, fur-booted feet. "Mercy!" I would howl. "Aargh! Burble!" I clamped my palms over my eyes and struggled not to laugh.

No need to say more. The old king accepted the younger king's gift, along with some other things—swords and cups, some girls and young men, her servants. For several days both sides made speeches, long-winded, tediously poetic, all lies, and then, with much soft weeping and sniffing, the Scyldings loaded up Wealtheow and the lesser beauties, made a few last touching observations, and went home.

A bad winter. I couldn't lay a hand on them, prevented as if by a charm. I huddled in my cave, grinding my teeth, beating my forehead with my fists and cursing nature.

Sometimes I went up to the frozen cliffwall and looked down, down, at where the lights lay blue, like the threads running out from a star, patterning the snow. My fists struck out at the cliff's ice-crust rock. It was no satisfaction. In the cave again, I listened to my mother move back and forth, a pale shape driven by restlessness and rage at the restlessness and rage she felt in me and could not cure. She would gladly have given her life to end my suffering—horrible, humpbacked, carp-toothed creature, eyes on fire with useless, mindless love. Who could miss the grim parallel? So the lady below would give, had given, her life for those she loved. So would any simpering, eyelash-batting female in her court, given the proper setup, the minimal conditions. The smell of the dragon lay around me like sulphurous smoke. At times I would wake up in panic, unable to breathe.

At times I went down.

She carried the mealbowl from table to table, smiling quietly, as if the people she served, her husband's people, were her own. The old king watched with thoughtful eyes, moved as he'd have been by the Shaper's music, except that it was different: not visions of glorious things that might be or sly revisions of the bloody past but present beauty that made time's flow seem illusory, some lower law that now had been suspended. Meaning as quality. When drunken men argued, pitting theory against theory,

bludgeoning each other's absurdities, she came between them, wordless, uncondemning, pouring out mead like a mother's love, and they were softened, reminded of their humanness, exactly as they might have been softened by the cry of a child in danger, or an old man's suffering, or spring. The Shaper sang things that had never crossed his mind before: comfort, beauty, a wisdom softer, more permanent, than Hrothgar's. The old king watched, remote from the queen, though she shared his bed, and he mused.

One night she paused in front of Unferth. He sat hunched, bitterly smiling, as always, his muscles taut as old nautical ropes in a hurricane. He was ugly as a spider.

"My lord?" she said. She often called the thanes "my lord." Servant of even the lowliest among them.

"No thank you," he said. He shot a glance at her, then looked down, smiled fiercely. She waited, expressionless except for perhaps the barest trace of puzzlement. He said, "I've had enough."

Down the table a man made bold by mead said, "Men have been known to kill their brothers when they've too much mead. Har, har."

A few men laughed.

Unferth stiffened. The queen's face paled. Once again Unferth glanced up at the queen, then away. His fists closed tight, resting on the table in front of him, inches from his knife. No one moved. The hall became still. She

stood strange-eyed, as if looking out from another world and time. Who can say what she understood? I knew, for one, that the brother-killer had put on the Shaper's idea of the hero like a merry mask, had seen it torn away, and was now reduced to what he was: a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions, stubbornly living on, ashamed and meaningless, because killing himself would be, like his life, unheroic. It was a paradox nothing could resolve but a murderous snicker. The moment stretched, a snag in time's stream, and still no one moved, no one spoke. As if defiantly, Unferth, murderer of brothers, again raised his eyes to the queen's, and this time didn't look down. Scorn? Shame?

The queen smiled. Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, "That's past." And it was. The demon was exorcised. I saw his hands unclench, relax, and—torn between tears and a bellow of scorn—I crept back to my cave.

It was not, understand, that she had secret wells of joy that overflowed to them all. She lay beside the sleeping king—I watched wherever she went, a crafty guardian, wealthy in wiles—and her eyes were open, the lashes bright with tears. She was more child, those moments, than woman. Thinking of home, remembering paths in the land of the Helmings where she'd played before she'd lain aside her happiness for theirs. She held the naked, bony

king as if he were the child, and nothing between him and the darkness but her white arm. Sometimes she'd slip from the bed while he slept and would cross to the door and go out alone into the night. Alone and never alone. Instantly, guards were all around her, gem-woman priceless among the Scylding treasures. She would stand in the cold wind looking east, one hand clutching her robe to her throat, the silent guards encircling her like trees. Child though she was, she would show no sign of her sorrow in front of them. At last some guard would speak to her, would mention the cold, and Wealtheow would smile and nod her thanks and go back in.

Once that winter her brother came, with his bear and a great troop of followers, to visit. Their talk and laughter rumbled up to the cliffwall. The double band drank, the Shaper sang, and then they drank again. I listened from a distance for as long as I could stand it, clenching my mind on the words of the dragon, then, helpless as always, I went down. The wind howled, piling up snow in drifts and blinding the night with ice-white dust. I walked bent over against the cold, protecting my eyes with my arms. Trees, posts, cowsheds loomed into my vision, then vanished, swallowed in white. When I came near Hart, I could smell the guards of the hall all around me, but I couldn't see them—nor, of course, could they see me. I went straight to the wall, plunging through drifts to my

knees, and pressed up against it for its warmth. It trembled and shook from the noise inside. I bent down to the crack I'd used before and watched.

She was brighter than the hearthfire, talking again with her family and friends, observing the antics of the bear. It was the king, old Hrothgar, who carried the meadbowl from table to table tonight. He walked, dignified, from group to group, smiling and filling the drinking cups, and you'd have sworn from his look that never until tonight had the old man been absolutely happy. He would glance at his queen from time to time as he moved among his people and hers, the Danes and Helmings, and with each glance his smile would grow warmer for a moment, and a thoughtful look would come over his eyes. Then it would pass—some gesture or word from a guest or one of his Scylding thanes—and he would be hearty, merry: not false, exactly, but less than what he was at the moment of the glance. As for the queen, she seemed not to know he was there. She sat beside her brother, her hand on his arm, the other hand on the arm of a shriveled old woman, precious relative. The bear sat with his feet stuck out, playing with his penis and surveying the hall with a crotchety look, as if dimly aware that there was something about him that humans could not approve. The Helming guests all talked at once, eagerly, constantly, as if squeezing all their past into an evening. I couldn't hear what

they said. The hall was a roar—voices, the clink of cups, the shuffle of feet. Sometimes Wealtheow would tip back her head, letting her copper-red hair fall free, and laugh; sometimes she listened, head cocked, now smiling, now soberly pursing her lips, only offering a nod. Hrothgar went back to his high, carved chair, relinquishing the bowl to the noblest of his thanes, and sat like an old man listening inside his mind to the voices of his childhood. Once, for a long moment, the queen looked at him while listening to her brother, her eyes as thoughtful as Hrothgar's. Then she laughed and talked again, and the king conversed with the man on his left; it was as if their minds had not met.

Later that night they passed a harp—not the old Shaper's instrument, no one touched that—and the queen's brother sang. He was no artist, with either his fingers or his throat, but all the hall was silent, listening. He sang, childlike except for the winter in his gray eyes, of a hero who'd killed a girl's old father out of love of the girl, and how the girl after that had both loved and hated the hero and finally had killed him. Wealtheow smiled, full of sorrow, as she listened. The bear irritably watched the dogs. Then others sang. Old Hrothgar watched and listened, brooding on dangers. (The queen's brother had straw-yellow hair and eyes as gray as slate. Sometimes when he stole a glance at Hrothgar, his face was a knife.)

Toward morning, they all went to bed. Half buried in snow, the deadly cold coming up through my feet, I kept watch. The queen put her hand on Hrothgar's bare shoulder as he slept and looked at him thoughtfully, exactly as Hrothgar had looked at her and at his people. She moved a strand of hair from his face. After a long, long time she closed her eyes, but even now I wasn't sure she was asleep.

And so in my cave, coughing from the smoke and clenching feet on fire with chilblains, I ground my teeth on my own absurdity. Whatever their excuse might be, I had none, I knew: I had seen the dragon. Ashes to ashes. And yet I was teased—tortured by the red of her hair and the set of her chin and the white of her shoulders—teased toward disbelief in the dragon's truths. A glorious moment was coming, my chest insisted, and even the fact that I myself would have no part in it—a member of the race God cursed, according to the Shaper's tale—was trifling. In my mind I watched her freckled hand move on the old man's arm as once I'd listened to the sigh of the Shaper's harp. Ah, woe, woe! How many times must a creature be dragged down the same ridiculous road? The Shaper's lies, the hero's self-delusion, now this: the idea of a queen! My mother, breathing hard, scraping through her hair with her crooked nails, watched me and sometimes moaned.

And so, the next night—it was dark as pitch—I burst the meadhall door, killed men, and stormed directly to the door behind which lay the sleeping queen. Glorious Unferth slept beside it. He rose to fight me. I slapped him aside like a troublesome colt. The queen's brother rose, unleashed the bear. I accepted its hug in my own and broke its back. I slammed into the bedroom. She sat up screaming, and I laughed. I snatched her foot, and now her unqueenly shrieks were deafening, exactly like the squeals of a pig. No one would defend her, not even suicidal Unferth at the door, screaming his rage—self-hatred. Old Hrothgar shook and made lunatic noises and drooled. I could have jerked her from the bed and stove in her golden-haired head against the wall. They watched in horror, Helmings on one side, Scyldings on the other (balance is anything), and I caught the other foot and pulled her naked legs apart as if to split her. "Gods, gods!" she screamed. I waited to see if the gods would come, but not a sign of them. I laughed. She called to her brother, then Unferth. They hung back. I decided to kill her. I firmly committed myself to killing her, slowly, horribly. I would begin by holding her over the fire and cooking the ugly hole between her legs. I laughed harder at that. They were all screaming now, hooting and yawling to their dead-stick gods. I would kill her, yes! I would squeeze out her feces between my fists. So much for meaning as

quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality. Grendel the truth-teacher, phantasm-tester! It was what I would be from this day forward—my commitment, my character as long as I lived—and nothing alive or dead could change my mind!

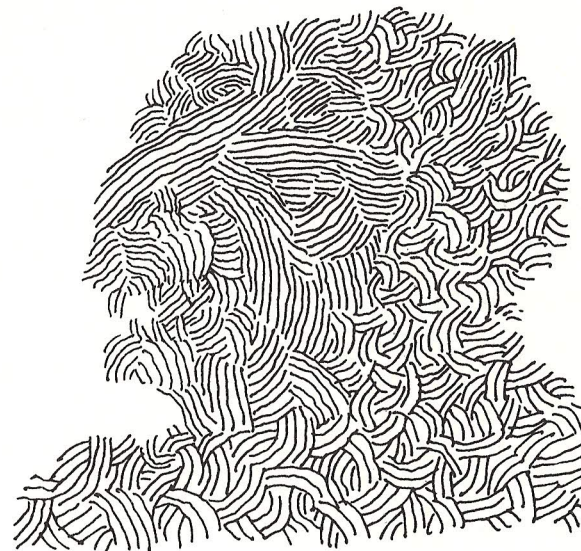
I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live. It would be, for me, mere pointless pleasure, an illusion of order for this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. (End quote.)

I let go her feet. The people stared, unbelieving. I had wrecked another theory. I left the hall.

But I'd cured myself. That much, at least, I could say for my behavior. I concentrated on the memory of the ugliness between her legs (bright tears of blood) and laughed as I ran through the heavy snow. The night was still. I could hear their crying in the meadhall. "Ah, Grendel, you sly old devil!" I whispered to the trees. The words rang false. (The east was gray.) I hung balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said—unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains—that she was beautiful. I resolved, absolutely and finally, to kill myself, for love of the Baby Grendel that used to be. But the next instant, for no particular reason, I changed my mind.

Balance is everything, sliding down slime. . . .

Cut B.



After the murder of Halga the Good,
dear younger brother of bold king Hrothgar
(helm of the Scyldings, sword-hilt handler,
bribe-gold bender who by his wife had
now two sons) came Hrothulf out of
orphan's woe to Hart.

(O hear me,
*rocks and trees, loud waterfalls! You imagine I tell you
these things just to hear myself speak? A little respect
there, brothers and sisters!*

(Thus poor Grendel,
anger's child,

red eyes hidden in the dark of verbs,
brachiating with a hoot from rhyme to rhyme.)

SCENE: *The Arrival of Hrothulf at Hart.*

"Hrothulf! Come to Aunt Wealtheow!
You poor, poor dear boy!"
"It is very kind of you, madam, to take me in."
"Nonsense, dearest! You're Hrothgar's flesh and blood!"
"So I'm told." A mumble. Trace of smile.
The old king frowns in his carved chair.
The boy has the manners, he broods, of a half-tamed wolf.
Fourteen years old and already a God-damned pretender?
Age, old chain of victories, where is your comfort?
He clears his throat.
No no; I jump to conclusions.
The boy has been through a bad time,
naturally. Father-funeral and all the rest.
And gifted, of course, with a proud heart,
like all his line. (Oft Scyld Shefing . . .)
(The hawk in the rafters hands down no opinion.)
The Shaper sings—the harp sougning out through the long
room
like summer wind—"By deeds worth praise
a man can, in any kingdom, prosper!"
So.

The boy sits solemn and hears the harp
behind closed eyes. The October hills in his calm mind
run wolves.

Theorum: Any action (*A*) of the human heart
must trigger an equal and opposite reaction (*A*¹).
Such is the golden opinion of the Shaper.
And so—I watch in glee—they take in Hrothulf;
quiet as the moon, sweet scorpion,
he sits between their two and cleans his knife.

SCENE: *Hrothulf in the Yard.*

Hrothulf speaks:

In ratty furs the peasants hoe their fields,
fat with stupidity, if not with flesh. Their foodsmells
foul the doorways, dungeon dark, where cow-eyed girls
give tit to the next generation's mindless hoe. Old men
with ringworm in their beards limp dusty lanes
to gather like bony dogs at the god-lined square
where the king's justice is dispensed; to nod like crows
at slips of the tongue by which a horse is lost, or delicate
mistakes
of venue through which murderers run free. "Long live
the king!" they squeak, "to whom we owe all joy!"
Obese with imagined freedom if not with fat, great lords
of lords look down with cowdog eyes and smile.

"All's well," they sigh. "Long live the king! All's well!"
 Law rules the land. Men's violence is chained
 to good (i.e., to the king): legitimate force
 that chops the bread-thief's neck and wipes its ax.—Death
 by book.

Think, sweating beast! Look up and think!
 Whence came these furs on the backs of your kind
 protectors?
 Why does the bread-thief die and the murdering thane
 escape by a sleight by the costliest of advocates?
 Think! Squeeze up your wrinkled face
 and seize the hangnail tip of a searing thought:
*Violence hacked this shack-filled hole in the woods where
 you
 play freedom games. Violence no more legitimate then
 than a wolf's. And now by violence they lock
 us in—you and me, old man: subdue our vile
 unkingly violence. Come into the shade.
 I would have a word with you and your wart-hog son.*

SCENE: *Hrothulf in the Woods.*

The nut tree, wide above my head,
 stretching its cool black limbs to take
 the sun, sends darkness down my chest.
 Its dappled, highcrowned roadways make

safe homes for birds; quick squirrels run
 the veins of its treasure-giving hand;
 but the ground below is dead.

Strange providence! Shall I call the tree
 tyrannical, since where it stands
 nothing survives but itself and its high-
 borne guests? Condemn it because it sends
 down stifling darkness, sucks the life
 from grass, and whitens the sapling leaf
 for trifling, fluttering friends?

The law of the world is a winter law,
 and casual. I too can be grim:
 snatch my daylight by violent will
 and be glorified for the deed, like him;
 drain my soil of Considerations,
 grip my desires like underground stones,
 let old things sicken and fail.

She touches my hair and smiles, kind,
 trusting the rhetoric of love: Give
 and get. But the thought flits through my mind,
 There have got to be stabler things than love.
 The blurred tree towering overhead
 consumes the sun; the ground is dead;
 I gasp for rain and wind.

SCENE: *The Queen Beside Hrothulf's Bed.*

Wealtheow speaks:

So sad so young? And even in sleep?
Worse times are yet to come, my love.
The babes you comfort when they weep
Will soon by birthright have

All these gold rings! Ah, then, then
Your almost-brother love will cool;
The cousin smile must grind out lean
Where younger cousins rule.

When I was a child I truly loved:
Unthinking love as calm and deep
As the North Sea. But I have lived,
And now I do not sleep.

In short, I watched the idea of violence growing in him, and apprehension in all of them, and I enjoyed myself (old hellroads-runner, earth-rim-roamer), sucking glee from spite,—O sucking to the pits! He hardly spoke when he first came, skinny, pimply, beardless except for the babyhair on his upper lip and chin. At the end of a year he never spoke at all, unless he was forced to it or found himself alone with the foul old old peasant he met in the

woods sometimes, his counselor. Hrothulf had hair as black as coal and hazel eyes that never blinked. He stood, always, with his head slung forward and his lips in a pout, like a man straining to remember something. The old man—he was nicknamed Red Horse—had a perpetually startled look, round, red eyes and mouth, white hair that flared around his high, empty dome like the beams of the sun: the look of a man who has suddenly remembered something. I followed the two down shaded paths, skull-lined, since I had used them often (but our travelers did not see the skulls)—Hrothulf stumbling over roots and stones, the old man swinging along on one stiff leg. He spit when he talked, his eyes bugged. He stunk.

"To step out of the region of legality requires an extraordinary push of circumstance," the old man yelled. He was deaf and shouted as if everyone else were too. "The incitement to violence depends upon total transvaluation of the ordinary values. By a single stroke, the most criminal acts must be converted to heroic and meritorious deeds. If the Revolution comes to grief, it will be because you and those you lead have become alarmed at your own brutality."

Hrothulf fell down. The old man went on swinging along the path, oblivious, waving his fists. Hrothulf looked around him in slight surprise, understood that he had fallen, and got up. He almost fell again as he ran to catch his adviser. "Make no mistake, my beloved prince," the old

man was yelling. "The total ruin of institutions and morals is an act of creation. A *religious* act. Murder and mayhem are the life and soul of revolution. I imagine you won't laugh when I tell you that. There are plenty of fools who would."

"Oh no, sir," said Hrothulf.

"The very soul! What does a kingdom pretend to do? Save the values of the community—regulate compromise—improve the quality of the commonwealth! In other words, protect the power of the people in power and keep the others down. By common agreement of course, so the fiction goes. And they do pretty well. We'll give them that."

Hrothulf nodded. "We have to give them that."

"Rewards to people who fit the System best, you know. King's immediate thanes, the thanes' top servants, and so on till you come to the people who don't fit at all. No problem. Drive them to the darkest corners of the kingdom, starve them, throw them in jail or put them out to war."

"That's how it works."

"But satisfy the greed of the majority, and the rest will do you no harm. That's it. You've still got your fiction of consent. If the lowest of the workers start grumbling, claim that the power of the state stands above society, regulating it, moderating it, keeping it within the bounds of order—an impersonal and higher authority of justice. And what if the workers are beyond your reconciliation? Cry 'Law!'

Cry 'Common good' and put on the pressure—arrest and execute a few."

"A stinking fraud," Hrothulf said, and bit his lip. There were tears in his eyes. The old serf laughed.

"Exactly, my boy! What is the state in a time of domestic or foreign crisis? What is the state when the chips are down? The answer is obvious and clear! Oh yes! If a few men quit work, the police move in. If the borders are threatened, the army rolls out. Public force is the life and soul of every state: not merely army and police but prisons, judges, tax collectors, every conceivable trick of coercive repression. The state is an organization of violence, a monopoly in what it is pleased to call *legitimate* violence. Revolution, my dear prince, is not the substitution of immoral for moral, or of illegitimate for legitimate violence; it is simply the pitting of power against power, where the issue is freedom for the winners and enslavement of the rest."

Hrothulf stopped. "That's not at all what I intend," he said. "There can be more freedom or less freedom in different states."

The old man stopped too, several steps ahead of him on the forest path, and looked back, polite by an effort. "Well, that may be," he said. He shrugged.

Hrothulf, though clumsy, was no fool. He said angrily (unaware of the irony that he, a prince, had a right to

anger, and the old man, a peasant, did not), "Nobody in his right mind would praise violence for its own sake, regardless of its ends!"

The old man shrugged and put on a childish smile. "But I'm a simple man, you see," he said, "and that's exactly what I do. All systems are evil. All governments are evil. Not just a trifle evil. *Monstrously* evil." Though he still smiled, he was shaking, only half controlling it. "If you want me to help you destroy a government, I'm here to serve. But as for Universal Justice—" He laughed.

Hrothulf puckered his lips, stared thoughtfully past him.

Hrothgar's nephew was kind, for all that, to the cousins he half intended to displace. He was a moody, lonely young man, after all, afraid of strangers, awkward even with the adults he knew well, and the cousins were plump blond children of three and four. There was one other cousin, Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter by a woman who'd died. Whenever Freawaru spoke to him, Hrothulf blushed.

He sat between the two boys at the table and helped them with their food, smiling when they talked but rarely answering. The queen would glance at the three now and then. So would others, sometimes. They all knew what was coming, though nobody believed it. Who can look into the wet-mouthed smiles of children and see a meadhall burn-

ing, or listen past their musical prattle to the midnight roar of fire?

—Except, of course, old Hrothgar. Violence and shame have lined the old man's face with mysterious calm. I can hardly look at him without a welling of confused, unpleasant emotion. He sits tall and still in his carved chair, stiff arms resting on the chair-sides, his clear eyes trained on the meadhall door where I'll arrive, if I come. When someone speaks to him, he answers politely and gently, his mind far away—on murdered thanes, abandoned hopes. He's a giant. He had in his youth the strength of seven men. Not now. He has nothing left but the power of his mind—and no pleasure there: a case of knives. The civilization he meant to build has transmogrified to a forest thick with traps. Hrothulf, he knows, is a danger to his sons; but he cannot abandon the child of his dead younger brother. Hygmod, his brother-in-law, is biding his time while Hrothgar lives, because of Wealtheow; but Hygmod, he knows, is no friend. And then there is a man named Ingeld, ruler of the Heathobards, as famous for slaughter as was Hrothgar in his day. The old man intends to deal out Freawaru to him; he has no assurance it will work. And then too there's his treasure-hoard. Another trap. A man plunders to build up wealth to pay his men and bring peace to the kingdom, but the hoard he builds for his safety becomes the lure of every marauder that happens

to hear of it. Hrothgar, keen of mind, is out of schemes. No fault of his. There are no schemes left. And so he waits like a man chained in a cave, staring at the entrance or, sometimes, gazing with sad, absent-minded eyes at Wealtheow, chained beside him. Who is one more trap, the worst. She's young, could have served a more vigorous man. And beautiful: need not have withered her nights and wasted her body on a bony, shivering wretch. She knows all this, which increases his pain and guilt. She understands the fear for his people that makes a coward of him, so that, that night when I attacked her, he would not lift a finger to preserve her. And his fear is one he cannot even be sure is generous; perhaps mere desire that his name and fame live on. She understands too his bitterness at growing old. She even understands—more terrible, no doubt, than all the rest—old Hrothgar's knowledge that peace must be searched through ordeal upon ordeal, with no final prospect but failure. Lesson on lesson they've suffered through, recognizing, more profoundly each time, their indignity, shame, triviality. It will continue.

How, if I know all this, you may ask, could I hound him—shatter him again and again, drive him deeper and deeper into woe? I have no answer, except perhaps this: why should I *not*? Has he made any move to deserve my kindness? If I give him a truce, will the king invite me in for a kiss on the forehead, a cup of mead? Ha! This

nobility of his, this dignity: are they not *my* work? What was he before? Nothing! A swollen-headed raider, full of boasts and stupid jokes and mead. No more noble than Red Horse, Hrothulf's friend. No one would have balked at my persecuting him then! I made him what he is. Have I not a right to test my own creation? Enough! Who says I have to defend myself? I'm a machine, like you. Like all of you. Blood-lust and rage are my character. Why does the lion not wisely settle down and be a horse? In any case, I too am learning, ordeal by ordeal, my indignity. It's all I have, my only weapon for smashing through these stiff coffin-walls of the world. So I dance in the moonlight, make foul jokes, or labor to shake the foundations of night with my heaped-up howls of rage. Something is bound to come of all this. I cannot believe such monstrous energy of grief can lead to nothing!

I have thought up a horrible dream to impute to Hrothgar.

Hrothgar speaks:

I have dreamt it again: standing suddenly still
In a thicket, among wet trees, stunned, minutely
Shuddering, hearing a wooden echo escape.
A mossy floor, almost colorless, disappears

GRENDDEL

In depths of rain among the tree shapes.
I am straining, tasting that echo a second longer.
If I can hold it . . . familiar if I can hold it . . .
A black tree with a double trunk—two trees
Grown into one—throws up its blurred branches.
The two trunks in their infinitesimal dance of growth
Have turned completely about one another, their join
A slowly twisted scar . . . that I recognize. . . .
A quick arc flashes sidewise in the air,
A heavy blade in flight. A wooden stroke:
Iron sinks in the gasping core.
I will dream it again.

December, approach
only way out of the
The trees are dead.
The days are an arrow
Snowlight blinds me
The creeks are frozen
I find dead wolves
through snow.
The trees are dead, a
through time and
snow, black cuts on
In the town, child