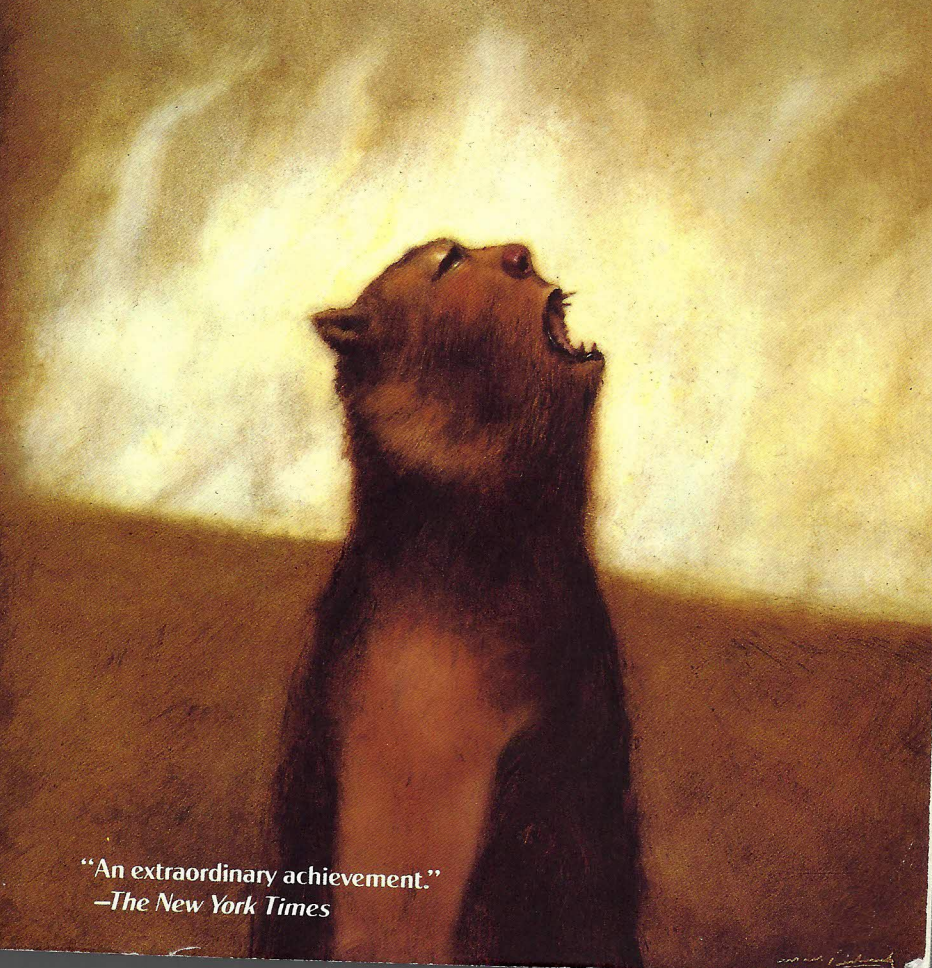


JOHN GARDNER

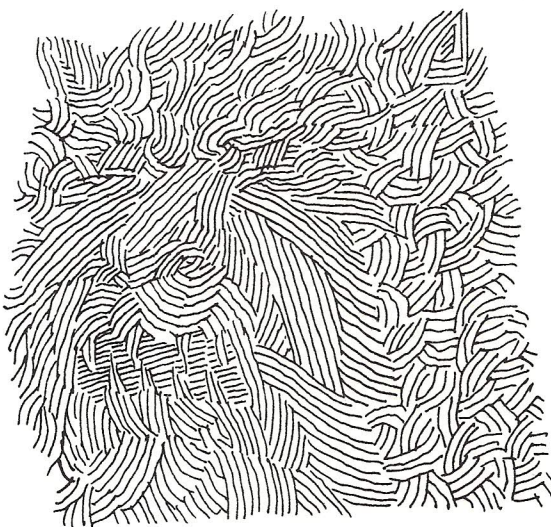
Grendel



"An extraordinary achievement."
—The New York Times

the tree shapes.
 echo a second longer.
 if I can hold it . . .
 the trunk—two trees
 up its blurred branches.
 infinitesimal dance of growth
 about one another, their join
 that I recognize. . . .
 rise in the air,
 A wooden stroke:
 g core.
 I will dream it again.

9



December, approaching the year's darkest night, and the
 only way out of the dream is down and through it.
 The trees are dead.
 The days are an arrow in a dead man's chest.
 Snowlight blinds me, heatless fire; pale, apocalyptic.
 The creeks are frozen; the deer show their ribs.
 I find dead wolves—a paw, a scraggly tail sticking up
 through snow.
 The trees are dead, and only the deepest religion can break
 through time and believe they'll revive. Against the
 snow, black cuts on a white, white hand.
 In the town, children go down on their backs in the

drifted snow and move their arms and, when they rise, leave behind them impressions, mysterious and ominous, of winged creatures. I come upon them as I move through sleeping streets to the meadhall, and though I know what they are, I pause and study them, picking at my lip.

I do not pretend to understand these feelings. I record them, check them off one by one for the dead ears of night.

Something is coming, strange as spring.

I am afraid.

Standing on an open hill, I imagine muffled footsteps overhead.

I watch one of Hrothgar's bowmen pursue a hart. The man, furred from his toes to his ears, walks through the moon-and-snowlit woods, silent as an owl, huge bow on his shoulder, his eyes on the dark tracks. He moves up a thickly wooded hill, and at the crest of it, standing as if waiting for him, he finds the hart. The antlers reach out, motionless, as still as the treelimb overhead or the stars above the trees. They're like wings, filled with otherworldly light. Neither the hart nor the hunter moves. Time is inside them, transferred from chamber to chamber like sand in an hourglass; it can no more get outside than sand in

the lower chamber can rise to the upper without a hand to turn stiff nature on its head. They face each other, unmoving as numbers on a stick. And then, incredibly, through the pale, strange light the man's hand moves—click click click click—toward the bow, and grasps it, and draws it down, away from the shoulder and around in front (click click) and transfers the bow to the slowly moving second hand, and the first hand goes back up and (click) over the shoulder and returns with an arrow, threads the bow. Suddenly time is a rush for the hart: his head flicks, he jerks, his front legs buckling, and he's dead. He lies as still as the snow hurtling outward around him to the hushed world's rim.

The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it.

Near Hrothgar's hall stand the images of the Scyldings' gods, grotesque faces carved out of wood or hacked from stone and set up in a circle, eyes staring inward, gazing thoughtfully at nothing. The priests approach them, carrying torches, their shaggy white heads bent, obsequious. "Great spirit," the chief of the priests wails, "ghostly Destroyer, defend the people of Scyld and kill their enemy, the terrible world-rim-walker!" I smile, arms folded on my chest, and wait, but nobody comes to kill me. They

sing, an antique language as ragged and strange as their beards, a language closer to mine than to their own. They march in a circle, from god to god—maybe uncertain which one is the Great Destroyer. "Is it you?" their meek old faces ask, lifting the torch to each monster-shape in turn. "Not I," whispers the head with four eyes. "Not I," whispers sly old dagger-tooth. "Not I," says the wolf-god, the bull-god, the horse-god, the happily smiling god with the nose like a pig's. They stab a calf and burn it, the corpse still jerking. The old peasant, friend of Prince Hrothulf, whispers crossly: "In the old days they used to kill virgins. Religion is sick."

Which is true. There is no conviction in the old priests' songs; there is only showmanship. No one in the kingdom is convinced that the gods have life in them. The weak observe the rituals—take their hats off, put them on again, raise their arms, lower their arms, moan, intone, press their palms together—but no one harbors unreasonable expectations. The strong—old Hrothgar, Unferth—ignore the images. The will to power resides among the stalactites of the heart. (Her-kapf.)

Once, years ago, for no particular reason, I wrecked the place; broke up the wooden gods like kindling and toppled the gods of stone. When they came out in the morning and saw what I'd done, no one was especially bothered except the priests. They lamented and tore their

hair, the priests, as fraught and rhetorical as they were when they prayed, and after a few days their outcries made people uneasy. On the chance that there might be something to it all, whatever a reasonable man might think, the people tipped the stone gods up again, with levers and ropes, and began to carve new gods of wood to replace those I'd ruined. It was dull work, you could see by their faces, but it was, for some reason, necessary. When the ring was complete, I considered wrecking it again, but the gods were inoffensive, dull. I decided the hell with it.

I have eaten several priests. They sit on the stomach like duck eggs.

Midnight. I sit in the center of the ring of gods, musing on them, pursuing some thought that I cannot make come clear. They wait, as quiet as upright bones in the softly falling snow. So Hrothgar waits, lying on his back with his eyes open. Wealtheow lies on her back beside him, her eyes open, her hand resting lightly in his. Hrothulf's breathing changes. He is having bad dreams. Unferth sleeps fitfully, guarding the meadhall; and the Shaper, in his big house, tosses and turns. He has a fever. He mumbles a few inchoate phrases to someone who is not there. All the gods have hats of snow and snow-crested noses. In the town

below me there are no lights left. Overhead, the stars are blanked out by clouds.

But someone is awake. I hear him coming toward me in the snow, vaguely alarming, approaching like an arrow in a slowed-down universe, and a shudder runs through me. Then I see him, and I laugh at my fear. An old priest, palsied, walking with a cane of ash. He thinks it has magic in it. "Who's there?" he pipes, coming to the edge of the ring. He has a black robe, and his beard, as white as the snow all around us, hangs almost to his knees. "Who's there?" he says again, and pokes himself through between two gods, feeling ahead of himself with the cane. "Is there somebody here?" he whimpers.

"It is I," I say. "The Destroyer."

A violent shock goes through him. He shakes all over, practically falls down. "My lord!" he whimpers. He goes down on his knees. "O blessed, blessed lord!" A look of doubt crosses his face, but he resists it. "I heard someone down here," he says. "I thought it was—" The doubt comes again, mixed with fear this time. He squints, cocks his head, struggling to penetrate his blindness by force of will. "I am Ork," he says uncertainly, "eldest and wisest of the priests." I smile, say nothing. I intend to paint the images with the old man's steaming blood. "I know all mysteries," the priest says. "I am the only man still living who has thought them all out."

"We are pleased with you, Ork," I say, voice very solemn. Then, suddenly impish—at times I cannot resist these things: "Tell us what you know of the King of the Gods."

"The King?" he says.

"The King." I do not giggle.

He rolls his blind eyes, figuring the odds, snatching through his mind for doctrines.

"Speak to us concerning His unspeakable beauty and danger," I say, and wait.

The snow falls softly on the images. The old priest, kneeling, has one knee on his beard and is unable to lift his head. He shakes all over, as if the palsy is something outside him, an element like wind.

"The King of Gods," he whispers, and searches his wits.

At last he folds his arthritic white hands, raises them before him like a nightmare flower, and speaks. "The King of the Gods is the ultimate limitation," he keens, "and His existence is the ultimate irrationality." A tic goes down one cheek; jerks the corner of his mouth. "For no reason can be given for just that limitation which it stands in His nature to impose. The King of the Gods is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality."

He tips his head, waiting for some response from me that will tell him how he's doing. I say nothing. The old

man clears his throat, and his face takes on an expression still more holy. The tic comes again.

"The King of the Gods is the actual entity in virtue of which the entire multiplicity of eternal objects obtains its graded relevance to each stage of concrescence. Apart from Him, there can be no relevant novelty."

I notice, with surprise, that the priest's blind eyes are brimming with tears. They seep down his cheeks into his beard. I raise my fingers to my mouth, baffled.

"The Chief God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of novel intensities. He is the *lure for our feeling*." Ork is now weeping profusely, so moved that his throat constricts. I observe in wonder. His knotted hands shake and sway.

"He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purposes of all creatures. He is an infinite patience, a tender care that nothing in the universe be vain."

He begins to moan, shaking violently, and it occurs to me that perhaps he is merely cold. But instead of hugging himself, as I expect him to, he stretches out his arms toward the sky, huge-knuckled fingers gnarled and twisted as if to frighten me. "O the ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil, such as hatred, or suffering, or death! The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetual perishing, and being actual involves elimination. The nature of evil may be epitomized, therefore, in two

simple but horrible and holy propositions: 'Things fade' and 'Alternatives exclude.' Such is His mystery: that beauty requires contrast, and that discord is fundamental to the creation of new intensities of feeling. Ultimate wisdom, I have come to perceive, lies in the perception that the solemnity and grandeur of the universe rise through the slow process of unification in which the diversities of existence are utilized, and nothing, *nothing* is lost." The old man falls forward, arms thrown out in front of him, and weeps with gratitude. I have trouble deciding what to do.

Before I can make up my mind about him, I become aware that there are others moving toward the place, drawn by the old man's keening. So quietly that even old Ork cannot hear me, I tiptoe out of the ring and hide behind a fat stone image of a god with a skull in his lap and a blacksmith's apron. Three of his fellow priests arrive. They gather around him, bend over to look at him. The snow falls on them softly.

FIRST PRIEST: Ork, what are you doing here? It is written that the old shall keep to the comfort of their beds!

SECOND PRIEST: It's a bad habit, beloved friend, this wandering about at night when monsters prowl.

THIRD PRIEST: Senility. I've been telling you the old fool's gone senile.

ORK: Brothers, I've talked with the Great Destroyer!

THIRD PRIEST: Bosh.

FIRST PRIEST: Blasphemy! It is written: "Ye shall not see my face."

SECOND PRIEST: Think what shape you'll be in for your morning devotions!

ORK: He stood as near to me as you are.

FIRST PRIEST: "Worship is the work of priests. What the gods do is the business of the gods." You know the text.

THIRD PRIEST: He's a blamed fool. If a man hankers for visions, he should do it in public, where it does us some good.

SECOND PRIEST: It doesn't look right, beloved friend, wandering around in the middle of the night. A man should try to be more regular.

ORK: Nevertheless, I saw him. My life of study and devotion has been rewarded! I told him my opinion of the King of the Gods, and he didn't deny it. I believe I'm approximately right.

FIRST PRIEST: The theory's ridiculous. Idle speculation. For it is written—

SECOND PRIEST: Please do come in with us, beloved friend. I hate being up after midnight. It ruins me the whole next day. It makes me put my clothes on wrong, and scramble the service, and eat incorrectly—

THIRD PRIEST: Lunatic priests are bad business. They give people the willies. One man like him can turn us all to paupers.

As I listen, shaking my head at the strangeness of the priestly conversation, another priest comes running up, younger than the others, pulling his outer robe on as he comes. They turn their heads, looking at the younger priest in annoyance. It occurs to me that perhaps he has been drinking. "What's this?" he cries. "Precious gods, what's this?" He throws his hands out, delighted by all he sees. Ork tells him what he has seen, and he listens in rapture. Before Ork has finished, the younger priest drops to his knees and throws his hands up, shaggy lips smiling, wild.

FOURTH PRIEST: Blessed! O blessed! (On his knees he goes over to Ork, seizes the old man's head between his hands, and kisses him.) I feared for you, dear blessed Ork—I feared your bloodless rationalism. But now I see, I see! The will of the gods! The rhythm is re-established! Merely rational thought—forgive me for preaching, but I must, I must!—merely rational thought leaves the mind incurably crippled in a closed and ossified system, it can only extrapolate from the past. But now at last, sweet fantasy has found root in your blessed soul! The absurd, the inspiring, the uncanny, the awesome, the terrifying, the ecstatic—none of these had a place, for you, before. But I should have seen it coming. O I *kick* myself for not seeing it coming! A vision of the Destroyer! Of course, of course!

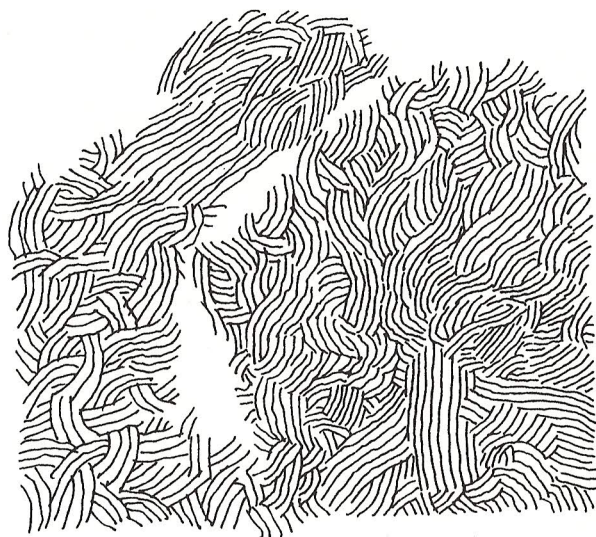
Before we know it, you'll be kissing girls! Can't you grasp it, brothers? Both blood and sperm are explosive, irregular, feeling-pitched, messy—and inexplicably fascinating! They transcend! They leap the gap! O blessed Ork! I believe your vision proves there is hope for us all!

So he raves, overflowing with meadbowl joy, and the older three priests look down at him as they would at a wounded snake. Ork ignores him, sniffing privately. I back away. Even a monster's blood-lust can be stifled by such talk. They remain inside the image ring, snow falling softly on their hair and beards, and except for their forms, their prattle, the town is dead.

Hrothgar is asleep now, resting up for tomorrow's ordeal of waiting. Wealtheow breathes evenly, beside him. Hrothulf and the king's two children are asleep. In the main hall, row on row in their wall-hung beds, the guardians snore, except Unferth. Puffy-eyed, he gets up, and in a kind of stupor goes to the meadhall door to piss. A dog barks—not at me: I have put my spell on them. Unferth hardly hears. He looks out over the snowy rooftops of the town to the snowy moor, the snowy woods, unaware of my presence behind the wall. The snow falls softly through the trees, closing up the foxes' dens, burying

the tracks of sleeping deer. A wolf, asleep with his head on his paws, awakens at the sound of my footsteps and opens his eyes but does not lift his head. He watches me pass, his gray eyes hostile, then sleeps again, his cave half hidden by snow.

I do not usually raid in the winter, when the world is a corpse. I would be wiser to be curled up, asleep like a bear, in my cave. My heart moves slowly, like freezing water, and I cannot clearly recall the smell of blood. And yet I am restless. I would fall, if I could, through time and space to the dragon. I cannot. I walk slowly, wiping the snow from my face with the back of my arm. There is no sound on earth but the whispering snowfall. I recall something. A void boundless as a nether sky. I hang by the twisted roots of an oak, looking down into immensity. Vastly far away I see the sun, black but shining, and slowly revolving around it there are spiders. I pause in my tracks, puzzled—though not stirred—by what I see. But then I am in the woods again, and the snow is falling, and everything alive is fast asleep. It is just some dream. I move on, uneasy; waiting.



Tedium is the worst pain.

The dull victim, staring, vague-eyed, at seasons that never were meant to be observed.

The sun walks mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan.

"The gods made this world for our joy!" the young priest squeals. The people listen to him dutifully, heads bowed. It does not impress them, one way or the other, that he's crazy.

The scent of the dragon is a staleness on the earth.

The Shaper is sick.

I watch a great horned goat ascend the rocks toward my mere. I have half a mind to admire his bottomless stupidity. "Hey, goat!" I yell down. "There's nothing here. Go back." He lifts his head, considers me, then lowers it again to keep an eye on crevasses and seams, icy scree, slick rocky ledges—doggedly continuing. I tip up a boulder and let it fall thundering toward him. His ears flap up in alarm, he stiffens, looks around him in haste, and jumps. The boulder bounds past him. He watches it fall, then turns his head, looks up at me disapprovingly. Then, lowering his head again, he continues. It is the business of goats to climb. He means to climb. "Ah, goat, goat!" I say as if deeply disappointed in him. "Use your reason! There's nothing here!" He keeps on coming. I am suddenly annoyed, no longer amused by his stupidity. The mere belongs to me and the firesnakes. What if everybody should decide the place is public? "Go back down, goat!" I yell at him. He keeps on climbing, mindless, mechanical, because it is the business of goats to climb. "Not here," I yell. "If climbing's your duty to the gods, go climb the meadhall." He keeps on climbing. I run back from the edge to a dead tree, throw myself against it and break it off and drag it back to the cliffwall. "You've had fair warning," I yell at him. I'm enraged now. The words come

echoing back to me. I lay the tree sideways, wait for the goat to be in better range, then shove. It drops with a crash and rolls crookedly toward him. He darts left, reverses himself and bounds to the right, and a limb catches him. He bleats, falling, flopping over with a jerk too quick for the eye, and bleats again, scrambling, sliding toward the ledge-side. The tree, slowly rolling, drops out of sight. His sharp front hooves dig in and he jerks onto his feet, but before his balance is sure my stone hits him and falls again. I leap down to make certain he goes over this time. He finds his feet the same instant that my second stone hits. It splits his skull, and blood sprays out past his dangling brains, yet he doesn't fall. He threatens me, blind. It's not easy to kill a mountain goat. He thinks with his spine. A death tremor shakes his flanks, but he picks toward me, jerking his great twisted horns at air. I back off, upward toward the mere the goat will never reach. I smile, threatened by an animal already dead, still climbing. I snatch up a stone and hurl it. It smashes his mouth, spraying out teeth, and penetrates to the jugular. He drops to his knees, gets up again. The air is sweet with the scent of his blood. Death shakes his body the way high wind shakes trees. He climbs toward me. I snatch up a stone.

At dusk I watch men go about their business in the towns of the Scyldings. Boys and dogs drive the horses and oxen

to the river and break through the ice to let them drink. Back at the barns, men carry in hay on wooden forks, dump grain in the mangers, and carry out manure. A wheelwright and his helper squat in their dark room hammering spokes into a hub. I listen to the grunt, the blow of the hammer, the grunt, the blow, like the sound of a leaky heart. Smells of cooking. Gray wood-smoke rises slowly toward a lead-gray sky. On the rocky cliffs looking out to sea, Hrothgar's watchmen, each man posted several stone's-throws away from the next, sit huddled in furs, on their horses' backs, or stand in the shelter of an outcropping ledge, rubbing their hands together, stamping their feet. No one will strike at the kingdom from the sea: icebergs drift a mile out, grinding against one another from time to time, letting out a low moan like the sigh of some huge sea-beast. The guards watch anyway, obedient to orders the king has forgotten to cancel.

People eat, leaning over their food together, seldom talking. The lamp at the center of the table lights their eyes. Dogs beside the men's legs wait, looking up from time to time, and the girl who brings the food from the stove stands looking at the wall as she waits for the plates to empty. An old man, finished before the rest, goes out to bring in wood. I spy on an old woman telling lies to children. (Her face is dark with some disease, and the veins on the backs of her hands are ropes. She is too old

to sweep or cook.) She tells of a giant across the sea who has the strength of thirty thanes. "Someday he will come here," she tells the children. Their eyes widen. A bald old man looks up from his earthenware plate and laughs. A gray dog pushes against his leg. He kicks it.

The sun stays longer each day now, climbing mechanical as a goat off the leaden horizon. Children slide down the hills on shaped boards, sending their happy cries through drifted stillness. As twilight deepens, their mothers call them in. A few feign deafness. A shadow looms over them (mine) and they're gone forever.

So it goes.

Darkness. At the house of the Shaper, people come and go, solemn faced, treading softly, their heads bowed and their hands folded for fear of sending dreadful apparitions through his dreams. His attendant, the boy who came here with him—a grown man now—sits by the old man's bed and plays pale runs on the old man's harp. The old man turns his blind head, rising from confusion to listen. He asks about a certain woman who does not come. No answer.

But the king comes, with the queen on his arm, young Hrothulf walking four steps behind them, holding the hands of their children. The king sits beside the Shaper's

bed as he sits in the hall, motionless, his patient eyes staring. Hrothulf and the children wait out in the entry room. The queen puts her fingertips gently on the old man's forehead.

The Shaper whispers for the lamp. The attendant pretends to bring it, though it stands already on the table beside his bed. "That's better," the queen says dutifully, and the king says, as if he couldn't see well before, "You look healthier today." The Shaper says nothing. Crouched in the bushes beside the path, peeking in like a whiskered old voyeur, wet-lipped, red-eyed, my chest filled with some meaningless anguish, I watch the old man working up the nerve to let his heart stop. "Where are all his fine phrases now?" I whisper to the night. I chuckle. The night, as usual, doesn't comment.

He sits motionless, propped up in bed, deathwhite hands folded on top of the covers: his eyes, once webbed with visions, are shut. The young man, the attendant sitting with the harp, does not play. The king and queen wait, dutiful, probably counting the time off in their heads, and the herbalist—humpbacked, robed in black (a tic screws taut one whole side of his face)—the herbalist, no longer useful to the onetime king of poets, paces back and forth slowly, rubbing his hands. He waits for the soft, dry throat-rattle that will free him to go pace elsewhere.

The Shaper speaks. They bend closer. "I see a time," he says, "when the Danes once again—" His voice trails off; puzzlement crosses his forehead, and one hand reaches up feebly as if to smooth it away but forgets before it can find the forehead, and falls back to the covers. He lifts his head a little, listening for footsteps. There are none. The head drops back weakly. His visitors wait on. They do not seem to realize that he is dead.

In another house, at a large, carved table, a middle-aged woman with hair just slightly less red than the queen's (she has close-together eyes and eyebrows plucked neat as the lines of a knife wound) sits by lamplight listening, as he did, for footsteps. Her nobleman husband lies sleeping in a nearby room, his head on his arm, as if listening to his heartbeat. She is a lady I have watched with the greatest admiration. Soul of fidelity, decorum. The Shaper would tip his whitened head, blind eyes staring at the floor whenever the lady spoke, and from time to time, when he sang of heroes, of ship-backs broken, there was no mistaking that he sang the song for her. Nothing came of it. She would leave the hall on her husband's arm: the Shaper would bow politely as she passed.

She hears them coming. I duck back into the gloom to watch and wait. The messenger the Shaper's attendant has sent goes up to the door and has hardly knocked once when the door opens inward and the lady appears,

staring through him. "He's dead," says the messenger. The lady nods. When the messenger is gone, the lady comes out onto the steps and stands with her arms locked, expressionless. She looks up the hill toward the meadhall.

"So all of us must sooner or later pass," I am tempted to whisper. "Alas! Woe!" I resist.

Only the wind is alive, pressing her robe to her fat, loose hips and bosom. The woman is as still as the dead man in his bed. I am tempted to snatch her. How her squeals would dance on the icicle-walls of the night! But I back away. I look in on the Shaper one more time. The old women are arranging him, putting gold coins on his eyelids to preserve him from seeing where he goes. At last, unsatisfied as ever, I slink back home.

In my cave the tedium is worse, of course. My mother no longer shows any sign of sanity, hurrying back and forth, wall to wall, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four, dark forehead furrowed like a new-plowed field, her eyes glittering and crazy as a captured eagle's. Each time I come in she gets between me and the door, as if to lock me up with her forever. I endure it, for the time. When I sleep, she presses close to me, half buries me under her thistly fur and fat. "Dool-dool," she moans. She drools and weeps. "Warovvish," she whimpers, and

tears at herself. Hanks of fur come away in her claws. I see gray hide. I study her, cool and objective in my corner, and because now the Shaper is dead, strange thoughts come over me. I think of the pastness of the past: how the moment I am alive in, prisoned in, moves like a slowly tumbling form through darkness, the underground river. Not only ancient history—the mythical age of the brothers' feud—but my own history one second ago, has vanished utterly, dropped out of existence. King Scyld's great deeds do not exist "back there" in Time. "Back there in Time" is an allusion of language. They do not exist at all. My wickedness five years ago, or six, or twelve, has no existence except as now, mumbling, mumbling, sacrificing the slain world to the omnipotence of words, I strain my memory to regain it. I snatch by my wits a time when I was very small and my mama held me softly in her arms. Ah, ah, how I loved you, Mama—dead these many years! I snatch a time when I crouched outside the meadhall hearing the first strange hymns of the Shaper. Beauty! Holiness! How my heart rocked! He is dead. I should have captured him, teased him, tormented him, made a fool of him. I should have cracked his skull midsong and sent his blood spraying out wet through the meadhall like a shocking change of key. One evil deed missed is a loss for all eternity.

I decide, naturally, to attend his funeral. She tries to prevent me. I lift her by the armpits as though she were a child and, gently, I set her aside. Her face trembles, torn, I think, between terror and self-pity. It crosses my mind that she knows something, but she doesn't, I know. The future is as dark, as unreal, as the past. Coolly, objectively, I watch the trembling; it's as if all the muscles are locked to the charge of an eel. Then I push her away. The face shatters, she whoops. I run to the pool and dive, and even now I can hear her. I will forget, tomorrow, so her pain is a matter of indifference.

And so to the funeral.

The Shaper's assistant, cradling the old man's polished harp, sings of Hoc and Hildeburh and Hnaef and Hengest, how Finn's thanes fought with his wife's dear kinsmen and killed King Hnaef, and a terrible thing ensued. When Finn had few men and his enemies had no king, they made a truce, and the terms were these: that Finn would be lord of the lordless Danes, because a king without men is a worthless thing, and thanes without a lord are exiles. Both sides made vows, swore the duty of peace, and so winter came, in its time, to the country of the Jutes.

The people listen silent and solemn to the old Shaper's song on the young man's lips, and the pyre where the old man lies stands waiting for fire. The dead arms are

crossed, the features are stiff and blue, as if frozen. Ice glints on the sides of the pyre. The world is white.

*Young Hengest still
through slaughter-dark winter stayed with Finn,
heart sorrowing. He thought of home,
though he could not drive on the dark sea
his ring-prowed ship; for the sea-air rolled,
dusky with wind, and the waves were locked
in ice. Then another season came,
another year, as the years do yet,
bright shining weather awaiting its time.
The winter was gone, earth's breast was fair,
and the exiled Hengest was eager to go,
unwilling guest from the dwelling.—Yet as
ice-chains locked the land, so Hengest's heart
was locked: revenge called harder to him than home.
He cried in his mind for quarrel, and quarrel came.
Then Finn lay down in blood, bold king
with all his company, and the queen was taken;
and, loaded with rings King Finn could not refuse,
the Danes sailed home. Men's double vows
soon wash away. Spring rain drips down through rafters.*

So he sings, looking down, recalling and repeating the words, hands light on the harp. The king listens, dry-eyed, his mind far, far away. Prince Hrothulf stands with the

children of Hrothgar and Wealtheow, his features revealing no more secrets than does snow. Men light the pyre. Unferth stares at the flames with eyes like stones. I too watch the fire, as well as I can. Colorless it seems. A more intense place in the brightness of snow and ice. It flames high at once, as if hungry for the coarse, lean meat. The priests walk slowly around the pyre, saying antique prayers, and the crowd, all in black, ignoring the black priests, keens. I watch the burning head burst, bare of visions, dark blood dripping from the corner of the mouth and ear.

End of an epoch, I could tell the king.

We're on our own again. Abandoned.

I awaken with a start and imagine I hear the goat still picking at the cliffwall, climbing to the mere. Something groans, far out at sea.

My mother makes sounds. I strain my wits toward them, clench my mind. *Beware the fish.*

I get up and walk, filled with restless expectation, though I know there is nothing to expect.

I am not the only monster on these moors.

I met an old woman as wild as the wind

Striding in white out of midnight's den.

Her cloak was in rags, and her flesh it was lean,

And her eyes, her murdered eyes . . .

Scent of the dragon.

I should sleep, drop war till spring as I normally do.

When I sleep I wake up in terror, with hands on my throat.

A stupid business.

Nihil ex nihilo, I always say.

II



I am mad with joy.—At least I think it's joy. Strangers have come, and it's a whole new game. I kiss the ice on the frozen creeks, I press my ear to it, honoring the water that rattles below, for by water they came: the icebergs parted as if gently pushed back by enormous hands, and the ship sailed through, sea-eager, foamy-necked, white sails riding the swan-road, flying like a bird! O happy Grendel! Fifteen glorious heroes, proud in their battle dress, fat as cows!

I could feel them coming as I lay in the dark of my cave. I stirred, baffled by the strange sensation, squinting into dark corners to learn the cause. It drew me as the

mind of the dragon did once. *It's coming!* I said. More clearly than ever I heard the muffled footsteps on the dome of the world, and even when I realized that the footsteps were nothing but the sound of my own heart, I knew more surely than before that something was coming. I got up, moved past stone icicles to the pool and the sunken door. My mother made no move to prevent me. At the pool, firesnakes shot away from me in all directions, bristling, hissing, mysteriously wrought up. They had sensed it too. That beat—steady, inhumanly steady; inexorable. And so, an hour before dawn, I crouched in shadows at the rocky sea-wall, foot of the giants' work. Low tide. Lead-gray water sucked quietly, stubborn and deliberate, at icy gray boulders. Gray wind teased leafless trees. There was no sound but the ice-cold surge, the cry of a gannet, invisible in grayness above me. A whale passed, long dark shadow two miles out. The sky grew light at my back. Then I saw the sail.

I was not the only one who saw them coming. A lone Danish coastguard stood bundled in furs, his horse beside him, and he shaded his eyes against the glint of the icebergs beyond the sail and watched the strangers come swiftly in toward land. The wooden keel struck sand and cut a gouge toward the boulders on the shore—a forty-foot cut, half the length of the ship—and then, quick as wolves—but mechanical, terrible—the strangers leaped

down, and with stiff, ice-crusting ropes as gray as the sea, the sky, the stones, they moored their craft. Their chain-mail rattled as they worked—never speaking, walking dead men—lashing the helm-bar, lowering the sail, unloading ash-spear shafts and battle-axes. The coastguard mounted, snatched up his spear, and rode loudly down to meet them. His horse's hooves shot sparks. I laughed. If they were here for war, the coastguard was a goner.

"What are ye, bearers of armor, dressed in mail-coats, that have thus come riding your tall ship over the sea-road, winter-cold ocean, here to Daneland?" Thus spake the coastguard. Wind took his words and sent them tumbling.

I bent double, soundlessly laughing till I thought I'd split. They were like trees, these strangers. Their leader was big as a mountain, moving with his forest toward the guard. Nevertheless, the Dane shook his spear the way attackers do when they're telling a man what they're going to do with his testicles. "Attaboy!" I whisper. I shadow box. "If they come at you, bite 'em in the leg!"

He scolded and fumed and demanded their lineage; they listened with folded arms. The wind blew colder. At last the coastguard's voice gave out—he bent over the pommel, coughing into his fist—and the leader answered. His voice, though powerful, was mild. Voice of a dead thing, calm as dry sticks and ice when the wind blows

over them. He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or so it seemed for an instant, from a dream I had almost forgotten. The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snake's. He had no more beard than a fish. He smiled as he spoke, but it was as if the gentle voice, the childlike yet faintly ironic smile were holding something back, some magician-power that could blast stone cliffs to ashes as lightning blasts trees.

"We're Geats," he said, "the hearth-companions of King Hygilac. You've heard of my father. A famous old man named Ecgtheow." His mind, as he spoke, seemed far away, as if, though polite, he were indifferent to all this—an outsider not only among the Danes but everywhere. He said: "We've come as friends for a visit with your lord King Hrothgar, protector of the people." He tipped his head, pausing. You'd have thought he had centuries. At last with a little shrug, he said, "Be so kind as to give us some advice, old man. We've come on a fairly important errand." The hint of irony in the smile grew darker, and he looked now not at the coastguard but at the coastguard's horse. "A certain thing can't very well be kept hidden, I think. You'll know if it's true, as we heard back home, that I don't know what kind of enemy stalks your hall at night—kills men, so they say, and for some reason scorns your warriors. If it's so—" He paused, his eyebrows

cocked, and glanced at the coastguard and smiled. "I've come to give Hrothgar advice."

You could see pretty well what advice he'd give. His chest was as wide as an oven. His arms were like beams. "Come ahead," I whispered. "Make your play. Do your worst." But I was less sure of myself than I pretended. Staring at his grotesquely muscled shoulders—stooped, naked despite the cold, sleek as the belly of a shark and as rippled with power as the shoulders of a horse—I found my mind wandering. If I let myself, I could drop into a trance just looking at those shoulders. He was dangerous. And yet I was excited, suddenly alive. He talked on. I found myself not listening, merely looking at his mouth, which moved—or so it seemed to me—independent of the words, as if the body of the stranger were a ruse, a disguise for something infinitely more terrible. Then the coastguard turned his horse and led them up to where the stone-paved road began, gray as the sea, between snow-banks. "I'll have men guard your ship," he said. He pointed out the meadhall, high on its hill above the town. Then he turned back. The sea-pale eyes of the stranger were focused on nothing. He and his company went on, their weapons clinking, chain-mail jangling, solemn and ominous as drums. They moved like one creature, huge strange machine. Sunlight gleamed on their helmets and cheekguards and flashed off their spearpoints, blinding.

I did not follow. I stayed in the ruin, prowling where long-dead giants prowled, my heart aching to know what the strangers were doing now, up at the meadhall. But it was daylight; I'd be a fool to go up and see.

I couldn't tell, back in my cave, whether I was afraid of them or not. My head ached from staying too long in the sunlight, and my hands had no grip. It was as if they were asleep. I was unnaturally conscious, for some reason, of the sounds in the cave: the roar of the underground river hundreds of feet below our rooms, reaming out walls, driving deeper and deeper; the centuries-old drip-drip of seepage building stalagmites, an inch in a hundred years; the spatter of the spring three rooms away—the room of the pictures half buried in stone—where the spring breaks through the roof. Half awake, half asleep, I felt as if I were myself the cave, my thoughts coursing downward through my own strange hollows . . . or some impulse older and darker than thought, as old as the mindless mechanics of a bear, the twilight meditations of a wolf, a tree . . .

Who knows what all this means? Neither awake nor asleep, my chest filled with an excitement like joy, I tried to think whether or not I was afraid of the strangers, and the thought made no sense. It was unreal—insubstantial as spiderweb-strands blowing lightly across a window that looks out on trees. I have sometimes watched men do

mysterious things. A man with a wife and seven children, a carpenter with a fair reputation as wise, not maddened by passions, not given to foolishness—regular of habit, dignified in bearing, a dedicated craftsman (no edge unbeveled, no ragged peg, no gouge or split)—once crept from his house at the edge of the town while his family slept, and fled down snowy paths through woods to the house of a hunter away in search of game. The hunter's wife admitted him, and he slept with her until the second rooster crowed; then he fled back home. Who knows why? Tedium is the worst pain. The mind lays out the world in blocks, and the hushed blood waits for revenge. All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal—a harmless, sensible, smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world—two snake-pits. The watchful mind lies, cunning and swift, about the dark blood's lust, lies and lies and lies until, weary of talk, the watchman sleeps. Then sudden and swift the enemy strikes from nowhere, the cavernous heart. Violence is truth, as the crazy old peasant told Hrothulf. But the old fool only half grasped what he said. He had never conversed with a dragon. And the stranger?

Afraid or not, I would go to the meadhall, I knew. I toyed, of course, with the ridiculous theory that I'd stay where I was safe, like a sensible beast. "Am I not free?—as free as a bird?" I whispered, leering, maniacal. I have

seen—I embody—the vision of the dragon: absolute, final waste. I saw long ago the whole universe as not-my-mother, and I glimpsed my place in it, a hole. *Yet I exist*, I knew. *Then I alone exist*, I said. *It's me or it*. What glee, that glorious recognition! (The cave my cave is a jealous cave.) For even my mama loves me not for myself, my holy specialness (he he ho ha), but for my son-ness, my possessedness, my displacement of air as visible proof of her power. I have set her aside—gently, picking her up by the armpits as I would a child—and so have proved that she has no power but the little I give her by momentary whim. So I might set aside Hrothgar's whole kingdom and all his thanes if I did not, for sweet desire's sake, set limits to desire. If I murdered the last of the Scyldings, what would I live for? I'd have to move.

So now, for once unsure of victory, I might set limits to desire: go to sleep, put off further raids till the Geats go home. For the world is divided, experience teaches, into two parts: things to be murdered, and things that would hinder the murder of things: and the Geats might reasonably be defined either way. So I whispered, wading through drifts waist-high, inexorably on my way to Hrothgar's meadhall. Darkness lay over the world like a coffin lid. I hurried. It would be a shame to miss the boasting. I came to the hall, bent down at my chink, peered in. The wind was shrill, full of patterns.

It was a scene to warm the cockles of your heart. The Danes were not pleased, to say the least, that the Geats had come to save them. Honor is very big with them; they'd rather be eaten alive than be bailed out by strangers. The priests weren't happy either. They'd been saying for years that the ghostly Destroyer would take care of things in time. Now here were these foreigner upstarts unmasking religion! My old friend Ork sat shaking his head in dismay, saying nothing, brooding, no doubt, on the dark metaphysical implications. Things fade; alternatives exclude. Whichever of us might exclude the other, when the time came for me and the stranger to meet, the eyes of the people would be drawn to the instance, they would fail to rise to the holy idea of process. Theology does not thrive in the world of action and reaction, change: it grows on calm, like the scum on a stagnant pool. And it flourishes, it prospers, on decline. Only in a world where everything is patently being lost can a priest stir men's hearts as a poet would by maintaining that nothing is in vain. For old times' sake, for the old priest's honor, I would have to kill the stranger. And for the honor of Hrothgar's thanes.

The Danes sat sulking, watching the strangers eat, wishing some one of them would give them an excuse to use their daggers. I covered my mouth to keep from cackling. The king presided, solemn and irritable. He knew that his

thanes couldn't handle me alone, and he was too old and tired to be much impressed—however useful it might be to his kingdom—by their fathead ideas of honor. *Get through the meal, that's the thing*, he was thinking. *Keep them from wasting their much touted skills on one another.* The queen wasn't present. Situation much too touchy.

Then up spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son, top man in Hrothgar's hall. He had a nose like a black, deformed potato, eyes like a couple of fangs. He leaned forward over the table and pointed the dagger he'd been eating with. "Say, friend," he said to the beardless leader of the Geats, "are you the same man that went swimming that time with young Breca—risked your lives in the middle of the winter for nothing—for a crazy meadboast?"

The stranger stopped eating, smiled.

"We heard about that," Unferth said. "Nobody could stop you—kings, priests, councilors—nobody. Splash! *Uh, uh, uh!*" Unferth made swimming motions, eyes rolled up, mouth gasping. The thanes around him laughed. "The sea boiled with waves, fierce winter swells. Seven nights you swam, so people say." He made his face credulous, and the Danes laughed again. "And at last Breca beat you, much stronger than you were. He proved his boast against you—for what it may be worth." The Danish thanes laughed. Even Hrothgar smiled. Unferth grew serious, and

now only the stranger went on smiling, he alone and the huge Geats next to him, patient as timberwolves. Unferth pointed with his dagger, giving friendly advice. "I predict it will go even worse for you tonight. You may have had successes—I haven't heard. But wait up for Grendel for one night's space and all your glorious successes will be done with."

The Danes applauded. The stranger smiled on, his downward-slanting eyes like empty pits. I could see his mind working, stone-cold, grinding like a millwheel. When the hall was still, he spoke, soft-voiced, his weird gaze focused nowhere. "Ah, friend Unferth, drunk with mead you've said a good deal about Breca. The truth is, nevertheless, that I beat him. I'm stronger in the ocean than any other man alive. Like foolish boys we agreed on the match and boasted, yes . . . we were both very young . . . swore we'd risk our lives in the sea, and did so. We took swords with us, swimming one-handed, to fight off whales."

Unferth laughed, and the others followed, as was right. It was preposterous.

The stranger said, "Breca couldn't swim away from me, for all his strength—a man with arms like yours, friend Unferth—and as for myself, I chose not to swim away from him. Thus we swam for five nights, and then a storm came up, icy wind from the north, black sky, raging waves,

and we were separated. The turmoil stirred up the sea-monsters. One of them attacked me, dragged me down to the bottom where the weight of the sea would have crushed any other man. But it was granted to me that I might kill him with my sword, which same I did. Then others attacked. They pressed me hard. I killed them, nine old water nickers, robbed them of the feast they expected at the bottom of the sea. In the morning, sword-ripped, they lay belly-up near shore. They'd trouble no more passing sailors after that. Light came from the east and, behold, I saw headlands, and I swam to them. Fate often enough will spare a man if his courage holds."

Now the Danes weren't laughing. The stranger said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for what came next. Nobody was. Solemn, humorless despite the slightly ironic smile, he suddenly cut deep—yet with the same mildness, the same almost inhuman indifference except for the pale flash of fire in his eyes. "Neither Breca nor you ever fought such battles," he said. "I don't boast much of that. Nevertheless, I don't recall hearing any glorious deeds of yours, except that you murdered your brothers. You'll prowl the stalagmites of hell for that, friend Unferth—clever though you are."

The hall was numb. The stranger was no player of games.

And yet he was shrewd, you had to grant. Whether or not they believed his wild tale of superhuman strength, no thane in the hall would attack him again and risk the slash of that mild, coolly murderous tongue.

Old King Hrothgar, for one, was pleased. The madman's single-mindedness would be useful in a monster fight. He spoke: "Where's the queen? We're all friends in this hall! Let her come to us and pass the bowl!"

She must have been listening behind her door. She came out, radiant, and crossed swiftly to the great golden bowl on the table by the hearth. As if she'd brought light and warmth with her, men began talking, joking, laughing, both Danes and Geats together. When she'd served all the Danes and the lesser Geats, she stood, red hair flowing, her neck and arms adorned in gold, by the leader of the strangers. "I thank God," she said, "that my wish has been granted, that at last I have found a man whose courage I can trust."

The stranger smiled, glanced at Unferth. Hrothgar's top man had recovered a little, though his neck was still dark red.

"We'll see," the stranger said.

And again I found something peculiar happening to my mind. His mouth did not seem to move with his words,

and the harder I stared at his gleaming shoulders, the more uncertain I was of their shape. The room was full of a heavy, unpleasant scent I couldn't place. I labor to remember something: twisted roots, an abyss . . . I lose it. The queer little spasm of terror passes. Except for his curious beardlessness, there is nothing frightening about the stranger. I've broken the backs of bulls no weaker than he is.

Hrothgar made speeches, his hand on the queen's. Unferth sat perfectly still, no longer blushing. He was struggling to make himself hope for the stranger's success, no doubt. *Heroism is more than noble language, dignity. Inner heroism, that's the trick! Glorious carbuncle of the soul! Except in the life of the hero the whole world's meaningless.* He took a deep breath. He would try to be a better person, yes. He forced a smile, but it twisted, out of his control. Tears! He got up suddenly and, without a word, walked out.

Hrothgar told the hall that the stranger was like a son to him. The queen's smile was distant, and the nephew, Hrothulf, picked at the table with a dirty fingernail. "You already have more sons than you need," the queen laughed lightly. Hrothgar laughed too, though he didn't seem to get it. He was tipsy. The stranger went on sitting with the same unlighted smile. The old king chatted of his plans for Freawaru, how he would marry her off to his enemy, the king of the Heathobards. The stranger

smiled on, but closed his eyes. He knew a doomed house when he saw it, I had a feeling; but for one reason or another he kept his peace. I grew more and more afraid of him and at the same time—who can explain it?—more and more eager for the hour of our meeting.

The queen rose, at last, and retired. The fire in the hearth had now died down. The priests filed out to the god-ring to do their devotions. Nobody followed. I could hear them in the distance: "O ghostly Destroyer . . ." The cold ring of gods stared inward with large, dead eyes.

It is the business of rams to be rams and of goats to be goats, the business of shapers to sing and of kings to rule. The stranger waits on, as patient as a grave-mound. I too wait, whispering, whispering, mad like him. Time grows, obeying its mechanics, like all of us. So the young Shaper observes, singing to the few who remain, fingertips troubling a dead man's harp.

*Frost shall freeze, and fire melt wood;
the earth shall give fruit, and ice shall bridge
dark water, make roofs, mysteriously lock
earth's flourishings; but the fetters of frost
shall also fall, fair weather return,
and the reaching sun restore the restless sea. . . .*

We wait.

The king retires, and his people leave.

GRENDDEL

The Geats build up the fire, prepare to sleep.

And now, silence.

Darkness.

It is time.

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