

The Seafarer

An abridged version

Translated from the Anglo-Saxon

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Translator's Note: This is an abridged version. I have concluded with line 99, as did Pound, for artistic coherence, and from lack of sympathy with the undistinguished ending of the manuscript. Instead of displaying the caesura between half-lines of the original Exeter Book (which is dated prior to 1050AD), or running the two halves of each line together as in Pound's translation, I have preferred, for clarity and impact, to give each half-line as a separate full line. The original Old English text may be found online [here](#).

The Seafarer

May I of my own self 1
Truth's song reckon,
Tell of my traverse,
How I oft endured
Days of hardship
Times of trouble,
Bitter the breast-care
That I suffered,
Known at my keel 5
Many a care's hold,
Dread wave-fall
When wary night-watch
Found me often
There at the ship's stem,
Wave-tossed, by cliff-wall.
Cold-fettered
My feet
Frost-bound
In cold clasp, 10
Where cares seethed then
Hot at the heart;
Hunger within tore
The sea-weary soul.

This knows he not
Who on land
Lives lightly,
How I care-wretched
On ice-cold ocean
Weathered winter 15
In ways of exile,
Bereft of my brethren,
Hung with ice-shards;
Hail showers flew.
There I heard naught
But sea roaring,
Ice-cold wave.
Whiles the swan's song
Had I for pleasure; 20
Gannet's clamour,
Curlew's crying,
For men's laughter;
The mew's singing
For mead-drinking.

Storms beat on stony cliffs
Where spoke the tern,
Icy-feathered;
Full oft the eagle screamed
Sea-foam-feathered; 25
No bright companion
There to comfort
The careworn soul.
For he treats as light,
Who drinks life's joys,
And bides in burgh,
Far from baleful journey,
Wine-proud and wanton,
How I weary oft
On brine-paths 30
Must abide.

Night-shadows neared,
Snow from the north,
Rime bound the land,
Hail fell on earth,
Coldest of crops.
Now are they troubled,
The thoughts of my heart,
That I on high streams
With salt-surge
Should strive –
Mind-lust urging
In every moment,
That spirit fare onward,
Seeking afar
The fastness
Of foreign folk.

35

For there's none so proud-minded
No man on this earth,
Nor so generous of goods, 40
Nor so bold in his youth,
Nor so dread in his deeds,
Nor so dear to his Lord,
That he in sea-faring
Has never a care
As to what Fate
May will for him.
Not for him harp-hearing,
Ring-giving,
Wife-winning, 45
Nor worldly glory,
Nor ever aught else
Lest it be wash of the wave;
But he ever has longing,
Who strives on the sea.

Grove bears blossom,
Burghs grow fair,
Fields show fruitful,
World seems new.
All spurs on 50
The eager-minded
Spirit to sail,
In one who seeks
On flood-ways
His faring.
So cuckoo admonishes
With sorrowful voice,
Sings, summer's guardian,
Boding sorrow
Bitter in breast-board. 55

This he knows not,
The well-found warrior,
What some must endure,
Who, wretched outcasts,
Widest must wander.
For now my heart writhes
Out of my breast,
My mind's gone
Mid mere-flood,
Over the whale's path, 60
Widely wandering
All earth's corners.
Comes oft to me
Greedy and eager,
Lone-flyer screeching
Whets for the whale-road
The heart unwearied,
Over the sea's hold.

Far brighter for me
Are the joys of my Lord, 65
Than this dead life
Lingering on land.
I'll not believe
That the world's weal
Will stand.
Always, ever will one
Of these three things
Ere a man's ending
Turn towards doubt:
Age or sickness 70
Or sword-hatred,
Tear the frail life
From the fated.

So for every man
After-praise
Of the living,
Last word and best,
He must work for,
Before he be gone;
Fearless in fold 75
Against fiend's malice,
Daring in deeds
Against devil,
So men's sons
Shall praise him after,
And his fame ever
Live with the angels,
On and forever,
In life eternal
A joy among many. 80

The days are gone,
All of the glory
Of earthly riches;
Now are no kings
Nor Caesars
Nor gold-givers
As once there were,
When the most among them
Marvels performed,
And lived in majesty 85
The most lordly.
Gone are the old watch
Their joys are over,
Now wane the weaker
And yet hold the world,
With sweat, they enjoy.

