

The cup-bearing boys, giving bracelets
 And rings to her husband's warriors. I heard
 The oldest soldiers of all calling
 For ale from Hrothgar's daughter's hands,
 And Freaw was the way they greeted her when she
 gave them

The golden cups. And Hrothgar will give her
 To Ingeld, gracious Froda's son;
 She and that ripening soldier will be married,
 The Danes' great lord and protector has declared,
 Hoping that his quarrel with the Hathobards can
 be settled.

By a woman. He's wrong: how many wars
 Have been put to rest in a prince's bed?
 Few. A bride can bring a little
 Peace, make spears silent for a time,
 But not long. Ingeld and all his men
 Will be drinking in the hall, when the wedding is
 done

And Freaw is his wife; the Danes will be wearing
 Gleaming armor and ring-marked old swords;
 And the prince and his people will remember those
 treasures,

Will remember that their fathers once wore them,
 fell

With those helmets on their heads, those swords in
 their hands.

"And seeing their ancestral armor and weapons
 Ingeld and his followers will be angry. And one

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Of his soldiers, sitting with ale in his cup
 And bitterness heavy in his heart, will remember
 War and death, and while he sits and drinks
 His sharp old tongue will begin to tempt
 Some younger warrior, pushing and probing
 For a new war: "That sword, that precious old

blade
 Over there, I think you know it, friend.
 Your father carried it, fought with it the last time
 He could swing a sword; the Danes killed him
 —And many more of our men—and stripped
 The dead bodies: the brave, bold Danes!

One of the princess' people, here,
 Now, might be the murderer's son,
 Boasting about his treasures, his ancient
 Armor—which ought to be yours, by right.
 "Bitter words will work in a hot-tempered

brain, pushing up thoughts of the past.

And then, when he can, calling his father's
 Name, the youngster will kill some innocent
 Dane, a servant—and bloody sword

In hand will run from the hall, knowing
 His way through the woods. But war will begin

As he runs, to the sound of broken oaths,
 And its heat will dry up Ingeld's heart.

Leave him indifferent to his Danish bride.

Hrothgar may think the Hathobards love him,
 Loving Freaw, but the friendship can't last,
 The vows are worthless.

"But of Grendel: you need to

Know more to know everything; I ought to
 Go on. It was early in the evening, Heaven's

Jewel had slid to its rest, and the jealous
 Monster, planning murder, came seeking us

Out, stalking us as we guarded Hrothgar's
 Hall. Hondshew, sleeping in his armor,
 Was the first Geat he reached: Grendel

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Seized him, tore him apart, swallowed him
 Down, feet and all, as fate
 Had decreed—a glorious young soldier, killed
 In his prime. Yet Grendel had only begun
 His bloody work, meant to leave us
 With his belly and his pouch both full, and Herot
 Half-empty. Then he tested his strength against
 mine,
 Hand to hand. His pouch hung
 At his side, a huge bag sewn
 From a dragon's skin, worked with a devil's
 Skill; it was closed by a marvelous clasp.
 The monster intended to take me, put me
 Inside, save me for another meal.
 He was bold and strong, but once I stood
 On my feet his strength was useless, and it failed
 him.

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"The whole tale of how I killed him,
 Repaid him in kind for all the evil
 He'd done, would take too long: your people,
 My prince, were honored in the doing. He escaped,
 Found a few minutes of life, but his hand,
 His whole right arm, stayed in Herot;
 The miserable creature crept away,
 Dropped to the bottom of his lake, half dead
 As he fell. When the sun had returned, the Danes'
 Great king poured out treasure, repaid me
 In hammered gold for the bloody battle
 I'd fought in his name. He ordered a feast;

There were songs, and the telling of tales. One
 ancient
 Dane told of long-dead times,
 And sometimes Hrothgar himself, with the harp
 In his lap, stroked its silvery strings
 And told wonderful stories, a brave king
 Reciting unhappy truths about good
 And evil—and sometimes he wove his stories
 On the mournful thread of old age, remembering
 Buried strength and the battles it had won.
 He would weep, and the old king, wise with many
 Winters, remembering what he'd done, once,
 What he'd seen, what he knew. And so we sat
 The day away, feasting. Then darkness
 Fell again, and Grendel's mother
 Was waiting, ready for revenge, hating
 The Danes for her son's death. The monstrous
 Hag succeeded, burst boldly into Herot
 And killed Esher, one of the king's oldest
 And wisest soldiers. But when the sun shone
 Once more the death-weary Danes could not build
 A pyre and burn his beloved body,
 Lay him on flaming logs, return ashes
 To dust: she'd carried away his corpse,
 Brought it to her den deep in the water.
 Hrothgar had wept for many of his men,
 But this time his heart melted, this
 Was the worst. He begged me, in your name, half-
 weeping
 As he spoke, to seek still greater glory
 Deep in the swirling waves, to win
 Still higher fame, and the gifts he would give me.
 Down in that surging lake I sought
 And found her, the horrible hag, fierce
 And wild; we fought, clutching and grasping;
 The water ran red with blood and at last,
 With a mighty sword that had hung on the wall,
 I cut off her head. I had barely escaped

With my life, my death was not written. And the
Danes'
Protector, Healfdane's great son, heaped up
Treasures and precious jewels to reward me.

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"He lived his life as a good king must:

I lost nothing, none of the gifts

My strength could have earned me. He opened his
store

Of gems and armor, let me choose as I liked,

So I could bring his riches to you, my ruler,

And prove his friendship, and my love. Your favor

Still governs my life: I have almost no family,

Higlac, almost no one, now, but you."

Then Beowulf ordered them to bring in the boar-
head

Banner, the towering helmet, the ancient,

Silvery armor, and the gold-carved sword:

"This war-gear was Hrothgar's reward, my gift

From his wise old hands. He wanted me to tell you,

First, whose treasures these were. Hergar

Had owned them, his older brother, who was king

Of Denmark until death gave Hrothgar the throne:

But Hergar kept them, would not give them to
Herward,

His brave young son, though the boy had proved

His loyalty. These are yours: may they serve you
well!"

And after the gleaming armor four horses

Were led in, four bays, swift and all

Alike. Beowulf had brought his king

Horses and treasure—as a man must,

Not weaving nets of malice for his comrades,
Preparing their death in the dark, with secret,
Cunning tricks. Higlac trusted

His nephew, leaned on his strength, in war,
Each of them intent on the other's joy.

And Beowulf gave Weithow's gift, her wonderful

Necklace, to Higd, Higlac's queen,

And gave her, also, three supple, graceful,

Saddle-bright horses; she received his presents,

Then wore that wonderful jewel on her breast.

So Edgeth's son proved himself,

Did as a famous soldier must do

If glory is what he seeks: not killing his comrades

In drunken rages, his heart not savage,

But guarding God's gracious gift, his strength,

Using it only in war, and then using it

Bravely. And yet as a boy he was scorned;

The Geats considered him worthless. When he sat

In their mead-hall, and their lord was making men

rich,

He held no claim on the king's good will.

They were sure he was lazy, noble but slow.

The world spun round, 'he was a warrior more

famous

Than any, and all the insults were wiped out.

Then Higlac, protector of his people, brought in

His father's—Beowulf's grandfather's—great sword,

Worked in gold; none of the Geats

Could boast of a better weapon. He laid it

In Beowulf's lap, then gave him seven

Thousand hides of land, houses

And ground and all. Geatland was home

For both king and prince; their fathers had left

them

Buildings and fields—but Higlac's inheritance

Stretched further, it was he who was king, and was

followed.

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead

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And Herdred, his son, who'd ruled the Geats
 After his father, had followed him into darkness—
 Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
 His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding
 Their king—then, when Higd's one son
 Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,
 Took the throne he'd refused, once,
 And held it long and well. He was old
 With years and wisdom, fifty winters
 A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness
 And dreams and brought terror to his people. The
 beast

Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden
 Path beneath; a man stumbled on
 The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient
 Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold
 The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and
 greedy

Stole a gem-studded cup, and fled.
 But now the dragon hid nothing, neither
 The theft nor itself; it swept through the darkness,
 And all Geatland knew its anger.

32

But the thief had not come to steal: he stole,
 And roused the dragon, not from desire
 But need. He was someone's slave, had been beaten
 By his masters, had run from all men's sight,
 But with no place to hide; then he found the hid-
 den

Path, and used it. And once inside,
 Seeing the sleeping beast, staring as it

Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,
 Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,
 Taking the jeweled cup.

That tower
 Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored
 there

Years before by the last survivor
 Of a noble race, ancient riches
 Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty
 Came. Death had taken them, one
 By one, and the warrior who watched over all
 That remained mourned their fate, expecting,
 Soon, the same for himself, knowing
 The gold and jewels he had guarded so long
 Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He
 brought

The precious cups, the armor and the ancient
 Swords, to a stone tower built

Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed
 Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves
 In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:

"Take these treasures, earth, now that no one
 Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the
 beginning;

Allow them to return. War and terror
 Have swept away my people, shut
 Their eyes to delight and to living, closed
 The door to all gladness. No one is left
 To lift these swords, polish these jeweled
 Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These ham-
 mered

Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish
 And crack; the hands that should clean and polish
 them

Are still forever. And these mail shirts, worn
 In battle, once, while swords crashed
 And blades bit into shields and men,
 Will rust away like the warriors who owned them.
 None of these treasures will travel to distant

Lands, following their lords. The harp's
 Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall
 On its swift wings, the stallion tramping
 In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every
 Kind, and their masters, hurled to the gravel?²²⁶⁵
 And so he spoke, sadly, of those
 Long dead, and lived from day to day,
 Joyless, until, at last, death touched
 His heart and took him too. And a stalker²²⁷⁰
 In the night, a flaming dragon, found
 The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear
 Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,
 Seeking caves and stone-split ruins
 But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried²²⁷⁵
 Itself with heathen silver and jewels
 It could neither use nor ever abandon.
 So mankind's enemy, the mighty beast,
 Slept in those stone walls for hundreds
 Of years; a runaway slave roused it,
 Stole a jeweled cup and bought²²⁸⁰
 His master's forgiveness, begged for mercy
 And was pardoned when his delighted lord took
 the present
 He bore, turned it in his hands and stared
 At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace²²⁸⁵
 To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred
 A dragon's anger. It turned, hunting
 The thief's tracks, and found them, saw
 Where its visitor had come and gone. He'd sur-
 vived,²²⁹⁰
 Had come close enough to touch its scaly
 Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous
 Jaws, through the grace of almighty God
 And a pair of quiet, quick-moving feet.
 The dragon followed his steps, anxious
 To find the man who had robbed it of silver
 And sleep; it circled around and around²²⁹⁵
 The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,
 He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.

The beast went back to its treasure, planning
 A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,²³⁰⁰
 Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
 Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
 The hours till the Almighty's candle went out,
 And evening came, and wild with anger
 It could fly burning across the land, killing²³⁰⁵
 And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was
 gone,
 And its heart was glad: glowing with rage
 It left the tower, impatient to repay
 Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone
 Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned²³¹⁰
 Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came
 quickly.
 Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon
 Burned down their homes. They watched in horror
 As the flames rose up: the angry monster²³¹⁵
 Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs
 Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness,
 Visible for miles, tokens of its hate
 And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats
 Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back²³²⁰
 To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn
 Could come. It had wrapped its flames around
 The Geats; now it trusted in stone
 Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they
 would not.
 Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and an-
 nounced
 That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,²³²⁵

Had melted away in the dragon's burning
 Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf's
 Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused
 Himself of breaking God's law, of bringing
 The Almighty's anger down on his people.
 Reproach pounded in his breast, gloomy
 And dark, and the world seemed a different place.
 But the hall was gone, the dragon's molten
 Breath had licked across it, burned it
 To ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats
 Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader
 And lord, began to plan it, ordered
 A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that
 Wood would be useless, that no linden shield
 Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
 Of the beast's breath. That noble prince
 Would end his days on earth, soon,
 Would leave this brief life, but would take the
 dragon
 With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure
 It had guarded so long. And he'd go to it alone,
 Scorning to lead soldiers against such
 An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing
 Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming
 Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse
 Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher
 Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's
 Unlucky hall. He'd killed Grendel
 And his mother, swept that murdering tribe
 Away. And he'd fought in Higlac's war
 With the Frisians, fought at his lord's side
 Till a sword reached out and drank Higlac's
 Blood, till a blade swung in the rush
 Of battle killed the Geats' great king.
 Then Beowulf escaped, broke through Frisian
 Shields and swam to freedom, saving
 Thirty sets of armor from the scavenging
 Franks, river people who robbed
 The dead as they floated by. Beowulf

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Offered them only his sword, ended
 So many jackal lives that the few
 Who were able skulked silently home, glad
 To leave him. So Beowulf swam sadly back
 To Geatland, almost the only survivor
 Of a foolish war. Higlac's widow
 Brought him the crown, offered him the kingdom,
 Not trusting Herdred, her son and Higlac's,
 To beat off foreign invaders. But Beowulf
 Refused to rule when his lord's own son
 Was alive, and the leaderless Geats could choose
 A rightful king. He gave Herdred
 All his support, offering an open
 Heart where Higlac's young son could see
 Wisdom he still lacked himself: warmth
 And good will were what Beowulf brought his new
 king.
 But Swedish exiles came, seeking
 Protection; they were rebels against Onela,
 Healfdane's son-in-law and the best ring-giver
 His people had ever known. And Onela
 Came too, a mighty king, marched
 On Geatland with a huge army; Herdred
 Had given his word and now he gave
 His life, shielding the Swedish strangers.
 Onela wanted nothing more:
 When Herdred had fallen that famous warrior
 Went back to Sweden, let Beowulf rule!

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But Beowulf remembered how his king had been
 killed.
 As soon as he could he lent the last

Took me from my father and kept me, taught me,
 Gave me gold and pleasure, glad that I sat
 At his knee. And he never loved me less
 Than any of his sons—Herbald, the oldest
 Of all, or Hathcyn, or Higlac, my lord.

Herbald died a horrible death,
 Killed while hunting: Hathcyn, his brother,
 Stretched his horn-tipped bow, sent
 An arrow flying, but missed his mark
 And hit Herbald instead, found him
 With a bloody point and pierced him through.
 The crime was great, the guilt was plain,
 But nothing could be done, no vengeance, no
 death

To repay that death, no punishment, nothing.
 "So with the graybeard whose son sins
 Against the king, and is hanged: he stands
 Watching his child swing on the gallows,
 Lamenting, helpless, while his flesh and blood
 Hangs for the raven to pluck. He can raise
 His voice in sorrow, but revenge is impossible.
 And every morning he remembers how his son
 Died, and despairs; no son to come
 Matters, no future heir, to a father
 Forced to live through such misery. The place
 Where his son once dwelled, before death compelled
 him

To journey away, is a windy wasteland,
 Empty, cheerless; the childless father
 Shudders, seeing it. So riders and ridden
 Sleep in the ground; pleasure is gone,
 The harp is silent, and hope is forgotten.

Of the Swedish rebels soldiers and gold,
 Helped him to a bitter battle across
 The wide sea, where victory, and revenge, and the
 Swedish

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Throne were won, and Onela was slain.
 So Edgetho's son survived, no matter
 What dangers he met, what battles he fought,
 Brave and forever triumphant, till the day

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Fate sent him to the dragon and sent him death.
 A dozen warriors walked with their angry
 King, when he was brought to the beast; Beowulf
 Knew, by then, what had woken the monster,
 And enraged it. The cup had come to him, traveled
 From dragon to slave, to master, to king,

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And the slave was their guide, had begun the Geats'
 Affliction, and now, afraid of both beast
 And men, was forced to lead them to the monster's
 Hidden home. He showed them the huge
 Stones, set deep in the ground, with the sea
 Beating on the rocks close by. Beowulf
 Stared, listening to stories of the gold
 And riches heaped inside. Hidden,

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But wakeful, now, the dragon waited,
 Ready to greet him. Gold and hammered
 Armor have been buried in pleasanter places!

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The battle-brave king rested on the shore,
 While his soldiers wished him well, urged him
 On. But Beowulf's heart was heavy:

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His soul sensed how close fate
 Had come, felt something, not fear but knowledge
 Of old age. His armor was strong, but his arm
 Hung like his heart. Body and soul
 Might part, here; his blood might be spilled,
 His spirit torn from his flesh. Then he spoke.

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"My early days were full of war,
 And I survived it all; I can remember everything.
 I was seven years old when Hrethel opened
 His home and his heart for me, when my king and
 lord

"And then, crying his sorrow, he crawls
 To his bed: the world, and his home, hurt him
 With their emptiness. And so it seemed to Hrethel,
 When Heribald was dead, and his heart swelled
 With grief. The murderer lived; he felt
 No love for him, now, but nothing could help,
 Word nor hand nor sharp-honed blade,
 War nor hate, battle or blood
 Or law. The pain could find no relief,
 He could only live with it, or leave grief and life
 Together. When he'd gone to his grave Hathcyn
 And Higlac, his sons, inherited everything.
 "And then there was war between Geats and

Swedes,

Bitter battles carried across
 The broad sea, when the mighty Hrethel slept
 And Ongentho's sons thought Sweden could safely
 Attack, saw no use to pretending friendship
 But raided and burned, and near old Rennsburg
 Slaughtered Geats with their thieving swords.
 My people repaid them, death for death,
 Battle for battle, though one of the brothers
 Bought that revenge with his life—Hathcyn,
 King of the Geats, killed by a Swedish
 Sword. But when dawn came the slayer
 Was slain, and Higlac's soldiers avenged
 Everything with the edge of their blades. Efor
 Caught the Swedish king, cracked
 His helmet, split his skull, dropped him,
 Pale and bleeding, to the ground, then put him
 To death with a swift stroke, shouting
 His joy.

"The gifts that Higlac gave me,
 And the land, I earned with my sword, as fate
 Allowed: he never needed Danes
 Or Goths or Swedes, soldiers and allies

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Bought with gold, bribed to his side.
 My sword was better, and always his.
 In every battle my place was in front,
 Alone, and so it shall be forever,
 As long as this sword lasts, serves me
 In the future as it has served me before. So
 I killed Dagref, the Frank, who brought death
 To Higlac, and who looted his corpse: Higd's
 Necklace, Welthow's treasure, never
 Came to Dagref's king. The thief
 Fell in battle, but not on my blade.
 He was brave and strong, but I swept him in my

arms,

Ground him against me till his bones broke,
 Till his blood burst out. And now I shall fight
 For this treasure, fight with both hand and sword."
 And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

"I've never known fear: as a youth I fought
 In endless battles. I am old, now,
 But I will fight again, seek fame still,
 If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
 To face me."

Then he said farewell to his followers,
 Each in his turn, for the last time:

"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
 Could be killed without it, crushed to death
 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
 Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
 Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
 I feel no shame, with shield and sword
 And armor, against this monster: when he comes

to me

I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
 Flames, stand till fate decides
 Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
 My hands calm: I need no hot
 Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
 We shall see, soon, who will survive
 This bloody battle, stand when the fighting

Is done. No one else could do
 What I mean to, here, no man but me
 Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
 Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
 And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
 Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"
 Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
 And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on
 his breast,
 Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
 The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked
 there!
 And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
 Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and
 shields
 Clashed, the best of kings, saw
 Huge stone arches and felt the heat
 Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
 Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
 To stand, a streaming current of fire
 And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
 Lord and leader, angry, lowered
 His sword and roared out a battle cry,
 A call so loud and clear that it reached through
 The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
 Ear. The beast rose, angry,
 Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
 But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
 A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
 Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
 Swung his shield into place, held it
 In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
 Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
 Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
 Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
 Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
 Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
 Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining

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Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
 Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
 To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
 Shield, and for a time it held, protected
 Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
 And for the first time in his life that famous prince
 Fought with fate against him, with glory
 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
 And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
 The ancient blade broke, bit into
 The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
 And failed him before it went deep enough, helped
 him
 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
 With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
 Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
 And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
 Victories in other wars: his weapon
 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
 Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's
 Famous son stared at death,
 Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
 For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
 Into darkness that all men must make, as death
 Ends their few brief hours on earth.
 Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
 As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
 And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
 Flames—a king, before, but now
 A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
 Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
 Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
 Deep in a wood. And only one of them
 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
 As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

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