

The Wife's Lament

I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing,
my own life's journey. I am able to tell
all the hardships I've suffered since I grew up,
but new or old, never worse than now –
5 ever I suffer the torment of my exile.
First my lord left his people
for the tumbling waves; I worried at dawn
where on earth my leader of men might be.
When I set out myself in my sorrow,
10 a friendless exile, to find his retainers,
that man's kinsmen began to think
in secret that they would separate us,
so we would live far apart in the world,
most miserably, and longing seized me.
15 My lord commanded me to live with him here;¹
I had few loved ones or loyal friends
in this country, which causes me grief.
Then I found that my most fitting man
was unfortunate, filled with grief,
20 concealing his mind, plotting murder
with a smiling face. So often we swore
that only death could ever divide us,
nothing else – all that is changed now;
it is now as if it had never been,
25 our friendship. Far and near, I must
endure the hatred of my dearest one.
They forced me to live in a forest grove,
under an oak tree in an earthen cave.²
This earth-hall is old, and I ache with longing;
30 the dales are dark, the hills too high,
harsh hedges overhung with briars,
a home without joy. Here my lord's leaving
often fiercely seized me. There are friends on earth,
lovers living who lie in their bed,

¹ Or, "take up a dwelling in a grove" or "live in a (pagan) shrine." The precise meaning of the line, like the general meaning of the poem, is a matter of dispute and conjecture.

² Or even "an earthen grave" or barrow.

35 while I walk alone in the light of dawn
under the oak-tree and through this earth-cave,
where I must sit the summer-long day;
there I can weep for all my exiles,
my many troubles; and so I may never
40 escape from the cares of my sorrowful mind,
nor all the longings that have seized my life.

May the young man be sad-minded³
with hard heart-thoughts, yet let him have
a smiling face along with his heartache,
45 a crowd of constant sorrows. Let to himself
all his worldly joys belong! let him be outlawed
in a far distant land, so that my friend sits
under stone cliffs chilled by storms,
weary-minded, surrounded by water
50 in a sad dreary hall! My beloved will suffer
the cares of a sorrowful mind; he will remember
too often a happier home. Woe to the one
who must suffer longing for a loved one.

source: The Exeter Book

translation: R.M. Liuzza

³ These difficult lines have been read as a particular reflection, imagining the mental state of her distant beloved, or as a general reflection on the double-faced nature of the world; here, following the reading of some critics, they are taken as a kind of curse.