**The Seafarer**

translated by**Burton Raffel**

            This tale is true, and mine. It tells   
            How the sea took me, swept me back   
            And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,   
            Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,   
5          In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells   
            Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold   
            Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow   
            As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast   
            In icy bands, bound with frost,   
10        With frozen chains, and hardship groaned   
            Around my heart. Hunger tore   
            At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered   
            On the quiet fairness of earth can feel   
            How wretched I was, drifting through winter   
15        On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,   
            Alone in a world blown clear of love,   
            Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.   
            The only sound was the roaring sea,   
            The freezing waves. The song of the swan   
20        Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,   
            The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,   
            The mewing of gulls instead of mead.   
            Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed   
            By icy-feathered terns and the eagle’s screams;   
25        No kinsman could offer comfort there,   
            To a soul left drowning in desolation.   
            And who could believe, knowing but   
            The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine   
            And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,   
30        I put myself back on the paths of the sea.   
            Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;   
            Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,   
            The coldest seeds. And how my heart   
            Would begin to beat, knowing once more   
35        The salt waves tossing and the towering sea!   
            The time for journeys would come and my soul   
            Called me eagerly out, sent me over   
            The horizon, seeking foreigners’ homes.   
            But there isn’t a man on earth so proud,   
40        So born to greatness, so bold with his youth,   
            Grown so brave, or so graced by God,   
            That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,   
            Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.   
            No harps ring in his heart, no rewards,   
45        No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,   
            Nothing, only the ocean’s heave;   
            But longing wraps itself around him.   
            Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,   
            Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,   
50        And all these admonish that willing mind   
            Leaping to journeys, always set   
            In thoughts traveling on a quickening tide.   
            So summer’s sentinel, the cuckoo, sings   
            In his murmuring voice, and our hearts mourn   
55        As he urges. Who could understand,   
            In ignorant ease, what we others suffer   
            As the paths of exile stretch endlessly on?   
            And yet my heart wanders away,   
            My soul roams with the sea, the whales’   
60        Home, wandering to the widest corners   
            Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,   
            Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me   
            To the open ocean, breaking oaths   
            On the curve of a wave.       
            Thus the joys of God   
65        Are fervent with life, where life itself   
            Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth   
            Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.   
            No man has ever faced the dawn   
            Certain which of Fate’s three threats   
70        Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy’s   
            Sword, snatching the life from his soul.   
            The praise the living pour on the dead   
            Flowers from reputation: plant   
            An earthly life of profit reaped   
75        Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery   
            Flung in the devil’s face, and death   
            Can only bring you earthly praise   
            And a song to celebrate a place   
            With the angels, life eternally blessed   
            In the hosts of Heaven.   
80             The days are gone   
            When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;   
            Now there are no rulers, no emperors,   
            No givers of gold, as once there were,   
            When wonderful things were worked among them   
85        And they lived in lordly magnificence.   
            Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.   
            The weakest survives and the world continues,   
            Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished.   
            The world’s honor ages and shrinks.   
90        Bent like the men who mould it. Their faces   
            Blanch as time advances, their beards   
            Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.   
            The sons of princes, sown in the dust.   
            The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing   
95        Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,   
            Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother   
            Opens his palms and pours down gold   
            On his kinsman’s grave, strewing his coffin   
            With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing   
100      Golden shakes the wrath of God   
            For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing   
            Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.   
            We all fear God. He turns the earth,   
            He set it swinging firmly in space,   
105     Gave life to the world and light to the sky.   
            Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.   
            He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven   
            To carry him courage and strength and belief.   
            A man must conquer pride, not kill it,   
110      Be firm with his fellows, chaste for himself,   
            Treat all the world as the world deserves,   
            With love or with hate but never with harm,   
            Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell,   
            Or set the flames of a funeral pyre   
115      Under his lord. Fate is stronger   
            And God mightier than any man’s mind.   
            Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,   
            Consider the ways of coming there,   
            Then strive for sure permission for us   
120     To rise to that eternal joy,   
            That life born in the love of God   
            And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy   
            Grace of Him who honored us,   
            Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

**Making Meanings Do questions 1,2,4,6, 7, than choose either 8 or 9 and answer them in a short essay on either a separate sheet or the back of the page.**  
  
Answer each question completely with an explanation-yes or no is never a sufficient answer.

**1.** What is your first impression of the speaker in this poem? What is his life like? What does he believe in and hope for?

**2.**What passages in the poem explain why the seafarer seeks the rigors of the sea rather than the delights of the land? Does he find what he looked for at sea?

**3.** Lines 58–64 suggest that the poet is beginning to talk about the glories of adventuring at sea, but then he changes direction. What does he turn his attention to over the next sixteen lines?

**4.** In line 80, the speaker begins to talk about the present state of the world—what does he think of it? How do these thoughts contribute to the poem’s **elegiac tone**?

**5.**The poem ends with a statement of the poet’s beliefs. What are they?

**6.**This short lyric is full of striking**metaphors**—for example, “frozen chains” in line 10. Select three of these metaphors, and explain what is being compared in each one. What emotional effect does each metaphor create?

**7.**What do you think the seafarer is searching for?

**8.**In line 88, the poem’s speaker says, “All glory is tarnished.” Do you think this idea also applies to today’s heroes and to present-day life? Explain your response.

**9.**Could the sentiments expressed in this poem be applied to the homeless today? Find passages in the poem to support your answer.