

“Beowulf” by Burton Raffel

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The Monster Grendel

1

. . . A powerful monster, living down
 In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
 As day after day the music rang
 Loud in that hall, the harp’s rejoicing
 5 Call and the poet’s clear songs, sung
 Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
 The Almighty making the earth, shaping
 These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
 Then proudly setting the sun and moon
 10 To glow across the land and light it;
 The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
 And leaves, made quick with life, with each
 Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
 As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
 15 So Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall
 Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
 Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
 Marshes, and made his home in a hell
 Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
 20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
 Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
 By God, punished forever for the crime
 Of Abel’s death. The Almighty drove
 Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
 25 Shut away from men; they split
 Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
 And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
 A brood forever opposing the Lord’s
 Will, and again and again defeated.

2

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
 Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
 Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
 He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting

Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
 35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
 He slipped through the door and there in the silence
 Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
 Unknowing in their beds, and ran out with their bodies,
 The blood dripping behind him, back
 40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.
 At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
 How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
 Broke their long feast with tears and laments
 For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
 45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
 The fate of his lost friends and companions,
 Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
 His followers apart. He wept, fearing
 The beginning might not be the end. And that night
 50 Grendel came again, so set
 On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
 No savage assault quench his lust
 For evil. Then each warrior tried
 To escape him, searched for rest in different
 55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
 Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
 Distance was safety; the only survivors
 Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.
 So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
 60 One against many, and won; so Herot
 Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
 Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
 Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
 By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
 65 The seas, was told and sung in all
 Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,
 How the monster relished his savage war
 On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
 Alive, seeking no peace, offering
 70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
 In gold or land, and paying the living
 For one crime only with another. No one
 Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
 That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
 75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
 And young, lying in waiting, hidden
 In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
 Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
 So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,

80 Killing as often as he could, coming
 Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
 In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
 Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious
 Throne, protected by God—God,
 85 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat
 In secret sessions, talking of terror
 And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
 90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
 Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's
 Support, the Devil's guidance in driving
 Their affliction off. That was their way,
 And the heathen's only hope, Hell
 95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
 Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
 Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
 His praise nor know His glory. Let them
 Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
 100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
 In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
 To those who will rise to God, drop off
 Their dead bodies, and seek our Father's peace!

3

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son
 105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
 Or strength could break it: That agony hung
 On king and people alike, harsh
 And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
 In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
 110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
 And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
 Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
 And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
 115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
 Now when help was needed. None
 Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
 As he was loved by the Geats: The omens were good,
 And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
 120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
 The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
 In all, and led them down to their boat;

He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

4

- 125 . . . Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:
"My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open
130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make."
Beowulf arose, with his men
135 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
140 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:
"Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: Sailors
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
155 All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called

- 160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
 Lord and protector of this noble place,
 A single request! I have come so far,
 Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
 That this one favor you should not refuse me—
- 165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
 Too, that the monster's scorn of men
 Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
 Nor will I. My lord Higlac
- 170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 Behind some broad linden shield: My hands
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
 Against the monster. God must decide
- 175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
 What it has been before, to invade this hall
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
- 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones,
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
- 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel,^o and he
 From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!"

5

- 190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship, and because
 Of the reception your father found at our court.
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:
- 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.
 Then he traveled across the curving waves
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruling this wide
- 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
 My older brother, a far better man

- Than I, had died and dying made me,
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
 How many times have my men, glowing
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
 Still, death taking more and more.
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."
 225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors,
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
 230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

Unferth's Challenge

6

- Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,
 Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly
 235 And sharp (vexed by Beowulf's adventure,
 By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone
 In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever
 Acquired glory and fame greater
 Than his own):
 "You're Beowulf, are you—the same
 240 Boastful fool who fought a swimming
 Match with Brecca, both of you daring

And young and proud, exploring the deepest
 Seas, risking your lives for no reason
 But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
 245 Not to, but no one could check such pride.
 With Brecca at your side you swam along
 The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
 Over the ocean's face. Then winter
 Churned through the water, the waves ran you
 250 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
 To survive. And at the end victory was his,
 Not yours. The sea carried him close
 To his home, to southern Norway, near
 The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
 255 Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
 His towns and his people. He'd promised to outswim you:
 Bonstan's son made that boast ring true.
 You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
 Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
 260 Staying a whole night through in this hall,
 Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you."
 Beowulf answered, Edgeth's great son:
 "Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face
 Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried
 265 To tell us about Brecca's doings. But the truth
 Is simple: No man swims in the sea
 As I can, no strength is a match for mine.
 As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—
 We were both too young to know better—that we'd risk
 270 Our lives far out at sea, and so
 We did. Each of us carried a naked
 Sword, prepared for whales or the swift
 Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.
 He could never leave me behind, swim faster
 275 Across the waves than I could, and I
 Had chosen to remain close to his side.
 I remained near him for five long nights,
 Until a flood swept us apart;
 The frozen sea surged around me,
 280 It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
 From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures
 Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
 Into life—and the iron hammered links
 Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
 285 Woven across my breast, saved me
 From death. A monster seized me, drew me
 Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws

Tight in my flesh. But fate let me
 Find its heart with my sword, hack myself
 290 Free; I fought that beast's last battle,
 Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

7

“Other monsters crowded around me,
 Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
 Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
 295 But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
 Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,
 Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
 By morning they'd decided to sleep on the shore,
 Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
 300 On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
 That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
 Would stop their passing. Then God's bright beacon
 Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
 And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
 305 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
 The living when they drive away death by themselves!
 Lucky or not, nine was the number
 Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
 Anywhere under Heaven's high arch, has fought
 310 In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder
 Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
 The monsters' hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
 The swift-flowing waters swept me along
 And I landed on Finnish soil. I've heard
 315 No tales of you, Unferth, telling
 Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
 Brecca's battles were never so bold;
 Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
 No boast, have announced no more than I know
 320 To be true. And there's more: You murdered your brothers,
 Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
 Won't help your soul; you'll suffer hell's fires,
 Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf's
 Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
 325 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
 To raid your hall, ruin Herot
 And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
 But he's learned that terror is his alone,
 Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
 330 Of reprisal; he's found no fighting, here,

- But only food, only delight.
 He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
 And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
 No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
- 335 The Geats will show him courage, soon
 He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
 Comes up again, opening another
 Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
 May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!”
- 340 Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
 Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
 At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
 In Beowulf’s bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.
 There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
- 345 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
 Hrothgar’s gold-ringed queen, greeted
 The warriors; a noble woman who knew
 What was right, she raised a flowing cup
 To Hrothgar first, holding it high
- 350 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
 Joy in that feast. The famous king
 Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
 Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
 Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
- 355 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
 Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf’s
 Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats’
 Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
 For allowing her hands the happy duty
- 360 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
 Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
 Edgeth’s brave son, then assured the Danish
 Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
 Ready:
- “When we crossed the sea, my comrades
- 365 And I, I already knew that all
 My purpose was this: to win the good will
 Of your people or die in battle, pressed
 In Grendel’s fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
 And courage, or here in this hall welcome
 My death!”
- 370 Welthow was pleased with his words,
 His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
 To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.
 The feast went on, laughter and music
 And the brave words of warriors celebrating

- 375 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane's
 Son, heavy with sleep; as soon
 As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel
 Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
 When night had covered the earth with its net
 380 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
 Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with him.
 He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats'
 Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped
 That Herot would be his to command. And then
 He declared:
 385 "No one strange to this land
 Has ever been granted what I've given you,
 No one in all the years of my rule.
 Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then
 Keep it free of evil, fight
 390 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
 And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full." . . .

The Battle

8

- Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
 Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
 Grendel came, hoping to kill
 395 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
 He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
 Up from his swampland, sliding silently
 Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
 Home before, knew the way—
 400 But never, before nor after that night,
 Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch,
 405 And rushed angrily over the threshold.
 He strode quickly across the inlaid
 Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes
 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
 410 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
 With rows of young soldiers resting together.
 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
 Intended to tear the life from those bodies
 By morning; the monster's mind was hot

415 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
 Of his last human supper. Human
 Eyes were watching his evil steps,
 420 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
 He came to, ripped him apart, cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
 425 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
 430 —And was instantly seized himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth
 Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
 435 His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
 This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
 440 But Higlac's follower remembered his final
 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
 The monster's flight, fastened those claws
 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 Closer. The infamous killer fought
 445 For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
 Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
 450 And Danes shook with terror. Down
 The aisles the battle swept, angry
 And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
 Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
 Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
 455 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
 And out, artfully worked, the building
 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
 To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
 As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
 460 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot

To stand forever; only fire,
 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
 Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
 Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
 465 The sounds changed, the Danes started
 In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
 In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
 And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
 470 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
 Of him who of all the men on earth
 Was the strongest.

9

That mighty protector of men
 Meant to hold the monster till its life
 Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
 475 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
 Swords raised and ready, determined
 To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
 Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel
 480 From every side, trying to open
 A path for his evil soul, but their points
 Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
 Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
 Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
 485 That blunted every mortal man's blade.
 And yet his time had come, his days
 Were over, his death near; down
 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
 To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
 490 Now he discovered—once the afflictor
 Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
 To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
 Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
 Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
 495 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
 But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
 And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
 Snapped, muscle and bone split
 And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
 500 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
 But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
 His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,

Only to die, to wait for the end
 Of all his days. And after that bloody
 505 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
 He who had come to them from across the sea,
 Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
 Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
 Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
 510 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,
 A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
 Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
 Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
 By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
 515 The victory, for the proof, hanging high
 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

10

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
 Herot, warriors coming to that hall
 520 From faraway lands, princes and leaders
 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
 525 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
 Where he'd dragged his corpse-like way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life.
 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 530 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 Surf had covered his death, hidden
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.
 Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 535 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 540 On earth or under the spreading sky
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .