

JOHN GARDNER

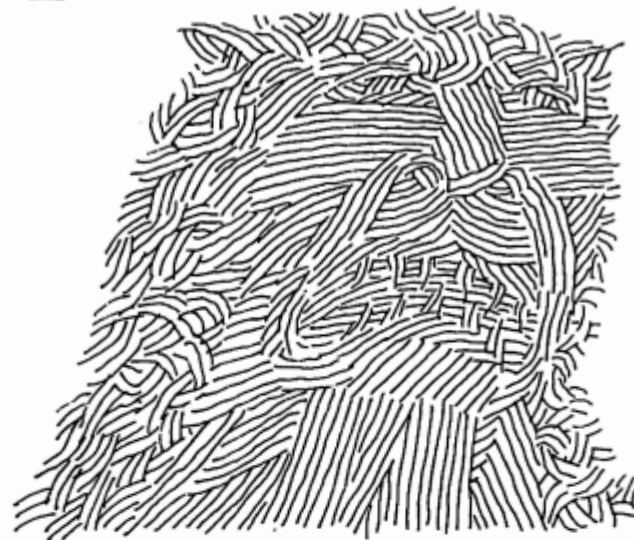
GRENDDEL

Illustrated by Emil Antonucci



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I



The old ram stands looking down over rockslides, stupidly triumphant. I blink. I stare in horror. "Scat!" I hiss. "Go back to your cave, go back to your cowshed—whatever." He cocks his head like an elderly, slow-witted king, considers the angles, decides to ignore me. I stamp. I hammer the ground with my fists. I hurl a skull-size stone at him. He will not budge. I shake my two hairy fists at the sky and I let out a howl so unspeakable that the water at my feet turns sudden ice and even I myself am left uneasy. But the ram stays; the season is upon us. And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war.

The pain of it! The stupidity!

"Ah, well," I sigh, and shrug, trudge back to the trees.

Do not think my brains are squeezed shut, like the ram's, by the roots of horns. Flanks atremble, eyes like stones, he stares at as much of the world as he can see and feels it surging in him, filling his chest as the melting snow fills dried-out creekbeds, tickling his gross, lopsided balls and charging his brains with the same unrest that made him suffer last year at this time, and the year before, and the year before that. (He's forgotten them all.) His hindparts shiver with the usual joyful, mindless ache to mount whatever happens near—the storm piling up black towers to the west, some rotting, docile stump, some spraddle-legged ewe. I cannot bear to look. "Why can't these creatures discover a little dignity?" I ask the sky. The sky says nothing, predictably. I make a face, uplift a defiant middle finger, and give an obscene little kick. The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed. Him too I hate, the same as I hate these brainless budding trees, these brattling birds.

Not, of course, that I fool myself with thoughts that I'm more noble. Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows. (I am neither proud nor ashamed, understand. One more dull victim, leering at seasons that never were meant to be observed.) "Ah, sad one, poor old freak!" I cry, and hug myself, and laugh, letting out salt tears, he he! till I fall down gasping and sobbing. (It's mostly fake.)

The sun spins mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan. Small birds, with a high-pitched yelp, lay eggs. The tender grasses peek up, innocent yellow, through the ground: the children of the dead. (It was just here, this shocking green, that once when the moon was tombed in clouds, I tore off sly old Athelgard's head. Here, where the startling tiny jaws of crocuses snap at the late-winter sun like the heads of baby watersnakes, here I killed the old woman with the irongray hair. She tasted of urine and spleen, which made me spit. Sweet mulch for yellow blooms. Such are the tiresome memories of a shadow-shooter, earth-rim-roamer, walker of the world's weird wall.) "Waaah!" I cry, with another quick, nasty face at the sky, mournfully observing the way it is, bitterly remembering the way it was, and idiotically casting tomorrow's nets. "Aargh! Yaww!" I reel, smash trees. Disfigured son of lunatics. The big-boled oaks gaze down at me yellow with morning, beneath complexity. "No offense," I say, with a terrible, sycophantish smile, and tip an imaginary hat.

It was not always like this, of course. On occasion it's been worse.

No matter, no matter.

The doe in the clearing goes stiff at sight of my horridness, then remembers her legs and is gone. It makes me cross. "Blind prejudice!" I bawl at the splintered sunlight

where half a second ago she stood. I wring my fingers, put on a long face. "Ah, the unfairness of everything," I say, and shake my head. It is a matter of fact that I have never killed a deer in all my life, and never will. Cows have more meat and, locked up in pens, are easier to catch. It is true, perhaps, that I feel some trifling dislike of deer, but no more dislike than I feel for other natural things—discounting men. But deer, like rabbits and bears and even men, can make, concerning my race, no delicate distinctions. That is their happiness: they see all life without observing it. They're buried in it like crabs in mud. Except men, of course. I am not in a mood, just yet, to talk of men.

So it goes with me day by day and age by age, I tell myself. Locked in the deadly progression of moon and stars. I shake my head, muttering darkly on shaded paths, holding conversation with the only friend and comfort this world affords, my shadow. Wild pigs clatter away through brush. A baby bird falls feet-up in my path, squeaking. With a crabby laugh, I let him lie, kind heaven's merciful bounty to some sick fox. So it goes with me, age by age. (Talking, talking. Spinning a web of words, pale walls of dreams, between myself and all I see.)

The first grim stirrings of springtime come (as I knew they must, having seen the ram), and even under the ground where I live, where no light breaks but the red of my fires and nothing stirs but the flickering shadows on

my wet rock walls, or scampering rats on my piles of bones, or my mother's fat, foul bulk rolling over, restless again—molested by nightmares, old memories—I am aware in my chest of tuberstirrings in the blacksweet duff of the forest overhead. I feel my anger coming back, building up like invisible fire, and at last, when my soul can no longer resist, I go up—as mechanical as anything else—fists clenched against my lack of will, my belly growling, mindless as wind, for blood. I swim up through the firesnakes, hot dark whalecocks prowling the luminous green of the mere, and I surface with a gulp among churning waves and smoke. I crawl up onto the bank and catch my breath.

It's good at first to be out in the night, naked to the cold mechanics of the stars. Space hurls outward, falcons swift, mounting like an irreversible injustice, a final disease. The cold night air is reality at last: indifferent to me as a stone face carved on a high cliff wall to show that the world is abandoned. So childhood too feels good at first, before one happens to notice the terrible sameness, age after age. I lie there resting in the steaming grass, the old lake hissing and gurgling behind me, whispering patterns of words my sanity resists. At last, heavy as an ice-capped mountain, I rise and work my way to the inner wall, beginning of wolfslopes, the edge of my realm. I stand in the high wind balanced, blackening the night with my stench, gazing down to cliffs that fall away to

cliffs, and once again I am aware of my potential: I could die. I cackle with rage and suck in breath.

"Dark chasms!" I scream from the cliff-edge, "seize me! Seize me to your foul black bowels and crush my bones!" I am terrified at the sound of my own huge voice in the darkness. I stand there shaking from head to foot, moved to the deep-sea depths of my being, like a creature thrown into audience with thunder.

At the same time, I am secretly unfooled. The uproar is only my own shriek, and chasms are, like all things vast, inanimate. They will not snatch me in a thousand years, unless, in a lunatic fit of religion, I jump.

I sigh, depressed, and grind my teeth. I toy with shouting some tidbit more—some terrifying, unthinkable threat, some blackly fuliginous riddling hex—but my heart's not in it. "Missed me!" I say with a coy little jerk and a leer, to keep my spirits up. Then, with a sigh, a kind of moan, I start very carefully down the cliffs that lead to the fens and moors and Hrothgar's hall. Owls cross my path as silently as raiding ships, and at the sound of my foot, lean wolves rise, glance at me awkwardly, and, neat of step as lizards, sneak away. I used to take some pride in that—the caution of owls when my shape looms in, the alarm I stir in these giant northern wolves. I was younger then. Still playing cat and mouse with the universe.

I move down through the darkness, burning with mur-

derous lust, my brains raging at the sickness I can observe in myself as objectively as might a mind ten centuries away. Stars, spattered out through lifeless night from end to end, like jewels scattered in a dead king's grave, tease, torment my wits toward meaningful patterns that do not exist. I can see for miles from these rock walls: thick forest suddenly still at my coming—cowering stags, wolves, hedgehogs, boars, submerged in their stifling, unmemorable fear; mute birds, pulsating, thoughtless clay in hushed old trees, thick limbs interlocked to seal drab secrets in.

I sigh, sink into the silence, and cross it like wind. Behind my back, at the world's end, my pale slightly glowing fat mother sleeps on, old, sick at heart, in our dingy underground room. Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag. Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life's curse. She clutches at me in her sleep as if to crush me. I break away. "Why are we here?" I used to ask her. "Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?" She trembles at my words. Her fat lips shake. "Don't ask!" her wiggling claws implore. (She never speaks.) "Don't ask!" It must be some terrible secret, I used to think. I'd give her a crafty squint. She'll tell me, in time, I thought. But she told me nothing. I

waited on. That was before the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth. He was not a friend.

And so I come through trees and towns to the lights of Hrothgar's meadhall. I am no stranger here. A respected guest. Eleven years now and going on twelve I have come up this clean-mown central hill, dark shadow out of the woods below, and have knocked politely on the high oak door, bursting its hinges and sending the shock of my greeting inward like a cold blast out of a cave. "Grendel!" they squeak, and I smile like exploding spring. The old Shaper, a man I cannot help but admire, goes out the back window with his harp at a single bound, though blind as a bat. The drunkest of Hrothgar's thanes come reeling and clanking down from their wall-hung beds, all shouting their meady, outrageous boasts, their heavy swords aswirl like eagles' wings. "Woe, woe, woe!" cries Hrothgar, hoary with winters, pecking in, wide-eyed, from his bedroom in back. His wife, looking in behind him, makes a scene. The thanes in the meadhall blow out the lights and cover the wide stone fireplace with shields. I laugh, crumple over; I can't help myself. In the darkness, I alone see clear as day. While they squeal and screech and bump into each other, I silently sack up my dead and withdraw to the woods. I eat and laugh and eat until I can barely walk, my chest-hair matted with dribbled blood, and then the roosters on the hill crow, and dawn comes over the

roofs of the houses, and all at once I am filled with gloom again.

"This is some punishment sent us," I hear them bawling from the hill.

My head aches. Morning nails my eyes.

"Some god is angry," I hear a woman keen. "The people of Scyld and Herogar and Hrothgar are mired in sin!"

My belly rumbles, sick on their sour meat. I crawl through bloodstained leaves to the eaves of the forest, and there peak out. The dogs fall silent at the edge of my spell, and where the king's hall surmounts the town, the blind old Shaper, harp clutched tight to his fragile chest, stares futilely down, straight at me. Otherwise nothing. Pigs root dully at the posts of a wooden fence. A rumple-horned ox lies chewing in dew and shade. A few men, lean, wearing animal skins, look up at the gables of the king's hall, or at the vultures circling casually beyond. Hrothgar says nothing, hoarfrost-bearded, his features cracked and crazed. Inside, I hear the people praying—whimpering, whining, mumbling, pleading—to their numerous sticks and stones. He doesn't go in. The king has lofty theories of his own.

"Theories," I whisper to the bloodstained ground. So the dragon once spoke. ("They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!" I recall his laugh.)

Then the groaning and praying stop, and on the side of the hill the dirge-slow shoveling begins. They throw up

a mound for the funeral pyre, for whatever arms or legs or heads my haste has left behind. Meanwhile, up in the shattered hall, the builders are hammering, replacing the door for (it must be) the fiftieth or sixtieth time, industrious and witless as worker ants—except that they make small, foolish changes, adding a few more iron pegs, more iron bands, with tireless dogmatism.

Now fire. A few little lizard tongues, then healthy flames reaching up through the tangled nest of sticks. (A feeble-minded crow could have fashioned a neater nest.) A severed leg swells up and bursts, then an arm, then another, and the red fire turns on the blackening flesh and makes it sizzle, and it reaches higher, up and up into greasy smoke, turning, turning like falcons at warplay, rushing like circling wolves up into the swallowing, indifferent sky. And now, by some lunatic theory, they throw on golden rings, old swords, and braided helmets. They wail, the whole crowd, women and men, a kind of song, like a single quavering voice. The song rings up like the greasy smoke and their faces shine with sweat and something that looks like joy. The song swells, pushes through woods and sky, and they're singing now as if by some lunatic theory they had won. I shake with rage. The red sun blinds me, churns up my belly to nausea, and the heat thrown out of the bone-fire burns my skin. I cringe, clawing my flesh, and flee for home.



Talking, talking, spinning a spell, pale skin of words that closes me in like a coffin. Not in a language that anyone any longer understands. Rushing, degenerate mutter of noises I send out before me wherever I creep, like a dragon burning his way through vines and fog.

I used to play games when I was young—it might as well be a thousand years ago. Explored our far-flung underground world in an endless wargame of leaps onto nothing, ingenious twists into freedom or new perplexity, quick whispered plottings with invisible friends, wild cackles when vengeance was mine. I nosed out, in my childish games, every last shark-toothed chamber and hall,

every black tentacle of my mother's cave, and so came at last, adventure by adventure, to the pool of firesnakes. I stared, mouth gaping. They were gray as old ashes; faceless, eyeless. They spread the surface of the water with pure green flame. I knew—I seemed to have known all along—that the snakes were there to guard something. Inevitably, after I'd stood there a while, rolling my eyes back along the dark hallway, my ears cocked for my mother's step, I screwed my nerve up and dove. The firesnakes scattered as if my flesh were charmed. And so I discovered the sunken door, and so I came up, for the first time, to moonlight.

I went no farther, that first night. But I came out again, inevitably. I played my way farther out into the world, vast cavern aboveground, cautiously darting from tree to tree challenging the terrible forces of night on tiptoe. At dawn I fled back.

I lived those years, as do all young things, in a spell. Like a puppy nipping, playfully growling preparing for battle with wolves. At times the spell would be broken suddenly: on shelves or in hallways of my mother's cave, large old shapes with smouldering eyes sat watching me. A continuous grumble came out of their mouths; their backs were humped. Then little by little it dawned on me that the eyes that seemed to bore into my body were in fact gazing through it, wearily indifferent to my slight ob-

struction of the darkness. Of all the creatures I knew, in those days, only my mother really looked at me.—Stared at me as if to consume me, like a troll. She loved me, in some mysterious sense I understood without her speaking it. I was her creation. We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out from it.—Or so I ardently, desperately affirmed. When her strange eyes burned into me, it did not seem quite sure. I was intensely aware of where I sat, the volume of darkness I displaced, the shiny-smooth span of packed dirt between us, and the shocking separateness from me in my mama's eyes. I would feel, all at once, alone and ugly, almost—as if I'd dirtied myself—obscene. The cavern river rumbled far below us. Being young, unable to face these things, I would bawl and hurl myself at my mother and she would reach out her claws and seize me, though I could see I alarmed her (I had teeth like a saw), and she would smash me to her fat, limp breast as if to make me a part of her flesh again. After that, comforted, I would gradually ease back out into my games. Crafty-eyed, wicked as an elderly wolf, I would scheme with or stalk my imaginary friends, projecting the self I meant to become into every dark corner of the cave and the woods above.

Then all at once there they'd be again, the indifferent, burning eyes of the strangers. Or my mother's eyes. Again my world would be suddenly transformed, fixed like a

rose with a nail through it, space hurtling coldly out from me in all directions. But I didn't understand.

One morning I caught my foot in the crack where two old treetrunks joined. "Owp!" I yelled. "Mama! Waa!" I was out much later than I'd meant to be. As a rule I was back in the cave by dawn, but that day I'd been lured out farther than usual by the heavenly scent of newborn calf—ah, sweeter than flowers, as sweet as my mama's milk. I looked at the foot in anger and disbelief. It was wedged deep, as if the two oak trees were eating it. Black sawdust—squirreldust—was spattered up the leg almost to the thigh. I'm not sure now how the accident happened. I must have pushed the two boles apart as I stepped up into the place where they joined, and then when I stupidly let go again they closed on my foot like a trap. Blood gushed from my ankle and shin, and pain flew up through me like fire up the flue of a mountain. I lost my head. I bellowed for help, so loudly it made the ground shake. "Mama! Waa! Waaa!" I bellowed to the sky, the forest, the cliffs, until I was so weak from loss of blood I could barely wave my arms. "I'm going to die," I wailed. "Poor Grendel! Poor old Mamal!" I wept and sobbed. "Poor Grendel will hang here and starve to death," I told myself, "and no one will ever even miss him!" The thought enraged me. I hooted. I thought of my mother's foreign eyes, staring at me from across the room: I thought of the

cool, indifferent eyes of the others. I shrieked in fear; still no one came.

The sun was up now, and even filtered as it was through the lacy young leaves, it made my head hurt. I twisted around as far as I could, hunting wildly for her shape on the cliffs, but there was nothing, or, rather, there was everything but my mother. Thing after thing tried, cynical and cruel, to foist itself off as my mama's shape—a black rock balanced at the edge of the cliff, a dead tree casting a long-armed shadow, a running stag, a cave entrance—each thing trying to detach itself, lift itself out of the general meaningless scramble of objects, but falling back, melting to the blank, infuriating clutter of not-my-mother. My heart began to race. I seemed to see the whole universe, even the sun and sky, leaping forward, then sinking away again, decomposing. Everything was wreckage, putrefaction. If she were there, the cliffs, the brightening sky, the trees, the stag, the waterfall would suddenly snap into position around her, sane again, well organized; but she was not, and the morning was crazy. Its green brilliance jabbed at me, live needles.

"Please, Mama!" I sobbed as if heartbroken.

Then, some thirty feet away, there was a bull. He stood looking at me with his head lowered, and the world snapped into position around him, as if in league with him. I must have been closer to the calf than I had

guessed, since he'd arrived to protect it. Bulls do such things, though they don't even know that the calves they defend are theirs. He shook his horns at me, as if scornful. I trembled. On the ground, on two good feet, I would have been more than a match for the bull, or if not, I could have outrun him. But I was four or five feet up in the air, trapped and weak. He could slam me right out of the tree with one blow of that boned, square head, maybe tearing the foot off, and then he could gore me to death at his leisure in the grass. He pawed the ground, looking at me up-from-under, murderous. "Go away!" I said. "Hsst!" It had no effect. I bellowed at him. He jerked his head as if the sound were a boulder I'd thrown at him, but then he merely stood considering, and, after a minute, he pawed the ground again. Again I bellowed. This time he hardly noticed it. He snorted through his nose and pawed more deeply, spattering grass and black earth at his sharp rear hooves. As if time had slowed down as it does for the dying, I watched him loll his weight forward, sliding into an easy lope, head tilted, coming toward me in a casual arc. He picked up speed, throwing his weight onto his huge front shoulders, crooked tail lifted behind him like a flag. When I screamed, he didn't even flick an ear but came on, driving like an avalanche now, thunder booming from his hooves across the cliffs. The same instant he struck my tree he jerked his head and flame

shot up my leg. The tip of one horn had torn me to the knee.

But that was all. The tree shuddered as he banged it with his skull, and he pivoted around it, stumbling. He gave his head a jerk, as if clearing his brains, then turned and loped back to where he'd charged me from before. He'd struck too low, and even in my terror I understood that he would always strike too low: he fought by instinct, blind mechanism ages old. He'd have fought the same way against an earthquake or an eagle: I had nothing to fear from his wrath but that twisting horn. The next time he charged I kept my eye on it, watched that horn with as much concentration as I'd have watched the rims of a crevasse I was leaping, and at just the right instant I flinched. Nothing touched me but the breeze as the horn flipped past.

I laughed. My ankle was numb now; my leg was on fire to the hip. I twisted to search the cliffwalls again, but still my mother wasn't there, and my laughter grew fierce. All at once, as if by sudden vision, I understood the emptiness in the eyes of those humpbacked shapes back in the cave. (Were they my brothers, my uncles, those creatures shuffling brimstone-eyed from room to room, or sitting separate, isolated, muttering forever like underground rivers, each in his private, inviolable gloom?)

I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical

chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist. All the rest, I saw, is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly—as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back. I create the whole universe, blink by blink.—An ugly god pitifully dying in a tree!

The bull struck again. I flinched from the horntip and bellowed with rage and pain. The limbs overhead, stretching out through the clearing like hungry snakes reaching up from their nest, would be clubs if I had them in my two hands, or barricades, piled between me and my cave, or kindling down in the room where my mother and I slept. Where they were, above me, they were—what? Kind shade? I laughed. A tearful howl.

The bull kept on charging. Sometimes after he hit he'd fall down and lie panting. I grew limp with my anarchistic laughter. I no longer bothered to jerk back my leg. Sometimes the horntip tore it, sometimes not. I clung to the tree-trunk that slanted off to my right, and I almost slept. Perhaps I did sleep, I don't know. I must have. Nothing mattered. Sometime in the middle of the afternoon I opened my eyes and discovered that the bull was gone.

I slept again, I think. When I woke up this time and looked up through the leaves overhead, there were vultures. I sighed, indifferent. I was growing used to the pain,

or it had lessened. Unimportant. I tried to see myself from the vultures' viewpoint. I saw, instead, my mother's eyes. Consuming. I was suddenly her focus of the general meaninglessness—not for myself, not for any quality of my large, shaggy body or my sly, unnatural mind. I was, in her eyes, some meaning I myself could never know and might not care to know: an alien, the rock broken free of the wall. I slept again.

That night, for the first time, I saw men.

It was dark when I awakened—or when I came to, if it was that. I was aware at once that there was something wrong. There was no sound, not even the honk of a frog or the chirp of a cricket. There was a smell, a fire very different from ours, pungent, painful as thistles to the nose. I opened my eyes and everything was blurry, as though underwater. There were lights all around me, like some weird creature's eyes. They jerked back as I looked. Then voices, speaking words. The sounds were foreign at first, but when I calmed myself, concentrating, I found I understood them: it was my own language, but spoken in a strange way, as if the sounds were made by brittle sticks, dried spindles, flaking bits of shale. My vision cleared and I saw them, mounted on horses, holding torches up. Some of them had shiny domes (as it seemed to me then) with horns coming out, like the bull's. They were small, these creatures, with dead-looking eyes and gray-white faces, and

yet in some ways they were like us, except ridiculous and, at the same time, mysteriously irritating, like rats. Their movements were stiff and regular, as if figured by logic. They had skinny, naked hands that moved by clicks. When I first became aware of them, they were all speaking at the same time. I tried to move, but my body was rigid; only one hand gave a jerk. They all stopped speaking at the same instant, like sparrows. We stared at each other.

One of them said—a tall one with a long black beard—"It moves independent of the tree."

They nodded.

The tall one said, "It's a growth of some kind, that's my opinion. Some beastlike fungus."

They all looked up into the branches.

A short, fat one with a tangled white beard pointed up into the tree with an ax. "Those branches on the northern side are all dead there. No doubt the whole tree'll be dead before midsummer. It's always the north side goes first when there ain't enough sap."

They nodded, and another one said, "See there where it grows up out of the trunk? Sap running all over."

They leaned over the sides of their horses to look, pushing the torches toward me. The horses' eyes glittered.

"Have to close that up if we're going to save this tree," the tall one said. The others grunted, and the tall one looked up at my eyes, uneasy. I couldn't move. He stepped

down off the horse and came over to me, so close I could have swung my hand and smashed his head if I could make my muscles move. "It's like blood," he said, and made a face.

Two of the others got down and came over to pull at their noses and look.

"I say that tree's a goner," one of them said.

They all nodded, except the tall one. "We can't just leave it rot," he said. "Start letting the place go to ruin and you know what the upshot'll be."

They nodded. The others got down off their horses and came over. The one with the tangled white beard said, "Maybe we could chop the fungus out."

They thought about it. After a while the tall one shook his head. "I don't know. Could be it's some kind of a oak-tree spirit. Better not to mess with it."

They looked uneasy. There was a hairless, skinny one with eyes like two holes. He stood with his arms out, like a challenged bird, and he kept moving around in jerky little circles, bent forward, peering at everything, at the tree, at the woods around, up into my eyes. Now suddenly he nodded. "That's it! King's right! It's a spirit!"

"You think so?" they said. Their heads poked forward.

"Sure of it," he said.

"Is it friendly, you think?" the king said.

The hairless one peered up at me with the fingertips of

one hand in his mouth. The skinny elbow hung straight down, as if he were leaning on an invisible table while he thought the whole thing through. His black little eyes stared straight into mine, as if waiting for me to tell him something. I tried to speak. My mouth moved, but nothing would come out. The little man jerked back. "He's hungry!" he said.

"Hungry!" they all said. "What does he eat?"

He looked at me again. His tiny eyes drilled into me and he was crouched as if he were thinking of trying to jump up into my brains. My heart thudded. I was so hungry I could eat a rock. He smiled suddenly, as if a holy vision had exploded in his head. "He eats *pig!*" he said. He looked doubtful. "Or maybe pigsmoke. He's in a period of transition."

They all looked at me, thinking it over, then nodded.

The king picked out six men. "Go get the thing some pigs," he said. The six men said "Yes sir!" and got on their horses and rode off. It filled me with joy, though it was all crazy, and before I knew I could do it, I laughed. They jerked away and stood shaking, looking up.

"The spirit's angry," one of them whispered.

"It always has been," another one said. "That's why it's killing the tree."

"No, no, you're wrong," the hairless one said. "It's yelling for pig."

"Pig!" I tried to yell. It scared them.

They all began shouting at each other. One of the horses neighed and reared up, and for some crazy reason they took it for a sign. The king snatched an ax from the man beside him and, without any warning, he hurled it at me. I twisted, letting out a howl, and it shot past my shoulder, just barely touching my skin. Blood trickled out.

"You're all crazy," I tried to yell, but it came out a moan. I bellowed for my mother.

"Surround him!" the king yelled, "Save the horses!"—and suddenly I knew I was dealing with no dull mechanical bull but with thinking creatures, pattern makers, the most dangerous things I'd ever met. I shrieked at them, trying to scare them off, but they merely ducked behind bushes and took long sticks from the saddles of their horses, bows and javelins. "You're all crazy," I bellowed, "you're all insane!" I'd never howled more loudly in my life. Darts like hot coals went through my legs and arms and I howled more loudly still. And then, just when I was sure I was finished, a shriek ten times as loud as mine came blaring off the cliff. It was my mother! She came roaring down like thunder, screaming like a thousand hurricanes, eyes as bright as dragonfire, and before she was within a mile of us, the creatures had leaped to their horses and galloped away. Big trees shattered and fell from her path; the earth trembled. Then her smell poured in like blood

into a silver cup, filling the moonlit clearing to the brim, and I felt the two trees that held me falling, and I was tumbling, free, into the grass.

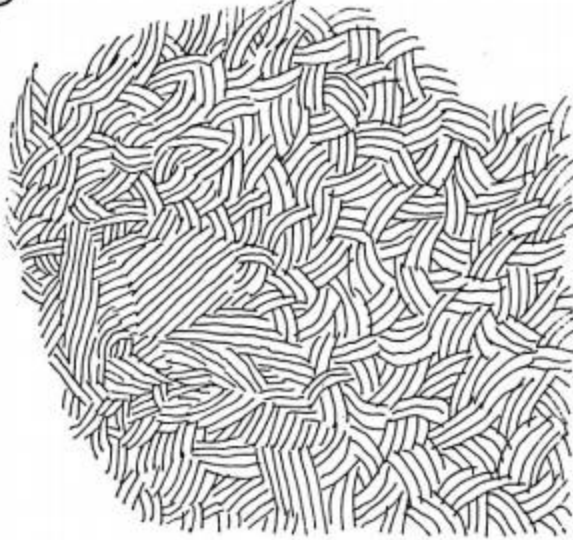
I woke up in the cave, warm firelight flickering on walls. My mother lay picking through the bone pile. When she heard me stir, she turned, wrinkling her forehead, and looked at me. There were no other shapes. I think I dimly understood even then that they'd gone deeper into darkness, away from men. I tried to tell her all that had happened, all that I'd come to understand: the meaningless objectness of the world, the universal brutality. She only stared, troubled at my noise. She'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any. I'd never heard her speak to the other shapes. (How I myself learned to speak I can't remember; it was a long, long time ago.) But I talked on, trying to smash through the walls of her unconsciousness. "The world resists me and I resist the world," I said. "That's all there is. The mountains are what I define them as." Ah, monstrous stupidity of childhood, unreasonable hope! I waken with a start and see it over again (in my cave, out walking, or sitting by the mere), the memory rising as if it has been pursuing me. The fire in my mother's eyes brightens and she reaches out as if some current is tearing us apart. "The world is all pointless accident," I say. Shouting now, my fists clenched. "I exist, nothing else." Her face works. She gets up on all

fours, brushing dry bits of bone from her path, and, with a look of terror, rising as if by unnatural power, she hurls herself across the void and buries me in her bristly fur and fat. I sicken with fear. "My mother's fur is bristly," I say to myself. "Her flesh is loose." Buried under my mother I cannot see. She smells of wild pig and fish. "My mother smells of wild pig and fish," I say. What I see I inspire with usefulness, I think, trying to suck in breath, and all that I do not see is useless, void. I observe myself observing what I observe. It startles me. "Then I am not that which observes!" I am *lack*. *Alack!* No thread, no frailest hair between myself and the universal clutter! I listen to the underground river. I have never seen it.

Talking, talking, spinning a skin, a skin . . .

I can't breathe, and I claw to get free. She struggles. I smell my mama's blood and, alarmed, I hear from the walls and floor of the cave the booming, booming, of her heart.

3



It wasn't because he threw that battle-ax that I turned on Hrothgar. That was mere midnight foolishness. I dismissed it, thought of it afterward only as you remember a tree that fell on you or an adder you stepped on by accident, except of course that Hrothgar was more to be feared than a tree or snake. It wasn't until later, when I was full-grown and Hrothgar was an old, old man, that I settled my soul on destroying him—slowly and cruelly. Except for his thanes' occasional stories of seeing my footprints, he'd probably forgotten by then that I existed.

He'd been busy. I'd watched it all from the eaves of the forest, mostly from up off the ground, in the branches.

In the beginning there were various groups of them: ragged little bands that roamed the forest on foot or horseback, crafty-witted killers that worked in teams, hunting through the summer, shivering in caves or little huts in the winter, occasionally wandering out into the snow to plow through it slowly, clumsily, after more meat. Ice clung to their eyebrows and beards and eyelashes, and I'd hear them whining and groaning as they walked. When two hunters from different bands came together in the woods, they would fight until the snow was slushy with blood, then crawl back, gasping and crying, to their separate camps to tell wild tales of what happened.

As the bands grew larger, they would seize and clear a hill and, with the trees they'd cut, would set up shacks, and on the crown of the hill a large, shaggy house with a steeply pitched roof and a wide stone hearth, where they'd all go at night for protection from other bands of men. The inside walls would be beautifully painted and hung with tapestries, and every cross-timber or falcon's perch was carved and gewgawed with toads, snakes, dragon shapes, deer, cows, pigs, trees, trolls. At the first sign of spring they would set out their shrines and scatter seeds on the sides of the hill, below the shacks, and would put up wooden fences to pen their pigs and cows. The women worked the ground and milked and fed the animals while the men hunted, and when the men came in from the wolf-

roads at dusk, the women would cook the game they'd caught while the men went inside and drank mead. Then they'd all eat, the men first, then the women and children, the men still drinking, getting louder and braver, talking about what they were going to do to the bands on the other hills. I would huddle, listening to their noise in the darkness, my eyebrows lifted, my lips pursed, the hair on the back of my neck standing up like pigs' bristles. All the bands did the same thing. In time I began to be more amused than revolted by what they threatened. It didn't matter to me what they did to each other. It was slightly ominous because of its strangeness—no wolf was so vicious to other wolves—but I half believed they weren't serious.

They would listen to each other at the meadhall tables, their pinched, cunning rats' faces picking like needles at the boaster's words, the warfalcons gazing down, black, from the rafters, and when one of them finished his raving threats, another would stand up and lift up his ram's horn, or draw his sword, or sometimes both if he was very drunk, and he'd tell them what *he* planned to do. Now and then some trivial argument would break out, and one of them would kill another one, and all the others would detach themselves from the killer as neatly as blood clotting, and they'd consider the case and they'd either excuse him, for some reason, or else send him out to the forest to live by stealing from their outlying pens like a wounded fox. At

times I would try to befriend the exile, at other times I would try to ignore him, but they were treacherous. In the end, I had to eat them. As a rule, though, that wasn't how all their drinking turned out. Normally the men would howl out their daring, and the evening would get merrier, louder and louder, the king praising this one, criticizing that one, no one getting hurt except maybe some female who was asking for it, and eventually they'd all fall asleep on each other like lizards, and I'd steal a cow.

But the threats were serious. Darting unseen from camp to camp, I observed a change come over their drunken boasts. It was late spring. Food was plentiful. Every sheep and goat had its wobbly twins, the forest was teeming, and the first crops of the hillsides were coming into fruit. A man would roar, "I'll steal their gold and burn their meadhall!" shaking his sword as if the tip were afire, and a man with eyes like two pins would say, "Do it now, Cowface! I think you're not even the man your father was!" The people would laugh. I would back away into the darkness, furious at my stupid need to spy on them, and I would glide to the next camp of men, and I'd hear the same.

Then once, around midnight, I came to a hall in ruins. The cows in their pens lay burbling blood through their nostrils, with javelin holes in their necks. None had been eaten. The watchdogs lay like dark wet stones, with their heads cut off, teeth bared. The fallen hall was a square of

flames and acrid smoke, and the people inside (none of them had been eaten either) were burned black, small, like dwarfs turned dark and crisp. The sky opened like a hole where the gables had loomed before, and the wooden benches, the trestle tables, the beds that had hung on the meadhall walls were scattered to the edge of the forest, shining charcoal. There was no sign of the gold they'd kept—not so much as a melted hilt.

Then the wars began, and the war songs, and the weapon making. If the songs were true, as I suppose at least one or two of them were, there had always been wars, and what I'd seen was merely a period of mutual exhaustion.

I'd be watching a meadhall from high in a tree, night-birds singing in the limbs below me, the moon's face hidden in a tower of clouds, and nothing would be stirring except leaves moving in the light spring breeze and, down by the pigpens, two men walking with their battle-axes and their dogs. Inside the hall I would hear the Shaper telling of the glorious deeds of dead kings—how they'd split certain heads, snuck away with certain precious swords and necklaces—his harp mimicking the rush of swords, clanging boldly with the noble speeches, sighing behind the heroes' dying words. Whenever he stopped, thinking up formulas for what to say next, the people would all shout and thump each other and drink to the Shaper's long life. In the shadow of the hall and by the outbuildings,

men sat whistling or humming to themselves, repairing weapons: winding bronze bands around gray ash-spears, treating their swordblades with snake's venom, watching the goldworker decorate the handles of battle-axes. (The goldworkers had an honored place. I remember one of them especially: a lean, aloof, superior man of middle age. He never spoke to the others except to laugh sometimes—"Nych heh heh.")

Then suddenly the birds below me in the tree would fall silent, and beyond the meadhall clearing I'd hear the creak of harness-leather. The watchmen and their dogs would stand stock-still, as if lightning-struck; then the dogs would bark, and the next instant the door would bang open and men would come tumbling, looking crazy, from the meadhall. The enemies' horses would thunder up into the clearing, leaping the pig-fences, sending the cows and the pigs away mooing and squealing, and the two bands of men would charge. Twenty feet apart they would slide to a stop and stand screaming at each other with raised swords. The leaders on both sides held their javelins high in both hands and shook them, howling their lungs out. Terrible threats, from the few words I could catch. Things about their fathers and their fathers' fathers, things about justice and honor and lawful revenge—their throats swollen, their eyes rolling like a newborn colt's, sweat running down their shoulders. Then they would fight. Spears

flying, swords whonking, arrows raining from the windows and doors of the meadhall and the edge of the woods. Horses reared and fell over screaming, ravens flew, crazy as bats in a fire, men staggered, gesturing wildly, making speeches, dying or sometimes pretending to be dying, sneaking off. Sometimes the attackers would be driven back, sometimes they'd win and burn the meadhall down, sometimes they'd capture the king of the meadhall and make his people give weapons and gold rings and cows.

It was confusing and frightening, not in a way I could untangle. I was safe in my tree, and the men who fought were nothing to me, except of course that they talked in something akin to my language, which meant that we were, incredibly, related. I was sickened, if only at the waste of it: all they killed—cows, horses, men—they left to rot or burn. I sacked all I could and tried to store it, but my mother would growl and make faces because of the stink.

The fighting went on all that summer and began again the next and again the next. Sometimes when a meadhall burned, the survivors would go to another meadhall and, stretching out their hands, would crawl unarmed up the strangers' hill and would beg to be taken in. They would give the strangers whatever weapons or pigs or cattle they'd saved from destruction, and the strangers would give them an outbuilding, the worst of their food, and some

straw. The two groups would fight as allies after that, except that now and then they betrayed each other, one shooting the other from behind for some reason, or stealing the other group's gold, some midnight, or sneaking into bed with the other group's wives and daughters.

I watched it, season after season. Sometimes I watched from the high cliff wall, where I could look out and see all the meadhall lights on the various hills across the countryside, glowing like candles, reflected stars. With luck, I might see, on a soft summer night, as many as three halls burning down at once. That was rare, of course. It grew rarer as the pattern of their warring changed. Hrothgar, who'd begun hardly stronger than the others, began to outstrip the rest. He'd worked out a theory about what fighting was for, and now he no longer fought with his six closest neighbors. He'd shown them the strength of his organization, and now, instead of making war on them, he sent men to them every three months or so, with heavy wagons and back-slings, to gather their tribute to his greatness. They piled his wagons high with gold and leather and weapons, and they kneeled to his messengers and made long speeches and promised to defend him against any foolhardy outlaw that dared to attack him. Hrothgar's messengers answered with friendly words and praise of the man they'd just plundered, as if the whole thing had been his idea, then whipped up the oxen, pulled up their loaded

back-slings, and started home. It was a hard trip. The tall, silky grass of the meadows and the paths along the forest would clog the heavy wagon spokes and snarl the oxen's hooves; wagon wheels sunk in the rich black earth that only the wind had ever yet seeded or harvested. The oxen rolled their eyes, floundering, and mooed. Men swore. They pushed at the wheels with long oak poles and slashed at the oxen till their backs were crosshatched with bleeding welts and their noses ran pink foam. Sometimes with one terrific heave, an ox would break free of the traces and plunge into the brush. A man on a horse would go after it, slashed by branches, cutting through tangles of hazel and hawthorn, his horse balking at the pain of thorns, and sometimes when the man found the ox he would fill it with arrows and leave it to the wolves. Sometimes he merely sat, when he found the ox, and met its stupid, gloomy eyes and wept. Sometimes a horse, mired to the waist, would give up and merely stand, head hanging, as if waiting for death, and the men would howl at it and cut it with whips, or throw stones, or club it with heavy limbs, until finally one of them came to his senses and calmed the others, and they would winch out the horse with ropes and wagon wheels, if they could, or else abandon the horse or kill it—first stripping off the saddle and bridle and the handsomely decorated harness. At times, when a wagon was hopelessly mired, the men would

walk back to Hrothgar's hall for help. When they returned, the wagon would be emptied of all its gold and burned, sometimes by people of Hrothgar's own tribe, though usually by others, and the oxen and horses would be dead.

Hrothgar met with his council for many nights and days, and they drank and talked and prayed to their curious carved-out creatures and finally came to a decision. They built roads. The kings from whom they'd taken tributes of treasure they now asked for tributes of men. Then Hrothgar and his neighbors, loaded like ants on a long march, pushed foot by foot and day by day around the marshes and over the moors and through the woods, pressing flat rocks into the soft ground and grass, and packing smaller stones around the rocks' sides, until, from my watch on the wall of the cliff, Hrothgar's whole realm was like a wobbly, lopsided wheel with spokes of stone.

And now when enemies from farther out struck at kings who called themselves Hrothgar's friends, a messenger would slip out and ride through the night to the tribute-taker, and in half an hour, while the enemy bands were still shouting at each other, still waving their ashspears and saying what horrible things they would do, the forest would rumble with the sound of Hrothgar's horsemen. He would overcome them: his band had grown large, and for the treasures Hrothgar could afford now to give them

in sign of his thanks, his warriors became hornets. New roads snaked out. New mead halls gave tribute. His treasure-hoard grew till his mead hall was piled to the rafters with brightly painted shields and ornamented swords and boar's-head helmets and coils of gold, and they had to abandon the mead hall and sleep in the outbuildings. Meanwhile, those who paid tribute to him were forced to strike at more distant halls to gather the gold they paid to Hrothgar—and a little on the side for themselves. His power overran the world, from the foot of my cliff to the northern sea to the impenetrable forests south and east. They hacked down trees in widening rings around their central halls and blistered the land with peasant huts and pigpen fences till the forest looked like an old dog dying of mange. They thinned out the game, killed birds for sport, set accidental fires that would burn for days. Their sheep killed hedges, snipped valleys bare, and their pigs nosed up the very roots of what might have grown. Hrothgar's tribe made boats to drive farther north and west. There was nothing to stop the advance of man. Huge boars fled at the click of a harness. Wolves would cower in the glens like foxes when they caught that deadly scent. I was filled with a wordless, obscurely murderous unrest.

One night, inevitably, a blind man turned up at Hrothgar's temporary mead hall. He was carrying a harp. I watched from the shadow of a cowshed, since on that hill

there were no trees. The guards at the door crossed their axes in front of him. He waited, smiling foolishly, while a messenger went inside. A few minutes later the messenger returned, gave the old man a grunt, and—cautiously, feeling ahead of himself with his crooked bare toes like a man engaged in some strange, pious dance, the foolish smile still fixed on his face—the blind old man went in. A boy darted up from the weeds at the foot of the hill, the harper's companion. He too was shown in.

The hall became quiet, and after a moment Hrothgar spoke, tones low and measured—of necessity, from too much shouting on midnight raids. The harper gave him back some answer, and Hrothgar spoke again. I glanced at the watchdogs. They still sat silent as tree stumps, locked in my spell. I crept closer to the hall to hear. The people were noisy for a time, yelling to the harper, offering him mead, making jokes, and then again King Hrothgar spoke, white-bearded. The hall became still.

The silence expanded. People coughed. As if all by itself, then, the harp made a curious run of sounds, almost words, and then a moment later, arresting as a voice from a hollow tree, the harper began to chant:

*Lo, we have heard the honor of the Spear-danes,
nation-kings, in days now gone,
how those battle-lords brought themselves glory.*

*Oft Scyld Shefing shattered the forces
 of kinsman-marauders, dragged away their
 meadhall-benches, terrified earls—after first men found him
 castaway. (He got recompense for that!)*
*He grew up under the clouds, won glory of men
 till all his enemies sitting around him
 heard across the whaleroads his demands and gave
 him tribute. That was a good king!*

So he sang—or intoned, with the harp behind him—twisting together like sailors' ropes the bits and pieces of the best old songs. The people were hushed. Even the surrounding hills were hushed, as if brought low by language. He knew his art. He was king of the Shapers, harpstring scratchers (oakmoss-bearded, inspired by winds). That was what had brought him over wilderness, down blindman's alleys of time and space, to Hrothgar's famous hall. He would sing the glory of Hrothgar's line and gild his wisdom and stir up his men to more daring deeds, for a price.

He told how Scyld by the cunning of arms had rebuilt the old Danish kingdom from ashes, lordless a long time before he came, and the prey of every passing band, and how Scyld's son by the strength of his wits had increased their power, a man who fully understood men's need, from lust to love, and knew how to use it to fashion a mile-wide fist of chain-locked steel. He sang of battles and

marriages, of funerals and hangings, the whimperings of beaten enemies, of splendid hunts and harvests. He sang of Hrothgar, hoarfrost white, magnificent of mind.

When he finished, the hall was as quiet as a mound. I too was silent, my ear pressed tight against the timbers. Even to me, incredibly, he had made it all seem true and very fine. Now a little, now more, a great roar began, an exhalation of breath that swelled to a rumble of voices and then to the howling and clapping and stomping of men gone mad on art. They would seize the oceans, the farthest stars, the deepest secret rivers in Hrothgar's name! Men wept like children: children sat stunned. It went on and on, a fire more dread than any visible fire.

Only one man in the kingdom seemed cast down: the man who'd been Hrothgar's harper before the blind man came to make his bid. The former harper crept out into the darkness, unnoticed by the rest. He slipped away through fields and forests, his precious old instrument under his arm, to seek out refuge in the hall of some lesser marauder. I too crept away, my mind aswim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden, and all of them, incredibly, lies.

What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way—and so did I.

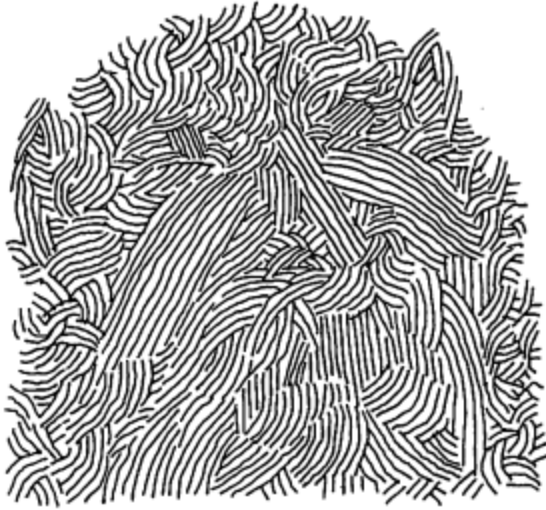
I crossed the moors in a queer panic, like a creature half insane. I knew the truth. *It was late spring. Every sheep and goat had its wobbly twins. A man said, "I'll steal their gold and burn their meadhall!" and another man said, "Do it now!"* I remembered the ragged men fighting each other till the snow was red slush, whining in winter, the shriek of people and animals burning, the whip-slashed oxen in the mire, the scattered battle-leavings: wolf-torn corpses, falcons fat with blood. Yet I also remembered, as if it had happened, great Scyld, of whose kingdom no trace remained, and his farsighted son, of whose greater kingdom no trace remained. And the stars overhead were alive with the promise of Hrothgar's vast power, his universal peace. The moors their axes had stripped of trees glowed silver in the moonlight, and the yellow lights of peasant huts were like scattered jewels on the ravendark cloak of a king. I was so filled with sorrow and tenderness I could hardly have found it in my heart to snatch a pig!

Thus I fled, ridiculous hairy creature torn apart by poetry—crawling, whimpering, streaming tears, across the world like a two-headed beast, like mixed-up lamb and kid at the tail of a baffled, indifferent ewe—and I gnashed my teeth and clutched the sides of my head as if to heal the split, but I couldn't.

There was a Scyld, once, who ruled the Danes; and other men ruled after him, that much was true. And the rest?

At the top of the cliffwall I turned and looked down, and I saw all the lights of Hrothgar's realm and the realms beyond that, that would soon be his, and to clear my mind, I sucked in wind and screamed. The sound went out, violent, to the rims of the world, and after a moment it bounced back up at me—harsh and ungodly against the sigh of the remembered harp—like a thousand tortured rat-squeals crying: *Lost!*

I clamped my palms to my ears and stretched up my lips and shrieked again: a stab at truth, a snatch at apocalyptic glee. Then I ran on all fours, chest pounding, to the smoky mere.



He sings to a heavier harpsong now, old heart-string scratcher, memory scraper. Of the richest of kings made sick of soul by the scattered bones of thanes. By late afternoon the fire dies down and the column of smoke is white, no longer greasy. There will be others this year, they know; yet they hang on. The sun backs away from the world like a crab and the days grow shorter, the nights grow longer, more dark and dangerous. I smile, angry in the thickening dusk, and feast my eyes on the greatest of mead halls, unsatisfied.

His pride. The torch of kingdoms. Hart.

The Shaper remains, though now there are nobler courts where he might sing. The pride of creation. He built this

hall by the power of his songs: created with casual words its grave mor(t)ality. The boy observes him, tall and solemn, twelve years older than the night he first crept in with his stone-eyed master. He knows no art but tragedy—a moving singer. The credit is wholly mine.

Inspired by winds (or whatever you please), the old man sang of a glorious mead hall whose light would shine to the ends of the ragged world. The thought took seed in Hrothgar's mind. It grew. He called all his people together and told them his daring scheme. He would build a magnificent mead hall high on a hill, with a view of the western sea, a victory-seat near the giants' work, old ruined fortress from the world's first war, to stand forever as a sign of the glory and justice of Hrothgar's Danes. There he would sit and give treasures out, all wealth but the lives of men and the people's land. And so his sons would do after him, and his sons' sons, to the final generation.

I listened, huddled in the darkness, tormented, mistrustful. I knew them, had watched them; yet the things he said seemed true. He sent to far kingdoms for woodsmen, carpenters, metalsmiths, goldsmiths—also carters, victualers, clothiers to attend to the workmen—and for weeks their uproar filled the days and nights. I watched from the vines and boulders of the giants' ruin, two miles off. Then word went out to the races of men that Hrothgar's hall was finished. He gave it its name. From neighboring

realms and from across the sea came men to the great celebration. The harper sang.

I listened, felt myself swept up. I knew very well that all he said was ridiculous, not light for their darkness but flattery, illusion, a vortex pulling them from sunlight to heat, a kind of midsummer burgeoning, waltz to the sickle. Yet I was swept up. "Ridiculous!" I hissed in the black of the forest. I snatched up a snake from beside my foot and whispered to it, "I knew him *when!*" But I couldn't bring out a wicked cackle, as I'd meant to do. My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways. I backed away, crablike, further into darkness—like a crab retreating in pain when you strike two stones at the mouth of his underwater den. I backed away till the honeysweet lure of the harp no longer mocked me. Yet even now my mind was tormented by images. Thanes filled the hall and a great silent crowd of them spilled out over the surrounding hill, smiling, peaceable, hearing the harper as if not a man in all that lot had ever twisted a knife in his neighbor's chest.

"Well then he's changed them," I said, and stumbled and fell on the root of a tree. "Why not?"

Why not? the forest whispered back—yet not the forest, something deeper, an impression from another mind, some live thing old and terrible.

I listened, tensed.

Not a sound.

"He reshapes the world," I whispered, belligerent. "So his name implies. He stares strange-eyed at the mindless world and turns dry sticks to gold."

A little poetic, I would readily admit. His manner of speaking was infecting me, making me pompous. "Nevertheless," I whispered crossly—but I couldn't go on, too conscious all at once of my whispering, my eternal posturing, always transforming the world with words—changing nothing. I still had the snake in my fist. I set it down. It fled.

"He takes what he finds," I said stubbornly, trying again. "And by changing men's minds he makes the best of it. Why not?" But it sounded petulant; and it wasn't true, I knew. He sang for pay, for the praise of women—one in particular—and for the honor of a famous king's hand on his arm. If the ideas of art were beautiful, that was art's fault, not the Shaper's. A blind selector, almost mindless: a bird. Did they murder each other more gently because in the woods sweet songbirds sang?

Yet I wasn't satisfied. His fingers picked infallibly, as if moved by something beyond his power, and the words stitched together out of ancient songs, the scenes interwoven out of dreary tales, made a vision without seams, an image of himself yet not-himself, beyond the need of any shaggy old gold-friend's pay: the projected possible.

"Why not?" I whispered, jerking forward, struggling to make my eyes sear through the dark trunks and vines.

I could feel it all around me, that invisible presence, chilly as the first intimation of death, the dusty unblinking eyes of a thousand snakes. There was no sound. I touched a fat, slick loop of vine, prepared to leap back in horror, but it was only vine, no worse. And still no sound, no movement. I got up on my feet, bent over, squinting, and edged back through the trees toward the town. It followed me—whatever it was. I was as sure of that as I'd ever been of anything. And then, in one instant, as if it had all been my mind, the thing was gone. In the hall they were laughing.

Men and women stood talking in the light of the mead-hall door and on the narrow streets below; on the lower hillside boys and girls played near the sheep pens, shyly holding hands. A few lay touching each other in the forest eaves. I thought how they'd shriek if I suddenly showed my face, and it made me smile, but I held myself back. They talked nothing, stupidities, their soft voices groping like hands. I felt myself tightening, cross, growing restless for no clear reason, and I made myself move more slowly. Then, circling the clearing, I stepped on something fleshy, and jerked away. It was a man. They'd cut his throat. His clothes had been stolen. I stared up at the hall, baffled, beginning to shake. They went on talking

softly, touching hands, their hair full of light. I lifted up the body and slung it across my shoulder.

Then the harp began to play. The crowd grew still.

The harp sighed, the old man sang, as sweet-voiced as a child.

He told how the earth was first built, long ago: said that the greatest of gods made the world, every wonder-bright plain and the turning seas, and set out as signs of his victory the sun and moon, great lamps for light to land-dwellers, kingdom torches, and adorned the fields with all colors and shapes, made limbs and leaves and gave life to the every creature that moves on land.

The harp turned solemn. He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect. The terrible race God cursed.

I believed him. Such was the power of the Shaper's harp! Stood wriggling my face, letting tears down my nose, grinding my fists into my streaming eyes, even though to do it I had to squeeze with my elbow the corpse of the proof that both of us were cursed, or neither, that the brothers had never lived, nor the god who judged them. "Waaa!" I bawled.

Oh what a conversion!

I staggered out into the open and up toward the hall with my burden, groaning out, "Mercy! Peace!" The

harper broke off, the people screamed. (They have their own versions, but this is the truth.) Drunken men rushed me with battle-axes. I sank to my knees, crying, "Friend! Friend!" They hacked at me, yipping like dogs. I held up the body for protection. Their spears came through it and one of them nicked me, a tiny scratch high on my left breast, but I knew by the sting it had venom on it and I understood, as shocked as I'd been the first time, that they could kill me—eventually *would* if I gave them a chance. I struck at them, holding the body as a shield, and two fell bleeding from my nails at the first little swipe. The others backed off. I crushed the body in my hug, then hurled it in their faces, turned, and fled. They didn't follow.

I ran to the center of the forest and fell down panting. My mind was wild. "Pity," I moaned, "O pity! pity!" I wept—strong monster with teeth like a shark's—and I slammed the earth with such force that a seam split open twelve feet long. "Bastards!" I roared. "Sons of bitches! Fuckers!" Words I'd picked up from men in their rages. I wasn't even sure what they meant, though I had an idea: defiance, rejection of the gods that, for my part, I'd known all along to be lifeless sticks. I roared with laughter, still sobbing. We, the accursed, didn't even have words for swearing in! "*AAARGH!*" I whooped, then covered my ears and hushed. It sounded silly.

My sudden awareness of my foolishness made me calm.

I looked up through the treetops, ludicrously hopeful. I think I was half prepared, in my dark, demented state, to see God, bearded and gray as geometry, scowling down at me, shaking his bloodless finger.

"Why can't I have someone to talk to?" I said. The stars said nothing, but I pretended to ignore the rudeness. "The Shaper has people to talk to," I said. I wrung my fingers. "Hrothgar has people to talk to."

I thought about it.

Perhaps it wasn't true.

As a matter of fact, if the Shaper's vision of goodness and peace was a part of himself, not idle rhymes, then no one understood him at all, not even Hrothgar. And as for Hrothgar, if he was serious about his idea of glory—sons and sons' sons giving out treasure—I had news for him. If he had sons, they wouldn't hear his words. They would weigh his silver and gold in their minds. I've watched the generations. I've seen their weasel eyes.

I fought down my smile.

"That could change," I said, shaking my finger as if at an audience. "The Shaper may yet improve men's minds, bring peace to the miserable Danes."

But they were doomed, I knew, and I was glad. No denying it. Let them wander the fogroads of Hell.

• • •

Two nights later I went back. I was addicted. The Shaper was singing the glorious deeds of the dead men, praising war. He sang how they'd fought me. It was all lies. The sly harp rasped like snakes in cattails, glorifying death. I snatched a guard and smashed him on a tree, but my stomach turned at the thought of eating him. "Woe to the man," the Shaper sang, "who shall through wicked hostilities shove his soul down into the fire's hug! Let him hope for no change: he can never turn away! But lucky the man who, after his deathday, shall seek the Prince, find peace in his father's embrace!"

"Bullshit!" I whispered through clenched teeth. How was it that he could enrage me so?

Why not? the darkness hissed around me. *Why not?* *Why not?* Teasing, tormenting, as cold as a dead hand closing on my wrist.

Imagination, I knew. Some evil inside myself pushed out into the trees. I knew what I knew, the mindless, mechanical brutality of things, and when the harper's lure drew my mind away to hopeful dreams, the dark of what was and always was reached out and snatched my feet.

And yet I'd be surprised, I had to admit, if anything in myself could be as cold, as dark, as centuries old as the presence I felt around me. I touched a vine to reassure myself. It was a snake. I snapped back in terror.

Then I calmed myself again. The fangs hadn't hit. It came to me that the presence was still there, somewhere deeper, much deeper, in the night. I had a feeling that if I let myself I could fall toward it, that it was pulling me, pulling the whole world in like a whirlpool.

Craziness, of course. I got up, though the feeling was as strong as ever, and felt my way back through the forest and over to the cliffwall and back to the mere and to my cave. I lay there listening to the indistinct memory of the Shaper's songs. My mother picked through the bone pile, sullen. I'd brought no food.

"Ridiculous," I whispered.

She looked at me.

It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce jolt that I wanted it. As they did too, though vicious animals, cunning, cracked with theories. I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable.

She whimpered, scratched at the nipple I had not sucked in years. She was pitiful, foul, her smile a jagged white tear in the firelight: waste.

She whimpered one sound: *Dool-dool! dool-dool!*, scratching at her bosom, a ghastly attempt to climb back up to speech.

I clamped my eyes shut, listened to the river, and after a time I slept.

I sat up with a jerk.

The thing was all around me, now, like a thunder charge.

"Who is it?" I said.

No answer. Darkness.

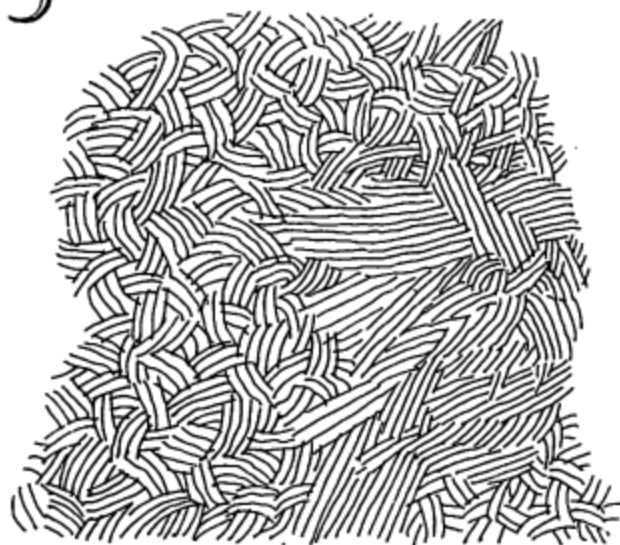
My mother was asleep; she was as deadlooking as a red-gray old sea-elephant stretched on the shore of a summer day.

I got up and silently left the cave. I went to the cliffwall, then down to the moor.

Still nothing.

I made my mind a blank and fell, sank away like a stone through earth and sea, toward the dragon.

5



No use of a growl, a whoop, a roar, in the presence of that beast! Vast, red-golden, huge tail coiled, limbs sprawled over his treasure-hoard, eyes not firey but cold as the memory of family deaths. Vanishing away across invisible floors, there were things of gold, gems, jewels, silver vessels the color of blood in the undulant, dragon-red light. Arching above him the ceiling and upper walls of his cave were alive with bats. The color of his sharp scales darkened and brightened as the dragon inhaled and exhaled slowly, drawing new air across his vast internal furnace; his razorsharp tusks gleamed and glinted as if they too, like the mountain beneath him, were formed of precious stones and metals.

My heart shook. His eyes stared straight at me. My knees and insides were so weak I had to drop down on all fours. His mouth opened slightly. Bits of flame escaped.

"Ah, Grendel!" he said. "You've come." The voice was startling. No rolling boom, as I would have expected, but a voice that might have come from an old, old man. Louder, of course, but not much louder.

"We've been expecting you," he said. He gave a nervous laugh, like a miser caught at his counting. His eyes were heavy-lidded, minutely veined, wrinkled like an elderly mead-drinker's. "Stand around the side, if you don't mind, boy," he said. "I get a cough sometimes, and it's terrible straight out front." The high dead eyelids wrinkled more, the corners of his mouth snaked up as he chuckled, sly, hardly hiding his malice. I quickly ducked around to the side.

"Good boy," he said. He tipped his head, lowering an eye toward me. "*Smart* boy! He he he!" He lifted a wrinkled paw with man-length talons for nails and held it over my head as if to crush me with it, but he merely brought it down lightly, once, twice, three times, patting my head.

"Well, speak, boy," he said. "Say 'Hello there, Mr. Dragon!'" He cackled.

My throat convulsed and I tried to get my breath to speak, but I couldn't.

The dragon smiled. Horrible, debauched, mouth limp and cracked, loose against the teeth as an ancient dog's. "Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*, eh? Scared enough to pee in their pants! He he!" He looked startled by an unpleasant thought, then cross. "You didn't, did you?"

I shook my head.

"Good," he said. "That's valuable stuff you're standing on. Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver (nyeh heh heh) . . . *Now*." He moved his head as if adjusting his flaking neck to a tight metal collar and put on what looked like, for him, a sober expression, like an old drunk preparing a solemn face for court. Then, as if involuntarily, he cackled again. It was horrible, horrible! Obscene! He couldn't stop himself. He cackled so hard a brilliant tear like a giant diamond rolled down his cheek. And still he couldn't stop. He raised up the taloned paw and pointed at me. His head tipped back, laughing, blowing fire out his mouth and nostrils. He tried to say something, but the laughing got worse. He rolled over on his side, stretching up one vast, wrinkled wing for balance, covering his eyes with one claw, still pointing with the other, roaring with laughter and kicking a little with his two back feet. I felt cross all at once, though I didn't dare show it. "Like a rabbit!" he brought out. "Nyee he he he! When you're scared, you look—nyee he he he—exactly . . . (*gasps!*) exactly . . ."

I scowled and, realizing I had my hands out in front of me like a rabbit sitting up, I jerked them behind my back. My scowl of rage nearly finished him. He hooted, gasped, sobbed, began to choke with laughter. I forgot myself completely. I snatched up an emerald the size of a fist and pulled it back to throw it at him. He was sober instantly. "Put it down!" he said. He drew in breath and turned his huge head straight at me. I dropped it and fought to keep my bowels from moving down.

"Don't touch," he said. The old-man voice was as terrible now as the eyes. It was as if he'd been dead for a thousand years. "Never never *never* touch my things," he said. Flame came out with the words and singed the hair on my belly and legs. I nodded, trembling all over. "Good," he said. He stared at me a moment longer, then slowly, slowly turned his head away. Then, old womanish, as if he were, though still spiteful, slightly embarrassed, he got back up onto his treasure pile, stretched out his wings, and settled.

He was in the foulest of moods. I doubted that I could learn anything from him now. I'd be lucky to get away alive. I thought all at once about what he'd said: "Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*." He had a point. From now on I'd stay clear of them. It was one thing to eat one from time to time—that was only natural: kept them from overpopulating, maybe starving to death, come winter—but it was another thing to scare them, give

them heart attacks, fill their nights with nightmares, just for sport.

"Fiddlesticks," the dragon said.

I blinked.

"Fiddlesticks, that's what I said," he repeated. "Why *not* frighten them? Creature, I could tell you things . . ." He rolled his eyes up under the heavy lids and made a noise, "*Glaagh*." He remained that way, breathing hard with peevish anger. "Stupid, stupid, *stupid!*" he hissed. "The whole damned kit and caboodle. Why did you come here? Why do you bother me?—Don't answer!" he added quickly, stopping me. "I know what's in your mind. I know everything. That's what makes me so sick and old and tired."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Be still!" he screamed. Flame shot clear to the cave-mouth. "I know you're sorry. For right now, that is. For this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. I'm unimpressed—No no! Be still!" His eye burst open like a hole, to hush me. I closed my mouth. The eye was terrible, lowering toward me. I felt as if I were tumbling down into it—dropping endlessly down through a soundless void. He let me fall, down and down toward a black sun and spiders, though he knew I was beginning to die. Nothing could have been more disinterested: serpent to the core.

But then he spoke after all, or rather laughed, and reality snapped back. Laughed, spoke, and broke my fall not as a kindness to me but because of his cold pleasure in knowing what he knew. I was in the cave again, and his horrible smile was snaking up his wrinkled cheek and his eye was once more half-closed. "You want the word," he said. "That's what you've come for. My advice is, don't ask! Do as I do! Seek out gold—but not *my* gold—and guard it!"

"Why?" I said.

"BE STILL!" The cave went white with his fire, and the rock walls roared the echo back. Bats flew like dust in a granary, then returned to their places, a few at a time, until all was still again, motionless, as if lifeless. His wings, which had stretched out slightly, relaxed and settled.

I waited for what seemed hours, huddling, my fingers protecting my head.

Then: "You want to know about the Shaper."

I nodded.

"Illusion," he said. He half smiled, then let it go as if infinitely weary, sick of Time. "I know everything, you see," the old voice wheedled. "The beginning, the present, the end. Everything. You now, you see the past and the present, like other low creatures: no higher faculties than memory and perception. But dragons, my boy, have a

whole different kind of mind." He stretched his mouth in a kind of smile, no trace of pleasure in it. "We see from the mountaintop: all time, all space. We see in one instant the passionate vision and the blowout. Not that we *cause* things to fail, you understand." He was testy all at once, as if answering an argument that had been put to him so often he was sick of it. "Dragons don't mess with your piddling free will. Pah! Listen to me, boy." The dead eye brightened. "If you with your knowledge of present and past recall that a certain man slipped on, say, a banana peel, or fell off his chair, or drowned in a river, that recollection does not mean that you *caused* him to slip, or fall, or drown. Correct? Of course it's correct! It happened, and you know it, but knowledge is not *cause*. Of course! Anyone who argues otherwise is a stupid ignoramus. Well, so with me. My knowledge of the future does not *cause* the future. It merely *sees* it, exactly as creatures at your low level recall things past. And even if, say, I interfere—burn up somebody's meadhall, for instance, whether because I just feel like it or because some supplicant asked me to—even then I do not change the future, I merely do what I saw from the beginning. That's obvious, surely. Let's say it's settled then. So much for free will and intercession!"

The dragon's eye closed to a slit. "Grendel!"

I jumped.

"Don't look so bored," he said. He scowled, black as midnight. "Think how *I* must feel," he said.

I almost said "I'm sorry," but caught myself.

"Man," he said, then left a long pause, letting scorn build up in the cave like the venom in his breath. "I can see you understand them. Counters, measurers, theory-makers.

All pigs eat cheese.

Old Snaggle is a pig.

If Snaggle is sick and refuses to eat, try cheese.

Games, games, games!" He snorted fire. "They only think they think. No total vision, total system, merely schemes with a vague family resemblance, no more identity than bridges and, say, spiderwebs. But they rush across chasms on spiderwebs, and sometimes they make it, and that, they think, settles that! I could tell you a thousand tiresome stories of their absurdity. They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity—the simplest insanity ever devised! Simple facts in isolation, and facts to connect them—ands and buts—are the *sine qua non* of all their glorious achievement. But there are no such facts. Connectedness is the essence of everything. It doesn't stop them, of course. They build the whole world out of teeth deprived of bodies to chew or be chewed on.

"They sense that, of course, from time to time; have

uneasy feelings that all they live by is nonsense. They have dim apprehensions that such propositions as 'God does not exist' are somewhat dubious at least in comparison with statements like 'All carnivorous cows eat meat.' That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality—puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. Mere tripe, believe me. Mere sleight-of-wits. He knows no more than they do about total reality—less, if anything: works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. It keeps them going—for what that's worth. As for myself, I can hardly bear to look."

"I see," I said. It was to some extent untrue.

The dragon smiled, seemed almost friendly for an instant. "You've been very attentive and thoughtful," he said, "all things considered. So I will tell you about Time and Space."

"Thank you," I said, as heartily as I could manage. I had more than enough to think about, it seemed to me.

He scowled, and I said no more. He took a deep breath, shifted his forelegs to a position more comfortable, and, after a moment's thought, began:

"In all discussions of Nature, we must try to remember the differences of scale, and in particular the differences of

time-span. We (by which I mean you, not us) are apt to take modes of observable functioning in our own bodies as setting an absolute scale. But as a matter of fact, it's extremely rash to extend conclusions derived from observation far beyond the scale of magnitude to which the observation was confined. For example, the apparent absence of change within a second of time tells nothing as to the change within a thousand years. Also, no appearance of change within a thousand years tells anything concerning what might happen in, say, a million years; and no apparent change within a million years tells anything about a million million years. We can extend this progression indefinitely; there is no absolute standard of magnitude. Any term in this progression is large compared to its predecessor and small compared to its successor.

"Again, all special studies presuppose certain fundamental types of things. (Here I am using the word 'thing,' notice, in its most general sense, which can include activities, colors, and all other *sensa*, also values.) As lower minds function, study, or 'science,' is concerned with a limited set of various types of things. There is thus, in the first place, this variety of types. In the second place, there is the determination as to what types are exhibited in any indicated situation. For example, there is the singular proposition—'This is green'—and there is the more general proposition—'All those things are green.' This type of

inquiry is what your usual reasoning takes care of. Undoubtedly such inquiries are essential in the initial stage of any study, for lower minds. But every such study must strive to get beyond it. Unfortunately—"

He glanced at me, suspicious. "You're not paying attention."

"I am!" I said, clasp my hands to show my seriousness.

But he shook his head slowly. "Nothing interests you but excitement, violence."

"That's not true!" I said.

His eye opened wider, his body brightened from end to end. "*You* tell *me* what's true?" he said.

"I'm trying to follow. I do my best," I said. "You should be reasonable. What do you expect?"

The dragon thought about it, breathing slowly, full of wrath. At last he closed his eyes. "Let us try starting somewhere else," he said. "It's damned hard, you understand, confining myself to concepts familiar to a creature of the Dark Ages. Not that one age is darker than another. Technical jargon from another dark age." He scowled as if hardly capable of forcing himself on. Then, after a long moment: "The essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order. The universe refuses the deadening influence of complete conformity. And yet in its refusal, it passes toward novel order as a primary requisite

for important experience. We have to explain the aim at forms of order, and the aim at novelty of order, and the measure of success, and the measure of failure. Apart from some understanding, however dim-witted, of these characteristics of historic process . . ." His voice trailed off.

After another long pause, he said: "Approach it this way. Let us take this jug." He picked up a golden vessel and held it toward me, not letting me touch it. In spite of himself, as it seemed, he looked hostile and suspicious, as if he thought I might perhaps be so stupid as to snatch the thing and run. "How does this jug differ from something animate?" He drew it back out of reach. "By organization! Exactly! This jug is an absolute democracy of atoms. It has importance, or thereness, so to speak, but no Expression, or, loosely, ah-ha!-ness. Importance is primarily monistic in its reference to the universe. Limited to a finite individual occasion, importance ceases to be important. In some sense or other—we can skip the details—importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite. Expression, however—listen closely now—expression is founded on the finite occasion. It is the activity of finitude impressing itself on its environment. Importance passes from the world as one to the world as many, whereas expression is the gift from the world as many to the world as one. The laws of nature are large average effects which reign impersonally. But there is

nothing average about expression: it is essentially individual. Consider one definite molecule—"

"A what?" I said.

The closed eyes squeezed tight. He let out a long, cross sigh of red-orange fire.

"Put it this way," he said. His voice had grown feeble, as if he were losing hope. "In the case of vegetables, we find expressive bodily organizations which lack any one center of experience with a higher complexity either of expressions received or of inborn data. Another democracy, but with qualifications, as we shall see. An animal, on the other hand, is dominated by one or more centers of experience. If the dominant activity be severed from the rest of the body—if, for example, we cut off the head—the whole coordination collapses, and the animal dies. Whereas in the case of the vegetable, the democracy can be subdivided into minor democracies which easily survive without much apparent loss of functional expression." He paused. "You at *least* follow that?"

"I think so."

He sighed. "Listen. Listen closely! An angry man does not usually shake his fist at the universe in general. He makes a selection and knocks his neighbor down. A piece of rock, on the other hand, impartially attracts the universe according to the law of gravitation. You grant there's a difference?"

He waited, furious with impatience. I met his eye as long as I could, then shook my head. It was unfair. For all I knew he might be telling me gibberish on purpose. I sat down. Let him babble. Let him burn me alive. The hell with it.

After a long, long time, he said, "It was stupid of you to come."

I nodded, sulking.

He stretched his wings—it was like a huge, irascible yawn—then settled again. "Things come and go," he said. "That's the gist of it. In a billion billion billion years, everything will have come and gone several times, in various forms. Even I will be gone. A certain man will absurdly kill me. A terrible pity—loss of a remarkable form of life. Conservationists will howl." He chuckled. "Meaningless, however. These jugs and pebbles, everything, these too will go. Poof! Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver . . ."

"You don't know that!" I said.

He smiled, showing all his teeth, and I knew he knew it.

"A swirl in the stream of time. A temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks, so to speak—pure metaphor, you understand—then by chance a vast floating cloud of dustspecks, an expanding universe—" He shrugged. "Complexities: green dust as well as the regular kind. Purple dust. Gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust,

copulating dust, *worshipful dust!*" He laughed, hollow as the cavern around him. "New laws for each new form, of course. New lines of potential. Complexity beyond complexity, accident on accident, until—" His leer was like icy wind.

"Go on," I said.

He closed his eyes, still smiling. "Pick an apocalypse, any apocalypse. A sea of black oil and dead things. No wind. No light. Nothing stirring, not even an ant, a spider. A silent universe. Such is the end of the flicker of time, the brief, hot fuse of events and ideas set off, accidentally, and snuffed out, accidentally, by man. Not a real ending of course, nor even a beginning. Mere ripple in Time's stream."

I squinted. "That really could happen?"

"It has happened," he said—and smiled as if it pleased him—"in the future. I am the witness."

I thought about it for a while, remembering the harp, then shook my head. "I don't believe you."

"It will come."

I went on squinting at him, hand on my mouth. He could lie. He was evil enough.

He shook his ponderous head. "Ah, man's cunning mind!" he said, and cackled. "Merely a new complexity, a new event, new set of nonce-rules generating further nonce-rules, down and down and down. Things lock on,

you know. The Devonian fish, the juxtaposed thumb, the fontanel, technology—*click click, click click...*”

“I think you’re lying,” I said, confused again, aswirl in words.

“I noticed that. You’ll never know. It must be very frustrating to be caged like a Chinaman’s cricket in a limited mind.” His cackle lacked spirit, this time. He was growing very weary of my presence.

“You said ‘Fiddlesticks,’ ” I said. “Why is it fiddlesticks if I stop giving people heart attacks over nothing? Why shouldn’t one change one’s ways, improve one’s character?” I must have been an interesting sight, that instant, big shaggy monster intense and earnest, bent like a priest at his prayers.

He shrugged. “Whatever you like. Do as you think best.”

“But why?”

“‘Why? Why?’ Ridiculous question! Why anything? My advice to you—”

I clenched my fists, though it was absurd, of course. One does not swing at dragons. “*No, why?*”

The dragon tipped up his great tusked head, stretched his neck, sighed fire. “Ah, Grendel!” he said. He seemed that instant almost to rise to pity. “You improve them, my boy! Can’t you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to

poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment—that’s what you make them recognize, embrace! You *are* mankind, or man’s condition: inseparable as the mountain-climber and the mountain. If you withdraw, you’ll instantly be replaced. Brute existents, you know, are a dime a dozen. No sentimental trash, then. If man’s the irrelevance that interests you, stick with him! Scare him to glory! It’s all the same in the end, matter and motion, simple or complex. No difference, finally. Death, transfiguration. Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen.”

I was sure he was lying. Or anyway half-sure. Flattering me into tormenting them because he, in his sullen hole, loved viciousness. I said, “Let them find some other ‘brute existent,’ whatever that is. I refuse.”

“Do!” he said leering scornfully. “Do something else, by all means! Alter the future! Make the world a better place in which to live! Help the poor! Feed the hungry. Be kind to idiots! What a challenge!”

He no longer looked at me, no longer made any pretense of telling the truth. “Personally,” he said, “my great ambition is to count all this”—he waved vaguely at the treasure around him—“and possibly sort it into piles.

'Know thyself,' that's my dictum. Know how much you've got, and beware of strangers!"

I scraped away rubies and emeralds with the side of my foot. "Let me tell you what the Shaper said."

"Spare me, I beg you!" He covered his ears with his claws, gave a hideous grin.

But I was stubborn. "He said that the greatest of gods made the world, every wonder-bright plain and the turning seas. He said—"

"Ridiculous."

"Why?"

"What god? Where? Life-force, you mean? The principle of process? God as the history of Chance?"

In some way that I couldn't explain, I knew that his scorn of my childish credulity was right.

"Nevertheless, something will come of all this," I said.

"Nothing," he said. "A brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity. My advice to you—"

"Wait and see," I said.

He shook his head. "My advice to you, my violent friend, is to seek out gold and sit on it."

6



Nothing was changed, everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It's one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poets' versions of time past and visions of time to come; it's another to know, as coldly and simply as my mother knows her pile of bones, what is. Whatever I may have understood or misunderstood in the dragon's talk, something much deeper stayed with me, became my aura. Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire—my scent and the world's, the scent of trees, rocks, waterways wherever I went.

But there was one thing worse. I discovered that the dragon had put a charm on me: no weapon could cut me.

I could walk up to the meadhall whenever I pleased, and they were powerless. My heart became darker because of that. Though I scorned them, sometimes hated them, there had been something between myself and men when we could fight. Now, invulnerable, I was as solitary as one live tree in a vast landscape of coal.

Needless to say, I misunderstood in the beginning: I thought it an advantage.

It was the height of summer, harvest season in the first year of what I have come to call my war with Hrothgar. The night air was filled with the smell of apples and shocked grain, and I could hear the noise in the meadhall from a mile away. I moved toward it, drawn as always, as if by some kind of curse. I meant not to be seen that night. For all the dragon's talk, I had no intention of terrifying Hrothgar's thanes for nothing. (I had not begun, at that time, my systematic raids. In fact I hadn't yet admitted to myself that it was war. I killed stragglers now and then—with a certain grim pleasure very different from that which I got from cracking a cow's skull—but I'd never yet struck at the hall, hadn't even revealed myself there—except on that one ridiculous night when I walked up and tried to join them.) I hunkered down at the edge of the forest, looking up the long hill at the meadhall lights. I could hear the Shaper's song.

I no longer remember exactly what he sang. I know only that it had a strange effect on me: it no longer filled me with doubt and distress, loneliness, shame. It enraged me. It was their confidence, maybe—their blissful, swinish ignorance, their bumptious self-satisfaction, and, worst of all, their *hope*. I went closer, darting from cowshed to cowshed and finally up to the wall. I found a crack and peeked in. I do remember what he said, now that I think about it. Or some of it. He spoke of how God had been kind to the Scyldings, sending so rich a harvest. The people sat beaming, bleary-eyed and fat, nodding their approval of God. He spoke of God's great generosity in sending them so wise a king. They all raised their cups to God and Hrothgar, and Hrothgar smiled, bits of food in his beard. The Shaper talked of how God had vanquished their enemies and filled up their houses with precious treasure, how they were the richest, most powerful people on earth, how here and here alone in all the world men were free and heroes were brave and virgins were virgins. He ended the song, and people clapped and shouted their praise and filled their golden cups. All around their bubble of stupidity I could feel the brume of the dragon.

Then a stick snapped behind me, and the same instant, a dog barked. A helmeted, chain-mailed guard leaped out at me, sword in two hands above his head, prepared to split me. I jerked back, but there was something in the

way, and I fell. I tried to roll, and then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the sword coming and I knew I couldn't escape it. I went limp, the way animals sometimes do at the moment of the predator's leap. Nothing happened.

I was as surprised as the guard. We both stared, I sprawling helpless on my back, the sword across my belly, the guard leaning forward, still holding the hilt as if afraid to let it go. His beard and nose stuck out through the cheekplates, and his eyes, in the shadowed recess of the helmet, were like two dark holes in a tree. My heart was pounding, filling my chest with pain. Still, neither of us moved. Then, almost the same instant, the guard screamed and I roared like a bull gone mad to drive him off. He let go of the sword and tried to retreat, walking backward, but he tripped on the dog and fell. I laughed, a little wild, and reached out fast as a striking snake for his leg. In a second I was up on my feet again. He screamed, dangling, and then there were others all around me. They threw javelins and axes, and one of the men caught the guard's thrashing arms and tried to yank him free. I held on, but except for that I couldn't act. It was as if I too was drunk on mead. I saw their weapons come flying straight at me, saw them touch my fur and drop quietly in the grass.

Then, little by little, I understood. I felt laughter welling up inside me—at the dragon-charm, at Hrothgar's whispering and trembling by the meadhall door, at everything—

the oblivious trees and sky, the witless moon. I'd meant them no harm, but they'd attacked me again, as always. They were crazy. And now at last the grim laughter came pouring out, as uncontrollable as the dragon's laugh, and I wanted to say, "Lo, God has vanquished mine enemies!"—but that made me laugh harder, though even now my heart raced and, in spite of it all, I was afraid of them. I backed away, still holding the screaming guard. They merely stared, with their useless weapons drawn, their shoulders hunched against my laughter. When I'd reached a safe distance, I held up the guard to taunt them, then held him still higher and leered into his face. He went silent, looking at me upside-down in horror, suddenly knowing what I planned. As if casually, in plain sight of them all, I bit his head off, crunched through the helmet and skull with my teeth and, holding the jerking, blood-slippery body in two hands, sucked the blood that sprayed like a hot, thick geyser from his neck. It got all over me. Women fainted, men backed toward the hall. I fled with the body to the woods, heart churning—boiling like a flooded ditch—with glee.

Some three or four nights later I launched my first raid. I burst in when they were all asleep, snatched seven from their beds, and slit them open and devoured them on the spot. I felt a strange, unearthly joy. It was as if I'd made some incredible discovery, like my discovery long ago of

the moonlit world beyond the mere. I was transformed. I was a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in: if the world had once imploded on the tree where I waited, trapped and full of pain, it now blasted outward, away from me, screeching terror. I had become, myself, the mama I'd searched the cliffs for once in vain. But that merely hints at what I mean. I had *become* something, as if born again. I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Mead halls, Wrecker of Kings!

But also, as never before, I was alone.

I do not complain of it (talking talking, complaining complaining, filling the world I walk with words). But I admit it was a jolt. It was a few raids later. The mead hall door burst open at my touch exactly as before, and, for once, that night, I hesitated. Men sat up in their beds, snatched their helmets, swords, and shields from the covers beside them, and, shouting brave words that came out like squeals, they threw their legs over the sides to stumble toward me. Someone yelled, "Remember this hour, ye thanes of Hrothgar, the boasts you made as the mead bowl passed! Remember our good king's gift of rings and pay him with all your might for his many kindnesses!"

Damned pompous fools. I hurled a bench at the closest. They all cowered back. I stood waiting, bent forward with

my feet apart, flat-footed, till they ended their interminable orations. I was hunched like a wrestler, moving my head from side to side, making sure no sneak slipped up on me. I was afraid of them from habit, and as the four or five drunkenest of the thanes came toward me, shaking their weapons and shouting at me, my idiotic fear of them mounted. But I held my ground. Then, with a howl, one plunged at me, sword above his head in both fists. I let it come. The charm held good. I closed my hand on the blade and snatched it from the drunken thane's hand and hurled it the length of the hall. It clattered on the fireplace stones and fell to the stone floor, ringing. I seized him and crushed him. Another one came at me, gloating in his bleary-eyed heroism, maniacally joyful because he had bragged that he would die for his king and he was doing it. He did it. Another one came, reeling and whooping, trying to make his eyes focus.

I laughed. It was outrageous: they came, they fell, howling insanity about brothers, fathers, glorious Hrothgar, and God. But though I laughed, I felt trapped, as hollow as a rotten tree. The mead hall seemed to stretch for miles, out to the edges of time and space, and I saw myself killing them, on and on and on, as if mechanically, without contest. I saw myself swelling like bellows on their blood, a meaningless smudge in a universe dead as old wind over bones, abandoned except for the burnt-blood scent of the

dragon. All at once I began to smash things—benches, tables, hanging beds—a rage as meaningless and terrible as everything else.

Then—as a crowning absurdity, my salvation that moment—came the man the thanes called Unferth.

He stood across the hall from me, youthful, intense, cold sober. He was taller than the others; he stood out among his fellow thanes like a horse in a herd of cows. His nose was as porous and dark as volcanic rock. His light beard grew in patches.

“Stand back,” he said.

The drunken little men around me backed away. The hallfloor between us, Unferth and myself, lay open.

“Monster, prepare to die!” he said. Very righteous. The wings of his nostrils flared and quivered like an outraged priest’s.

I laughed. “Aargh!” I said. I spit bits of bone.

He glanced behind him, making sure he knew exactly where the window was. “Are you right with your god?” he said.

I laughed somewhat more fiercely. He was one of those.

He took a tentative step toward me, then paused, holding his sword out and shaking it. “Tell them in Hell that Unferth, son of Ecglaf sent you, known far and wide in these Scanian lands as a hero among the Scyldings.” He took a few sidesteps, like one wrestler circling another,

except that he was thirty feet away; the maneuver was ridiculous.

“Come, come,” I said. “Let me tell them I was sent by Sideways-Walker.”

He frowned, trying to puzzle out my speech. I said it again, louder and slower, and a startled look came over him. Even now he didn’t know what I was saying, but it was clear to him, I think, that I was speaking words. He got a cunning look, as if getting ready to offer a deal—the look men have when they fight with men instead of poor stupid animals.

He was shaken, and to get back his nerve he spoke some more. “For many months, unsightly monster, you’ve murdered men as you pleased in Hrothgar’s hall. Unless you can murder me as you’ve murdered lesser men, I give you my word those days are done forever! The king has given me splendid gifts. He will see tonight that his gifts have not gone for nothing! Prepare to fall, foul thing! This one red hour makes your reputation or mine!”

I shook my head at him, wickedly smiling. “Reputation!” I said, pretending to be much impressed.

His eyebrows shot up. He’d understood me; no doubt of it now. “You can talk!” he said. He backed away a step.

I nodded, moving in on him. Near the center of the room there was a trestle table piled high with glossy apples. An evil idea came over me—so evil it made me shiver as I

smiled—and I sidled across to the table. “So you’re a hero,” I said. He didn’t get it, and I said it twice more before I gave up in disgust. I talked on anyway, let him get what he could, come try for reputation when he pleased. “I’m impressed,” I said. “I’ve never seen a live hero before. I thought they were only in poetry. Ah, ah, it must be a terrible burden, though, being a hero—glory reaper, harvester of monsters! Everybody always watching you, weighing you, seeing if you’re still heroic. You know how it is—he he! Sooner or later the harvest virgin will make her mistake in the haystack.” I laughed.

The dragon-scent in the room grew stronger, as if my teasing were bringing the old beast near. I picked up an apple and polished it lightly and quickly on the hair of my arm. I had my head bowed, smiling, looking at him up through my eyebrows.

“Dread creature—” he said.

I went on polishing the apple, smiling. “And the awful inconvenience,” I said. “Always having to stand erect, always having to find noble language! It must wear on a man.”

He looked hurt and slightly indignant. He’d understood.

“Wretched shape—” he said.

“But no doubt there are compensations,” I said. “The pleasant feeling of vast superiority, the easy success with women—”

“Monster!” he howled.

“And the joy of self-knowledge, that’s a great compensation! The easy and absolute certainty that whatever the danger, however terrible the odds, you’ll stand firm, behave with the dignity of a hero, yea, even to the grave!”

“No more talk!” he yelled. His voice broke. He lifted his sword to make a run at me, and I laughed—howled—and threw an apple at him. He dodged, and then his mouth dropped open. I laughed harder, threw another. He dodged again.

“Hey!” he yelled. A forgivable lapse.

And now I was raining apples at him and laughing myself weak. He covered his head, roaring at me. He tried to charge through the barrage, but he couldn’t make three feet. I slammed one straight into his pock-marked nose, and blood spurted out like joining rivers. It made the floor slippery, and he went down. *Clang!* I bent double with laughter. Poor Jangler—Unferth—tried to take advantage of it, charging at me on all fours, snatching at my ankles, but I jumped back and tipped over the table on him, half burying him in apples as red and innocent as smiles. He screamed and thrashed, trying to get at me and at the same time trying to see if the others were watching. He was crying, only a boy, famous hero or not: a poor miserable virgin.

“Such is life,” I said, and mocked a sigh. “Such is dig-

nity!" Then I left him. I got more pleasure from that apple fight than from any other battle in my life.

I was sure, going back to my cave (it was nearly dawn), that he wouldn't follow. They never did. But I was wrong; he was a new kind of Scylding. He must have started tracking me that same morning. A driven man, a maniac. He arrived at the cave three nights later.

I was asleep. I woke up with a start, not sure what it was that had awakened me. I saw my mother moving slowly and silently past me, blue murder in her eyes. I understood instantly, not with my mind but with something quicker, and I darted around in front to block her way. I pushed her back.

There he lay, gasping on his belly like a half drowned rat. His face and throat and arms were a crosshatch of festering cuts, the leavings of the firesnakes. His hair and beard hung straight down like seaweed. He panted for a long time, then rolled his eyes up, vaguely in my direction. In the darkness he couldn't see me, though I could see him. He closed his hand on the sword hilt and jiggled the sword a little, too weak to raise it off the floor.

"Unferth has come!" he said.

I smiled. My mother moved back and forth like a bear behind me, stirred up by the smell.

He crawled toward me, the sword noisily scraping on the cave's rock floor. Then he gave out again. "It will be

sung," he whispered, then paused again to get wind. "It will be sung year on year and age on age that Unferth went down through the burning lake—" he paused to pant—"and gave his life in battle with the world-rim monster." He let his cheek fall to the floor and lay panting for a long time, saying nothing. It dawned on me that he was waiting for me to kill him. I did nothing. I sat down and put my elbows on my knees and my chin on my fists and merely watched. He lay with his eyes closed and began to get his breath back. He whispered: "It's all very well to make a fool of me before my fellow thanes. All very well to talk about dignity and noble language and all the rest, as if heroism were a golden trinket, mere outward show, and hollow. But such is not the case, monster. That is to say—" He paused, seemed to grope; he'd lost his train of thought.

I said nothing, merely waited, blocking my mother by stretching out an arm when she came near.

"Even now you mock me," Unferth whispered. I had an uneasy feeling he was close to tears. If he wept, I was not sure I could control myself. His pretensions to uncommon glory were one thing. If for even an instant he pretended to misery like mine . . .

"You think me a witless fool," he whispered. "Oh, I heard what you said. I caught your nasty insinuations. 'I thought heroes were only in poetry,' you said. Implying that what I've made of myself is mere fairytale stuff." He

raised his head, trying to glare at me, but his blind stare was in the wrong direction, following my mother's pacing. "Well, it's not, let me tell you." His lips trembled and I was certain he would cry, I would have to destroy him from pure disgust, but he held it. He let his head fall again and sucked for air. A little of his voice came back, so that he no longer had to whisper but could bring out his words in a slightly reedy whine. "Poetry's trash, mere clouds of words, comfort to the hopeless. But this is no cloud, no syllabled phantom that stands here shaking its sword at you."

I let the slight exaggeration pass.

But Unferth didn't. "Or lies here," he said. "A hero is not afraid to face cruel truth." That reminded him, apparently, of what he'd meant to say before. "You talk of heroism as noble language, dignity. It's more than that, as my coming here has proved. No man above us will ever know whether Unferth died here or fled to the hills like a coward. Only you and I and God will know the truth. That's inner heroism."

"Hmm," I said. It was not unusual, of course, to hear them contradict themselves, but I would have liked it if he'd stuck to one single version, either that they would know and sing his tragedy or that they wouldn't. So it would have been in a poem, surely, if Unferth were a character, good or evil, heroic or not. But reality, alas, is essentially shoddy. I let out a sigh.

He jerked his head up, shocked. "Does *nothing* have value in your horrible ruin of a brain?"

I waited. The whole scene was his idea, not mine.

I saw the light dawning in his eyes. "I understand," he said. I thought he would laugh at the bottomless stupidity of my cynicism, but while the laugh was still starting at the corners of his eyes, another look came, close to fright. "You think me deluded. Tricked by my own walking fairytale. You think I came without a hope of winning—came to escape indignity by suicide!" He did laugh now, not amused: sorrowful and angry. The laugh died quickly. "I didn't know how deep the pool was," he said. "I had a chance. I knew I had no more than that. It's all a hero asks for."

I sighed. The word "hero" was beginning to grate. He was an idiot. I could crush him like a fly, but I held back.

"Go ahead, scoff," he said, petulant. "Except in the life of a hero, the whole world's meaningless. The hero sees values beyond what's possible. That's the *nature* of a hero. It kills him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile."

I nodded in the darkness. "And breaks up the boredom," I said.

He raised up on his elbows, and the effort of it made his shoulders shake. "One of us is going to die tonight. Does *that* break up your boredom?"

"It's not true," I said. "A few minutes from now I'm going to carry you back to Hrothgar, safe and sound. So much for poetry."

"I'll kill myself," he whispered. He shook violently now.

"Up to you," I answered reasonably, "but you'll admit it may seem at least a trifle cowardly to some."

His fists closed and his teeth clenched; then he relaxed and lay flat.

I waited for him to find an answer. Minutes passed. It came to me that he had quit. He had glimpsed a glorious ideal, had struggled toward it and seized it and come to understand it, and was disappointed. One could sympathize.

He was asleep.

I picked him up gently and carried him home. I laid him at the door of Hrothgar's meadhall, still asleep, killed the two guards so I wouldn't be misunderstood, and left.

He lives on, bitter, feebly challenging my midnight raids from time to time (three times this summer), crazy with shame that he alone is always spared, and furiously jealous of the dead. I laugh when I see him. He throws himself at me, or he cunningly sneaks up behind, sometimes in disguise—a goat, a dog, a sickly old woman—and I roll on the floor with laughter. So much for heroism. So much for the harvest-virgin. So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons.