

# Beowulf Rides the Range

## Using the Nature Imagery in Old and Middle English Poetry

by Jordan Clary

WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE POET WHO HAS MOST influenced me, the answer is usually: Anonymous. The first time I remember coming across Anonymous was in the Middle English lyric:

Westron wind, where wilt thou blow,  
The small rains down shall rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again.

Anonymous intrigued me. Who had he been? A lover? A traveling bard? A young man, vital or dying? I believed that the writer of “Western Wind” was male, just as later I would read lyrics that would speak to me in a female voice. Part storyteller, part lyricist, Anonymous had many faces, many voices. Old and Middle English poetry led me into an ancient world of adventure and travel where waves battered rocky cliffs and monsters devoured warriors. I believe it was this poetry that also first inspired my love of the sea.

Last fall I was asked to do a series of poetry workshops for Janesville Elementary School in Janesville, California, for the River of Words art and poetry contest there, coordinated by Becky Thompson. Former poet laureate Robert Hass originated River of Words (a nationwide project) as a way for communities to learn about their local watersheds. It’s an idea I am especially attracted to because it connects poetry to the tangible world of nature, and also teaches students about the biology, ecology, and history of their area.

I had recently been re-reading poems from *The Exeter Book* and decided to use some of these poems and *Beowulf* as a springboard for nature writing. *The Exeter Book* contains the largest extant collection of Old English poetry and is believed to have been copied circa 970–90. The original manuscript is still housed in the Exeter Cathedral Library. Nature images permeate Old English poetry. To the wanderer on the sea, the only sound the wind carries is the cry of a lone seagull. The waves are violent and the weather is always cold. Anglo-Saxon England was a landscape defined by the elements. Yet I found the poetry challenging as well. Our modern concept of nature writing would have likely seemed strange to an Old English poet. It wasn’t until much later, with the Romantics, that nature began to be personified and idealized. Old English poetry generally presents nature as a challenge to be overcome rather than an idyllic symbol of beauty.

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I also wasn’t sure how the two worlds of Old England and the contemporary American West would merge. Janesville is located in the high desert, a dry land where rocks crack in the summer sun and strong winds blow tumbleweed across the lawn in front of the school. Would the misty seacoast of “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” inspire these students to create their own landscape images?

At the time, I was a writer-in-residence at two other local schools, Credence Continuation High School and The Community Day School, a small school for boys on probation. I decided to try out Old English poetry and nature writing on the teenagers first.

We began by discussing the area’s main watershed, Honey Lake. During dry years, Honey Lake exists only as mud flats, but in its current state, after several winters of heavy rains, it appears as a pristine lake stretching nearly twenty miles from Highway 395 to the base of the Skedaddle Mountains. Local legend has it that a tall person can practically walk across it without going under. Honey Lake was once part of Lake Lahotan, a huge inland sea stretching from Oregon and California through much of Nevada and Utah. It’s a watershed with a rich history: petroglyphs and artifacts abound, and legends from the Paiute and Modoc peoples of the area tell of battles fought and civilizations that have come and gone on its shores. The first settlement of Europeans was on the shores of Honey Lake, until dry years sent them farther north, to the Susan River.

I passed out a copy of my own translation of “The Wanderer” and a copy of Ezra Pound’s translation of “The Seafarer.” My treatment of “The Wanderer” is a fairly literal, rough rendition of the poem. I sacrificed much of the alliteration and rhythm that define Old English poetry. Pound’s marvelous translation, on the other hand, captures the essence of the poem while incorporating the alliteration and “feel” of the poet’s voice. The students first read through the translations on their own. Next I read aloud certain verses that emphasize the natural world, such as:

. . . Storms battered the stony slope,  
Falling snow storm binds the earth,  
The tumult of winter  
When the dark one comes.  
The shadow of night grows dark,  
Sends from the north a fierce hail storm  
To the vexation of men.  
All the kingdom of earth is full of hardship.  
The ordained course of events changes the world under the  
heavens.

I then read the beginning of Pound's translation of "The Seafarer":

May I for my own self song's truth reckon.  
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days  
Hardship endured oft.  
Bitter breast-cares have I abided,  
Known on my keel many a care's hold,  
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent  
Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head  
While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,  
My feet were by frost benumbed.  
Chill its chains are; chafing sighs  
Hew my heart round and hunger begot  
Mere-weary mood. Lest man know not  
That he on dry land loveliest liveth,  
List how I, care-wretched, on ice-cold sea,  
Weathered the winter, wretched outcast  
Deprived of my kinsmen;  
Hung with hard ice-flakes where hail-scur flew,  
There I heard naught save the harsh sea  
And ice-cold wave, at whiles the swan cries,  
Did for my games the gannet's clamor,  
Sea-fowls' loudness was for me laughter,  
The mews' singing all my mead-drink.  
Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern  
In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed  
With spray on his pinion.

For those of us who have been enchanted by these works, the poems' technicalities are only one part of the spell cast by Old English poetry. The poems create places where myth and history blend. They come from a time when poetry was spoken rather than written. For a glimpse into contemporary spoken poetry, I questioned James, a young Mexican-Native American from the Community Day School who hated writing but who could invent a spontaneous two-to-three-minute rap on nearly any subject. "They call me 'Music' in my group home," James had told me earlier. "I'm who they come to if they want something real said, whether it be a love poem for their girlfriend or an admonition to a little brother. They know I can do it 'cause I'm Music."

"So where do you get your words," I asked him in class, "when someone asks you to rap something for them?"

James shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it. It's like I get a sense of the person and the words just come to me."

"Do you know that if you'd been born in a different time you would have held an honored place in your community? This would have been your job, creating stories and poems and telling them to your people."

"My uncle does it, too," James said. "Only his is different. He don't do rap. It's more story-like."

This led to a discussion of how poetry is memorized and rendered from one telling to another. Rap is held in memory by its rhyme; Old English by alliteration and patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. Each line of poetry is divided into two half-lines with three or four stressed syllables and several unstressed syllables.

For the writing assignment I told students to choose an emotion and, without naming it, to write a description of nature



that would express that feeling. I told them to incorporate alliteration if they wanted to. Rick Baker, a young man who had been in my classes for two years and who usually wrote pieces with lines such as "dark shadows plague my sleep, running my mind ragged with their incessant jabbering," wrote:

The setting sun rested blissfully on the soft silky horizon  
The colors flowed across the sky like the graceful brush strokes  
of a talented painter.  
The gentle wind whispered and caressed the clouds into colorful  
cotton  
moving gently across the evening sky.  
Oranges and reds, purples and pinks all faded fast  
into deep blue shadows, silky and sensuous  
danced across the mountains and valleys.  
The land was drenched deliriously in colorful bliss  
then it faded, all of it, into deep blue and purple.

Tandi LaRae wrote:

The leaves swirl  
at a ferocious speed.  
The wind picks up,  
strangling you,  
gnawing at your face.  
Your eyes water  
and your breath catches  
your throat.

One of the great rewards of teaching is the surprises that it offers, the quiet student who creates magic or the hostile one who suddenly finds she has something to say. James's raps were among those rewards, although he always pointedly refused to commit anything to paper. That day, the magic came from Amanda Harlow, a new student most of the kids shunned. Amanda wore thick glasses and had long hair that hung over her face. Sometimes she made strange verbal outbursts or would ramble on about unrelated topics. She lived in one of the group homes out in the desert far from town, and was not destined for popularity. She usually sat by herself near the front of the room, often sketching in a spiral-bound notebook. That day, Amanda wrote the following poem:

A tree, a desert  
An image in water, pure  
Shimmering and cool.  
The sky high above  
Favors a ruddy color  
Like death  
Humbled tree branches

Bare, pale under the sky's view  
Bent in its defeat  
Yet held just above  
The water-tree position  
Favored but beaten  
Knowing no sorrow  
The tree holds its withered place  
For time yet to come.

That poem brought attention to Amanda, which inspired her to create more fine pieces throughout the year. I made a broadside of it and hung it in the hall. A few weeks later when the performers for the Poetry Alive! group came to the school, they asked her to autograph a copy.

The next week two students, Tandi LaRae and Rob Brocksen, accompanied me to a fourth grade class in Janesville. We read short selections from "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer." I also paraphrased the story of *Beowulf*, the Old English epic about the life and death of the Geatish warrior called Beowulf, who travelled across the sea to help the Danish king rid himself of a monster. I focused on Beowulf's fight with the monsters Grendel and Grendel's mother, reading the description of the mere where they lived (a *mere* can be a pond, a lake, a marsh, or an arm of the sea):

They occupied the secret land, the wolf slopes, the windy headlands, the terrible fen passage where the mountain stream goes downwards under the dark cliff, under the torrent of earth. It is not far hence in miles that the mere stands, over which hangs the rime-covered grove. The wood, firm in roots, overshadows the water.

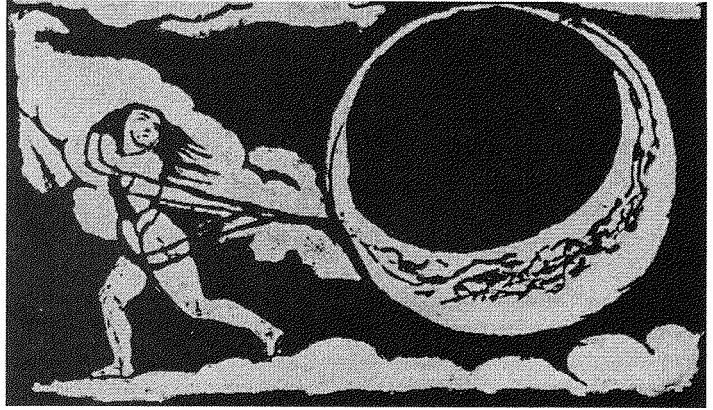
(trans. Jordan Clary)

We talked about alliteration and brainstormed a list of descriptive words and alliterative pairs, which I wrote on the board. I asked the students to choose a body of water they were familiar with. This could be the area's main watershed, Honey Lake, or one of the other local lakes or streams that run through the high desert. If they still could not get started, I told them to imagine themselves as a body of water, or as an animal who used the water, and then to write from that perspective. Personification came easily to these students. I was surprised at the large number of them who chose to become the object they wrote about, as in:

In the spring, the smell of fragrant tulips all around me.  
Colors of the rainbow on me after it rains—purple, blue and red.  
The fish in me splashing and playing.  
Trees and flowers whisper in the wind.  
The deer and antelope drink from me.  
Rain hits me like a thousand little rocks.  
I am the Susan River flowing in the wind.

—Nichol Shaver

In the spring the rain falls. My red berries smell ever so sweet in the morning. Rain drops still on the red berries with their sweet fragrance. The rain tingles the berries all over. The berries are talking to each other asking when will the next rain fall? Then the rain comes again. The berries cheer and laugh. When the



rain ends, birds eat my berries. What am I? I am a bush, a green luscious bush.

—Chelsea Harmon

Water holds a special place in the high desert. Nearly all the students had vivid memories of driving into the nearby mountains to swim or fish in one of the area's lakes. Eagle Lake, a pristine alkaline lake surrounded by pine-covered mountains, is equal in beauty and nearly equal in size to its more famous neighbor Lake Tahoe, 150 miles to the southwest. Eagle Lake was a favorite topic for many of the students, including Kelli Hallam:

Eagle Lake is like a bowl of soup to animals. It has green leaves like vegetables. Animals come and drink from it. It's surrounded with flowers. When it rains, it smells like wet grass. When the waters run the animals bathe in it. The trees sway when the wind blows. The animals love to swim in the shade. The animals love the colors of the leaves: red, green, and orange. After the long day they lie down on the grass and rest.

Later that spring I discovered another dimension to Old English poetry, through an unexpected channel—cowboy poetry. As part of my residency, I invited a local cowboy poet, Russ Collier, to do a performance at Credence High School and at the Community Day School. I wasn't sure how the students would react to Russ. Most of them had cultivated tough exterior personae. Many lived in group homes or foster homes. A high percentage had been sent to this rural area by courts in Oakland or San Francisco, to "straighten them out." Their music was rap, heavy metal, Goth. Most scorned country music and cowboys—those were for the kids who went to the "real" high school down the road. Yet within a matter of minutes Russ, with his easy manner and off-color jokes, had these city kids laughing and participating in the performance. Russ and James (Music) formed an instant connection with their love of wordplay and rhyming poetry. "A cowboy rapper" is what James called Russ.

During his introduction, Russ spoke of the way poetry travels, and about how many traditional cowboy poems could be traced to the sailors and pirates who came to the New World. Russ recited cowboy poems and old seafaring songs. Some poems were in fact nearly identical to the old seafaring songs, the only difference being the words *desert* or *prairie* were substituted for *ocean*. As he spoke, verses from "The

Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” flitted through my mind. I realized that I had considered the career of Anonymous to have ended hundreds of years ago, when in fact he or she was alive and well in isolated pockets of folk arts around the world.

That afternoon I bought a collection of cowboy poetry that Russ had recommended. Like Old English poetry, many cowboy poems tell of isolation and long nights alone with the elements while longing for some ephemeral comfort only half-remembered. The following verses from the poem “The Blizzard” by Eugene Ware, who is said to have written it “way back in the 1860s,” carry some of the flavor of Old English seafaring poems:

It was midnight at the Cimarron  
Not many a year ago;  
The blizzard was whirling pebbles and sand  
And billows of frozen snow.

He sat on a bale of harness,  
In a dugout roofed with clay;  
The wolves overhead bewailed  
In a dismal protracted way;

They peeped down the adobe chimney,  
And quarreled and sniffed and clawed,  
But the fiddler kept on with his music  
As the blizzard stalked abroad;

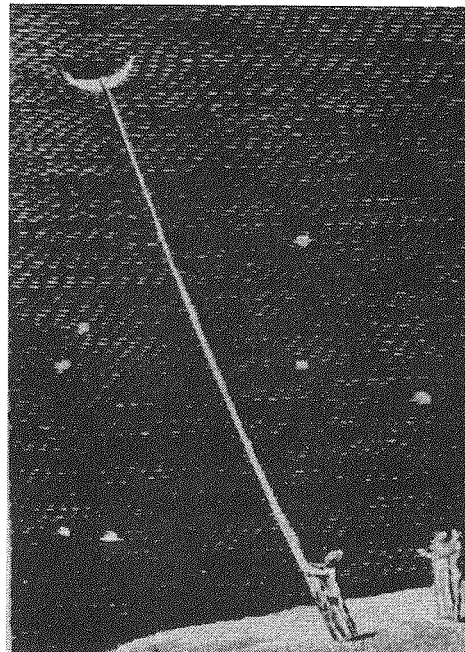
And time and again, that strange refrain  
Came forth in a minor key:  
“No matter how long the river,  
The river will reach the sea!”

From there it was an easy leap to imagine Beowulf as a cowboy. He rode a ship instead of a bronco, but the swaggering attitude, the love of adventure for adventure’s sake, and the strict codes of honor all had correlatives in the American West. Perhaps the Old West was not so far removed from the concept of the blood feud as we are today. Dragons and monsters such as Grendel seldom show up in cowboy poetry, but giant oxen, whirlwinds of mythic proportions, and talking animals that lead lonely cowboys astray are all common fare—as is the devil, who appears in this anonymous rendition called “Hell in Texas”:

The devil in Hades we’re told was chained,  
And there for a thousand years remained.  
He did not grumble nor did he groan.  
But determined to make a hell of his own  
Where he could torture the souls of men  
Without being chained in that poisoned pen. . . .

He put thorns on the cactus and horns on the toads  
And scattered tarantulas along the road.  
He gave spiral springs to the bronco steed  
And a thousand legs to the centipede.

And all will be mavericks unless they bore  
Thorns and scratches and bites by the score.  
The sand burrs prevail and so do the ants,  
And those who sit down need half soles on their pants.



Oh, the wild boar roams the black chaparral.  
It’s a hell of a place he’s got for hell.

*(This rendition recited by Roy Green of Shandon, California)*

Even the concept of fate, in Old English poetry called *wyrd*, shows up frequently in cowboy poems. In one called “Like It or Not,” contemporary cowboy poet Bill Simpson tells of an old buckaroo who talks “About drinkin’ and fightin’! / An’ ridin’ em hard! / About fate he called luck! / In the turn of a card.” Like Old English poetry, cowboy poetry uses the harsh elements of the natural world to provide a backdrop for its lyrics and narratives. In both, the natural world is often in opposition to the characters in it. Authors in both genres use natural images to speak of loneliness, struggle, and isolation. The forlorn wail of the wind, whether blowing across the empty prairie or the open sea, echoes through them both.

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