

The Wife's Lament

BY UNKNOWN

TRANSLATED BY ANDRÉ BABYN

"The Wife's Lament" appears only in the Exeter Book, a tenth century Old English manuscript compiled between 960 and 990 CE. In the poem, an exiled female speaker laments her forced separation from someone who may be her husband.

I sing this song, full of sadness,
this song which is myself. I will tell, what I am able,
about what hardships I have faced—since I grew up,
recently or long ago, never more than now.
Always I suffer my misery of exile.

First my lord departed from my people,
over waves rolling; I had grief before dawn
thinking of the lands which held him, my people's lord.
Then I set out, a friendless stranger, searching
for his retinue, because of my grievous need.
Relatives of this man began to plan
through secret thought that they would separate us,
that we as far apart as possible in the kingdom of the world
would live, wretchedly, and me longing.

My lord commanded me to take a grove for a house:
little of what is beloved to me did I possess in this country,
no loyal friends; for that is my mind's sadness.
When I found the man who was my complete match,
he was unfortunate, sad of mind and heart,
with thoughts concealed, planning his crime
behind a joyful demeanor. Very often we vowed
that we would never be separated, not by death
or anything else; what was before is now changed,
is now as if it never were, that friendship
between us. Must I who desires you nearby
suffer, my dearly loved, this feud?

Commanded was I to dwell in a forest grove.
Under an oak tree, in a cave—the earth's chest.

Old is this earth hall and I am filled with longing.
Here is a gloomy valley, treacherous hills,
bitter hedges, briars waxing, overgrown
in this house without joy. Very often my cruel departure
takes hold of me. Friends live on earth
lying in bed with their beloveds
while I in the time before dawn alone walk
under oak tree. In the earth's chest
I sit many long summer days
weeping for the misery of exile
my many hardships; there I am never able
to rest from my mind's grief
nor from all the longing that in this life takes hold of me.

It may be that he is always sorrowful,
his heart's thoughts stern; perhaps he has
a joyful demeanor next to his grief,
its constant sorrowful tumult. Whether he is dependent on himself
for all of his worldly joy, or whether he is an outcast, very far
from his distant country, sitting
under stone cliffs frost-rimmed from storms,
friendless, water flowing before
his echoing home, my lover suffers
much grief of the mind. Too often he remembers
a house full of joy. Woe to those that must
of longing in life abide.