

## Start Up Poems – The English and the Sea

### Sea-Fever

by John Masefield (1878-1967)

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;  
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,  
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;  
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,  
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,  
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;  
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,  
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

### The Seafarer, by Ezra Pound (trans. of the Anglo-Saxon poem)

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 clamour,  
Sea-fowls, loudness was for me laughter,  
The mew's 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.

[...]

Aye, for ever, a lasting life's-blast,  
Delight mid the doughty.  
Days little durable,  
And all arrogance of earthen riches,  
There come now no kings nor Cæsars  
Nor gold-giving lords like those gone.  
Howe'er in mirth most magnified,  
Whoe'er lived in life most lordliest,  
Drear all this excellence, delights undurable!  
Waneth the watch, but the world holdeth.  
Tomb hideth trouble. The blade is layed low.  
Earthly glory ageth and seareth.  
No man at all going the earth's gait,  
But age fares against him, his face paleth,  
Grey-haired he groaneth, knows gone companions,  
Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven,  
Nor may he then the flesh-cover, whose life ceaseth,  
Nor eat the sweet nor feel the sorry,  
Nor stir hand nor think in mid heart,  
And though he strew the grave with gold,  
His born brothers, their buried bodies  
Be an unlikely treasure hoard.

*The Seafarer* is regarded as both the finest and the most problematic poem in Old English (that is, Anglo-Saxon)—note shown here. The widely-held consensus is that the poem is about sea-faring up to line 65, and that the remainder is a homily about the poet's desire for heaven. In this reading there are two poems and a process of allegorisation in the latter which has no part in the former, a more "down to earth" (or sea?) performance. Either way, it is a powerful embodiment of the character of the English as a sea-faring people. This sensibility did not stop with the Anglo-Saxons though perhaps it has dissipated in post-imperial and jet-plane conditions of today.