

THE WESTFARER

By James Dorr

This poem was originally published in  
*Dark Destiny: Proprietors of Fate* (White Wolf, 1995)

Know this: The world is wide and bowl-like,  
Its extremities up-curved at every corner,  
To north, ice-locked Thule, night-bound Nifelheim,  
Home of Hel, goddess, of death's hungered gnawing;  
To south, fiery Muspel, hall of bright Surtr,  
Birthplace of sun and stars, flame's heat and searing;  
To east, dawn, beginnings, destiny's first day,  
The morning of men's lives, of mead and brave sailings;  
To west, only endings.

I sing now of west-faring,  
I, Signy, Helmsdottir, bondsmaid and seeress,  
Dark haired, dark fortune'd, sailmaid and dire traveler,  
Sing I of wanderings, of three men, and one more.  
The first I sing, Bjarni, the son of glum Herjolf,  
Made sail south to Ireland, then Iceland and Greenland,  
Was caught first by north wind, then calmed in a white fog  
His ships drifting westward, saw at last woodlands  
And hills unfamiliar; north then he set helm,  
Disdaining to beach there, until, dim in cloudbanks,  
His tired eye saw ice fields, and, so turning east again,  
Entered at last the fjord of Eirik Redbeard.  
This, then, was Greenland, Bjarni's last landfall,  
From whence sailed the second, Leif, Eirik's eldest son,

Blown, too, by winds west, backward on Bjarni's course  
To a land of black stone, high and ice-summited,  
Which named he Helluland hailing cliffs' flatness;  
Next founded he Markland, fairer and forested,  
Willow-wrapped and with spruce meet for ships' siding;  
Yet went he on south and west, seeking new wonders,  
Till he found a grass valley, frostless in winter,  
Its streams filled with salmon, its dew sweet as honey,  
Its hills vine-encumbered and heavy with wine fruit.  
Here Eiriksson wintered, then, weighty with new lore,  
Returned he to Brattahlid, byre of his father,  
From whence, third, came Thorvald, thane and Leif's brother,  
To west to the new land, and north for exploring  
Found inlets and rivers, ice-laden Kjalarness,  
Named for his keel's scraping on hard sand bottom,  
And found he there Skraelings or, as we say, "Screamers,"  
The men of this new place who, making no welcome,  
Set on him with arrows until, slain, his crew made sail  
Heavy with grief, home.

Thus weave the Nornir

The fates of men, earthbound, unvisioning futures,  
Save that I, Helmsdottir, am cursed with seeing!

~

Listen as I sing: The fourth man I sailed with,  
Thorfinn Karlsefni, from Iceland to Eiriksfjord,  
Greenland's south settlement; I, Signy, first of three  
Women I tell you now, and, later, one again.

## *The Westfarer*

Second was fair Gudrid, gaunt Thorvald's widow  
Who, at Eiriksfjord, betrothed Thorfinn our captain.  
Filled she that winter his ears with wonder,  
With tales of the travelings of the first three I sang  
Until, with spring's budding, three ships he fitted,  
Broad knarrs meet for blue water, deep and strong-bottomed  
And high, with their oaken strakes near overflowing  
As goods he had brought aboard, cattle and brood-sows,  
Corn-seed and women -- yes, wives we took with us too --  
Seeking to settle these new strands of plenty.  
Oars straining, we pushed to sea, then, with the wind  
Raised sails of dyed wool-cloth as red as sun's setting,  
Our masts tall as ice clouds kept pole star to rightward,  
As, wave-thunder tossing, we followed the whales' track  
Until the black, flat stone of Helluland sighting.  
Thence bore we to larboard, as had Leif before us turned,  
Sails tacked to carry us south with the current,  
Until we passed Markland and came to a place of streams,  
Fast racing waters, and there, winter near us --  
So long had we journeyed! -- spent we our first snow time.  
Huddled we now in huts cursing the harsh wind  
That blew ice and coldness, beyond expectation,  
As some called aloud to Thor, others to Odin,  
Others the White-Iesus worshiped of Christers,  
While I, alone, friendless, away from the hearth fire,  
Banished with bond-slaves to sleep in far corners,  
Dreamed, shivering, of shadows.

This was the first sharing:

This, my first Norn-vision,   gifted by Verdandi,  
She of the Always-Now --   later would I, weeping,  
Come to Skuld's blessing,   the skald-sense of Will-Be --  
This showed me ice creeping   from west and north crevices,  
Steadily southward,   until, the world shifting  
Once more back to sunlight,   again at last came spring.  
And so again did come spring,   so sailed we further,  
Surprised by the land's cold   that not Leif nor Thorvald  
Had claimed to encounter;   yet climbed we the wave crests,  
Our ships' timbers groaning,   as groped we again to south,  
Finding both fruit-vines   and honeyed meadows,  
Until came we to a bay,   arm-like, encircling,  
Protected from currents   and storms' harsh keenings,  
And here we entered,   made fast our anchors,  
Built byres and longhouses,   pens for our meat-beasts,  
Sowed rye and barley   thus for our abiding.  
And dreamed I this place at night   not yet of coldness,  
But shadows, of shapes melting,   shifting in moonlight.

~

Autumn brought Screamers,   our first meet with Skraelings,  
Ugly-haired, squat men,   with broad cheeks and huge eyes  
Who crept, their feet soundless,   in sandals of furred skin,  
Until, nearly at our gates   whooped they their greeting  
In shrill ululation,   in shrieks and mad soundings.  
Their tongue we knew not,   yet gestures made Thorfinn  
To show we desired trade,   their furs for our dyed cloth,

## *The Westfarer*

Red as the sun's rays, and also sweet milk we gave  
Fresh from our grazed beasts, frothing and well-fatted,  
But one thing we would not offer despite their wish,  
That being weapons, our steel swords and spear points.  
Alas, it turned not well, our metal they lusted for;  
One took to stealing and quickly we slew him,  
Then others screamed foully and fled to the forest,  
Leaving us for that night, but the next morning  
Returned they in numbers near overwhelming.  
Screeching, they shot at us, sharp arrows coursing,  
Then with clubs fell on us forcing us backward,  
Driving us to rock cliffs where clung we in despair  
To our lives' last hour.

My tale would be over

Save, as I sang before, just as three men there were,  
Three who began it all, braving, first, western seas,  
So, too, were three women : I, Signy, song-teller;  
Gudrid the second, fair bride of Karlsefni;  
And third now bold Freydis Eiriksdottir,  
Who, in heat of battle, tore loose her byrnie  
And, baring her breasts to all, took in hand sword's blade,  
Stung it against her teats terrifying,  
Through magic of womenkind, milk and blood mixing,  
Birth and death drawing in dire steel together,  
Our enemy Skraelings who, screaming the louder,  
Fled once again forestward, leaving to us the field.  
So passed the second year of Thorfinn's settling

Of grape bedecked Vine-Land.

The winter grew on us,  
But milder now, easy for us to endure the cold,  
Save it seemed fiercer the closer to spring it came.  
Then the next growth season came back the Screamer,  
But cautious now, canny, content with harassment,  
Unwilling to brave the walls we built in winter,  
Protecting our village -- but came back, too, visions:

~

This time I attended a band of armed hunters,  
A servant to skin the deer, scrape from meat, entrails,  
To clean and to carry, as my masters cared me to.  
Thus marched I through the wood, marveled at autumn,  
Its early arrival, trees orange with brightness,  
And how left the Skraelings with passage of summer.  
At night cooked I meat for men, shared in their mead, too,  
Until in a stone place surrounded by boulders  
Our fur skins we wrapped us in, fitfully slept then,  
And dreamed I of shadows.

In shade form my vision  
Took me to a stone land, much like that I slept in,  
But north, by a great lake, choked full with ice mountains,  
And there saw I men as wolves -- men clothed in wolf-skins,  
But shifting, arising, grown huge now, slaving --  
Men who as wolves themselves, howled forth in anger.  
Listened I to their words, heard I their hatred  
Of ship-borne men such as I lately had sailed with,

*The Westfarer*

Of eastern men, artisans, builders and hunters,  
Despoilers of virgin earth, bane of their Vinland.  
Showed me the future then, of farms and homesteads,  
Of axe-leveled forests, fields cut from wood they felt  
Earth-Mother owed them, they, Her erst protectors,  
And, thus to prevent such wyrd, this their revenge was:  
The cold, they commanded; men's crops would they wither  
Through ever-harsh ice seasons, increasing winter-blight,  
Hamper thus sea-lanes, snow sending southward  
Not just in these western lands, but the world over.  
Then saw they me in my dream, huddled in sleep-dress,  
But feared they the magic of Freydis -- all women --  
Just as did the Screamers that first meeting's season  
And so left me, waking, warm, curled in fur blankets,  
Once more with my own kind.

But woke I now, shrieking,  
Beholding the slaughter of men slain around me,  
Of dark entrails steaming in sunlight of morning,  
Of throats ripped and tooth-chewed, limbs torn from bodies,  
All heaped in a fell hill -- thus arose I, alone!  
Snatched I up sword and shield lest I find Skraelings,  
Or wolf-manlings -- Fenrir's folk -- lurking in forest;  
I knew not, my breasts I bared, prayed their protection,  
As trod I not bravely, but trembling through wood-trails,  
Until at last, fainting, came I from the forest  
To homestead and Freydis, to Gudrid and Thorfinn.  
Told I then of slaughter, of gore stained on stone ground,

And warriors took oath to rush into woodland,  
To search out the Skraelings, to lay at rest slain men,  
But when at last night fell, returned, finding nothing.

~

Thus came our third winter: Behind walls we waited,  
Feared frost, the snow's howling, the wolf cubs of Fenrir,  
And when spring's days lengthened took ship and departed.  
We sailed north to Greenland, anchored at Eiriksfjord,  
Glad of the ice-glint of that far land's glaciers;  
Told we our tale there, then, fearful to tarry,  
Sailed eastward to Iceland, from there to the sun's rise.  
And yet I had visions -- no more would they leave me! --  
Of winters grown worse, of ice-sheets increasing,  
Of blight ever following, haunting our footsteps,  
Of Skraelings across the sea, sailing in skin boats,  
In Greenland itself fared south, Inuit seal-catchers,  
Following cold to come soon to the farmsteads:  
There saw I too, as I say, a fourth woman,  
A fourth after we, the three, left for the east-lands,  
A Skraeling, Navaranak, whispering to Norsemen,  
And then, again, to her own, sowing forth enmity.  
Then saw I umiaks, skin boats of Skraelings,  
Disguised well as ice floes, sneaking through fjord-mouths,  
Approaching the homesteads as men, inside, sleeping,  
See not flame and arrows until they lie, dying;  
And thus, too, passed Greenland, last of west thane-holds,  
And nearly as well, Iceland, as cold increases,



*The Westfarer*

As winters grow bitter, the blight of the wolf-men,  
That ever spreads south.

~

But sing I one more tale,  
One last before ending, of earth and its future:  
Of one final seeing that comforts my night-sleep.  
Know you that the world is vast in its bowl shape,  
Its northern side rising, but south, too, up-curving;  
That where Hel and Nifelheim, home of Wolf-Fenrir,  
Hold sway in their highness, so too, south, opposing,  
The mountains of Muspel grow men wise as foxes.  
In dream-vision saw I this, one man among them  
Prostrating before a queen, begging this bounty,  
That from her pawned jewel-hoard be hired ships and seamen,  
A sailing to west be planned, with ships' holds groaning  
With byrned and armed men, with barrels that shoot fire,  
And -- see I this also, ye wolf-folk and wolflings,  
This wyrd I foretell you --

These foxes spread northward.