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Elegy For James Rosier

Craig Williamson

Swarthmore College, cwillia1@swarthmore.edu

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Elegy for James Rosier

I sit alone, shaping this song
 From the wordhoard of my mentor's making.
 The worm we call time has taken him;
 Yet in my heart he is still waking.

My lord of learning wanders the cold road,
 Who taught me to chant and cherish lives
 Both old and new. He wanted no wisdom or courage.
 What I sing now he sings through.

He made my Beowulf a father's blessing;
 Queen Wealhtheow a sustaining cup.
 Even as my sorrow rouses, grieving,
 On the cold moors Grendel's waking up.

He was my mentor in *hwær cwom mago*,
 He was my lord in *leofleodcýning*.
 He was my friend in *ond mec longade*.
 He was my song in *nu sculon herigea*n.

From his English garden, I picked out plants--
 From his Saxon study, words and tunes--
 From his heart's store, a fathering kindness--
 To plant, to sing, to father more.

When life was lonely as a winter road,
 His wine was welcome, his words a feast.
 He grabbed my tears like a great bear--
 He was rabbi, warrior, tender beast.

In plain words, I promise that without Jim
 I would have been no wanderer, known no song,
 Found no father in my own home.
 He shaped for me a charm for living.

Sometimes the solver becomes the riddle:
 Body and soul-- when the bone-house
 Moves back to mother ground,
 The ghost goes riding memory's wind.

What mulches, muscles grain and oak.
 What rises, blooms in breath of song.
 What lives, changes-- what changes, lives.
 The shaping spirit walks past death.

In the late afternoon twenty winters ago,
 Twelve students sat round his table,
 Translating, praising the passing glory
 of Beowulf, blessing in song as we were able:

Pa ymbe hlæw riðan hildedeore,
 æþelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
 woldon care cwidan ond kyning mænan,
 wordgyd wreccan ond ymb wer spreccan;
 eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc

dugudum demdon, swa hit gedefe bið,
 þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
 ferhdum freoge, þonne he forð scile
 of lichaman læded weorðan.
 Swa begnornodon Geata leode
 hlafordes hryrc, heorðgeneatas,
 cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyninga
 manna mildust ond monðwærust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

Around Beowulf's barrow rode twelve battle-warriors,
 Mourning their prince, keening for the king,
 Shaping their praise for a precious man;
 They spoke of sorrow, they sang of courage,
 Of great words and deeds-- weaving glory
 With a web of power for tribes to come.
 When a lord lies low, lament is fitting,
 But also praise. Let's love the spirit
 When life lifts from the body's home.
 Let's honor memory when time has taken
 The man, leaving us a lasting glory--*dom*.
 So the twelve Geats shaped a lament,
 Hearth-friends sang of Beowulf's fall,
 Keening and claiming that of all the kings,
 He was the bravest, kindest, mildest of men,
 Most open to others, most deserving of praise.

That class is no more, but Jim's students are singing,
 Shaping of heart's thought a harp of memory,
 A cup of praise, passed from time to time
 Til time itself seems both barrow and blessing.

We lament Jim's passing but promise to remember
 That of all Old English teachers on earth,
 He was the kindest of heart, the keenest of mind,
 The gentlest of spirit. His judgment, our *dom*.

We praise the man and promise to continue
 His singing, his shaping, while he turns gracefully
 To earth and spirit, wood and wind--
 Resonating our songs, stirring our strings.

--Craig Williamson
 Swarthmore College