

# Beowulf in Afghanistan

By Laurie Fyffe

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CHARACTERS (In order of appearance):

Louise Flynn

Grant

Beginning of Script:

BEAT ONE: Heorot

(Sound. Wind. The credits runs. Lights up. The stage is bare with a dark background.)

(Close up of a hand turning on a lamp.)

(Enter **LOUISE**. A middle aged white woman wearing a red blouse and dark trousers.)

**LOUISE**

Hwæt! Wē Gār-Dena ingeār-dagum,(inyear)

Pēod-cyninga, prym gefrūnon, (thead-cyninga frym yefrunon)

hū oā æpelingas ellen fremedon!

Hwæt. So. As in, here we are. Also, in some translations, Lo! Listen! Or, Attention. Anglo Saxon. A language in which you can feel the axe of a consonant sheer a vowel to the bone.

Hwæt! Wē Gār-Dena ingeār-dagum,

Pēod-cyninga, prym gefrūnon,

hū oā æpelingas ellen fremedon!

Listen. Praise the glory of the spear-Danes

From days long past, when Kings of tribes,

Showed great courage.

So begins our story, a tale spun entirely around the slaying of a monster. A heroic poem in which we meet a man, self-identified as warrior. A leader of whom one day it would be said: Pæt wæs gōd cyning! That was a good King.

Beowulf was a Prince of the Geats, a man who subjected himself to rigorous training to become a warrior. And, when the time came to test his courage, travelled beyond his country's borders to help another tribe rid their realm of a terrible scourge. But I'm getting ahead of myself. What is the inciting incident of our story?

(Enter **GRANT**, a tall young black man, wearing a grey T-shirt and jeans.)

**GRANT**

I watched the towers fall. All that dust. All that death.

**LOUISE**

What action triggers this timeless tale?

**GRANT**

Heorot.

**LOUISE**

It all begins when King Hrothgar of the Danes gets it into his head to build a great hall. A gathering place more magnificent than anything yet raised by the children of men – I mean, of humankind. Now, King Hrothgar builds Heorot for two reasons –

**GRANT**

Warriors need a place to get drunk.

**LOUISE**

In the words of the poet, a royal building...fashioned by craftsmen, in which the sons of men should hear of forever. A place to gather and sing, listen to the harp, and tell stories. And, so that Hrothgar might make splendid bestowals among his chosen men, ensuring their allegiance in times of war. So, Heorot is built and it is magnificent. From the perspective of the 8th Century, this is a structure that scrapes the sky.

**GRANT**

Twin Towers.

**LOUISE**

The architectural wonder of its age. Rising from a promontory overlooking the North Sea, alight with candles and roaring fires. Its soaring interior walls bear the shields of the tribes. A gathering place, where the people listen enraptured as the tellers of tales weaves the threads of their glory days into one colourful tapestry of a blossoming culture. King Hrothgar built Heorot to make his people proud.

**GRANT**

But pride stirth up envy.

**LOUISE**

Enter Grendel, a creature determined to take down the Danes. A primordial thing that crawls one day out of the moorland mists.

**GRANT**

He is the beast.

**LOUISE**

Grendel's lineage is liminal. Not quite man, not completely monster. A being to inspire a painting on a cave wall. "Mære mearc-stapa". The moor-stalker.

**GRANT**

He that holds the wastelands under his dominion.

**LOUISE**

A brute with a forehead sprouting horns, the elongated torso of a giraffe, a creature that walks upright, but behind which slithers a serpent's tail.

Grendel, of the ancient tribe of therianthropes, half formed creatures on the way to human, evolutionary hiccups. If you believe mythical beings were once real, Grendel might well have been the last of an ancient tribe of trolls or ogres, a sibling of centaurs. No doubt he has some human genomes in his blood, enough to harbour a well-formed hatred for humankind. But the poem bestows on Grendel an even more disturbing lineage; he is a son of Cain. Meaning...?

**GRANT**

Cain slew Abel. Murdered a brother.

**LOUISE**

Lo! Son of Cain is a descendant of the damned. The orc-neas, evil spirits of the dead, the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of ... think about it...

**GRANT**

Zombies.

**LOUISE**

Hell corpses. And now, this brooding misfit lurks night after night under the brilliant gaze of the as yet unnamed constellation Orion, the Hunter. Skulking around the outer ramparts of Heorot listening to all that swelling poetic oratory. His ire is so aroused it bursts a blood vessel in his barbarian brain.

However, before conjuring up Grendel as Zombie lurching toward Heorot, let us ask ourselves, is there any room for sympathy for the beast? In John Gardner's 1971 novel *Grendel*, Beowulf's adversary, is a bewildered, self-reflective creature suffering the colonization of his moorland territory by Hrothgar's clan. It is the Danes who are the interlopers. Grendel is cast as the last of his tribe, an Indigenous other.

### **GRANT**

Does that excuse what he did?

### **LOUISE**

Hwæt. In the dead of night, Grendel invades Heorot.

Where sleeping & slackened

Lay the out-reveled Ring Danes

Headless of sorrow, oblivious to pain.

### **GRANT**

Greedy the bone grinder Grendel is on them.

His blood-work a lesson in unhallowed slaughter;

He grabs from the living some doomed thirty Danes.

And strews his escape with their bloody remains.

### **LOUISE**

Much is made of the ferocity of Grendel's feasting on the warriors' flesh; whatever else they were, tribe therianthropes were by nature cannibalis.

BEAT TWO: Grief Bringing Grendel  
(Music/sound underscore. The first two speeches overlap.)

### **GRANT**

It was in that darkness, that cold before dawn,

When doubt assails the human heart,  
That Grendel's war-strength was made plain to men.

**LOUISE**

Ðā wæs on ūhtan mid ær-dæge,  
Grendles gūo-cræft gumum undyrne;  
Pa wæs æfter wiste wōp ūp āhafen,  
Micel morgen-swēg...

(Pause.)

**GRANT**

The Danes greeted the dawn with a deep wail, a soul slaying cry of lamentation. Grief. Inconsolable.

**LOUISE**

Grendel has brought the Ring Danes to their knees. His forays into Heorot become regular binge feasts. With uncanny swiftness he strikes and vanishes. Slowly, the tapestry of the Dane's glory days is torn to shreds.

**GRANT**

Futile reconnaissance missions into the wastelands to ferret out the daemon death bringer yield nothing.

**LOUISE**

Those brave enough to stalk the fiend over the moors arrive at a mere, a lake at the bottom of a steep rock crevice. Sea snakes writhe beneath its surface, and the water sends a chill slithering up the arm penetrating to the marrow of the bone.

**LOUISE**

A cave, an underground lair is suspected, but none dare cleave that surface and brave what lies beneath. Time after time, the warriors return, each painting a different picture of what Grendel looks like. Under moonlight the enemy is a fear inspired shadow, at dawn a ghostly apparition that melts into the morning mist. Truth be told; only the dead have seen his face.

(Exit **LOUISE**.)

**BEAT THREE: The Enemy Unseen**  
**GRANT**

The Taliban has an uncanny ability to become invisible. He knows the terrain. And it isn't all flat desert crisscrossed by roads. We're drawn into lowlands and watersheds dense with foliage, fields of grape vines guarded by rock solid drying huts that look like mini fortresses. We hunt him through poppy and marijuana fields. Now, poppies come up to about here. (Indicates waist high) But marijuana is planted in rows on top of mounds, so the plants can be seven feet tall with thick leaves. Before we can declare a field clear, we walk up and down those furrow lanes, one at a time, looking for signs of the Taliban. And as we walk, we kick up a powder fine dust that fills the air. And when a ray of sunlight penetrates the plants the air is transformed into a blurred golden mist. You can't see more than ten feet ahead. A real fog of war. But, the Taliban has an even more impressive disappearing act. Melting into the population. One time, through binoculars, after we'd been fired on and there was a lull, I saw a couple of men emerge from a grape drying hut and walk away. We'd just been in a combat exchange! And here were these two guys, a mile away, sauntering down the road. No weapons visible. Unarmed. So, according to our rules of engagement, they were off limits. The Taliban fighter can toss his weapon and turn into a farmer, a villager building a wall, or a vegetable seller wheeling a cart and we can't touch him.

**LOUISE**

How DO you fight an enemy you can't see?

**GRANT**

Even when you can see him.

**LOUISE**

For twelve long winters, Grendel makes war on the Danes.

Meanwhile, over the WHALE ROAD, in the land of the Geats, Beowulf is coming of age. Entering whatever contests he can to build his warrior prowess: swordplay, spear throwing, swimming –

**GRANT**

He was the mightiest of men.

Ripe with vigor and valor.

Stalwart & stately.

And as for his swimming, (laughs) they call him wave-walker.

## **LOUISE**

Word of the Grendel carnage reaches Geatland, arousing fear and sympathy. Beowulf asks his King if he can go to the aid of the Danes.

Reluctantly, the elders grant permission to their Prince to embark on his bold quest.

From the bonds of his faithful he chose fourteen comrades,

And from ancient forests did carve a fair ship.

Oh, she flew like a bird, this well braced craft

Cleaved the breast of the foam,

Cleared the churn of the waves,

O'er the blue of the whale road she proudly did slip,

Into sight of white sea-cliffs, the Geat sailors she bore

Where they set their feet firmly on the Danes sandy shore.

## **GRANT**

Upon arrival, Beowulf and his companions are ushered into King Hrothgar's presence. But on the threshold of Heorot, they pause. Is this the mighty hall of the Danes? Men sit in silence casting lackluster gazes at the new arrivals. Even the story shaper is mute; harp strings stilled. Heorot is a joyless place pummeled into a deathly silence. Too late the Danes discovered that no man-forged blade could harm the havoc wrecking monster. Beowulf stares at a hollow eyed King, slumped in his throne. Grendel can't touch Hrothgar. The gods protect anointed rulers.

## **LOUISE**

But he can make him watch.

## **GRANT**

The greatest desecration is the fear in the eyes of so many unseasoned warriors; young men recruited in haste to fill the ranks of the dead. Soldiers become section commanders. A young sergeant becomes company sergeant-major, and an even younger master-corporal becomes platoon commander. A ripple down the line with everyone stepping up.

Ready or not, ready.

BEAT FOUR: What is a hero?  
(**LOUISE** sits in a chair. Sound of knocking. Enter **GRANT**.)

**GRANT**

Professor Flynn!

**LOUISE**

Yes...ah?

**GRANT**

Grant. I'm bored with Odysseus.

**LOUISE**

Of course you are.

**GRANT**

It takes him too long to get home!

**LOUISE** (Sighs)

Yes. It does.

**GRANT**

And he loses most of the men under his command.

**LOUISE**

He loses them all.

**GRANT**

How can I write an essay on the nature of heroism, if I don't really believe the man was a hero?

**LOUISE**

I think you're being overly dismissive of Odysseus' heroic potential. Are you perhaps daunted by the number of pages?

**GRANT**

Truth is, The Odyssey is a bit of a slog.

**LOUISE**

The Odyssey as slog. That's not exactly a thesis to capture the heart of your professor. But, why don't you take on Beowulf.

**GRANT**

Bay – a – wolf. What's it about?

**LOUISE**

Well, you know how The Odyssey is about Odysseus, and Hamlet is about Hamlet –

**GRANT**

Ok, ok,,, But why Beowulf? What makes him so special? What's the main attraction?

**LOUISE**

The main attraction is you get to slog through two-hundred and thirteen pages, as opposed to five-hundred and twenty-three – if we're counting.

**GRANT**

We are.

(**LOUISE** picks up a small volume titled: Beowulf; she writes in it. Then places the book where **GRANT** can pick it up. He does so.)

“To Grant from Professor Flynn; may you come unharmed through the clash of battle.” What battle? I'm not in any battle.

**LOUISE**

The battle of life. And 'clash of battle' is a phrase you'll find in both Beowulf and – perhaps, someday – The Odyssey.

**GRANT**

Clash of battle. Not bad. But he better be a real hero.

**LOUISE**

Now there's the question for your thesis, Grant. What makes a real hero?

(**LOUISE** stands beside chair. **GRANT** faces down stage.)

BEAT FIVE: Beowulf battles Grendel

**LOUISE**

Hwæt! “Waes pu, Hroogar, hal!”

**GRANT**

King Hrothgar, I am Beowulf.

Mighty the deeds I have done in my youth.

News of this giant deamon reached me in Geatland;

Now, against Grendel, alone, I shall settle this matter.

**LOUISE**

Oh, you will, will you!

(**LOUISE** swaggers. She is now Unferth.)

**LOUISE**

Forward steps Unferth from his place beside his King, a bitter survivor of the scourge of Grendel, bristling at this boasting warrior newly arrived from a ride over the whale road. You’ll just march on over the moors in your flashy coat of chain mail, very nicely meshed by the way, waving your newly forged sword and ‘settle the matter’. We’ve been trying to send this daemon to hell for twelve long years. And you’re not the first savior to stand before our King and say, I’ll fix this for you. Wait – Art thou that Beowulf who with Breca contested the wide sea for the prize in swimming?

**GRANT**

That would be me.

We held a naked sword in one hand as we swam!

Together in the cold sea for five nights diving amid the surging flood, braving the coldest of storms and darkening nights until a wind from the north forced us apart. Wild were the waves, as sea-monsters stirred beneath us. Suddenly, my flesh was gripped, and I was dragged into the depths, yet it was granted to me the strength to pierce the monster with my sword. Nine sea-monsters I slew. And I have not heard of a harder fought night by any man under the arching sky of heaven.

**LOUISE**

It didn't matter whether or not the Danes believed him; by the time Beowulf had finished bragging, they liked him. Shush...shush... Then, whispers and a hush as Hrothgar's Queen, Wealhtheow, a gold adorned woman enters the hall. (Reverential.) She bears the mead-flagon to Beowulf, filling his cup, then makes the rounds to all his warriors offering a gracious welcome. No one speaks, and all are humbled.

**GRANT**

I have a question.

**LOUISE**

Yes.

**GRANT**

Is that what women did in Beowulf, serve beer?

**LOUISE**

The role of women in Beowulf is misunderstood and misrepresented. Pathetic attempts to adapt this epic poem into a movie, depict Heorot as a hall full of buxom bar maids being grabbed by Hrothgar's warriors. They're wrong! The women of Beowulf are the wives and daughters of Kings, essential components in the lineage required for the birthing of a line of heroes. They make speeches and are listened to. They unite Kingdoms! It is an honour to have a royal female fill your mead cup. Regular servings of meat and drink are carried out by men, clearly referred to in the poem as stewards.

**GRANT**

Now, Beowulf's plan was a simple one. Tonight they would celebrate as of old. Eat, drink and be contrary, he told them. Then, we settle down for the night. And wait.

**LOUISE**

Dā cōm of mōre – under mist-hleopum

Grendel gongan – Godes yrre baer:

Here comes the monster,

Hunting for humans in Heorot's high hall.

## **GRANT**

Breaching its portals, sniffing for man flesh,  
Grendel bears down on the warriors;  
When, all of a sudden, swift mighty Beowulf,  
Rises up and grabs the creature's claw.

## **LOUISE**

Grendel and Beowulf are locked in mortal combat. Forewarned that it would be useless, Beowulf does not reach for his sword, but clings to the creature with an iron grip. Screaming in pain, Grendel attempts a retreat, but Beowulf hangs on, summoning all his strength, digging hard into foul flesh, tearing through muscle and sinew, searching for bone, until finally, using the creature's strength against him, he swings Grendel hard against the walls of Heorot and rips off his arm and shoulder.

## **GRANT**

Bones crushed, sinews snapped; Grendel's arm is ripped from his shoulder.

(A howl of agony. Overlapping with discordant music/sound.)

A howl of terror and defeat, sung by a mortally wounded creature. The cry of any human being on the threshold of death.

## **LOUISE**

Mad with pain, Grendel flees Heorot.

## **GRANT**

Beowulf took the bleeding hunk of Grendel flesh and nailed it, shoulder arm and claw, to Heorot's high hall. Warriors arrive and stare in disbelief.

## **LOUISE**

Now it is the enemy's turn to trail blood on the path to death. Eager for confirmation of the ogre's demise, Unferth and a band of men track the monster over the moor.

## **GRANT**

We follow the signs in the dust.

**LOUISE**

A trail of gore, a body dragging itself.

**GRANT**

Evidence of a slow and torturous progress over uneven, rocky terrain.

**LOUISE**

Death-marked was the path that led Unferth and his men over the moor.

When they arrive at the devil's mere,

A tide of tumbling gore marks the surface

Where the doomed monster has plunged deep.

Drowned, they are certain, in his watery den.

**GRANT**

We found him moments before death. He cursed us with his dying breath.

**LOUISE;**

I don't remember that part.

**GRANT**

I remember every part.

BEAT SIX: The Wind and The Sand  
(Sounds of the harp and cheering.)

**LOUISE**

So, Heorot rings with the sounds of celebration. Imagine the sense of relief at the end of years of oppressive and fear.

The storytelling bard is tuning his Saxon harp – shouldn't take too long with seven strings – and improvising a song of heroic praise.

Blood still drips from the hunk of Grendel meat nailed to the wall.

Hrothgar enters the hall and immediately embraces Beowulf as his son promising all the benefits of this new kinship.

**GRANT**

Grendel could still be out there.

**LOUISE**

His shoulder and arm are nailed to the wall!

**GRANT**

Tracking a mortally wounded enemy is dangerous work.

**LOUISE**

The war is over!

**GRANT**

Is it? How many times has the war been over in Afghanistan? Peace is a prelude. There is no timeline when you are fighting an enemy you don't know or understand. Retreating, the Taliban almost always managed to scoop up their dead. That surprised us. We were told they were a bunch of brutal fanatics, armed with outdated weapons, with little training, and no strategic planning capabilities. In combat, we learned that they were a bunch of brutal fanatics, with perfectly functional weapons, rigorous training, and capable of remaining invisible while luring us into an ambush.

**LOUISE**

The Danes of Heorot ready the hall for a great feast. And Beowulf, centre of it all, is at his ease, plus, courtesy of Hrothgar, he is piling up a huge treasure. There's no getting around the fact that Beowulf's heroic deeds made him rich; and that most of it would go back to his King and country.

**GRANT**

We weren't there to protect oil wells.

**LOUISE**

A helmet and sword, finely forged, eight horses with gold bridles, a saddle of sumptuous design, and finally –

**GRANT**

Our job was to fix this failed state.

**LOUISE**

Presented by Queen Wealhtheow herself a neck-torque of fine gold.

## GRANT

Afghanistan doesn't have oil. There's no treasure in those hills. Just history. Some of my comrades said: we're here for the kids. Girls have the right to go to school. I get that. But we're dying here. Best bet is to send the Taliban packing so that Afghanistan will be a better country. I'd heard about public executions, but it was stories of public amputations that shocked me. A woman flashes pink nail polish and the next thing she knows the religious police are sawing off the ends of her fingers. Or the colour of her socks offends – keep in mind she's under a Burka – and they cut off her foot. In public! Like butchering meat in a market. There is a level of barbarity that no human being should have to live with. I like to think we're fighting for the right to build a country that works. Where elected leaders, doctors, and teachers can work without fear. Where farmers can make a living growing grapes and corn, instead of drugs. Where people can walk into a marketplace without wondering if an ordinary day will end in a bloodbath. The history of this country for as long as most people alive today can remember is one of war. The older you are the more wars you remember.

(Shift in tone)

We arrive at a village for a Shura. My Commanding Officer is here with the Battalion CO. Both men are seated in a circle with the village elders. A Shura is a consultation during which all the courtesies are observed. So our officers have removed their helmets. I stand right behind them. Gun low, but ready. No one wants a repeat of what happened in March. No one wants an axe to the skull.

The Afghan elders smile and nod. Our officers smile and nod, listening and talking through interpreters. Everyone drinks tea. A young boy comes forward, stands arms folded behind the elders, frowning. I wonder what he's thinking. A girl hovers behind him, dancing on light feet. She looks ready to run. And for the first time I see them, the Taliban. Suddenly made visible by all the normal things that are absent. Where is everybody? Aren't villages busy places? Four old men and a couple of kids!

## GRANT

The unbelievably hot air is weighted with tension. What are they thinking, these old men: Will these soldiers take our guns? Will they burn our crops? Should we tell them that the Taliban were busy on the road last night, digging a hole, filling it with an abomination of destruction. Will the Canadians punish us when that bomb blows up sending metal and glass into the bodies of their soldiers? Should we tell them? Don't look them in the eye; they are dead men.

(Beat)

Suddenly the eldest villager struggles to his feet. The Shura is over. And we leave. Truth is, we know what they're thinking. We've heard it all before. One day these Canadians will be gone, and NATO will be gone, just like the Russians, or the British who have been here and gone many times. One day even the Americans will be gone. But the Taliban will still be here with their long memories. They are the wind and all these armies are the sand, and the wind always comes back to blow the sand away.

BEAT SEVEN: Sites of Horror  
(**GRANT** picks up a skipping rope and skips.)

**GRANT**

Army taught me to stay in shape as if my life depended on it. Because it did.

(Enter **LOUISE**. She holds a skipping rope. Skips. Stops.)

**LOUISE**

Teaching taught me to stay in shape. For the day I get the urge to make a run for it.

So, the Danes and Geat warriors celebrate their triumph over the defeated monster, sinking into relief and exhaustion. (Change of tone.) But now, the narrator of Beowulf steps forward. He tells us, ominously, that no man or woman can know the grim shape of things to come.

**GRANT**

Drowning in the blood stained mere, dying on his last choked cry of pain, Grendel's suffering was witnessed by his mother.

**LOUISE**

That night she springs on the mead soaked revellers.

(**LOUISE** whirls skipping rope.)

**LOUISE**

Before the surprised warriors can even steady their swords, she takes her revenge –

(**LOUISE** flings the skipping rope down hard on the floor.)

Killing, then stealing back over the moor. Taking with her the bloody trophy of her son. Havoc has come again to Heorot.

(Exit **LOUISE. GRANT** is alone.)

## **GRANT**

The dead strewn on the road to Kandahar, the IEDs, homemade bombs triggered from a mile away at the flick of a Bic. Comrades blown into bloody pieces as the enemy watches, then melts into the hot, dry air.

We pull the fallen to safety, pressure wounds, apply tourniquets, check for vitals, radio in the Priority One Casualties – immediate and advanced medical care required – and the Priority Four Casualties – vital signs absent.

**LOUISE** (From off stage.)

Flick of a Bic?

## **GRANT**

A Bic pen. A villager led us to a stash of homemade IED materials; all the necessary bits and pieces to blow a man to Kingdom Come. The detonator was fashioned out of the shaft of a Bic ballpoint pen. Ingenious. So, professor, if you believe the pen is mightier than the sword, you just might be right. I never, not in my wildest dreams of Afghanistan, thought I'd be staring into the aftermath of that kind of assault. Rest? Sleep? Dive down in the land of nightmares, come back shaking and sweating with hours until dawn. Beowulf took no wife, had no children. Maybe it was hard, even in the eighth century, to find someone who could understand the clash of battle. To appreciate that home again, in the land of peace and plenty, you could be waiting in line at the gas station, when the smell of petrol smacks your brain back into the pulsing rotors of a Chinook helicopter. And your head is ringing with the sound of the gunner spraying bullets over the brown land below. What the hell! Are we being fired on! No, just preventative measures.

(Beat)

## **GRANT**

So, now comes the hard part. Grendel was a waiting game; sit in the hall and he would come. But now our hero has to pursue the mother to her lair, he has to fight her on her territory. He's going to have to leave the walls of Heorot and travel beyond the wire. Mount an incursion into enemy territory, set up a Forward Operating Base, dine on rations, sleep under the stars. Sleep on the ground next to the LAV, get used to the dust

invading every crevice, ignore the sand fleas, keep watch for the yellow death stalker, the scorpion. How long? For as long as it takes.

**LOUISE** (From off stage.)

LAV?

**GRANT**

Light Armoured Vehicle. The Taliban call them the dragons that shit white men.

(Enter **LOUISE**; she stands Up Stage.)

**LOUISE**

You read Beowulf in Afghanistan.

**GRANT**

Again and again. Put me to sleep a few times. Which was a blessing. Invaded my dreams. Which was an improvement. Once, in battle, I found myself thinking about Beowulf. I'm hunkered down by a thick mud wall, the Taliban are out there, forward operations is trying to get a fix. God, it's hot. September and it's 35 degrees Celsius and I'm carrying over fifty pounds of equipment. Suddenly, I'm Beowulf, right at that moment when he's facing the surface of the mere, and he knows that Grendel's mother is down there. No choice. He's got to dive in and fight her, the mother monster. But all I can think is – that water must be cold. And now, I'm there, on the moors somewhere between the North and Baltic Sea, where the air is damp, maybe a light snow or mizzle of freezing rain falling on my face as I perch on a rock staring down into that deep, dark lake. And then I dive, piercing the surface, and all that cold iciness flows through me. What a relief. Now I'm focused. Stone cold ready and alert: Beowulf about to take the plunge.

(Light shift; Sound/music.)

BEAT EIGHT: Dark Waters  
(**LOUISE** addresses her class.)

**LOUISE**

Good afternoon class. So, what frightens you?

(Beat)

What terrifies me is the 3 pm to 6 pm class where you can't make up your minds if you want to sleep or eat pizza. So, what do we fear? There are three archetypal locations of terror in Beowulf. Name one? Ok, think of your average teen horror film. Where do we find the babysitter?

**GRANT**

The house?

**LOUISE**

Right. The barricaded night house: Heorot. You do everything you can to keep the horror out, but it finds a way in, or in the case of the babysitter, it was already there in the basement. Another site of dread?

**GRANT**

A wilderness.

**LOUISE**

What kind?

**GRANT**

Harsh, hostile and unforgiving. In Afghanistan, we scurried up rock faces, full of crevices, lots of places for the enemy to hide; lots of places for you to be exposed. And the temperatures were always extreme; unbearably hot during the day, freezing at night. Beowulf faced the moors. Bogs, quicksand, and a fog that obscured the way ahead.

**LOUISE**

And the third site of terror?

**GRANT**

Dark waters.

**LOUISE**

The barricaded night house, the unforgiving wilderness, and dark waters. Think of any modern horror film and you quickly realize that it draws on our primordial fear of one of these archetypal spaces. And our hero has to conquer his fear of all three.

**LOUISE** (Anglo Saxon)

Gyrede hine Beowulf!

## **GRANT**

Beowulf stood ready.

Fame or death take me! He cried.

And with that, sword in hand, he dove into the mere.

He swam for half a day until he reached the bottom...

## **LOUISE**

At the bottom of the lake he is caught in the sharp iron grip of Grendel's mother. She has been waiting. Locked in hand to hand combat they fight as she hauls him to her lair. Emerging into air and firelight of this underwater cave, Beowulf is revived. Her claws have failed to pierce his finely woven chain mail vest.

## **GRANT**

He draws his sword and strikes the sea witch – but his blade is strangely deflected. Like her son, the mother is impervious to man-made weapons. Surprised, Beowulf stumbles back, he falls, staring up as the fiend brings down her knife. Once again, his ring metal war-shirt saves him. But his strength is sapped.

## **LOUISE**

In his heart he knows: if he does not slay now, he will be slain.

## **GRANT**

Suddenly, he saw it, a flash of metal and there it is. Lying on top of the heap of the monster's treasure horde, a brilliant blade. Longer and heavier than any wielded by man, a weapon of giants. In desperation Beowulf crawls toward the sword and grasps the hilt.

## **LOUISE**

Unleashing this miraculous blade from its jewel encrusted sheath,

He raises it over his head, and summoning all his strength...

A strength born of the despairing of life,

swings hard and savagely down

cleaving the skull, severing the neck,

shearing the life-threads of his opponent.

watching as she crumples to the ground.

**GRANT**

Second monster slain.

(Music/sound: light shift.)

**LOUISE**

Back in Heorot, amid the tumult of triumph, King Hrothgar strikes a strangely sombre tone.

**GRANT**

He lectures the warrior. You should never do that.

**LOUISE**

Beowulf, thou mightiest of men, celebrated hero, temper your pride.

The flower of the mighty is too often fleeting

Erelong you shall fall to some ill or the sword;

Feel the bite of the blade, or keenly aimed spear;

Or odious age your clear eye will darken,

Death stalks even heroes, and carries them away.

**GRANT**

At night, just at that moment when I feel myself falling into sleep, memory descends like a flock of vultures. A beating of wings on my weary brain. And I'm wide-awake staring at the moving pictures of the past. How do you defeat the monster memory?

(Sound; beating of wings.)

BEAT NINE: Dragons

**LOUISE**

And so, Beowulf has defeated both Grendel and his dam.

Two monsters down.

His quest is ended. His treasure loaded,  
He departs in his swift moving ship, riding the winds  
Over the blue whale road, setting Denmark behind him.  
Eager to see the rising cliffs of Geatland.

**GRANT**

He returned home a hero.

**LOUISE**

A tested warrior, who told his tale, in the presence of his King,  
With his comrades by his side, to affirm his every deed.

**GRANT**

I liked it that he wore the mantle of hero so well. I liked it, but I didn't  
believe it.

**LOUISE**

Flash forward fifty years. Beowulf is now Lord of the Geats.  
Much loved and wise they said, and just.  
Prat wæs gōd cyning. That was one good King.

**GRANT**

That's it?

**LOUISE**

The story tells us nothing of those fifty years when Beowulf was King.

**GRANT**

How often did he return to the Halls of Heorot, see again the hollow eyed  
fear in the eyes of young Danes? Or the monster mother's lair, where she  
sat and brooded amid the bones of the men she'd ripped apart. It's one  
thing to set out to kill a monster, another feat altogether to walk his path  
strewn with the bodies of the dead. Did Beowulf see those blood-drenched  
remains in his dreams?

**LOUISE**

The warrior's dreams are not part of the heroic tale.

**GRANT**

Well they should be. Skip to the dragon.

**LOUISE**

There was, in the land of the Geats, a dragon. No immediate threat, as dragons go, content to sleep. Until one day, an intruder stumbled into its lair and dared to steal from its treasure horde. Now, if there is one thing to remember about dragons it's that you should never, never, never, touch their things. Aroused, enraged, the dragon emerges from its lair. Seeking the thief in the night, it spews forth flame, razing fields, and burning homes throughout the land. Beneath the shadow of the dragon's wings, nothing survives.

**GRANT**

Wait, the dragon was there, sleeping all those years while Beowulf was King?

**LOUISE**

Yes. Dragon's lie in wait, brooding and baleful.

**GRANT**

The sleeping dragon, curled round its treasure. Alone in its den. Possessive, jealous of any intruder. Growing mad protecting his horde. Sometimes even hating its treasure because it denies him peace.

(Beat)

**GRANT**

The dragon coiled in flames, slithering through the brain –

That's memory. Lying in wait.

**LOUISE**

And so, our hero goes forth to slay his last monster.

**GRANT**

His last deployment. Was he alone?

**LOUISE**

Wiglaf, son of Weohstan was by his side.

**GRANT**

What! One man! He was King. Where was his army!

**LOUISE**

Fled to the woods. It was a dragon.

**GRANT**

Not a fair fight. Where was NATO when we needed them?

**LOUISE**

Beowulf stands before the dragon's lair and calls forth the beast. A war bright echo from the voice of man. The creature slithers forth, enveloping our hero in a gush of flames. The dragon's claws rake his flesh, life-blood welling out when Wiglaf rushes forward and strikes, sinking his sword into the dragon's lower flanks. Drawing his knife, Beowulf crawls forward, and knowing that this is the last blow he will strike in this life, sinks the blade into the beast's heart. The dragon's flame dies. The beast is dead. But so is the warrior's strength seeping away. Beowulf looks up and sees the stars, the as yet unnamed constellation Orion.

**GRANT**

Time freezes...

(**GRANT** hands a copy of Beowulf to **LOUISE**.)

The one you gave me.

**LOUISE**

It's burnt. The pages are singed. (She opens to inscription.) "To Grant from Professor Flynn, may you come unharmed through the clash of battle." Well, did you?

**GRANT**

I'm in a convoy, inside a Light Armoured Vehicle, moving down a long dusty road in Afghanistan. Suddenly, the LAV is struck by an RPG, rocket propelled grenade. The impact knocks us to the floor, against walls. But the back hatch flies open and we spew forth firing. Enemy fire is coming from all directions. Bullets rip through the air. My left arm takes a shock, my elbow goes weak. Blunt force to my chest thuds off the ceramic plate of my blast vest. There's a high-pitched ping as something grazes my

helmet. I spin and fall. I look up. Brad is still standing. He turns to me. Well, how about that? He says. Then he just crumples to the ground. I took three bullets. Sustained a minor arm wound. My comrade takes one, but it cuts straight through his temple, and the light of his life is gone in the instant. Extinguished. My friend.

(Beat.)

Why him? Why not me?

**LOUISE**

Fate gives us no answers.

**GRANT**

I ask myself, which monster was the worst one Beowulf faced, which cost him the most; in blood, in fear. And which one followed him home? What monster could he not shake? Grendel? Did he think of his long death over the moors? Or Grendel's mother? Any guilt there?

**LOUISE**

Memory assaults. Take it on.

**GRANT**

How?

**LOUISE**

Define your objective, assess the terrain, draw up a plan of attack, and stick to it.

**GRANT**

That little book was in the LAV during the attack. It survived. Impacted, singed. It should have burnt to ashes. Where was the sword of kings when we needed it? The magical invisible weapon presented to the hero in his hour of need.

**LOUISE**

Perhaps it's just a metaphor.

**GRANT**

For what?

**LOUISE**

Courage?

**GRANT**

Courage.

**LOUISE**

What is the weapon that pierces the dark? What cutting edge can demolish the cruel irony of a pen that triggers death? What is the golden sword presented to the tribes at the climax of their struggle? Courage. Beowulf wasn't perfect, he was boastful and vain, he killed both Grendel and his mother with relentless brutality. But he did it to protect a people that weren't his own. He stepped outside his tribe for the sake of another. He showed courage.

**GRANT**

The shock of returning home to my own tribe wasn't just the memories of what happened over there; it was this sinking feeling that Grendel was here. Invisible in the shadows. Waiting.

**LOUISE**

For what?

**GRANT**

The inevitable payback. The moment when we all fall down.

(Beat)

**GRANT**

Tell me, professor, do you truly believe that what is happening over there, could never happen here? The cruelty toward the weak and vulnerable, the corruption, the lying.

**LOUISE**

I've heard enough stories to know that anything can happen anywhere. No child of human kind can know the shape of things to come.

EPILOGUE: The Hero's Farewell

**LOUISE**

It was, by all accounts, a glorious funeral for Beowulf.

**GRANT**

He deserved no less. The flag draped coffin.

**LOUISE**

The pyre built high on a cliff overlooking the sea.

**GRANT**

The slow march of comrades through the dust of twilight, weighed down by the burden they carry and the heaviness in their hearts.

**LOUISE**

It's frame hung with helmets of gold and his finely meshed coat of mail, gleaming by the light of torches

**GRANT**

Tears streaming down their faces.

**LOUISE**

The chanting of dirges, the recitation of prayers, the keening of women, lamenting the world to come without their King.

**GRANT**

The rows of soldiers standing at attention. That final salute.

**LOUISE**

Consuming flames leap through the bone cage to devour a mighty heart.

**GRANT**

The open maw of the CC-130 Hercules. A steel bird waiting to wing the warrior home.

**LOUISE**

Heofon rēce swealg.

**GRANT**

And the heavens swallow the smoke.

(**LOUISE** Exit S.L. **GRANT** walks forward. He stands facing the class.)

Hwæt!

(Fade to black.)

End of Transcript