Sofia Samatar, *Standing at the Ruins*

He is a warrior prince. He hunts in the deserts of central Arabia. He drinks and carouses with his companions, and pursues scandalous love affairs. When his father banishes him for his bad behaviour, he becomes even more reckless, an outlaw. At the news of his father’s death, he shrugs, he goes on playing backgammon. Afterwards, however, he gets riotously drunk and embarks on a campaign of vengeance that will absorb the remainder of his short life. He is the greatest poet of his age. According to legend, he is slain by a treacherous gift from the Emperor Justinian: a poisoned robe.

He is Imru al-Qays, the Man of Misfortune, the Wandering King. He composes a stunning poem, known as his *Muallaqa*, or ‘Hanging Ode’, one of a handful of pre-Islamic poems so precious they were said to have been inscribed in gold and hung on the walls of the Kaaba. Luminous language, imperishable lines. The poem’s opening phrase, *Qifa nabki* – ‘Stop, let us weep’ – signals a traditional scene, in which the poet surveys the ruins of his beloved’s campsite. This trope was already conventional in the poet’s time, produced by a nomadic Bedouin culture: the common experience of coming across the traces of an abandoned camp became, for poets, an occasion for mourning the loss of a real or imagined woman. With Imru al-Qays, the old theme finds its most powerful and lasting expression, so that his *Muallaqa* becomes its exemplar. *Qifa nabki*. Stop, let us weep. A call to pause, to dismount, to come down to earth, to face the signs of destruction and loss, and to weep in torrents. In Arabic poetics, this classical motif is known *as al-waqf ala al-atlal*: ‘standing at the ruins’. <…>

The *Muallaqa* of Imru al-Qays is part of our oldest poetic inheritance, transmitted orally for two centuries before it was written down. In English, too, certain poems have come down to us from an oral tradition, such as those recorded, long after their composition, in the tenth-century *Exeter Book*. Most of these poems are anonymous. Several are elegies that, like Imru al-Qays’s ode, call on their listeners to contemplate ruins. All over the world, laments the friendless exile in the poem known as *The Wanderer*, wine-halls crumble, buildings are swept by snow, walls crushed by frost. Like Imru al-Qays, this speaker mourns the loss of human worlds, though he speaks the language of frozen seacoasts rather than deserts, the sand replaced by snow. Alone in his boat, he rows the rime-cold sea with his bare hands. He has lost his lord, his companions. He hoards his sorrows, binding them in his heart. Sometimes he dreams of the past, and it seems to him that he is with his lord again; but he wakes to see only the fallow waves about him. Sea-birds bathe, fanning their feathers. Ice and snow fall, mingled with hail.