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VOLUME A

THE ANCIENT WORLD

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He tied the letter on a fir-branch,
 Where it could be seen from the road;
 He cast the gold writing-box into the spring;
 Marko took off his green cloak,
 Laid it on the grass under the fir-tree,
 Made the sign of the cross, sat on the cloak,
 Pulled his sable cap down over his eyes;
 He lay down, he did not get back up.
 The dead Marko was near the spring
 From one day to the next for a week of days:
 Whoever passed by on the wide road,
 And caught sight of Kraljević Marko,
 Thought to a man that Marko was sleeping there,
 And so veered far around him,
 For fear that he would be roused
 Where there is fortune, there is also misfortune:
 Where misfortune, also fortune:
 And now all good fortune brought—
 The abbot Vaso from Mount Athos,³
 With his novice Isaiah.
 When the abbot caught sight of Marko,
 He reached for the deacon with his right hand:
 "More softly, son, don't rouse him!—
 For Marko is ill-tempered waking from a dream,
 And he may kill us both."
 Looking on while Marko slept, the monk
 Caught sight of the letter above Marko,
 He studied the letter in front of him:—
 The letter said that this was Marko, dead.
 Then the monk dismounted from his horse,
 And took hold of the hero Marko,
 But Marko had long since passed away.
 Abbot Vaso shed tears,
 For he sorrowed deeply over Marko;
 He unbuckled the three belts of riches,
 Unbuckled them, and buckled them on himself.
 Abbot Vaso thought and thought
 Where he might bury the dead Marko;
 He thought and thought, then he made his decision:
 He tied the dead Marko on his horse,
 Then he bore him to the sea's shore,
 Sat beside the dead Marko on a galley,
 Took him straight to Mount Athos,
 Took him to the church below Vilindar,
 Bore him into the church at Vilindar;

3. A center of Eastern Orthodox monastic culture in northern Greece.

He read for Marko a service for the dead,
 Sang a requiem for his body on earth
 In the midst of the white church at Vilindar;
 And then the old man buried Marko,
 But he fixed no sign above him,
 So that Marko's grave would not be known,
 So that his enemies would not take revenge.



The Odyssey!

BOOK 1. ATHENA INSPIRES THE PRINCE

Sing to me of the man, Muse,² the man of twists and turns
 driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
 the hallowed heights of Troy.
 Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
 many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
 fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
 But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
 the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
 the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
 and the Sungod wiped from sight the day of their return.
 Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
 start from where you will—sing for our time too.
 By now,
 all the survivors, all who avoided headlong death
 were safe at home, escaped the wars and waves.
 But one man alone . . .
 his heart set on his wife and his return—Calypso,
 the bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband.
 But then, when the wheeling seasons brought the year around,
 that year spun out by the gods when he should reach his home,
 Ithaca—though not even there would he be free of trials,
 even among his loved ones—then every god took pity,
 all except Poseidon.³ He raged on, seething against
 the great Odysseus till he reached his native land.
 But now
 Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away,
 Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of mankind,
 a people split in two, one part where the Sungod sets
 and part where the Sungod rises. There Poseidon went
 to receive an offering, bulls and rams by the hundred—

1. Translated by Robert Fagles.

2. Goddess of epic poetry, one of several Muses.

3. God of the sea, of earthquakes, and of horses.

30 far away at the feast the Sea-lord sat and took his pleasure.
But the other gods, at home in Olympian Zeus's halls,
met for full assembly there, and among them now
the father of men and gods was first to speak,
35 sorely troubled, remembering handsome Aegisthus,
the man Agamemnon's son, renowned Orestes, killed.
Recalling Aegisthus, Zeus harangued the immortal powers:
"Ah how shameless—the way these mortals blame the gods.
From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,
but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
40 compound their pains beyond their proper share.
Look at Aegisthus now . . .
above and beyond *his* share he stole Atreides'⁴ wife,
he murdered the warlord coming home from Troy
though he knew it meant his own total ruin.
45 Far in advance we told him so ourselves,
dispatching the guide, the giant-killer Hermes.⁵
'Don't murder the man,' he said, 'don't court his wife.
Beware, revenge will come from Orestes, Agamemnon's son,
that day he comes of age and longs for his native land.'
50 So Hermes warned, with all the good will in the world,
but would Aegisthus' hardened heart give way?
Now he pays the price—all at a single stroke."

And sparkling-eyed Athena drove the matter home:

55 "Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king,
surely he goes down to a death he earned in full!
Let them all die so, all who do such things.
But my heart breaks for Odysseus,
that seasoned veteran cursed by fate so long—
far from his loved ones still, he suffers torments
60 off on a wave-washed island rising at the center of the seas.
A dark wooded island, and there a goddess makes her home,
a daughter of Atlas, wicked Titan who sounds the deep
in all its depths, whose shoulders lift on high
the colossal pillars thrusting earth and sky apart.
65 Atlas' daughter it is who holds Odysseus captive,
luckless man—despite his tears, forever trying
to spellbind his heart with suave, seductive words
and wipe all thought of Ithaca from his mind.
But he, straining for no more than a glimpse
70 of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land,
Odysseus longs to die . . .

Olympian Zeus,

have you no care for *him* in your lofty heart?
Did he never win your favor with sacrifices
burned beside the ships on the broad plain of Troy?

4. "Son of Atreus," Agamemnon.

5. Messenger god.

75 Why, Zeus, why so dead set against Odysseus?"

"My child," Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
"what nonsense you let slip through your teeth. Now,
how on earth could I forget Odysseus? Great Odysseus
who excels all men in wisdom, excels in offerings too
80 he gives the immortal gods who rule the vaulting skies?
No, it's the Earth-Shaker, Poseidon, unappeased,
forever fuming against him for the Cyclops
whose giant eye he blinded: godlike Polyphemus,
towering over all the Cyclops' clans in power.
85 The nymph Thoosa bore him, daughter of Phorcys,
lord of the barren salt sea—she met Poseidon
once in his vaulted caves and they made love.
And now for his blinded son the earthquake god—
though he won't quite kill Odysseus—
90 drives him far off course from native land.
But come, all of us here put heads together now,
work out his journey home so Odysseus can return.
Lord Poseidon, I trust, will let his anger go.
How can he stand his ground against the will
95 of all the gods at once—one god alone?"

Athena, her eyes flashing bright, exulted,
"Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king!
If now it really pleases the blissful gods
100 that wise Odysseus shall return—home at last—
let us dispatch the guide and giant-killer Hermes
down to Ogygia Island, down to announce at once
to the nymph with lovely braids our fixed decree:
Odysseus journeys home—the exile must return!
While I myself go down to Ithaca, rouse his son
105 to a braver pitch, inspire his heart with courage
to summon the flowing-haired Achaeans to full assembly,
speak his mind to all those suitors, slaughtering on and on
his droves of sheep and shambling longhorn cattle.
Next I will send him off to Sparta and sandy Pylos,
there to learn of his dear father's journey home.
110 Perhaps he will hear some news and make his name
throughout the mortal world."

So Athena vowed
and under her feet she fastened the supple sandals,
ever-glowing gold, that wing her over the waves
115 and boundless earth with the rush of gusting winds.
She seized the rugged spear tipped with a bronze point—
weighted, heavy, the massive shaft she wields to break the lines
of heroes the mighty Father's daughter storms against.
And down she swept from Olympus' craggy peaks
120 and lit on Ithaca, standing tall at Odysseus' gates,
the threshold of his court. Gripping her bronze spear,

she looked for all the world like a stranger now,
like Mentes, lord of the Taphians.

125 There she found the swagging suitors, just then
amusing themselves with rolling dice before the doors,
lounging on hides of oxen they had killed themselves.
While heralds and brisk attendants bustled round them,
some at the mixing-bowls, mulling wine and water,
others wiping the tables down with sopping sponges,
130 setting them out in place, still other servants
jointed and carved the great sides of meat.

First by far to see her was Prince Telemachus,
sitting among the suitors, heart obsessed with grief.
He could almost see his magnificent father, here . . .
135 in the mind's eye—if only *he* might drop from the clouds
and drive these suitors all in a rout throughout the halls
and regain his pride of place and rule his own domains!
Daydreaming so as he sat among the suitors,
he glimpsed Athena now
and straight to the porch he went, mortified
140 that a guest might still be standing at the doors.
Pausing beside her there, he clasped her right hand
and relieving her at once of her long bronze spear,
met her with winged words: "Greetings, stranger!
Here in our house you'll find a royal welcome.
145 Have supper first, then tell us what you need."

He led the way and Pallas Athena followed.
Once in the high-roofed hall, he took her lance
and fixed it firm in a burnished rack against
150 a sturdy pillar, there where row on row of spears,
embattled Odysseus' spears, stood stacked and waiting.
Then he escorted her to a high, elaborate chair of honor,
over it draped a cloth, and here he placed his guest
with a stool to rest her feet. But for himself
155 he drew up a low reclining chair beside her,
richly painted, clear of the press of suitors,
concerned his guest, offended by their uproar,
might shrink from food in the midst of such a mob.
He hoped, what's more, to ask her about his long-lost father.
A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher
160 and over a silver basin tipped it out
so they might rinse their hands,
then pulled a gleaming table to their side.
A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve them,
appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty.
165 A carver lifted platters of meat toward them,
meats of every sort, and set beside them golden cups
and time and again a page came round and poured them wine.

170 But now the suitors trooped in with all their swagger
and took their seats on low and high-backed chairs.
Heralds poured water over their hands for rinsing,
serving maids brought bread heaped high in trays
and the young men brimmed the mixing-bowls with wine.
175 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand,
and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink
the suitors set their minds on other pleasures,
song and dancing, all that crowns a feast.
A herald placed an ornate lyre in Phemius' hands,
180 the bard who always performed among them there;
they forced the man to sing.

A rippling prelude—
and no sooner had he struck up his rousing song
than Telemachus, head close to Athena's sparkling eyes,
spoke low to his guest so no one else could hear:
"Dear stranger, would you be shocked by what I say?
185 Look at them over there. Not a care in the world,
just lyres and tunes! It's easy for them, all right,
they feed on another's goods and go scot-free—
a man whose white bones lie strewn in the rain somewhere,
rotting away on land or rolling down the ocean's salty swells.
190 But that man—if they caught sight of him home in Ithaca,
by god, they'd all pray to be faster on their feet
than richer in bars of gold and heavy robes.
But now, no use, he's died a wretched death.
No comfort's left for us . . . not even if
195 someone, somewhere, says he's coming home.
The day of his return will never dawn.

Enough.
Tell me about yourself now, clearly, point by point.
Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
What sort of vessel brought you? Why did the sailors
200 land you here in Ithaca? Who did they say they are?
I hardly think you came this way on foot!
And tell me this for a fact—I need to know—
is this your first time here? Or are you a friend of father's,
a guest from the old days? Once, crowds of other men
205 would come to our house on visits—visitor that he was,
when he walked among the living."

Her eyes glinting,
goddess Athena answered, "My whole story, of course,
I'll tell it point by point. Wise old Anchialus
was my father. My own name is Mentes,
210 lord of the Taphian men who love their oars.
And here I've come, just now, with ship and crew,
sailing the wine-dark sea to foreign ports of call,
to Temese, out for bronze—our cargo gleaming iron.

Our ship lies moored off farmlands far from town,
 riding in Rithron Cove, beneath Mount Nion's woods.
 As for the ties between your father and myself,
 we've been friends forever, I'm proud to say,
 and he would bear me out
 if you went and questioned old lord Laertes.⁶
 He, I gather, no longer ventures into town
 but lives a life of hardship, all to himself,
 off on his farmstead with an aged serving-woman
 who tends him well, who gives him food and drink
 when weariness has taken hold of his withered limbs
 from hauling himself along his vineyard's steep slopes.
 And now I've come—and why? I heard that he was back . . .
 your father, that is. But no, the gods thwart his passage.
 Yet I tell you great Odysseus is not dead. He's still alive,
 somewhere in this wide world, held captive, out at sea
 on a wave-washed island, and hard men, savages,
 somehow hold him back against his will.

Wait,

I'll make you a prophecy, one the immortal gods
 have planted in my mind—it will come true, I think,
 though I am hardly a seer or know the flights of birds.
 He won't be gone long from the native land he loves,
 not even if iron shackles bind your father down.
 He's plotting a way to journey home at last;
 he's never at a loss.

But come, please,

tell me about yourself now, point by point.
 You're truly Odysseus' son? You've sprung up so!
 Uncanny resemblance . . . the head, and the fine eyes—
 I see him now. How often we used to meet in the old days
 before he embarked for Troy, where other Argive captains,
 all the best men, sailed in the long curved ships.
 From then to this very day
 I've not set eyes on Odysseus or he on me."

And young Telemachus cautiously replied,
 "I'll try, my friend, to give you a frank answer.
 Mother has always told me I'm his son, it's true,
 but I am not so certain. Who, on his own,
 has ever really known who gave him life?
 Would to god I'd been the son of a happy man
 whom old age overtook in the midst of his possessions!
 Now, think of the most unlucky mortal ever born—
 since you ask me, yes, they say I am his son."

6. Odysseus's father.

"Still," the clear-eyed goddess reassured him,
 "trust me, the gods have not marked out your house
 for such an unsung future,
 not if Penelope has borne a son like you.
 But tell me about all this and spare me nothing.
 What's this banqueting, this crowd carousing here?
 And what part do you play yourself? Some wedding-feast,
 some festival? Hardly a potluck supper, I would say.
 How obscenely they lounge and swagger here, look,
 gorging in your house. Why, any man of sense
 who chanced among them would be outraged,
 seeing such behavior."

Ready Telemachus

took her up at once: "Well, my friend,
 seeing you want to probe and press the question,
 once this house was rich, no doubt, beyond reproach
 when the man you mentioned still lived here, at home.
 Now the gods have reversed our fortunes with a vengeance—
 wiped that man from the earth like no one else before.

I would never have grieved so much about his death
 if he'd gone down with comrades off in Troy
 or died in the arms of loved ones,
 once he had wound down the long coil of war.
 Then all united Achaea would have raised his tomb
 and he'd have won his son great fame for years to come.
 But now the whirlwinds have ripped him away, no fame for him!
 He's lost and gone now—out of sight, out of mind—and I . . .

he's left me tears and grief. Nor do I rack my heart
 and grieve for him alone. No longer. Now the gods
 have invented other miseries to plague me.

Listen.

All the nobles who rule the islands round about,
 Dulichion, and Same, and wooded Zacynthus too,
 and all who lord it in rocky Ithaca as well—
 down to the last man they court my mother,
 they lay waste my house! And mother . . .
 she neither rejects a marriage she despises
 nor can she bear to bring the courting to an end—
 while they continue to bleed my household white.
 Soon—you wait—they'll grind me down as well."

"Shameful!"—

brimming with indignation, Pallas Athena broke out.

"Oh how much you need Odysseus, gone so long—
 how *he'd* lay hands on all these brazen suitors!
 If only he would appear, now,
 at his house's outer gates and take his stand,
 armed with his helmet, shield and pair of spears,
 as strong as the man I glimpsed that first time

in our own house, drinking wine and reveling there . . .
 just come in from Ephyra, visiting Ilus, Mermerus' son.
 Odysseus sailed that way, you see, in his swift trim ship,
 hunting deadly poison to smear on his arrows' bronze heads.
 Ilus refused—he feared the wrath of the everlasting gods—but
 but father, so fond of him, gave him all he wanted.
 If only *that* Odysseus sported with these suitors,
 a blood wedding, a quick death would take the lot!
 True, but all lies in the lap of the great gods,
 whether or not he'll come and pay them back,
 here, in his own house.

But you, I urge you,
 think how to drive these suitors from your halls.
 Come now, listen closely. Take my words to heart.
 At daybreak summon the island's lords to full assembly,
 give your orders to all and call the gods to witness:
 tell the suitors to scatter, each to his own place.
 As for your mother, if the spirit moves her to marry,
 let her go back to her father's house, a man of power.
 Her kin will arrange the wedding, provide the gifts,
 the array that goes with a daughter dearly loved.

For you,
 I have some good advice, if only you will accept it.
 Fit out a ship with twenty oars, the best in sight,
 sail in quest of news of your long-lost father.
 Someone may tell you something
 or you may catch a rumor straight from Zeus,
 rumor that carries news to men like nothing else.
 First go down to Pylos, question old King Nestor,
 then cross over to Sparta, to red-haired Menelaus,
 of all the bronze-armored Achaeans the last man back.
 Now, if you hear your father's alive and heading home,
 hard-pressed as you are, brave out one more year.
 If you hear he's dead, no longer among the living,
 then back you come to the native land you love,
 raise his grave-mound, build his honors high
 with the full funeral rites that he deserves—
 and give your mother to another husband.

Then,
 once you've sealed those matters, seen them through,
 think hard, reach down deep in your heart and soul
 for a way to kill these suitors in your house,
 by stealth or in open combat.

You must not cling to your boyhood any longer—
 it's time you were a man. Haven't you heard
 what glory Prince Orestes won throughout the world
 when he killed that cunning, murderous Aegisthus,
 who'd killed his famous father?

And you, my friend—

how tall and handsome I see you now—be brave, you too,
 so men to come will sing your praises down the years.
 But now I must go back to my swift trim ship
 and all my shipmates, chafing there, I'm sure,
 waiting for my return. It all rests with you.
 Take my words to heart.”

“Oh stranger,”
 heedful Telemachus replied, “indeed I will.
 You've counseled me with so much kindness now,
 like a father to a son. I won't forget a word.
 But come, stay longer, keen as you are to sail,
 so you can bathe and rest and lift your spirits,
 then go back to your ship, delighted with a gift,
 a prize of honor, something rare and fine
 as a keepsake from myself. The kind of gift
 a host will give a stranger, friend to friend.”

Her eyes glinting, Pallas declined in haste:
 “Not now. Don't hold me here. I long to be on my way.
 As for the gift—whatever you'd give in kindness—
 save it for my return so I can take it home.
 Choose something rare and fine, and a good reward
 that gift is going to bring you.”

With that promise,
 off and away Athena the bright-eyed goddess flew
 like a bird in soaring flight
 but left his spirit filled with nerve and courage,
 charged with his father's memory more than ever now.
 He felt his senses quicken, overwhelmed with wonder—
 this was a god, he knew it well and made at once
 for the suitors, a man like a god himself.

Amidst them still
 the famous bard sang on, and they sat in silence, listening
 as he performed The Achaeans' Journey Home from Troy:
 all the blows Athena doomed them to endure.

And now,
 from high above in her room and deep in thought,
 she caught his inspired strains . . .

Icarius' daughter Penelope, wary and reserved,
 and down the steep stair from her chamber she descended,
 not alone: two of her women followed close behind.

That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors,
 drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,
 paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof,
 with one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side.
 Suddenly, dissolving in tears and bursting through
 the bard's inspired voice, she cried out, “Phemius!
 So many other songs you know to hold us spellbound,
 works of the gods and men that singers celebrate.

390 Sing one of those as you sit beside them here
and they drink their wine in silence.

But break off this song—the
unendurable song that always rends the heart inside me . . .
the unforgettable grief, it wounds me most of all!
How I long for my husband—alive in memory, always,
that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas
right to the depths of Argos!”

“Why, mother,”
poised Telemachus put in sharply, “why deny
our devoted bard the chance to entertain us
any way the spirit stirs him on?
Bards are not to blame—

Zeus is to blame. He deals to each and every
laborer on this earth whatever doom he pleases.
Why fault the bard if he sings the Argives’ harsh fate?
It’s always the latest song, the one that echoes last
in the listeners’ ears, that people praise the most.
405 Courage, mother. Harden your heart, and listen.
Odysseus was scarcely the only one, you know,
whose journey home was blotted out at Troy.
Others, so many others, died there too.

So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for giving orders,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house.”

Astonished,
she withdrew to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense in what her son had said.
Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women,
she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

But the suitors broke into uproar through the shadowed halls,
all of them lifting prayers to lie beside her, share her bed,
until discreet Telemachus took command: “You suitors
who plague my mother, you, you insolent, overweening . . .
for this evening let us dine and take our pleasure,
no more shouting now. What a fine thing it is
to listen to such a bard as we have here—
the man sings like a god.

But at first light
we all march forth to assembly, take our seats
so I can give my orders and say to you straight out:
You must leave my palace! See to your feasting elsewhere,
devour your own possessions, house to house by turns.
But if you decide the fare is better, richer here,
destroying one man’s goods and going scot-free,

all right then, carve away!

But I’ll cry out to the everlasting gods in hopes
that Zeus will pay you back with a vengeance—all of you
destroyed in my house while I go scot-free myself!”

So Telemachus declared. And they all bit their lips,
amazed the prince could speak with so much daring.

Eupithes’ son Antinous broke their silence:

“Well, Telemachus, only the gods could teach you
to sound so high and mighty! Such brave talk.

I pray that Zeus will never make *you* king of Ithaca,
though your father’s crown is no doubt yours by birth.”

But cool-headed Telemachus countered firmly:

“Antinous, even though my words may offend you,
I’d be happy to take the crown if Zeus presents it.
You think that nothing worse could befall a man?

It’s really not so bad to be a king. All at once
your palace grows in wealth, your honors grow as well.
But there are hosts of other Achaean princes, look—
young and old, crowds of them on our island here—
and any one of the lot might hold the throne,
now great Odysseus is dead . . .

But I’ll be lord of my own house and servants,
all that King Odysseus won for me by force.”

And now Eurymachus, Polybus’ son, stepped in:
“Surely this must lie in the gods’ lap, Telemachus—
which Achaean will lord it over seagirt Ithaca.

Do hold on to your own possessions, rule your house.
God forbid that anyone tear your holdings from your hands
while men still live in Ithaca.

But about your guest,
dear boy, I have some questions. Where does he come from?
Where’s his country, his birth, his father’s old estates?

Did he bring some news of your father, his return?
Or did he come on business of his own?

How he leapt to his feet and off he went!
No waiting around for proper introductions.
And no mean man, not by the looks of him, I’d say.”

“Eurymachus,” Telemachus answered shrewdly,
“clearly my father’s journey home is lost forever.
I no longer trust in rumors—rumors from the blue—
nor bother with any prophecy, when mother calls
some wizard into the house to ask him questions.
As for the stranger, though,

the man’s an old family friend, from Taphos,
wise Anchialus’ son. He says his name is Mentes,
lord of the Taphian men who love their oars.”

So he said

but deep in his mind he knew the immortal goddess.
Now the suitors turned to dance and song,
to the lovely beat and sway,

waiting for dusk to come upon them there . . .
and the dark night came upon them, lost in pleasure.
Finally, to bed. Each to his own house.

Telemachus,
off to his bedroom built in the fine courtyard—
a commanding, lofty room set well apart—
retired too, his spirit swarming with misgivings.
His devoted nurse attended him, bearing a glowing torch,
Eurycleia the daughter of Ops, Pisenor's son.

Laertes had paid a price for the woman years ago,
still in the bloom of youth. He traded twenty oxen,
honored her on a par with his own loyal wife at home
but fearing the queen's anger, never shared her bed.
She was his grandson's escort now and bore a torch,
for she was the one of all the maids who loved
the prince the most—she'd nursed him as a baby.

He spread the doors of his snug, well-made room,
sat down on the bed and pulled his soft shirt off,
tossed it into the old woman's conscientious hands,
and after folding it neatly, patting it smooth,
she hung it up on a peg beside his corded bed,
then padded from the bedroom,

drawing the door shut with the silver hook,
sliding the doorbolt home with its rawhide strap.
There all night long, wrapped in a sheep's warm fleece,
he weighed in his mind the course Athena charted.

BOOK 2. TELEMACHUS SETS SAIL.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
the true son of Odysseus sprang from bed and dressed,
over his shoulder he slung his well-honed sword,
fastened rawhide sandals under his smooth feet
and stepped from his bedroom, handsome as a god.
At once he ordered heralds to cry out loud and clear
and summon the flowing-haired Achaeans to full assembly.
Their cries rang out. The people filed in quickly.
When they'd grouped, crowding the meeting grounds,

Telemachus strode in too, a bronze spear in his grip
and not alone: two sleek hounds went trotting at his heels.
And Athena lavished a marvelous splendor on the prince
so the people all gazed in wonder as he came forward,
the elders making way as he took his father's seat.

The first to speak was an old lord, Aegyptius,
stooped with age, who knew the world by heart.

For one dear son had sailed with King Odysseus,
bound in the hollow ships to the stallion-land of Troy—
the spearman Antiphos—but the brutal Cyclops killed him,
trapped in his vaulted cave, the last man the monster ate.
Three other sons he had: one who mixed with the suitors,
Eurynomus, and two kept working their father's farms.
Still, he never forgot the soldier, desolate in his grief.
In tears for the son he lost, he rose and said among them,

"Hear me, men of Ithaca. Hear what I have to say.
Not once have we held assembly, met in session
since King Odysseus sailed away in the hollow ships.
Who has summoned us now—one of the young men,
one of the old-timers? What crisis spurs him on?
Some news he's heard of an army on the march,
word he's caught firsthand so he can warn us now?
Or some other public matter he'll disclose and argue?
He's a brave man, I'd say. God be with him, too!
May Zeus speed him on to a happy end,
whatever his heart desires!"

Winning words

with a lucky ring. Odysseus' son rejoiced;
the boy could sit no longer—fired up to speak,
he took his stand among the gathered men.
The herald Pisenor, skilled in custom's ways,
put the staff in his hand, and then the prince,
addressing old Aegyptius first, led off with, "Sir,
that man is not far off—you'll soon see for yourself—
I was the one who called us all together.
Something wounds me deeply . . .

not news I've heard of an army on the march,
word I've caught firsthand so I can warn you now,
or some other public matter I'll disclose and argue.
No, the crisis is my own. Trouble has struck my house—
a double blow. First, I have lost my noble father
who ruled among you years ago, each of you here,
and kindly as a father to his children.

But now this,
a worse disaster that soon will grind my house down,
ruin it all, and all my worldly goods in the bargain.
Suitors plague my mother—against her will—
sons of the very men who are your finest here!

They'd sooner die than approach her father's house
so Icarus himself might see to his daughter's bridal,
hand her to whom he likes, whoever meets his fancy.
Not they—they infest our palace day and night,
they butcher our cattle, our sheep, our fat goats,
feasting themselves sick, swilling our glowing wine
as if there's no tomorrow—all of it, squandered.

65 Now we have no man like Odysseus in command
to drive this curse from the house. We ourselves?
We're hardly the ones to fight them off. All we'd do
is parade our wretched weakness. A boy inept at battle.
Oh I'd swing to attack if I had the power in me.
By god, it's intolerable, what they do—disgrace,
my house a shambles!

70 You should be ashamed yourselves,
mortified in the face of neighbors living round about!
Fear the gods' wrath—before they wheel in outrage
and make these crimes recoil on your heads.

75 I beg you by Olympian Zeus, by Themis' too,
who sets assemblies free and calls us into session—
stop, my friends! Leave me alone to pine away in anguish . . .
Unless, of course, you think my noble father Odysseus
did the Achaean army damage, deliberate harm,
and to pay me back you'd do me harm, deliberately
setting these parasites against me. Better for me
if *you* were devouring all my treasure, all my cattle—
if you were the ones, we'd make amends in no time.
We'd approach you for reparations round the town,
demanding our goods till you'd returned the lot.
But now, look, you load my heart with grief—
there's nothing I can do!"

80 Filled with anger,
down on the ground he dashed the speaker's scepter—
bursting into tears. Pity seized the assembly.
All just sat there, silent . . .

90 No one had the heart to reply with harshness.
Only Antinous, who found it in himself to say,
"So high and mighty, Telemachus—such unbridled rage!
Well now, fling your accusations at *us*?
Think to pin the blame on *us*? You think again.
It's not the suitors here who deserve the blame,
it's your own dear mother, the matchless queen of cunning.
Look here. For three years now, getting on to four,
she's played it fast and loose with all our hearts,
building each man's hopes—
dangling promises, dropping hints to each—
but all the while with something else in mind.
100 This was her latest masterpiece of guile:
she set up a great loom in the royal halls
and she began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
the yarns endless, and she would lead us on: 'Young men,
my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more,
105 go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until
I can finish off this web . . .

1. Goddess of justice, right, and law.

110 so my weaving won't all fray and come to nothing.
This is a shroud for old lord Laertes, for that day
when the deadly fate that lays us out at last will take him down.
I dread the shame my countrywomen would heap upon me,
yes, if a man of such wealth should lie in state
without a shroud for cover.'

Her very words,
and despite our pride and passion we believed her.
115 So by day she'd weave at her great and growing web—
by night, by the light of torches set beside her,
she would unravel all she'd done. Three whole years
she deceived us blind, seduced us with this scheme . . .
Then, when the wheeling seasons brought the fourth year on,
one of her women, in on the queen's secret, told the truth
and we caught her in the act—unweaving her gorgeous web.
120 So she finished it off. Against her will. We forced her.

Now Telemachus, here is how the suitors answer *you*—
you burn it in your mind, you and all our people:
125 send your mother back! Direct her to marry
whomever her father picks, whoever pleases her.
So long as she persists in tormenting us,
quick to exploit the gifts Athena gave her—
a skilled hand for elegant work, a fine mind
130 and subtle wiles too—we've never heard the like,
not even in old stories sung of all Achaea's
well-coifed queens who graced the years gone by:
Mycenae crowned with garlands, Tyro and Alcmena . . .
Not one could equal Penelope for intrigue
135 but in this case she intrigued beyond all limits.
So, we will devour your worldly goods and wealth
as long as *she* holds out, holds to that course
the gods have charted deep inside her heart.
Great renown she wins for herself, no doubt,
140 great loss for you in treasure. We'll not go back
to our old estates or leave for other parts,
not till she weds the Argive man she fancies."

But with calm good sense Telemachus replied:
"Antinous, how can I drive my mother from our house
145 against her will, the one who bore me, reared me too?
My father is worlds away, dead or alive, who knows?
Imagine the high price I'd have to pay Icarus
if all on my own I send my mother home.
Oh what I would suffer from her father—
150 and some dark god would hurt me even more
when mother, leaving her own house behind,
calls down her withering Furies² on my head,

2. Earth goddesses who avenge crimes against family members.

and our people's cries of shame would hound my heels.
 I will never issue that ultimatum to my mother.
 And you, if you have any shame in your own hearts,
 you must leave my palace! See to your feasting elsewhere,
 devour your own possessions, house to house by turns.
 But if you decide the fare is better, richer here,
 destroying one man's goods and going scot-free,
 all right then, carve away!
 But I'll cry out to the everlasting gods in hopes
 that Zeus will pay you back with a vengeance—all of you
 destroyed in my house while I go scot-free myself!"

And to seal his prayer, farseeing Zeus sent down a sign.
 He launched two eagles soaring high from a mountain ridge
 and down they glided, borne on the wind's draft a moment,
 wing to wingtip, pinions straining taut till just
 above the assembly's throbbing hum they whirled,
 suddenly, wings thrashing, wild onslaught of wings
 and banking down at the crowd's heads—a glaring, fatal sign—
 talons slashing each other, tearing cheeks and throats
 they swooped away on the right through homes and city.
 All were dumbstruck, watching the eagles trail from sight,
 people brooding, deeply, what might come to pass . . .
 Until the old warrior Halitherses,
 Mastor's son, broke the silence for them—
 the one who outperformed all men of his time
 at reading bird-signs, sounding out the omens,
 rose and spoke, distraught for each man there:
 "Hear me, men of Ithaca! Hear what I have to say,
 though my revelations strike the suitors first of all—
 a great disaster is rolling like a breaker toward their heads.
 Clearly Odysseus won't be far from loved ones any longer—
 now, right now, he's somewhere near, I tell you,
 breeding bloody death for all these suitors here,
 pains aplenty too for the rest of us who live
 in Ithaca's sunlit air.

Long before that,
 we must put heads together, find some way
 to stop these men, or let them stop themselves.
 Better for them that way, by far. I myself
 am no stranger to prophecy—I can see it now!
 Odysseus . . . all is working out for him, I say,
 just as I said it would that day the Argives sailed
 for Troy and the mastermind of battle boarded with them.
 I said then: after many blows, and all his shipmates lost,
 after twenty years had wheeled by, he would come home,
 unrecognized by all . . .
 and now, look, it all comes to pass!"

"Stop, old man!"

Eurymachus, Polybus' son, rose up to take him on.
 "Go home and babble your omens to your children—
 save *them* from some catastrophe coming soon.
 I'm a better hand than you at reading portents.
 Flocks of birds go fluttering under the sun's rays,
 not all are fraught with meaning. Odysseus?
 He's dead now, far from home—
 would to god that you'd died with him too.
 We'd have escaped your droning prophecies then
 and the way you've loosed the dogs of this boy's anger—
 your eyes peeled for a house-gift he might give you.
 Here's *my* prophecy, bound to come to pass.
 If you, you old codger, wise as the ages,
 talk him round, incite the boy to riot,
 he'll be the first to suffer, let me tell you.
 And you, old man, we'll clap some fine on you
 you'll weep to pay, a fine to crush your spirit!
 Telemachus?"

Here in front of you all, here's my advice for him.
 Let him urge his mother back to her father's house—
 her kin will arrange the wedding, provide the gifts,
 the array that goes with a daughter dearly loved.
 Not till then, I'd say, will the island princes quit
 their taxing courtship. Who's there to fear? I ask you.
 Surely not Telemachus, with all his tiresome threats.
 Nor do we balk, old man, at the prophecies you mouth—
 they'll come to grief, they'll make us hate you more.
 The prince's wealth will be devoured as always,
 mercilessly—no reparations, ever . . . not
 while the queen drags out our hopes to wed her,
 waiting, day after day, all of us striving hard
 to win one matchless beauty. Never courting others,
 bevvies of brides who'd suit each noble here."

Telemachus answered, firm in his resolve:
 "Eurymachus—the rest of you fine, brazen suitors—
 I have done with appeals to you about these matters.
 I'll say no more. The gods know how things stand
 and so do all the Achaeans. And now all I ask
 is a good swift ship and a crew of twenty men
 to speed me through my passage out and back.
 I'm sailing off to Sparta, sandy Pylos too,
 for news of my long-lost father's journey home.
 Someone may tell me something
 or I may catch a rumor straight from Zeus,
 rumor that carries news to men like nothing else.
 Now, if I hear my father's alive and heading home,
 hard-pressed as I am, I'll brave out one more year.
 If I hear he's dead, no longer among the living,

then back I'll come to the native land I love,
raise his grave-mound, build his honors high
with the full funeral rites that he deserves—
and give my mother to another husband.”

250 A declaration,
and the prince sat down as Mentor took the floor,
Odysseus' friend-in-arms to whom the king,
sailing off to Troy, committed his household,
ordering one and all to obey the old man
and he would keep things steadfast and secure.

255 “Hear me, men of Ithaca. Hear what I have to say.
Never let any sceptered king be kind and gentle now,
not with all his heart, or set his mind on justice—
no, let him be cruel and always practice outrage.
260 Think: not one of the people whom he ruled
remembers Odysseus now, that godlike man,
and kindly as a father to his children!

I don't grudge these arrogant suitors for a moment,
weaving their violent work with all their wicked hearts—
265 they lay their lives on the line when they consume
Odysseus' worldly goods, blind in their violence,
telling themselves that he'll come home no more.
But all the rest of you, how you rouse my fury!
Sitting here in silence . . .

270 never a word put forth to curb these suitors,
paltry few as they are and you so many.”

“Mentor!”
Euenor's son Leocritus rounded on him, shouting,
“Rabble-rousing fool, now what's this talk?
275 Goading them on to try and hold us back!

It's uphill work, I warn you,
fighting a force like ours—for just a meal.
Even if Odysseus of Ithaca did arrive in person,
280 to find us well-bred suitors feasting in his halls,
and the man were hell-bent on routing us from the palace—
little joy would his wife derive from his return,
for all her yearning. Here on the spot he'd meet
a humiliating end if he fought against such odds.
You're talking nonsense—idiocy.

No more. Come,
dissolve the assembly. Each man return to his holdings.
285 Mentor and Halitherses can speed our young prince on,
his father's doddering friends since time began.
He'll sit tight a good long while, I trust,
scrabbling for news right here in Ithaca—
he'll never make that trip.”

290 This broke up the assembly, keen to leave.
The people scattered quickly, each to his own house,

while the suitors strolled back to King Odysseus' palace.

295 Telemachus, walking the beach now, far from others,
washed his hands in the foaming surf and prayed to Pallas:³
“Dear god, hear me! Yesterday you came to my house,
you told me to ship out on the misty sea and learn
if father, gone so long, is ever coming home . . .
Look how my countrymen—the suitors most of all,
the pernicious bullies—foil each move I make.”

300 Athena came to his prayer from close at hand,
for all the world with Mentor's build and voice,
and she urged him on with winging words: “Telemachus,
you'll lack neither courage nor sense from this day on,
not if your father's spirit courses through your veins—
305 now there was a man, I'd say, in words and action both!
So how can your journey end in shipwreck or defeat?

Only if you were not his stock, Penelope's too,
then I'd fear your hopes might come to grief.
Few sons are the equals of their fathers;
310 most fall short, all too few surpass them.

But you, brave and adept from this day on—
Odysseus' cunning has hardly given out in you—
there's every hope that you will reach your goal.
Put them out of your mind, these suitors' schemes and plots.
315 They're madmen. Not a shred of sense or decency in the crowd.
Nor can they glimpse the death and black doom hovering
just at their heads to crush them all in one short day.

But you, the journey that stirs you now is not far off,
not with the likes of me, your father's friend and yours,
to rig you a swift ship and be your shipmate too.
320 Now home you go and mix with the suitors there.

But get your rations ready,
pack them all in vessels, the wine in jars,
and barley-meal—the marrow of men's bones—
325 in durable skins, while I make rounds in town
and quickly enlist your crew of volunteers.
Lots of ships in seagirt Ithaca, old and new.
I'll look them over, choose the best in sight,
we'll fit her out and launch her into the sea at once!”

330 And so Athena, daughter of Zeus, assured him.
No lingering now—he heard the goddess' voice—
but back he went to his house with aching heart
and there at the palace found the brazen suitors
skinning goats in the courtyard, singeing pigs for roasting.
335 Antinous, smiling warmly, sauntered up to the prince,
grasped his hand and coaxed him, savoring his name:

3. Athena, virgin and masculine goddess and protector of Odysseus.

"Telemachus, my high and mighty, fierce young friend, no more nursing those violent words and actions now. Come, eat and drink with us, just like the old days. Whatever you want our people will provide. A ship and a picked crew to speed you to holy Pylos, out for the news about your noble father."

340

But self-possessed Telemachus drew the line:

"Antinous, now how could I dine with you in peace and take my pleasure? You ruffians carousing here! Isn't it quite enough that you, my mother's suitors, have ravaged it all, my very best, these many years, while I was still a boy? But now that I'm full-grown and can hear the truth from others, absorb it too—now, yes, that the anger seethes inside me . . .

350

I'll stop at nothing to hurl destruction at your heads, whether I go to Pylos or sit tight here at home. But the trip I speak of will not end in failure.

Go I will, as a passenger, nothing more,

since I don't seem to command my own crew.

That, I'm sure, is the way that suits you best."

355

With this

he nonchalantly drew his hand from Antinous' hand while the suitors, busy feasting in the halls, mocked and taunted him, flinging insults now.

"God help us," one young buck kept shouting,

"he wants to slaughter us all!

He's off to sandy Pylos to hire cutthroats,

even Sparta perhaps, so hot to have our heads.

Why, he'd rove as far as Ephyra's dark rich soil

and run back home with lethal poison, slip it

into the bowl and wipe us out with drink!"

365

"Who knows?" another young blade up and ventured.

"Off in that hollow ship of his, he just might drown,

far from his friends, a drifter like his father.

What a bore! He'd double our work for us,

splitting up his goods, parceling out his house

to his mother and the man who weds the queen."

370

So they scoffed

but Telemachus headed down to his father's storeroom,

broad and vaulted, piled high with gold and bronze,

chests packed with clothing, vats of redolent oil.

And there, standing in close ranks against the wall,

were jars of seasoned, mellow wine, holding the drink

unmixed inside them, fit for a god, waiting the day

Odysseus, worn by hardship, might come home again.

Doors, snugly fitted, doubly hung, were bolted shut

and a housekeeper was in charge by night and day—

her care, her vigilance, guarding all those treasures—

380

Eurycleia the daughter of Ops, Pisenor's son.

Telemachus called her into the storeroom: "Come, nurse,

draw me off some wine in smaller traveling jars,

mellow, the finest vintage you've been keeping,

next to what you reserve for our unlucky king—

in case Odysseus might drop in from the blue

and cheat the deadly spirits, make it home.

Fill me an even dozen, seal them tightly.

Pour me barley in well-stitched leather bags,

twenty measures of meal, your stone-ground best.

But no one else must know. These rations now,

put them all together. I'll pick them up myself,

toward evening, just about the time that mother

climbs to her room and thinks of turning in.

I'm sailing off to Sparta, sandy Pylos too,

for news of my dear father's journey home.

Perhaps I'll catch some rumor."

A wail of grief—

and his fond old nurse burst out in protest, sobbing:

"Why, dear child, what craziness got into your head?

Why bent on rambling over the face of the earth?—

a darling only son! Your father's worlds away,

god's own Odysseus, dead in some strange land.

And these brutes here, just wait, the moment you're gone

they'll all be scheming against you. Kill you by guile,

they will, and carve your birthright up in pieces.

No, sit tight here, guard your own things here.

Don't go roving over the barren salt sea—

no need to suffer so!"

410

"Courage, old woman,"

thoughtful Telemachus tried to reassure her,

"there's a god who made this plan.

But swear you won't say anything to my mother.

Not till ten or a dozen days have passed

or she misses me herself and learns I'm gone.

She mustn't mar her lovely face with tears."

415

The old one swore a solemn oath to the gods

and vowing she would never breathe a word,

quickly drew off wine in two-eared jars

and poured barley in well-stitched leather bags.

Telemachus returned to the hall and joined the suitors.

420

Then bright-eyed Pallas thought of one more step.

Disguised as the prince, the goddess roamed through town,

pausing beside each likely crewman, giving orders:

"Gather beside our ship at nightfall—be there."

She asked Noëmon, Phronius' generous son,

to lend her a swift ship. He gladly volunteered.

425

The sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark.
 Now the goddess hauled the swift ship down to the water,
 stowed in her all the tackle well-rigged vessels carry,
 moored her well away at the harbor's very mouth
 and once the crew had gathered, rallying round,
 she heartened every man.

Then bright-eyed Pallas thought of one last thing.
 Back she went to King Odysseus' halls and there
 she showered sweet oblivion over the suitors,
 dazing them as they drank, knocking cups from hands.
 No more loitering now, their eyes weighed down with sleep,
 they rose and groped through town to find their beds.
 But calling the prince outside his timbered halls,
 taking the build and voice of Mentor once again,
 flashing-eyed Athena urged him on: "Telemachus,
 your comrades-at-arms are ready at the oars,
 waiting for your command to launch. So come,
 on with our voyage now, we're wasting time."

And Pallas Athena sped away in the lead
 as he followed in her footsteps, man and goddess.
 Once they reached the ship at the water's edge
 they found their long-haired shipmates on the beach.
 The prince, inspired, gave his first commands:
 "Come, friends, get the rations aboard!
 They're piled in the palace now.
 My mother knows nothing of this. No servants either.
 Only one has heard our plan."

He led them back
 and the men fell in and fetched down all the stores
 and stowed them briskly, deep in the well-ribbed holds
 as Odysseus' son directed. Telemachus climbed aboard.
 Athena led the way, assuming the pilot's seat
 reserved astern, and he sat close beside her.
 Cables cast off, the crew swung to the oarlocks.
 Bright-eyed Athena sent them a stiff following wind
 rippling out of the west, ruffling over the wine-dark sea
 as Telemachus shouted out commands to all his shipmates:
 "All lay hands to tackle!" They sprang to orders,
 hoisting the pinewood mast, they stepped it firm
 in its block amidships, lashed it fast with stays
 and with braided rawhide halyards hauled the white sail high.
 Suddenly wind hit full and the canvas bellied out
 and a dark blue wave, foaming up at the bow,
 sang out loud and strong as the ship made way,
 skimming the whitecaps, cutting toward her goal.
 All running gear secure in the swift black craft,
 they set up bowls and brimmed them high with wine
 and poured libations out to the everlasting gods

who never die—to Athena first of all,
 the daughter of Zeus with flashing sea-gray eyes—
 and the ship went plunging all night long and through the dawn.

BOOK 3. KING NESTOR REMEMBERS

As the sun sprang up, leaving the brilliant waters in its wake,
 climbing the bronze sky to shower light on immortal gods
 and mortal men across the plowlands ripe with grain—
 the ship pulled into Pylos, Neleus' storied citadel,
 where the people lined the beaches,
 sacrificing sleek black bulls to Poseidon,
 god of the sea-blue mane who shakes the earth.
 They sat in nine divisions, each five hundred strong,
 each division offering up nine bulls, and while the people
 tasted the innards, burned the thighbones for the god,
 the craft and crew came heading straight to shore.
 Striking sail, furling it in the balanced ship,
 they moored her well and men swung down on land.
 Telemachus climbed out last, with Athena far in front
 and the bright-eyed goddess urged the prince along:
 "Telemachus, no more shyness, this is not the time!
 We sailed the seas for this, for news of your father—
 where does he lie buried? what fate did he meet?
 So go right up to Nestor, breaker of horses.
 We'll make him yield the secrets of his heart.
 Press him yourself to tell the whole truth;
 he'll never lie—the man is far too wise."

The prince replied, wise in his own way too,
 "How can I greet him, Mentor, even approach the king?
 I'm hardly adept at subtle conversation.
 Someone my age *might* feel shy, what's more,
 interrogating an older man."

"Telemachus,"
 the bright-eyed goddess Athena reassured him,
 "some of the words you'll find within yourself,
 the rest some power will inspire you to say.
 You least of all—I know—
 were born and reared without the gods' good will."

And Pallas Athena sped away in the lead
 as he followed in her footsteps—man and goddess
 gained the place where the Pylians met and massed.
 There sat Nestor among his sons as friends around them
 decked the banquet, roasted meats and skewered strips for broiling.
 As soon as they saw the strangers, all came crowding down,
 waving them on in welcome, urging them to sit.
 Nestor's son Pisistratus, first to reach them,

grasped their hands and sat them down at the feast
 on fleecy throws spread out along the sandbanks,
 flanking his brother Thrasymedes and his father.
 He gave them a share of innards, poured some wine
 in a golden cup and, lifting it warmly toward Athena,
 daughter of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder,
 greeted the goddess now with an invitation:
 "Say a prayer to lord Poseidon, stranger,
 his is the feast you've found on your arrival.
 But once you've made your libation and your prayer—
 all according to ancient custom—hand this cup
 of hearty, seasoned wine to your comrade here
 so he can pour forth too. He too, I think,
 should pray to the deathless ones himself.
 All men need the gods . . .
 but the man is younger, just about my age.
 That's why I give the gold cup first to you."

With that

Pisistratus placed in her hand the cup of mellow wine
 and Pallas rejoiced at the prince's sense of tact
 in giving the golden winecup first to her.
 At once she prayed intensely to Poseidon:
 "Hear me, Sea-lord, you who embrace the earth—
 don't deny our wishes, bring our prayers to pass!
 First, then, to Nestor and all his sons grant glory.
 Then to all these Pylians, for their splendid rites
 grant a reward that warms their gracious hearts.
 And last, Poseidon, grant Telemachus and myself
 safe passage home, the mission accomplished
 that sped us here in our rapid black ship."

So she prayed, and brought it all to pass.
 She offered the rich two-handled cup to Telemachus,
 Odysseus' son, who echoed back her prayer word for word.
 They roasted the prime cuts, pulled them off the spits
 and sharing out the portions, fell to the royal feast.
 Once they'd put aside desire for food and drink,
 old Nestor the noble charioteer began, at last:
 "Now's the time, now they've enjoyed their meal,
 to probe our guests and find out who they are.
 Strangers—friends, who are you?"

Where did you sail from, over the running sea-lanes?
 Out on a trading spree or roving the waves like pirates,
 sea-wolves raiding at will, who risk their lives
 to plunder other men?"

Poised Telemachus answered,
 filled with heart, the heart Athena herself inspired,
 to ask for the news about his father, gone so long,
 and make his name throughout the mortal world.

"Nestor, son of Neleus, Achaea's pride and glory—
 where are we from, you ask? I will tell you all.
 We hail from Ithaca, under the heights of Nion.
 Our mission here is personal, nothing public now.
 I am on the trail of my father's widespread fame,
 you see, searching the earth to catch some news
 of great-hearted King Odysseus who, they say,
 fought with you to demolish Troy some years ago.
 About all the rest who fought the Trojans there,
 we know where each one died his wretched death,
 but father . . . even his death—
 the son of Cronus shrouds it all in mystery.
 No one can say for certain where he died,
 whether he went down on land at enemy hands
 or out on the open sea in Amphitrite's breakers.
 That's why I've come to plead before you now,
 if you can tell me about his cruel death:
 perhaps you saw him die with your own eyes
 or heard the wanderer's end from someone else.
 More than all other men, that man was born for pain.
 Don't soften a thing, from pity, respect for me—
 tell me, clearly, all your eyes have witnessed.
 I beg you—if ever my father, lord Odysseus,
 pledged you his word and made it good in action
 once on the fields of Troy where you Achaeans suffered,
 remember his story now, tell *me* the truth."

Nestor the noble charioteer replied at length:

"Ah dear boy, since you call back such memories,
 such living hell we endured in distant Troy—
 we headstrong fighting forces of Achaea—
 so many raids from shipboard down the foggy sea,
 cruising for plunder, wherever Achilles led the way;
 so many battles round King Priam's walls we fought,
 so many gone, our best and bravest fell.
 There Ajax lies, the great man of war.
 There lies Achilles too.
 There Patroclus, skilled as the gods in counsel.
 And there my own dear son, both strong and staunch,
 Antilochus—lightning on his feet and every inch a fighter!
 But so many other things we suffered, past that count—
 what mortal in this wide world could tell it all?
 Not if you sat and probed his memory, five, six years,
 delving for all the pains our brave Achaeans bore there.
 Your patience would fray, you'd soon head for home . . .

Nine years we wove a web of disaster for those Trojans,
 pressing them hard with every tactic known to man,
 and only after we slaved did Zeus award us victory.

And no one there could hope to rival Odysseus,
 not for sheer cunning—
 at every twist of strategy he excelled us all.
 Your father, yes, if you are in fact his son . . .
 I look at you and a sense of wonder takes me.
 Your way with words—it's just like his—I'd swear
 no youngster could ever speak like you, so apt, so telling.
 As long as I and great Odysseus soldiered there,
 why, never once did we speak out at odds,
 neither in open muster nor in royal council:
 forever one in mind, in judgment balanced, shrewd,
 we mapped our armies' plans so things might turn out best.
 But then, once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city,
 Zeus contrived in his heart a fatal homeward run
 for all the Achaeans who were fools, at least,
 dishonest too, so many met a disastrous end,
 thanks to the lethal rage
 of the mighty Father's daughter. Eyes afire,
 Athena set them feuding, Atreus' two sons! . . .
 They summoned all the Achaean ranks to muster,
 rashly, just at sunset—no hour to rally troops—
 and in they straggled, sodden with wine, our heroes.
 The brothers harangued them, told them why they'd met:
 a crisis—Menelaus urging the men to fix their minds
 on the voyage home across the sea's broad back,
 but it brought no joy to Agamemnon, not at all.
 He meant to detain us there and offer victims,
 anything to appease Athena's dreadful wrath—
 poor fool, he never dreamed Athena would not comply.
 The minds of the everlasting gods don't change so quickly.
 So the two of them stood there, wrangling, back and forth
 till the armies sprang up, their armor clashing, ungodly uproar—
 the two plans split the ranks. That night we barely slept,
 seething with hard feelings against our own comrades,
 for Zeus was brooding over us, poised to seal our doom . . .
 At dawn, half of us hauled our vessels down to sea,
 we stowed our plunder, our sashed and lovely women.
 But half the men held back, camped on the beach,
 waiting it out for Agamemnon's next commands
 while our contingent embarked—
 we pushed off and sailed at a fast clip
 as a god smoothed out the huge troubling swells.
 We reached Tenedos quickly, sacrificed to the gods,
 the crews keen for home, but a quick return was not
 in Zeus's plans, not yet: that cruel power
 loosed a cursed feud on us once again.

1. Agamemnon and Menelaus.

Some swung their rolling warships hard about—
 Odysseus sailed them back, the flexible, wily king,
 veering over to Agamemnon now to shore his fortunes up.
 But not I. Massing the ships that came in my flotilla,
 I sped away as the god's mischief kept on brewing,
 dawning on me now. And Tydeus' fighting son
 Diomedes fled too, rousing all his comrades.
 Late in the day the red-haired Menelaus joined us,
 overtook us at Lesbos, debating the long route home:
 whether to head north, over the top of rocky Chios,
 skirting Psyrie, keeping that island off to port
 or run south of Chios, by Mimas' gusty cape.
 We asked the god for a sign. He showed us one,
 he urged us to cut out on the middle passage,
 straight to Euboea now,
 escape a catastrophe, fast as we could sail!
 A shrilling wind came up, stiff, driving us on
 and on we raced, over the sea-lanes rife with fish
 and we made Geraestus Point in the dead of night.
 Many thighs of bulls we offered Poseidon there—
 thank god we'd crossed that endless reach of sea.
 Then on the fourth day out the crews of Diomedes,
 breaker of horses, moored their balanced ships
 at Argos port, but I held course for Pylos, yes,
 and never once did the good strong wind go limp
 from the first day the god unleashed its blast.
 And so, dear boy, I made it home from Troy,
 in total ignorance, knowing nothing of their fates,
 the ones who stayed behind:
 who escaped with their lives and who went down.
 But still, all I've gathered by hearsay, sitting here
 in my own house—that you'll learn, it's only right,
 I'll hide nothing now.
 They say the Myrmidons,
 those savage spearmen led by the shining son
 of lionhearted Achilles, traveled home unharmed.
 Philoctetes the gallant son of Poias, safe as well.
 Idomeneus brought his whole contingent back to Crete,
 all who'd escaped the war—the sea snatched none from him.
 But Atreus' son Agamemnon . . . you yourselves, even
 in far-off Ithaca, must have heard how he returned,
 how Aegisthus hatched the king's horrendous death.
 But what a price he paid, in blood, in suffering.
 Ah how fine it is, when a man is brought down,
 to leave a son behind! Orestes took revenge,
 he killed that cunning, murderous Aegisthus,
 who'd killed his famous father.
 And you, my friend—

how tall and handsome I see you now—be brave, you too, so men to come will sing your praises down the years.”

Telemachus, weighing the challenge closely, answered, “Oh Nestor, son of Neleus, Achaea’s pride and glory, what a stroke of revenge that was! All Achaeans will spread Orestes’ fame across the world, a song for those to come.

If only the gods would arm me in such power I’d take revenge on the lawless, brazen suitors riding roughshod over me, plotting reckless outrage. But for me the gods have spun out no such joy, for my father or myself. I must bear up, that’s all.”

And the old charioteer replied, “Now that you mention it, dear boy, I do recall a mob of suitors, they say, besets your mother there in your own house, against your will, and plots your ruin. Tell me, though, do you let yourself be so abused, or do people round about, stirred up by the prompting of some god, despise you now? Who knows if he will return someday to take revenge on all their violence? Single-handed perhaps or with an Argive army at his back? If only the bright-eyed goddess chose to love you just as she lavished care on brave Odysseus, years ago in the land of Troy where we Achaeans struggled! I’ve never seen the immortals show so much affection as Pallas openly showed *him*, standing by your father—if only she’d favor you, tend you with all her heart, many a suitor then would lose all thought of marriage, blotted out forever.”

“Never, your majesty,” Telemachus countered gravely, “that will never come to pass, I know. What you say dumbfounds me, staggers imagination! Hope, hope as I will, that day will never dawn . . .

not even if the gods should will it so.”

“Telemachus!”

Pallas Athena broke in sharply, her eyes afire— “What’s this nonsense slipping through your teeth? It’s light work for a willing god to save a mortal even half the world away. Myself, I’d rather sail through years of trouble and labor home and see that blessed day, than hurry home to die at my own hearth like Agamemnon, killed by Aegisthus’ cunning—by his own wife. But the great leveler, Death: not even the gods can defend a man, not even one they love, that day

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when fate takes hold and lays him out at last.”

“Mentor,”

wise Telemachus said, “distraught as we are for him, let’s speak of this no more. My father’s return? It’s inconceivable now. Long ago the undying gods have sealed his death, his black doom. But now there’s another question I would put to Nestor: Nestor excels all men for sense and justice, his knowledge of the world.

Three generations he has ruled, they say, and to my young eyes he seems a deathless god! Nestor, son of Neleus, tell me the whole story—how did the great king Agamemnon meet his death? Where was Menelaus? What fatal trap did he set, that treacherous Aegisthus, to bring down a man far stronger than himself? Was Menelaus gone from Achaeans Argos, roving the world somewhere, so the coward found the nerve to kill the king?”

And old Nestor the noble charioteer replied:

“Gladly, my boy, I’ll tell you the story first to last . . . Right you are, you guess what would have happened if red-haired Menelaus, arriving back from Troy, had found Aegisthus alive in Agamemnon’s palace. No barrow piled high on the earth for *his* dead body, no, the dogs and birds would have feasted on his corpse, sprawled on the plain outside the city gates, and no one, no woman in all Achaea, would have wept a moment, such a monstrous crime the man contrived!

But there we were, camped at Troy, battling out the long hard campaign while he at his ease at home, in the depths of Argos, stallion-country—he lay siege to the wife of Agamemnon, luring, enticing her with talk. At first, true, she spurned the idea of such an outrage, Clytemnestra the queen, her will was faithful still.

And there was a man, what’s more, a bard close by, to whom Agamemnon, setting sail for Troy, gave strict commands to guard his wife. But then, that day the doom of the gods had bound her to surrender, Aegisthus shipped the bard away to a desert island, marooned him there, sweet prize for the birds of prey, and swept her off to his own house, lover lusting for lover. And many thighbones he burned on the gods’ holy altars, many gifts he hung on the temple walls—gold, brocades—in thanks for a conquest past his maddest hopes.

Now we, you see, were sailing home from Troy in the same squadron, Menelaus and I, comrades-in-arms from years of war. But as we rounded holy Sounion, Athens’ headland,

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lord Apollo² attacked Atrides' helmsman, aye,
 with his gentle shafts he shot the man to death—
 an iron grip on the tiller, the craft scudding fast—
 320 Phrontis, Onetor's son, who excelled all men alive
 at steering ships when gales bore down in fury.
 So Menelaus, straining to sail on, was held back
 till he could bury his mate with fitting rites.
 But once he'd got off too, plowing the wine-dark sea
 325 in his ribbed ships, and made a run to Malea's beetling cape,
 farseeing Zeus decided to give the man rough sailing,
 poured a hurricane down upon him, shrilling winds,
 giant, rearing whitecaps, monstrous, mountains high.
 There at a stroke he cut the fleet in half and drove
 330 one wing to Crete, where Cydonians make their homes
 along the Iardanus River. Now, there's a sheer cliff
 plunging steep to the surf at the farthest edge of Gortyn,
 out on the mist-bound sea, where the South Wind piles breakers,
 huge breakers, left of the headland's horn, toward Phaestos,
 335 with only a low reef to block the crushing tides.
 In they sailed, and barely escaped their death—
 the ships' crews, that is—
 the rollers smashed their hulls against the rocks.
 But as for the other five with pitch-black prows,
 the wind and current swept them on toward Egypt.

So Menelaus, amassing a hoard of stores and gold,
 was off cruising his ships to foreign ports of call
 while Aegisthus hatched his vicious work at home.
 340 Seven years he lorded over Mycenae rich in gold,
 once he'd killed Agamemnon—he ground the people down.
 But the eighth year ushered in his ruin, Prince Orestes
 home from Athens, yes, he cut him down, that cunning,
 murderous Aegisthus, who'd killed his famous father.
 Vengeance done, he held a feast for the Argives,
 350 to bury his hated mother, craven Aegisthus too,
 the very day Menelaus arrived, lord of the warcy,
 freighted with all the wealth his ships could carry.

So you,
 dear boy, take care. Don't rove from home too long,
 too far, leaving your own holdings unprotected—
 355 crowds in your palace so brazen
 they'll carve up all your wealth, devour it all,
 and then your journey here will come to nothing.
 Still I advise you, urge you to visit Menelaus.
 He's back from abroad at last, from people so removed
 360 you might abandon hope of ever returning home,

2. Archer god of prophecy, disease, healing, poetry, and music.

once the winds had driven you that far off course,
 into a sea so vast not even cranes could wing their way
 in one year's flight—so vast it is, so awesome . . .

365 So, off you go with your ships and shipmates now.
 Or if you'd rather go by land, there's team and chariot,
 my sons at your service too, and they'll escort you
 to sunny Lacedaemon,³ home of the red-haired king.
 Press him yourself to tell the whole truth:
 he'll never lie—the man is far too wise.”

370 So he closed
 as the sun set and darkness swept across the earth
 and the bright-eyed goddess Pallas spoke for all:
 “There was a tale, old soldier, so well told.

375 Come, cut out the victims' tongues and mix the wine,
 so once we've poured libations out to the Sea-lord
 and every other god, we'll think of sleep. High time—
 the light's already sunk in the western shadows.
 It's wrong to linger long at the gods' feast;
 we must be on our way.”

Zeus's daughter—
 they all hung closely on every word she said.
 380 Heralds sprinkled water over their hands for rinsing,
 the young men brimmed the mixing bowls with wine,
 they tipped first drops for the god in every cup
 then poured full rounds for all. They rose and flung
 the victims' tongues on the fire and poured libations out.
 385 When they'd poured, and drunk to their hearts' content,
 Athena and Prince Telemachus both started up
 to head for their ship at once.

But Nestor held them there, objecting strongly:
 “Zeus forbid—and the other deathless gods as well—
 390 that you resort to your ship and put my house behind
 like a rank pauper's without a stitch of clothing,
 no piles of rugs, no blankets in his place
 for host and guests to slumber soft in comfort.

395 Why, I've plenty of fine rugs and blankets here.
 No, by god, the true son of my good friend Odysseus
 won't bed down on a ship's deck, not while I'm alive
 or my sons are left at home to host our guests,
 whoever comes to our palace, newfound friends.”

“Dear old man,
 you're right,” Athena exclaimed, her eyes brightening now.
 “Telemachus should oblige you. Much the better way.
 400 Let him follow you now, sleep in your halls,
 but I'll go back to our trim black ship,

hearten the crew and give each man his orders.

I'm the only veteran in their ranks, I tell you.

All the rest, of an age with brave Telemachus,
are younger men who sailed with him as friends.

I'll bed down there by the dark hull tonight,
at dawn push off for the proud Cauconians.

Those people owe me a debt long overdue,
and no mean sum, believe me.

But you, seeing my friend is now your guest,
speed him on his way with a chariot and your son

and give him the finest horses that you have,
bred for stamina, trained to race the wind."

With that the bright-eyed goddess winged away
in an eagle's form and flight.

Amazement fell on all the Achaeans there.

The old king, astonished by what he'd seen,
grasped Telemachus' hand and cried out to the prince,

"Dear boy—never fear you'll be a coward or defenseless,
not if at your young age the gods will guard you so.
Of all who dwell on Olympus, this was none but she,

Zeus's daughter, the glorious one, his third born,
who prized your gallant father among the Argives.

Now, O Queen, be gracious! Give us high renown,
myself, my children, my loyal wife and queen.

And I will make you a sacrifice, a yearling heifer
broad in the brow, unbroken, never yoked by men.

I'll offer it up to you—I'll sheathe its horns in gold."

So he prayed, and Pallas Athena heard his prayer.

And Nestor the noble chariot-driver led them on,
his sons and sons-in-law, back to his regal palace.

Once they reached the storied halls of the aged king
they sat on rows of low and high-backed chairs.

As they arrived the old man mixed them all a bowl,
stirring the hearty wine, seasoned eleven years

before a servant broached it, loosed its seal.

Mulling it in the bowl, old Nestor poured
a libation out, praying hard to Pallas Athena,

daughter of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder.

Once they had poured their offerings, drunk their fill,
the Pylians went to rest, each in his own house.

But the noble chariot-driver let Telemachus,
King Odysseus' son, sleep at the palace now,

on a corded bed inside the echoing colonnade,
with Prince Pisistratus close beside him there,

the young spearman, already captain of armies,
though the last son still unwed within the halls.

The king retired to chambers deep in his lofty house

where the queen his wife arranged and shared their bed.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
old Nestor the noble chariot-driver climbed from bed,
went out and took his seat on the polished stones,

a bench glistening white, rubbed with glossy oil,
placed for the king before his looming doors.

There Neleus held his sessions years ago,
a match for the gods in counsel.

But his fate had long since forced him down to Death.

Now royal Nestor in turn, Achaea's watch and ward,
sat there holding the scepter while his sons,

coming out of their chambers, clustered round him,
hovering near: Echephron, Stratius, Perseus

and Aretus, Thrasymedes like a god, and sixth,
young lord Pisistratus came to join their ranks.

They escorted Prince Telemachus in to sit beside them.

Nestor, noble charioteer, began the celebration:

"Quickly, my children, carry out my wishes now
so I may please the gods, Athena first of all—

she came to me at Poseidon's flowing feast,
Athena in all her glory!

Now someone go to the fields to fetch a heifer,
lead her here at once—a herdsman drive her in.

Someone hurry down to Prince Telemachus' black ship
and bring up all his crewmen, leave just two behind.

And another tell our goldsmith, skilled Laerces,
to come and sheathe the heifer's horns in gold.

The rest stay here together. Tell the maids
inside the hall to prepare a sumptuous feast—

bring seats and firewood, bring pure water too."

They all pitched in to carry out his orders.

The heifer came from the fields, the crewmen came in
from brave Telemachus' ship, and the smith came in

with all his gear in hand, the tools of his trade,
the anvil, hammer and well-wrought tongs he used

for working gold. And Athena came as well
to attend her sacred rites.

The old horseman passed the gold to the smith,
and twining the foil, he sheathed the heifer's horns

so the goddess' eyes might dazzle, delighted with the gift.

Next Stratius and Echephron led the beast by the horns.
Aretus, coming up from the storeroom, brought them

lustral water filling a flower-braided bowl,
in his other hand, the barley in a basket.

Thrasymedes, staunch in combat, stood ready,
whetted ax in his grasp to cut the heifer down,

and Perseus held the basin for the blood.

Now Nestor the old charioteer began the rite.
Pouring the lustral water, scattering barley-meal,
he lifted up his ardent prayers to Pallas Athena,
launching the sacrifice, flinging onto the fire
the first tufts of hair from the victim's head.

Prayers said, the scattering barley strewn,
suddenly Nestor's son impetuous Thrasymedes
strode up close and struck—the ax chopped
the neck tendons through—

and the blow stunned
the heifer's strength—

The women shrilled their cry,
Nestor's daughters, sons' wives and his own loyal wife
Eurydice, Clymenus' eldest daughter. Then, hoisting up
the victim's head from the trampled earth, they held her fast
as the captain of men Pisistratus slashed her throat.

Dark blood gushed forth, life ebbed from her limbs—
they quartered her quickly, cut the thighbones out
and all according to custom wrapped them round in fat,
a double fold sliced clean and topped with strips of flesh.

And the old king burned these over dried split wood
and over the fire poured out glistening wine
while young men at his side held five-pronged forks.
Once they'd burned the bones and tasted the organs,
they sliced the rest into pieces, spitted them on skewers
and raising points to the fire, broiled all the meats.

During the ritual lovely Polycaste, youngest daughter
of Nestor, Neleus' son, had bathed Telemachus.
Rinsing him off now, rubbing him down with oil,
she drew a shirt and handsome cape around him.
Out of his bath he stepped, glistening like a god,
strode in and sat by the old commander Nestor.

They roasted the prime cuts, pulled them off the spits
and sat down to the feast while ready stewards saw
to rounds of wine and kept the gold cups flowing.
When they'd put aside desire for food and drink,
Nestor the noble chariot-driver issued orders:
"Hurry, my boys! Bring Telemachus horses,
a good full-maned team—
hitch them to a chariot—he must be off at once."

They listened closely, snapped to his commands
and hitched a rapid team to a chariot's yoke in haste.
A housekeeper stowed some bread and wine aboard
and meats too, food fit for the sons of kings.
Telemachus vaulted onto the splendid chariot—
right beside him Nestor's son Pisistratus,
captain of armies, boarded, seized the reins,

whipped the team to a run and on the horses flew,
holding nothing back, out into open country,
leaving the heights of Pylos fading in their trail,
shaking the yoke across their shoulders all day long.

The sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark
as they reached Phera, pulling up to Diocles' halls,
the son of Orilochus, son of the Alpheus River.
He gave them a royal welcome; there they slept the night.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
they yoked their pair again, mounted the blazoned car
and out through the gates and echoing colonnade
they whipped the team to a run and on they flew,
holding nothing back—and the princes reached
the wheatlands, straining now for journey's end,
so fast those purebred stallions raced them on
as the sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark.

BOOK 4. THE KING AND QUEEN OF SPARTA

At last they gained the ravines of Lacedaemon ringed by hills
and drove up to the halls of Menelaus in his glory.

They found the king inside his palace, celebrating
with throngs of kinsmen a double wedding-feast
for his son and lovely daughter. The princess
he was sending on to the son of great Achilles,
breaker of armies. Years ago Menelaus vowed,
he nodded assent at Troy and pledged her hand
and now the gods were sealing firm the marriage.

So he was sending her on her way with team and chariot,
north to the Myrmidons' famous city governed by her groom.
From Sparta he brought Alecto's daughter as the bride
for his own full-grown son, the hardy Megapenthes,
born to him by a slave. To Helen the gods had granted
no more offspring once she had borne her first child,
the breath-taking Hermione,
a luminous beauty gold as Aphrodite.

So now
they feasted within the grand, high-roofed palace,
all the kin and clansmen of Menelaus in his glory,
reveling warmly here as in their midst
an inspired bard sang out and struck his lyre—
and through them a pair of tumblers dashed and sprang,
whirling in leaping handspings, leading on the dance.

The travelers, Nestor's shining son and Prince Telemachus,
had brought themselves and their horses to a standstill
just outside the court when good lord Eteoneus,
passing through the gates now, saw them there,

and the ready aide-in-arms of Menelaus took the message through his sovereign's halls and stepping close to his master broke the news: "Strangers have just arrived, your majesty, Menelaus. Two men, but they look like kin of mighty Zeus himself. Tell me, should we unhitch their team for them or send them to someone free to host them well?"

The red-haired king took great offense at that: "Never a fool before, Eteoneus, son of Boëthous, now I see you're babbling like a child! Just think of all the hospitality we enjoyed at the hands of other men before we made it home, and god save us from such hard treks in years to come. Quick, unhitch their team. And bring them in, strangers, guests, to share our flowing feast."

Back through the halls he hurried, calling out to other brisk attendants to follow quickly. They loosed the sweating team from under the yoke, tethered them fast by reins inside the horse-stalls, tossing feed at their hoofs, white barley mixed with wheat, and canted the chariot up against the polished walls, shimmering in the sun, then ushered in their guests, into that magnificent place. Both struck by the sight, they marveled up and down the house of the warlord dear to Zeus—a radiance strong as the moon or rising sun came flooding through the high-roofed halls of illustrious Menelaus.

Once they'd feasted their eyes with gazing at it all, into the burnished tubs they climbed and bathed. When women had washed them, rubbed them down with oil and drawn warm fleece and shirts around their shoulders, they took up seats of honor next to Atrides Menelaus. A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher and over a silver basin tipped it out so they might rinse their hands, then pulled a gleaming table to their side.

A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve them, appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty. As a carver lifted platters of meat toward them, meats of every sort, and set before them golden cups, the red-haired king Menelaus greeted both guests warmly: "Help yourselves to food, and welcome! Once you've dined we'll ask you who you are. But your parents' blood is hardly lost in you. You must be born of kings, bred by the gods to wield the royal scepter. No mean men could sire sons like you."

With those words he passed them a fat rich loin with his own hands, the choicest part, that he'd been served himself.

They reached for the good things that lay outspread and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink, Telemachus, leaning his head close to Nestor's son, spoke low to the prince so no one else could hear: "Look, Pisistratus—joy of my heart, my friend—the sheen of bronze, the blaze of gold and amber, silver, ivory too, through all this echoing mansion! Surely Zeus's court on Olympus must be just like this, the boundless glory of all this wealth inside! My eyes dazzle . . . I am struck with wonder."

But the red-haired warlord overheard his guest and cut in quickly with winged words for both: "No man alive could rival Zeus, dear boys, with his everlasting palace and possessions. But among men, I must say, few if any could rival *me* in riches. Believe me, much I suffered, many a mile I roved to haul such treasures home in my ships. Eight years out, wandering off as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia,¹ even Egypt, I reached the Ethiopians, Sidonians, Eretrians—Libya too, where lambs no sooner spring from the womb than they grow horns. Three times in the circling year the ewes give birth. So no one, neither king nor shepherd could want for cheese or mutton, or sweet milk either, udders swell for the sucklings round the year.

But while I roamed those lands, amassing a fortune, a stranger killed my brother, blind to the danger, duped blind—thanks to the cunning of his cursed, murderous queen! So I rule all this wealth with no great joy. You must have heard my story from your fathers, whoever they are—what hardships I endured, how I lost this handsome palace built for the ages, filled to its depths with hoards of gorgeous things. Well, would to god I'd stayed right here in my own house with a third of all that wealth and they were still alive, all who died on the wide plain of Troy those years ago, far from the stallion-land of Argos.

And still, much as I weep for all my men, grieving sorely, time and again, sitting here in the royal halls, now indulging myself in tears, now brushing tears away—the grief that numbs the spirit gluts us quickly—for none of all those comrades, pained as I am, do I grieve as much for one . . . that man who makes sleep hateful, even food, as I pore over his memory. No one, no Achaean

1. Modern Syria, Lebanon, and Galilee.

- 120 labored hard as Odysseus labored or achieved so much.
And how did his struggles end? In suffering for that man;
for me, in relentless, heartbreaking grief for him,
lost and gone so long now—dead or alive, who knows?
How they must mourn him too. Laertes, the old man,
and self-possessed Penelope. Telemachus as well,
the boy he left a babe in arms at home.”
- 125 Such memories
stirred in the young prince a deep desire to grieve
for Odysseus. Tears streamed down his cheeks
and wet the ground when he heard his father’s name,
both hands clutching his purple robe before his eyes.
130 Menelaus recognized him at once but pondered
whether to let him state his father’s name
or probe him first and prompt him step by step.
- 135 While he debated all this now within himself,
Helen emerged from her scented, lofty chamber—
striking as Artemis with her golden shafts—
and a train of women followed . . .
Adreste drew up her carved reclining-chair,
140 Alcippe brought a carpet of soft-piled fleece,
Phylo carried her silver basket given by Alcandre,
King Polybus’ wife, who made his home in Egyptian Thebes
where the houses overflow with the greatest troves of treasure.
The king gave Menelaus a pair of bathing-tubs in silver,
two tripods, ten bars of gold, and apart from these
145 his wife presented Helen her own precious gifts:
a golden spindle, a basket that ran on casters,
solid silver polished off with rims of gold.
Now Phylo her servant rolled it in beside her,
heaped to the brim with yarn prepared for weaving;
150 the spindle swathed in violet wool lay tipped across it.
Helen leaned back in her chair, a stool beneath her feet,
and pressed her husband at once for each detail:
“Do we know, my lord Menelaus, who our visitors
claim to be, our welcome new arrivals?
155 Right or wrong, what can I say? My heart tells me
to come right out and say I’ve never seen such a likeness,
neither in man nor woman—I’m amazed at the sight.
To the life he’s like the son of great Odysseus,
surely he’s Telemachus! The boy that hero left
160 a babe in arms at home when all you Achaeans
fought at Troy, launching your headlong battles
just for my sake, shameless whore that I was.”
- 165 “My dear, my dear,” the red-haired king assured her,
“now that you mention it, I see the likeness too . . .
Odysseus’ feet were like the boy’s, his hands as well,
his glancing eyes, his head, and the fine shock of hair.

- 170 Yes, and just now, as I was talking about Odysseus,
remembering how he struggled, suffered, all for me,
a flood of tears came streaming down his face
and he clutched his purple robe before his eyes.”
- 175 “Right you are”—Pisistratus stepped in quickly—
“son of Atreus, King Menelaus, captain of armies:
here is the son of that great hero, as you say.
But the man is modest, he would be ashamed
to make a show of himself, his first time here,
and interrupt you. We delight in your voice
as if some god were speaking!
The noble horseman Nestor sent me along
180 to be his escort. Telemachus yearned to see you,
so you could give him some advice or urge some action.
When a father’s gone, his son takes much abuse
in a house where no one comes to his defense.
So with Telemachus now. His father’s gone.
No men at home will shield him from the worst.”
- 185 “Wonderful!” the red-haired king cried out.
“The son of my dearest friend, here in my own house!
That man who performed a hundred feats of arms for me.
And I swore that when he came I’d give him a hero’s welcome,
him above all my comrades—if only Olympian Zeus,
190 farseeing Zeus, had granted us both safe passage
home across the sea in our swift trim ships.
Why, I’d have settled a city in Argos for him,
built him a palace, shipped him over from Ithaca,
him and all his wealth, his son, his people too—
195 emptied one of the cities nestling round about us,
one I rule myself. Both fellow-countrymen then,
how often we’d have mingled side-by-side!
Nothing could have parted us,
bound by love for each other, mutual delight . . .
200 till death’s dark cloud came shrouding round us both.
But god himself, jealous of all this, no doubt,
robbed that unlucky man, him and him alone,
of the day of his return.”
- 205 So Menelaus mused
and stirred in them all a deep desire to grieve.
Helen of Argos, daughter of Zeus, dissolved in tears,
Telemachus wept too, and so did Atreus’ son Menelaus.
Nor could Nestor’s son Pisistratus stay dry-eyed,
remembering now his gallant brother Antilochus,
cut down by Memnon,² splendid son of the Morning.
210 Thinking of him, the young prince broke out:

2. King of Ethiopia.

215 "Old Nestor always spoke of you, son of Atreus,
as the wisest man of all the men he knew,
whenever we talked about you there at home,
questioning back and forth. So now, please,
if it isn't out of place, indulge me, won't you?
Myself, I take no joy in weeping over supper.
Morning will soon bring time enough for that.
Not that I'd grudge a tear
for any man gone down to meet his fate.
220 What other tribute can we pay to wretched men
than to cut a lock, let tears roll down our cheeks?
And I have a brother of my own among the dead,
and hardly the poorest soldier in our ranks.
You probably knew him. I never met him, never
225 saw him myself. But they say he outdid our best,
Antilochus—lightning on his feet and every inch a fighter!"

"Well said, my friend," the red-haired king replied.
"Not even an older man could speak and do as well.
Your father's son you are—your words have all his wisdom.
It's easy to spot the breed of a man whom Zeus
has marked for joy in birth and marriage both.
Take great King Nestor now:

230 Zeus has blessed him, all his lifelong days,
growing rich and sleek in his old age at home,
his sons expert with spears and full of sense.
Well, so much for the tears that caught us just now;
let's think again of supper. Come, rinse our hands.
235 Tomorrow, at dawn, will offer me and Telemachus
time to talk and trade our thoughts in full."

240 Asphalion quickly rinsed their hands with water,
another of King Menelaus' ready aides-in-arms.
Again they reached for the good things set before them.

Then Zeus's daughter Helen thought of something else.
245 Into the mixing-bowl from which they drank their wine
she slipped a drug, heart's-ease, dissolving anger,
magic to make us all forget our pains. . . .

No one who drank it deeply, muddled in wine,
could let a tear roll down his cheeks that day,
not even if his mother should die, his father die,
not even if right before his eyes some enemy brought down
250 a brother or darling son with a sharp bronze blade.

So cunning the drugs that Zeus's daughter plied,
potent gifts from Polydamna the wife of Thon,
a woman of Egypt, land where the teeming soil
bears the richest yield of herbs in all the world:
255 many health itself when mixed in the wine,
and many deadly poison.

260 Every man is a healer there, more skilled
than any other men on earth—Egyptians born
of the healing god himself. So now Helen, once
she had drugged the wine and ordered winecups filled,
resuming the conversation, entertained the group:
"My royal king Menelaus—welcome guests here,
265 sons of the great as well! Zeus can present us
times of joy and times of grief in turn:
all lies within his power.

So come, let's sit back in the palace now,
dine and warm our hearts with the old stories.
I will tell something perfect for the occasion.

270 Surely I can't describe or even list them all,
the exploits crowding fearless Odysseus' record,
but what a feat that hero dared and carried off
in the land of Troy where you Achaeans suffered!
Scarring his own body with mortifying strokes,
275 throwing filthy rags on his back like any slave,
he slipped into the enemy's city, roamed its streets—
all disguised, a totally different man, a beggar,
hardly the figure he cut among Achaea's ships.
That's how Odysseus infiltrated Troy,
and no one knew him at all . . .

280 I alone, I spotted him for the man he was,
kept questioning him—the crafty one kept dodging.
But after I'd bathed him, rubbed him down with oil,
given him clothes to wear and sworn a binding oath
not to reveal him as Odysseus to the Trojans, not
285 till he was back at his swift ships and shelters,
then at last he revealed to me, step by step,
the whole Achaean strategy. And once he'd cut
a troop of Trojans down with his long bronze sword,
back he went to his comrades, filled with information.

290 The rest of the Trojan women shrilled their grief. Not I:
my heart leapt up—
my heart had changed by now—

I yearned
to sail back home again! I grieved too late for the madness
Aphrodite³ sent me, luring me there, far from my dear land,
forsaking my own child, my bridal bed, my husband too,
295 a man who lacked for neither brains nor beauty."

And the red-haired Menelaus answered Helen:
"There was a tale, my lady. So well told.
Now then, I have studied, in my time,
300 the plans and minds of great ones by the score.

3. Goddess of physical love.

And I have traveled over a good part of the world
but never once have I laid eyes on a man like him—
what a heart that fearless Odysseus had inside him!

What a piece of work the hero dared and carried off
in the wooden horse where all our best encamped,
our champions armed with bloody death for Troy . . .
when along you came, Helen—roused, no doubt,
by a dark power bent on giving Troy some glory,
and dashing Prince Deiphobus squired your every step.
Three times you sauntered round our hollow ambush,
feeling, stroking its flanks,

challenging all our fighters, calling each by name—
yours was the voice of all our long-lost wives!

And Diomedes and I, crouched tight in the midst
with great Odysseus, hearing you singing out,
were both keen to spring up and sally forth
or give you a sudden answer from inside,

but Odysseus damped our ardor, reined us back.
Then all the rest of the troops kept stock-still,
all but Anticlus. He was hot to salute you now
but Odysseus clamped his great hands on the man's mouth
and shut it, brutally—yes, he saved us all,
holding on grim-set till Pallas Athena
lured you off at last."

But clear-sighted Telemachus ventured,
"Son of Atreus, King Menelaus, captain of armies,
so much the worse, for not one bit of that
saved *him* from grisly death . . .

not even a heart of iron could have helped.
But come, send us off to bed. It's time to rest,
time to enjoy the sweet relief of sleep."

And Helen briskly told her serving-women
to make beds in the porch's shelter, lay down
some heavy purple throws for the beds themselves,
and over them spread some blankets, thick woolly robes,
a warm covering laid on top. Torches in hand,
they left the hall and made up beds at once.
The herald led the two guests on and so they slept
outside the palace under the forecourt's colonnade,
young Prince Telemachus and Nestor's shining son.
Menelaus retired to chambers deep in his lofty house
with Helen the pearl of women loosely gowned beside him.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
the lord of the warcry climbed from bed and dressed,
over his shoulder he slung his well-honed sword,
fastened rawhide sandals under his smooth feet,
stepped from his bedroom, handsome as a god,
and sat beside Telemachus, asking, kindly,

"Now, my young prince, tell me what brings you here
to sunny Lacedaemon, sailing over the sea's broad back.
A public matter or private? Tell me the truth now."

And with all the poise he had, Telemachus replied,
"Son of Atreus, King Menelaus, captain of armies,
I came in the hope that you can tell me now
some news about my father.

My house is being devoured, my rich farms destroyed,
my palace crammed with enemies, slaughtering on and on
my droves of sheep and shambling longhorn cattle.

Suitors plague my mother—the insolent, overweening . . .
That's why I've come to plead before you now,
if you can tell me about his cruel death:

perhaps you saw him die with your own eyes
or heard the wanderer's end from someone else.
More than all other men, that man was born for pain.
Don't soften a thing, from pity, respect for me—

tell me, clearly, all your eyes have witnessed.
I beg you—if ever my father, lord Odysseus,
pledged you his word and made it good in action
once on the fields of Troy where you Achaeans suffered,
remember his story now, tell *me* the truth."

"How shameful!"

the red-haired king burst out in anger. "That's the bed
of a brave man of war they'd like to crawl inside,
those spineless, craven cowards!

Weak as the doe that beds down her fawns
in a mighty lion's den—her newborn sucklings—
then trails off to the mountain spurs and grassy bends
to graze her fill, but back the lion comes to his own lair
and the master deals both fawns a ghastly bloody death,
just what Odysseus will deal that mob—ghastly death.

Ah if only—Father Zeus, Athena and lord Apollo—
that man who years ago in the games at Lesbos
rose to Philomelides' challenge, wrestled him,
pinned him down with one tremendous throw
and the Argives roared with joy . . .

if only *that* Odysseus sported with those suitors,
a blood wedding, a quick death would take the lot!

But about the things you've asked me, so intently,
I'll skew and sidestep nothing, not deceive you, ever.
Of all he told me—the Old Man of the Sea who never lies—
I'll hide or hold back nothing, not a single word.

It was in Egypt, where the gods still marooned me,
eager as I was to voyage home . . . I'd failed,
you see, to render them full, flawless victims,
and gods are always keen to see their rules obeyed.
Now, there's an island out in the ocean's heavy surge,

well off the Egyptian coast—they call it Pharos—
 far as a deep-sea ship can go in one day's sail
 with a whistling wind astern to drive her on.
 There's a snug harbor there, good landing beach
 where crews pull in, draw water up from the dark wells
 then push their vessels off for passage out.
 But here the gods becalmed me twenty days . . .
 not a breath of the breezes ruffling out to sea
 that speed a ship across the ocean's broad back.
 Now our rations would all have been consumed,
 our crews' stamina too, if one of the gods
 had not felt sorry for me, shown me mercy,
 Eidothea, a daughter of Proteus,
 that great power, the Old Man of the Sea.
 My troubles must have moved her to the heart
 when she met me trudging by myself without my men.
 They kept roaming around the beach, day in, day out,
 fishing with twisted hooks, their bellies racked by hunger.
 Well, she came right up to me, filled with questions:
 'Are you a fool, stranger—soft in the head and lazy too?
 Or do you let things slide because you *like* your pain?
 Here you are, cooped up on an island far too long,
 with no way out of it, none that you can find,
 while all your shipmates' spirit ebbs away.'

So she prodded and I replied at once,
 'Let me tell you, goddess—whoever you are—
 I'm hardly landlocked here of my own free will.
 So I must have angered one of the deathless gods
 who rule the skies up there. But you tell *me*—
 you immortals know it all—which one of you
 blocks my way here, keeps me from my voyage?
 How can I cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?'

And the glistening goddess reassured me warmly,
 'Of course, my friend, I'll answer all your questions.
 Who haunts these parts? Proteus of Egypt does,
 the immortal Old Man of the Sea who never lies,
 who sounds the deep in all its depths. Poseidon's servant.
 He's my father, they say, he gave me life. And he,
 if only you ambush him somehow and pin him down,
 will tell you the way to go, the stages of your voyage,
 how you can cross the swarming sea and reach home at last.
 And he can tell you too, if you want to press him—
 you are a king, it seems—
 all that's occurred within your palace, good and bad,
 while you've been gone your long and painful way.'

'Then you are the one'—I quickly took her up.
 'Show me the trick to trap this ancient power,

or he'll see or sense me first and slip away.
 It's hard for a mortal man to force a god.'

'True, my friend,' the glistening one agreed,
 'and again I'll tell you all you need to know.
 When the sun stands striding at high noon,
 then up from the waves he comes—
 the Old Man of the Sea who never lies—
 under a West Wind's gust that shrouds him round
 in shuddering dark swells, and once he's out on land
 he heads for his bed of rest in deep hollow caves
 and around him droves of seals—sleek pups bred
 by his lovely ocean-lady—bed down too
 in a huddle, flopping up from the gray surf,
 giving off the sour reek of the salty ocean depths.
 I'll lead you there myself at the break of day
 and couch you all for attack, side-by-side.
 Choose three men from your crew, choose well,
 the best you've got aboard the good decked hulls.
 Now I will tell you all the old wizard's tricks . . .
 First he will make his rounds and count the seals
 and once he's checked their number, reviewed them all,
 down in their midst he'll lie, like a shepherd with his flock.
 That's your moment. Soon as you see him bedded down,
 muster your heart and strength and hold him fast,
 wildly as he writhes and fights you to escape.
 He'll try all kinds of escape—twist and turn
 into every beast that moves across the earth,
 transforming himself into water, superhuman fire,
 but you hold on for dear life, hug him all the harder!
 And when, at last, he begins to ask you questions—
 back in the shape you saw him sleep at first—
 relax your grip and set the old god free
 and ask him outright, hero,
 which of the gods is up in arms against you?
 How can you cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?'

So she urged and under the breaking surf she dove
 as I went back to our squadron beached in sand,
 my heart a heaving storm at every step . . .
 Once I reached my ship hauled up on shore
 we made our meal and the godsent night came down
 and then we slept at the sea's smooth shelving edge.
 When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 I set out down the coast of the wide-ranging sea,
 praying hard to the gods for all their help,
 taking with me the three men I trusted most
 on every kind of mission.

Eidothea, now,

had slipped beneath the sea's engulfing folds
but back from the waves she came with four sealskins,
all freshly stripped, to deceive her father blind.

She scooped out lurking-places deep in the sand
and sat there waiting as we approached her post,
then couching us side-by-side she flung a sealskin
over each man's back. Now there was an ambush
that would have overpowered us all—overpowering,
true, the awful reek of all those sea-fed brutes!

Who'd dream of bedding down with a monster of the deep?

But the goddess sped to our rescue, found the cure
with ambrosia,⁴ daubing it under each man's nose—
that lovely scent, it drowned the creatures' stench.

So all morning we lay there waiting, spirits steelled,
while seals came crowding, jostling out of the sea
and flopped down in rows, basking along the surf.

At high noon the old man emerged from the waves
and found his fat-fed seals and made his rounds,
counting them off, counting *us* the first four,
but he had no inkling of all the fraud afoot.

Then down he lay and slept, but we with a battle-cry,
we rushed him, flung our arms around him—he'd lost nothing,
the old rascal, none of his cunning quick techniques!
First he shifted into a great bearded lion
and then a serpent—

a panther— a ramping wild boar—
a torrent of water—

a tree with soaring branchtops—
but we held on for dear life, braving it out
until, at last, that quick-change artist,
the old wizard, began to weary of all this
and burst out into rapid-fire questions:

'Which god, Menelaus, conspired with you
to trap me in ambush? seize me against my will?
What on earth do you want?'

'You know, old man,'
I countered now. 'Why put me off with questions?
Here I am, cooped up on an island far too long,
with no way out of it, none that I can find,
while my spirit ebbs away. But you tell *me*—
you immortals know it all—which one of you
blocks my way here, keeps me from my voyage?
How can I cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?'

'How wrong you were!' the seer shot back at once.
'You should have offered Zeus and the other gods

a handsome sacrifice, *then* embarked, if you ever hoped
for a rapid journey home across the wine-dark sea.

It's not your destiny yet to see your loved ones,
reach your own grand house, your native land at last,
not till you sail back through Egyptian waters—
the great Nile swelled by the rains of Zeus—
and make a splendid rite to the deathless gods
who rule the vaulting skies. Then, only then
will the gods grant you the voyage you desire.'

So he urged, and broke the heart inside me,
having to double back on the mist-bound seas,
back to Egypt, that, that long and painful way . . .
Nevertheless I caught my breath and answered,
'That I will do, old man, as you command.

But tell me this as well, and leave out nothing:
Did all the Achaeans reach home in the ships unharmed,
all we left behind, Nestor and I, en route from Troy?
Or did any die some cruel death by shipwreck
or die in the arms of loved ones,
once they'd wound down the long coil of war?'

And he lost no time in saying, 'Son of Atreus,
why do you ask me that? Why do you need to know?
Why probe my mind? You won't stay dry-eyed long.
I warn you, once you have heard the whole story.
Many of them were killed, many survived as well,
but only two who captained your bronze-armored units
died on the way home—you know who died in the fighting,
you were there yourself.

And one is still alive,
held captive, somewhere, off in the endless seas . . .

Ajax, now, went down with his long-oared fleet.
First Poseidon drove him onto the cliffs of Gyrae,
looming cliffs, then saved him from the breakers—
he'd have escaped his doom, too, despite Athena's hale,
if he hadn't flung that brazen boast, the mad blind fool.

"In the teeth of the gods," he bragged, "I have escaped
the ocean's sheer abyss!" Poseidon heard that frantic vaunt
and the god grasped his trident in both his massive hands
and struck the Gyraean headland, hacked the rock in two,
and the giant stump stood fast but the jagged spur
where Ajax perched at first, the raving madman—
toppling into the sea, it plunged him down, down
in the vast, seething depths. And so he died,
having drunk his fill of brine.

Your brother?

He somehow escaped that fate; Agamemnon got away

4. Food of the immortals.

575 in his beaked ships. Queen Hera⁵ pulled him through.
 But just as he came abreast of Malea's beetling cape
 580 a hurricane snatched him up and swept him way off course—
 groaning, desperate—driving him over the fish-infested sea
 to the wild borderland where Thyestes made his home
 in the days of old and his son Aegisthus lived now.
 But even from there a safe return seemed likely,
 yes, the immortals swung the wind around to fair
 and the victors sailed home. How he rejoiced,
 585 Atrides setting foot on his fatherland once more—
 he took that native earth in his hands and kissed it,
 hot tears flooding his eyes, so thrilled to see his land!
 But a watchman saw him too—from a lookout high above—
 a spy that cunning Aegisthus stationed there,
 luring the man with two gold bars in payment.
 590 One whole year he'd watched . . .
 so the great king would not get past unseen,
 his fighting power intact for self-defense.
 The spy ran the news to his master's halls
 and Aegisthus quickly set his stealthy trap.
 595 Picking the twenty best recruits from town
 he packed them in ambush at one end of the house,
 at the other he ordered a banquet dressed and spread
 and went to welcome the conquering hero, Agamemnon,
 went with team and chariot, and a mind aswarm with evil.
 600 Up from the shore he led the king, he ushered him in—
 suspecting nothing of all his doom—he feasted him well
 then cut him down as a man cuts down some ox at the trough!
 Not one of your brother's men-at-arms was left alive,
 none of Aegisthus' either. All, killed in the palace.'

605 So Proteus said, and his story crushed my heart.
 I knelt down in the sand and wept. I'd no desire
 to go on living and see the rising light of day.
 But once I'd had my fill of tears and writhing there,
 the Old Man of the Sea who never lies continued,
 610 'No more now, Menelaus. How long must you weep?
 Withering tears, what good can come of tears?
 None I know of. Strive instead to return
 to your native country—hurry home at once!
 Either you'll find the murderer still alive
 615 or Orestes will have beaten you to the kill.
 You'll be in time to share the funeral feast.'

So he pressed, and I felt my heart, my old pride,
 for all my grieving, glow once more in my chest
 and I asked the seer in a rush of winging words,

5. Wife and sister of Zeus, the greatest of the gods.

620 'Those two I know now. Tell me the third man's name.
 Who is still alive, held captive off in the endless seas?
 Unless he's dead by now. I want to know the truth
 though it grieves me all the more.'

'Odysseus'—
 the old prophet named the third at once—

625 'Laertes' son, who makes his home in Ithaca . . .
 I saw him once on an island, weeping live warm tears
 in the nymph Calypso's house—she holds him there by force.
 He has no way to voyage home to his own native land,
 no trim ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars
 and send him scudding over the sea's broad back.

630 But about your own destiny, Menelaus,
 dear to Zeus, it's not for you to die
 and meet your fate in the stallion-land of Argos,
 no, the deathless ones will sweep you off to the world's end,
 the Elysian Fields, where gold-haired Rhadamanthys waits,
 where life glides on in immortal ease for mortal man;
 635 no snow, no winter onslaught, never a downpour there
 but night and day the Ocean River sends up breezes,
 singing winds of the West refreshing all mankind.
 All this because you are Helen's husband now—
 640 the gods count *you* the son-in-law of Zeus.'

So he divined and down the breaking surf he dove
 as I went back to the ships with my brave men,
 my heart a rising tide at every step.

645 Once I reached my craft hauled up on shore
 we made our meal and the godsent night came down
 and then we slept at the sea's smooth shelving edge.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 we hauled the vessels down to the sunlit breakers first
 then stepped the masts amidships, canvas brailled—
 650 the crews swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks
 and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
 Back we went to the Nile swelled by the rains of Zeus,
 I moored the ships and sacrificed in a splendid rite,
 and once I'd slaked the wrath of the everlasting gods
 655 I raised a mound for Agamemnon, his undying glory.

All this done, I set sail and the gods sent me
 a stiff following wind that sped me home,
 home to the native land I love.

660 But come,
 my boy, stay on in my palace now with me,
 at least till ten or a dozen days have passed.
 Then I'll give you a princely send-off—shining gifts,
 three stallions and a chariot burnished bright—
 665 and I'll add a gorgeous cup so you can pour
 libations out to the deathless gods on high

and remember Menelaus all your days."

Telemachus, summoning up his newfound tact, replied,

"Please, Menelaus, don't keep me quite so long.

True, I'd gladly sit beside you one whole year without a twinge of longing for home or parents.

It's wonderful how you tell your stories, all you say—I

delight to listen! Yes, but now, I'm afraid,

my comrades must be restless in sacred Pylos,

and here you'd hold me just a little longer.

As for the gift you give me, let it be a keepsake.

Those horses I really cannot take to Ithaca;

better to leave them here to be your glory.

You rule a wide level plain

where the fields of clover roll and galingale

and wheat and oats and glistening full-grain barley.

No running-room for mares in Ithaca, though, no meadows.

Goat, not stallion, land, yet it means the world to me.

None of the rugged islands slanting down to sea

is good for pasture or good for bridle paths,

but Ithaca, best of islands, crowns them all!"

So he declared. The lord of the warcry smiled,

patted him with his hand and praised his guest, concluding,

"Good blood runs in you, dear boy, your words are proof.

Certainly I'll exchange the gifts. The power's mine.

Of all the treasures lying heaped in my palace

you shall have the finest, most esteemed. Why,

I'll give you a mixing-bowl, forged to perfection—

it's solid silver finished off with a lip of gold.

Hephaestus⁶ made it himself. And a royal friend,

Phaedimus, king of Sidon, lavished it on me

when his palace welcomed me on passage home.

How pleased I'd be if you took it as a gift!"

And now as the two confided in each other,

banqueters arrived at the great king's palace,

leading their own sheep, bearing their hearty wine,

and their wives in lovely headbands sent along the food.

And so they bustled about the halls preparing dinner . . .

But all the while the suitors, before Odysseus' palace,

amused themselves with discus and long throwing spears,

out on the leveled grounds, free and easy as always,

full of swagger. But lord Antinous sat apart,

dashing Eurymachus beside him, ringleaders,

head and shoulders the strongest of the lot.

Phronius' son Noëmon approached them now,

quick to press Antinous with a question:

"Antinous, have we any notion or not

when Telemachus will return from sandy Pylos?

He sailed in a ship of mine and now I need her back

to cross over to Elis Plain where I keep a dozen horses,

brood-mares suckling some heavy-duty mules, unbroken.

I'd like to drive one home and break him in."

That dumbfounded them both. They never dreamed

the prince had gone to Pylos, Neleus' city—

certain the boy was still nearby somewhere,

out on his farm with flocks or with the swineherd.

"Tell me the truth!" Antinous wheeled on Noëmon.

"When did he go? And what young crew went with him?

Ithaca's best? Or his own slaves and servants?

Surely he has enough to man a ship.

Tell me this—be clear—I've got to know:

did he commandeer your ship against your will

or did you volunteer it once he'd won you over?"

"I volunteered it, of course," Noëmon said.

"What else could anyone do, when such a man,

a prince weighed down with troubles,

asked a favor? Hard to deny him anything.

And the young crew that formed his escort? Well,

they're the finest men on the island, next to us.

And Mentor took command—I saw him climb aboard—

or a god who looked like Mentor head to foot,

and that's what I find strange. I saw good Mentor

yesterday, just at sunup, here. But clearly

he boarded ship for Pylos days ago."

With that he headed back to his father's house,

leaving the two lords stiff with indignation.

They made the suitors sit down in a group

and stop their games at once. Eupithes' son

Antinous rose up in their midst to speak,

his dark heart filled with fury,

blazing with anger—eyes like searing fire:

"By god, what a fine piece of work he's carried off!

Telemachus—what insolence—and we thought his little jaunt

would come to grief. But in spite of us all, look,

the young cub slips away, just like that—

picks the best crew in the land and off he sails.

And this is just the start of the trouble he can make.

Zeus kill that brazen boy before he hits his prime!

Quick, fetch me a swift ship and twenty men—

I'll waylay him from ambush, board him coming back

in the straits between Ithaca and rocky Same.

This gallant voyage of his to find his father

will find *him* wrecked at last!"

6. Crippled god of fire, smiths, and artisans, husband of Aphrodite.

They all roared approval, urged him on,
rose at once and retired to Odysseus' palace.

760

But not for long was Penelope unaware
of the grim plots her suitors planned in secret.
The herald Medon told her. He'd overheard their schemes,
listening in outside the court while they wove on within.
He rushed the news through the halls to tell the queen
who greeted him as he crossed her chamber's threshold:
"Herald, why have the young blades sent you now?"

765

To order King Odysseus' serving-women
to stop their work and slave to fix their feast?
I hate their courting, their running riot here—
would to god that this meal, here and now,
were their last meal on earth!

770

Day after day,
all of you swarming, draining our life's blood,
my wary son's estate. What, didn't you listen
to your fathers—when you were children, years ago—
telling you how Odysseus treated them, your parents?
Never an unfair word, never an unfair action
among his people here, though that's the way
of our god-appointed kings,
hating one man, loving the next, with luck.
Not Odysseus. Never an outrage done to any man alive.
But you, you and your ugly outbursts, shameful acts,
they're plain to see. Look at the thanks he gets
for all past acts of kindness!"

775

780

Medon replied,
sure of his own discretion, "Ah my queen,
if only *that* were the worst of all you face.
Now your suitors are plotting something worse,
harsher, crueler. God forbid they bring it off!
They're poised to cut Telemachus down with bronze swords
on his way back home. He's sailed off, you see . . .
for news of his father—to sacred Pylos first,
then out to the sunny hills of Lacedaemon."

790

Her knees gave way on the spot, her heart too.
She stood there speechless a while, struck dumb,
tears filling her eyes, her warm voice choked.

795

At last she found some words to make reply:
"Oh herald, why has my child gone and left me?
No need in the world for him to board the ships,
those chariots of the sea that sweep men on,
driving across the ocean's endless wastes . . .
Does he want his very name wiped off the earth?"

800

Medon, the soul of thoughtfulness, responded,
"I don't know if a god inspired your son
or the boy's own impulse led him down to Pylos,

but he went to learn of his father's journey home,
or whatever fate he's met."

805

Back through King Odysseus' house he went
but a cloud of heartbreak overwhelmed the queen.
She could bear no longer sitting on a chair
though her room had chairs aplenty.

810

Down she sank on her well-built chamber's floor,
weeping, pitifully, as the women whimpered round her,
all the women, young and old, who served her house.
Penelope, sobbing uncontrollably, cried out to them,
"Hear me, dear ones! Zeus has given me torment—
me above all the others born and bred in *my* day.
My lionhearted husband, lost, long years ago,
who excelled the Argives all in every strength—
that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas
right to the depths of Argos!

815

But now my son,
my darling boy—the whirlwinds have ripped him
out of the halls without a trace! I never heard
he'd gone—not even from you, you hard, heartless . . .
not one of you even thought to rouse me from my bed,
though well you knew when he boarded that black ship.
Oh if only I had learned he was planning such a journey,
he would have stayed, by god, keen as he was to sail—
or left me dead right here within our palace.

825

Go, someone, quickly! Call old Dolius now,
the servant my father gave me when I came,
the man who tends my orchard green with trees,
so he can run to Laertes, sit beside him,
tell him the whole story, point by point.

830

Perhaps—who knows?—he'll weave some plan,
he'll come out of hiding, plead with all these people
mad to destroy his line, his son's line of kings!"

835

"Oh dear girl," Eurycleia the fond old nurse replied,
"kill me then with a bronze knife—no mercy—or let me live,
here in the palace—I'll hide nothing from you now!

840

I knew it all, I gave him all he asked for,
bread and mellow wine, but he made me take
a binding oath that I, I wouldn't tell you,
no, not till ten or a dozen days had passed
or you missed the lad yourself and learned he'd gone,
so tears would never mar your lovely face . . .
Come, bathe now, put on some fresh clothes,
climb to the upper rooms with all your women
and pray to Pallas, daughter of storming Zeus—
she may save Telemachus yet, even at death's door.

845

Don't worry an old man, worried enough by now.
I can't believe the blessed gods so hate

850

the heirs of King Arcesius, through and through.
One will still live on—I know it—born to rule
this lofty house and the green fields far and wide.”

With that
she lulled Penelope’s grief and dried her eyes of tears.

855 And the queen bathed and put fresh clothing on,
climbed to the upper rooms with all her women
and sifting barley into a basket, prayed to Pallas,

860 “Hear me, daughter of Zeus whose shield is thunder—
tireless one, Athena! If ever, here in his halls,
resourceful King Odysseus

burned rich thighs of sheep or oxen in your honor,
oh remember it now for my sake, save my darling son,
defend him from these outrageous, overbearing suitors!”

865 She shrilled a high cry and the goddess heard her prayer
as the suitors burst into uproar through the shadowed halls
and one of the lusty young men began to brag. “Listen,
our long-courted queen’s preparing us all a marriage—
with no glimmer at all
how the murder of her son has been decreed.”

870 Boasting so,
with no glimmer at all of what had been decreed.
But Antinous took the floor and issued orders:

“Stupid fools! Muzzle your bragging now—
before someone slips inside and reports us.
Up now, not a sound, drive home our plan—
it suits us well, we approved it one and all.”

875 With that he picked out twenty first-rate men
and down they went to the swift ship at the sea’s edge.
First they hauled the craft into deeper water,
stepped the mast amidships, canvas brailled,
made oars fast in the leather oarlock straps
880 while zealous aides-in-arms brought weapons on.
They moored her well out in the channel, disembarked
and took their meal on shore, waiting for dusk to fall.

885 But there in her upper rooms she lay, Penelope
lost in thought, fasting, shunning food and drink,
brooding now . . . would her fine son escape his death
or go down at her overweening suitors’ hands?
Her mind in torment, wheeling

890 like some lion at bay, dreading gangs of hunters
closing their cunning ring around him for the finish.
Harried so she was, when a deep kind sleep overcame her,
back she sank and slept, her limbs fell limp and still.

And again the bright-eyed goddess Pallas thought
of one more way to help. She made a phantom now,
its build like a woman’s build, Iphthime’s, yes,

another daughter of generous Lord Icarus,
Eumelus’ bride, who made her home in Phrae.
Athena sped her on to King Odysseus’ house
to spare Penelope, worn with pain and sobbing,
further spells of grief and storms of tears.

900 The phantom entered her bedroom,
passing quickly in through the doorbolt slit
and hovering at her head she rose and spoke now:

905 “Sleeping, Penelope, your heart so wrung with sorrow?
No need, I tell you, no, the gods who live at ease
can’t bear to let you weep and rack your spirit.
Your son will still come home—it is decreed.
He’s never wronged the gods in any way.”

910 And Penelope murmured back, still cautious,
drifting softly now at the gate of dreams,
“Why have you come, my sister?”

Your visits all too rare in the past,
for you make your home so very far away.

915 You tell me to lay to rest the grief and tears
that overwhelm me now, torment me, heart and soul?
With my lionhearted husband lost long years ago,
who excelled the Argives all in every strength?
That great man whose fame resounds through Hellas
right to the depths of Argos . . .

920 And now my darling boy,
he’s off and gone in a hollow ship! Just a youngster,
still untrained for war or stiff debate.

Him I mourn even more than I do my husband—
I quake in terror for all that he might suffer
either on open sea or shores he goes to visit.
925 Hordes of enemies scheme against him now,
keen to kill him off
before he can reach his native land again.”

“Courage!” the shadowy phantom reassured her.
930 “Don’t be overwhelmed by all your direst fears.
He travels with such an escort, one that others
would pray to stand beside them. She has power—
Pallas Athena. She pities you in your tears.
She wings me here to tell you all these things.”

935 But the circumspect Penelope replied,
“If you *are* a god and have heard a god’s own voice,
come, tell me about that luckless man as well.
Is he still alive? does he see the light of day?
Or is he dead already, lost in the House of Death?”

940 “About that man,” the shadowy phantom answered,
“I cannot tell you the story start to finish,
whether he’s dead or alive.

It's wrong to lead you on with idle words."

At that
she glided off by the doorpost past the bolt—
gone on a lifting breeze. Icarus' daughter
started up from sleep, her spirit warmed now
that a dream so clear had come to her in darkest night.

But the suitors boarded now and sailed the sea-lanes,
plotting in their hearts Telemachus' plunge to death.
Off in the middle channel lies a rocky island,
just between Ithaca and Same's rugged cliffs—
Asteris—not large, but it has a cove,
a harbor with two mouths where ships can hide.
Here the Achaeans lurked in ambush for the prince.

BOOK 5. ODYSSEUS—NYMPH AND SHIPWRECK

As Dawn rose up from bed by her lordly mate Tithonus,
bringing light to immortal gods and mortal men,
the gods sat down in council, circling Zeus
the thunder king whose power rules the world.
Athena began, recalling Odysseus to their thoughts,
the goddess deeply moved by the man's long ordeal,
held captive still in the nymph Calypso's house:
"Father Zeus—you other happy gods who never die—
never let any sceptered king be kind and gentle now,
not with all his heart, or set his mind on justice—
no, let him be cruel and always practice outrage.
Think: not one of the people whom he ruled
remembers Odysseus now, that godlike man,
and kindly as a father to his children.

Now
he's left to pine on an island, racked with grief
in the nymph Calypso's house—she holds him there by force.
He has no way to voyage home to his own native land,
no trim ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars
and send him scudding over the sea's broad back.
And now his dear son . . . they plot to kill the boy
on his way back home. Yes, he has sailed off
for news of his father, to holy Pylos first,
then out to the sunny hills of Lacedaemon."

"My child," Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
"what nonsense you let slip through your teeth. Come now,
wasn't the plan your own? You conceived it yourself:
Odysseus shall return and pay the traitors back.
Telemachus? Sail him home with all your skill—
the power is yours, no doubt—
home to his native country all unharmed
while the suitors limp to port, defeated, baffled men."

With those words, Zeus turned to his own son Hermes.

"You are our messenger, Hermes, sent on all our missions.
Announce to the nymph with lovely braids our fixed decree:
Odysseus journeys home—the exile must return.

But not in the convoy of the gods or mortal men.
No, on a lashed, makeshift raft and wrung with pains,
on the twentieth day he will make his landfall, fertile Scheria,
the land of Phaeacians, close kin to the gods themselves,
who with all their hearts will prize him like a god
and send him off in a ship to his own beloved land,
giving him bronze and hoards of gold and robes—
more plunder than he could ever have won from Troy
if Odysseus had returned intact with his fair share.
So his destiny ordains. He shall see his loved ones,
reach his high-roofed house, his native land at last."

So Zeus decreed and the giant-killing guide obeyed at once.

Quickly under his feet he fastened the supple sandals,
ever-glowing gold, that wing him over the waves
and boundless earth with the rush of gusting winds.
He seized the wand that enchants the eyes of men
whenever Hermes wants, or wakes us up from sleep.
That wand in his grip, the powerful giant-killer,
swooping down from Pieria, down the high clear air,
plunged to the sea and skimmed the waves like a tern
that down the deadly gulfs of the barren salt swells
glides and dives for fish,

dipping its beating wings in bursts of spray—
so Hermes skimmed the crests on endless crests.

But once he gained that island worlds apart,
up from the deep-blue sea he climbed to dry land
and strode on till he reached the spacious cave
where the nymph with lovely braids had made her home,
and he found her there inside . . .

A great fire
blazed on the hearth and the smell of cedar
cleanly split and sweetwood burning bright
wafted a cloud of fragrance down the island.
Deep inside she sang, the goddess Calypso, lifting
her breathtaking voice as she glided back and forth
before her loom, her golden shuttle weaving.

Thick, luxuriant woods grew round the cave,
alders and black poplars, pungent cypress too,
and there birds roosted, folding their long wings,
owls and hawks and the spread-beaked ravens of the sea,
black skimmers who make their living off the waves.
And round the mouth of the cavern trailed a vine
laden with clusters, bursting with ripe grapes.
Four springs in a row, bubbling clear and cold,

running side-by-side, took channels left and right.
Soft meadows spreading round were starred with violets,
lush with beds of parsley. Why, even a deathless god
who came upon that place would gaze in wonder,
heart entranced with pleasure. Hermes the guide,
the mighty giant-killer, stood there, spellbound . . .

85 But once he'd had his fill of marveling at it all
he briskly entered the deep vaulted cavern.

Calypso, lustrous goddess, knew him at once,
as soon as she saw his features face-to-face.

90 Immortals are never strangers to each other,
no matter how distant one may make her home.
But as for great Odysseus—

Hermes could not find him within the cave.

Off he sat on a headland, weeping there as always,
wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish,
gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears.

95 But Calypso, lustrous goddess, questioned Hermes,
seating him on a glistening, polished chair.
“God of the golden wand, why have you come?

A beloved, honored friend,
but it's been so long, your visits much too rare.

100 Tell me what's on your mind. I'm eager to do it,
whatever I can do . . . whatever can be done.”

And the goddess drew a table up beside him,
heaped with ambrosia, mixed him deep-red nectar.¹
Hermes the guide and giant-killer ate and drank.

105 Once he had dined and fortified himself with food
he launched right in, replying to her questions:

“As one god to another, you ask me why I've come.
I'll tell you the whole story, mince no words—
your wish is my command.

It was Zeus who made me come, no choice of mine.
Who would willingly roam across a salty waste so vast,
so endless? Think: no city of men in sight, and not a soul
to offer the gods a sacrifice and burn the fattest victims.

115 But there is no way, you know, for another god to thwart
the will of storming Zeus and make it come to nothing.
Zeus claims you keep beside you a most unlucky man,
most harried of all who fought for Priam's Troy
nine years, sacking the city in the tenth,
and then set sail for home.

120 But voyaging back they outraged Queen Athena
who loosed the gales and pounding seas against them.
There all the rest of his loyal shipmates died
but the wind drove him on, the current bore him here.

125 Now Zeus commands you to send him off with all good speed:

1. Drink of the gods.

it is not his fate to die here, far from his own people.
Destiny still ordains that he shall see his loved ones,
reach his high-roofed house, his native land at last.”

130 But lustrous Calypso shuddered at those words
and burst into a flight of indignation. “Hard-hearted
you are, you gods! You unrivaled lords of jealousy—
scandalized when goddesses sleep with mortals,
openly, even when one has made the man her husband.

135 So when Dawn with her rose-red fingers took Orion,
you gods in your everlasting ease were horrified
till chaste Artemis² throned in gold attacked him,
out on Delos, shot him to death with gentle shafts.
And so when Demeter³ the graceful one with lovely braids

140 gave way to her passion and made love with Iasion,
bedding down in a furrow plowed three times—
Zeus got wind of it soon enough, I'd say,
and blasted the man to death with flashing bolts.

So now at last, you gods, you train your spite on *me*
for keeping a mortal man beside me. The man I saved,
riding astride his keel-board, all alone, when Zeus

145 with one hurt of a white-hot bolt had crushed
his racing warship down the wine-dark sea.
There all the rest of his loyal shipmates died
but the wind drove him on, the current bore him here.

150 And I welcomed him warmly, cherished him, even vowed
to make the man immortal, ageless, all his days . . .
But since there is no way for another god to thwart
the will of storming Zeus and make it come to nothing,
let the man go—if the Almighty insists, commands—
and destroy himself on the barren salt sea!

155 I'll send him off, but not with any escort.
I have no ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars
and send him scudding over the sea's broad back.
But I will gladly advise him—I'll hide nothing—
so he can reach his native country all unharmed.”

160

And the guide and giant-killer reinforced her words:
“Release him at once, just so. Steer clear of the rage of Zeus!
Or down the years he'll fume and make your life a hell.”

With that the powerful giant-killer sped away.

165 The queenly nymph sought out the great Odysseus—
the commands of Zeus still ringing in her ears—
and found him there on the headland, sitting, still,
weeping, his eyes never dry, his sweet life flowing away
with the tears he wept for his foiled journey home,
since the nymph no longer pleased. In the nights, true,

170

2. Virgin goddess of wilderness and the hunt.

3. Goddess of grain.

he'd sleep with her in the arching cave—he had no choice—
unwilling lover alongside lover all too willing . . .

175 But all his days he'd sit on the rocks and beaches,
wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish,
gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears.

180 So coming up to him now, the lustrous goddess ventured,
“No need, my unlucky one, to grieve here any longer,
no, don't waste your life away. Now I am willing,
heart and soul, to send you off at last. Come,
take bronze tools, cut your lengthy timbers,
make them into a broad-beamed raft

and top it off with a half-deck high enough
to sweep you free and clear on the misty seas.

185 And I myself will stock her with food and water,
ruddy wine to your taste—all to stave off hunger—

give you clothing, send you a stiff following wind
so you can reach your native country all unharmed.

If only the gods are willing. They rule the vaulting skies.
They're stronger than I to plan and drive things home.”

190 Long-enduring Odysseus shuddered at that
and broke out in a sharp flight of protest.

“Passage home? Never. Surely you're plotting
something else, goddess, urging me—in a raft—to
cross the ocean's mighty gulfs. So vast, so full
of danger not even deep-sea ships can make it through,
195 swift as they are and buoyed up by the winds of Zeus himself.
I won't set foot on a raft until you show good faith,
until you consent to swear, goddess, a binding oath
you'll never plot some new intrigue to harm me!”

200 He was so intense the lustrous goddess smiled,
stroked him with her hand, savored his name and chided,
“Ah what a wicked man you are, and never at a loss.
What a thing to imagine, what a thing to say!

205 Earth be my witness now, the vaulting Sky above
and the dark cascading waters of the Styx⁴—I swear
by the greatest, grimmest oath that binds the happy gods:
I will never plot some new intrigue to harm you.

Never. All I have in mind and devise for *you*
are the very plans I'd fashion for myself
if I were in your straits. My every impulse
bends to what is right. Not iron, trust me,
the heart within *my* breast. I am all compassion.”

And lustrous Calypso quickly led the way
as he followed in the footsteps of the goddess.

4. Underworld river and the goddess who guaranteed the gods' oaths.

215 They reached the arching cavern, man and god as one,
and Odysseus took the seat that Hermes just left,
while the nymph set out before him every kind
of food and drink that mortal men will take.

220 Calypso sat down face-to-face with the king
and the women served her nectar and ambrosia.
They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
and when they'd had their fill of food and drink
the lustrous one took up a new approach. “So then,
royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, man of exploits,
still eager to leave at once and hurry back
to your own home, your beloved native land?

Good luck to you, even so. Farewell!

230 But if you only knew, down deep, what pains
are fated to fill your cup before you reach that shore,
you'd stay right here, preside in our house with me
and be immortal. Much as you long to see your wife,
the one you pine for all your days . . . and yet
I just might claim to be nothing less than she,
neither in face nor figure. Hardly right, is it,
for mortal woman to rival immortal goddess?
How, in build? in beauty?”

“Ah great goddess,”

worldly Odysseus answered, “don't be angry with me,
please. All that you say is true, how well I know.

240 Look at my wise Penelope. She falls far short of you,
your beauty, stature. She is mortal after all
and you, you never age or die . . .

Nevertheless I long—I pine, all my days—to
travel home and see the dawn of my return.

245 And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine-dark sea,
I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure.
Much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now
in the waves and wars. Add this to the total—
bring the trial on!”

Even as he spoke

the sun set and the darkness swept the earth.

250 And now, withdrawing into the cavern's deep recesses,
long in each other's arms they lost themselves in love.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
Odysseus quickly dressed himself in cloak and shirt
while the nymph slipped on a loose, glistening robe,
filmy, a joy to the eye, and round her waist
she ran a brocaded golden belt

255 and over her head a scarf to shield her brow,
then turned to plan the great man's voyage home.
She gave him a heavy bronze ax that fit his grip,
both blades well-honed, with a fine olive haft
lashed firm to its head. She gave him a polished

smoothing-adze as well and then she led the way
to the island's outer edge where trees grew tall,
alders, black poplars and firs that shot sky-high,
seasoned, drying for years, ideal for easy floating.
Once she'd shown her guest where the tall timber stood,
Calypso the lustrous goddess headed home again.
He set to cutting trunks—the work was done in no time.
Twenty in all he felled, he trimmed them clean with his ax
and split them deftly, tried them straight to the line.
Meanwhile the radiant goddess brought him drills—
he bored through all his planks and wedged them snugly,
knocking them home together, locked with pegs and joints.
Broad in the beam and bottom flat as a merchantman
when a master shipwright turns out her hull,
so broad the craft Odysseus made himself.
Working away at speed
he put up half-decks pinned to close-set ribs
and a sweep of gunwales rounded off the sides.
He fashioned the mast next and sank its yard in deep
and added a steering-oar to hold her right on course,
then he fenced her stem to stern with twigs and wicker,
bulwark against the sea-surge, floored with heaps of brush.
And lustrous Calypso came again, now with bolts of cloth
to make the sail, and he finished that off too, expertly.
Braces, sheets and brails—he rigged all fast on board,
then eased her down with levers into the sunlit sea.

That was the fourth day and all his work was done.
On the fifth, the lovely goddess launched him from her island,
once she had bathed and decked him out in fragrant clothes.
And Calypso stowed two skins aboard—dark wine in one,
the larger one held water—added a sack of rations,
filled with her choicest meats to build his strength,
and summoned a wind to bear him onward, fair and warm.
The wind lifting his spirits high, royal Odysseus
spread sail—gripping the tiller, seated astern—
and now the master mariner steered his craft,
sleep never closing his eyes, forever scanning
the stars, the Pleiades and the Plowman late to set
and the Great Bear that mankind also calls the Wagon:
she wheels on her axis always fixed, watching the Hunter,
and she alone is denied a plunge in the Ocean's baths.
Hers were the stars the lustrous goddess told him
to keep hard to port as he cut across the sea.
And seventeen days he sailed, making headway well;
on the eighteenth, shadowy mountains slowly loomed . . .
the Phaeacians' island reaching toward him now,
over the misty breakers, rising like a shield.

But now Poseidon, god of the earthquake, saw him—
just returning home from his Ethiopian friends,
from miles away on the Solymi mountain-range
he spied Odysseus sailing down the sea
and it made his fury boil even more.
He shook his head and rumbled to himself,
“Outrageous! Look how the gods have changed their minds
about Odysseus—while I was off with my Ethiopians.
Just look at him there, nearing Phaeacia's shores
where he's fated to escape his noose of pain
that's held him until now. Still my hopes ride high—
I'll give that man his swamping fill of trouble!”
With that he rammed the clouds together—both hands
clutching his trident—churned the waves into chaos, whipping
all the gales from every quarter, shrouding over in thunderheads
the earth and sea at once—and night swept down from the sky—
East and South Winds clashed and the raging West and North,
sprung from the heavens, roiled heaving breakers up—
and Odysseus' knees quaked, his spirit too;
numb with fear he spoke to his own great heart:
“Wretched man—what becomes of me now, at last?
I fear the nymph foretold it all too well—
on the high seas, she said, before I can reach
my native land I'll fill my cup of pain! And now,
look, it all comes to pass. What monstrous clouds—
King Zeus crowning the whole wide heaven black—
churning the seas in chaos, gales blasting,
raging around my head from every quarter—
my death-plunge in a flash, it's certain now!
Three, four times blessed, my friends-in-arms
who died on the plains of Troy those years ago,
serving the sons of Atreus to the end. Would to god
I'd died there too and met my fate that day the Trojans,
swarms of them, hurled at me with bronze spears,
fighting over the corpse of proud Achilles!
A hero's funeral then, my glory spread by comrades—
now what a wretched death I'm doomed to die!”
At that a massive wave came crashing down on his head,
a terrific onslaught spinning his craft round and round—
he was thrown clear of the decks—
the steering-oar wrenched
from his grasp—
and in one lightning attack the brawling
galewinds struck full-force, snapping the mast mid-shaft
and hurling the sail and sailyard far across the sea.
He went under a good long while, no fast way out,
no struggling up from under the giant wave's assault,

his clothing dragged him down—divine Calypso's gifts—
 but at last he fought his way to the surface spewing
 bitter brine, streams of it pouring down his head.
 But half-drowned as he was, he'd not forget his craft—
 he lunged after her through the breakers, laying hold
 and huddling amidships, fled the stroke of death.
 Pell-mell the rollers tossed her along down-current,
 wild as the North Wind tossing thistle along the fields
 at high harvest—dry stalks clutching each other tightly—
 so the galewinds tumbled her down the sea, this way, that way,
 now the South Wind flinging her over to North to sport with,
 now the East Wind giving her up to West to harry on and on.

But someone saw him—Cadmus' daughter with lovely ankles,
 Ino, a mortal woman once with human voice and called
 Leucothea now she lives in the sea's salt depths,
 esteemed by all the gods as she deserves.

She pitied Odysseus, tossed, tormented so—
 she broke from the waves like a shearwater on the wing,
 lit on the wreck and asked him kindly, "Ah poor man,
 why is the god of earthquakes so dead set against you?
 Strewing your way with such a crop of troubles!
 But he can't destroy you, not for all his anger.
 Just do as I say. You seem no fool to me.

Strip off those clothes and leave your craft
 for the winds to hurl, and swim for it now, you must,
 strike out with your arms for landfall there,
 Phaeacian land where destined safety waits.
 Here, take this scarf,

tie it around your waist—it is immortal.
 Nothing to fear now, neither pain nor death.
 But once you grasp the mainland with your hands
 untie it quickly, throw it into the wine-dark sea,
 far from the shore, but you, you turn your head away!"

With that the goddess handed him the scarf
 and slipped back in the heavy breaking seas
 like a shearwater once again

and a dark heaving billow closed above her.
 But battle-weary Odysseus weighed two courses,
 deeply torn, probing his fighting spirit: "Oh no—
 I fear another immortal weaves a snare to trap me,
 urging me to abandon ship! I won't. Not yet.

That shore's too far away—
 I glimpsed it myself—where she says refuge waits.
 No, here's what I'll do, it's what seems best to me.
 As long as the timbers cling and joints stand fast,
 I'll hold out aboard her and take a whipping—
 once the breakers smash my craft to pieces,
 then I'll swim—no better plan for now."

But just as great Odysseus thrashed things out,
 Poseidon god of the earthquake launched a colossal wave,
 terrible, murderous, arching over him, pounding down on him,
 hard as a windstorm blasting piles of dry parched chaff,
 scattering flying husks—so the long planks of his boat
 were scattered far and wide. But Odysseus leapt aboard
 one timber and riding it like a plunging racehorse
 stripped away his clothes, divine Calypso's gifts,
 and quickly tying the scarf around his waist
 he dove headfirst in the sea,
 stretched his arms and stroked for life itself.
 But again the mighty god of earthquakes spied him,
 shook his head and grumbled deep in his spirit, "Go, go,
 after all you've suffered—rove your miles of sea—
 till you fall in the arms of people loved by Zeus.
 Even so I can hardly think you'll find
 your punishments too light!"

With that threat
 he lashed his team with their long flowing manes,
 gaining Aegae port where his famous palace stands.

But Zeus's daughter Athena countered him at once.
 The rest of the winds she stopped right in their tracks,
 commanding them all to hush now, go to sleep.
 All but the boisterous North—she whipped him up
 and the goddess beat the breakers flat before Odysseus,
 dear to Zeus, so he could reach the Phaeacians,
 mingle with men who love their long oars
 and escape his death at last.

Yes, but now,
 adrift on the heaving swells two nights, two days—
 quite lost—again and again the man foresaw his death.
 Then when Dawn with her lovely locks brought on
 the third day, the wind fell in an instant,

all glazed to a dead calm, and Odysseus,
 scanning sharply, raised high by a groundswell,
 looked up and saw it—landfall, just ahead.
 Joy . . . warm as the joy that children feel
 when they see their father's life dawn again,
 one who's lain on a sickbed racked with torment,

wasting away, slowly, under some angry power's onslaught—
 then what joy when the gods deliver him from his pains!
 So warm, Odysseus' joy when he saw that shore, those trees,
 as he swam on, anxious to plant his feet on solid ground again.
 But just offshore, as far as a man's shout can carry,
 he caught the boom of a heavy surf on jagged reefs—
 roaring breakers crashing down on an ironbound coast,
 exploding in fury—

the whole sea shrouded—
 sheets of spray—

no harbors to hold ships, no roadstead where they'd ride,
 nothing but jutting headlands, riptooth reefs, cliffs.
 450 Odysseus' knees quaked and the heart inside him sank;
 he spoke to his fighting spirit, desperate: "Worse and worse!
 Now that Zeus has granted a glimpse of land beyond my hopes,
 now I've crossed this waste of water, the end in sight,
 there's no way out of the boiling surf—I see no way!
 455 Rugged reefs offshore, around them breakers roaring,
 above them a smooth rock face, rising steeply, look,
 and the surge too deep inshore, no spot to stand
 on my own two legs and battle free of death.
 If I clamber out, some big comber will hoist me,
 dash me against that cliff—my struggles all a waste!
 460 If I keep on swimming down the coast, trying to find
 a seabeach shelving against the waves, a sheltered cove—
 I dread it—another gale will snatch me up and haul me
 back to the fish-infested sea, retching in despair.
 Or a dark power will loose some monster at me,
 465 rearing out of the waves—one of the thousands
 Amphitrite's⁵ breakers team with. Well I know
 the famous god of earthquakes hates my very name!"

Just as that fear went churning through his mind
 a tremendous roller swept him toward the rocky coast
 470 where he'd have been flayed alive, his bones crushed
 if the bright-eyed goddess Pallas had not inspired him now.
 He lunged for a reef, he seized it with both hands and clung
 for dear life, groaning until the giant wave surged past
 and so he escaped its force, but the breaker's backwash
 475 charged into him full fury and hurled him out to sea.
 Like pebbles stuck in the suckers of some octopus
 dragged from its lair—so strips of skin torn
 from his clawing hands stuck to the rock face.
 A heavy sea covered him over, then and there
 480 unlucky Odysseus would have met his death—
 against the will of Fate—
 but the bright-eyed one inspired him yet again.
 Fighting out from the breakers pounding toward the coast,
 out of danger he swam on, scanning the land, trying to find
 485 a seabeach shelving against the waves, a sheltered cove,
 and stroking hard he came abreast of a river's mouth,
 running calmly, the perfect spot, he thought . . .
 free of rocks, with a windbreak from the gales.
 As the current flowed he felt the river's god and
 490 prayed to him in spirit: "Hear me, lord, whoever you are,
 I've come to you, the answer to all my prayers—
 rescue me from the sea, the Sea-lord's curse!

5. Goddess, queen of the sea.

Even immortal gods will show a man respect,
 whatever wanderer seeks their help—like me—
 495 I throw myself on your mercy, on your current now—
 I have suffered greatly. Pity me, lord,
 your suppliant cries for help!"

So the man prayed
 and the god stemmed his current, held his surge at once
 and smoothing out the swells before Odysseus now,
 500 drew him safe to shore at the river's mouth.

His knees buckled, massive arms fell limp,
 the sea had beaten down his striving heart.
 His whole body swollen, brine aplenty gushing
 out of his mouth and nostrils—breathless, speechless,
 505 there he lay, with only a little strength left in him,
 deadly waves of exhaustion overwhelmed him now . . .

But once he regained his breath and rallied back to life,
 at last he loosed the goddess' scarf from his body,
 dropped it into the river flowing out to sea
 510 and a swift current bore it far downstream
 and suddenly Ino caught it in her hands.

Struggling up from the banks, he flung himself
 in the deep reeds, he kissed the good green earth
 and addressed his fighting spirit, desperate still:

515 "Man of misery, what next? Is this the end?

If I wait out a long tense night by the banks,
 I fear the sharp frost and the soaking dew together
 will do me in—I'm bone-weary, about to breathe my last,
 and a cold wind blows from a river on toward morning.
 But what if I climb that slope, go for the dark woods
 520 and bed down in the thick brush? What if I'm spared
 the chill, fatigue, and a sweet sleep comes my way?
 I fear wild beasts will drag me off as quarry."

But this was the better course, it struck him now.
 He set out for the woods and not far from the water
 found a grove with a clearing all around and crawled
 beneath two bushy olives sprung from the same root,
 525 one olive wild, the other well-bred stock.

No sodden gusty winds could ever pierce them,
 nor could the sun's sharp rays invade their depths,
 nor could a downpour drench them through and through,
 so dense they grew together, tangling side-by-side.
 Odysseus crept beneath them, scraping up at once
 a good wide bed for himself with both hands.

530 A fine litter of dead leaves had drifted in,
 enough to cover two men over, even three,
 in the wildest kind of winter known to man.
 Long-enduring great Odysseus, overjoyed at the sight,
 bedded down in the midst and heaped the leaves around him.

540 As a man will bury his glowing brand in black ashes,
 off on a lonely farmstead, no neighbors near,
 to keep a spark alive—no need to kindle fire
 from somewhere else—so great Odysseus buried
 545 himself in leaves and Athena showered sleep
 upon his eyes . . . sleep in a swift wave
 delivering him from all his pains and labors,
 blessed sleep that sealed his eyes at last.

BOOK 6. THE PRINCESS AND THE STRANGER

5 So there he lay at rest, the storm-tossed great Odysseus,
 borne down by his hard labors first and now deep sleep
 as Athena traveled through the countryside
 and reached the Phaeacians' city. Years ago
 they lived in a land of spacious dancing-circles,
 Hyperia, all too close to the overbearing Cyclops,
 stronger, violent brutes who harried them without end.
 So their godlike king, Nausithous, led the people off
 10 in a vast migration, settled them in Scheria,
 far from the men who toil on this earth—
 he flung up walls around the city, built the houses,
 raised the gods' temples and shared the land for plowing.
 But his fate had long since forced him down to Death
 and now Alcinous ruled, and the gods made him wise.
 15 Straight to his house the clear-eyed Pallas went,
 full of plans for great Odysseus' journey home.
 She made her way to the gaily painted room
 where a young girl lay asleep . . .
 a match for the deathless gods in build and beauty,
 20 Nausicaa, the daughter of generous King Alcinous.
 Two handmaids fair as the Graces slept beside her,
 flanking the two posts with the gleaming doors closed.
 But the goddess drifted through like a breath of fresh air,
 rushed to the girl's bed and hovering close she spoke,
 25 in face and form like the shipman Dymas' daughter,
 a girl the princess' age, and dearest to her heart.
 Disguised, the bright-eyed goddess chided, "Nausicaa,
 how could your mother bear a careless girl like you?
 Look at your fine clothes, lying here neglected—
 30 with your marriage not far off;
 the day you should be decked in all your glory
 and offer elegant dress to those who form your escort.
 That's how a bride's good name goes out across the world
 and it brings her father and queenly mother joy. Come,
 35 let's go wash these clothes at the break of day—
 I'll help you, lend a hand, and the work will fly!
 You won't stay unwed long. The noblest men

40 in the country court you now, all Phaeacians
 just like you, Phaeacia-born and raised. So come,
 the first thing in the morning press your kingly father
 to harness the mules and wagon for you, all to carry
 your sashes, dresses, glossy spreads for your bed.
 It's so much nicer for you to ride than go on foot.
 The washing-pools are just too far from town."

45 With that
 the bright-eyed goddess sped away to Olympus, where,
 they say, the gods' eternal mansion stands unmoved,
 never rocked by galewinds, never drenched by rains,
 nor do the drifting snows assail it, no, the clear air
 stretches away without a cloud, and a great radiance
 50 plays across that world where the blithe gods
 live all their days in bliss. There Athena went,
 once the bright-eyed one had urged the princess on.

Dawn soon rose on her splendid throne and woke
 Nausicaa finely gowned. Still beguiled by her dream,
 55 down she went through the house to tell her parents now,
 her beloved father and mother. She found them both inside.
 Her mother sat at the hearth with several waiting-women,
 spinning yarn on a spindle, lustrous sea-blue wool.
 Her father she met as he left to join the lords
 at a council island nobles asked him to attend.

60 She stepped up close to him, confiding, "Daddy dear,
 I wonder, won't you have them harness a wagon for me,
 the tall one with the good smooth wheels . . . so I
 can take our clothes to the river for a washing?
 65 Lovely things, but lying before me all soiled.
 And you yourself, sitting among the princes,
 debating points at your council,
 you really should be wearing spotless linen.
 Then you have five sons, full-grown in the palace,
 70 two of them married, but three are lusty bachelors
 always demanding crisp shirts fresh from the wash
 when they go out to dance. Look at my duties—
 that all rests on me."

So she coaxed, too shy
 to touch on her hopes for marriage, young warm hopes,
 in her father's presence. But he saw through it all
 and answered quickly, "I won't deny you the mules,
 75 my darling girl . . . I won't deny you anything.
 Off you go, and the men will harness a wagon,
 the tall one with the good smooth wheels,
 fitted out with a cradle on the top."

With that
 he called to the stablemen and they complied.
 They trundled the wagon out now, rolling smoothly,

Deleted from reading selection:
 Books 6-15

615 ~~he leapt up with a start at dawn but still so dazed~~
 he forgot to climb back again by the long ladder—
 headfirst from the roof he plunged, his neck snapped
 from the backbone, his soul flew down to Death.

620 Once on our way, I gave the men their orders:
 'You think we are headed home, our own dear land?
 Well, Circe sets us a rather different course . . .
 down to the House of Death and the awesome one, Persephone,
 there to consult the ghost of Tiresias, seer of Thebes.'

625 So I said, and it broke my shipmates' hearts.
 They sank down on the ground, moaning, tore their hair.
 But it gained us nothing—what good can come of grief?

630 Back to the swift ship at the water's edge we went,
 our spirits deep in anguish, faces wet with tears.
 But Circe got to the dark hull before us,
 tethered a ram and black ewe close by—
 slipping past unseen. Who can glimpse a god
~~who wants to be invisible~~ gliding here and there?"

BOOK 11. THE KINGDOM OF THE DEAD

5 "Now down we came to the ship at the water's edge,
 we hauled and launched her into the sunlit breakers first,
 stepped the mast in the black craft and set our sail
 and loaded the sheep aboard, the ram and ewe,
 then we ourselves embarked, streaming tears,
 our hearts weighed down with anguish . . .
 But Circe, the awesome nymph with lovely braids
 who speaks with human voice, sent us a hardy shipmate,
 yes, a fresh following wind ruffling up in our wake,
 10 bellying out our sail to drive our blue prow on as we,
 securing the running gear from stern to stern, sat back
 while the wind and helmsman kept her true on course.
 The sail stretched taut as she cut the sea all day
 and the sun sank and the roads of the world grew dark.

15 And she made the outer limits, the Ocean River's bounds
 where Cimmerian people have their homes—their realm and city
 shrouded in mist and cloud. The eye of the Sun can never
 flash his rays through the dark and bring them light,
 not when he climbs the starry skies or when he wheels
 20 back down from the heights to touch the earth once more—
 an endless, deadly night overhangs those wretched men.
 There, gaining that point, we beached our craft
 and herding out the sheep, we picked our way
 by the Ocean's banks until we gained the place
 that Circe made our goal.

Here at the spot

30 Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims fast,
 and I, drawing my sharp sword from beside my hip,
 dug a trench of about a forearm's depth and length
 and around it poured libations out to all the dead,
 first with milk and honey, and then with mellow wine,
 then water third and last, and sprinkled glistening barley
 over it all, and time and again I vowed to all the dead,
 to the drifting, listless spirits of their ghosts,
 that once I returned to Ithaca I would slaughter
 35 a barren heifer in my halls, the best I had,
 and load a pyre with treasures—and to Tiresias,
 alone, apart, I would offer a sleek black ram,
 the pride of all my herds. And once my vows
 and prayers had invoked the nations of the dead,
 40 I took the victims, over the trench I cut their throats
 and the dark blood flowed in—and up out of Erebus they came,
 flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone . . .
 Brides and unwed youths and old men who had suffered much
 and girls with their tender hearts freshly scarred by sorrow
 and great armies of battle dead, stabbed by bronze spears,
 45 men of war still wrapped in bloody armor—thousands
 swarming around the trench from every side—
 unearthly cries—blanching terror gripped me!
 I ordered the men at once to flay the sheep
 that lay before us, killed by my ruthless blade,
 50 and burn them both, and then say prayers to the gods,
 to the almighty god of death and dread Persephone.
 But I, the sharp sword drawn from beside my hip,
 sat down on alert there and never let the ghosts
 of the shambling, shiftless dead come near that blood
 55 till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

But first
 the ghost of Elpenor, my companion, came toward me.
 He'd not been buried under the wide ways of earth,
 not yet, we'd left his body in Circe's house,
 unwept, unburied—this other labor pressed us.
 60 But I wept to see him now, pity touched my heart
 and I called out a winged word to him there: 'Elpenor,
 how did you travel down to the world of darkness?
 Faster on foot, I see, than I in my black ship.'

65 My comrade groaned as he offered me an answer:
 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
 the doom of an angry god, and god knows how much wine—
 they were my ruin, captain . . . I'd bedded down
 on the roof of Circe's house but never thought
 70 to climb back down again by the long ladder—
 headfirst from the roof I plunged, my neck snapped
 from the backbone, my soul flew down to Death. Now,

I beg you by those you left behind, so far from here,
your wife, your father who bred and reared you as a boy,
and Telenachus, left at home in your halls, your only son.

75

Well I know when you leave this lodging of the dead
that you and your ship will put ashore again
at the island of Aeaëa—then and there,

my lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off
and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't,
or my curse may draw god's fury on your head.

80

No, burn me in full armor, all my harness,
heap my mound by the churning gray surf—
a man whose luck ran out—

so even men to come will learn my story.

85

Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar

I swung with mates when I rowed among the living.'

'All this, my unlucky friend,' I reassured him,
'I will do for you. I won't forget a thing.'

So we sat
and faced each other, trading our bleak parting words,
I on my side, holding my sword above the blood,
he across from me there, my comrade's phantom
dragging out his story.

90

But look, the ghost

of my mother came! My mother, dead and gone now . . .
Anticleia—daughter of that great heart Autolycus—
whom I had left alive when I sailed for sacred Troy.
I broke into tears to see her here, but filled with pity,
even throbbing with grief, I would not let her ghost
approach the blood till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

95

At last he came. The shade of the famous Theban prophet,
holding a golden scepter, knew me at once and hailed me:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits,
man of pain, what now, what brings you here,
forsaking the light of day

100

to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?

105

Stand back from the trench—put up your sharp sword
so I can drink the blood and tell you all the truth.'

Moving back, I thrust my silver-studded sword
deep in its sheath, and once he had drunk the dark blood
the words came ringing from the prophet in his power:
'A sweet smooth journey home, renowned Odysseus,
that is what you seek

110

but a god will make it hard for you—I know—
you will never escape the one who shakes the earth,
quaking with anger at you still, still enraged
because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son.
Even so, you and your crew may still reach home,

115

suffering all the way, if you only have the power
to curb their wild desire and curb your own, what's more,
from the day your good trim vessel first puts in
at Thrinacia Island, flees the cruel blue sea.

120

There you will find them grazing,

herds and fat flocks, the cattle of Helios,

god of the sun who sees all, hears all things.

Leave the beasts unharmed, your mind set on home,

and you all may still reach Ithaca—bent with hardship,

true—but harm them in any way, and I can see it now:

125

your ship destroyed, your men destroyed as well.

And even if you escape, you'll come home late

and come a broken man—all shipmates lost,

130

alone in a stranger's ship—

and you will find a world of pain at home,

crude, arrogant men devouring all your goods,

courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.

No doubt you will pay them back in blood when you come home!

But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—

by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—

go forth once more, you must . . .

carry your well-planed oar until you come

to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,

whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all

to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,

wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—

unmistakable, clear, so clear you cannot miss it:

140

When another traveler falls in with you and calls

that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain,

then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth

and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,

Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—

then journey home and render noble offerings up

to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,

to all the gods in order.

And at last your own death will steal upon you . . .

a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes

to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age

with all your people there in blessed peace around you.

All that I have told you will come true.'

'Oh Tiresias,'

I replied as the prophet finished, 'surely the gods

have spun this out as fate, the gods themselves.

But tell me one thing more, and tell me clearly.

I see the ghost of my long-lost mother here before me.

Dead, crouching close to the blood in silence,

she cannot bear to look me in the eyes—

her own son—or speak a word to me. How,

lord, can I make her know me for the man I am?'

165

'One rule there is,' the famous seer explained,
'and simple for me to say and you to learn.
Any one of the ghosts you let approach the blood
will speak the truth to you. Anyone you refuse
will turn and fade away.'

170

And with those words,
now that his prophecies had closed, the awesome shade
of lord Tiresias strode back to the House of Death.
But I kept watch there, steadfast till my mother
approached and drank the dark, clouding blood.
She knew me at once and wailed out in grief
and her words came winging toward me, flying home:
'Oh my son—what brings you down to the world
of death and darkness? You are still alive!

175

It's hard for the living to catch a glimpse of this . . .
Great rivers flow between us, terrible waters,
the Ocean first of all—no one could ever ford
that stream on foot, only aboard some sturdy craft.
Have you just come from Troy, wandering long years
with your men and ship? Not yet returned to Ithaca?
You've still not seen your wife inside your halls?'

185

'Mother,'
I replied, 'I had to venture down to the House of Death,
to consult the shade of Tiresias, seer of Thebes.
Never yet have I neared Achaëa, never once
set foot on native ground,

always wandering—endless hardship from that day
I first set sail with King Agamemnon bound for Troy,
the stallion-land, to fight the Trojans there.

190

But tell me about yourself and spare me nothing.
What form of death overcame you, what laid you low,
some long slow illness? Or did Artemis showering arrows
come with her painless shafts and bring you down?

195

Tell me of father, tell of the son I left behind:
do my royal rights still lie in their safekeeping?
Or does some stranger hold the throne by now
because men think that I'll come home no more?
Please, tell me about my wife, her turn of mind,
her thoughts . . . still standing fast beside our son,
still guarding our great estates, secure as ever now?
Or has she wed some other countryman at last,
the finest prince among them?'

205

'Surely, surely,'
my noble mother answered quickly, 'she's still waiting
there in your halls, poor woman, suffering so,
her life an endless hardship like your own . . .
wasting away the nights, weeping away the days.
No one has taken over your royal rights, not yet.
Telemachus still holds your great estates in peace,

210

he attends the public banquets shared with all,
the feasts a man of justice should enjoy,
for every lord invites him. As for your father,
he keeps to his own farm—he never goes to town—
with no bed for him there, no blankets, glossy throws;
all winter long he sleeps in the lodge with servants,
in the ashes by the fire, his body wrapped in rags.

215

But when summer comes and the bumper crops of harvest,
any spot on the rising ground of his vineyard rows
he makes his bed, heaped high with fallen leaves,
and there he lies in anguish . . .

220

with his old age bearing hard upon him, too,
and his grief grows as he longs for your return.
And I with the same grief, I died and met my fate.

225

No sharp-eyed Huntress showering arrows through the halls
approached and brought me down with painless shafts,
nor did some hateful illness strike me, that so often
devastates the body, drains our limbs of power.

230

No, it was my longing for you, my shining Odysseus—
you and your quickness, you and your gentle ways—
that tore away my life that had been sweet.'

And I, my mind in turmoil, how I longed
to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was!
Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her,
three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away
like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time
the grief cut to the heart, sharper, yes, and I,
I cried out to her, words winging into the darkness:
'Mother—why not wait for me? How I long to hold you!—

235

so even here, in the House of Death, we can fling
our loving arms around each other, take some joy
in the tears that numb the heart. Or is this just
some wrath that great Persephone sends my way
to make me ache with sorrow all the more?'

240

My noble mother answered me at once:

245

'My son, my son, the unluckiest man alive!
This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone,
this is just the way of mortals when we die.

Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together—
the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes
once life slips from the white bones, and the spirit,
rustling, flutters away . . . flown like a dream.

250

But you must long for the daylight. Go, quickly.
Remember all these things
so one day you can tell them to your wife.'

255

And so we both confided, trading parting words,
and there slowly came a grand array of women,

all sent before me now by august Persephone,
and all were wives and daughters once of princes.
They swarmed in a flock around the dark blood
while I searched for a way to question each alone,
and the more I thought, the more this seemed the best:
Drawing forth the long sharp sword from beside my hip,
I would not let them drink the dark blood, all in a rush,
and so they waited, coming forward one after another.
Each declared her lineage, and I explored them all.

And the first I saw there? Tyro, born of kings,
who said her father was that great lord Salmooneus,
said that she was the wife of Cretheus, Aeolus' son.
And once she fell in love with the river god, Enipeus,
far the clearest river flowing across the earth,
and so she'd haunt Enipeus' glinting streams,
till taking his shape one day

the god who girds the earth and makes it tremble
bedded her where the swirling river rushes out to sea,
and a surging wave reared up, high as a mountain, dark,
arching over to hide the god and mortal girl together.
Loosing her virgin belt, he lapped her round in sleep
and when the god had consummated his work of love
he took her by the hand and hailed her warmly:

'Rejoice in our love, my lady! And when this year
has run its course you will give birth to glorious children—
bedding down with the gods is never barren, futile—
and you must tend them, breed and rear them well.
Now home you go, and restrain yourself, I say,
never breathe your lover's name but know—
I am Poseidon, god who rocks the earth!'

With that he dove back in the heaving waves
and she conceived for the god and bore him Pelias, Neleus,
and both grew up to be stalwart aides of Zeus almighty,
both men alike. Pelias lived on the plains of Iolcos,
rich in sheepflocks, Neleus lived in sandy Pylos.
And the noble queen bore sons to Cretheus too:
Aeson, Pheres and Amythaon, exultant charioteer.

And after Tyro I saw Asopus' daughter Antiope,
proud she'd spent a night in the arms of Zeus himself
and borne the god twin sons, Amphion and Zethus,
the first to build the footings of seven-gated Thebes,
her bastions too, for lacking ramparts none could live
in a place so vast, so open—strong as both men were.

And I saw Alcmena next, Amphitryon's wife,
who slept in the clasp of Zeus and merged in love
and brought forth Heracles, rugged will and lion heart.
And I saw Megara too, magnanimous Creon's daughter

wed to the stalwart Heracles, the hero never daunted.

And I saw the mother of Oedipus, beautiful Epicaste.
What a monstrous thing she did, in all innocence—
she married her own son . . .
who'd killed his father, then he married *her*!
But the gods soon made it known to all mankind.
So he in growing pain ruled on in beloved Thebes,
lordling Cadmus' people—thanks to the gods' brutal plan—
while she went down to Death who guards the massive gates.
Lashing a noose to a steep rafter, there she hanged aloft,
strangling in all her anguish, leaving her son to bear
the world of horror a mother's Furies bring to life.

And I saw magnificent Chloris, the one whom Neleus
wooed and won with a hoard of splendid gifts,
so dazzled by her beauty years ago . . .

the youngest daughter of Iasus' son Amphion,
the great Minyan king who ruled Orchomenos once.
She was his queen in Pylos, she bore him shining sons,
Nestor and Chromius, Periclymenus too, good prince.
And after her sons she bore a daughter, majestic Pero,
the marvel of her time, courted by all the young lords
round about. But Neleus would not give her to any suitor,
none but the man who might drive home the herds
that powerful Iphiclus had stolen. Lurching,
broad in the brow, those longhorned beasts,
and no small task to round them up from Phylace.
Only the valiant seer Melampus volunteered—
he would drive them home—

but a god's iron sentence bound him fast:
barbarous herdsmen dragged him off in chains.
Yet when the months and days had run their course
and the year wheeled round and the seasons came again,
then mighty Iphiclus loosed the prophet's shackles,
once he had told him all the gods' decrees.
And so the will of Zeus was done at last.

And I saw Leda next, Tyndareus' wife,
who'd borne the king two sons, intrepid twins,
Castor, breaker of horses, and the hardy boxer Polydeuces,
both buried now in the life-giving earth though still alive.
Even under the earth Zeus grants them that distinction:
one day alive, the next day dead, each twin by turns,
they both hold honors equal to the gods'.

And I saw Iphimedeia next, Aloeus' wife,
who claimed she lay in the Sea-lord's loving waves
and gave the god two sons, but they did not live long,
Otus staunch as a god and far-famed Ephialtes.
They were the tallest men the fertile earth has borne,

the handsomest too, by far, aside from renowned Orion.
 Nine yards across they measured, even at nine years old,
 nine fathoms tall they towered. They even threatened
 the deathless gods they'd storm Olympus' heights
 with the pounding rush and grinding shock of battle.
 They were wild to pile Ossa upon Olympus, then on Ossa
 Pelion dense with timber—their toeholds up the heavens.
 And they'd have won the day if they had reached peak strength
 but Apollo the son of Zeus, whom sleek-haired Leto bore,
 laid both giants low before their beards had sprouted,
 covering cheek and chin with a fresh crop of down.

Phaedra and Procris too I saw, and lovely Ariadne,
 daughter of Minos, that harsh king. One day Theseus tried
 to spirit her off from Crete to Athens' sacred heights
 but he got no joy from her. Artemis killed her first
 on wave-washed Dia's shores, accused by Dionysus.

And I saw Clymene, Maera and loathsome Eriphyle—
 bribed with a golden necklace
 to lure her lawful husband to his death . . .

But the whole cortege I could never tally, never name,
 not all the daughters and wives of great men I saw there.
 Long before that, the godsent night would ebb away.
 But the time has come for sleep, either with friends
 aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.
 My passage home will rest with the gods and you."

Odysseus paused . . . They all fell silent, hushed,
 his story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls
 till the white-armed queen Arete suddenly burst out,
 "Phaeacians! How does this man impress you now,
 his looks, his build, the balanced mind inside him?
 The stranger is my guest

but each of you princes shares the honor here.
 So let's not be too hasty to send him on his way,
 and don't scrimp on his gifts. His need is great,
 great as the riches piled up in your houses,
 thanks to the gods' good will."

Following her,
 the old revered Echeneus added his support,
 the eldest lord on the island of Phaeacia:

"Friends, the words of our considerate queen—
 they never miss the mark or fail our expectations.
 So do as Arete says, though on Alcinous here
 depend all words and action."

"And so it will be"—
 Alcinous stepped in grandly—"sure as I am alive
 and rule our island men who love their oars!
 Our guest, much as he longs for passage home,
 must stay and wait it out here till tomorrow,

400 till I can collect his whole array of parting gifts.
 His send-off rests with every noble here
 but with me most of all:
 I hold the reins of power in the realm."

405 Odysseus, deft and tactful, echoed back,
 "Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
 if you would urge me now to stay here one whole year
 then speed me home weighed down with lordly gifts,
 I'd gladly have it so. Better by far, that way.
 The fuller my arms on landing there at home,
 the more respected, well received I'd be
 by all who saw me sailing back to Ithaca."

410 "Ah Odysseus," Alcinous replied, "one look at you
 and we know that you are no one who would cheat us—
 no fraud, such as the dark soil breeds and spreads
 across the face of the earth these days. Crowds of vagabonds
 frame their lies so tightly none can test them. But you,
 what grace you give your words, and what good sense within!
 You have told your story with all a singer's skill,

420 the miseries you endured, your great Achaeans too.
 But come now, tell me truly: your godlike comrades—
 did you see any heroes down in the House of Death,
 any who sailed with you and met their doom at Troy?
 The night's still young, I'd say the night is endless.
 For us in the palace now, it's hardly time for sleep.
 Keep telling us your adventures—they are wonderful.
 I could hold out here till Dawn's first light
 if only you could bear, here in our halls,
 to tell the tale of all the pains you suffered."

425 So the man of countless exploits carried on:
 "Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
 there is a time for many words, a time for sleep as well.
 But if you insist on hearing more, I'd never stint
 on telling my own tale and those more painful still,
 the griefs of my comrades, dead in the war's wake,
 who escaped the battle-cries of Trojan armies
 only to die in blood at journey's end—
 thanks to a vicious woman's will.

430 Now then,
 no sooner had Queen Persephone driven off
 the ghosts of lovely women, scattering left and right,
 than forward marched the shade of Atreus' son Agamemnon,
 fraught with grief and flanked by all his comrades,
 troops of his men-at-arms who died beside him,
 who met their fate in lord Aegisthus' halls.
 He knew me at once, as soon as he drank the blood,
 and wailed out, shrilly; tears sprang to his eyes,
 he thrust his arms toward me, keen to embrace me there—

445

no use—the great force was gone, the strength lost forever,
now, that filled his rippling limbs in the old days.
I wept at the sight, my heart went out to the man,
my words too, in a winging flight of pity:

‘Famous Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon!
What fatal stroke of destiny brought you down?
Wrecked in the ships when lord Poseidon roused
some punishing blast of stormwinds, gust on gust?
Or did ranks of enemies mow you down on land
as you tried to raid and cut off herds and flocks
or fought to win their city, take their women?’

The field marshal’s ghost replied at once:

‘Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, mastermind of war,
I was not wrecked in the ships when lord Poseidon
roused some punishing blast of stormwinds, gust on gust,
nor did ranks of enemies mow me down on land—
Aegisthus hatched my doom and my destruction,
he killed me, he with my own accursed wife . . .
he invited me to his palace, sat me down to feast
then cut me down as a man cuts down some ox at the trough!
So I died—a wretched, ignominious death—and round me
all my comrades killed, no mercy, one after another,
just like white-tusked boars

butchered in some rich lord of power’s halls
for a wedding, banquet or groaning public feast.
You in your day have witnessed hundreds slaughtered,
killed in single combat or killed in pitched battle, true,
but if you’d laid eyes on this it would have wrenched your heart—
how we sprawled by the mixing-bowl and loaded tables there,
throughout the palace, the whole floor awash with blood.

But the death-cry of Cassandra,¹ Priam’s daughter—the
most pitiful thing I heard! My treacherous queen,
Clytemnestra, killed her over my body, yes, and I,
lifting my fists, beat them down on the ground,
dying, dying, writhing around the sword.

But she, that whore, she turned her back on me,
well on my way to Death—she even lacked the heart
to seal my eyes with her hand or close my jaws.

So,
there’s nothing more deadly, bestial than a woman
set on works like these—what a monstrous thing
she plotted, slaughtered her own lawful husband!
Why, I expected, at least, some welcome home
from all my children, all my household slaves
when I came sailing back again . . . But she—

the queen hell-bent on outrage—bathes in shame
not only herself but the whole breed of womankind,
even the honest ones to come, forever down the years!’

So he declared and I cried out, ‘How terrible!
Zeus from the very start, the thunder king
has hated the race of Atreus with a vengeance—
his truest weapon women’s twisted wiles.
What armies of us died for the sake of Helen . . .
Clytemnestra schemed your death while you were worlds away!’

‘True, true,’ Agamemnon’s ghost kept pressing on,
‘so even your own wife—never indulge her too far.
Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know;
just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.

Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.
She’s much too steady, her feelings run too deep,
Icarus’ daughter Penelope, that wise woman.
She was a young bride, I well remember . . .

we left her behind when we went off to war,
with an infant boy she nestled at her breast.
That boy must sit and be counted with the men now—
happy man! His beloved father will come sailing home
and see his son, and he will embrace his father,
that is only right. But *my* wife—she never
even let me feast my eyes on my own son;
she killed me first, his father!

I tell you this—bear it in mind, you must—
when you reach your homeland steer your ship
into port in secret, never out in the open . . .
the time for trusting women’s gone forever!

Enough. Come, tell me this, and be precise.
Have you heard news of my son? Where’s he living now?
Perhaps in Orchomenos, perhaps in sandy Pylos
or off in the Spartan plains with Menelaus?
He’s not dead yet, my Prince Orestes, no,
he’s somewhere on the earth.’

So he probed
but I cut it short: ‘Atrides, why ask me that?
I know nothing, whether he’s dead or alive.
It’s wrong to lead you on with idle words.’

So we stood there, trading heartsick stories,
deep in grief, as the tears streamed down our faces.
But now there came the ghosts of Peleus’ son Achilles,
Patroclus,² fearless Antilochus—and Great Ajax too,

1. Trojan princess and Agamemnon’s war prize.

2. Achilles’ companion.

the first in stature, first in build and bearing
of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son.

555 The ghost of the splendid runner knew me at once
and hailed me with a flight of mournful questions:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, man of tactics,
reckless friend, what next?

560 What greater feat can that cunning head contrive?
What daring brought you down to the House of Death?—
where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home.'

The voice of his spirit paused, and I was quick to answer:
'Achilles, son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaeans,
I had to consult Tiresias, driven here by hopes
he would help me journey home to rocky Ithaca.
565 Never yet have I neared Achaëa, never once
set foot on native ground . . .
my life is endless trouble.

But you, Achilles,
there's not a man in the world more blest than you—
there never has been, never will be one.

570 Time was, when you were alive, we Argives
honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
you lord it over the dead in all your power.
So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.'

I reassured the ghost, but he broke out, protesting,
575 'No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.
But come, tell me the news about my gallant son.
580 Did he make his way to the wars,
did the boy become a champion—yes or no?
Tell me of noble Peleus, any word you've heard—
still holding pride of place among his Myrmidon hordes,
or do they despise the man in Hellas and in Phthia
because old age has lamed his arms and legs?
585 For I no longer stand in the light of day—
the man I was—comrade-in-arms to help my father
as once I helped our armies, killing the best fighters
Troy could field in the wide world up there . . .
590 Oh to arrive at father's house—the man I was,
for one brief day—I'd make my fury and my hands,
invincible hands, a thing of terror to all those men
who abuse the king with force and wrest away his honor!'

595 So he grieved but I tried to lend him heart:
'About noble Peleus I can tell you nothing,
but about your own dear son, Neoptolemus,
I can report the whole story, as you wish.

I myself, in my trim ship, I brought him
out of Scyros to join the Argives under arms.

585 And dug in around Troy, debating battle-tactics,
he always spoke up first, and always on the mark—
godlike Nestor and I alone excelled the boy. Yes,
and when our armies fought on the plain of Troy
he'd never hang back with the main force of men—
he'd always charge ahead,

590 giving ground to no one in his fury,
and scores of men he killed in bloody combat.
How could I list them all, name them all, now,
the fighting ranks he leveled, battling for the Argives?
But what a soldier he laid low with a bronze sword:
the hero Eurypylus, Telephus' son, and round him
troops of his own Ceteian comrades slaughtered,
lured to war by the bribe his mother took.

595 The only man I saw to put Eurypylus
in the shade was Memnon, son of the Morning.
Again, when our champions climbed inside the horse
that Epeus built with labor, and I held full command
to spring our packed ambush open or keep it sealed,
all our lords and captains were wiping off their tears,
knees shaking beneath each man—but not your son.
600 Never once did I see his glowing skin go pale;
he never flicked a tear from his cheeks, no,
he kept on begging me there to let him burst
from the horse, kept gripping his hilted sword,
his heavy bronze-tipped javelin, keen to loose
his fighting fury against the Trojans. Then,
605 once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city,
laden with his fair share and princely prize
he boarded his own ship, his body all unscarred.
Not a wound from a flying spear or a sharp sword,
cut-and-thrust close up—the common marks of war.
610 Random, raging Ares plays no favorites.'

So I said and
off he went, the ghost of the great runner, Aeacus' grandson
loping with long strides across the fields of asphodel,
triumphant in all I had told him of his son,
his gallant, glorious son.

615 Now the rest of the ghosts, the dead and gone
came swarming up around me—deep in sorrow there,
each asking about the grief that touched him most.
Only the ghost of Great Ajax, son of Telamon,
kept his distance, blazing with anger at me still
for the victory I had won by the ships that time
I pressed my claim for the arms of Prince Achilles.
His queenly mother had set them up as prizes,

- 625 Pallas and captive Trojans served as judges.
Would to god I'd never won such trophies!
All for them the earth closed over Ajax,
that proud hero Ajax . . .
- 630 greatest in build, greatest in works of war
of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son.
I cried out to him now, I tried to win him over:
'Ajax, son of noble Telamon, still determined,
even in death, not once to forget that rage
you train on me for those accursed arms?
The gods set up that prize to plague the Achaeans—
so great a tower of strength we lost when you went down!
For *your* death we grieved as we did for Achilles' death—
we grieved incessantly, true, and none's to blame
but Zeus, who hated Achaea's fighting spearmen
so intensely, Zeus sealed your doom.
Come closer, king, and listen to my story.
Conquer your rage, your blazing, headstrong pride!'
- 640 So I cried out but Ajax answered not a word.
He stalked off toward Erebus, into the dark
to join the other lost, departed dead.
Yet now, despite his anger,
he might have spoken to me, or I to him,
but the heart inside me stirred with some desire
to see the ghosts of others dead and gone.
- 650 And I saw Minos there, illustrious son of Zeus,
firmly enthroned, holding his golden scepter,
judging all the dead . . .
Some on their feet, some seated, all clustering
round the king of justice, pleading for his verdicts
reached in the House of Death with its all-embracing gales.
- 655 I next caught sight of Orion, that huge hunter,
rounding up on the fields of asphodel those wild beasts
the man in life cut down on the lonely mountain-slopes,
brandishing in his hands the bronze-studded club
that time can never shatter.
- 660 I saw Tityus too,
son of the mighty goddess Earth—sprawling there
on the ground, spread over nine acres—two vultures
hunched on either side of him, digging into his liver,
beaking deep in the blood-sac, and he with his frantic hands
could never beat them off, for he had once dragged off
the famous consort of Zeus in all her glory,
Leto, threading her way toward Pytho's ridge,
over the lovely dancing-rings of Panopeus.
- And I saw Tantalus too, bearing endless torture.

- 670 He stood erect in a pool as the water lapped his chin—
 parched, he tried to drink, but he could not reach the surface,
no, time and again the old man stooped, craving a sip,
time and again the water vanished, swallowed down,
laying bare the caked black earth at his feet—
some spirit drank it dry. And over his head
675 leafy trees dangled their fruit from high aloft,
pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red,
succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark,
but as soon as the old man would strain to clutch them fast
a gust would toss them up to the lowering dark clouds.
- 680 And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture,
grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working,
heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on
thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just
as it teetered, set to topple over—
685 time and again
the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and
the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again—
so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up,
sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head.
- 690 And next I caught a glimpse of powerful Heracles—
his ghost, I mean: the man himself delights
in the grand feasts of the deathless gods on high,
wed to Hebe, famed for her lithe, alluring ankles,
the daughter of mighty Zeus and Hera shod in gold.
695 Around him cries of the dead rang out like cries of birds,
scattering left and right in horror as on he came like night,
naked bow in his grip, an arrow grooved on the bowstring,
glaring round him fiercely, forever poised to shoot.
A terror too, that sword-belt sweeping across his chest,
700 a baldric of solid gold emblazoned with awesome work . . .
bears and ramping boars and lions with wild, fiery eyes,
and wars, routs and battles, massacres, butchered men.
May the craftsman who forged that masterpiece—
whose skills could conjure up a belt like that—
705 never forge another!
Heracles knew me at once, at first glance,
and hailed me with a winging burst of pity:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus famed for exploits,
luckless man, you too? Braving out a fate as harsh
as the fate I bore, alive in the light of day?
710 Son of Zeus that I was, my torments never ended,
forced to slave for a man not half the man I was:
he saddled me with the worst heartbreaking labors.
Why, he sent me down here once, to retrieve the hound
that guards the dead—no harder task for me, he thought—
715 but I dragged the great beast up from the underworld to earth

Homer

400

and Hermes and gleaming-eyed Athena blazed the way!"

With that he turned and back he went to the House of Death but I held fast in place, hoping that others might still come, shades of famous heroes, men who died in the old days and ghosts of an even older age I longed to see,

Theseus and Pirithous, the gods' own radiant sons. But before I could, the dead came surging round me, hordes of them, thousands raising unearthly cries, and blanching terror gripped me—panicked now that Queen Persephone might send up from Death some monstrous head, some Gorgon's staring face! I rushed back to my ship, commanded all hands to take to the decks and cast off cables quickly.

They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks and a strong tide of the Ocean River swept her on downstream, sped by our rowing first, then by a fresh fair wind."

BOOK 12. THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

"Now when our ship had left the Ocean River rolling in her wake and launched out into open sea with its long swells to reach the island of Aeaea—east where the Dawn forever young has home and dancing-rings and the Sun his risings—heading in we beached our craft on the sands, the crews swung out on the low sloping shore and there we fell asleep, awaiting Dawn's first light.

As soon as Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone again I dispatched some men to Circe's halls to bring the dead Elpenor's body. We cut logs in haste and out on the island's sharpest jutting headland held his funeral rites in sorrow, streaming tears. Once we'd burned the dead man and the dead man's armor, heaping his grave-mound, hailing a stone that coped it well, we planted his balanced oar aloft to crown his tomb.

And so we saw to his rites, each step in turn. Nor did our coming back from Death escape Circe—she hurried toward us, decked in rich regalia, handmaids following close with trays of bread and meats glistening and gleaming ruddy wine. And the lustrous goddess, standing in our midst, hailed us warmly: 'Ah my daring, reckless friends! You who ventured down to the House of Death alive, doomed to die twice over—others die just once. Come, take some food and drink some wine, rest here the livelong day

and then, tomorrow at daybreak, you must sail. But I will set you a course and chart each seaman, so neither on sea nor land will some new trap

ensnare you in trouble, make you suffer more.' Her foresight won our fighting spirits over.

So all that day till the sun went down we sat and feasted on sides of meat and heady wine, and when the sun had set and night came on the men lay down to sleep by the ship's stern-cables. But Circe, taking me by the hand, drew me away from all my shipmates there and sat me down and lying beside me probed me for details.

I told her the whole story, start to finish, then the queenly goddess laid my course:

'Your descent to the dead is over, true, but listen closely to what I tell you now and god himself will bring it back to mind. First you will raise the island of the Sirens, those creatures who spellbind any man alive, whoever comes their way. Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air—no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him, no happy children beaming up at their father's face. The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him, lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses rotting away, rags of skin shriveling on their bones. . . . Race straight past that coast! Soften some beeswax and stop your shipmates' ears so none can hear, none of the crew, but if you are bent on hearing, have them tie you hand and foot in the swift ship, erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast so you can hear the Sirens' song to your heart's content. But if you plead, commanding your men to set you free, then they must lash you faster, rope on rope.

But once your crew has rowed you past the Sirens a choice of routes is yours. I cannot advise you which to take, or lead you through it all—you must decide for yourself—

but I can tell you the ways of either course. On one side beetling cliffs shoot up, and against them pound the huge roaring breakers of blue-eyed Amphitrite—the Clashing Rocks they're called by all the blissful gods. Not even birds can escape them, no, not even the doves that veer and fly ambrosia home to Father Zeus: even of those the sheer Rocks always pick off one and Father wings one more to keep the number up. No ship of men has ever approached and slipped past—always some disaster—big timbers and sailors' corpses whirled away by the waves and lethal blasts of fire. One ship alone, one deep-sea craft sailed clear, the *Argo*, sung by the world, when heading home

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Book 12

like the moan of lowing oxen.

Yet six more days
my eager companions feasted on the cattle of the Sun,
the pick of the herds they'd driven off, but then,
when Cronian Zeus brought on the seventh day,
the wind in its ceaseless raging dropped at last,
and stepping the mast at once, hoisting the white sail
we boarded ship and launched her, made for open sea.

But once we'd left that island in our wake—
no land at all in sight, nothing but sea and sky—
then Zeus the son of Cronus mounted a thunderhead
above our hollow ship and the deep went black beneath it.
Nor did the craft scud on much longer. All of a sudden
killer-squalls attacked us, screaming out of the west,
a murderous blast shearing the two forestays off
so the mast toppled backward, its running tackle spilling
into the bilge. The mast itself went crashing into the stern,
it struck the helmsman's head and crushed his skull to pulp
and down from his deck the man flipped like a diver—
his hardy life spirit left his bones behind.

Then, then in the same breath Zeus hit the craft
with a lightning-bolt and thunder. Round she spun,
reeling under the impact, filled with reeking brimstone,
shipmates pitching out of her, bobbing round like seahawks
swept along by the whitecaps past the trim black hull—
and the god cut short their journey home forever.

But I went lurching along our battered hulk
till the sea-surge ripped the plankings from the keel
and the waves swirled it away, stripped bare, and snapped
the mast from the decks—but a backstay made of bull's-hide
still held fast, and with this I lashed the mast and keel
together, made them one, riding my makeshift raft
as the wretched galewinds bore me on and on.

At last the West Wind quit its wild rage
but the South came on at once to hound me even more,
making me double back my route toward cruel Charybdis.
All night long I was rushed back and then at break of day
I reached the crag of Scylla and dire Charybdis' vortex
right when the dreadful whirlpool gulped the salt sea down.
But heaving myself aloft to clutch at the fig-tree's height,
like a bat I clung to its trunk for dear life—not a chance
for a good firm foothold there, no clambering up it either,
the roots too far to reach, the boughs too high overhead,
huge swaying branches that overshadowed Charybdis.

But I held on, dead set . . . waiting for her
to vomit my mast and keel back up again—

Oh how I ached for both! and back they came,

late but at last, at just the hour a judge at court,
who's settled the countless suits of brash young claimants,
rises, the day's work done, and turns home for supper—
that's when the timbers reared back up from Charybdis.
I let go—I plunged with my hands and feet flailing,
crashing into the waves beside those great beams
and scrambling aboard them fast

I rowed hard with my hands right through the straits . . .
And the father of men and gods did not let Scylla see me,
else I'd have died on the spot—no escape from death.

I drifted along nine days. On the tenth, at night,
the gods cast me up on Ogygia, Calypso's island,
home of the dangerous nymph with glossy braids
who speaks with human voice, and she took me in,
she loved me . . . Why cover the same ground again?
Just yesterday, here at hall, I told you all the rest,
you and your gracious wife. It goes against my grain
to repeat a tale told once, and told so clearly."

BOOK 13. ITHACA AT LAST

His tale was over now. The Phaeacians all fell silent, hushed,
his story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls
until Alcinous found the poise to say, "Odysseus,
now that you have come to my bronze-floored house,
my vaulted roofs, I know you won't be driven
off your course, nothing can hold you back—
however much you've suffered, you'll sail home.
Here, friends, here's a command for one and all,
you who frequent my palace day and night and drink
the shining wine of kings and enjoy the harper's songs.
The robes and hammered gold and a haul of other gifts
you lords of our island council brought our guest—
all lie packed in his polished sea-chest now. Come,
each of us add a sumptuous tripod, add a cauldron!

Then recover our costs with levies on the people:
it's hard to afford such bounty man by man."

The king's instructions met with warm applause
and home they went to sleep, each in his own house.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
they hurried down to the ship with handsome bronze gifts,
and striding along the decks, the ardent King Alcinous
stowed them under the benches, shipshape, so nothing
could foul the crewmen tugging at their oars.

Then back the party went to Alcinous' house
and shared a royal feast.

The majestic king

slaughtered an ox for them to Cronus' mighty son,
 Zeus of the thundercloud, whose power rules the world.
 They burned the thighs and fell to the lordly banquet,
 reveling there, while in their midst the inspired bard
 struck up a song, Demodocus, prized by all the people.
 True, but time and again Odysseus turned his face
 toward the radiant sun, anxious for it to set,
 yearning now to be gone and home once more . . .
 As a man aches for his evening meal when all day long
 his brace of wine-dark oxen have dragged the bolted plowshare
 down a fallow field—how welcome the setting sun to him,
 the going home to supper, yes, though his knees buckle,
 struggling home at last. So welcome now to Odysseus
 the setting light of day, and he lost no time
 as he pressed Phaeacia's men who love their oars,
 addressing his host, Alcinous, first and foremost:
 "Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
 make your libations, launch me safely on my way—
 to one and all, farewell!"

All is now made good, my heart's desire,
 your convoy home, your precious, loving gifts,
 and may the gods of Olympus bless them for me!
 May I find an unswerving wife when I reach home,
 and loved ones hale, unharmed! And you, my friends
 remaining here in your kingdom now, may you delight
 in your loyal wives and children! May the gods
 rain down all kinds of fortune on your lives,
 misfortune never harbor in your homeland!"

All burst into applause, urging passage home
 for their parting guest, his farewell rang so true.
 Hallowed King Alcinous briskly called his herald:
 "Come, Pontonous! Mix the wine in the bowl,
 pour rounds to all our banqueters in the house,
 so we, with a prayer to mighty Zeus the Father,
 can sail our new friend home to native land."

Pontonous mixed the heady, honeyed wine
 and hovering closely, poured full rounds for all.
 And from where they sat they tipped libations out
 to the happy gods who rule the vaulting skies.
 Then King Odysseus rose up from his seat
 and placing his two-eared cup in Arete's hands,
 addressed the queen with parting wishes on the wing:
 "Your health, my queen, through all your days to come—
 until old age and death, that visit all mankind,
 pay you a visit too. Now I am on my way
 but you, may you take joy in this house of yours,
 in your children, your people, in Alcinous the king!"

With that the great Odysseus strode across the threshold.
 And King Alcinous sent the herald off with the guest
 to lead him down to the swift ship and foaming surf.
 And Arete sent her serving-women, one to carry
 a sea-cloak, washed and fresh, a shirt as well,
 another assigned to bear the sturdy chest
 and a third to take the bread and ruddy wine.

When they reached the ship at the water's edge
 the royal escorts took charge of the gifts at once
 and stores of food and wine, stowed them deep in the holds,
 and then for their guest they spread out rug and sheets
 on the half-deck, clear astern on the ship's hull
 so he might sleep there soundly, undisturbed.
 And last, Odysseus climbed aboard himself
 and down he lay, all quiet
 as crewmen sat to the oarlocks, each in line.

They slipped the cable free of the drilled stone post
 and soon as they swung back and the blades tossed up the spray
 an irresistible sleep fell deeply on his eyes, the sweetest,
 soundest oblivion, still as the sleep of death itself . . .

And the ship like a four-horse team careering down the plain,
 all breaking as one with the whiplash cracking smartly,
 leaping with hoofs high to run the course in no time—
 so the stern hove high and plunged with the seething rollers
 crashing dark in her wake as on she surged unwavering,
 never flagging, no, not even a darting hawk,
 the quickest thing on wings, could keep her pace
 as on she ran, cutting the swells at top speed,
 bearing a man endowed with the gods' own wisdom,
 one who had suffered twenty years of torment, sick at heart,
 cleaving his way through wars of men and pounding waves at sea
 but now he slept in peace, the memory of his struggles
 laid to rest.

And then, that hour the star rose up,
 the clearest, brightest star, that always heralds
 the newborn light of day, the deep-sea-going ship
 made landfall on the island . . . Ithaca, at last.

There on the coast a haven lies, named for Phorcys,
 the old god of the deep—with two jutting headlands,
 sheared off at the seaward side but shelving toward the bay,
 that break the great waves whipped by the gales outside
 so within the harbor ships can ride unmoored
 whenever they come in mooring range of shore.
 At the harbor's head a branching olive stands
 with a welcome cave nearby it, dank with sea-mist,
 sacred to nymphs of the springs we call the Naiads.
 There are mixing-bowls inside and double-handled jars,

120 crafted of stone, and bees store up their honey in the hollows.
There are long stone looms as well, where the nymphs weave out
their webs from clouds of sea-blue wool—a marvelous sight—
and a wellspring flows forever. The cave has two ways in,
one facing the North Wind, a pathway down for mortals;
the other, facing the South, belongs to the gods,
no man may go that way . . .
125 it is the path for all the deathless powers.

Here at this bay the Phaeacian crew put in—
they'd known it long before—driving the ship so hard
she ran up onto the beach for a good half her length,
such way the oarsmen's brawny arms had made.
130 Up from the benches, swinging down to land,
first they lifted Odysseus off the decks—
linen and lustrous carpet too—and laid him
down on the sand asleep, still dead to the world,
then hoisted out the treasures proud Phaeacians,
135 urged by open-hearted Pallas, had lavished on him,
setting out for home. They heaped them all
by the olive's trunk, in a neat pile, clear
of the road for fear some passerby might spot
and steal Odysseus' hoard before he could awaken.
140 Then pushing off, they pulled for home themselves.

But now Poseidon, god of the earthquake, never once
forgetting the first threats he leveled at the hero,
probed almighty Zeus to learn his plans in full:
145 "Zeus, Father, I will lose all my honor now
among the immortals, now there are mortal men
who show me no respect—Phaeacians, too,
born of my own loins! I said myself
that Odysseus would suffer long and hard
before he made it home, but I never dreamed
150 of blocking his return, not absolutely at least,
once *you* had pledged your word and bowed your head.
But now they've swept him across the sea in their swift ship,
they've set him down in Ithaca, sound asleep, and loaded the man
155 with boundless gifts—bronze and hoards of gold and robes—
aye, more plunder than he could ever have won from Troy
if Odysseus had returned intact with his fair share!"

"Incredible," Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied.
160 "Earth-shaker, you with your massive power, why moaning so?
The gods don't disrespect you. What a stir there'd be
if they flung abuse at the oldest, noblest of them all.
Those mortals? If any man, so lost in his strength
and prowess, pays you no respect—just pay him back.
The power is always yours.
165 Do what you like. Whatever warms your heart."

"King of the dark cloud," the earthquake god agreed,
"I'd like to avenge myself at once, as you advise,
but I've always feared your wrath and shied away.
170 But now I'll crush that fine Phaeacian cutter
out on the misty sea, now on her homeward run
from the latest convoy. They will learn at last
to cease and desist from escorting every man alive—
I'll pile a huge mountain round about their port!"

175 "Wait, dear brother," Zeus who collects the clouds
had second thoughts. "Here's what seems best to *me*.
As the people all lean down from the city heights
to watch her speeding home, strike her into a rock
that looks like a racing vessel, just offshore—
amaze all men with a marvel for the ages.
180 Then pile your huge mountain round about their port."

Hearing that from Zeus, the god of the earthquake
sped to Scheria now, the Phaeacians' island home,
and waited there till the ship came sweeping in,
185 scudding lightly along—and surging close abreast,
the earthquake god with one flat stroke of his hand
struck her to stone, rooted her to the ocean floor
and made for open sea.

The Phaeacians, aghast,
those lords of the long oars, the master mariners
traded startled glances, sudden outcries:

190 "Look—who's pinned our swift ship to the sea?"

"Just racing for home!"

"Just hove into plain view!"

They might well wonder, blind to what had happened,
till Alcinous rose and made things all too clear:

195 "Oh no—my father's prophecy years ago . . .
it all comes home to me with a vengeance now!
He used to say Poseidon was vexed with us because
we escorted all mankind and never came to grief.
He said that one day, as a well-built ship of ours
sailed home on the misty sea from such a convoy,
200 the god would crush it, yes,
and pile a huge mountain round about our port.
So the old king foretold. Now, look, it all comes true!

205 Hurry, friends, do as I say, let us all comply:
stop our convoys home for every castaway
chancing on our city! As for Poseidon,
sacrifice twelve bulls to the god at once—
the pick of the herds. Perhaps he'll pity us,
pile no looming mountain ridge around our port."

The people, terrified, prepared the bulls at once.

210 So all of Phaeacia's island lords and captains,
milling round the altar, lifted prayers
to Poseidon, master of the sea . . .

215 That very moment
great Odysseus woke from sleep on native ground at last—
he'd been away for years—but failed to know the land
for the goddess Pallas Athena, Zeus's daughter,
showered mist over all, so under cover
she might change his appearance head to foot
as she told him every peril he'd meet at home—
keep him from being known by wife, townsmen, friends,
till the suitors paid the price for all their outrage.

220 And so to the king himself all Ithaca looked strange . . .
the winding beaten paths, the coves where ships can ride,
the steep rock face of the cliffs and the tall leafy trees.
He sprang to his feet and, scanning his own native country,
groaned, slapped his thighs with his flat palms
and Odysseus cried in anguish:

225 "Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?
What *are* they here—violent, savage, lawless?
or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?
Where can I take this heap of treasure now
and where in the world do I wander off myself?
If only the trove had stayed among the Phaeacians there
and I had made my way to some other mighty king
who would have hosted me well and sent me home!
But now I don't know where to stow all this,
and I can't leave it here, inviting any bandit
to rob me blind.

235 So damn those lords and captains,
those Phaeacians! Not entirely honest or upright, were they?
Sweeping me off to this, this no-man's-land, and they,
they swore they'd sail me home to sunny Ithaca—well,
they never kept their word. Zeus of the Suppliants
pay them back—he keeps an eye on the world of men
and punishes all transgressors!

240 Come, quickly,
I'll inspect my treasure and count it up myself.
Did they make off with anything in their ship?"

245 With that he counted up the gorgeous tripods,
cauldrons, bars of gold and the lovely woven robes.
Not a stitch was missing from the lot. But still
he wept for his native country, trailing down the shore
where the wash of sea on shingle ebbs and flows,
his homesick heart in turmoil.

250 But now Athena appeared and came toward him.
She looked like a young man . . . a shepherd boy
yet elegant too, with all the gifts that grace the sons of kings,

255 with a well-cut cloak falling in folds across her shoulders,
sandals under her shining feet, a hunting spear in hand.
Odysseus, overjoyed at the sight, went up to meet her,
joining her now with salutations on the wing:
"Greetings, friend! Since you are the first
I've come on in this harbor, treat me kindly—
no cruelty, please. Save these treasures,
save me too. I pray to you like a god,
I fall before your knees and ask your mercy!
And tell me this for a fact—I need to know—
where on earth am I? what land? who lives here?
Is it one of the sunny islands or some jutting shore
of the good green mainland slanting down to sea?"

260 Athena answered, her eyes brightening now.
"You must be a fool, stranger, or come from nowhere,
if you really have to ask what land this is.
Trust me, it's not so nameless after all.
It's known the world around,
to all who live to the east and rising sun
and to all who face the western mists and darkness.
It's a rugged land, too cramped for driving horses,
but though it's far from broad, it's hardly poor.
There's plenty of grain for bread, grapes for wine,
the rains never fail and the dewfall's healthy.
Good country for goats, good for cattle too—
there's stand on stand of timber
and water runs in streambeds through the year.

275 So,
stranger, the name of Ithaca's reached as far as Troy,
and Troy, they say, is a long hard sail from Greece."

280 Ithaca . . . Heart racing, Odysseus that great exile
filled with joy to hear Athena, daughter of storming Zeus,
pronounce that name. He stood on native ground at last
and he replied with a winging word to Pallas,
not with a word of truth—he choked it back,
always invoking the cunning in his heart:
"Ithaca . . . yes, I seem to have heard of Ithaca,
even on Crete's broad island far across the sea,
and now I've reached it myself, with all this loot,
but I left behind an equal measure for my children.
I'm a fugitive now, you see. I killed Idomeneus' son,
Orsilochous, lightning on his legs, a man who beat
all runners alive on that long island—what a racer!
He tried to rob me of all the spoil I'd won at Troy,
the plunder I went to hell and back to capture, true,
cleaving my way through wars of men and waves at sea—
and just because I refused to please his father,
serve under *him* at Troy. I led my own command.

295 300

305 So now with a friend I lay in wait by the road,
I killed him just loping in from the fields—
with one quick stroke of my bronze spear
in the dead of night, the heavens pitch-black . . .
no one could see us, spot me tearing out his life
with a weapon honed for action. Once I'd cut him down
I made for a ship and begged the Phoenician crew for mercy,
paying those decent hands a hearty share of plunder—
310 asked them to take me on and land me down in Pylos,
there or lovely Elis, where Epeans rule in power.
But a heavy galewind blew them way off course,
much against their will—
they'd no desire to cheat me. Driven afar,
315 we reached this island here at the midnight hour,
rowing for dear life, we made it into your harbor—
not a thought of supper, much as we all craved food,
we dropped from the decks and lay down, just like that!
A welcome sleep came over my weary bones at once,
320 while the crew hoisted up my loot from the holds
and set it down on the sand near where I slept.
They reembarked, now homeward bound for Sidon,
their own noble city, leaving me here behind,
homestick in my heart . . .”

As his story ended,
325 goddess Athena, gray eyes gleaming, broke into a smile
and stroked him with her hand, and now she appeared a woman,
beautiful, tall and skilled at weaving lovely things.
Her words went flying straight toward Odysseus:
“Any man—any god who met you—would have to be
330 some champion lying cheat to get past *you*
for all-round craft and guile! You terrible man,
foxy, ingenious, never tired of twists and tricks—
so, not even here, on native soil, would you give up
those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!
335 Come, enough of this now. We're both old hands
at the arts of intrigue. Here among mortal men
you're far the best at tactics, spinning yarns,
and I am famous among the gods for wisdom,
cunning wiles, too.
340 Ah, but you never recognized me, did you?
Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus—who always
stands beside you, shields you in every exploit:
thanks to me the Phaeacians all embraced you warmly.
345 And now I am here once more, to weave a scheme with you
and to hide the treasure-trove Phaeacia's nobles
lavished on you then—I willed it, planned it so
when you set out for home—and to tell you all
the trials you must suffer in your palace . . .
Endure them all. You must. You have no choice.

350 And to no one—no man, no woman, not a soul—
reveal that you are the wanderer home at last.
No, in silence you must bear a world of pain,
subject yourself to the cruel abuse of men.”

“Ah goddess,” the cool tactician countered,
355 “you're so hard for a mortal man to know on sight,
however shrewd he is—the shapes you take are endless!
But I do know this: you were kind to me in the war years,
so long as we men of Achaea soldiered on at Troy.
But once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city,
360 boarded ship, and a god dispersed the fleet,
from then on, daughter of Zeus, I never saw you,
never glimpsed you striding along my decks
to ward off some disaster. No, I wandered on,
my heart forever torn to pieces inside my chest
365 till the gods released me from my miseries at last,
that day in the fertile kingdom of Phaeacia when
you cheered me with words, in person, led me to their city.
But now I beg you by your almighty Father's name . . .
for I can't believe I've reached my sunny Ithaca,
370 I must be roaming around one more exotic land—
you're mocking me, I know it, telling me tales
to make me lose my way. Tell me the truth now,
have I really reached the land I love?”

“Always the same, your wary turn of mind,”
375 Athena exclaimed, her glances flashing warmly.
“That's why I can't forsake you in your troubles—
you are so winning, so worldly-wise, so self-possessed!
Anyone else, come back from wandering long and hard,
would have hurried home at once, delighted to see
380 his children and his wife. Oh, but not you,
it's not your pleasure to probe for news of them—
you must put your wife to the proof yourself!
But she, she waits in your halls, as always,
her life an endless hardship . . .
385 wasting away the nights, weeping away the days.
I never had doubts myself, no, I knew down deep
that you would return at last, with all your shipmates lost.
But I could not bring myself to fight my Father's brother,
Poseidon, quaking with anger at you, still enraged
because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son.
390 But come, let me show you Ithaca's setting,
I'll convince you. This haven—look around—
it's named for Phorcyas, the old god of the deep,
and here at the harbor's head the branching olive stands
with the welcome cave nearby it, dank with sea-mist,
395 sacred to nymphs of the springs we call the Naiads.
Here, under its arching vault, time and again

420 Homer

you'd offer the nymphs a generous sacrifice
to bring success! And the slopes above you, look,
Mount Neriton decked in forests!"

440

At those words
the goddess scattered the mist and the country stood out clear
and the great man who had borne so much rejoiced at last,
thrilled to see his Ithaca—he kissed the good green earth
and raised his hands to the nymphs and prayed at once,
"Nymphs of the springs, Naiads, daughters of Zeus,
I never dreamed I would see you yet again . . .
Now rejoice in my loving prayers—and later,
just like the old days, I will give you gifts
if Athena, Zeus's daughter, Queen of Armies
comes to my rescue, grants this fighter life
and brings my son to manhood!"

410

"Courage!"—
goddess Athena answered, eyes afire—
"Free your mind of all that anguish now.
Come, quick, let's bury your treasures here
in some recess of this haunted hallowed cave
where they'll be safe and sound,
then we'll make plans so we can win the day."

415

With that
the goddess swept into the cavern's shadowed vault,
searching for hiding-places far inside its depths
while Odysseus hauled his treasures closer up,
the gold, durable bronze and finespun robes,
the Phaeacians' parting gifts.

420

Once he'd stowed them well away, the goddess,
Pallas Athena, daughter of storming Zeus,
sealed the mouth of the cavern with a stone.

425

Then down they sat by the sacred olive's trunk
to plot the death of the high and mighty suitors.
The bright-eyed goddess Athena led the way:
"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
think how to lay your hands on all those brazen suitors,
lording it over your house now, three whole years,
courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.
But she, forever broken-hearted for your return,
builds up each man's hopes—
dangling promises, dropping hints to each—
but all the while with something else in mind."

435

"God help me!" the man of intrigue broke out:
"Clearly I might have died the same ignoble death
as Agamemnon, bled white in my own house too,
if you had never revealed this to me now,
goddess, point by point.
Come, weave us a scheme so I can pay them back!"

440

Stand beside me, Athena, fire me with daring, fierce
as the day we ripped Troy's glittering crown of towers down.
Stand by me—furious now as then, my bright-eyed one—
and I would fight three hundred men, great goddess,
with you to brace me, comrade-in-arms in battle!"

445

Gray eyes ablaze, the goddess urged him on:
"Surely I'll stand beside you, not forget you,
not when the day arrives for us to do our work.
Those men who court your wife and waste your goods?
I have a feeling some will splatter your ample floors
with all their blood and brains. Up now, quickly.
First I will transform you—no one must know you.
I will shrivel the supple skin on your lithe limbs,
strip the russet curls from your head and deck you out
in rags you'd hate to see some other mortal wear;
I'll dim the fire in your eyes, so shining once—
until you seem appalling to all those suitors,
even your wife and son you left behind at home.
But you, you make your way to the swineherd first,
in charge of your pigs, and true to you as always,
loyal friend to your son, to Penelope, so self-possessed.
You'll find him posted beside his swine, grubbing round
by Raven's Rock and the spring called Arethusa,
rooting for feed that makes pigs sleek and fat,
the nuts they love, the dark pools they drink.
Wait there, sit with him, ask him all he knows.
I'm off to Sparta, where the women are a wonder,
to call Telemachus home, your own dear son, Odysseus.
He's journeyed to Lacedaemon's rolling hills
to see Menelaus, searching for news of you,
hoping to learn if you are still alive."

460

465

470

Shrewd Odysseus answered her at once:
"Why not tell him the truth? You know it all.
Or is *he* too—like father, like son—condemned
to hardship, roving over the barren salt sea
while strangers devour our livelihood right here?"

475

But the bright-eyed goddess reassured him firmly:
"No need for anguish, trust me, not for him—
I escorted your son myself

480

so he might make his name by sailing there.
Nor is he saddled down with any troubles now.
He sits at ease in the halls of Menelaus,
bathed in endless bounty . . . True enough,
some young lords in a black cutter lurk in ambush,
poised to kill the prince before he reaches home,
but I have my doubts they will. Sooner the earth
will swallow down a few of those young gallants

485

490 who eat you out of house and home these days!"

No more words, not now—
 Athena stroked Odysseus with her wand.
 She shriveled the supple skin on his lithe limbs,
 495 stripped the russet curls from his head, covered his body
 top to toe with the wrinkled hide of an old man
 and dimmed the fire in his eyes, so shining once.
 She turned his shirt and cloak into squalid rags,
 ripped and filthy, smeared with grime and soot.
 She flung over this the long pelt of a bounding deer,
 500 rubbed bare, and gave him a staff and beggar's sack,
 torn and tattered, slung from a fraying rope.

All plans made,
 they went their separate ways—Athena setting off
 to bring Telemachus home from hallowed Lacedaemon.

BOOK 14. THE LOYAL SWINEHERD

So up from the haven now Odysseus climbed a rugged path
 through timber along high ground—Athena had shown the way—
 to reach the swineherd's place, that fine loyal man
 5 who of all the household hands Odysseus ever had
 cared the most for his master's worldly goods.

Sitting at the door of his lodge he found him,
 there in his farmstead, high-walled, broad and large,
 with its long view on its cleared rise of ground . . .
 The swineherd made those walls with his own hands
 10 to enclose the pigs of his master gone for years.
 Alone, apart from his queen or old Laertes,
 he'd built them up of quarried blocks of stone
 and coped them well with a fence of wild pear.

Outside he'd driven stakes in a long-line stockade,
 15 a ring of thickset palings split from an oak's dark heart.
 Within the yard he'd built twelve sties, side-by-side,
 to bed his pigs, and in each one fifty brood-sows
 slept aground, penned and kept for breeding.
 The boars slept outside, but far fewer of them,
 20 thanks to the lordly suitors' feasts that kept on
 thinning the herd and kept the swineherd stepping,
 sending to town each day the best fat hog in sight.

By now they were down to three hundred and sixty head.
 But guarding them all the time were dogs like savage beasts,
 25 a pack of four, reared by the swineherd, foreman of men.
 The man himself was fitting sandals to his feet,
 carving away at an oxhide, dark and supple.

As for his men, three were off with their pigs,
 herding them here or there. Under orders he'd sent
 30 a fourth to town, with hog in tow for the gorging suitors

to slaughter off and glut themselves with pork.

Suddenly—those snarling dogs spotted Odysseus,
 charged him fast—a shatter of barks—but Odysseus
 sank to the ground at once, he knew the trick:
 35 the staff dropped from his hand but here and now,

on his own farm, he might have taken a shameful mauling.
 Yes, but the swineherd, quick to move, dashed for the gate,
 flinging his oxhide down, rushed the dogs with curses,
 scattered them left and right with flying rocks
 40 and warned his master, "Lucky to be alive, old man—

a moment more, my pack would have torn you limb from limb!
 Then you'd have covered me with shame. As if the gods
 had never given me blows and groans aplenty . . .

Here I sit, my heart aching, broken for *him*,

my master, my great king—fattening up

his own hogs for other men to eat, while he,

starving for food, I wager, wanders the earth,

a beggar adrift in strangers' cities, foreign-speaking lands,

if he's still alive, that is, still sees the rising sun.

Come, follow me into my place, old man, so you,

at least, can eat your fill of bread and wine.

Then you can tell me where you're from

and all the pains you've weathered."

On that note

the loyal swineherd led the way to his shelter,

showed his guest inside and sat Odysseus down

on brush and twigs he piled up for the visitor,

flinging over these the skin of a shaggy wild goat,

broad and soft, the swineherd's own good bedding.

The king, delighted to be so well received,

thanked the man at once: "My host—may Zeus

and the other gods give *you* your heart's desire

for the royal welcome you have shown me here!"

And you replied, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,

"It's wrong, my friend, to send any stranger packing—

even one who arrives in worse shape than you.

Every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus

and whatever scrap they get from the likes of us,

they'll find it welcome. That's the best we can do,

we servants, always cowed by our high and mighty masters,

especially our young lords . . . But my old king?

The gods, they must have blocked his journey home.

He'd have treated me well, he would, with a house,

a plot of land and a wife you'd gladly prize.

Goods that a kind lord will give a household hand

who labors for him, hard, whose work the gods have sped,

just as they speed the work I labor at all day.

My master, I tell you, would have repaid me well

if he'd grown old right here. But now he's dead . . .
 If only Helen and all her kind had died out too,
 brought to her knees, just as she cut the legs
 from under troops of men! My king among them,
he went off to the stallion-land of Troy
 to fight the Trojans, save Agamemnon's honor!"

Enough—
 he brusquely cinched his belt around his shirt,
 strode out to the pens, crammed with droves of pigs,
 picked out two, bundled them in and slaughtered both,
 singed them, sliced them down, skewered them through
 and roasting all to a turn, set them before Odysseus,
 sizzling hot on the spits.

Then coating the meat with white barley groats
 and mixing honeyed wine in a carved wooden bowl,
 he sat down across from his guest, inviting warmly,
 "Eat up now, my friend. It's all we slaves have got,
 scrawny pork, while the suitors eat the fatted hogs—
 no fear of the gods in their hard hearts, no mercy!
 Trust me, the blessed gods have no love for crime.
 They honor justice, honor the decent acts of men.
 Even cutthroat bandits who raid foreign parts—
 and Zeus grants them a healthy share of plunder,
 ships filled to the brim, and back they head for home—
 even their dark hearts are stalked by the dread of vengeance.
 But the suitors know, they've caught some godsent rumor
 of master's grisly death! That's why they have no mind
 to do their courting fairly or go back home in peace.
 No, at their royal ease they devour all his goods,
 those brazen rascals never spare a scrap!
 Not a day or a night goes by, sent down by Zeus,
 but they butcher victims, never stopping at one or two,
 and drain his wine as if there's no tomorrow—
 swilling the last drop . . .

Believe me, my master's wealth was vast!
 No other prince on earth could match his riches,
 not on the loamy mainland or here at home in Ithaca—
 no twenty men in the world could equal his great treasures!

Let me count them off for you. A dozen herds of cattle
 back on the mainland, just as many head of sheep,
 as many droves of pigs and goatflocks ranging free;
 hired hands or his own herdsmen keep them grazing there.
 Here in Ithaca, goatflocks, eleven in all, scatter
 to graze the island, out at the wild end,
 and trusty goatherds watch their every move.
 And each herdsman, day after day, it never ends,
 drives in a beast for the suitors—best in sight,
 a sheep or well-fed goat. While I tend to these pigs,
 I guard them, pick the best for those carousers

and send it to the slaughter!"

His voice rose
 while the stranger ate his meat and drank his wine,
 ravenous, bolting it all down in silence . . .
 brooding on ways to serve the suitors right.
 But once he'd supped and refreshed himself with food,
 he filled the wooden bowl he'd been drinking from,
 brimmed it with wine and passed it to his host
 who received the offer gladly, spirit cheered
 as the stranger probed him now with winging words:

"Friend, who was the man who bought you with his goods,
 the master of such vast riches, powerful as you say?
 You tell me he died defending Agamemnon's honor?
 What's his name? I just might know such a man . . .
 Zeus would know, and the other deathless gods,
 if I ever saw him, if I bring you any news.
 I've roamed the whole earth over."

And the good swineherd answered, foreman of men,
 "Old friend, no wanderer landing here with news of *him*
 is likely to win his wife and dear son over.
 Random drifters, hungry for bed and board,
 lie through their teeth and swallow back the truth.
 Why, any tramp washed up on Ithaca's shores
 scurries right to my mistress, babbling lies,
 and she ushers him in, kindly, pressing for details,
 and the warm tears of grief come trickling down her cheeks,
 the loyal wife's way when her husband's died abroad.
 Even you, old codger, could rig up some fine tale—
 and soon enough, I'd say,
 if they gave you shirt and clothing for your pains.
 My master? Well, no doubt the dogs and wheeling birds
 have ripped the skin from his ribs by now, his life is through—
 or fish have picked him clean at sea, and the man's bones
 lie piled up on the mainland, buried deep in sand . . .
 he's dead and gone. Aye, leaving a broken heart
 for loved ones left behind, for *me* most of all.
 Never another master kind as he!

I'll never find one—no matter where I go,
 not even if I went back to mother and father,
 the house where I was born and my parents reared me once.
 Ah, but much as I grieve for them, much as I long
 to lay my eyes on them, set foot on the old soil,
 it's longing for him, him that wrings my heart—
 Odysseus, lost and gone!

That man, old friend, far away as he is . . .
 I can scarcely bear to say his name aloud,
 so deeply he loved me, cared for me, so deeply.
 Worlds away as he is, I call him Master, Brother!"

“My friend,” the great Odysseus, long in exile, answered,
 “since you are dead certain, since you still insist
 he’s never coming back, still the soul of denial,
 I won’t simply say it—on my oath I swear
 Odysseus is on his way!”

Reward for such good news? Let me have it
 the moment he sets foot in his own house,
 dress me in shirt and cloak, in handsome clothes.
 Before then, poor as I am, I wouldn’t take a thing.
 I hate that man like the very Gates of Death who,
 ground down by poverty, stoops to peddling lies.
 I swear by Zeus, the first of all the gods,
 by this table of hospitality here, my host,

by Odysseus’ hearth where I have come for help:
 all will come to pass, I swear, exactly as I say.
 True, this very month—just as the old moon dies
 and the new moon rises into life—Odysseus will return!
 He will come home and take revenge on any man
 who offends his wedded wife and princely son!”

“Good news,” you replied, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
 “but I will never pay a reward for *that*, old friend—
 Odysseus, he’ll never come home again. Never . . .
 Drink your wine, sit back, let’s talk of other things.
 Don’t remind me of all this. The heart inside me
 breaks when anyone mentions my dear master.
 That oath of yours, we’ll let it pass—

Odysseus,
 oh come back!—

just as I wish, I and Penelope,
 old Laertes too, Telemachus too, the godlike boy.
 How I grieve for *him* now, I can’t stop—Odysseus’ son,
 Telemachus. The gods reared him up like a fine young tree
 and I often said, ‘In the ranks of men he’ll match his father,
 his own dear father—amazing in build and looks, that boy!’
 But all of a sudden a god wrecks his sense of balance—
 god or man, no matter—off he’s gone to catch
 some news of his father, down to holy Pylos.
 And now those gallant suitors lie in wait for him,
 sailing home, to tear the royal line of Arcesius
 out of Ithaca, root and branch, good name and all!
 Enough. Let *him* pass too—whether he’s trapped
 or the hand of Zeus will pull him through alive.

Come,
 old soldier, tell me the story of your troubles,
 tell me truly, too, I’d like to know it well . . .
 Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
 What sort of vessel brought you? Why did the sailors
 land you here in Ithaca? Who did they say they are?
 I hardly think you came this way on foot.”

The great teller of tales returned at length,
 “My story—the whole truth—I’m glad to tell it all.
 If only the two of us had food and mellow wine
 to last us long, here in your shelter now,
 for us to sup on, undisturbed,

while others take the work of the world in hand,
 I could easily spend all year and never reach the end
 of my endless story, all the heartbreaking trials
 I struggled through. The gods willed it so . . .

I hail from Crete’s broad land, I’m proud to say,
 and I am a rich man’s son. And many other sons
 he brought up in his palace, born in wedlock,
 sprung of his lawful wife. Unlike my mother,
 She was a slave, a concubine he’d purchased, yes,
 but he treated me on a par with all his true-born sons—
 Castor, Hylax’ son. I’m proud to boast his blood, that man
 revered like a god throughout all Crete those days,
 for wealth, power and all his glorious offspring.
 But the deadly spirits soon swept him down
 to the House of Death, and his high and mighty sons
 carved up his lands and then cast lots for the parts
 and gave me just a pittance, a paltry house as well.
 But I won myself a wife from wealthy, landed people,
 thanks to my own strong points. I was no fool
 and never shirked a fight.

But now my heyday’s gone—
 I’ve had my share of blows. Yet look hard at the husk
 and you’ll still see, I think, the grain that gave it life.
 By heaven, Ares gave me courage, Athena too, to break
 the ranks of men wide open, once, in the old days,
 whenever I picked my troops and formed an ambush,
 plotting attacks to spring against our foes—
 no hint of death could daunt my fighting spirit!
 Far out of the front I’d charge and spear my man,
 I’d cut down any enemy soldier backing off.
 Such was I in battle, true, but I had no love
 for working the land, the chores of households either,
 the labor that raises crops of shining children. No,
 it was always oarswept ships that thrilled my heart,
 and wars, and the long polished spears and arrows,
 dreadful gear that makes the next man cringe.

I loved them all—god planted that love inside me.
 Each man delights in the work that suits him best.
 Why, long before we Achaeans ever camped at Troy,
 nine commands I led in our deep-sea-going ships,
 raiding foreign men, and a fine haul reached my hands.
 I helped myself to the lion’s share and still more spoils
 came by lot. And my house grew by leaps and bounds,
 I walked among the Cretans, honored, feared as well.

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 came by lot. And my house grew by leaps and bounds,
 I walked among the Cretans, honored, feared as well.

But then, when thundering Zeus contrived that expedition—
that disaster that brought so many fighters to their knees—
and men kept pressing me and renowned Idomeneus
to head a fleet to Troy,

there was no way out, no denying them then,
the voice of the people bore down much too hard.

So nine whole years we Achaeans soldiered on at Troy,
in the tenth we sacked King Priam's city, then embarked
for home in the long ships, and a god dispersed the fleet.
Unlucky me. Shrewd old Zeus was plotting still more pain.

No more than a month I stayed at home, taking joy
in my children, loyal wife and lovely plunder.

But a spirit in me urged, 'Set sail for Egypt—
fit out ships, take crews of seasoned heroes!'

Nine I fitted out, the men joined up at once
and then six days my shipmates feasted well,
while I provided a flock of sheep to offer up
to the gods and keep the feasters' table groaning.

On the seventh we launched out from the plains of Crete
with a stiff North Wind fair astern—smooth sailing,
aye, like coasting on downstream . . .

And not one craft in our squadron foundered;
all shipshape, and all hands sound, we sat back
while the wind and helmsmen kept us true on course.

Five days out and we raised the great river Nile
and there in the Nile delta moored our ships of war.
God knows I ordered my trusty crews to stand by,
just where they were, and guard the anchored fleet
and I sent a patrol to scout things out from higher ground.
But swept away by their own reckless fury, the crew went berserk—
they promptly began to plunder the lush Egyptian farms,
dragged off the women and children, killed the men.

Outcries reached the city in no time—stirred by shouts
the entire town came streaming down at the break of day,
filling the river plain with chariots, ranks of infantry
and the gleam of bronze. Zeus who loves the lightning
flung down murderous panic on all my men-at-arms—
no one dared to stand his ground and fight,
disaster ringed us round from every quarter.

Droves of my men they hacked down with swords,
led off the rest alive, to labor for them as slaves.

And I? Zeus flashed an inspiration through my mind,
though I wish I'd died a soldier down in Egypt then!

A world of pain, you see, still lay in wait for me . . .
Quickly I wrenched the skullcap helmet off my head,
I tore the shield from my back and dropped my spear
and ran right into the path of the king's chariot,
hugged and kissed his knees. He pitied me, spared me,

hoisted me onto his war-car, took me home in tears.
Troops of his men came rushing after, shaking javelins,
mad to kill me—their fighting blood at the boil—
but their master drove them off.

He feared the wrath of Zeus, the god of guests,
the first of the gods to pay back acts of outrage.

So,
there I lingered for seven years, amassing a fortune
from all the Egyptian people loading me with gifts.
Then, at last, when the eighth had come full turn,
along comes this Phoenician one fine day . . .

a scoundrel, swindler, an old hand at lies
who'd already done the world a lot of damage.
Well, he smoothly talked me round and off we sailed,
Phoenicia-bound, where his house and holdings lay.

There in his care I stayed till the year was out.
Then, when the months and days had run their course
and the year wheeled round and the seasons came again,
he conned me aboard his freighter bound for Libya,

pretending I'd help him ship a cargo there for sale
but in fact he'd sell *me* there and make a killing!

I suspected as much, of course, but had no choice,
so I boarded with him, yes, and the ship ran on
with a good strong North Wind gusting—
fast on the middle passage clear of Crete—
but Zeus was brewing mischief for that crew . . .

Once we'd left the island in our wake—
no land at all in sight, nothing but sea and sky—
then Zeus the son of Cronus mounted a thunderhead
above our hollow ship and the deep went black beneath it.

Then, then in the same breath Zeus hit the craft
with a lightning-bolt and thunder. Round she spun,
reeling under the impact, filled with reeking brimstone,
shipmates pitching out of her, bobbing round like seahawks
swept along by the breakers past the trim black hull—
and the god cut short their journey home forever.

Not mine.

Zeus himself—when I was just at the final gasp—
thrust the huge mast of my dark-prowed vessel
right into my arms so I might flee disaster
one more time. Wrapping myself around it,

I was borne along by the wretched galewinds,
rushed along nine days—on the tenth, at dead of night,
a shouldering breaker rolled me up along Thesprotia's beaches.¹
There the king of Thesprotia, Phidon, my salvation,
treated me kindly, asked for no reward at all.

1. In northwestern Greece.

430 Homer

His own good son had found me, half-dead
from exhaustion and the cold. He raised me up
by the hand and led me home to his father's house
and dressed me in cloak and shirt and decent clothes.
That's where I first got wind of *him*—Odysseus . . .
The king told me he'd hosted the man in style,
befriended him on his way home to native land,
and showed me all the treasure Odysseus had amassed.
Bronze and gold and plenty of hard wrought iron,
enough to last a man and ten generations of his heirs—
so great the wealth stored up for *him* in the king's vaults!
But Odysseus, he made clear, was off at Dodona then
to hear the will of Zeus that rustles forth
from the god's tall leafy oak: how should he return,
after all the years away, to his own green land of Ithaca—
openly or in secret? Phidon swore to me, what's more,
as the princely man poured out libations in his house,
"The ship's hauled down and the crew set to sail,
to take Odysseus home to native land."

But I . . .
he shipped me off before. A Thesprotian cutter
chanced to be heading for Dulichion rich in wheat,
so he told the crew to take me to the king, Acastus,
treat me kindly, too, but it pleased them more
to scheme foul play against me,
sink me into the very depths of pain. As soon
as the ship was far off land, scudding in mid-sea,
they sprang their trap—my day of slavery then and there!
They stripped from my back the shirt and cloak I wore,
decked me out in a new suit of clothes, all rags,
ripped and filthy—the rags you see right now.
But then, once they'd gained the fields of Ithaca,
still clear in the evening light, they lashed me fast
to the rowing-benches, twisting a cable round me;
all hands went ashore
and rushed to catch their supper on the beach.

But the gods themselves unhitched my knots at once
with the gods' own ease. I wrapped my head in rags,
slid down the gangplank polished smooth, slipped my body
into the water, not a splash, chest-high, then quick,
launched out with both my arms and swam away—
out of the surf in no time, clear of the crew.
I clambered upland, into a flowery, fragrant brush
and crouched there, huddling low. They raised a hue and cry,
wildly beat the bushes, but when it seemed no use
to pursue the hunt, back they trudged again and
boarded their empty ship.

The gods hid me themselves—
it's light work for them—and brought me here,

the homestead of a man who knows the world.
So it seems to be my lot that I'll live on."

And you replied, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
"So much misery, friend! You've moved my heart,
deeply, with your long tale . . . such blows, such roving.
But one part's off the mark, I know—you'll never persuade me—
what you say about Odysseus. A man in your condition,
who are *you*, I ask you, to lie for no good reason?"

Well I know the truth of my good lord's return,
how the gods detested him, with a vengeance—
never letting him go under, fighting Trojans,
or die in the arms of loved ones,
once he'd wound down the long coil of war.

Then all united Achaea would have raised his tomb
and he'd have won his son great fame for years to come.
But now the whirlwinds have ripped him away—no fame for him!

And I live here, cut off from the world, with all my pigs.
I never go into town unless, perhaps, wise Penelope
calls me back, when news drops in from nowhere.

There they crowd the messenger, cross-examine him,
heartsick for their long-lost lord or all too glad
to eat him out of house and home, scot-free.

But I've no love for all that probing, prying,
not since some Aetolian fooled me with his yarn.
He'd killed a man, wandered over the face of the earth,
stumbled onto my hut, and I received him warmly.

He told me he'd seen Odysseus

lodged with King Idomeneus down in Crete—
refitting his ships, hard-hit by the gales,
but he'd be home, he said, by summer or harvest-time,
his hulls freighted with treasure, manned by fighting crews.
So you, old misery, seeing a god has led you here to me,
don't try to charm me now, don't spellbind me with lies!

Never for *that* will I respect you, treat you kindly;
no, it's my fear of Zeus, the god of guests,
and because I pity you . . ."

"Good god," the crafty man pressed on,
"what a dark, suspicious heart you have inside you!
Not even my oath can win you over, make you see the light.
Come, strike a bargain—all the gods of Olympus
witness now our pact!

If your master returns, here to your house,
dress me in shirt and cloak and send me off
to Dulichion at once, the place I long to be.
But if your master doesn't return as I predict,
set your men on me—fling me off some rocky crag
so the next beggar here may just think twice
before he peddles lies."

"Surely, friend!"—

the swineherd shook his head—"and just think of the praise and fame I'd win among mankind, now and for all time to come, if first I took you under my roof, I treated you kindly as my guest then cut you down and robbed you of your life—how keen I'd be to say my prayers to Zeus! But it's high time for a meal.

I hope the men will be home at any moment so we can fix a tasty supper in the lodge."

As host and guest confided back and forth the herdsmen came in, driving their hogs up close, penning sows in their proper sties for the night, squealing for all they're worth, shut inside their yard, and the good swineherd shouted to his men,

"Bring in your fattest hog!
I'll slaughter it for our guest from far abroad.
We'll savor it ourselves. All too long we've sweated over these white-tusked boars—our wretched labor—white others wolf our work down free of charge!"

Calling out

as he split up kindling now with a good sharp ax and his men hauled in a tusker five years old, rippling fat, and stood him steady by the hearth. The swineherd, soul of virtue, did not forget the gods. He began the rite by plucking tufts from the porker's head, threw them into the fire and prayed to all the powers, "Bring him home, our wise Odysseus, home at last!" Then raising himself full-length, with an oak log he'd left unsplit he clubbed and stunned the beast and it gasped out its life . . .

The men slashed its throat, singed the carcass, quickly quartered it all, and then the swineherd, cutting first strips for the gods from every limb, spread them across the thighs, wrapped in sleek fat, and sprinkling barley over them, flung them on the fire. They sliced the rest into pieces, pierced them with skewers, broiled them all to a turn and, pulling them off the spits, piled the platters high. The swineherd, standing up to share the meat—his sense of fairness perfect—carved it all out into seven equal portions.

One he set aside, lifting up a prayer to the forest nymphs and Hermes, Maia's son, and the rest he handed on to each man in turn. But to Odysseus he presented the boar's long loin and the cut of honor cheered his master's heart. The man for all occasions thanked his host:

"I pray, Eumaeus, you'll be as dear to Father Zeus as you are to me—a man in my condition—

you honor me by giving me your best."

You replied in kind, Eumaeus, swineherd: "Eat, my strange new friend . . . enjoy it now, it's all we have to offer. As for Father Zeus, one thing he will give and another he'll hold back, whatever his pleasure. All things are in his power."

He burned choice parts for the gods who never die and pouring glistening wine in a full libation, placed the cup in his guest's hands—Odysseus, raider of cities—and down he sat to his own share. Mesaulius served them bread, a man the swineherd purchased for himself in his master's absence—alone, apart from his queen or old Laertes—bought him from Taphians, bartered his own goods. They reached out for the spread that lay at hand and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink, Mesaulius cleared the things away. And now, content with bread and meat, they made for bed at once.

A foul night came on—the dark of the moon—and Zeus rained from dusk to dawn and a sodden West Wind raged. Odysseus spoke up now, keen to test the swineherd. Would he take his cloak off, hand it to his guest or at least tell one of his men to do the same?

He cared for the stranger so, who ventured now, "Listen, Eumaeus, and all you comrades here, allow me to sing my praises for a moment.

Say it's the wine that leads me on, the wild wine that sets the wisest man to sing at the top of his lungs, laugh like a fool—it drives the man to dancing . . . it even tempts him to blurt out stories better never told. But now that I'm sounding off, I can't hold back.

Oh make me young again, and the strength inside me steady as a rock! Just as I was that day we sprang a sudden ambush against the Trojans.

Odysseus led the raid with Atreus' son Menelaus. I was third in command—they'd chosen me themselves. Once we'd edged up under the city's steep ramparts, crowding the walls but sinking into the thick brake, the reeds and marshy flats, huddling under our armor there we lay, and a foul night came on, the North Wind struck, freezing cold, and down from the skies the snow fell like frost, packed hard—the rims of our shields armored round with ice. There all the rest of the men wore shirts and cloaks and, hunching shields over their shoulders, slept at ease.

Not I. I'd left my cloak at camp when I set out—idiot—never thinking it might turn cold, so I joined in with just the shield on my back and a shining waist-guard . . . But then at last,

the night's third watch, the stars just wheeling down—
 I muttered into his ear, Odysseus, right beside me,
 nudging him with an elbow—he perked up at once—
 ‘Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, full of tactics,
 I’m not long for the living. The cold will do me in.
 See, I’ve got no cloak. Some spirit’s fooled me—
 I came out half-dressed. Now there’s no escape!’
 I hadn’t finished—a thought flashed in his mind;
 no one could touch the man at plots or battles.
 ‘Shhh!’ he hissed back—Odysseus had a plan—
 ‘One of our fighters over there might hear you.’
 Then he propped his head on his forearm, calling out,
 ‘Friends, wake up. I slept and a god sent down a dream.
 It warned that we’re too far from the ships, exposed.
 Go, someone, tell Agamemnon, our field marshal—
 he might rush reinforcements from the beach.’
 Thoas, son of Andraemon, sprang up at once,
 flung off his purple cloak and ran to the ships
 while I, bundling into his wrap, was glad at heart
 till Dawn rose on her golden throne once more.
 Oh make me young again
 and the strength inside me steady as a rock!
 One of the swineherds here would lend a wrap
 for love of a good soldier, respect as well.
 Now they spurn me, dressed in filthy rags.”

And you replied, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
 “Now that was a fine yarn you told, old-timer,
 not without point, not without profit either.
 You won’t want for clothes or whatever else
 is due a worn-out traveler come for help—
 not for tonight at least. Tomorrow morning
 you’ll have to flap around in rags again.
 Here we’ve got no store of shirts and cloaks,
 no changes. Just one wrap per man, that’s all.
 But just you wait till Odysseus’ dear son comes back—
 that boy will deck you out in a cloak and shirt
 and send you off, wherever your heart desires!”

With that
 he rose to his feet and laid out a bed by the fire,
 throwing over it skins of sheep and goats and
 down Odysseus lay. Eumaeus flung on his guest
 the heavy flaring cloak he kept in reserve
 to wear when winter brought some wild storm.

So here
 Odysseus slept and the young hands slept beside him.
 Not the swineherd. Not his style to bed indoors,
 apart from his pigs. He geared up to go outside
 and it warmed Odysseus’ heart,
 Eumaeus cared so much for his absent master’s goods.

First, over his broad shoulders he slung a whetted sword,
 wrapped himself in a cloak stitched tight to block the wind,
 and adding a cape, the pelt of a shaggy well-fed goat,
 he took a good sharp lance to fight off men and dogs.
 Then out he went to sleep where his white-tusked boars
 had settled down for the night . . . just under
 a jutting crag that broke the North Wind’s blast.

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BOOK 15: THE PRINCE SETS SAIL FOR HOME

Now south through the spacious dancing-rings of Lacedaemon
 Athena went to remind the hero’s princely son
 of his journey home and spur him on his way.

She found him there with Nestor’s gallant son,
 bedded down in the porch of illustrious Menelaus—
 Pisistratus, at least, overcome with deep sound sleep,
 but not Telemachus. Welcome sleep could not hold him.

All through the godsent night he lay awake . . .
 tossing with anxious thoughts about his father.
 Hovering over him, eyes ablaze, Athena said,
 “It’s wrong, Telemachus, wrong to rove so far,

so long from home, leaving your own holdings
 unprotected—crowds in your palace so brazen
 they’ll carve up all your wealth, devour it all,
 and then your journey here will come to nothing.

Quickly, press Menelaus, lord of the warcry,
 to speed you home at once, if you want to find
 your irreproachable mother still inside your house.

Even now her father and brothers urge Penelope
 to marry Eurymachus, who excels all other suitors
 at giving gifts and drives the bride-price higher.
 She must not carry anything off against your will!

You know how the heart of a woman always works:
 she likes to build the wealth of her new groom—
 of the sons she bore, of her dear, departed husband,
 not a memory of the dead, no questions asked.

So sail for home, I say!

With your own hands turn over all your goods
 to the one serving-woman you can trust the most,
 till the gods bring to light your own noble bride.

And another thing. Take it to heart, I tell you.
 Picked men of the suitors lie in ambush, grim-set
 in the straits between Ithaca and rocky Same,
 poised to kill you before you can reach home,

but I have my doubts they will. Sooner the earth
 will swallow down a few of those young gallants
 who eat you out of house and home these days!
 Just give the channel islands a wide berth,
 push on in your trim ship, sail night and day,

He turned to a trusted friend and said, "Piraeus, ~~son of Clyteus, you are the one who's done my bidding,~~ more than all other friends who sailed with me to Pylos. Please, take this guest of mine to your own house. Treat him kindly, host him with all good will till I can come myself."

605

"Of course, Telemachus," Piraeus the gallant spearman offered warmly: "Stay up-country just as long as you like. I'll tend the man, he'll never lack a lodging."

610

Piraeus boarded ship and told the crew to embark at once and cast off cables quickly—they swung aboard and sat to the oars in ranks. Telemachus fastened rawhide sandals on his feet and took from the decks his rugged bronze-tipped spear. The men cast off, pushed out and pulled for town as Telemachus ordered, King Odysseus' son. The prince strode out briskly,

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legs speeding him on till he reached the farm where his great droves of pigs crowded their pens, and the loyal swineherd often slept beside them, always the man to serve his masters well.

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BOOK 16. FATHER AND SON

As dawn came into the lodge, the king and loyal swineherd set out breakfast, once they had raked the fire up and got the herdsmen off with droves of pigs. And now Telemachus . . .

5

the howling dogs went nuzzling up around him, not a growl as he approached. From inside Odysseus noticed the pack's quiet welcome, noticed the light tread of footsteps too and turned to Eumaeus quickly, winged a word: "Eumaeus, here comes a friend of yours, I'd say. Someone you know, at least. The pack's not barking, must be fawning around him. I can hear his footfall."

10

The words were still on his lips when his own son stood in the doorway, there. The swineherd started up, amazed, he dropped the bowls with a clatter—he'd been busy mixing ruddy wine. Straight to the prince he rushed and kissed his face and kissed his shining eyes, both hands, as the tears rolled down his cheeks. As a father, brimming with love, welcomes home his darling only son in a warm embrace—what pain he's borne for him and him alone!—home now, in the tenth year from far abroad,

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so the loyal swineherd hugged the beaming prince, he clung for dear life, covering him with kisses, yes, like one escaped from death. Eumaeus wept and sobbed, his words flew from the heart: "You're home, Telemachus, sweet light of my eyes! I never thought I'd see you again, once you'd shipped to Pylos! Quick, dear boy, come in, let me look at you, look to my heart's content—under my own roof, the rover home at last. You rarely visit the farm and men these days, always keeping to town, as if it *cheered* you to see them there, that infernal crowd of suitors!"

30

"Have it your way," thoughtful Telemachus replied.

"Dear old man, it's all for you that I've come, to see you for myself and learn the news—whether mother still holds out in the halls or some other man has married her at last, and Odysseus' bed, I suppose, is lying empty, blanketed now with filthy cobwebs."

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"Surely," the foreman of men responded, "she's still waiting there in your halls, poor woman, suffering so, her life an endless hardship . . . wasting away the nights, weeping away the days."

With that

he took the bronze spear from the boy, and Telemachus, crossing the stone doorsill, went inside the lodge.

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As he approached, his father, Odysseus, rose to yield his seat, but the son on his part waved him back: "Stay where you are, stranger. I know we can find another seat somewhere, here on our farm, and here's the man to fetch it."

50

So Odysseus, moving back, sat down once more, and now for the prince the swineherd strewed a bundle of fresh green brushwood, topped it off with sheepskin and there the true son of Odysseus took his place. Eumaeus set before them platters of roast meat left from the meal he'd had the day before; he promptly served them bread, heaped in baskets, mixed their hearty wine in a wooden bowl and then sat down himself to face the king.

55

They reached for the good things that lay at hand, and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink Telemachus asked his loyal serving-man at last, "Old friend, where does this stranger come from? Why did the sailors land him here in Ithaca? Who did they say they are?"

65

I hardly think he came this way on foot."

You answered him, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
 "Here, my boy, I'll tell you the whole true story.
 He hails from Crete's broad land, he's proud to say,
 but he claims he's drifted round through countless towns of men,
 roaming the earth . . . and so a god's spun out his fate.
 He just now broke away from some Thesprotian ship
 and came to my farm. I'll put him in *your* hands,
 you tend to him as you like.
 He counts on you, he says, for care and shelter."

"Shelter? Oh Eumaeus," Telemachus replied,
 "that word of yours, it cuts me to the quick!
 How can I lend the stranger refuge in my house?
 I'm young myself. I can hardly trust my hands
 to fight off any man who rises up against me.

Then my mother's wavering, always torn two ways:
 whether to stay with me and care for the household,
 true to her husband's bed, the people's voice as well,
 or leave at long last with the best man in Achaea
 who courts her in the halls, who offers her the most.
 But our new guest, since he's arrived at your house,
 I'll give him a shirt and cloak to wear, good clothing,
 give him a two-edged sword and sandals for his feet
 and send him off, wherever his heart desires.

Or if you'd rather, keep him here at the farmstead,
 tend to him here, and I'll send up the clothes
 and full rations to keep the man in food;
 he'll be no drain on you and all your men.

But I can't let him go down and join the suitors.
 They're far too abusive, reckless, know no limits:
 they'll make a mockery of him—that would break my heart.
 It's hard for a man to win his way against a mob,
 even a man of iron. They are much too strong."

"Friend"—the long-enduring Odysseus stepped in—
 "surely it's right for *me* to say a word at this point.
 My heart, by god, is torn to pieces hearing this,
 both of you telling how these reckless suitors,
 there in your own house, against your will,
 plot your ruin—a fine young prince like you.
 Tell me, though, do you let yourself be so abused
 or do people round about, stirred up by the prompting
 of some god, despise you? Or are your brothers at fault?
 Brothers a man can trust to fight beside him, true,
 no matter what deadly blood-feud rages on.
 Would I were young as you, to match my spirit now,
 or I were the son of great Odysseus, or the king himself
 returned from all his roving—there's still room for hope!
 Then let some foreigner lop my head off if I failed
 to march right into Odysseus' royal halls

and kill them all. And what if I went down,
 crushed by their numbers—I, fighting alone?
 I'd rather die, cut down in my own house
 than have to look on at their outrage day by day.
 Guests treated to blows, men dragging the serving-women
 through the noble house, exploiting them all, no shame,
 and the gushing wine swilled, the food squandered—
 gorging for gorging's sake—
 and the courting game goes on, no end in sight!"

"You're right, my friend," sober Telemachus agreed.
 "Now let me tell you the whole story, first to last.
 It's not that all our people have turned against me,
 keen for a showdown. Nor have I any brothers at fault,
 brothers a man can trust to fight beside him, true,
 no matter what deadly blood-feud rages on . . .
 Zeus made our line a line of only sons.

Arcesius had only one son, Laertes,
 and Laertes had only one son, Odysseus,
 and I am Odysseus' only son. He fathered me,
 he left me behind at home, and from me he got no joy.
 So now our house is plagued by swarms of enemies.
 All the nobles who rule the islands round about,
 Dulichion, and Same, and wooded Zacynthus too,
 and all who lord it in rocky Ithaca as well—
 down to the last man they court my mother,
 they lay waste my house! And mother . . .

she neither rejects a marriage she despises
 nor can she bear to bring the courting to an end—
 while they continue to bleed my household white.
 Soon—you wait—they'll grind *me* down as well!
 But all lies in the lap of the great gods.

Eumaeus,
 good old friend, go, quickly, to wise Penelope.
 Tell her I'm home from Pylos safe and sound.
 I'll stay on right here. But you come back
 as soon as you've told the news to her alone.
 No other Achaean must hear—
 all too many plot to take my life."

"I know,"
 you assured your prince, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd.
 "I see your point—there's sense in this old head.
 One thing more, and make your orders clear.
 On the same trip do I go and give the news
 to King Laertes too? For many years, poor man,
 heartsick for his son, he'd always keep an eye
 on the farm and take his meals with the hired hands
 whenever he felt the urge to. Now, from the day
 you sailed away to Pylos, not a sip or a bite

he's touched, they say, not as he did before,
and his eyes are shut to all the farmyard labors.
Huddled over, groaning in grief and tears,
he wastes away—the man's all skin and bones."

165

"So much the worse," Telemachus answered firmly.
"Leave him alone; though it hurts us now, we must.
If men could have all they want, free for the taking,
I'd take first my father's journey home. So,
you go and give the message, then come back,
no roaming over the fields to find Laertes.
Tell my mother to send her housekeeper,
fast as she can, in secret—
she can give the poor old man the news."

170

That roused Eumaeus. The swineherd grasped his sandals,
strapped them onto his feet and made for town.

175

His exit did not escape Athena's notice . . .
Approaching, closer, now she appeared a woman,
beautiful, tall and skilled at weaving lovely things.
Just at the shelter's door she stopped, visible to Odysseus
but Telemachus could not see her, sense her there—
the gods don't show themselves to every man alive.
Odysseus saw her, so did the dogs; no barking now,
they whimpered, cringing away in terror through the yard.
She gave a sign with her brows, Odysseus caught it,
out of the lodge he went and past the high stockade
and stood before the goddess. Athena urged him on:
"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
now is the time, now tell your son the truth.
Hold nothing back, so the two of you can plot
the suitors' doom and then set out for town.
I myself won't lag behind you long—
I'm blazing for a battle!"

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Athena stroked him with her golden wand.

First she made the cloak and shirt on his body
fresh and clean, then made him taller, supple, young,
his ruddy tan came back, the cut of his jawline firmed
and the dark beard clustered black around his chin.
Her work complete, she went her way once more
and Odysseus returned to the lodge. His own son
gazed at him, wonderstruck, terrified too, turning
his eyes away, suddenly—

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200

this must be some god—
and he let fly with a burst of exclamations:
"Friend, you're a new man—not what I saw before!
Your clothes, they've changed, even your skin has changed—
surely you are some god who rules the vaulting skies!
Oh be kind, and we will give you offerings,
gifts of hammered gold to warm your heart—

205

spare us, please. I beg you!"

"No, I am not a god,"

the long-enduring, great Odysseus returned.

210

"Why confuse me with one who never dies?"

No, I am your father—

the Odysseus you wept for all your days,

you bore a world of pain, the cruel abuse of men."

215

And with those words Odysseus kissed his son
and the tears streamed down his cheeks and wet the ground,
though before he'd always reined his emotions back.

But still not convinced that it was his father,

Telemachus broke out, wild with disbelief,

"No, you're not Odysseus! Not my father!"

220

Just some spirit spellbinding me now—

to make me ache with sorrow all the more.

Impossible for a mortal to work such marvels,

not with his own devices, not unless some god

comes down in person, eager to make that mortal

young or old—like that! Why, just now

you were old, and wrapped in rags, but *now*, look,

you seem like a god who rules the skies up there!"

225

"Telemachus," Odysseus, man of exploits, urged his son,

"it's wrong to marvel, carried away in wonder so

to see your father here before your eyes.

No other Odysseus will ever return to you.

That man and I are one, the man you see . . .

here after many hardships,

endless wanderings, after twenty years

I have come home to native ground at last.

235

My changing so? Athena's work, the Fighter's Queen—

she has that power, she makes me look as she likes,

now like a beggar, the next moment a young man,

decked out in handsome clothes about my body.

It's light work for the gods who rule the skies

to exalt a mortal man or bring him low."

240

At that

Odysseus sat down again, and Telemachus threw his arms

around his great father, sobbing uncontrollably

as the deep desire for tears welled up in both.

245

They cried out, shrilling cries, pulsing sharper

than birds of prey—eagles, vultures with hooked claws—

when farmers plunder their nest of young too young to fly.

Both men so filled with compassion, eyes streaming tears,

that now the sunlight would have set upon their cries

if Telemachus had not asked his father, all at once,

"What sort of ship, dear father, brought you here?—

Ithaca, at last. Who did the sailors say they are?

I hardly think you came back home on foot!"

250

- 255 So long an exile, great Odysseus replied,
 “Surely, my son, I’ll tell you the whole story now.
 Phaeacians brought me here, the famous sailors
 who ferry home all men who reach their shores.
 They sailed me across the sea in their swift ship,
 they set me down in Ithaca, sound asleep, and gave me
 glittering gifts—bronze and hoards of gold and robes.
 All lie stowed in a cave, thanks to the gods’ help,
 and Athena’s inspiration spurred me here, now,
 so we could plan the slaughter of our foes.
 260 Come, give me the full tally of these suitors—
 I must know their numbers, gauge their strength.
 Then I’ll deploy this old tactician’s wits,
 decide if the two of us can take them on,
 alone, without allies,
 270 or we should hunt reserves to back us up.” “Father,”
 clear-headed Telemachus countered quickly,
 “all my life I’ve heard of your great fame—
 a brave man in war and a deep mind in counsel—
 but what you say dumbfounds me, staggers imagination!
 275 How on earth could two men fight so many and so strong?
 These suitors are not just ten or twenty, they’re far more—
 you count them up for yourself now, take a moment . . .
 From Dulichion, fifty-two of them, picked young men,
 six servants in their troop; from Same, twenty-four,
 280 from Zacynthus, twenty Achaeans, nobles all,
 and the twelve best lords from Ithaca itself.
 Medon the herald’s with them, a gifted bard,
 and two henchmen, skilled to carve their meat.
 If we pit ourselves against all these in the house,
 285 I fear the revenge you come back home to take
 will recoil on our heads—a bitter, deadly blow.
 Think: can you come up with a friend-in-arms?
 Some man to fight beside us, some brave heart?”
 “Let me tell you,” the old soldier said,
 290 “bear it in mind now, listen to me closely.
 Think: will Athena flanked by Father Zeus
 do for the two of us?
 Or shall I rack my brains for another champion?”
 Telemachus answered shrewdly, full of poise,
 295 “Two great champions, those you name, it’s true.
 Off in the clouds they sit
 and they lord it over gods and mortal men.”
 “Trust me,” his seasoned father reassured him,
 “they won’t hold off long from the cries and clash of battle,
 300 not when we and the suitors put our fighting strength

- to proof in my own halls! But now, with daybreak,
 home you go and mix with that overbearing crowd.
 The swineherd will lead me into the city later,
 looking old and broken, a beggar once again.
 305 If they abuse me in the palace, steel yourself,
 no matter what outrage I must suffer, even
 if they drag me through our house by the heels
 and throw me out or pelt me with things they hurl—
 you just look on, endure it. Prompt them to quit
 310 their wild reckless ways, try to win them over
 with friendly words. Those men will never listen,
 now the day of doom is hovering at their heads.
 One more thing. Take it to heart, I urge you.
 When Athena, Queen of Tactics, tells me it is time,
 315 I’ll give you a nod, and when you catch that signal
 round up all the deadly weapons kept in the hall,
 stow them away upstairs in a storeroom’s deep recess—
 all the arms and armor—and when the suitors miss them
 and ask you questions, put them off with a winning story:
 320 ‘I stowed them away, clear of the smoke. A far cry
 from the arms Odysseus left when he went to Troy,
 fire-damaged equipment, black with reeking fumes.
 And a god reminded me of something darker too.
 When you’re in your cups a quarrel might break out,
 325 you’d wound each other, shame your feasting here
 and cast a pall on your courting.
 Iron has powers to draw a man to ruin.’
 Just you leave
 a pair of swords for the two of us, a pair of spears
 and a pair of oxhide bucklers right at hand so we
 can break for the weapons, seize them! Then Athena,
 330 Zeus in his wisdom—they will daze the suitors’ wits.
 Now one last thing. Bear it in mind. You must.
 If you are my own true son, born of my blood,
 let no one hear that Odysseus has come home.
 335 Don’t let Laertes know, not Eumaeus either,
 none in the household, not Penelope herself.
 You and I alone will assess the women’s mood
 and we might test a few of the serving-men as well:
 where are the ones who still respect us both,
 340 who hold us in awe? And who shirk their duties?—
 slighting you because you are so young.”
 “Soon enough, father,” his gallant son replied,
 “you’ll sense the courage inside me, that I know—
 I’m hardly a flighty, weak-willed boy these days.
 345 But I think your last plan would gain us nothing.
 Reconsider, I urge you.
 You’ll waste time, roaming around our holdings,

456 Homer

probing the fieldhands man by man, while the suitors
sit at ease in our house, devouring all our goods—
those brazen rascals never spare a scrap!
But I do advise you to sound the women out:
who are disloyal to you, who are guiltless?
The men—I say no to testing them farm by farm.
That's work for later, if you have really seen
a sign from Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder."

Now as father and son conspired, shaping plans,
the ship that brought the prince and shipmates back
from Pylos was just approaching Ithaca, home port.
As soon as they put in to the harbor's deep bay
they hauled the black vessel up onto dry land
and eager deckhands bore away their gear
and rushed the priceless gifts to Clytius' house.

But they sent a herald on to Odysseus' halls at once
to give the news to thoughtful, cautious Penelope
that Telemachus was home—just up-country now
but he'd told his mates to sail across to port—

so the noble queen would not be seized with fright
and break down in tears. And now those two men met,
herald and swineherd, both out on the same errand,
to give the queen the news. But once they reached
the house of the royal king the herald strode up,
into the serving-women's midst, and burst out,
"Your beloved son, my queen, is home at last!"

Eumaeus though, bending close to Penelope,
whispered every word that her dear son
entrusted him to say. Message told in full,
he left the halls and precincts, heading for his pigs.

But the news shook the suitors, dashed their spirits.
Out of the halls they crowded, past the high-walled court
and there before the gates they sat in council.

Polybus' son Eurymachus opened up among them:
"Friends, what a fine piece of work he's carried off!
Telemachus—what insolence—and we thought his little jaunt
would come to grief! Up now, launch a black ship,
the best we can find—muster a crew of oarsmen,
row the news to our friends in ambush, fast,
bring them back at once."

And just then—
he'd not quite finished when Amphinomus,
wheeling round in his seat,
saw their vessel moored in the deep harbor,
their comrades striking sail and hoisting oars.

He broke into heady laughter, called his friends:
"No need for a message now. They're home, look there!
Some god gave them the news, or they saw the prince's ship

395 go sailing past and failed to overtake her."

Rising, all trooped down to the water's edge
as the crew hauled the vessel up onto dry land
and the hot-blooded hands bore off their gear.
Then in a pack they went to the meeting grounds,
suffering no one else, young or old, to sit among them.
Eupithes' son Antinous rose and harangued them all:
"What a blow! See how the gods have saved this boy
from bloody death? And our lookouts all day long,
stationed atop the windy heights, kept watch,

395 shift on shift, and once the sun went down
we'd never sleep the night ashore, never,
always aboard our swift ship, cruising till dawn,
patrolling to catch Telemachus, kill him on the spot,
and all the while some spirit whisked him home!

410 So here at home we'll plot his certain death:
he must never slip through our hands again,
that boy—while he still lives,
I swear we'll never bring our venture off.

415 The clever little schemer, he does have his skills,
and the crowds no longer show us favor, not at all.
So act! Before he can gather his people in assembly.
He'll never give in an inch, I know, he'll rise

420 and rage away, shouting out to them all how we,
we schemed his sudden death but never caught him.
Hearing of our foul play, they'll hardly sing our praises.
Why, they might do us damage, run us off our lands,
drive us abroad to hunt for strangers' shores.

Strike first, I say, and kill him!—
clear of town, in the fields or on the road.
Then we'll seize his estates and worldly goods,
carve them up between us, share and share alike.
But as for his palace, let his mother keep it,
she and the man she weds.

There's my plan.

430 If you find it offensive, if you want him
living on—in full command of his patrimony—
gather here no more then, living the life of kings,
consuming all his wealth. Each from his own house
must try to win her, showering her with gifts.
Then she can marry the one who offers most,
the man marked out by fate to be her husband."

435 That brought them all to a hushed, stunned silence
till Amphinomus rose to have his say among them—
the noted son of Nisus, King Aretias' grandson,
the chief who fed the suitors from Dulichion,
land of grass and grains,
and the man who pleased Penelope the most,

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Homer

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thanks to his timely words and good clear sense.

Concerned for their welfare now, he stood and argued:

"Friends, I've no desire to kill Telemachus, not I—

it's a terrible thing to shed the blood of kings.

Wait, sound out the will of the gods—that first.

If the decrees of mighty Zeus commend the work,

I'll kill the prince myself and spur on all the rest.

If the gods are against it, then I say hold back!"

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So Amphinomus urged, and won them over.

They rose at once, returned to Odysseus' palace,

entered and took their seats on burnished chairs.

But now an inspiration took the discreet Penelope

to face her suitors, brutal, reckless men.

The queen had heard it all . . .

how they plotted inside the house to kill her son.

The herald Medon told her—he'd overheard their schemes.

And so, flanked by her ladies, she descended to the hall.

That luster of women, once she reached her suitors,

drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,

paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof

and rounding on Antinous, cried out against him:

"You, Antinous! Violent, vicious, scheming—

you, they say, are the best man your age in Ithaca,

best for eloquence, counsel. You're nothing of the sort!

Madman, why do you weave destruction for Telemachus?—

show no pity to those who need it?—those over whom

almighty Zeus stands guard. It's wrong, unholy, yes,

weaving death for those who deserve your mercy!

Don't you know how your father fled here once?

A fugitive, terrified of the people, up in arms

against him because he'd joined some Taphian pirates

out to attack Thesprotians, sworn allies of ours.

The mobs were set to destroy him, rip his life out,

devour his vast wealth to their heart's content,

but Odysseus held them back, he kept their fury down.

And this is the man whose house you waste, scot-free,

whose wife you court, whose son you mean to kill—

you make my life an agony! Stop, I tell you,

stop all this, and make the rest stop too!"

But Polybus' son Eurymachus tried to calm her:

"Wise Penelope, daughter of Icarus, courage!

Disabuse yourself of all these worries now.

That man is not alive—

he never will be, he never can be born—

who'll lift a hand against Telemachus, your son,

not while I walk the land and I can see the light.

I tell you this—so help me, it will all come true—

in an instant that man's blood will spurt around my spear!

My spear, since time and again Odysseus dandled me

on his knees, the great raider of cities fed me

roasted meat and held the red wine to my lips.

So to me your son is the dearest man alive,

and I urge the boy to have no fear of death,

not from the suitors at least.

What comes from the gods—there's no escaping that."

Encouraging, all the way, but all the while

plotting the prince's murder in his mind . . .

The queen, going up to her lofty well-lit room,

tell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,

till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

Returning just at dusk to Odysseus and his son,

the loyal swineherd found they'd killed a yearling pig

and standing over it now were busy cooking supper.

But Athena had approached Laertes' son Odysseus,

tapped him with her wand and made him old again.

She dressed him in filthy rags too, for fear Eumaeus,

recognizing his master face-to-face, might hurry

back to shrewd Penelope, blurting out the news

and never hide the secret in his heart.

Telemachus was the first to greet the swineherd:

"Welcome home, my friend! What's the talk in town?

Are the swaggering suitors back from ambush yet—

or still waiting to catch me coming home?"

You answered the prince, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,

"I had no time to go roaming all through town,

digging round for that. My heart raced me on

to get my message told and rush back here.

But I met up with a fast runner there,

sent by your crew, a herald,

first to tell your mother all the news.

And this I know, I saw with my own eyes—

I was just above the city, heading home,

clambering over Hermes' Ridge, when I caught sight

of a trim ship pulling into the harbor, loaded down

with a crowd aboard her, shields and two-edged spears.

I think they're the men you're after—I'm not sure."

At that the young prince Telemachus smiled,

glancing toward his father, avoiding Eumaeus' eyes.

And now,

with the roasting done, the meal set out, they ate well

and no one's hunger lacked a proper share of supper.

When they'd put aside desire for food and drink,

they remembered bed and took the gift of sleep.

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BOOK 17. STRANGER AT THE GATES

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
 Telemachus strapped his rawhide sandals to his feet
 and the young prince, the son of King Odysseus,
 picked up the rugged spear that fit his grip
 and striking out for the city, told his swineherd,
 "I'm off to town, old friend, to present myself to mother.
 She'll never stop her bitter tears and mourning,
 well I know, till she sees me face-to-face.
 And for you I have some orders—
 take this luckless stranger to town, so he can beg
 his supper there, and whoever wants can give the man
 some crumbs and a cup to drink. How can I put up with
 every passerby? My mind's weighed down with troubles.
 If the stranger resents it, all the worse for him.
 I like to tell the truth and tell it plainly."

"My friend,
 subtle Odysseus broke in, "I've no desire, myself,
 to linger here. Better that beggars cadge their meals
 in town than in the fields. Some willing soul
 will see to my needs. I'm hardly fit, at my age,
 to keep to a farm and jump to a foreman's every order.
 Go on then. This man will take me, as you've told him,
 once I'm warm from the fire and the sun's good and strong.
 Look at the clothing on my back—all rags and tatters.
 I'm afraid the frost at dawn could do me in,
 and town, you say, is a long hard way from here."

At that Telemachus strode down through the farm
 in quick, firm strides, brooding death for the suitors.
 And once he reached his well-constructed palace,
 propping his spear against a sturdy pillar
 and crossing the stone threshold, in he went.

His old nurse was the first to see him, Eurycleia,
 just spreading fleeces over the carved, inlaid chairs.
 Tears sprang to her eyes, she rushed straight to the prince
 as the other maids of great Odysseus flocked around him,
 hugged him warmly, kissed his head and shoulders.

Now down from her chamber came discreet Penelope,
 looking for all the world like Artemis or golden Aphrodite—
 bursting into tears as she flung her arms around her darling son
 and kissed his face and kissed his shining eyes and sobbed,
 "You're home, Telemachus!"—words flew from her heart—
 "sweet light of my eyes! I never thought I'd see you again,
 once you shipped to Pylos—against my will, so secret,
 out for news of your dear father. Quick tell me,

did you catch sight of the man—meet him—what?"

"Please, mother," steady Telemachus replied,
 "don't move me to tears, don't stir the heart inside me.
 I've just escaped from death. Sudden death.
 No. Bathe now, put on some fresh clothes,
 go up to your own room with your serving-women,
 pray, and promise the gods a generous sacrifice
 to bring success, if Zeus will ever grant us
 the hour of our revenge. I myself am off
 to the meeting grounds to summon up a guest
 who came with me from abroad when I sailed home.
 I sent him on ahead with my trusted crew.
 I told Piraeus to take him to his house,
 treat him well, host him with all good will
 till I could come myself."

Words to the mark

that left his mother silent . . .
 She bathed now, put on some fresh clothes,
 prayed, and promised the gods a generous sacrifice
 to bring success, if Zeus would ever grant
 the hour of their revenge.

Spear in hand,
 Telemachus strode on through the hall and out,
 and a pair of sleek hounds went trotting at his heels.
 And Athena lavished a marvelous splendor on the prince
 so the people all gazed in wonder as he came forward.
 The swaggering suitors clustered, milling round him,
 welcome words on their lips, and murder in their hearts.
 But he gave them a wide berth as they came crowding in
 and there where Mentor sat, Antiphus, Halitherses too—
 his father's loyal friends from days gone by—
 he took his seat as they pressed him with their questions.
 And just then Piraeus the gallant spearman approached,
 leading the stranger through the town and out onto
 the meeting grounds. Telemachus, not hanging back,
 went right up to greet Theoclymenus, his guest,
 but Piraeus spoke out first: "Quickly now,
 Telemachus, send some women to my house
 to retrieve the gifts that Menelaus gave you."

"Wait, Piraeus," wary Telemachus cautioned,
 "we've no idea how all of this will go.
 If the brazen suitors cut me down in the palace—
 off guard—and carve apart my father's whole estate,
 I'd rather you yourself, or one of his friends here,
 keep those gifts and get some pleasure from them.
 But if I can bring down slaughter on that crew,
 you send the gifts to my house—we'll share the joy."

Their plans made, he led the wayworn stranger home
 and once they reached the well-constructed palace,
 spreading out their cloaks on a chair or bench,
 into the burnished tubs they climbed and bathed.
 When women had washed them, rubbed them down with oil
 and drawn warm fleece and shirts around their shoulders,
 out of the baths they stepped and sat on high-backed chairs.
 A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher
 and over a silver basin tipped it out
 so they might rinse their hands,
 then pulled a gleaming table to their side.
 A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve them,
 appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty.
 Penelope sat across from her son, beside a pillar,
 leaning back on a low chair and winding finespun yarn.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
 and when they'd put aside desire for food and drink,
 the queen, for all her composure, said at last,
 "Telemachus, I'm going back to my room upstairs
 and lie down on my bed . . .
 that bed of pain my tears have streaked, year in,
 year out, from the day Odysseus sailed away to Troy
 with Atreus' two sons.

But you, you never had the heart—
 before those insolent suitors crowd back to the house—
 to tell me clearly about your father's journey home,
 if you've heard any news."

"Of course, mother,"

thoughtful Telemachus reassured her quickly,
 "I will tell you the whole true story now.
 We sailed to Pylos, to Nestor, the great king,
 and he received me there in his lofty palace,
 treated me well and warmly, yes, as a father treats
 a long-lost son just home from voyaging, years abroad:
 such care he showered on me, he and his noble sons.
 But of strong, enduring Odysseus, dead or alive,
 he's heard no news, he said, from any man on earth.
 He sent me on to the famous spearman Atrides Menelaus,
 on with a team of horses drawing a bolted chariot.
 And there I saw her, Helen of Argos—all for her
 Achaeans and Trojans suffered so much hardship,
 thanks to the gods' decree . . .

The lord of the warcry, Menelaus, asked at once
 what pressing need had brought me to lovely Lacedaemon,
 and when I told him the whole story, first to last,
 the king burst out, 'How shameful! That's the bed
 of a brave man of war they'd like to crawl inside,
 those spineless, craven cowards!

Weak as the doe that beds down her fawns

in a mighty lion's den—her newborn sucklings—
 then trails off to the mountain spurs and grassy bends
 to graze her fill, but back the lion comes to his own lair
 and the master deals both fawns a ghastly bloody death,
 just what Odysseus will deal that mob—ghastly death.

Ah if only—Father Zeus, Athena and lord Apollo—
 that man who years ago in the games at Lesbos
 rose to Philomelides' challenge, wrestled him,
 pinned him down with one tremendous throw
 and the Argives roared with joy . . .

if only *that* Odysseus sported with those suitors,
 a blood wedding, a quick death would take the lot!
 But about the things you've asked me, so intently,
 I'll skew and sidestep nothing, not deceive you, ever.
 Of all he told me—the Old Man of the Sea who never lies—
 I'll hide or hold back nothing, not a single word.

He said he'd seen Odysseus on an island,
 ground down in misery, off in a goddess' house,
 the nymph Calypso, who holds him there by force.
 He has no way to voyage home to his own native land,
 no trim ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars
 and send him scudding over the sea's broad back.'

So Menelaus, the famous spearman, told me.
 My mission accomplished, back I came at once,
 and the gods sent me a stiff following wind
 that sped me home to the native land I love."

His reassurance stirred the queen to her depths
 and the godlike seer Theoclymenus added firmly,
 "Noble lady, wife of Laertes' son, Odysseus,
 Menelaus can have no perfect revelations;
 mark *my* words—I will make you a prophecy,
 quite precise, and I'll hold nothing back.

I swear by Zeus, the first of all the gods,
 by this table of hospitality here, my host,
 by Odysseus' hearth where I have come for help—
 I swear Odysseus is on native soil, here and now!
 Poised or on the prow, learning of these rank crimes
 he's sowing seeds of ruin for all your suitors.

So clear, so true, that bird-sign I saw
 as I sat on the benched ship
 and sounded out the future to the prince!"

"If only, my friend," reserved Penelope exclaimed,
 "everything you say would come to pass!
 You'd soon know my affection, know my gifts.
 Any man you meet would call you blest."

And so the three confided in the halls
 while all the suitors, before Odysseus' palace,

amused themselves with discus and long throwing spears,
out on the leveled grounds, free and easy as always,
full of swagger. When the dinner-hour approached
and sheep came home from pastures near and far,
driven in by familiar drovers,
Medon called them all, their favorite herald,
always present at their meals: "My young lords,
now you've played your games to your hearts' content,
come back to the halls so we can fix your supper.
Nothing's better than dining well on time!"

They came at his summons, rising from the games
and now, bustling into the well-constructed palace,
flinging down their cloaks on a chair or bench,
they butchered hulking sheep and fatted goats,
full-grown hogs and a young cow from the herd,
preparing for their feast.

At the same time

the king and his loyal swineherd geared to leave
the country for the town. Eumaeus, foreman of men,
set things in motion: "Friend, I know you're keen
on going down to town today, just as my master bid,
though I'd rather you stay here to guard the farm.
But I prize the boy, I fear he'll blame me later—
a dressing-down from your master's hard to bear.
So off we go now. The shank of the day is past.
You'll find it colder with nightfall coming on."

"I know, I see your point," the crafty man replied.

"There's sense in this old head. So let's be off.

And from now on, you lead me all the way.

Just give me a stick to lean on,

if you have one ready-cut. You say the road

is treacherous, full of slips and slides."

With that

he flung his beggar's sack across his shoulders—

torn and tattered, slung from a fraying rope.

Eumaeus gave him a staff that met his needs.

Then the two moved out, leaving behind them

dogs and herdsmen to stay and guard the farm.

And so the servant led his master toward the city,

looking for all the world like an old and broken beggar

hunched on a stick, his body wrapped in shameful rags . . .

Down over the rugged road they went till hard by town
they reached the stone-rimmed fountain running clear
where the city people came and drew their water.
Ithacus built it once, with Neritus and Polyctor.

Round it a stand of poplar thrived on the dank soil,
all in a nestling ring, and down from a rock-ledge overhead

the cold water splashed, and crowning the fountain
rose an altar-stone erected to the nymphs,

where every traveler paused and left an offering.

Here Dolius' son, Melanthius, crossed their path,

herding his goats with a pair of drovers' help,

the pick of his flocks to make the suitors' meal.

As soon as he saw them there he broke into a flood

of brutal, foul abuse that made Odysseus' blood boil.

"Look!"—he sneered—"one scum nosing another scum along,

dirt finds dirt by the will of god—it never fails!

Wretched pig-boy, where do you take your filthy swine,

this sickening beggar who licks the pots at feasts?

Hanging round the doorposts, rubbing his back,

scavenging after scraps,

no hero's swords and cauldrons, not for *him*.

Hand him over to me—I'll teach him to work a farm,

muck out my stalls, pitch feed to the young goats;

why to drink will put some muscle on his hams!

Oh no, he's learned his lazy ways too well,

he's got no itch to stick to good hard work,

he'd rather go scrounging round the countryside,

begging for crusts to stuff his greedy gut!

Let me tell you—so help me it's the truth—

if he sets foot in King Odysseus' royal palace,

salvos of footstools flung at his head by all the lords

will crack his ribs as he runs the line of fire through the house!"

Wild, reckless taunts—and just as he passed Odysseus

the idiot lurched out with a heel and kicked his hip

but he couldn't knock the beggar off the path,

he stood his ground so staunchly. Odysseus was torn . . .

should he wheel with his staff and beat the scoundrel senseless?—

or hoist him by the midriff, split his skull on the rocks?

He steeled himself instead, his mind in full control.

But Eumaeus glared at the goatherd, cursed him to his face,

then lifted up his hands and prayed his heart out:

"O nymphs of the fountain, daughters of Zeus—

if Odysseus ever burned you the long thighs

of lambs or kids, covered with rich fat,

now bring my prayer to pass!

Let that man come back—some god guide him now!

He'd toss to the winds the flashy show you make,

Melanthius, so cocksure—always strutting round the town

while worthless fieldhands leave your flocks a shambles!"

"Listen to him!" the goatherd shouted back.

"All bark and no bite from the vicious mutt!

One fine day I'll ship him out in a black lugger,

miles from Ithaca—sell him off for a good stiff price!

275 Just let Apollo shoot Telemachus down with his silver bow,
today in the halls, or the suitors snuff his life out—
as sure as I know the day of the king's return
is blotted out, the king is worlds away!"

280 With his parting shot he left them trudging on
and went and reached the royal house in no time.
Slipping in, he took his seat among the suitors,
facing Eurymachus, who favored him the most.
The carvers set before him his plate of meat,
a staid housekeeper brought the man his bread.

285 And now at last the king and loyal swineherd,
drawing near the palace, halted just outside
as the lyre's rippling music drifted round them—
Phemius, striking up a song for assembled guests—
and the master seized his servant's hand, exclaiming,
"Friend, what a noble house! Odysseus' house, it must be!
No mistaking it—you could tell it among a townful, look.
One building linked to the next, and the courtyard wall
is finished off with a fine coping, the double doors
are battle-proof—no man could break them down!
I can tell a crowd is feasting there in force—
smell the savor of roasts . . . the ringing lyre, listen,
the lyre that god has made the friend of feasts."

295 "An easy guess," you said, Eumaeus, swineherd,
"for a man as keen as you at every turn.
Put heads together. What do we do next?
Either you're the first one into the palace—
mix with the suitors, leave me where I am.
Or if you like, stay put, and I'll go first myself.
Don't linger long. Someone might spot you here outside,
knock you down or pelt you. Mark my words. Take care."

300 The man who'd borne long years abroad replied,
"Well I know. Remember? There's sense in this old head.
You go in, you first, while I stay here behind.
Stones and blows and I are hardly strangers.
My heart is steeled by now,
I've had my share of pain in the waves and wars.
Add this to the total. Bring the trial on.

310 But there's no way to hide the belly's hungers—
what a curse, what mischief it brews in all our lives!
Just for hunger we rig and ride our long benched ships
on the barren salt sea, speeding death to enemies."

315 Now, as they talked on, a dog that lay there
lifted up his muzzle, pricked his ears . . .
It was Argos, long-enduring Odysseus' dog
he trained as a puppy once, but little joy he got

325 since all too soon he shipped to sacred Troy.
In the old days young hunters loved to set him
coursing after the wild goats and deer and hares.
But now with his master gone he lay there, castaway,
on piles of dung from mules and cattle, heaps collecting
out before the gates till Odysseus' serving-men
could cart it off to manure the king's estates.
Infested with ticks, half-dead from neglect,
here lay the hound, old Argos.

330 But the moment he sensed Odysseus standing by
he thumped his tail, nuzzling low, and his ears dropped,
though he had no strength to drag himself an inch
toward his master. Odysseus glanced to the side
and flicked away a tear, hiding it from Eumaeus,
diverting his friend in a hasty, offhand way:

335 "Strange, Eumaeus, look, a dog like this,
lying here on a dung-hill . . .
what handsome lines! But I can't say for sure
if he had the running speed to match his looks
or he was only the sort that gentry spoil at table,
show-dogs masters pamper for their points."

340 You told the stranger, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
"Here—it's all too true—here's the dog of a man
who died in foreign parts. But if he had now
the form and flair he had in his glory days—
as Odysseus left him, sailing off to Troy—

345 you'd be amazed to see such speed, such strength.
No quarry he chased in the deepest, darkest woods
could ever slip this hound. A champion tracker too!
Ah, but he's run out of luck now, poor fellow . . .
his master's dead and gone, so far from home,
and the heartless women tend him not at all. Slaves,
with their lords no longer there to crack the whip,
lose all zest to perform their duties well. Zeus,
the Old Thunderer, robs a man of half his virtue
the day the yoke clamps down around his neck."

355 With that he entered the well-constructed palace,
strode through the halls and joined the proud suitors.
But the dark shadow of death closed down on Argos' eyes
the instant he saw Odysseus, twenty years away.

360 Now Prince Telemachus, first by far to note
the swineherd coming down the hall, nodded briskly,
called and waved him on. Eumaeus, glancing about,
picked up a handy stool where the carver always sat,
slicing meat for the suitors feasting through the house.
He took and put it beside the prince's table, facing him,
straddled it himself as a steward set a plate of meat

before the man and served him bread from trays.

Right behind him came Odysseus, into his own house, looking for all the world like an old and broken beggar hunched on a stick, his body wrapped in shameful rags. Just in the doorway, just at the ashwood threshold, there he settled down . . .

leaning against the cypress post a master joiner planed smooth and hung with a plumb line years ago.

Telemachus motioned the swineherd over now, and choosing a whole loaf from a fine wicker tray and as much meat as his outstretched hands could hold, he said, "Now take these to the stranger, tell him too to make the rounds of the suitors, beg from one and all. Bashfulness, for a man in need, is no great friend."

And Eumaeus did his bidding, went straight up to the guest and winged a greeting: "Here, stranger, Prince Telemachus sends you these, and tells you too to make the rounds of the suitors, beg from one and all. Bashfulness for a beggar, he says, is no great friend."

"Powerful Zeus!" the crafty king responded, "grant that your prince be blest among mankind—and all his heart's desires come to pass!"

Taking the food in both hands, setting it down, spread out on his filthy sack before his feet, the beggar fell to his meal

as the singer raised a song throughout the house.

Once he'd supped and the stirring bard had closed, the suitors broke into uproar down along the hall.

And now Athena came to the side of Laertes' royal son and urged him, "Go now, gather crusts from all the suitors, test them, so we can tell the innocent from the guilty."

But not even so would Athena save one man from death.

Still, off he went, begging from each in turn, circling left to right, reaching out his hand like a beggar from the day that he was born.

They pitied him, gave him scraps, were puzzled too, asking each other, "Who is this?" "Where's he from?"

Till the goatherd Melanthius shouted out in their midst,

"Listen to me, you lords who court our noble queen—I'll tell you about the stranger. I've seen him before.

I know for a fact the swineherd led him in,

though I have no idea who the fellow is

or where he thinks he comes from."

At that

Antinous wheeled on Eumaeus, lashing out at him:

"Your highness, swineherd—why drag *this* to town?

Haven't we got our share of vagabonds to deal with,

disgusting beggars who lick the feasters' plates?

Isn't it quite enough, these swarming crowds consuming your master's bounty—

must you invite this rascal in the bargain?"

"Antinous,

highborn as you are," you told the man, Eumaeus,

"that was a mean low speech!

Now who'd go out, who on his own hook—

not I—and ask a stranger in from nowhere

unless he had some skills to serve the house?

A prophet, a healer who cures disease, a worker in wood or even a god-inspired bard whose singing warms the heart—

they're the ones asked in around the world. A beggar?

Who'd invite a beggar to bleed his household white?

You, you of all the suitors are always roughest

on the servants of our king, on me most of all.

Not that I care, no, so long as his queen,

his wise queen, is still alive in the palace,

Prince Telemachus too."

"Stop, Eumaeus,"

poised Telemachus broke in quickly now,

"don't waste so much breath on Antinous here.

It's just his habit to bait a man with abuse

and spur the rest as well."

He wheeled on the suitor,

letting loose: "How kind you are to me, Antinous,

kind as a father to his son! Encouraging me

to send this stranger packing from my house

with a harsh command! I'd never do it. God forbid.

Take and give to the beggar. I don't grudge it—

I'd even urge you on. No scruples now,

never fear your gifts will upset my mother

or any servant in King Odysseus' royal house.

But no such qualm could enter that head of yours,

bent on feeding your own face, not feeding strangers!"

Antinous countered the young prince in kind:

"So high and mighty, Telemachus—such unbridled rage!

If all the suitors gave him the sort of gift I'll give,

the house would be rid of *him* for three whole months!"

With that, from under his table he seized the stool

that propped his smooth feet as he reveled on—

just lifting it into view . . .

But as for the rest,

all gave to the beggar, filled his sack with handouts,

bread and meat. And Odysseus seemed at the point

of getting back to his doorsill,

done with testing suitors, home free himself

when he stopped beside Antinous, begging face-to-face:

"Give me a morsel, friend. You're hardly the worst
 Achaean here, it seems. The noblest one, in fact.
 You look like a king to me!
 So you should give a bigger crust than the rest
 and I will sing your praises all across the earth.
 I too once lived in a lofty house that men admired;
 rolling in wealth, I'd often give to a vagabond like myself,
 whoever he was, whatever need had brought him to my door.
 And crowds of servants I had, and lots of all it takes
 to live the life of ease, to make men call you rich.
 But Zeus ruined it all—god's will, no doubt—
 when he shipped me off with a roving band of pirates
 bound for Egypt, a long hard sail, to wreck my life.
 There in the Nile delta I moored our ships of war.
 God knows I ordered my trusty crews to stand by,
 just where they were, and guard the anchored fleet
 and I sent a patrol to scout things out from higher ground.
 But swept away by their own reckless fury, the crew went berserk—
 they promptly began to plunder the lush Egyptian farms,
 dragged off the women and children, killed the men.
 Outcries reached the city in no time—stirred by shouts
 the entire town came streaming down at the break of day,
 filling the river plain with chariots, ranks of infantry
 and the gleam of bronze. Zeus who loves the lightning
 flung down murderous panic on all my men-at-arms—
 no one dared to stand his ground and fight,
 disaster ringed us round from every quarter.
 Drove off my men they hacked down with swords,
 led off the rest alive, to labor for them as slaves.
 Myself? They passed me on to a stranger come their way,
 to ship me to Cyprus—Iasus' son Dmetor it was,
 who ruled Cyprus then with an iron fist.
 And from there I sailed to Ithaca,
 just as you see me now, ground down by pain and sorrow—"
 "Good god almighty!" Antinous cut the beggar short.
 "What spirit brought this pest to plague our feast?
 Back off! Into the open, clear of my table, or you,
 you'll soon land in an Egypt, Cyprus, to break your heart!
 What a brazen, shameless beggar! Scrounging food
 from each man in turn, and look at their handouts,
 reckless, never a qualm, no holding back, not
 when making free with the next man's goods—
 each one's got plenty here."
 "Pity, pity,"
 the wry Odysseus countered, drawing away.
 "No sense in your head to match your handsome looks.
 You'd grudge your servant a pinch of salt from your own larder,
 you who lounge at the next man's board but lack the heart
 to tear a crust of bread and hand it on to me,

though there's god's plenty here."
 Boiling over
 Antinous gave him a scathing look and let fly,
 "Now you won't get out of the hall unscarred, I swear,
 not after such a filthy string of insults!"
 With that
 he seized the stool and hurled it—
 Square in the back
 it struck Odysseus, just under the right shoulder
 but he stood up against it—steady as a rock,
 unshattered by Antinous' blow—just shook his head,
 silent, his mind churning with thoughts of bloody work.
 Back he went to the doorsill, crouched, and setting down
 his sack about to burst, he faced the suitors, saying,
 "Hear me out, you lords who court the noble queen,
 I must say what the heart inside me urges.
 There's nothing to groan about, no hurt, when a man
 takes a blow as he fights to save his own possessions,
 cattle or shining flocks. But Antinous struck me
 all because of my good-for-nothing belly—that,
 that curse that makes such pain for us poor men.
 But if beggars have their gods and Furies too,
 let Antinous meet his death before he meets his bride!"
 "Enough, stranger!" Antinous volleyed back.
 "Sit there and eat in peace—or go get lost! Or else,
 for the way you talk, these young men will hale you
 up and down the halls by your hands or feet
 until you're skinned alive!"
 Naked threats—
 but the rest were outraged, even those brash suitors.
 One would say to another, "Look, Antinous,
 that was a crime, to strike the luckless beggar!"
 "Your fate is sealed if he's some god from the blue."
 "And the gods do take on the look of strangers
 dropping in from abroad—"
 "Disguised in every way
 as they roam and haunt our cities, watching over us—"
 "All our foul play, all our fair play too!"
 So they warned, but Antinous paid no heed.
 And the anguish welled up in Telemachus' breast
 for the blow his father took, yet he let no tears
 go rolling down his face—he just shook his head,
 silent, his mind churning with thoughts of bloody work.
 But then, when cautious Queen Penelope heard
 how Antinous struck the stranger, there in the halls,
 she cried out, with her serving-women round her,

“May Apollo the Archer strike you just as hard!”
 And her housekeeper Eurynome added quickly,
 “If only our prayers were granted—
 then not one of the lot would live to see
 Dawn climb her throne tomorrow!”

550

“Dear old woman,”
 alert Penelope replied, “they’re all hateful,
 plotting their vicious plots. But Antinous
 is the worst of all—he’s black death itself.
 Here’s this luckless stranger, wandering down
 the halls and begging scraps—hard-pressed by need—
 and the rest all give the man his fill of food
 but that one gives him a footstool
 hurled at his right shoulder, hits his back!”

555

While she exclaimed among her household women,
 sitting there in her room, Odysseus bent to supper.
 Penelope called the swineherd in and gave instructions:
 “Go, good Eumaeus, tell the stranger to come at once.
 I’d like to give him a warm welcome, ask the man
 if he’s heard some news about my gallant husband
 or seen him in the flesh . . .
 He seems like one who’s roved around the world.”

560

“My queen,” you answered, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
 “if only the lords would hold their peace a moment!
 Such stories he tells—he’d charm you to your depths.
 Three nights, three days I kept him in my shelter;
 I was the first the fellow stumbled onto,
 fleeing from some ship. But not even so

570

could he bring his tale of troubles to an end.
 You know how you can stare at a bard in wonder—
 trained by the gods to sing and hold men spellbound—
 how you can long to sit there, listening, all your life
 when the man begins to sing. So he charmed my heart,
 I tell you, huddling there beside me at my fire.

575

He and Odysseus’ father go way back, he says,
 sworn friends, and the stranger hails from Crete
 where the stock of old King Minos still lives on,
 and from Crete he made his way, racked by hardship,
 tumbling on like a rolling stone until he turned up here.
 He swears he’s heard of Odysseus—just in reach,
 in rich Thesprotian country—still alive,
 laden with treasure, heading home at last!”

580

“Go,”
 the cautious queen responded, “call him here
 so he can tell me his own tale face-to-face.
 Our friends can sit at the gates or down the halls
 and play their games, debauched to their hearts’ content.
 Why not? Their own stores, their bread and seasoned wine,

590

lie intact at home; food for their serving-men alone.
 But they, they infest our palace day and night,
 they butcher our cattle, our sheep, our fat goats,
 feasting themselves sick, swilling our glowing wine
 as if there’s no tomorrow—all of it, squandered.
 No, there is no man like Odysseus in command
 to drive this curse from the house. Dear god,
 if only Odysseus came back home to native soil now,
 he and his son would avenge the outrage of these men—like that!”

595

600

At her last words Telemachus shook with a lusty sneeze!
 like a thunderclap resounding up and down the halls.
 The queen was seized with laughter, calling out
 to Eumaeus winged words: “Quickly, go!
 Bring me this stranger now, face-to-face!

605

You hear how my son sealed all I said with a sneeze?
 So let death come down with grim finality on these suitors—
 one and all—not a single man escape his sudden doom!
 And another thing. Mark my words, I tell you.
 If I’m convinced that all he says is true,
 I’ll dress him in shirt and cloak, in handsome clothes.”

610

Off the swineherd went, following her instructions,
 made his way to the stranger’s side and winged a word:
 “Old friend—our queen, wise Penelope, summons you,
 the prince’s mother! The spirit moves her now,
 heartsick as she is,

615

to ask a question or two about her husband.
 And if she’s convinced that all you say is true,
 she’ll dress you in shirt and cloak. That’s what you need,
 that most of all now. Bread you can always beg
 around the country, fill your belly well—
 they’ll give you food, whoever has a mind to.”

620

“Gladly, Eumaeus,” the patient man replied,
 “I’ll tell her the whole truth and nothing but,
 Icarus’ daughter, your wise queen Penelope.
 I know all about that man . . .

625

it’s been my lot to suffer what he’s suffered.
 But I fear the mob’s abuse, those rough young bucks,
 their pride and violence hit the iron skies!
 Just now that scoundrel—as I went down the halls,
 harming no one—up and dealt me a jolting blow,
 and who would raise a hand to save me? Telemachus?
 Anyone else? No one. So tell Penelope now,
 anxious as she may be, to wait in the halls
 until the sun goes down. Then she can ask me
 all she likes about her husband’s journey home.

630

635

But let her give me a seat close by the fire.
The clothes on my back are tatters. Well you know—
you are the first I begged for care and shelter.”

640

Back the swineherd went, following his instructions.
Penelope, just as he crossed her threshold, broke out,
“Didn’t you bring him? What’s in the vagrant’s mind?
Fear of someone? Embarrassed by something else,
here in the house? Is the fellow bashful?
A bashful man will make a sorry beggar.”

645

You answered your queen, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd,
“He talks to the point—he thinks as the next man would
who wants to dodge their blows, that brutal crew.
He tells you to wait here till the sun goes down.
It’s better for you, my queen. Then you can talk
with the man in private, hear the stranger’s news.”

650

“Nobody’s fool, that stranger,” wise Penelope said,
“he sees how things could go. Surely no men on earth
can match that gang for reckless, deadly schemes.”

655

So she agreed, and now, mission accomplished,
back the loyal swineherd went to mix with the suitors.
Moving next to the prince, he whispered a parting word,
their heads close together so no one else could hear.

660

“Dear boy, I must be off, to see to the pigs
and the whole farm—your living, mine as well.
You’re the one to tend to all things here.
Look out for your own skin first,

do take care, you mustn’t come to grief.

Crowds of your own countrymen plot your death—
let Zeus wipe out the lot before they kill us all!”

665

“Right you are, old friend,” the canny prince replied.
“Now off you go, once you’ve had your supper.
But come back bright and early,
bring some good sound boards for slaughter. Yes,
I’ll tend to all things here, I and the deathless gods.”

670

And the swineherd sat down again on his polished stool
and once he’d supped and drunk to his heart’s content,
back he went to his pigs, leaving the royal precincts
still filled with feasters, all indulging now
in the joys of dance and song.
The day was over. Dusk was falling fast.

675

BOOK 18. THE BEGGAR-KING OF ITHACA

Now along came this tramp, this public nuisance
who used to scrounge a living round the streets of Ithaca—
notorious for his belly, a ravenous, bottomless pit

for food and drink, but he had no pith, no brawn,
despite the looming hulk that met your eyes.

5

Arnaeus was his name,
so his worthy mother called him at birth,
but all the young men called him Irus for short
because he’d hustle messages at any beck and call.¹

10

Well he came by to rout the king from his own house
and met Odysseus now with a rough, abusive burst:
“Get off the porch, you old goat, before I haul you
off by the leg! Can’t you see them give me the wink,
all of them here, to drag you out—and so I would
but I’ve got some pangs of conscience. Up with you, man,
or before you know it, we’ll be trading blows!”

15

A killing look,

and the wily old soldier countered, “Out of your mind?
What damage have I done *you*? What have I said?

I don’t grudge you anything.

not if the next man up and gives you plenty.

20

This doorsill is big enough for the both of us—
you’ve got no call to grudge me what’s not yours.

You’re another vagrant, just like me, I’d say,

and it lies with the gods to make us rich or poor. So,
keep your fists to yourself, don’t press your luck, don’t rile me,
or old as I am, I’ll bloody your lip, splatter your chest
and buy myself some peace and quiet for tomorrow.

25

I doubt you’ll ever come lumbering back again
to the halls of Laertes’ royal son Odysseus.”

“Look who’s talking!” the beggar rumbled in anger.

30

“How this pot-bellied pig runs off at the mouth—
like an old crone at her oven!

Well I’ve got a knock-out blow in store for *him*—
I’ll batter the tramp with both fists, crack every tooth

35

from his jaws, I’ll litter the ground with teeth
like a rogue sow’s, punished for rooting corn!
Belt up—so the lords can see us fight it out.

How can you beat a champion half your age?”

Tongue-lashing each other, tempers flaring,
there on the polished sill before the lofty doors.

40

And Antinous, that grand prince, hearing them wrangle,
broke into gloating laughter, calling out to the suitors,

“Friends, nothing like this has come our way before—
what sport some god has brought the palace now!

45

The stranger and Irus, look,

they’d battle it out together, fists flying.

Come, let’s pit them against each other—fast!”

1. His name resembles that of Iris, messenger of the gods.

520 Homer

430 "as good as his luck in bending back that weapon!"

435 ~~So they mocked, but Odysseus, mastermind in action,~~
 once he'd handled the great bow and scanned every incl,
 then, like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song—
 who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
 440 making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end—
 so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.
 Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch
 and under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow's cry.
 445 Horror swept through the suitors, faces blanching white,
 and Zeus cracked the sky with a bolt, his blazing sign,
 and the great man who had borne so much rejoiced at last
 that the son of cunning Cronus flung that omen down for him.
 He snatched a winged arrow lying bare on the board—
 the rest still bristled deep inside the quiver,
 soon to be tasted by all the feasters there.
 455 Setting shaft on the handgrip, drawing the notch
 and bowstring back, back . . . right from his stool,
 just as he sat but aiming straight and true, he let fly—
 and never missing an ax from the first ax-handle
 clean on through to the last and out
 470 the shaft with its weighted brazen head shot free!

"Telemachus,"

Odysseus looked to his son and said, "your guest,
 sitting here in your house, has not disgraced you.
 No missing the mark, look, and no long labor spent
 to string the bow. My strength's not broken yet,
 not quite so frail as the mocking suitors thought.
 But the hour has come to serve our masters right—
 supper in broad daylight—then to other revels,
 song and dancing, all that crowns a feast."

480 He paused with a warning nod, and at that sign
 Prince Telemachus, son of King Odysseus,
 girding his sharp sword on, clamping hand to spear,
 took his stand by a chair that flanked his father—
 his bronze spearpoint glinting now like fire . . .

BOOK 22. SLAUGHTER IN THE HALL

Now stripping back his rags Odysseus master of craft and battle
 vaulted onto the great threshold, gripping his bow and quiver
 bristling arrows, and poured his flashing shafts before him,
 loose at his feet, and thundered out to all the suitors:
 "Look—your crucial test is finished, now, at last!
 But another target's left that no one's hit before—
 we'll see if I can hit it—Apollo give me glory!"

5

10 With that he trained a stabbing arrow on Antinous . . .
 just lifting a gorgeous golden loving-cup in his hands,
 about to drain the wine—and slaughter the last thing
 on the suitor's mind: who could dream that one foe
 in that crowd of feasters, however great his power,
 would bring down death on himself, and black doom?
 15 But Odysseus aimed and shot Antinous square in the throat
 and the point went stabbing clean through the soft neck and out—
 and off to the side he pitched, the cup dropped from his grasp
 as the shaft sank home, and the man's life-blood came spurting
 from his nostrils—

thick red jets— a sudden thrust of his foot—

20 he kicked away the table—
 food showered across the floor,
 the bread and meats soaked in a swirl of bloody filth.
 The suitors burst into uproar all throughout the house
 when they saw their leader down. They leapt from their seats,
 milling about, desperate, scanning the stone walls—
 not a shield in sight, no rugged spear to seize.
 25 They wheeled on Odysseus, lashing out in fury:
 "Stranger, shooting at men will cost your life!"

"Your game is over—you, you've shot your last!"

"You'll never escape your own headlong death!"

"You killed the best in Ithaca—our fine prince!"

"Vultures will eat your corpse!"

Groping, frantic—

each one persuading himself the guest had killed
 the man by chance. Poor fools, blind to the fact
 that all their necks were in the noose, their doom sealed.

35 With a dark look, the wily fighter Odysseus shouted back,
 "You dogs! you never imagined I'd return from Troy—
 so cocksure that you bled my house to death,
 ravished my serving-women—wooed my wife
 behind my back while I was still alive!
 No fear of the gods who rule the skies up there,
 no fear that men's revenge might arrive someday—
 40 now all your necks are in the noose—your doom is sealed!"

Terror gripped them all, blanched their faces white,
 each man glancing wildly—how to escape his instant death?
 Only Eurymachus had the breath to venture, "If you,
 45 you're truly Odysseus of Ithaca, home at last,
 you're right to accuse these men of what they've done—
 so much reckless outrage here in your palace,

50 so much on your lands. But here he lies,
quite dead, and he incited it all—Antinous—
look, the man who drove us all to crime!

55 Not that he needed marriage, craved it so;
he'd bigger game in mind—though Zeus barred his way—
he'd lord it over Ithaca's handsome country, king himself,
once he'd lain in wait for your son and cut him down!

But now he's received the death that he deserved.

60 So spare your own people! Later we'll recoup
your costs with a tax laid down upon the land,
covering all we ate and drank inside your halls,
and each of us here will pay full measure too—
twenty oxen in value, bronze and gold we'll give
until we melt your heart. Before we've settled,
who on earth could blame you for your rage?"

But the battle-master kept on glaring, seethings.

65 "No, Eurymachus! Not if you paid me all your father's wealth—
all you possess now, and all that could pour in from the world's end—
no, not even then would I stay my hands from slaughter
till all you suitors had paid for all your crimes!
Now life or death—your choice—fight me or flee
if you hope to escape your sudden bloody doom!
I doubt one man in the lot will save his skin!"

His menace shook their knees, their hearts too
but Eurymachus spoke again, now to the suitors: "Friends!
This man will never restrain his hands, invincible hands—
now that he's seized that polished bow and quiver, look,
he'll shoot from the sill until he's killed us all!
So fight—call up the joy of battle! Swords out!
Tables lifted—block his arrows winging death!
Charge him, charge in a pack—
80 try to rout the man from the sill, the doors,
race through town and sound an alarm at once—
our friend would soon see he's shot his bolt!"

Brave talk—
he drew his two-edged sword, bronze, honed for the kill
and hurled himself at the king with a raw savage cry
85 in the same breath that Odysseus loosed an arrow
ripping his breast beside the nipple so hard
it lodged in the man's liver—
out of his grasp the sword dropped to the ground—
over his table, head over heels he tumbled, doubled up,
90 flinging his food and his two-handled cup across the floor—
he smashed the ground with his forehead, writhing in pain,
both feet flailing out, and his high seat tottered—
the mist of death came swirling down his eyes.

95 Amphinomus rushed the king in all his glory,
charging him face-to-face, a slashing sword drawn—
if only he could force him clear of the doorway, now,
but Telemachus—too quick—stabbed the man from behind,
plunging his bronze spear between the suitor's shoulders
and straight on through his chest the point came jutting out—
100 down he went with a thud, his forehead slammed the ground.
Telemachus swerved aside, leaving his long spearshaft
lodged in Amphinomus—fearing some suitor just might
lunge in from behind as he tugged the shaft,
impale him with a sword or hack him down,
105 crouching over the corpse.

He went on the run, reached his father at once
and halting right beside him, let fly, "Father—
now I'll get you a shield and a pair of spears,
a helmet of solid bronze to fit your temples!
110 I'll arm myself on the way back and hand out
arms to the swineherd, arm the cowherd too—
we'd better fight equipped!"

"Run, fetch them,"
the wily captain urged, "while I've got arrows left
to defend me—or they'll force me from the doors
115 while I fight on alone!"

Telemachus moved to his father's orders smartly.
Off he ran to the room where the famous arms lay stored,
took up four shields, eight spears, four bronze helmets
ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these,
120 ran back to reach his father's side in no time.

The prince was first to case himself in bronze
and his servants followed suit—both harnessed up
and all three flanked Odysseus, mastermind of war,
and he, as long as he'd arrows left to defend himself,
125 kept picking suitors off in the palace, one by one
and down they went, corpse on corpse in droves.
Then, when the royal archer's shafts ran out,

he leaned his bow on a post of the massive doors—
where walls of the hallway catch the light—and armed:
130 across his shoulder he slung a buckler four plies thick,
over his powerful head he set a well-forged helmet,
the horsehair crest atop it tossing, bristling terror,
and grasped two rugged lances tipped with fiery bronze.

Now a side-door was fitted into the main wall—
135 right at the edge of the great hall's stone sill—
and led to a passage always shut by good tight boards.
But Odysseus gave the swineherd strict commands
to stand hard by the side-door, guard it well—
the only way the suitors might break out.

Agelaus called to his comrades with a plan:
 "Friends, can't someone climb through the hatch?—
 tell men outside to sound the alarm, be quick—
 our guest would soon see he'd shot his last!"

The goatherd Melanthius answered, "Not a chance,
 my lord—the door to the courtyard's much too near,
 dangerous too, the mouth of the passage cramped.
 One strong man could block us, one and all!
 No, I'll fetch you some armor to harness on,
 out of the storeroom—there, nowhere else, I'm sure,
 the king and his gallant son have stowed their arms!"

With that the goatherd clambered up through smoke-ducts
 high on the wall and scurried into Odysseus' storeroom,
 bundled a dozen shields, as many spears and helmets
 ridged with horsehair crests and, loaded with these,
 rushed back down to the suitors, quickly issued arms.
 Odysseus' knees shook, his heart too, when he saw them
 buckling on their armor, brandishing long spears—
 here was a battle looming, well he knew.

He turned at once to Telemachus, warnings flying:
 "A bad break in the fight, my boy! One of the women's
 tipped the odds against us—or could it be the goatherd?"

"My fault, father," the cool clear prince replied,
 "the blame's all mine. That snug door to the vault,
 I left it ajar—they've kept a better watch than I.
 Go, Eumaeus, shut the door to the storeroom,
 check and see if it's one of the women's tricks
 or Dolius' son Melanthius. He's our man, I'd say."

And even as they conspired, back the goatherd
 climbed to the room to fetch more burnished arms,
 but Eumaeus spotted him, quickly told his king
 who stood close by: "Odysseus, wily captain,
 there he goes again, the infernal nuisance—
 just as we suspected—back to the storeroom.
 Give me a clear command!

Do I kill the man—if I can take him down—
 or drag him back to you, here, to pay in full
 for the vicious work he's plotted in your house?"

Odysseus, master of tactics, answered briskly,
 "I and the prince will keep these brazen suitors
 crammed in the hall, for all their battle-fury.
 You two wrench Melanthius' arms and legs behind him,
 fling him down in the storeroom—lash his back to a plank
 and strap a twisted cable fast to the scoundrel's body,
 hoist him up a column until he hits the rafters—
 let him dangle in agony, still alive,
 for a good long time!"

They hung on his orders, keen to do his will.
 Off they ran to the storeroom, unseen by him inside—
 Melanthius, rummaging after arms, deep in a dark recess
 as the two men took their stand, either side of the doorposts,
 poised till the goatherd tried to cross the doorsill . . .

one hand clutching a crested helmet, the other
 an ample old buckler blotched with mildew,
 the shield Laertes bore as a young soldier once
 but there it lay for ages, seams on the handstraps split—
 Quick, they rushed him, seized him, haled him back by the hair,
 flung him down on the floor, writhing with terror, bound him
 hand and foot with a chafing cord, wrenched his limbs
 back, back till the joints locked tight—

just as Laertes' cunning son commanded—
 they strapped a twisted cable round his body,
 hoisted him up a column until he hit the rafters,

then you mocked him, Eumaeus, my good swineherd:
 "Now stand guard through the whole night, Melanthius—
 stretched out on a soft bed fit for *you*, your highness!
 You're bound to see the Morning rising up from the Ocean,
 mounting her golden throne—at just the hour you always
 drive in goats to feast the suitors in the hall!"

So they left him, trussed in his agonizing sling;
 they clapped on armor again, shut the gleaming doors
 and ran to rejoin Odysseus, mastermind of war.

And now as the ranks squared off, breathing fury—
 four at the sill confronting a larger, stronger force
 arrayed inside the hall—now Zeus's daughter Athena,
 taking the build and voice of Mentor, swept in
 and Odysseus, thrilled to see her, cried out,
 "Rescue us, Mentor, now it's life or death!
 Remember your old comrade—all the service
 I offered you! We were boys together!"

So he cried
 yet knew in his bones it was Athena, Driver of Armies.
 But across the hall the suitors brayed against her,
 Agelaus first, his outburst full of threats:

"Mentor, never let Odysseus trick you into
 siding with *him* to fight against the suitors.

Here's our plan of action, and we will see it through!
 Once we've killed them both, the father and the son,
 we'll kill you too, for all you're bent on doing
 here in the halls—you'll pay with your own head!

And once our swords have stopped your violence cold—
 all your property, all in your house, your fields,
 we'll lump it all with Odysseus' rich estate
 and never let your sons live on in your halls
 or free your wife and daughters to walk through town!"

235 Naked threats—and Athena hit new heights of rage,
she lashed out at Odysseus now with blazing accusations:
“Where’s it gone, Odysseus—your power, your fighting heart?
The great soldier who fought for famous white-armed Helen,
240 battling Trojans nine long years—nonstop, no mercy,
mowing their armies down in grueling battle—
you who seized the broad streets of Troy
with your fine strategic stroke! How can you—
now you’ve returned to your own house, your own wealth—
bewail the loss of your combat strength in a war with *suitors*?
245 Come, old friend, stand by me! You’ll see action now,
see how Mentor the son of Alcinus, that brave fighter,
kills your enemies, pays you back for service!”
Rousing words—
but she gave no all-out turning of the tide, not yet,
she kept on testing Odysseus and his gallant son,
250 putting their force and fighting heart to proof.
For all the world like a swallow in their sight
she flew on high to perch
on the great hall’s central roofbeam black with smoke.

But the suitors closed ranks, commanded now by Damastor’s son
Agelaus, flanked by Eurynomus, Demoptolemus and Amphimedon,
255 Pisander, Polyctor’s son, and Polybus ready, waiting—
head and shoulders the best and bravest of the lot
still left to fight for their lives,
now that the pelting shafts had killed the rest.
Agelaus spurred his comrades on with battle-plans:
260 “Friends, at last the man’s invincible hands are useless!
Mentor has mouthed some empty boasts and flitted off—
just four are left to fight at the front doors. So now,
no wasting your long spears—all at a single hurl,
just six of us launch out in the first wave!
265 If Zeus is willing, we may hit Odysseus,
carry off the glory! The rest are nothing
once the captain’s down!”

At his command,
concentrating their shots, all six hurled as one
but Athena sent the whole salvo wide of the mark—
270 one of them hit the jamb of the great hall’s doors,
another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point
of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.
Seeing his men untouched by the suitors’ flurry,
steady Odysseus leapt to take command:
275 “Friends! now it’s for *us* to hurl at them, I say,
into this ruck of suitors! Topping all their crimes
they’re mad to strip the armor off our bodies!”

Taking aim at the ranks, all four let fly as one
and the lances struck home—Odysseus killed Demoptolemus,

280 Telemachus killed Euryades—the swineherd, Elatus—
and the cowherd cut Pisander down in blood.
They bit the dust of the broad floor, all as one.
Back to the great hall’s far recess the others shrank
as the four rushed in and plucked up spears from corpses.

285 And again the suitors hurled their whetted shafts
but Athena sent the better part of the salvo wide—
one of them hit the jamb of the great hall’s doors,
another the massive door itself, and the heavy bronze point
of a third ashen javelin crashed against the wall.
290 True, Amphimedon nicked Telemachus on the wrist—
the glancing blade just barely broke his skin.

Ctesippus sent a long spear sailing over
Eumaeus’ buckler, grazing his shoulder blade
but the weapon skittered off and hit the ground.
295 And again those led by the brilliant battle-master
hurled their razor spears at the suitors’ ranks—
and now Odysseus raider of cities hit Eurydamas,
Telemachus hit Amphimedon—Eumaeus, Polybus—
and the cowherd stabbed Ctesippus

300 right in the man’s chest and triumphed over his body:
“Love your mockery, do you? Son of that blowhard Polytherses!
No more shooting off your mouth, you idiot, such big talk—
leave the last word to the gods—they’re much stronger!
Take this spear, this guest-gift, for the cow’s hoof
305 you once gave King Odysseus begging in his house!”

So the master of longhorn cattle had his say—
as Odysseus, fighting at close quarters, ran Agelaus
through with a long lance—Telemachus speared Leocritus
310 so deep in the groin the bronze came punching out his back
and the man crashed headfirst, slamming the ground full-face.
And now Athena, looming out of the rafters high above them,
brandished her man-destroying shield of thunder, terrifying
the suitors out of their minds, and down the hall they panicked—
wild, like herds stampeding, driven mad as the darting gadfly
315 strikes in the late spring when the long days come round.
The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked,
swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller birds
that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds
but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless,
320 never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport—
so the attackers routed suitors headlong down the hall,
wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right
and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—
the whole floor awash with blood.

Leodes now—
he flung himself at Odysseus, clutched his knees,
325 crying out to the king with a sudden, winging prayer:

528 Homer

330 "I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
Never, I swear, did I harass any woman in your house—
never a word, a gesture—nothing, no, I tried
to restrain the suitors, whoever did such things.
They wouldn't listen, keep their hands to themselves—
so reckless, so they earn their shameful fate.
But I was just their prophet—
my hands are clean—and I'm to die their death!
Look at the thanks I get for years of service!"

335 A killing look, and the wry soldier answered,
"Only a priest, a prophet for this mob, you say?
How hard you must have prayed in my own house
that the heady day of my return would never dawn—
my dear wife would be yours, would bear your children!
For that there's no escape from grueling death—you die!"

340 And snatching up in one powerful hand a sword
left on the ground—Agelaus dropped it when he fell—
Odysseus hacked the prophet square across the neck
and the praying head went tumbling in the dust.

345 Now one was left,
trying still to escape black death. Phemius, Terpis' son,
the bard who always performed among the suitors—
they forced the man to sing. . . .

350 There he stood, backing into the side-door,
still clutching his ringing lyre in his hands,
his mind in turmoil, torn—what should he do?
Steal from the hall and crouch at the altar-stone
of Zeus who Guards the Court, where time and again
Odysseus and Laertes burned the long thighs of oxen?
Or throw himself on the master's mercy, clasp his knees?
That was the better way—or so it struck him, yes,
grasp the knees of Laertes' royal son. And so,

360 cradling his hollow lyre, he laid it on the ground
between the mixing-bowl and the silver-studded throne,
then rushed up to Odysseus, yes, and clutched his knees,
singing out to his king with a stirring, winged prayer:
"I hug your knees, Odysseus—mercy! spare my life!
What a grief it will be to you for all the years to come
if you kill the singer now, who sings for gods and men.
I taught myself the craft, but a god has planted
deep in my spirit all the paths of song—
songs I'm fit to sing for you as for a god.
Calm your bloodlust now—don't take my head!
He'd bear me out, your own dear son Telemachus—
never of my own will, never for any gain did I
perform in your house, singing after the suitors
had their feasts. They were too strong, too many—
they forced me to come and sing—I had no choice!"

370

375 The inspired Prince Telemachus heard his pleas
and quickly said to his father close beside him,
"Stop, don't cut him down! This one's innocent.
So is the herald Medon—the one who always
tended me in the house when I was little—
spare him too. Unless he's dead by now,
killed by Philoetius or Eumaeus here—
or ran into *you* rampaging through the halls."

380 The herald pricked up his anxious ears at that . . .
cautious soul, he covered, trembling, under a chair—
wrapped in an oxhide freshly stripped—to dodge black death.
He jumped in a flash from there, threw off the smelly hide
and scuttling up to Telemachus, clutching his knees,
the herald begged for life in words that fluttered:
"Here I am, dear boy—spare me! Tell your father,
flushed with victory, not to kill me with his sword—
enraged as he is with these young lords who bled
his palace white and showed you no respect,
the reckless fools!"

385 Breaking into a smile
the canny Odysseus reassured him, "Courage!
The prince has pulled you through, he's saved you now
so you can take it to heart and tell the next man too:
clearly doing good puts doing bad to shame.
Now leave the palace, go and sit outside—
out in the courtyard, clear of the slaughter—
you and the bard with all his many songs.
Wait till I've done some household chores
that call for my attention."

400 The two men scurried out of the house at once
and crouched at the altar-stone of mighty Zeus—
glancing left and right,
fearing death would strike at any moment.

405 Odysseus scanned his house to see if any man
still skulked alive, still hoped to avoid black death.
But he found them one and all in blood and dust . . .
great hauls of them down and out like fish that fishermen
drag from the churning gray surf in looped and coiling nets
and fling ashore on a sweeping hook of beach—some noble catch
heaped on the sand, twitching, lusting for fresh salt sea
but the Sungod hammers down and burns their lives out . . .
so the suitors lay in heaps, corpse covering corpse.

410 At last the seasoned fighter turned to his son:
"Telemachus, go, call the old nurse here—
I must tell her all that's on my mind."

415 Telemachus ran to do his father's bidding,
shook the women's doors, calling Eurycleia:

420 "Come out now! Up with you, good old woman!
You who watch over all the household hands—
quick, my father wants you, needs to have a word!"

425 Crisp command that left the old nurse hushed—
she spread the doors to the well-constructed hall,
She found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses,
splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured
430 some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood,
his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—
a sight to strike terror. So Odysseus looked now,
splattered with gore, his thighs, his fighting hands,
and she, when she saw the corpses, all the pooling blood,
was about to lift a cry of triumph—here was a great exploit,
435 look—but the soldier held her back and checked her zeal
with warnings winging home: "Rejoice in your heart,
old woman—peace! No cries of triumph now.
It's unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead.
These men the doom of the gods has brought low,
440 and their own indecent acts. They'd no regard
for any man on earth—good or bad—
who chanced to come their way. And so, thanks
to their reckless work, they met this shameful fate.
Quick, report in full on the women in my halls—
who are disloyal to me, who are guiltless?"

"Surely, child,"

445 his fond old nurse replied, "now here's the truth.
Fifty women you have inside your house,
women we've trained to do their duties well,
to card the wool and bear the yoke of service.
Some dozen in all went tramping to their shame,
450 thumbing their noses at me, at the queen herself!
And Telemachus, just now come of age—his mother
would never let the boy take charge of the maids.
But let me climb to her well-lit room upstairs
and tell your wife the news—
455 some god has put the woman fast asleep."

"Don't wake her yet," the crafty man returned,
"you tell those women to hurry here at once—
just the ones who've shamed us all along."

460 Away the old nurse bustled through the house
to give the women orders, rush them to the king.
Odysseus called Telemachus over, both herdsmen too,
with strict commands: "Start clearing away the bodies.
Make the women pitch in too. Chairs and tables—
scrub them down with sponges, rinse them clean.
465 And once you've put the entire house in order,

march the women out of the great hall—between
the roundhouse and the courtyard's strong stockade—
and hack them with your swords, slash out all their lives—
blot out of their minds the joys of love they relished
under the suitors' bodies, rutting on the sly!"

470 The women crowded in, huddling all together . . .
wailing convulsively, streaming live warm tears.
First they carried out the bodies of the dead
and propped them under the courtyard colonnade,
475 standing them one against another. Odysseus
shouted commands himself, moving things along
and they kept bearing out the bodies—they were forced.
Next they scrubbed down the elegant chairs and tables,
washed them with sopping sponges, rinsed them clean.
480 Then Telemachus and the herdsmen scraped smooth
the packed earth floor of the royal house with spades
as the women gathered up the filth and piled it outside.
And then, at last, once the entire house was put in order,
they marched the women out of the great hall—between
485 the roundhouse and the courtyard's strong stockade—
crammed them into a dead end, no way out from there,
and stern Telemachus gave the men their orders:
"No clean death for the likes of them, by god!
Not from me—they showered abuse on my head,
490 my mother's too!"

You sluts—the suitors' whores!"

With that, taking a cable used on a dark-prowed ship
he coiled it over the roundhouse, lashed it fast to a tall column,
hoisting it up so high no toes could touch the ground.
Then, as doves or thrushes beating their spread wings
495 against some snare rigged up in thickets—flying in
for a cozy nest but a grisly bed receives them—
so the women's heads were trapped in a line,
nooses yanking their necks up, one by one
so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . .
500 they kicked up heels for a little—not for long.

Melanthius?

They hauled him out through the doorway, into the court,
lopped his nose and ears with a ruthless knife,
tore his genitals out for the dogs to eat raw
and in manic fury hacked off hands and feet.

Then,

505 once they'd washed their own hands and feet,
they went inside again to join Odysseus.
Their work was done with now.
But the king turned to devoted Eurycleia, saying,
"Bring sulfur, nurse, to scour all this pollution—
bring me fire too, so I can fumigate the house.

510

And call Penelope here with all her women—
tell all the maids to come back in at once.”

515 “Well said, my boy,” his old nurse replied,
“right to the point. But wait,
let me fetch you a shirt and cloak to wrap you.
No more dawdling round the palace, nothing but rugs
to cover those broad shoulders—it’s a scandal!”

“Fire first,” the good soldier answered.
“Light me a fire to purify this house.”

520 The devoted nurse snapped to his command,
brought her master fire and brimstone. Odysseus
purged his palace, halls and court, with cleansing fumes.

525 Then back through the royal house the old nurse went
to tell the women the news and bring them in at once.
They came crowding out of their quarters, torch in hand,
flung their arms around Odysseus, hugged him, home at last,
and kissed his head and shoulders, seized his hands, and he,
overcome by a lovely longing, broke down and wept . . .
deep in his heart he knew them one and all.

BOOK 23. THE GREAT ROOTED BED

Up to the rooms the old nurse clambered, chuckling all the way,
to tell the queen her husband was here now, home at last.

Her knees bustling, feet shuffling over each other,
till hovering at her mistress’ head she spoke:

5 “Penelope—child—wake up and see for yourself,
with your own eyes, all you dreamed of, all your days!
He’s here—Odysseus—he’s come home, at long last!
He’s killed the suitors, swaggering young brutes
who plagued his house, wolfed his cattle down,
rode roughshod over his son!”

10 “Dear old nurse,” wary Penelope replied,
“the gods have made you mad. They have that power,
putting lunacy into the clearest head around
or setting a half-wit on the path to sense.

15 They’ve unhinged you, and you were once so sane.
Why do you mock me?—haven’t I wept enough?—
telling such wild stories, interrupting my sleep,
sweet sleep that held me, sealed my eyes just now.
Not once have I slept so soundly since the day
Odysseus sailed away to see that cursed city . . .
Destroy, I call it—I hate to say its name!

20 Now down you go. Back to your own quarters.
If any other woman of mine had come to me,
rousing me out of sleep with such a tale,

25 I’d have her bundled back to her room in pain.
It’s only your old gray head that spares you that!”

30 “Never”—the fond old nurse kept pressing on—
“dear child, I’d never mock you! No, it’s all true,
he’s here—Odysseus—he’s come home, just as I tell you!
He’s the stranger they all manhandled in the hall.
Telemachus knew he was here, for days and days,
but he knew enough to hide his father’s plans
so *he* could pay those vipers back in kind!”

35 Penelope’s heart burst in joy, she leapt from bed,
her eyes streaming tears, she hugged the old nurse
and cried out with an eager, winging word,
“Please, dear one, give me the whole story.

40 If he’s really home again, just as you tell me,
how did he get those shameless suitors in his clutches?—
single-handed, braving an army always camped inside.”

“I have no idea,” the devoted nurse replied.
“I didn’t see it, I didn’t ask—all I heard
was the choking groans of men cut down in blood.
We crouched in terror—a dark nook of our quarters—
all of us locked tight behind those snug doors

45 till your boy Telemachus came and called me out—
his father rushed him there to do just that. And then
I found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses;
there he stood and all around him, over the beaten floor,
the bodies sprawled in heaps, lying one on another . . .
How it would have thrilled your heart to see him—
splattered with bloody filth, a lion with his kill!

50 And now they’re all stacked at the courtyard gates—
he’s lit a roaring fire,
he’s purifying the house with cleansing fumes
and he’s sent me here to bring you back to him.
Follow me down! So now, after all the years of grief,
you two can embark, loving hearts, along the road to joy.
Look, your dreams, put off so long, come true at last—
he’s back alive, home at his hearth, and found you,
found his son still here. And all those suitors
who did him wrong, he’s paid them back, he has,
right in his own house!”

55 “Hush, dear woman,”
guarded Penelope cautioned her at once.

60 “Don’t laugh, don’t cry in triumph—not yet.
You know how welcome the sight of him would be
to all in the house, and to me most of all
and the son we bore together.

65 But the story can’t be true, not as you tell it,
no, it must be a god who’s killed our brazen friends—

up in arms at their outrage, heart-breaking crimes.
They'd no regard for any man on earth—
good or bad—who chanced to come their way. So,
thanks to their reckless work they die their deaths.
Odysseus? Far from Achaea now, he's lost all hope
of coming home . . . he's lost and gone himself."

75

"Child," the devoted old nurse protested,
"what nonsense you let slip through your teeth.
Here's your husband, warming his hands at his own hearth,
here—and you, you say he'll never come home again,
always the soul of trust! All right, this too—
I'll give you a sign, a proof that's plain as day.
That scar, made years ago by a boar's white tusk—
I spotted the scar myself, when I washed his feet,
and I tried to tell you, ah, but he, the crafty rascal,
clamped his hand on my mouth—I couldn't say a word.
Follow me down now. I'll stake my life on it:
if I am lying to *you*—
kill me with a thousand knives of pain!"

80

85

"Dear old nurse," composed Penelope responded,
"deep as you are, my friend, you'll find it hard
to plumb the plans of the everlasting gods.
All the same, let's go and join my son
so I can see the suitors lying dead
and see . . . the one who killed them."

95

With that thought
Penelope started down from her lofty room, her heart
in turmoil, torn . . . should she keep her distance,
probe her husband? Or rush up to the man at once
and kiss his head and cling to both his hands?
As soon as she stepped across the stone threshold,
slipping in, she took a seat at the closest wall
and radiant in the firelight, faced Odysseus now.
There he sat, leaning against the great central column,
eyes fixed on the ground, waiting, poised for whatever words
his hardy wife might say when she caught sight of him.
A long while she sat in silence . . . numbing wonder
filled her heart as her eyes explored his face.
One moment he seemed . . . Odysseus, to the life—
the next, no, he was not the man she knew,
a huddled mass of rags was all she saw.

100

105

110

"Oh mother," Telemachus reproached her,
"cruel mother, you with your hard heart!
Why do you spurn my father so—why don't you
sit beside him, engage him, ask him questions?
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle—

115

your heart was always harder than a rock!"

"My child,"

Penelope, well-aware, explained, "I'm stunned with wonder,
powerless. Cannot speak to him, ask him questions,
look him in the eyes . . . But if he is truly
Odysseus, home at last, make no mistake:
we two will know each other, even better—
we two have secret signs,
known to us both but hidden from the world."

120

125

Odysseus, long-enduring, broke into a smile
and turned to his son with pointed, winging words:
"Leave your mother here in the hall to test me
as she will. She soon will know me better.
Now because I am filthy, wear such grimy rags,
she spurns me—your mother still can't bring herself
to believe I am her husband.

130

But you and I,
put heads together. What's our best defense?
When someone kills a lone man in the realm
who leaves behind him no great band of avengers,
still the killer flees, goodbye to kin and country.
But we brought down the best of the island's princes,
the pillars of Ithaca. Weigh it well, I urge you."

135

"Look to it all yourself now, father," his son
deferred at once. "You are the best on earth,
they say, when it comes to mapping tactics.
No one, no mortal man, can touch you there.
But we're behind you, hearts intent on battle,
nor do I think you'll find us short on courage,
long as our strength will last."

140

145

"Then here's our plan,"
the master of tactics said. "I think it's best.
First go and wash, and pull fresh tunics on
and tell the maids in the hall to dress well too.
And let the inspired bard take up his ringing lyre
and lead off for us all a dance so full of heart
that whoever hears the strains outside the gates—
a passerby on the road, a neighbor round about—
will think it's a wedding-feast that's under way.
No news of the suitors' death must spread through town
till we have slipped away to our own estates,
our orchard green with trees. There we'll see
what winning strategy Zeus will hand us then."

155

They hung on his words and moved to orders smartly.
First they washed and pulled fresh tunics on,
the women arrayed themselves—the inspired bard
struck up his resounding lyre and stirred in all
a desire for dance and song, the lovely lilt and beat,

160

till the great house echoed round to the measured tread
of dancing men in motion, women sashed and lithe.
And whoever heard the strains outside would say,
"A miracle—someone's married the queen at last!"

"One of her hundred suitors."

"That callous woman,
too faithless to keep her lord and master's house
to the bitter end—"

"Till he came sailing home."

170 So they'd say, blind to what had happened:
the great-hearted Odysseus was home again at last.
The maid Eurynome bathed him, rubbed him down with oil
and drew around him a royal cape and choice tunic too.
And Athena crowned the man with beauty, head to foot,
made him taller to all eyes, his build more massive,
yes, and down from his brow the great goddess
ran his curls like thick hyacinth clusters
full of blooms. As a master craftsman washes
gold over beaten silver—a man the god of fire
and Queen Athena trained in every fine technique—
180 and finishes off his latest effort, handsome work . . .
so she lavished splendor over his head and shoulders now.
He stepped from his bath, glistening like a god,
and back he went to the seat that he had left
and facing his wife, declared,

185 "Strange woman! So hard—the gods of Olympus
made you harder than any other woman in the world!
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle.
Come, nurse, make me a bed, I'll sleep alone.
She has a heart of iron in her breast."

"Strange man,"
wary Penelope said. "I'm not so proud, so scornful,
nor am I overwhelmed by your quick change . . .
195 You look—how well I know—the way he looked,
setting sail from Ithaca years ago
aboard the long-oared ship.

Come, Eurycleia,
move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber—
that room the master built with his own hands.
200 Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is,
and spread it deep with fleece,
blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm."

Putting her husband to the proof—but Odysseus
blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife:
205 "Woman—your words, they cut me to the core!

210 Who could move my bed? Impossible task,
even for some skilled craftsman—unless a god
came down in person, quick to lend a hand,
lifted it out with ease and moved it elsewhere.
Not a man on earth, not even at peak strength,
would find it easy to prise it up and shift it, no,
a great sign, a hallmark lies in its construction.

215 I know, I built it myself—no one else . . .
There was a branching olive-tree inside our court,
grown to its full prime, the bole like a column, thickset.
Around it I built my bedroom, finished off the walls
with good tight stonework, roofed it over soundly
and added doors, hung well and snugly wedged.

220 Then I lopped the leafy crown of the olive,
clean-cutting the stump bare from roots up,
planing it round with a bronze smoothing-adze—
I had the skill—I shaped it plumb to the line to make
my bedpost, bored the holes it needed with an auger.
Working from there I built my bed, start to finish,

225 I gave it ivory inlays, gold and silver fittings,
wove the straps across it, oxhide gleaming red.
There's our secret sign, I tell you, our life story!
Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm?—
I don't know—or has someone chopped away
that olive-trunk and hauled our bedstead off?"

230 Living proof—

Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender,
recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered.
She dissolved in tears, rushed to Odysseus, flung her arms
around his neck and kissed his head and cried out,
"Odysseus—don't flare up at me now, not you,
always the most understanding man alive!"

235 The gods, it was the gods who sent us sorrow—
they grudged us both a life in each other's arms
from the heady zest of youth to the stoop of old age.
But don't fault me, angry with me now because I failed,
at the first glimpse, to greet you, hold you, so . . .
In my heart of hearts I always cringed with fear
some fraud might come, beguile me with his talk;
the world is full of the sort,

240 cunning ones who plot their own dark ends.
Remember Helen of Argos, Zeus's daughter—
would *she* have sported so in a stranger's bed
if she had dreamed that Achaea's sons were doomed
to fight and die to bring her home again?

245 Some god spurred her to do her shameless work.
Not till then did her mind conceive that madness,
blinding madness that caused her anguish, ours as well.
But now, since you have revealed such overwhelming proof—

the secret sign of our bed, which no one's ever seen
but you and I and a single handmaid, Actoris,
the servant my father gave me when I came,
who kept the doors of our room you built so well . . .
you've conquered my heart, my hard heart, at last!"

255 The more she spoke, the more a deep desire for tears
welled up inside his breast—he wept as he held the wife
he loved, the soul of loyalty, in his arms at last.

260 Joy, warm as the joy that shipwrecked sailors feel
when they catch sight of land—Poseidon has struck
their well-rigged ship on the open sea with gale winds
and crushing walls of waves, and only a few escape, swimming,
struggling out of the frothing surf to reach the shore,
their bodies crusted with salt but buoyed up with joy
as they plant their feet on solid ground again,
spared a deadly fate. So joyous now to her

265 the sight of her husband, vivid in her gaze,
that her white arms, embracing his neck
would never for a moment let him go . . .
Dawn with her rose-red fingers might have shone
upon their tears, if with her glinting eyes

270 Athena had not thought of one more thing.

She held back the night, and night lingered long
at the western edge of the earth, while in the east

she reined in Dawn of the golden throne at Ocean's banks,
commanding her not to yoke the windswift team that brings men light,
Blaze and Aurora, the young colts that race the Morning on.

Yet now Odysseus, seasoned veteran, said to his wife,
"Dear woman . . . we have still not reached the end
of all our trials. One more labor lies in store—
boundless, laden with danger, great and long,
and I must brave it out from start to finish.

275 So the ghost of Tiresias prophesied to me,
the day that I went down to the House of Death
to learn our best route home, my comrades' and my own.
But come, let's go to bed, dear woman—at long last
delight in sleep, delight in each other, come!"

"If it's bed you want," reserved Penelope replied,
"it's bed you'll have, whenever the spirit moves you,
now that the gods have brought you home again
to native land, your grand and gracious house.
But since you've alluded to it,

280 since a god has put it in your mind,
please, tell me about this trial still to come.
I'm bound to learn of it later, I am sure—
what's the harm if I hear of it tonight?"

"Still so strange,"

300 Odysseus, the old master of stories, answered.
"Why again, why force me to tell you all?
Well, tell I shall. I'll hide nothing now.
But little joy it will bring you, I'm afraid,
as little joy for me.

The prophet said

305 that I must rove through towns on towns of men,
that I must carry a well-planed oar until
I come to a people who know nothing of the sea,
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is my sign,
he told me, clear, so clear I cannot miss it,
and I will share it with you now . . .

310 When another traveler falls in with me and calls
that weight across my shoulder a fan to winnow grain,
then, he told me, I must plant my oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.

315 And at last my own death will steal upon me . . .
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take me down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all my people here in blessed peace around me.
All this, the prophet said, will come to pass."

320 "And so," Penelope said, in her great wisdom,
"if the gods will really grant a happier old age,
there's hope that we'll escape our trials at last."

325 So husband and wife confided in each other,
while nurse and Eurynome, under the flaring brands,
were making up the bed with coverings deep and soft.
And working briskly, soon as they'd made it snug,
back to her room the old nurse went to sleep
as Eurynome, their attendant, torch in hand,
lighted the royal couple's way to bed and,
leading them to their chamber, slipped away.
Rejoicing in each other, they returned to their bed,
the old familiar place they loved so well.

330 Now Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd
rested their dancing feet and had the women do the same,
and across the shadowed hall the men lay down to sleep.

But the royal couple, once they'd reveled in all
the longed-for joys of love, reveled in each other's stories,
the radiant woman telling of all she'd borne at home,

345 watching them there, the infernal crowd of suitors
slaughtering herds of cattle and good fat sheep—
while keen to win her hand—
draining the broached vats dry of vintage wine.
350 And great Odysseus told his wife of all the pains
he had dealt out to other men and all the hardships
he'd endured himself—his story first to last—
and she listened on, enchanted . . .
Sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told.

He launched in with how he fought the Cicones down,
355 then how he came to the Lotus-eaters' lush green land.
Then all the crimes of the Cyclops and how he paid him back
for the gallant men the monster ate without a qualm—
then how he visited Aeolus, who gave him a hero's welcome
then he sent him off, but the homeward run was not his fate,
360 not yet—some sudden squalls snatched him away once more
and drove him over the swarming sea, groaning in despair.
Then how he moored at Teledylus, where Laestrygonians
wrecked his fleet and killed his men-at-arms.
He told her of Circe's cunning magic wiles

365 and how he voyaged down in his long benched ship
to the moldering House of Death, to consult Tiresias,
ghostly seer of Thebes, and he saw old comrades there
and he saw his mother, who bore and reared him as a child.
He told how he caught the Sirens' voices throbbing in the wind
370 and how he had scudded past the Clashing Rocks, past grim Charybdis,
past Scylla—whom no rover had ever coasted by, home free—
and how his shipmates slaughtered the cattle of the Sun
and Zeus the king of thunder split his racing ship
with a reeking bolt and killed his hardy comrades,
375 all his fighting men at a stroke, but he alone
escaped their death at sea. He told how he reached
Ogygia's shores and the nymph Calypso held him back,
deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband—
cherished him, vowed to make him immortal, ageless, all his days,
380 yes, but she never won the heart inside him, never . . .
then how he reached the Phaeacians—heavy sailing there—
who with all their hearts had prized him like a god
and sent him off in a ship to his own beloved land,
giving him bronze and hoards of gold and robes . . .

385 and that was the last he told her, just as sleep
overcame him . . . sleep loosing his limbs,
slipping the toils of anguish from his mind.

Athena, her eyes afire, had fresh plans.
Once she thought he'd had his heart's content
390 of love and sleep at his wife's side, straightaway
she roused young Dawn from Ocean's banks to her golden throne
to bring men light and roused Odysseus too, who rose

from his soft bed and advised his wife in parting,
“Dear woman, we both have had our fill of trials.

395 You in our house, weeping over my journey home,
fraught with storms and torment, true, and I,
pinned down in pain by Zeus and other gods,
for all my desire, blocked from reaching home.
But now that we've arrived at our bed together—
the reunion that we yearned for all those years—
look after the things still left me in our house.

400 But as for the flocks those brazen suitors plundered,
much I'll recoup myself, making many raids;
the rest our fellow-Ithacans will supply
till all my folds are full of sheep again.

405 But now I must be off to the upland farm,
our orchard green with trees, to see my father,
good old man weighed down with so much grief for me.
And you, dear woman, sensible as you are,
I would advise you, still . . .

410 quick as the rising sun the news will spread
of the suitors that I killed inside the house.
So climb to your lofty chamber with your women.
Sit tight there. See no one. Question no one.”

415 He strapped his burnished armor round his shoulders,
roused Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd,
and told them to take up weapons honed for battle.

They snapped to commands, harnessed up in bronze,
opened the doors and strode out, Odysseus in the lead.
420 By now the daylight covered the land, but Pallas,
shrouding them all in darkness,
quickly led the four men out of town.

BOOK 24. PEACE

Now Cyllenian Hermes called away the suitors' ghosts,
holding firm in his hand the wand of fine pure gold
that enchants the eyes of men whenever Hermes wants
or wakes us up from sleep.

5 With a wave of this he stirred and led them on
and the ghosts trailed after with high thin cries
as bats cry in the depths of a dark haunted cavern,
shrilling, flittering, wild when one drops from the chain—
slipped from the rock face, while the rest cling tight . . .

10 So with their high thin cries the ghosts flocked now
and Hermes the Healer led them on, and down the dank
moldering paths and past the Ocean's streams they went
and past the White Rock and the Sun's Western Gates and past
the Land of Dreams, and they soon reached the fields of asphodel
where the dead, the burnt-out wraiths of mortals, make their home.

There they found the ghosts of Peleus' son Achilles, Patroclus, fearless Antilochus—and Great Ajax too, the first in stature, first in build and bearing of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son. They had grouped around Achilles' ghost, and now the shade of Atreus' son Agamemnon marched toward them—fraught with grief and flanked by all his comrades, troops of his men-at-arms who died beside him, who met their fate in lord Aegisthus' halls.

Achilles' ghost was first to greet him: "Agamemnon, you were the one, we thought, of all our fighting princes Zeus who loves the lightning favored most, all your days, because you commanded such a powerful host of men on the fields of Troy where we Achaeans suffered. But you were doomed to encounter fate so early, you too, yet no one born escapes its deadly force. If only you had died your death in the full flush of the glory you had mastered—died on Trojan soil! Then all united Achaea would have raised your tomb and you'd have won your son great fame for years to come. Not so. You were fated to die a wretched death."

And the ghost of Atreides Agamemnon answered, "Son of Peleus, great godlike Achilles! Happy man, you died on the fields of Troy, a world away from home, and the best of Trojan and Argive champions died around you, fighting for your corpse. And you . . . there you lay in the whirling dust, overpowered in all your power and wiped from memory all your horseman's skills. That whole day we fought, we'd never have stopped if Zeus had not stopped us with sudden gales.

Then we bore you out of the fighting, onto the ships, we laid you down on a litter, cleansed your handsome flesh with warm water and soothing oils, and round your body troops of Danaans wept hot tears and cut their locks. Hearing the news, your mother, Thetis, rose from the sea, immortal sea-nymphs in her wake, and a strange unearthly cry came throbbing over the ocean. Terror gripped Achaea's armies, they would have leapt in panic, boarded the long hollow ships if one man, deep in his age-old wisdom, had not checked them: Nestor—from the first his counsel always seemed the best, and now, concerned for the ranks, he rose and shouted, 'Hold fast, Argives! Sons of Achaea, don't run now!

This is Achilles' mother rising from the sea with all her immortal sea-nymphs—she longs to join her son who died in battle!' That stopped our panicked forces in their tracks as the Old Man of the Sea's daughters gathered round you—wailing, heartsick—dressed you in ambrosial, deathless robes and the Muses, nine in all, voice-to-voice in choirs,

their vibrant music rising, raised your dirge. Not one soldier would you have seen dry-eyed, the Muses' song so pierced us to the heart. For seventeen days unbroken, days and nights we mourned you—immortal gods and mortal men. At the eighteenth dawn we gave you to the flames and slaughtered around your body droves of fat sheep and shambling longhorn cattle, and you were burned in the garments of the gods and laved with soothing oils and honey running sweet, and a long cortege of Argive heroes paraded in review, in battle armor round your blazing pyre, men in chariots, men on foot—a resounding roar went up. And once the god of fire had burned your corpse to ash, at first light we gathered your white bones, Achilles, cured them in strong neat wine and seasoned oils. Your mother gave us a gold two-handled urn, a gift from Dionysus, she said, a masterwork of the famous Smith, the god of fire. Your white bones rest in that, my brilliant Achilles, mixed with the bones of dead Patroclus, Menoetius' son, apart from those of Antilochus, whom you treasured more than all other comrades once Patroclus died. Over your bones we reared a grand, noble tomb—devoted veterans all, Achaea's combat forces—high on its jutting headland over the Hellespont's¹ broad reach, a landmark glimpsed from far out at sea by men of our own day and men of days to come.

And then

your mother, begging the gods for priceless trophies, set them out in the ring for all our champions. You in your day have witnessed funeral games for many heroes, games to honor the death of kings, when young men cinch their belts, tense to win some prize—but if you'd laid eyes on these it would have thrilled your heart, magnificent trophies the goddess, glistening-footed Thetis, held out in your honor. You were dear to the gods, so even in death your name will never die . . .

Great glory is yours, Achilles, for all time, in the eyes of all mankind! But I?

What joy for me when the coil of war had wound down? For my return Zeus hatched a pitiful death at the hands of Aegisthus—and my accursed wife."

As they exchanged the stories of their fates, Hermes the guide and giant-killer drew up close to both, leading down the ghosts of the suitors King Odysseus killed. Struck by the sight, the two went up to them right away

1. Strait between Europe and Asia, the modern Dardanelles.

110 and the ghost of Atreus' son Agamemnon recognized
the noted prince Amphimedon, Melaneus' dear son
who received him once in Ithaca, at his home,
and Atreides' ghost called out to his old friend now,
115 "Amphimedon, what disaster brings you down to the dark world?
All of you, good picked men, and all in your prime—
no captain out to recruit the best in any city
could have chosen better. What laid you low?
120 Wrecked in the ships when lord Poseidon roused
some punishing blast of gales and heavy breakers?
Or did ranks of enemies mow you down on land
as you tried to raid and cut off herds and flocks
or fought to win their city, take their women?
Answer me, tell me. I was once your guest.
Don't you recall the day I came to visit
125 your house in Ithaca—King Menelaus came too—
to urge Odysseus to sail with us in the ships
on our campaign to Troy? And the long slow voyage,
crossing wastes of ocean, cost us one whole month.
That's how hard it was to bring him round,
130 Odysseus, raider of cities."

"Famous Atreides!"
Amphimedon's ghost called back. "Lord of men, Agamemnon,
I remember it all, your majesty, as you say,
and I will tell you, start to finish now,
the story of our death,

135 the brutal end contrived to take us off.
We were courting the wife of Odysseus, gone so long.
She neither spurned nor embraced a marriage she despised,
no, she simply planned our death, our black doom!
This was her latest masterpiece of guile:
140 she set up a great loom in the royal halls
and she began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
the yarns endless, and she would lead us on: 'Young men,
my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more,
go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until
145 I can finish off this web . . .
so my weaving won't all fray and come to nothing.
This is a shroud for old lord Laertes, for that day
when the deadly fate that lays us out at last will take him down.
I dread the shame my countrywomen would heap upon me,
150 yes, if a man of such wealth should lie in state
without a shroud for cover.'

Her very words,
and despite our pride and passion we believed her.
So by day she'd weave at her great and growing web—
by night, by the light of torches set beside her,
155 she would unravel all she'd done. Three whole years

she deceived us blind, seduced us with this scheme . . .
Then, when the wheeling seasons brought the fourth year on
and the months waned and the long days came round once more,
one of her women, in on the queen's secret, told the truth
and we caught her in the act—unweaving her gorgeous web.
160 So she finished it off. Against her will. We forced her.
But just as she bound off that great shroud and washed it,
spread it out—glistening like the sunlight or the moon—
just then some wicked spirit brought Odysseus back,
165 from god knows where, to the edge of his estate
where the swineherd kept his pigs. And back too,
to the same place, came Odysseus' own dear son,
scudding home in his black ship from sandy Pylos.
The pair of them schemed our doom, our deathtrap,
170 then lit out for town—
Telemachus first in fact, Odysseus followed,
later, led by the swineherd, and clad in tatters,
looking for all the world like an old and broken beggar
hunched on a stick, his body wrapped in shameful rags.
175 Disguised so none of us, not even the older ones,
could spot that tramp for the man he really was,
bursting in on us there, out of the blue. No,
we attacked him, blows and insults flying fast,
and he took it all for a time, in his own house,
180 all the taunts and blows—he had a heart of iron.
But once the will of thundering Zeus had roused his blood,
he and Telemachus bore the burnished weapons off
and stowed them deep in a storeroom, shot the bolts
and he—the soul of cunning—told his wife to set
185 the great bow and the gleaming iron axes out
before the suitors—all of us doomed now—
to test our skill and bring our slaughter on . . .
Not one of us had the strength to string that powerful weapon,
all of us fell far short of what it took. But then,
190 when the bow was coming round to Odysseus' hands,
we raised a hue and cry—he must not have it,
no matter how he begged! Only Telemachus
urged him to take it up, and once he got it
in his clutches, long-suffering great Odysseus
195 strung his bow with ease and shot through all the axes,
then, vaulting onto the threshold, stood there poised, and pouring
his flashing arrows out before him, glaring for the kill,
he cut Antinous down, then shot his painful arrows
into the rest of us, aiming straight and true,
200 and down we went, corpse on corpse in droves.
Clearly a god was driving him and all his henchmen,
routing us headlong in their fury down the hall,
wheeling into the slaughter, slashing left and right

205 and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—
the whole floor awash with blood.

Agamemnon . . . our bodies lie untended even now,
strewn in Odysseus' palace. They know nothing yet,
the kin in our houses who might wash our wounds
of clotted gore and lay us out and mourn us.
These are the solemn honors owed the dead."

210

"Happy Odysseus!"

Agamemnon's ghost cried out. "Son of old Laertes—
mastermind—what a fine, faithful wife you won!
What good sense resided in your Penelope—
how well Icarus' daughter remembered you,
Odysseus, the man she married once!
The fame of her great virtue will never die.
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.
A far cry from the daughter of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra—
what outrage she committed, killing the man *she* married once!—
yes, and the song men sing of her will ring with loathing.
She brands with a foul name the breed of womankind,
even the honest ones to come!"

220

225 So they traded stories,
the two ghosts standing there in the House of Death,
far in the hidden depths below the earth.

Odysseus and his men had stridden down from town
and quickly reached Laertes' large, well-tended farm
that the old king himself had wrested from the wilds,
years ago, laboring long and hard. His lodge was here
and around it stretched a row of sheds where fieldhands,
bondsmen who did his bidding, sat and ate and slept.

230

And an old Sicilian woman was in charge,
who faithfully looked after her aged master
out on his good estate remote from town.

235

Odysseus told his servants and his son,
"Into the timbered lodge now, go, quickly,
kill us the fattest porker, fix our meal.
And I will put my father to the test,
see if the old man knows me now, on sight,
or fails to, after twenty years apart."

240

With that he passed his armor to his men
and in they went at once, his son as well. Odysseus
wandered off, approaching the thriving vineyard, searching,
picking his way down to the great orchard, searching,
but found neither Dolius nor his sons nor any hand.
They'd just gone off, old Dolius in the lead,
to gather stones for a dry retaining wall
to shore the vineyard up. But he did find

245

250 his father, alone, on that well-worked plot,
spading round a sapling—clad in filthy rags,
in a patched, unseemly shirt, and round his shins
he had some oxhide leggings strapped, patched too,
to keep from getting scraped, and gloves on his hands
to fight against the thorns, and on his head
he wore a goatskin skullcap
255 to cultivate his misery that much more . . .
Long-enduring Odysseus, catching sight of him now—
a man worn down with years, his heart racked with sorrow—
halted under a branching pear-tree, paused and wept.
Debating, head and heart, what should he do now?
260 Kiss and embrace his father, pour out the long tale—
how he had made the journey home to native land—
or probe him first and test him every way?
Torn, mulling it over, this seemed better:
265 test the old man first,
reproach him with words that cut him to the core.

Convinced, Odysseus went right up to his father.
Laertes was digging round the sapling, head bent low
as his famous offspring hovered over him and began,
"You want no skill, old man, at tending a garden.
270 All's well-kept here; not one thing in the plot,
no plant, no fig, no pear, no olive, no vine,
not a vegetable, lacks your tender, loving care.
But I must say—and don't be offended now—
275 your plants are doing better than yourself.
Enough to be stooped with age
but look how squalid you are, those shabby rags.
Surely it's not for sloth your master lets you go to seed.
There's nothing of slave about your build or bearing.
280 I have eyes: you look like a king to me. The sort
entitled to bathe, sup well, then sleep in a soft bed.
That's the right and pride of you old-timers.
Come now, tell me—in no uncertain terms—
whose slave are you? whose orchard are you tending?

285

And tell me this—I must be absolutely sure—
this place I've reached, is it truly Ithaca?
Just as that fellow told me, just now . . .

290 I fell in with him on the road here. Clumsy,
none too friendly, couldn't trouble himself
to hear me out or give me a decent answer
when I asked about a long-lost friend of mine,
whether he's still alive, somewhere in Ithaca,
or dead and gone already, lost in the House of Death.
Do you want to hear his story? Listen. Catch my drift.
I once played host to a man in my own country;
he'd come to my door, the most welcome guest
from foreign parts I ever entertained.

295

He claimed he came of good Ithacan stock,
 said his father was Arcesius' son, Laertes.
 So I took the new arrival under my own roof,
 I gave him a hero's welcome, treated him in style—
 stores in our palace made for princely entertainment.
 And I gave my friend some gifts to fit his station,
 handed him seven bars of well-wrought gold,
 a mixing-bowl of solid silver, etched with flowers,
 a dozen cloaks, unlined and light, a dozen rugs
 and as many full-cut capes and shirts as well,
 and to top it off, four women, perfect beauties
 skilled in crafts—he could pick them out himself.”

310 “Stranger,” his father answered, weeping softly,
 “the land you’ve reached is the very one you’re after,
 true, but it’s in the grip of reckless, lawless men.
 And as for the gifts you showered on your guest,
 you gave them all for nothing.

315 But if you’d found him alive, here in Ithaca,
 he would have replied in kind, with gift for gift,
 and entertained you warmly before he sent you off.
 That’s the old custom, when one has led the way.
 But tell me, please—in no uncertain terms—
 how many years ago did you host the man,
 that unfortunate guest of yours, my son . . .
 there was a son, or was he all a dream?

320 That most unlucky man, whom now, I fear,
 far from his own soil and those he loves,
 the fish have swallowed down on the high seas
 or birds and beasts on land have made their meal.
 Nor could the ones who bore him—mother, father—
 wrap his corpse in a shroud and mourn him deeply.
 Nor could his warm, generous wife, so self-possessed,
 Penelope, ever keen for her husband on his deathbed,
 the fit and proper way, or close his eyes at last.
 These are the solemn honors owed the dead.

330 But tell me your own story—that I’d like to know:
 Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
 Where does the ship lie moored that brought you here,
 your hardy shipmates too? Or did you arrive
 as a passenger aboard some stranger’s craft
 and men who put you ashore have pulled away?”

“The whole tale.”

340 his crafty son replied, “I’ll tell you start to finish.
 I come from Roamer-Town, my home’s a famous place,
 my father’s Unsparing, son of old King Pain,
 and my name’s Man of Strife . . .
 I sailed from Sicily, aye, but some ill wind
 blew me here, off course—much against my will—

345 and my ship lies moored off farmlands far from town.

As for Odysseus, well, five years have passed
 since he left my house and put my land behind him,
 luckless man! But the birds were good as he launched out,
 all on the right, and I rejoiced as I sent him off
 and he rejoiced in sailing. We had high hopes
 we’d meet again as guests, as old friends,
 and trade some shining gifts.”

350 At those words
 a black cloud of grief came shrouding over Laertes.
 Both hands clawing the ground for dirt and grime,
 he poured it over his grizzled head, sobbing, in spasms.
 Odysseus’ heart shuddered, a sudden twinge went shooting up
 through his nostrils, watching his dear father struggle . . .

355 He sprang toward him, kissed him, hugged him, crying,
 “Father—I am your son—myself, the man you’re seeking,
 home after twenty years, on native ground at last!
 Hold back your tears, your grief.

360 Let me tell you the news, but we must hurry—
 I’ve cut the suitors down in our own house,
 I’ve paid them back their outrage, vicious crimes!”

“Odysseus . . .”

365 Laertes, catching his breath, found words to answer.
 “You—you’re truly my son, Odysseus, home at last?
 Give me a sign, some proof—I must be sure.”

“This scar first,”

quick to the mark, his son said, “look at this—
 the wound I took from the boar’s white tusk
 on Mount Parnassus. There you’d sent me, you
 and mother, to see her fond old father, Autolycus,
 and collect the gifts he vowed to give me, once,
 when he came to see us here.

370 Or these, these trees—
 let me tell you the trees you gave me years ago,
 here on this well-worked plot . . .

375 I begged you for everything I saw, a little boy
 trailing you through the orchard, picking our way
 among these trees, and you named them one by one.
 You gave me thirteen pear, ten apple trees
 and forty figs—and promised to give me, look,
 fifty vinerows, bearing hard on each other’s heels,
 clusters of grapes year-round at every grade of ripeness,
 mellowed as Zeus’s seasons weigh them down.”

Living proof—

385 and Laertes’ knees went slack, his heart surrendered,
 recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered.
 He threw his arms around his own dear son, fainting
 as hardy great Odysseus hugged him to his heart
 until he regained his breath, came back to life

and cried out, "Father Zeus—
 you gods of Olympus, you still rule on high
 if those suitors have truly paid in blood
 for all their reckless outrage! Oh, but now
 my heart quakes with fear that all the Ithacans
 will come down on us in a pack, at any time,
 and rush the alarm through every island town!"

395

"There's nothing to fear," his canny son replied,
 "put it from your mind. Let's make for your lodge
 beside the orchard here. I sent Telemachus on ahead,
 the cowherd, swineherd too, to fix a hasty meal."

400

So the two went home, confiding all the way
 and arriving at the ample, timbered lodge,
 they found Telemachus with the two herdsmen
 carving sides of meat and mixing ruddy wine.
 Before they ate, the Sicilian serving-woman
 bathed her master, Laertes—his spirits high
 in his own room—and rubbed him down with oil
 and round his shoulders drew a fresh new cloak.
 And Athena stood beside him, fleshing out the limbs
 of the old commander, made him taller to all eyes,
 his build more massive, stepping from his bath,
 so his own son gazed at him, wonderstruck—
 face-to-face he seemed a deathless god . . .

410

"Father"—Odysseus' words had wings—"surely
 one of the everlasting gods has made you
 taller, stronger, shining in my eyes!"

415

Facing his son, the wise old man returned,
 "If only—Father Zeus, Athena and lord Apollo—
 I were the man I was, king of the Cephallenians
 when I sacked the city of Nericus, sturdy fortress
 out on its jutting cape! If I'd been young in arms
 last night in our house with harness on my back,
 standing beside you, fighting off the suitors,
 how many I would have cut the knees from under—
 the heart inside you would have leapt for joy!"

420

So father and son confirmed each other's spirits.
 And then, with the roasting done, the meal set out,
 the others took their seats on chairs and stools,
 were just putting their hands to bread and meat
 when old Dolius trudged in with his sons,
 worn out from the fieldwork.

425

The old Sicilian had gone and fetched them home,
 the mother who reared the boys and tended Dolius well,
 now that the years had ground the old man down . . .
 When they saw Odysseus—knew him in their bones—
 they stopped in their tracks, staring, struck dumb,

435

but the king waved them on with a warm and easy air:
 "Sit down to your food, old friend. Snap out of your wonder.
 We've been cooling our heels here long enough,
 eager to get our hands on all this pork,
 hoping you'd all troop in at any moment."

440

Spreading his arms, Dolius rushed up to him,
 clutched Odysseus by the wrist and kissed his hand,
 greeting his king now with a burst of winging words:
 "Dear master, you're back—the answer to our prayers!
 We'd lost all hope but the gods have brought you home!

445

Welcome—health! The skies rain blessings on you!
 But tell me the truth now—this I'd like to know—
 shrewd Penelope, has she heard you're home?
 Or should we send a messenger?"

450

"She knows by now,
 old man," his wily master answered brusquely.
 "Why busy yourself with that?"

So Dolius went back to his sanded stool.

His sons too, pressing around the famous king,
 greeted Odysseus warmly, grasped him by the hand
 then took their seats in order by their father.

455

But now, as they fell to supper in the lodge,
 Rumor the herald sped like wildfire through the city,
 crying out the news of the suitors' bloody death and doom,
 and massing from every quarter as they listened, kinsmen milled
 with wails and moans of grief before Odysseus' palace.

460

And then they carried out the bodies, every family
 buried their own, and the dead from other towns
 they loaded onto the rapid ships for crews
 to ferry back again, each to his own home . . .

465

Then in a long, mourning file they moved to assembly
 where, once they'd grouped, crowding the meeting grounds,
 old lord Eupithes rose in their midst to speak out.
 Unforgettable sorrow wrung his heart for his son,
 Antinous, the first that great Odysseus killed.

470

In tears for the one he lost, he stood and cried,
 "My friends, what a mortal blow this man has dealt
 to all our island people! Those fighters, many and brave,
 he led away in his curved ships—he lost the ships
 and he lost the men and back he comes again
 to kill the best of our Cephallenian princes.

475

Quick, after him! Before he flees to Pylos
 or holy Elis, where Epeans rule in power—
 up, attack! Or we'll hang our heads forever,
 all disgraced, even by generations down the years,
 if we don't punish the murderers of our brothers and our sons!
 Why, life would lose its relish—for me, at least—

480

I'd rather die at once and go among the dead.
Attack!—before the assassins cross the sea
and leave us in their wake.”

485 He closed in tears
and compassion ran through every Achaean there.
Suddenly Medon and the inspired bard approached them,
fresh from Odysseus' house, where they had just awakened.
They strode into the crowds; amazement took each man
but the herald Medon spoke in all his wisdom:
490 “Hear me, men of Ithaca. Not without the hand
of the deathless gods did Odysseus do these things!
Myself, I saw an immortal fighting at his side—
like Mentor to the life. I saw the same god,
now in front of Odysseus, spurring him on,
495 now stampeding the suitors through the hall,
crazed with fear, and down they went in droves!”

Terror gripped them all, their faces ashen white.
At last the old warrior Halitherses, Mastor's son—
who alone could see the days behind and days ahead—
rose up and spoke, distraught for each man there:
500 “Hear me, men of Ithaca. Hear what I have to say.
Thanks to your own craven hearts these things were done!
You never listened to me or the good commander Mentor,
you never put a stop to your sons' senseless folly.
505 What fine work they did, so blind, so reckless,
carving away the wealth, affronting the wife
of a great and famous man, telling themselves
that he'd return no more! So let things rest now.
Listen to me for once—I say don't attack!
510 Else some will draw the lightning on their necks.”

So he urged
and some held fast to their seats, but more than half
sprang up with warcries now. They had no taste
for the prophet's sane plan—winning Euphies
quickly won them over. They ran for armor
515 and once they'd harnessed up in burnished bronze
they grouped in ranks before the terraced city.
Euphies led them on in their foolish, mad campaign,
certain he would avenge the slaughter of his son
but the father was not destined to return—
520 he'd meet his death in battle then and there.

Athena at this point made appeals to Zeus:
“Father, son of Cronus, our high and mighty king,
now let me ask you a question . . .
tell me the secrets hidden in your mind.
525 Will you prolong the pain, the cruel fighting here
or hand down pacts of peace between both sides?”

“My child,” Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,

530 “why do you pry and probe me so intently? Come now,
wasn't the plan your own? You conceived it yourself:
Odysseus should return and pay the traitors back.

Do as your heart desires—
but let me tell you how it should be done.
Now that royal Odysseus has taken his revenge,
535 let both sides seal their pacts that he shall reign for life,
and let us purge their memories of the bloody slaughter
of their brothers and their sons. Let them be friends,
devoted as in the old days. Let peace and wealth
come cresting through the land.”

So Zeus decreed
and launched Athena already poised for action—
540 down she swept from Olympus' craggy peaks.

By then Odysseus' men had had their fill
of hearty fare, and the seasoned captain said,
“One of you go outside—see if they're closing in.”
545 A son of Dolius snapped to his command,
ran to the door and saw them all too close
and shouted back to Odysseus,

550 “They're on top of us! To arms—and fast!”
Up they sprang and strapped themselves in armor,
the three men with Odysseus, Dolius' six sons
and Dolius and Laertes clapped on armor too,
gray as they were, but they would fight if forced.
Once they had all harnessed up in burnished bronze
they opened the doors and strode out, Odysseus in the lead.

And now, taking the build and voice of Mentor,
555 Zeus's daughter Athena marched right in.
The good soldier Odysseus thrilled to see her,
turned to his son and said in haste, “Telemachus,
you'll learn soon enough—as you move up to fight
where champions strive to prove themselves the best—
560 not to disgrace your father's line a moment.
In battle prowess we've excelled for ages
all across the world.”

Telemachus reassured him,
565 “Now you'll see, if you care to watch, father,
now I'm fired up. Disgrace, you say?
I won't disgrace your line!”

Laertes called out in deep delight,
“What a day for me, dear gods! What joy—
my son and my grandson vying over courage!”
“Laertes!”

570 Goddess Athena rushed beside him, eyes ablaze:
“Son of Arcestus, dearest of all my comrades,
say a prayer to the bright-eyed girl and Father Zeus,
then brandish your long spear and wing it fast!”

Athena breathed enormous strength in the old man.

He lifted a prayer to mighty Zeus's daughter,
brandished his spear a moment, winged it fast
and hit Eupithes, pierced his bronze-sided helmet
that failed to block the bronze point tearing through—
down Eupithes crashed, his armor clanging against his chest.
Odysseus and his gallant son charged straight at the front lines,
slashing away with swords, with two-edged spears and now
they would have killed them all, cut them off from home
if Athena, daughter of storming Zeus, had not cried out
in a piercing voice that stopped all fighters cold,
"Hold back, you men of Ithaca, back from brutal war!
Break off—shed no more blood—make peace at once!"

So Athena commanded. Terror blanched their faces,
they went limp with fear, weapons slipped from their hands
and strewed the ground at the goddess' ringing voice.
They spun in flight to the city, wild to save their lives,
but loosing a savage cry, the long-enduring great Odysseus,
gathering all his force, swooped like a soaring eagle—
just as the son of Cronus hurled a reeking bolt
that fell at her feet, the mighty Father's daughter,
and blazing-eyed Athena wheeled on Odysseus, crying,
"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits,
hold back now! Call a halt to the great leveler, War—
don't court the rage of Zeus who rules the world!"

So she commanded. He obeyed her, glad at heart.

And Athena handed down her pacts of peace
between both sides for all the years to come—
the daughter of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder,
yes, but the goddess still kept Mentor's build and voice.



RESONANCES

Franz Kafka: The Silence of the Sirens¹

Proof that inadequate, even childish measures may serve to rescue one from peril:

To protect himself from the Sirens Ulysses stopped his ears with wax and had himself bound to the mast of his ship. Naturally any and every traveler before him could have done the same, except those whom the Sirens allured even from a great distance; but it was known to all the world that such things were of no help whatever. The song of the Sirens could pierce through everything, and the longing of those they seduced would have broken far stronger bonds than chains and masts. But Ulysses did

1. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. The great modernist writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was born and raised in the German-Jewish section of Prague, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both drawn to and estranged from the cultures around him—Czech, German, and Jewish—Kafka wrote enigmatic parables, stories, and novels such as *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* (see Volume F) probing the absurdities of existence. A self-doubting perfectionist, he published little before his early death from tuberculosis. In the short parable given here, Kafka revisits the famous scene of the Sirens (page 405) to create an image of a man—or an artist—struggling against silence rather than seductive song.

not think of that, although he had probably heard of it. He trusted absolutely to his handful of wax and his fathom of chain, and in innocent elation over his little stratum sailed out to meet the Sirens.

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never. Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength, and the consequent exaltation that bears down everything before it, no earthly powers can resist.

And when Ulysses approached them the potent songstresses actually did not sing, whether because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or because the look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing.

But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him. Soon, however, all this faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer.

But they—lovelier than ever—stretched their necks and turned, let their awesome hair flutter free in the wind, and freely stretched their claws on the rocks. They no longer had any desire to allure; all that they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes.

If the Sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Ulysses had escaped them.

A codicil² to the foregoing has also been handed down. Ulysses, it is said, was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could pierce his armor. Perhaps he had really noticed, although here the human understanding is beyond its depths, that the Sirens were silent, and held up to them and to the gods the aforementioned pretense merely as a sort of shield.

George Seferis: Upon a Foreign Verse¹

For Elli, Christmas 1931

Fortunate he who's made the voyage of Odysseus.

Fortunate if on setting out he's felt the rigging of a love strong in his body,
spreading there like veins where the blood throbs.

2. A clause added at the end of a legal document.

1. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. The modern Greek poet George Seferis (1900–1971) studied law in Paris and then joined the Greek diplomatic service; he was ambassador to England at the end of his career. He wrote all the while, publishing a dozen books of verse, essays, diaries, and fiction, mostly written while abroad. His verse achieved international acclaim, and he won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1963. Influenced by French Symbolist poetry, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, Seferis became the first major modernist poet in Greece. At the same time, his work is filled with references to classical literature, particularly to the wanderings of Odysseus, as in his 1940 poem, which sees Homer's epic both as a living presence and as deeply foreign, despite the apparent closeness of ancient and modern Greece.