The Odyssey

Part One

by Homer

**-----------------------------------------translated by Robert Fitzgerald--------------------------**  
Part 1

The Adventures of Odysseus

*In the opening verses, Homer addresses the muse of epic poetry. He asks her help in telling the tale of Odysseus.*

       Sing in me, Muse,[[1]](#footnote-1) and through me tell the story  
        of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
        the wanderer, harried for years on end,  
        after he plundered the stronghold  
        on the proud height of Troy.[[2]](#footnote-2)  
5                                                  He saw the townlands  
        and learned the minds of many distant men,  
        and weathered many bitter nights and days  
        in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only  
        to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.  
10    But not by will nor valor could he save them,  
        for their own recklessness destroyed them all—  
        children and fools, they killed and feasted on  
        the cattle of Lord Helios,[[3]](#footnote-3) the Sun,  
        and he who moves all day through heaven  
15    took from their eyes the dawn of their return.  
        Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,[[4]](#footnote-4)  
        tell us in our time, lift the great song again.

Sailing from Troy

*Ten years after the Trojan War, Odysseus departs from the goddess Calypso’s island. He arrives in Phaeacia, ruled by Alcinous. Alcinous offers a ship to Odysseus and asks him to tell of his adventures.*

          I am Laertes’ son, Odysseus.

                                                  Men hold me  
        formidable for guile[[5]](#footnote-5) in peace and war:  
  20     this fame has gone abroad to the sky’s rim.

       My home is on the peaked seamark of Ithaca[[6]](#footnote-6)  
        under Mount Neion’s windblown robe of leaves,  
        in sight of other islands—Dulichium,  
       Same, wooded Zacynthus—Ithaca  
25     being most lofty in that coastal sea,  
    and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.  
        A rocky isle, but good for a boy’s training;  
        I shall not see on earth a place more dear,  
        though I have been detained long by Calypso,   
30       loveliest among goddesses, who held me  
    in her smooth caves, to be her heart’s delight,   
        as Circe of Aeaea, the enchantress,  
        desired me, and detained me in her hall.  
        But in my heart I never gave consent.  
35       Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass  
    his own home and his parents? In far lands  
        he shall not, though he find a house of gold.

        What of my sailing, then, from Troy?

                                        What of those years  
        of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus?  
40      The wind that carried west from Ilium[[7]](#footnote-7)  
    brought me to Ismarus, on the far shore,  
        a strongpoint on the coast of the Cicones.   
        I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.  
       Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,  
45      to make division, equal shares to all—  
   but on the spot I told them: ‘Back, and quickly!   
        Out to sea again!’ My men were mutinous,[[8]](#footnote-8)  
        fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep  
        they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle,  
 50      feasting—while fugitives went inland, running  
    to call to arms the main force of Cicones.  
        This was an army, trained to fight on horseback  
        or, where the ground required, on foot. They came  
        with dawn over that terrain like the leaves  
 55      and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,  
    dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.  
        My men stood up and made a fight of it—  
        backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,  
        from bright morning through the blaze of noon  
 60      holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;  
    but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,  
        then the Achaeans,[[9]](#footnote-9) one by one, gave way.  
        Six benches were left empty in every ship  
        that evening when we pulled away from death.  
 65      And this new grief we bore with us to sea:  
    our precious lives we had, but not our friends.  
        No ship made sail next day until some shipmate  
        had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost  
        unfleshed by the Cicones on that field.

The Lotus-Eaters

70 Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north  
   a storm against the ships, and driving veils  
        of squall moved down like night on land and sea.  
        The bows went plunging at the gust; sails  
        cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.  
75       We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,  
    unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:[[10]](#footnote-10)  
        then two long days and nights we lay offshore  
        worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,  
        until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.  
 80   Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,  
    letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

I might have made it safely home, that time,  
        but as I came round Malea the current  
        took me out to sea, and from the north  
  85    a fresh gale drove me on, past Cythera.  
 Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea  
        before dangerous high winds.Upon the tenth  
        we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters,  
  who live upon that flower. We landed there  
90    to take on water. All ships’ companies   
        mustered alongside for the midday meal.  
        Then I sent out two picked men and a runner  
        to learn what race of men that land sustained.  
        They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus Eaters,  
95    who showed no will to do us harm, only  
        offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—  
        but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus,  
        never cared to report, nor to return:  
        they longed to stay forever, browsing on  
100    that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.  
        I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,  
        tied them down under their rowing benches,  
        and called the rest: ‘All hands aboard;  
        come, clear the beach and no one taste  
105    the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.’   
        Filing in to their places by the rowlocks  
        my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,  
        and we moved out again on our seafaring.

The Cyclops

In the next land we found were Cyclopes,

110 giants, louts, without a law to bless them.

In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth

in mystery to the immortal gods, they neither plow

nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain –

wild wheat and barley – grows untended, and

115 wine grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven’s rains.

Cyclopes have no muster and no meeting,

no consultation or old tribal ways,

but each one dwells in his own mountain cave

dealing out rough justice to wife and child,

120 indifferent to what the others do. . .

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland,

at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern

yawning above the water, screened with laurel,

and many rams and goats about the place

125 inside a sheepfold ---made from slabs of stone

earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged

towering oak trees.

A prodigious man

slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks

to graze afield---remote from all companions

130 knowing none but savage ways, a brute

so huge, he seemed no man at all of those

who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather

a shaggy mountain reared in solitude.

We beached there, and I told the crew

135 to stand by and keep watch over the ship:

as for myself I took the twelve best fighters

and went ahead. I had a goatskin full.

Of sweet liquor that Euanthes’ son,

Maron, had given me. He kept Appollo’s

140 holy grove at Ismarus; for kindness

we showed him there, and showed his wife and child,

he gave me seven shining golden talents

perfectly formed, a silver winebowl,

and then this liquor---twelve two-handled jars

145 of brandy, pure and fiery. Not a slave

in Maron’s household knew this drink; only

he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew;

and they would put one cup full---ruby-colored,

honey-smooth---in twenty more of water,

150 but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume

over the winebowl. No man turned away

when cups of this came around.

A wineskin full

I brought along, and victuals in a bag,

for in my bones I knew some towering brute

155 would be upon us soon---al outward power,

a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Cyclops

had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep,

so we looked round at everything inside:

160 a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens

crowded with labs and kids, each in its class:

firstling apart from middlings, and the dewdrops,’

or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both.

And vessels full of whey were brimming there---

165 bowls of eartware and pails for milking.

My men came pressing round me, pleading:

Why not

take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back,

throw open all the pens, and make a run for it?

We’ll drive the kids and lams aboard. We say

170 put out again on good salt water!

Ah,

how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished

to see the cave man, what he had to offer---

no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends.   
        We lit a fire, burnt an offering,

175  and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence  
        around the embers, waiting. When he came  
        he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder  
        to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it  
        with a great crash into that hollow cave,  
180    and we all scattered fast to the far wall.  
        Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered  
        the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams  
        and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung  
        high overhead a slab of solid rock  
185    to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,  
        with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred  
        the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it  
        over the doorsill. Next he took his seat  
        and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job  
190    he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;  
        thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,  
        sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,  
        and poured the whey to stand in bowls  
        cooling until he drank it for his supper.  
195    When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,  
        heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.

        ‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?  
        What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?  
        Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives  
200   like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’

        We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread  
        of that deep rumble and that mighty man.  
        But all the same I spoke up in reply:

        ‘We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course  
205   by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;  
        homeward bound, but taking routes and ways  
        uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.  
        We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus—  
        the whole world knows what city  
210   he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.  
        It was our luck to come here; here we stand,  
        beholden for your help, or any gifts  
        you give—as custom is to honor strangers.  
        We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care  
215    for the gods’ courtesy; Zeus will avenge   
        the unoffending guest.’

                                            He answered this  
        from his brute chest, unmoved:

                                              ‘You are a ninny,  
        or else you come from the other end of nowhere,  
        telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes  
220    care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus  
        or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.  
        I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—  
        you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.  
        Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—  
225    around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?’

        He thought he’d find out, but I saw through this,  
        and answered with a ready lie:

                                                 ‘My ship?  
        Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,  
        broke it up on the rocks at your land’s end.  
230   A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.  
        We are survivors, these good men and I.’

          Neither reply nor pity came from him,  
        but in one stride he clutched at my companions  
        and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies  
235    to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.  
        Then he dismembered them and made his meal,  
        gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—  
        everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.  
        We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,  
240    powerless, looking on at this, appalled;  
        but Cyclops went on filling up his belly  
        with manflesh and great gulps of whey,  
        then lay down like a mast among his sheep.  
          My heart beat high now at the chance of action,  
245    and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went  
        along his flank to stab him where the midriff  
        holds the liver. I had touched the spot  
        when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him  
        we perished there as well, for we could never  
250    move his ponderous doorway slab aside.  
        So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

        When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose  
        lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire  
        and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,  
255    putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,  
        his chores being all dispatched, he caught  
        another brace of men to make his breakfast,  
        and whisked away his great door slab  
        to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,  
260    reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.  
        There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops  
        rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.  
        And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,  
        if but Athena granted what I prayed for.  
265    Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:

        a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—  
        an olive tree, felled green and left to season  
        for Cyclops’s hand. And it was like a mast  
        a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—  
270    a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:   
        so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I  
        chopped out a six-foot section of this pole  
        and set it down before my men, who scraped it;  
        and when they had it smooth, I hewed again  
275    to make a stake with pointed end. I held this  
        in the fire’s heart and turned it, toughening it,  
        then hid it, well back in the cavern, under  
        one of the dung piles in profusion there.  
        Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured  
280    along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust  
        and grind that spike in Cyclops’s eye, when mild  
        sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,  
        the men I would have chosen won the toss—  
        four strong men, and I made five as captain.

285     At evening came the shepherd with his flock,   
        his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,  
        entered the cave: by some sheepherding whim—  
        or a god’s bidding—none were left outside.  
        He hefted his great boulder into place  
290    and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes  
        in proper order, put the lambs to suck,  
        and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.  
        Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.  
          My moment was at hand, and I went forward  
295    holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,  
        looking up, saying:  
                                                 ‘Cyclops, try some wine.

        Here’s liquor to wash down your scraps of men.  
        Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried  
        under our planks. I meant it for an offering  
300    if you would help us home. But you are mad,  
        unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,  
        will any other traveler come to see you?’

        He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down  
        so fiery and smooth he called for more:

305    ‘Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,   
        how are you called? I’ll make a gift will please you.  
        Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow  
        out of grassland and loam in heaven’s rain,  
        but here’s a bit of nectar and ambrosia!’

 310   Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.   
        I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,  
        then I sang out in cordial tones:

                                       ‘Cyclops,  
        you ask my honorable name? Remember  
        the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.  
315    My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,  
        everyone calls me Nohbdy.’

                                               And he said:  
        ‘Nohbdy’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends.  
        Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.’

        Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,  
320    his great head lolling to one side; and sleep  
        took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,  
        he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

        Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike  
        deep in the embers, charring it again,  
325    and cheered my men along with battle talk  
        to keep their courage up: no quitting now.  
        The pike of olive, green though it had been,  
        reddened and glowed as if about to catch.  
        I drew it from the coals and my four fellows  
330    gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops  
        as more than natural force nerved them; straight  
        forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it  
        deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it  
        turning it as a shipwright turns a drill  
335    in planking, having men below to swing  
        the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.  
        So with our brand we bored that great eye socket  
        while blood ran out around the red-hot bar.  
        Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball  
        hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

340                                             In a smithy   
        one sees a white-hot axhead or an adze  
        plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—  
        the way they make soft iron hale and hard—   
        just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.  
345    The Cyclops bellowed and the rock roared round him,  
        and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face  
        he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,  
        threw it away, and his wild hands went groping;  
        then he set up a howl for Cyclopes  
350    who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.  
        Some heard him; and they came by divers ways  
        to clump around outside and call:

                                             ‘What ails you,   
        Polyphemus? Why do you cry so sore  
        in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.  
355    Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man   
        has tricked you, ruined you?’

                                               Out of the cave  
        the mammoth Polyphemus roared in answer:

        ‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me. Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

        To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

360   ‘Ah well, if nobody has played you foul   
        there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain  
        given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,  
        Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.’

                                              So saying  
        they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter  
365    to see how like a charm the name deceived them.  
        Now Cyclops, wheezing as the pain came on him,  
        fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone  
        and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide  
        for any silly beast or man who bolted—  
370    hoping somehow I might be such a fool.  
        But I kept thinking how to win the game:  
        death sat there huge; how could we slip away?  
        I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,  
        reasoning as a man will for dear life,  
375    until a trick came—and it pleased me well.  
        The Cyclops’s rams were handsome, fat, with heavy  
        fleeces, a dark violet.

                                                            Three abreast  
        I tied them silently together, twining  
        cords of willow from the ogre’s bed;  
380    then slung a man under each middle one  
        to ride there safely, shielded left and right.  
        So three sheep could convey each man. I took  
        the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,  
        and hung myself under his kinky belly,  
385    pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep  
        in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.  
        So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

         When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose  
        the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,  
390    and peals of bleating echoed round the pens  
        where dams with udders full called for a milking.  
        Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,  
        the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,  
        but my men riding on the pectoral fleece  
395    the giant’s blind hands blundering never found.   
        Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,  
        weighted by wool and me with my meditations.  
        The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:

        ‘Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest  
400    in the night cave? You never linger so,  
        but graze before them all, and go afar  
        to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way  
        leading along the streams, until at evening  
        you run to be the first one in the fold.  
405    Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving  
        over your Master’s eye? That carrion rogue  
        and his accurst companions burnt it out  
        when he had conquered all my wits with wine.  
        Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.  
410    Oh, had you brain and voice to tell  
        where he may be now, dodging all my fury!  
        Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall  
        his brains would strew the floor, and I should have  
        rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.’

415     He sent us into the open, then. Close by,   
        I dropped and rolled clear of the ram’s belly,  
        going this way and that to untie the men.  
        With many glances back, we rounded up  
        his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,  
420    and drove them down to where the good ship lay.  
        We saw, as we came near, our fellows’ faces  
        shining; then we saw them turn to grief  
        tallying those who had not fled from death.  
        I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,  
425    and in a low voice told them: ‘Load this herd;   
        move fast, and put the ship’s head toward the breakers.’  
        They all pitched in at loading, then embarked  
        and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,  
        as far offshore as shouted words would carry,  
430    I sent a few back to the adversary:

         ‘O Cyclops! Would you feast on my companions?  
        Puny, am I, in a Caveman’s hands?  
        How do you like the beating that we gave you,  
        you damned cannibal? Eater of guests  
435    under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!’

         The blind thing in his doubled fury broke  
        a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.  
        Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank  
        whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giantwave  
440    that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.  
        I got the longest boathook out and stood  
        fending us off, with furious nods to all  
        to put their backs into a racing stroke—  
        row, row or perish. So the long oars bent  
445    kicking the foam sternward, making head  
        until we drew away, and twice as far.  
        Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew  
        in low voices protesting:

                                                 ‘Godsake, Captain!

        Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!’

450    ‘That tidal wave he made on the first throw   
        all but beached us.’

                                                 ‘All but stove us in!’

        ‘Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,  
        he’ll get the range and lob a boulder.’

                                                                        ‘Aye

        He’ll smash our timbers and our heads together!’

 455     I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,  
        but let my anger flare and yelled:      
                                                               'Cyclops,  
        if ever mortal man inquire  
        how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him  
        Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:  
460    Laertes’ son, whose home’s on Ithaca!’

        At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

        ‘Now comes the weird upon me, spoken of old.  
        A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Telemus,  
        a son of Eurymus great length of days  
465    he had in wizardry among the Cyclopes,  
        and these things he foretold for time to come:  
        my great eye lost, and at Odysseus’ hands.  
        Always I had in mind some giant, armed  
        in giant force, would come against me here.  
470    But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—   
        you put me down with wine, you blinded me.  
        Come back, Odysseus, and I’ll treat you well,  
        praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—  
        his son I am, for he by his avowal  
475    fathered me, and, if he will, he may  
        heal me of this black wound—he and no other  
        of all the happy gods or mortal men.’

          Few words I shouted in reply to him:

        ‘If I could take your life I would and take  
480    your time away, and hurl you down to hell!  
        The god of earthquake could not heal you there!

        ’At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness  
        toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

        ‘O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,  
485    if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:  
        grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never  
        see his home: Laertes’ son, I mean,  
        who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny  
        intend that he shall see his roof again  
490    among his family in his fatherland,  
        far be that day, and dark the years between.  
        Let him lose all companions, and return  
        under strange sail to bitter days at home.’

In these words he prayed, and the god heard him.

495 Now he laid hand on a bigger stone

and wheeled around, titanic for the cast,

to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel’s track.

But it fell short, just aft the steering oar,

and whelming seas rose giant above the stone

500 to bear us onward toward the island.

There

As we ran in we saw the squadron waiting,

the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all

our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward.

We beached her, grinding keel in soft sand,

505 and waded in, ourselves, on the sand beach.

Then we unloaded all the Cyclops’ flock

to make division, share and share alike,

only my fighters voted that my ram,

the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him

510 by the seaside and burnt his long thighbones

to Zeus beyond the storm cloud, Cronus’ son,

who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering:

destruction for my ships he had in store

and death for those who sailed them, my companions.

515 Now all day long until the sun went down

we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine,

till after sunset in the gathering dark

we went to sleep above the was of ripples.

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose

520 touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders

to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines;

and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks

oarsmen in line dipped oars in the grey sea.

So we moved out, sad in the vast offing,

525 having our precious lives, but not our friends.

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

*Odysseus and his men sail to Aeolia, where Aeolus, king of the winds, send Odysseus on his way with a gift: a sack containing all of the winds except the favorable west wind. When they are near home, Odysseus’ men open the sack, letting loose a storm that drives them back to Aeolia. Aeolus casts them out, having decided they are detested by the gods. They sail for seven days and arrive in the land of the Laestrygonians, a race of cannibals. These creatures destroy all of Odysseus’ ships except the one he is sailing in. Odysseus and his reduced crew escape and reach Aeaea, the island ruled by the sorceress-goddess Circe. She transforms half of the men into swine. Protected by a magic herb, Odysseus demands that Circe change his men back into human form. Before Odysseus departs from the island a year later, Circe informs him that in order to reach home he must journey to the land of the dead, Hades, and consult the blind prophet Tiresias.*

We bore down on the ship at the sea’s edge

and launched her on the salt immortal sea,

steppig our mast and spar in the black ship;

embarked the ram and ewe and went aboard

530 in tears, with bitter and sore dread upon us.

But now a breeze came up for us astern---

a canvas-bellying landbreeze, hale shipmate

sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair;

so we made fast the braces, took our thwarts,

535 and let the wind and steersman work the ship

with full sail spread full day above our coursing,

till the sun dipped, and all the ways grew dark

upon the fathomless unresting sea.

By night

our ship ran onward toward the Ocean’s bourne,

540 the realm and region of the Men of Winter,

hidden in mist and cloud. Never the flaming

eye of Helios lights on those men

at morning, when he climbs the sky of starts,

nor in descending earthward out of heaven;

545 ruinous night being rove over those wretches.

We made the land, put ram and ewe ashore,

and took our way along the Ocean stream

to find the place foretold for us by Circe.

The Perimedes and Eulylochus

550 pinioned the sacred beasts. With my drawn blade

I spaded the votive pit, and poured

libations round it to the unnumbered dead:

sweet milk and honey, then sweet wine, and last

clear water; and I scattered barley down.  
555 Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,  
    vowing to slaughter my best heifer for them  
        before she calved, at home in Ithaca,  
        and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;  
        as for Teiresias, I swore to sacrifice  
560  a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.  
     Thus to assuage the nations of the dead  
        I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,  
        letting their black blood stream into the well pit.  
        Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,  
 565  brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,  
    and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;  
        many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,  
        battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.  
        From every side they came and sought the pit  
 570 with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.  
    But presently I gave command to my officers  
        to flay those sheep the bronze cut down, and make  
        burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—  
        to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.  
 575 Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep  
    the surging phantoms from the bloody pit  
        till I should know the presence of Teiresias.

One shade came first---Elpenor, of our company,

who lay unburied still on the wide eart

580 as we had left him---dead in Circe’s hall,

untouched, unmourned, when other cares compelled us.

Now when I was him there I wept for pity

And called out to him:

How is this, Elpenor,

how could you journey to the western gloom

585 switer afoot than I in the black lugger?

He sighed, and answered:

Son of great Laertes,

Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,

bad luck shadowed me, and no kindly power;

ignoble death I drank with so much wine,

590 I slept on Circe’s roof, then could not see

the long steep backward ladder, coming down

and fell that height. My neckbone buckled, under,

snapped, and my spirit found this well of dark.

Now hear the grace I pray for, in the name

595 of those back in the world, not here---your wife

and father, he who gave you bread in childhood,

and your own child, your only son, Telemachus,

long ago left at home.

When you make small

and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,

600 you will moor ship, I know, on Aeaea Island;

there, O my lord, remember me, I pray,

do not abandon me unwept, unburied,

 to tempt the gods’ wrath, while you sail for home:

but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had,

605 and build a cairn for me above the breakers---

an unknown sailor’s mark for men to come.

Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it

The oar I pulled in life with my companions.

He ceased, and I replied:

Unhappy spirit,

610 I promise you the barrow and the burial.

So we conversed, and grimly at a distance,

With my long sword between, guarding the blood,

While the faint image of the lad spoke on.

Now came the soul of Anticlea, dead,

615 my mother, daughter of Autolycus,

dead now, though living still when I took ship

for holy Troy. Seeing the ghost, I grieved,

but held her off, through pang on pang of tears,

till I should know the presence of Tiresias.

620  Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward  
        bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

        ‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,  
     Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,  
        why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,  
625  to see the cold dead and the joyless region?  
        Stand clear, put up your sword;  
        let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.’

       At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard  
        let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,  
630  as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke  
        the prince of those with gift of speech:  
                                                                  ‘Great captain,  
        a fair wind and the honey lights of home  
     are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;  
        the god who thunders on the land prepares it,  
635  not to be shaken from your track, implacable,  
        in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.  
        One narrow strait may take you through his blows:  
     denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.  
        When you make landfall on Thrinakia first  
640   and quit the violet sea, dark on the land  
        you’ll find the grazing herds of Helios  
        by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.  
     Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent,   
        and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.  
645  But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction  
        for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,  
        bereft of all companions, lost for years,  
     under strange sail shall you come home, to find  
        your own house filled with trouble: insolent men  
650   eating your livestock as they court your lady.  
        Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!  
        But after you have dealt out death—in open  
     combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,   
        go overland on foot, and take an oar,  
655  until one day you come where men have lived  
        with meat unsalted, never known the sea,  
        nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows  
     and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.  
        The spot will soon be plain to you, and I  
660  can tell you how: some passerby will say,  
        What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?  
        Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf  
     and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:  
        a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,  
665  and carry out pure hecatombs at home  
        to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods,  
        to each in order. Then a seaborne death  
     soft as this hand of mist will come upon you  
        when you are wearied out with rich old age,  
670  your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.  
        And all this shall be just as I foretell.’

THE SIRENS

*Odysseus return to Circe’s Island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis; and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.*

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,

and on the first rays Circe left me, taking

her away like a great goddess up the island.

675 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men

to get aboard and cast off at the stern.

The scrambled to their places by the rowlocks

and all in line dipped their oars in the grey sea.

But soon an offshore breeze ble to our liking---

680 A canvas-bellying breeze, a lust shipmate

sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.

So we made fast the braces, and we rested,

letting the wind and steersman work the ship.

        The crew being now silent before me, I  
685   addressed them, sore at heart:

                                                              ‘Dear friends,  
        more than one man, or two, should know those things  
     Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,  
        so let me tell her forecast: then we die  
        with our eyes open, if we are going to die,  
690  or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens  
        weaving a haunting song over the sea  
     we are to shun, she said, and their green shore  
        all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I  
        alone should listen to their song. Therefore  
695  you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,  
        erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,  
     and if I shout and beg to be untied,  
        take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’

         I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,  
700   while our good ship made time, bound outward down  
        the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

    Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm  
        came over all the sea, as though some power  
        lulled the swell.  
                          The crew were on their feet  
705  briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,  
        each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades  
     and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved  
        a massive cake of beeswax into bits  
        and rolled them in my hands until they softened—  
710   no long task, for a burning heat came down  
        from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward  
     I carried wax along the line, and laid it  
        thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb  
        amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
715   and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,  
        as we came smartly within hailing distance,  
     the two Sirens, noting our fast ship  
        off their point, made ready, and they sang:

This way, oh turn your bows,

720 Achaea’s glory,

As all the world allows---

Moor and be merry.

Sweet coupled airs we sing.

No lonely seafarer

725 Holds clear of entering

Our green mirror.

Pleased by each purling note

Like honey twining

From her throat and my throat,

730 Who lies a-pinning?

Sea rovers here take joy

Voyaging onward,

As from our song of Troy

Greybeard and rower-boy

735 Goeth more learned.

All feats on that great field

In the long warfare,

Dark days the bright gods willed,

Wounds you bore there,

740 Argos’ old soldiery

On Troy beach teeming,

Charmed out of time we see.

No life on earth can be

Hid from our dreaming.

745 The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water  
        made me crave to listen, and I tried to say  
        ‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows;  
    but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes   
        got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,  
750   and passed more line about, to hold me still.  
        So all rowed on, until the Sirens  
        dropped under the sea rim, and their singing  
        dwindled away.

                                         My faithful company  
        rested on their oars now, peeling off  
755  the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;  
        then set me free.

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

                                            But scarcely had that island  
        faded in blue air when I saw smoke

    and white water, with sound of waves in tumult—   
        a sound the men heard, and it terrified them.  
760  Oars flew from their hands; the blades went knocking  
        wild alongside till the ship lost way,  
        with no oar blades to drive her through the water.  
     Well, I walked up and down from bow to stern,  
        trying to put heart into them, standing over  
765  every oarsman, saying gently,  
                                            ‘Friends,  
        have we never been in danger before this?  
        More fearsome, is it now, than when the Cyclops  
     penned us in his cave? What power he had!  
        Did I not keep my nerve, and use my wits  
770   to find a way out for us?  
                                                Now I say  
        by hook or crook this peril too shall be  
        something that we remember.

                                           Heads up, lads!  
     We must obey the orders as I give them.  
        Get the oar shafts in your hands, and lie back  
775  hard on your benches; hit these breaking seas.  
        Zeus help us pull away before we founder.

        You at the tiller, listen, and take in  
     all that I say—the rudders are your duty;   
        keep her out of the combers and the smoke;  
780  steer for that headland; watch the drift, or we  
        fetch up in the smother, and you drown us.’

        That was all, and it brought them round to action.  
     But as I sent them on toward Scylla, I  
        told them nothing, as they could do nothing.  
785  They would have dropped their oars again, in panic,  
        to roll for cover under the decking. Circe’s  
        bidding against arms had slipped my mind,  
     so I tied on my cuirass and took up   
        two heavy spears, then made my way along  
790  to the foredeck—thinking to see her first from there,  
        the monster of the gray rock, harboring  
        torment for my friends. I strained my eyes  
 upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere  
        could I catch sight of her.

                                         And all this time,  
795  in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current,  
        we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port  
        and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire  
     gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she  
        vomited, all the sea was like a caldron  
800   seething over intense fire, when the mixture  
        suddenly heaves and rises.

                                                     The shot spume  
        soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.

    But when she swallowed the sea water down  
        we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard  
805  the rock bellowing all around, and dark  
        sand raged on the bottom far below.  
        My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes  
     were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear  
        of being devoured.

                                                    Then Scylla made her strike,  
810  whisking six of my best men from the ship.

        I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen  
        and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling  
     high overhead. Voices came down to me  
        in anguish, calling my name for the last time.

815   A man surfcasting on a point of rock  
        for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod  
        to drop the sinker and the bait far out,  
   will hook a fish and rip it from the surface  
        to dangle wriggling through the air;

                                                so these  
820  were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.  
   
        She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,  
        in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—  
     and deathly pity ran me through  
        at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered  
825  questing the passes of the strange sea.

                                            We rowed on.  
        The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,  
        and Scylla dropped astern.

THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

        In the small hours of the third watch, when stars  
   that shone out in the first dusk of evening  
830  had gone down to their setting, a giant wind  
        blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus  
        shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;  
        so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose  
     touched the windy world, we dragged our ship  
835  to cover in a grotto, a sea cave  
   where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.  
        I mustered all the crew and said:

                                       ‘Old shipmates,  
        our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink;  
     the cattle here are not for our provision,  
840  or we pay dearly for it.  
                                                                     Fierce the god is  
        who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:  
        Helios; and no man avoids his eye.’

         To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now  
     we had a month of onshore gales, blowing  
845   day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.  
        As long as bread and good red wine remained  
        to keep the men up, and appease their craving,  
        they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,  
     when all the barley in the ship was gone,  
850   hunger drove them to scour the wild shore  
        with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,  
        whatever fell into their hands; and lean days  
        wore their bellies thin.

                                                                     The storms continued.  
     So one day I withdrew to the interior  
855  to pray the gods in solitude, for hope  
        that one might show me some way of salvation.  
        Slipping away, I struck across the island  
        to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.  
     I washed my hands there, and made supplication   
860  to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—  
        but they, for answer, only closed my eyes  
        under slow drops of sleep.

                                   Now on the shore Eurylochus  
        made his insidious plea:

                                                   ‘Comrades,’ he said,  
    ‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.  
865  All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,  
        but famine is the most pitiful, the worst  
        end that a man can come to.

                                                   Will you fight it?  
        Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle  
     for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;  
870  and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,  
        if ever that day comes—  
        we’ll build a costly temple and adorn it  
        with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.  
     But if he flares up over his heifers lost,  
875  wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods  
        make cause with him, why, then I say: Better  
        open your lungs to a big sea once for all  
        than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!’

      Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured ‘Aye!’   
880   trooping away at once to round up heifers.  
        Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows  
        were grazing near, and soon the men drew up  
        around their chosen beasts in ceremony.  
     They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—   
885   having no barley meal—to strew the victims,  
        performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine  
        and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free  
        to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,  
     with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.  
890  Then, as they had no wine, they made libation  
        with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;  
        and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,  
        they spitted the carved meat.

                                          Just then my slumber  
     left me in a rush, my eyes opened,  
895  and I went down the seaward path. No sooner  
        had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory  
        odors of burnt fat eddied around me;  
        grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

    ‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,   
900   you made me sleep away this day of mischief!  
        O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!  
        Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.’

         Lampetia in her long gown meanwhile  
   had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:

905   ‘They have killed your kine.’

                                 And the Lord Helios  
        burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

        ‘O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,  
        punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening,  
    now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy  
910  at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,  
        and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.  
        Restitution or penalty they shall pay—  
    and pay in full—or I go down forever  
   to light the dead men in the underworld.’

915 Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud mad reply:

‘Peace, Helios, shine on among the gods,

shine over mortals in the fields of grain.

Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make

splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.’

920 ---Calypso later told me of this exchange,

as she declared that Hermes had told her.

Well, then I had reached the sea cave and the ship,

I faced each man, and had it our; but where

could any remedy be found? There was none.

925 The silken beeves of Helios were dead.

The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear:

cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw

and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast

930 upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter

from Helios’ herd; and Zeus, the son of Cronus,

added one fine morning.

All the gales

had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze

we launched again, stepping the mast and sail,

935 to make for the open sea. Astern of us

the island coastline faded, and no land

showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven,

when Zeus Cronion piled a thunderhead

above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean.

940 We held the course, but briefly. Then the squall

struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking

both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft

along the ships length, so the running rigging

showered into the bilge.

On the afterdeck

945 the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow

bashing the skull in, knocking him overside,

as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver.

With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly

a bolt against the ship, a direct hit,

950 so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulphur,

and all the men were flung into the sea.

The came up ‘round the wreck, bobbing awhile

like petrels on the waves.

No more seafaring

homeward for these, no sweet day of return;

955 the god had turned his face from them.

I clambered

fore and aft my hulk until a comber

split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber

floated free; the mast, too, broke away.

A backstay floated dangling from it, stout

960 rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing

mast and keel together. These I straddled,

riding the frightful storm.

Nor had I yet

seen the worst of it: for now the west wind

dropped, and a southeast gale came on---one more

965 twist of the knife---taking me north again,

straight for Charybdis. All the night I drifted

and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay

off Scylla mountain and Charybdis deep.

There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow

970 tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree,

catching on like a bat under a bough.

Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing

the root and bole being far below, and far

above my head the branches and their leaves,

975 massed, overshadowing Charybdis pool.

But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel

would come back to the surface when she spouted.

And ah! How long, with what desire, I waited!

Till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears

980 and judges pleas in the marketplace all day

between contentious men, goes home to supper

the long poles at last reared from the sea.

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging

straight into the foam besides the timbers,

985 pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands

to pass by Scylla. Never could I have passed her

had not the father of gods and men, this time,

kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait,

nine days I drifted in the open sea

990 before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods,

upon Ogygia Isle. The dangerous nymph

Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty,

And she received me, loved me.

But why tell

the same tale that I told last night in the hall

995 to you and your lady? Those adventures

made a long evening, and I do not hold

with tiresome repetition of a story”

**Part 2**

**The Return of Odysseus**

**“Twenty years gone, and I am back again”**

*Odysseus has finished telling his story to the Phaeacians. The next day, young Phaeacian noblemen conduct him home by ship. He arrives in Ithaca after an absence of twenty years. The goddess Athena appears and informs him of the situation at home. Numerous suitors, believing Odysseus to be dead, have been continually seeking the hand of his w Penelope, in marriage, while overrunning Odysseus’ palace and enjoying themselves at Penelope’s expense. Moreover they are plotting to murder Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, before he can inherit his father’s lands. Telemachus, who, like Penelope, still hopes for his father’s return, has journeyed to Pylos and Sparta to learn what he can about his father’s fate. Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar and directs him to the hut of Eumaeus, his old and faithful swineherd. While Odysseus and Eumaeus are eating breakfast, Telemachus arrives. Athena then appears to Odysseus.*

…From the air

she walked, taking the form of a tall woman,

handsome and clever at her craft, and stood

1000    beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus,

unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed,

for not to everyone will gods appear.

Odysseus noticed her: so did the dogs,

who cowered whimpering away from her. She only

1005    nodded, signing to him with her brows,

a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard,

he passed out through the gate in the stockade

to face the goddess. There she said to him:

“Son of Laertes and the gods of old,

1010    Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,

dissemble to your son no longer now.

The time has come: tell him how you together

will bring doom on the suitors in the town.

I shall not be far distant then, for I

1015    myself desire battle.”

Saying no more,

she tipped her golden wand upon the man,

making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic

fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him,

ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard

1020    no longer gray upon his chin. And she

withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus

reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck.

Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away

as though it were a god, and whispered:

“Stranger,

1025    you are no longer what you were just now!

Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are

one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven!

Be kind to us, we’ll make you fair oblation

and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

1030    The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.

I am that father whom your boyhood lacked

and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks

1035    as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus,

uncomprehending, wild

with incredulity cried out:

“You cannot

be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits

conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!

1040    No man of woman born could work these wonders

by his own craft, unless a god came into it

with ease to turn him young or old at will.

I swear you were in rags and old,

and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

1045    Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear

and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept

away by wonder at your father’s presence.

No other Odysseus will ever come,

for he and I are one, the same; his bitter

1050    fortune and his wanderings are mine.

Twenty years gone, and I am back again

on my own island.

As for my change of skin,

that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers,

uses as she will; she has the knack

1055    to make me seem a beggar man sometimes

and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me.

It is no hard thing for the gods of heaven

to glorify a man or bring him low.”

When he had spoken, down he sat.

Then, throwing

1060    his arms around this marvel of a father

Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears

rose from the wells of longing in both men,

and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering

as those of the great taloned hawk,

1065    whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.

So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,

and might have gone on weeping so till sundown.

had not Telemachus said:

“Dear father! Tell me

what kind of vessel put you here ashore

1070    on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they?

I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!”

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

“Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.

Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage

1075    as they give other wanderers. By night

over the open ocean, while I slept,

they brought me in their cutter, set me down

on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold

and stores of woven things. By the gods’ will

1080    these lie all hidden in a cave. I came

to this wild place, directed by Athena,

so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies.

Count up the suitors for me, let me know

what men at arms are there, how many men.

1085    I must put all my mind to it, to see

if we two by ourselves can take them on

or if we should look round for help.”

Telemachus

replied:

“O Father, all my life your fame

as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—

1090    your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—

but what you speak of is a staggering thing,

beyond imagining, for me. How can two men

do battle with a houseful in their prime?

For I must tell you this is no affair

1095    of ten or even twice ten men, but scores,

throngs of them. You shall see, here and now.

The number from Dulichium alone

is fifty-two, picked men, with armorers,

a half dozen: twenty-four came from Same,

1100    twenty from Zacynthus; our own island

accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers,

Medon the crier, and the Master Harper,

besides a pair of handymen at feasts.

If we go in against all these

1105    I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance.

You must think hard if you would conjure up

the fighting strength to take us through.”

Odysseus

who had endured the long war and the sea answered:

“I’ll tell you now.

1110    Suppose Athena’s arm is over us, and Zeus

her father’s, must I rack my brains for more?”

Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said:

“Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it,

but throned in the serene clouds overhead:

1115    other affairs of men and gods they have to rule over.”

And the hero answered:

“Before long they will stand to right and left of us

in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—

our nerve against the suitors’ in my hall.

1120    Here is your part: at break of day tomorrow

home with you, go mingle with our princes.

The swineherd later on will take me down

the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks,

hangdog and old. If they make fun of me

1125     in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up

your springing heart, no matter what I suffer,

no matter if they pull me by the heels

or practice shots at me, to drive me out.

Look on, hold down your anger. You may even

1130    plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms

to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you,

rash as they are, facing their day of wrath.

Now fix the next step in your mind.

Athena,

 counseling me, will give me word, and I

1135    shall signal to you, nodding: at that point

round up all armor, lances, gear of war

left in our hall, and stow the lot away

back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors

miss those arms and question you, be soft

1140    in what you say: answer:

‘I thought I’d move them

out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those

bright arms Odysseus left us years ago

when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire’s

hot breath came, they had grown black and drear.

1145    One better reason, too, 1 had from Zeus:

suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,

you might be crazed and bloody one another,

and that would stain your feast, your courtship.

Tempered

iron can magnetize a man.’

Say that

1150    But put aside two broadswords and two spears

for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby

when we go into action. Pallas Athena

and Zeus All-Provident will see you through,

bemusing our young friends.

Now one thing more.

1155    If son of mine you are and blood of mine,

let no one hear Odysseus is about.

Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here,

nor any slave, nor even Penelope.

But you and I alone must learn how far

1160    the women are corrupted; we should know

how to locate good men among our hands,

the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers

who take you lightly, as alone and young.”

**“Argus”**

*Odysseus heads for town with Eumaeus. Outside the palace, Odysseus’ old dog, Argus, is lying at rest as his long-absent master approaches.*

While he spoke

an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears

1165    and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argus.

trained as a puppy by Odysseus,

but never taken on a hunt before

his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,

hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,

1170    but he had grown old in his master’s absence.

Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last

upon a mass of dung before the gates—

manure of mules and cows, piled there until

fieldhands could spread it on the king’s estate.

1175    Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,

old Argus lay.

But when he knew he heard

Odysseus’ voice nearby, he did his best

to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,

having no strength to move nearer his master.

1180    And the man looked away,

wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he

hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

“I marvel that they leave this hound to lie

here on the dung pile;

1185    he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him,

though I can’t say as to his power and speed

when he was young. You find the same good build

in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep

all for style.’

And you replied, Eumaeus:

1190    “A hunter owned him—but the man is dead

in some far place. If this old hound could show

the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him,

going to Troy, you’d see him swift and strong.

He never shrank from any savage thing

1195    he’d brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent

no other dog kept up with him. Now misery

has him in leash. His owner died abroad,

and here the women slaves will take no care of him.

You know how servants are: without a master

1200    they have no will to labor, or excel.

For Zeus who views the wide world takes away

half the manhood of a man, that day

he goes into captivity and slavery.”

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward

1205    into the megaron among the suitors:

but death and darkness in that instant closed

the eyes of Argus, who had seen his master,

Odysseus, after twenty years.

**The Suitors**

*Still disguised as a beggar Odysseus enters his home. He is confronted by the haughty suitor Antinous.*

But here Antinous broke in, shouting:

“God!

1210    What evil wind blew in this pest?

Get over,

stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you?

Egyptian whips are sweet

to what you’ll come to here, you nosing rat,

making your pitch to everyone!

1215    These men have bread to throw away on you

because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares

another’s food, when he has more than plenty?”

With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

“A pity that you have more looks than heart.

1220    You’d grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder

to your own handyman. You sit here, fat

on others’ meats and cannot bring yourself

to rummage out a crust of bread for me!”

Then anger made Antinous’ heart beat hard,

1225    and, glowering under his brows, he answered:

“Now!

You think you’ll shuffle off and get away

after that impudence?°  Oh, no you don’t!”

The stool he let fly hit the man’s right shoulder

on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—

1230    like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.

Odysseus only shook his head, containing

thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,

then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again

upon the door sill, Facing the whole crowd

1235    he said, and eyed them all:

“One word only,

my lords, and suitors of the famous queen,

One thing I have to say.

There is no pain, no burden for the heart

when blows come to a man, and he defending

1240    his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.

Here it was otherwise. Antinous

hit me for being driven on by hunger—

how many bitter seas men cross for hunger!

If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies’

1245    pent in the dark to avenge a poor man’s wrong, then may

Antinous meet his death before his wedding day!”

Then said Eupeithes’ son, Antinous:

“Enough.

Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamble elsewhere,

unless you want these lads to stop your mouth

1250    pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet,

over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!”

But now the rest were mortified, and someone

spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him:

“A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—

1255    bad business, if he happened to be a god.

You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do,

looking like strangers, turning up

in towns and settlements to keep an eye

on manners, good or bad.”

But at this notion

1260    Antinous only shrugged.

Telemachus,

after the blow his father bore, sat still

without a tear, though his heart felt the blow.

Slowly he shook his head from side to side,

containing murderous thoughts.

Penelope

1265    on the higher level of her room had heard

the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:

“Would god you could be hit yourself, Antinous—

hit by Apollo’s bowshot!”

And Eurynome.”

her housekeeper, put in:

“He and no other?

1270    If all we pray for came to pass, not one

would live till dawn!”

Her gentle mistress said:

“Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend

ruin for all of us; but Antinous

appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.

1275    Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,

driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone

in hail gave bits, to cram his bag—only

Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!”

So she described it, sitting in her chamber

1280    among her maids—while her true lord was eating.

Then she called in the forester and said:

“Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus,

and send him here, so I can greet and question him.

Abroad in the great world, he may have heard

1285    rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!”

**Penelope**

*In the evening. Penelope questions the old beggar about himself.*

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:

who are you, where do you come from, of what nation

and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world

1290    should have a fault to find with you. Your name

has gone out under heaven like the sweet

honor of some god-fearing king, who rules

in equity over the strong: his black lands bear

both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,

1295     new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea

gives great hauls of fish by his good strate

so that his folk fare well.

O my dear lady,

this being so, let it suffice to ask me

of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.

1300    Do not enforce me to recall my pain.

My heart is sore: but I must not be found

sitting in tears here, in another’s house:

it is not well forever to be grieving.

One of the maids might say—or you might think—

1305    I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”

And Penelope replied:

“Stranger, my looks,

my face, my carriage,’ were soon lost or faded

when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy,

Odysseus my lord among the rest.

1310    If he returned, if he were here to care for me,

I might be happily renowned!

But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.

Sons of the noblest families on the islands,

Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus,

1315    with native Ithacans, are here to court me,

against my wish: and they consume this house.

Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant

or herald on the realm’s affairs?

How could I?

wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here

1320    they press for marriage.

Ruses served my turn

to draw the time out—first a close-grained web

I had the happy thought to set up weaving

On my big loom in hall. I said, that day:

‘Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,

1325    let me finish my weaving before I marry,

or else my thread will have been spun in vain.

It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes

when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.

The country wives would hold me in dishonor

1330    if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’

I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed.

So every day I wove on the great loom,

but every night by torchlight I unwove it;

and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans.

1335    But when the seasons brought a fourth year on,

as long months waned, and the long days were spent,

through impudent folly in the slinking maids

they caught me—clamored up to me at night;

I had no choice then but to finish it.

1340    And now, as matters stand at last,

I have no strength left to evade a marriage,

cannot find any further way: my parents

urge it upon me, and my son

will not stand by while they eat up his property.

1345    He comprehends it, being a man full-grown,

able to oversee the kind of house

Zeus would endow with honor.

But you too

confide in me, tell me your ancestry.

You were not born of mythic oak or stone.”

*Penelope again asks the beggar to tell about himself. He makes up a tale in which Odysseus is mentioned and declares that Penelope’s husband will soon be home.*

1350     “You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed

homeward now, no more to be abroad

far from his island, his dear wife and son.

Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this,

god of the zenith, noblest of the gods,

1355     and Lord Odysseus’ hearthfire, now before me:

I swear these things shall turn out as I say.

Between this present dark and one day’s ebb,

after the wane, before the crescent moon,

Odysseus will come.”

**The Challenge**

*Pressed by the suitors to choose a husband from among them, Penelope says she will marry whoever can string Odysseus’ bow and shoot an arrow through twelve oxhandle sockets. The suitors try and fail. Still in disguise, Odysseus asks for a turn and gets it.*

. . .And Odysseus took his time,

1360    turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,

for borings that termites might have made

while the master of the weapon was abroad.

The suitors were now watching him, and some

jested among themselves:

“A bow lover!”

1365    “Dealer in old bows!”

“Maybe he has one like it

at home!”

“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”

“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

And one disdainful suitor added this:

“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he

bends it!”

1370     But the man skilled in all ways of contending,

satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,

like a musician, like a harper, when

with quiet hand upon his instrument

he draws between his thumb and forefinger

1375     a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly

Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.

Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,

so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang

a swallow’s note,

In the hushed hail it smote the suitors

1380    and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered

overhead, one loud crack for a sign.

And Odysseus laughed within him that the son

of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down.

He picked one ready bow from his table

1385    where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still

in the quiver for the young men’s turn to come.

He nocked it, let it rest across the handgrip,

and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,

aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed

1390    arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle

through every socket ring, and grazed not one,

to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly

Odysseus said:

‘Telemachus, the stranger

you welcomed in your hail has not disgraced you.

1395    I did not miss, neither did I take all day

stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,

not so contemptible as the young men say.

The hour has come to cook their lordships’ mutton—

supper by daylight. Other amusements later,

1400    with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince

Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,

belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,

and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze

1405    stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

**Odysseus’ Revenge**

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands

leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver

and spoke to the crowd:

  “So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

1410    Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,

if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous

just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,

embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers:

1415    the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of death?

How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends

who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed—

could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on his eyes?

Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin

1420    and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall

from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted

crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,

and one last kick upset his table

1425    knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.

Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay

the suitors jostled in uproar down the hail,

everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned

the walls in the long room for arms: but not a shield,

1430    not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and throw.

All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”

“Your own throat will be slit for this!”

“Our finest lad is down!

You killed the best on Ithaca.”

“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

1435    For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot,

an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend

they were already in the grip of death.

But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

“You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it

1440    home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder.

. . . You dared

bid for my wife while I was still alive.

Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven,

contempt for what men say of you hereafter.

Your last hour has come. You die in blood.”

1445    As they all took this in, sickly green fear

pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered

looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.

Eurymachus’ alone could speak. He said:

“If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,

1450    all that you say these men have done is true.

Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.

But here he lies, the man who caused them all.

Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on

to do these things. He cared less for a marriage

1455    than for the power Cronion has denied him

as king of Ithaca. For that

he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.

He is dead now and has his portion. Spare

your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make

1460    restitution of wine and meat consumed,

and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen

with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.

Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger.”

Odysseus glowered under his black brows

1465    and said:

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,

all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold

put up by others, would I hold my hand.

There will be killing till the score is paid.

You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,

1470    or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.

I doubt one man of you skins by.”

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard

Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.

“Friends,” he said, “the man is implacable.

1475    Now that he’s got his hands on bow and quiver

he’ll shoot from the big doorstone there

until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say,

let’s remember the joy of it. Swords out!

Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.

1480    After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.

If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass

into the town, we’ll call out men to chase him.

This fellow with his bow will shoot no more

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine bronze,

1485    honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and loud

he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly

an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt

sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his liver.

The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell aside,

1490    pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,

were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed

on the ground.

Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out,

he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed on

his eyes.

Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus,

1495    broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make

the great soldier give way at the door.

But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him

between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove

clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell

1500    forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.

Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark spear

planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out

someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with a

sword

at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables

1505    to his father’s side and halted, panting, saying:

“Father let me bring you a shield and spear,

a pair of spears, a helmet.

I can arm on the run myself: I’ll give

outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd.

1510    Better to have equipment.”

Said Odysseus:

“Run then, while I hold them off with arrows

as long as the arrows last. When all are gone

if I’m alone they can dislodge me.”

Quick

upon his father’s word Telemachus

1515    ran to the room where spears and armor lay.

He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,

four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,

and ran back, loaded down, to his father’s side.

He was the first to pull a helmet on

1520    and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.

The servants armed themselves, and all three took their stand

beside the master of battle.

While he had arrows

he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down

one of his huddling enemies.

But when all barbs had flown from the bowman’s fist,

he leaned his bow in the bright entryway

beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield

hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm,

horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head.

then took his tough and bronze-shod spears…

*Aided by Athena, Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and another faithful herdsman kill all the suitors.*

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And Odysseus looked around him, narrow eyed,

for any others who had lain hidden

while death’s black fury passed.

In blood and dust

he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

1535    Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a half-moon bay

in a fine-meshed net from the whitecaps of the sea:

how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea,

twitching their cold lives away in Helios’ fiery air:

so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

**Penelope’s Test**

*Penelope tests Odysseus to prove that he really is her husband.*

1540    Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,

was being bathed now by Eurynome

and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again

in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena

lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him

1545    taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair

in curls like petals of wild hyacinth

but all red-golden. Think of gold infused

on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art

Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one

1550    whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished

beauty over Odysseus’ head and shoulders.

He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,

facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,

the immortals of Olympus made you hard,

1555    harder than any. Who else in the world

would keep aloof as you do from her husband

if he returned to her from years of trouble,

cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.

1560    Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope

spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,

if man you are. . . This is no pride on my part

 nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.

I know so well how you—how he—appeared

1565    boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same…

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.

Place it outside the bedchamber my lord

built with his own hands. Pile the big bed

with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

1570    With this she tried him to the breaking point,

and he turned on her in a flash raging:

“Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now!

Who dared to move my bed?

No builder had the skill for that—unless

1575    a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal

in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.

There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,

built into that bed—my handiwork

and no one else’s!

An old trunk of olive

1580    grew like a pillar on the building plot,

and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,

lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,

gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.

Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,

1585    hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up

into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve

as model for the rest. I planed them all,

inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,

and stretched a bed between—a pliant web

1590    of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There’s our sign!

I know no more. Could someone else’s hand

have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”

Their secret! As she heard it told, her knees

grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.

1595    With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,

throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him, murmuring:

“Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think

what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us

1600    life together in our prime and flowering years,

kept us from crossing into age together. Forgive me,

don’t be angry. I could not

welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself

long ago against the frauds of men,

1605    impostors who might come—and all those many

whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .

But here and now, what sign could be so clear

as this of our own bed?

No other man has ever laid eyes on it—

1610    only my own slave, Actoris, that my father

sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.

You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache

of longing mounted, and he wept at last,

1615    his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,

longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer

spent in rough water where his ship went down

under Poseidon’s blows, gale winds and tons of sea.

Few men can keep alive through a big surf

1620    to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches

in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:

  and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,

her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

**The Ending**

*Odysseus is reunited with his father, Laertes.  Athena commands that peace prevail between Odysseus and the relatives of the slain suitors. Odysseus has regained his family and his kingdom.*

1. **Muse:** Any one of the nine goddesses of the arts, literature, and the sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Troy:** City in northwest Asia Minor, site of the Trojan War. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **Helios:** Sun god. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. **Zeus:** King of the gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. **Guile:** (n.) craftiness; cunning. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. **Ithaca:** Island off the west coast of Greece. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. **Ilium:** Troy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. **Mutinous:** (adj.) rebellious. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. **Achaeans:** Greeks; here, Odysseus’ men. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. **Lee:** (n.) area sheltered from the wind. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)