

HERACLES

PROUDLY did the Muses sing of Heracles, often called Hercules, the strongest man who ever lived on earth and the greatest of all the descendants of Danaüs. His mother was Princess Alcmena, granddaughter of Perseus and Andromeda, and famed for her beauty and virtue.

His father was Zeus, so Hera, of course, hated Alcmena and pursued Heracles with her wrath. When he was an infant the goddess sent two spotted serpents into his cradle, but little Heracles simply grasped them in his powerful hands and squeezed the life out of them. He grew stronger every day, but his trouble was that he did not know his own strength.

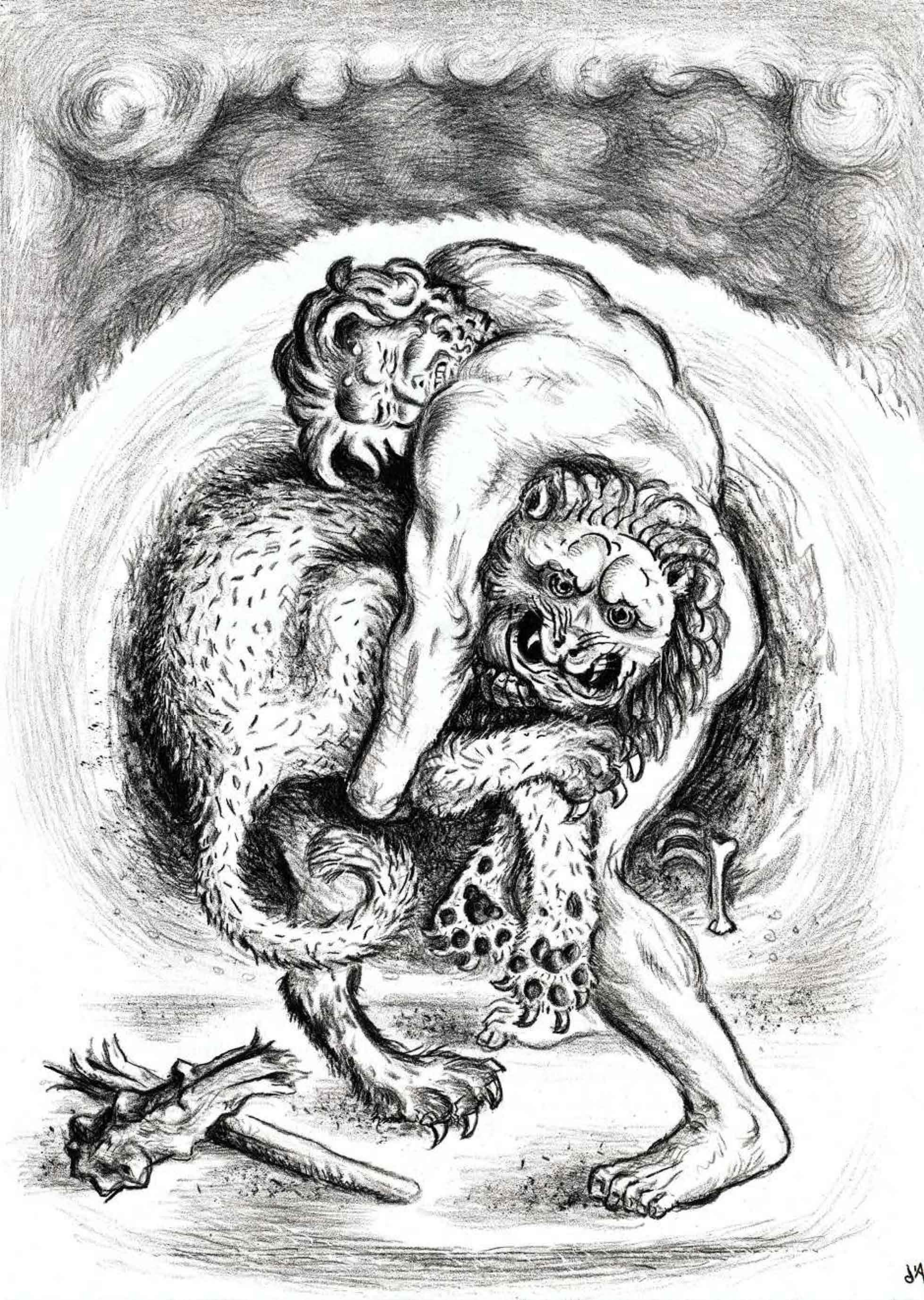
Being of noble birth, he had to learn to sing and play the lyre, but Heracles would much rather wrestle and fight. One day his music teacher Linus scolded him for singing out of tune. In a fit of fury Heracles banged his lyre over the teacher's head, harder than he had meant, and the blow killed the poor man. Heracles was too strong to have around a palace so he was sent into the mountains as a shepherd. There he could use his tremendous strength on prowling beasts. Soon he had rid the countryside around Thebes of lions and wolves, and the fame of his strength spread far and wide. He came back from the mountains as a hero, and the King of Thebes regarded him so highly that he gave him his daughter in marriage. Hera did not like this at all, and she made Heracles insane. Raving mad, he swatted down his own children, mistaking them for wild beasts. When he regained his senses, he was horrified at what he had done, and went to the oracle of Delphi to learn what he must do to atone for his crime. He was told that he must serve for ten years as the slave of his cousin Eurystheus and perform ten labors for him.

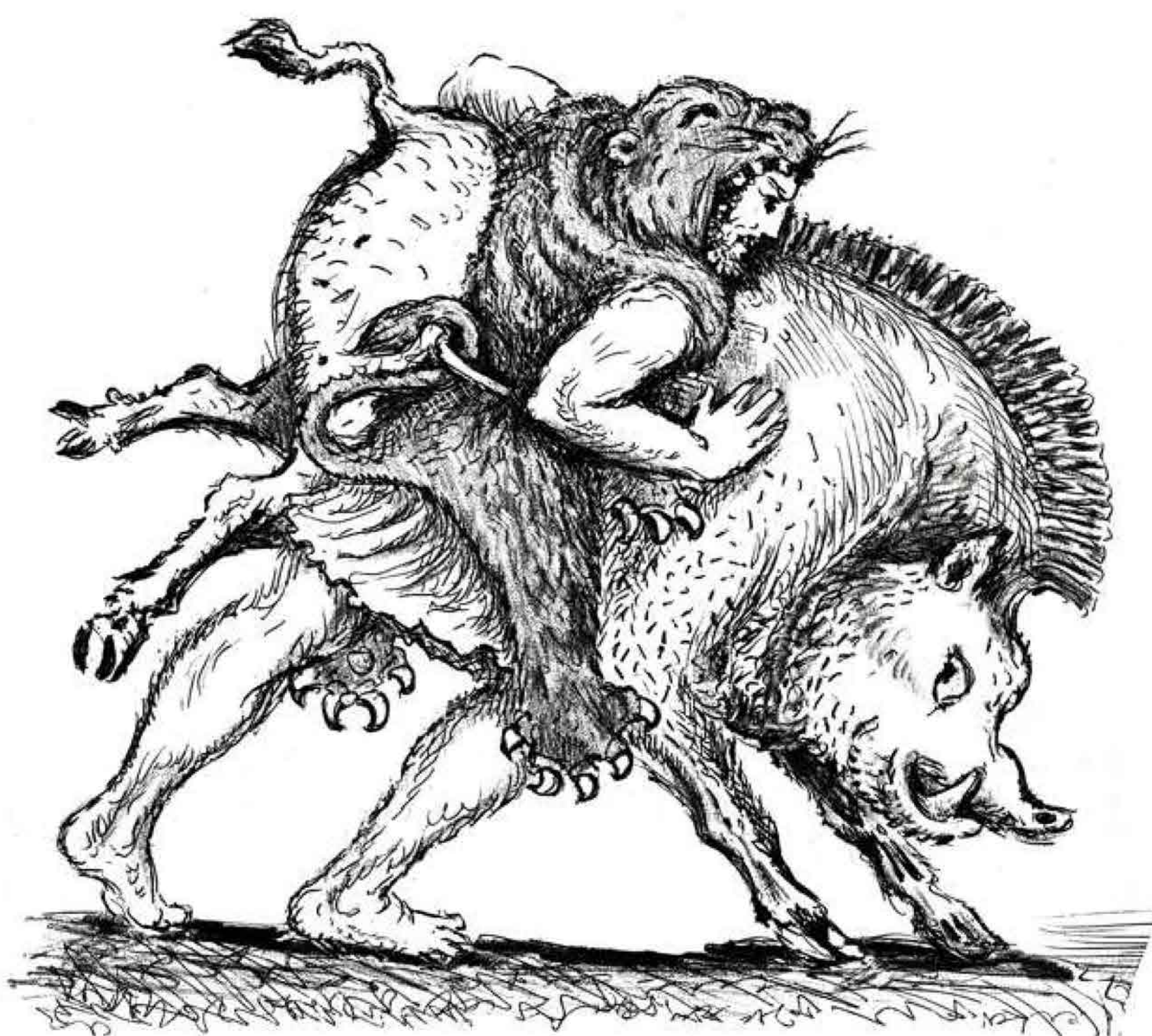
Hera was pleased, for Eurystheus, the King of Mycenae, was a weak little man who hated his strong cousin Heracles. With her help the king would surely think of the hardest tasks for Heracles to perform.

For his first four labors Eurystheus sent Heracles to rid the nearby countryside of dangerous beasts and monsters.

In the valley of Nemea dwelt a monstrous lion whose hide was so tough it could not be pierced by any weapons. It was one of Echidna's dreadful offspring, which Zeus had let live as a challenge to future heroes.

Heracles chased it out of its lair, seized it in his bare hands, and





squeezed it to death. Then he skinned the beast with its own claws, and with the impenetrable skin of the Nemean lion slung over his head and shoulders, he reported back to Eurystheus, his first labor performed.

In the swamps of Lerna there lived a nine-headed Hydra, another of Echidna's brood. This monster was so poisonous that the fumes from its breath alone were enough to kill whatever came close to it.

Heracles filled his enormous lungs with air, held his breath, and ran at the Hydra. Swinging his club, he knocked off its heads, and one after the other they rolled to the ground. But no sooner had he knocked off one head than a new one grew in its place. He half turned around and let out enough air to call to his charioteer to bring a firebrand and sear the necks. Then no new heads could sprout. When Hera saw that Heracles was winning over the Hydra, she sent a giant crab to pinch his heel. With a mighty kick Heracles sent the giant crab flying as he knocked off the last of the heads. Then he dipped his arrows in the Hydra's blood, making them so poisonous that a mere scratch from them was deadly, and he returned to Mycenae, his second labor performed.

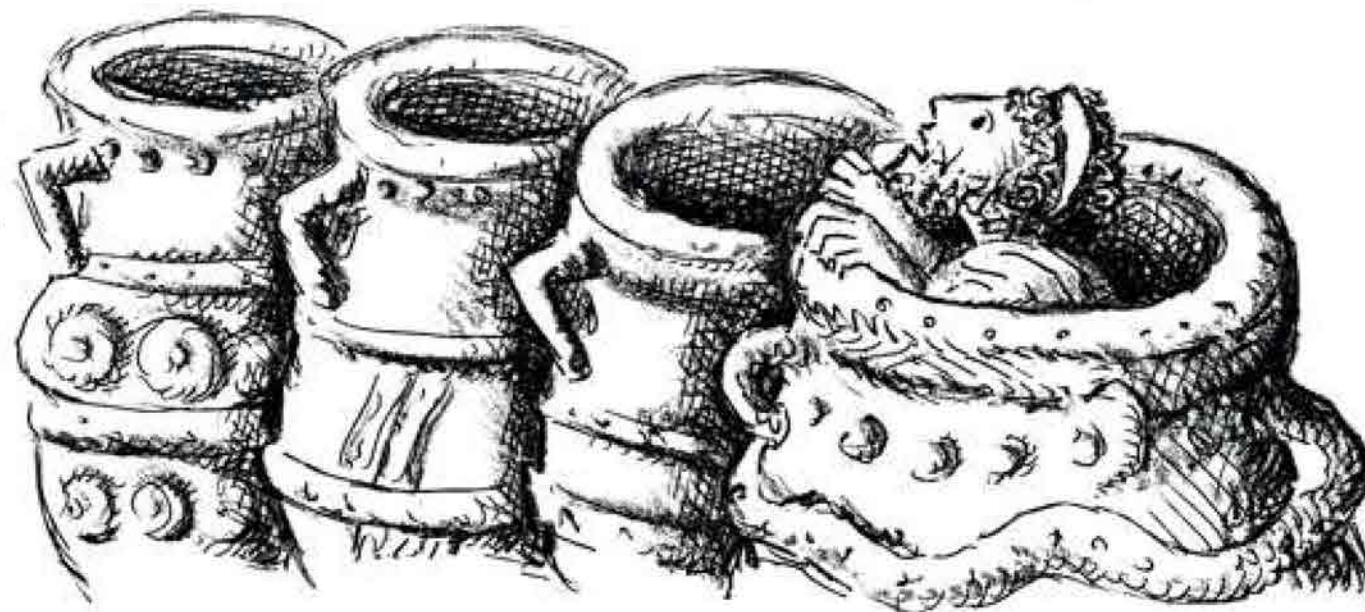
On the slopes of Mount Erymanthus roamed a wild and dreadful boar, with tusks as sharp as swords. Eurystheus sent Heracles to bring this beast back alive.

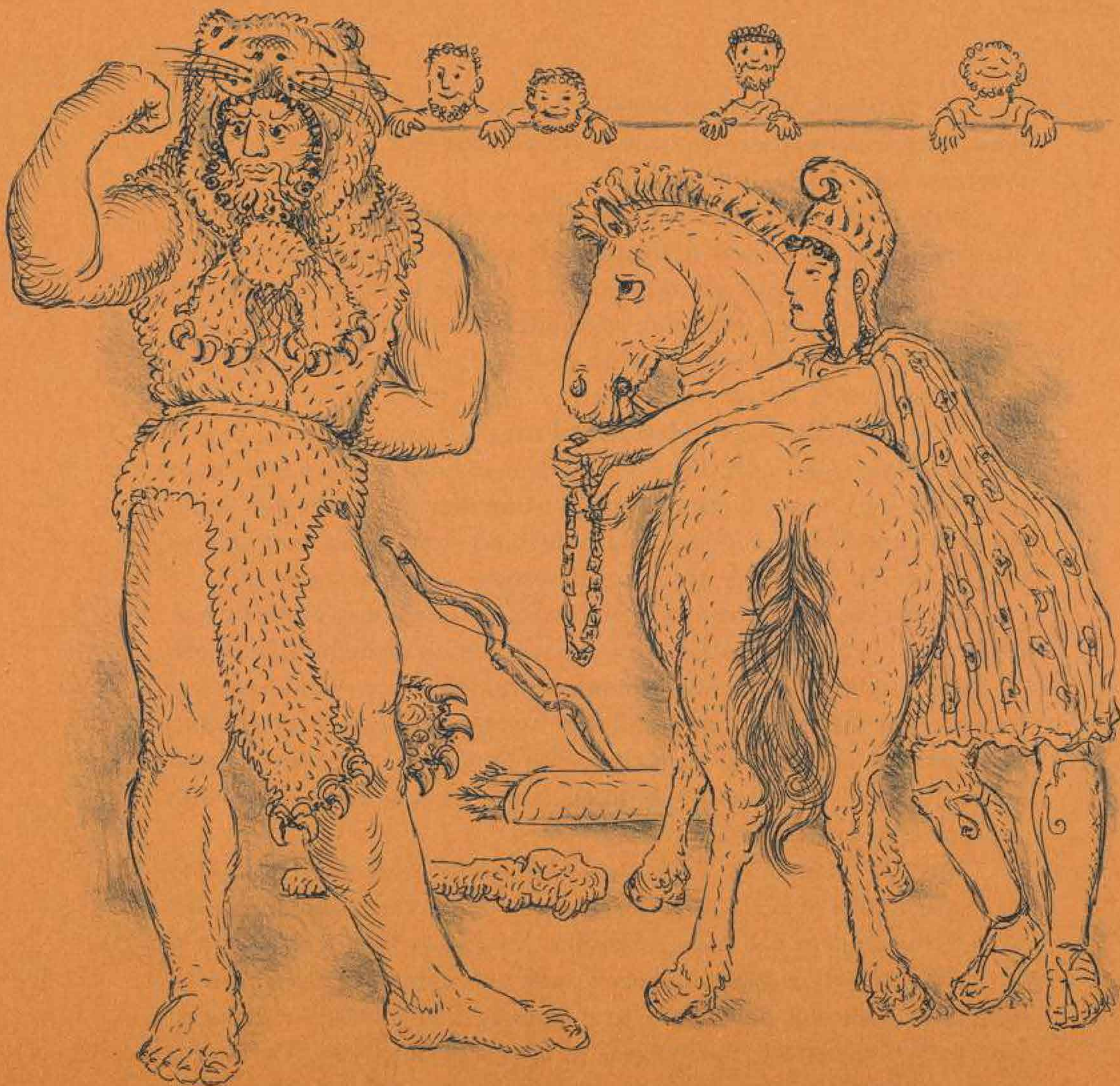
With loud yells, Heracles chased the boar out of its lair and drove it ahead of him all the way to the top of the snow-capped mountain. The heavy beast sank into the snow and it was easy for Heracles to catch and subdue it. He pushed, dragged, and rolled it all the way down to the gates of Mycenae. When Eurystheus saw the fearful boar, he dived into an urn and barely dared to peek out.

Then Eurystheus sent Heracles to rid the Stymphalian Lake of a swarm of dangerous birds. They had feathers of brass so sharp that, when one of them fell to the ground, it killed whomever it hit. But they could not penetrate Heracles' lion skin, and he made such a din, with a huge rattle, that the birds took fright and flew away, never to return.

Eurystheus was distressed to see with what great ease Heracles had performed his first four labors. Now he sent him to bring back alive one of the sacred hinds of Artemis. He hoped that Heracles would harm the creature with his brute strength and thereby earn the wrath of the goddess. But Heracles pursued the swift deer with great patience over hills and dales. The year was almost over when at last he caught the deer. With great care he carried it back to Mycenae.

Next, to humble his strong cousin, Eurystheus ordered Heracles to clean the stables of King Augeas, who lived across the mountains to the west. King Augeas had huge herds and his stables and barnyards had not been cleaned for years. Heaps of dung rose mountain high. No man alive could clean his stables in a year, thought Eurystheus. But Heracles with tremendous strength changed the course of two rivers. The waters flooded through stables and barnyards and washed them clean in less than a day.





Eurystheus now, on the advice of Hera, sent Heracles far afield for his last four labors. He must travel way to the east and fetch back to Mycenae the golden girdle of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a tribe of wild and warlike women who rode better and fought harder than any men. Eurystheus was sure that even Heracles would be overwhelmed by the furious women. But when Heracles arrived in Amazon land, the proud queen was so taken by the sight of his bulging muscles that she gave him her belt without a fight. She would gladly



have given him her hand in the bargain, but Hera, in the disguise of an Amazon, spread the rumor that Heracles had come to kidnap Hippolyta. The Amazons threw themselves upon Heracles, but for once they had found their master! Heracles swung his mighty club, and the little Amazon husbands, who were spinning and cooking and tending the babies, were amazed to see their dangerous wives subdued by a single man.

In triumph, Heracles returned to Mycenae with Hippolyta's belt. He could not bring the queen, she had been killed in the fight.

Far to the north there lived a king whose name was Diomedes. He was a very inhospitable king and had trained his four mares to devour all strangers who came to his land.

Now Eurystheus sent Heracles to capture the four man-eating mares and bring them back alive.

Heracles traveled to the north, slew King Diomedes, and threw him to his own mares. When the mares had eaten the evil king, they were so tame that they let Heracles drive them back to the gates of Mycenae.

Then Eurystheus sent Heracles south to catch a fierce, fire-breathing bull on the island of Crete. The Cretans, who were great bullfighters, could not catch the bull, but Heracles seized the charging bull by the horns without heeding the flames from its nostrils, flung it to the ground, and returned to Mycenae, bringing the subdued beast. Eurystheus was glad he had a safe urn to hide in.

For his tenth labor, Heracles was sent to an island far out in the ocean, to bring back a huge herd of red cows. They belonged to Geryon, a monster with three bodies on one pair of legs.

Heracles walked off with a powerful stride and soon reached the end of all land in the west. The only boat he could spot was the golden vessel of Helios, the sun. Heracles aimed his mighty bow at the sun and threatened to shoot him from the sky if he did not lend it to him. Helios did not dare to refuse, and he let Heracles take his golden boat.

Before he sailed off, Heracles pulled up two huge crags and set them down, one on each side of the strait that separates Europe from Africa. There they stand to this day, called the Pillars of Hercules.

When Heracles was out at sea and the waves rose high around him, he aimed a poisoned arrow at the waves, threatening to shoot them if they did not still at once. The waves flattened in fear and Heracles sailed on to Geryon's island. He began at once to load the herd of red cows, and Geryon's watchman and his two-headed dog rushed at him. With one swing of his mighty club Heracles did away with them both. Then Geryon himself came running to attack him, his three huge bodies swaying on his thin legs. Calmly Heracles lifted his bow, took careful aim, and sent a poisoned arrow through all of the monster's three bodies. As time was getting short, Heracles rowed back as fast as he could with the herd. When he arrived at the mainland, Hera sent a swarm of gadflies to sting the cows and they scattered all over Europe. Still, Heracles man-



aged to round them up and bring them to the gates of Mycenae just before the year was up. There, Eurystheus sacrificed the cows to Hera, and, gratified, the goddess whispered into his ear that he must demand two more labors from Heracles, for his charioteer had helped him to singe the heads of the Hydra, and not he but the waters of two rivers had washed the Augean stables clean.

Heracles scowled but he bowed his head in submission, for he had won much glory on his ten labors and hoped to win some more.

For his eleventh labor, Heracles was sent to find Hera's secret garden of the Hesperides and pick three golden apples from the little apple tree that Mother Earth had given Hera for her wedding gift. Nereus, the Old Gray Man of the Sea, was the only one on earth who knew where the garden was, but he would not reveal the secret. When Heracles seized him to squeeze the secret out of him, Nereus tried to escape by changing himself into all kinds of animals. But Heracles held on to him and at last Nereus had to tell him that the garden of the Hesperides lay west of the setting sun, not far from where the Titan Atlas stood, holding up the sky.

On his way to the garden, Heracles heard the groans of the Titan Prometheus, who was chained to the Caucasus Mountains. Heracles was in a hurry, but he felt sorry for the Titan and took time off to tear apart his chains. Zeus, impressed by the strength of his son, let him do it. In gratitude Prometheus warned Heracles not to pick the golden apples himself, or he would die. They were apples of immortality and could be picked only by a god.